The Story of the
3/5 Darkhorse Marine Battalion
Sangin, Afghanistan
October 2010–April 2011
To Hell and Back
The Story of the 3/5 Darkhorse Marine Battalion
in Sangin, Afghanistan
October 2010-April 2011
Dedication

Since the beginning of time, warriors have marched off to war leaving families behind. Warriors do a dreadful and necessary job for their cultures and countries. Warriors are a class all their own. Warriors experience things mere mortals cannot even imagine. I regularly tell people Marines do superhuman things every day and consider it normal.

As the 3/5 marched off to Sangin, Afghanistan to do what our country asked, the families were left behind. But unlike the days of ancient Greece or Old Testament times when a runner would come back to give news of the war, we could sit at our computers and get news of what was happening. We realized it was only a shadow of what our warriors experienced.

This is what the war in Sangin, Afghanistan looked like to families. This is how we experienced it: news articles, letters, emails, Marine parent message boards, and facebook.

What the members of the 3/5 Darkhorse Marine battalion did for our country was significant. In the future, when your children ask, here is the answer. The war in all its glory, gore, sadness, drama, valor, and trauma, as the families experienced it.

Thank you seems so insignificant and inadequate. We have what we have in our country today because men like you were willing to answer the warrior call when our country asked.

Love,

Mom
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

February 1, 2012

To the Families and Friends of The Boys of 3/5:

The Facebook Page of The Boys of 3/5 was started after the death of Lance Corporal Victor Anthony Dew. It became a passion for Mark "Coach" Soto after he and his wife, Theresa, reached out to us in the first beginning hours after the Marines came to our door that dreaded afternoon of October 13, 2010 to notify us of the death of our eldest child. Mark stayed by our side as we found out in those first few days that his eldest son, Corporal Josh Soto, was also with 3/5, and that not only did we live in the same town but both boys graduated from the same high school. It wasn't until weeks or even months later that we found out that his son was on the scene and was the one that cut Victor loose from his safety harness inside the destroyed MATV. Our families are forever bonded by the events of that one moment.

It is also the events of that one moment that we all have our Facebook Family of The Boys of 3/5. It is through each one of you that has supported me and my family as we travel down the new road we have in front of us that we have been able to keep moving. It is through each one of you that has supported each other, encouraged each other and been there for each other through the nerves, the smiles, the tears and the numerous words of encouragement that we see every day since The Boys page came to life.

Our family, the family of The Boys of 3/5, is a family like no other. We have not all met each other and that day will probably never happen, and yet, we are still growing, still adding more family members every day. So I want to take this moment to say, Thank You. Thank you for making The Boys of 3/5 what it is today, a place where we all can go and be with family.

It is also through this family that a 3/5 mom has created this chronological order of the events of our Dark Horse men while they were deployed for Operation Enduring Freedom 10.2 in Sangin, Afghanistan. It is with much appreciation and heartfelt thanks that we give to this mom for sharing her labor of love with the rest of her family.

With love and respect,
Semper Fi

"Mom" Patty Schumacher
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

February 1, 2012

Dear Family,

As a father who has two sons and son-in-law serving in our United States military it is my honor to present you with this factual and historical gift. Words cannot express the appreciation we have for the 3/5 mother that spent hours of her time chronologically designing this book. THANK YOU!

From the time my two Marine sons deployed to Afghanistan I will never forget the day we said, “See you later.”

We had two boys deploy at the same time. This was the second time my wife and I had experienced this type of family stress in less than 4 years. One Marine boy (my Gunny son-in-law) was heading to Camp Leatherneck. He works on avionic electronics. My other boy (my 0311, Cpl. middle son and blood) was heading to Sangin.

I remember the going away party we threw them at their home in the Lincoln Housing Center near Camp San Mateo, Camp Pendleton. It was a beautiful, hot, Southern California summer day and the Marines were ready. They had trained hard, prepared for their deployment, were cocky and feisty. They were ready to go kick-ass! Myself as a high school football coach, “I loved it!” They were ready and I knew they would win. I saw it in their eyes and felt from their hearts.

Soon after their departure we realized we would be in for a long haul.

Shortly after their arrival one boy was sadly killed (Sparks), then all hell broke loose. The next week we lost nine, “What was happening?”

One of the nine Marines who were killed during this one week time was Pfc. Victor Dew. I coached him football in high school years earlier. He was from my hometown and I knew him. He lived right up the street and was deployed in Sangin with my son. Later I found out my son was one of the 3/5 Marines who assisted other Marines to help pull Victor Dew out of the wreckage where three others passed. It was a terrible time. Later Tom and Patty Schumacher would ask me to eulogize their boy, Victor. It was an honor and I will never forget this. Our families were forever bonded.

As a father, and mother we just wanted intelligence. Daily, we would scour the internet looking for daily reports but it was never enough. So one day, while sitting in my home office I had this
idea. Why don’t I start a Facebook page where all of us families can support and help each other, a place where we could talk, communicate, pray and share information? Now, these type of military support pages seemingly exist everywhere. WE LOVE IT!

On the day I was opening the page, I remember listening to a country radio station and I heard a song by Kenney Chesney called, “The Boys of Fall.” I looked over at my wife and said, “That’s it!” I am going to start a Facebook page and call it ‘The Boys of 3/5.’” The rest is history! Our logo emblazes the cover of this book. And the page grows steadily even to this day. The goal of the page is to support, bring love, bring humor, and show America that the boys deserve our everyday love and respect. They earned it!

We also use the page to support all the old-timers, the classics. The Vietnam vets who were treated horribly upon their return. THIS PAGE SHOUTS THANK YOU TO ALL OUR MILITARY!

I cannot say enough about the caring families and friends we have met through this page. They are truly some of the most beautiful families in the world. They care, they love, and they support and pray! You can’t beat that - IT’S AMERICA!!

Please let me take this time to express my sincere heartfelt thanks to the Gold Star families who are represented in this book. WE LOVE YOU AND PROMISE TO NEVER FORGET!!

For the wounded of 3/5, “Thank you for your inspiration and how much you have given for our freedom. I know you hate to hear this, “BUT YOU ARE HEROES AND WHAT AMERICA IS ALL ABOUT!”

For the ones who remain and fight – Semper Fidelis and RAH! America supports you.

God bless each and every one of you.

Always remember that we are family and family sticks together!

Your good friend,

Mark “Coach” Soto
coach@battleforveterans.org
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British troops withdraw from Sangin

Responsibility for deadly Afghan district switches to US Marine Corps after four years under British command

guardian.co.uk, Monday 20 September 2010 03.09 EDT

British forces conducting a routine patrol around Sangin bazaar.
Photograph: Si Ethell/PA

British troops today formally ended their mission in Afghanistan's deadly Sangin area by passing control of the district to US forces.
Responsibility for security was switched from 40 Commando Royal Marines to the US Marine Corps just after 6.30am (BST), the defence secretary, Liam Fox, announced.
"British forces have served in Sangin over the last four years and should be very proud of the achievements they have made in one of the most challenging areas of Afghanistan," he said.
"The level of sacrifice has been high and we should never forget the many brave troops who have lost their lives in the pursuit of success in an international mission rooted firmly in our own national security in the UK."

The troops involved would be redeployed to central Helmand, where they would continue to fight the insurgency and help build a stable and secure Afghanistan, he said.

In July, the Guardian revealed that British troops were planning to withdraw from Sangin, in a move later confirmed by the government.
Over the past four years the district has claimed the lives of more than 100 British troops – a third of all UK casualties in the conflict – in a mission that officers concede may seem a failure.
But the Ministry of Defence spokesman Major General Gordon Messenger, a former commander of the UK Helmand task force, insisted the handover was not an admission of defeat.
"It certainly won't look like that on the ground," he told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.
"The British soldiers that are there are handing over to the American marines. In terms of the physical security presence and every other aspect of the campaign in Sangin, it's going to be more of a continuum than a watershed.
"We are seeing real and positive progress in areas that only a year or so ago were in a very different state."

The area, part of Helmand province, is described by troops as a "hellhole" and is thought to be the most dangerous in Afghanistan.
October 1, 2010
Dear Family and Friends of 3D Bn, 5th Marines,

All of 3/5 has finally arrived in Afghanistan. In the coming days, the battalion will complete its reception, theater-specific training, and movement to its area of operations. The battalion is working hard to assume ownership of the equipment that it will be using over the next seven months, and learning the area and people over which it will soon assume tactical responsibility. The weather is still warm during the day, but is cooling off and pleasant at night. All hands are excited to finally start executing the counterinsurgency mission for which it has trained so hard over the last 11 months. While there is much work to be done, there is great potential for positive progress to be made in the coming months, as Marines aggressively pursue the enemy and improve local security every single day, working with the local government and its Afghan National Security Forces. Thank you for your continued support to the Darkhorse battalion and your Marine or Sailor; you should be extremely proud of his courage, determination, selflessness, and patriotism.

Semper Fidelis,
LtCol Morris
Commanding Officer

Lima Company
3rd platoon
1st squad at Camp Leatherneck before leaving for Sangin
Dear Friends and Families of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines,

"Today, on 13 October 2010, the Darkhorse Battalion assumed authority of the Sangin District in Helmand Province from 3/7, and have officially assumed responsibility there for the NATO International Security Assistance Force mission in support of the Government of Afghanistan. The Marines have settled into their new living conditions with enthusiasm, and are actively working to learn their assigned areas of operations and get to know the Afghan people who live there. While there are many challenges ahead for the battalion's Marines and Sailors, there is a feeling amongst the local people that positive changes are possible with the arrival of United States Marines. The battalion and its leadership are working diligently with its Afghan National Security Force partners, specifically the Afghan Uniformed Police and the Afghan National Army, and the District's Afghan Government representatives, to increase security in Sangin and bring economic development and stability to its people. Mail has begun to arrive, morale is high, and the enemies of Afghanistan and the United States are learning what it means to be afraid. Thanks for your continued support."

Hope all is well.

Sincerely,

LtCol Morris
Commanding Officer
3D Battalion, 5th Marines
News: Large IED storage and facilitation facility destroyed in Helmand

KABUL, Afghanistan - An Afghan National Security and International Security Assistance force patrol located and destroyed an improvised explosive facilitation and storage compound during an operation in the Sangin district of Helmand province, Saturday.

Multiple intelligence reports and tips from local citizens led the combined force to the compound ascertained to be the primary IED facilitation and storage facility in the district.

The target compound is associated with a senior Sangin-based Taliban leader and facilitator of IEDs and their components along with other lethal aid in the Sangin area. The compound has a historic link with insurgency in the area, and has been regularly used by Taliban leaders and facilitators as a Taliban command and control facility.

Intelligence established the facility was filled with IEDs, but was also thoroughly rigged with explosives to deny access by anyone other than the Taliban; villagers would not go near the building.

The ANSF and ISAF force visually detected numerous booby traps, as well as explosive residue around the facility, to corroborate the intelligence reports. The patrol ensured Afghan civilians in the area were a safe distance from the site and protected them in an enclosed building, before they safely destroyed the building.

Large secondary explosions indicated that the IED cache was sizeable.

"Local Afghans can feel a little more secure knowing these weapons won't harm them or the security forces that are there to protect them," said U.S. Army Col. Rafael Torres, International Assistance Force Joint Command Combined Joint Operations Center director.
Marine Corps News
Unit in Sangin loses 9 Marines in 4 days

By Dan Lamothe - Staff writer
Posted: Monday Oct 18, 2010 18:11:02 EDT

Nine Marines with a battalion that recently deployed to Afghanistan were killed during a four-day period last week, putting the Marine Corps on pace for its deadliest month in combat this year.

Third Battalion, 5th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, Calif., suffered the casualties, Pentagon officials said. The unit deployed the last week of September, and is patrolling Sangin, a violent district that the Corps took over from British forces last month. The unit replaced 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, out of Twenty-nine Palms, Calif., in northern Helmand province.

With two weeks left in October, the Corps has lost 15 Marines and one corpsman in Afghanistan this month. The worst months for Marine deaths this year were June and August, with 17 each. Fifteen were killed in Afghanistan in February, when the Corps launched a major assault on Marjah, a Taliban stronghold and narcotics hub.

The 3/5 casualties in October include:
• Sgt. Ian Tawney, 25. The squad leader was killed Saturday by an improvised explosive device while on a foot patrol, Marine officials said. He enlisted on March 14, 2005, and had deployed to Iraq in 2007.
• Lance Cpl. James Boelk, 24. The infantry rifleman was killed by an IED while on a foot patrol last Friday, officials said. He was on his first combat deployment.
• Lance Cpl. Joseph Lopez, 26. The infantry rifleman was killed by an IED while on a foot patrol last Thursday, officials said. He was on his first combat deployment.
• Lance Cpl. Alec Catherwood, 19. The infantry rifleman was shot to death while on a foot patrol last Thursday, officials said. He was on his first combat deployment.
• Lance Cpl. Irvin Ceniceros, 21. The machine gunner was shot to death while on a foot patrol last Thursday, officials said. He was on his first combat deployment.

Four additional Marines were killed last Wednesday in the same IED blast while riding in a Mine Resistant Ambush Protected All-Terrain Vehicle, or M-ATV, according to media reports. Those Marines include:
• Cpl. Justin Cain, 22. The machine gunner was on his first combat deployment.
• Lance Cpl. Phillip Vinnedge, 19. The anti-tank assaultman was on his first deployment.
• Lance Cpl. Joseph Rodewald, 21. The machine gunner was on his first combat deployment.
• Pfc. Victor Dew, 20. The anti-tank assaultman was on his first deployment.

Additional details about the deaths were not immediately available, but the Corps said the unit is now based in Sangin in a news release covering the death of Lance Cpl. John Sparks, 23. He was shot to death Oct. 8, becoming the first Marine to die on 3/5’s deployment, Marine officials said.
Dallas Marine, killed in Afghanistan, had strong sense of self

Marine Corps Sgt. Ian Tawney, who was killed in Afghanistan on Saturday, poses with his pregnant wife, Ashley. The two grew up together in Dallas. U.S. Marine Sgt. Ian M. Tawney always maintained close ties to his Dallas roots, but even from an early age, he loved to explore.

Tawney's strong sense of independence manifested itself when he organized a yearlong trip to Argentina at age 15. And his enthusiasm for life became evident when he returned, spouting fluent Spanish.

"As a very young child, he had a very strong sense of self and was very decisive about what he wanted to do with his life," said his mother, Theda Tawney on Monday.

So when Tawney, 25, joined the Marines five years ago, his work ethic quickly distinguished him, and he won several awards.

But his life was cut short Saturday when he was conducting combat operations and killed when an improvised explosive device blew up in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan.

Friends and family remember Tawney as a devoted husband, a loyal friend and an avid outdoorsman.

"It's hard when you've lost somebody and you try to define who they were," said his father, John Tawney.

His family was in Dover, Del., on Monday, awaiting the arrival of Tawney's body.

Tawney was soon to be a father himself. His wife Ashley is expecting a baby girl in January.

"He was honored to be a member of the Marine Corps," said his father. Among Tawney's numerous awards are the Purple Heart, Combat Action Ribbon, Iraq Campaign Medal and Navy Unit Commendation.

"Even though he didn't like to call attention to himself, he was a natural leader," said his mother.

Tawney previously fought in Iraq in 2007. He served with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, I Marine Expeditionary Force from Camp Pendleton, Calif.

Tawney is the 10th Marine from his battalion to be killed in 10 days. Lance Cpl. Joseph Rodewald of Albany also served in Tawney's battalion and was killed Oct. 13 by a roadside bomb. Tawney is the 26th person in Oregon to die in the Afghanistan conflict.

Tawney was a top student in squad leader school, and he graduated as the honor man of his class, his
father said. He had wanted to make the Marines his career.

"He just knew what he wanted in his life, and he went for it," his mother said. "He was a man of great integrity."

His wife described him as outgoing and full of life. He loved hunting, snowboarding and riding motorcycles.

"He loved to laugh," Ashley Tawney said. The two met in pre-school and stayed friends throughout high school. Finally, when both of them were working at a retirement facility, they began dating. Tawney was excited about the arrival of their daughter.

"It's going to be a real blessing to have a part of him through her," Theda Tawney said.

In addition to his parents and his wife, Tawney is survived by brothers Shayne Chandler and Jacob Tawney, sisters Stacy Barham, Karin Lamberton and Karla Cowan, and grandmothers Leona Smith and Kathryn Tawney. Funeral arrangements are pending.
October 18, 2010
Dear Family and Friends of the Darkhorse,

Since the 13th of October, when 3/5 assumed authority of the Sangin District in Helmand Province, there has been a steady stream of bad news from Afghanistan for every member of our extended family. During this time, the battalion has suffered more than a few casualties, as it learns to deal with a very challenging and unforgiving environment in northern Helmand Province. Nothing hurts more than to lose a family member, and fellow Marine or Sailor, or hear of them being critically wounded. I, too, have been shocked and saddened by the loss of so many fine young men to enemy fire and improvised explosive devices in such a short time. With that being said, we must push forward on our assigned mission despite our losses, just as our predecessors did at places like Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal, Chosin, and Vietnam. Our ultimate success will ensure that the sacrifice of so many is never forgotten. While nothing can replace the loss of even one of our fine men who has been lost, you need to know that their sacrifice has not been in vain and that the Battalion is doing what it was sent to do—protect the Afghan people, develop their security forces, and destroy the very real enemies of America and Afghanistan.

I want to reassure you that, with every day that goes by, the Marines and Sailors of the battalion are rapidly adjusting to their environment and the enemy’s activities. Please take comfort in the fact that we are knocking the hell out of the enemy here and that he is scared. The Taliban definitely fear the U.S. Marine, as they should, and their fear extends all the way back to their senior leadership. I also want to reassure you that the pre-deployment training provided to your man has been effective and, coupled with their skill, experience, and esprit de corps, is allowing us to take the fight to an enemy who has been comfortable and left unmolested for years. Unfortunately, Sangin is a place where the smallest mistake is costly. We are focused on ensuring that we do not make the same mistakes twice.

Finally, I ask for your patience with communications from the front. While difficult under normal circumstances, the loss of many men over consecutive days has consumed any extra time that would normally be spent informing the Family Readiness Officer and Rear Party what is happening. I also hope that you understand that there is a process in place for casualty notification. This process has been designed to first and foremost protect the privacy of those who have had Marines killed or wounded in action in order to allow them to deal with their loss in peace. This process is led by Headquarters Marine Corps and allows for the release of information 24 hours after the Primary Next of Kin has been notified. My Family Readiness Officer is not involved in this notification process, but can provide you the casualty assistance officer’s contact information if you want to send your condolences to the Gold Star family. I ask that you respect the process. I also have decided not to announce casualty information via MCT or the Battalion’s webpage because I think it will be less mentally draining on families over time than announcing every casualty we sustain as soon as it happens. I also do not want to provide information to the enemy who is known to track our casualties on the internet. I know you all care for your loved ones, and want to know if they are safe. I hope that you can respect my decision to allow the process to work as it is designed, and honor those who have sacrificed properly when we redeploy. If you really have to know who was killed, you can access the DOD New Releases webpage and read the casualty releases on a daily basis. For wounded Marines, release of their information is covered under the Privacy Act, so unless the Marine or Sailor wants people to know they have been wounded, I cannot release it.

God Bless you and the members of the Darkhorse who are laying it all out on the line for the defense of our Nation. I appreciate your continued support, and will try to update you as often as possible. Whenever you can, send a note, some good stateside goodies, and an extra pair of socks and footpowder. Get Some!

Sincerely,

LtCol Morris
Commanding Officer
3rd Battalion, 5th Marines
Sangin insurgents target Marines on foot with IEDs, too

October 20th, 2010 | Afghanistan Infantry Sangin | Posted by Dan Lamothe

Staff Sgt. Hoskie T. Attson, an explosive ordnance disposal technician, uncovers the components of an improvised explosive device near Patrol Base Wishton in Sangin district center Oct. 9. (Photo by Sgt. Steve Cushman/Marine Corps)

When Marines pushed into Afghanistan’s Sangin district this summer, it was widely predicted that things would be difficult.

The district, in northern Helmand province, had been a notoriously dangerous area for British troops. In four years patrolling Sangin, 106 British troops died, including 36 this year, according to this Daily Mail report. British forces ceded control of Sangin to 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, out of Twentynine Palms, Calif., last month, concentrating their forces instead in Lashkar Gah, Helmand’s provincial capital — and a place far more stable than Sangin.

That’s relevant background when considering the awful news out Sangin within the last week. Nine Marines with 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, Calif., were killed between Wednesday and Saturday, just weeks after deploying to replace 3/7 in Sangin and surrounding areas. Add in an earlier 3/5 casualty in Sangin on Oct. 8, and the battalion already has had 10 casualties in its first month in theater.

Four of those Marines were killed last Wednesday when an improvised explosive device rocked their Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected all-terrain vehicle, said Cpl. Zachary Nola, a Marine spokesman at Camp Pendleton. Three other Marines were killed by small-arms fire.
That leaves three additional deaths with the same generic cause in Marine casualty announcements: “killed by an IED blast while conducting dismounted combat operations against enemy forces.” In other words, they were hit while on foot, rather than while riding in a vehicle.

The Taliban’s practice of tailoring IEDs to target Marines on foot is probably more common than what is portrayed in the mainstream media, where the concept of an IED is almost exclusively focused on the targeting of vehicles.

In the spring, Marines told me in Helmand’s violent Marjah district that Taliban forces had started to plant directional fragmentation-charge IEDs, a kind of makeshift anti-personnel mine. Typically built in a coffee can or another small, metal device, they are packed with nuts, bolts or spark plugs and attached to 10 to 20 pounds of homemade explosives. They are called “DFCs” by Marines, and they can be detonated remotely or with tripwires.

Details out of Sangin have been scarce, but it seems likely they’re facing the same danger. An embedded report posted here notes that Marines are preparing to clear an “IED belt” near Sangin. The military also announced this week that coalition forces recently destroyed an IED “facilitation and storage compound” in Sangin.

Still, a Marine spokesman in Afghanistan told me by e-mail today that 3/5 isn’t involved in any major ongoing assault or operation. The battalion is “conducting normal counterinsurgency operations there,” said 1st Lt. Joshua Benson. “There is nothing out of the norm in terms of operations in Sangin.”

That means the effort to improve conditions in Sangin is ongoing, but it also suggests the threats there are still very real. You might want to keep 3/5 in your thoughts going forward.

*This post was corrected to note that Helmand province’s capital is Lashkar Gah.*
October 25, 2010

Dear Darkhorse friends and family,

After almost two weeks since the transfer of authority from 3/7, your Battalion of Marines and Sailors are demonstrating why they are the best in the business. Despite taking tough losses in the first few days in their area of operations, the Battalion has dusted itself off and continued to move forward as our fallen and wounded mates would want us to do. Spending equal amounts of time between the green, vegetated agricultural zone alongside the Helmand River and the dry, dusty desert to its East, Marines are often operating in two different environments during the same patrol or day.

Fortunately, the weather has just begun to cool off somewhat, so we are seeing temperatures in the 70s during the day and low 50s at night. This brings some comfort to the task at hand, which continues to consume every man for almost 18 hours or more a day. Your men are working hard and doing great things to bring security to this troubled area of Afghanistan; they are out on patrol, working with the Afghan National Army or Police, and dishing out some payback to the Taliban every chance they get. We are tending to our wounded and also helping the local people out when they are seriously injured by an IED or in a Taliban initiated firefight designed to cause innocents to be wounded or killed. Despite the complex nature of the fight, your Marines are rapidly adapting to their environment and becoming more comfortable in it every day, and maintaining their honor and character in the process. You should be amazingly proud of your son, husband, or brother who is serving with me here, defending America and its freedom against its enemies. There are none finer.

A couple of updates for the next week. First, I just conducted a memorial service for LCpl s Catherwood, Boelk, and Lopez from Kilo company, which was well attended by those Sledgehammer Marines that were able, and plan on conducting services in the coming week for the other six Marines lost since our transfer of authority on 13 October. While I plan on conducting a Battalion Memorial Service after the deployment is complete, it has been important for us to mourn our lost brothers and then go back to work, as the mission has not changed. Second, MajGen Mills, the I MEF Forward and Regional Command Southwest Commanding General will be here tomorrow for a visit. As the former CG of the 1st Marine Division, General Mills has a vested interest in this Battalion’s success despite being three levels up in the chain of command. I hope to talk to the CG about all of the great things your men have been doing since they arrived, and I am sure the CG cannot wait to get a little Darkhorse hospitality.

That’s all for now. We love you and thank you for your continued and enduring support. We have started to get all sorts of care packages in the last few days and the Marines are thrilled to hear from home. I will send you another update in about one week’s time. In the mean time, we’ll be “getting some!”

Semper Fi,
LtCol Morris
Camp Pendleton Marines see heavy combat in Sangin
General says clear, hold, build strategy progressing

It is a familiar pattern for Marines serving in Helmand province, a stronghold of the Taliban in southern Afghanistan. Their initial pushes into areas controlled by insurgents have been met with heavy resistance, including small arms fire, ambushes, and lethal improvised bomb attacks.

Sangin, where a battalion of Camp Pendleton Marines moved in earlier this month, has been no different.

The northern reaches of the province on the road to the strategic Kajaki dam have been “one of our more active security challenges,” said Brig. Gen. Joseph Osterman, commanding general of Task Force Leatherneck and the 1st Marine Division Forward, speaking Tuesday from Afghanistan in a briefing with Pentagon reporters.

At least 10 Marines from Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment were killed in action this month in Sangin, including four felled in a single bomb attack on their mine-resistant all terrain vehicle. Those deaths made October the deadliest month for the Marine Corps this year in Afghanistan, with the fatalities of 18 Marines and one Navy corpsman.

The Camp Pendleton battalion had replaced Twentynine Palms Marines from the 3rd battalion, 7th Marine regiment who deployed to Sangin this summer to serve alongside British Royal Marines. The British relinquished command of the area in September to consolidate with other United Kingdom forces in the central areas of Helmand province.

A company of Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment had also served in the area in 2008, when they lost three Marines killed in action.

Task Force Leatherneck is comprised of approximately 10,700 personnel deployed throughout Helmand province and a couple neighboring districts, including U.S. Marine ground forces and the nation of Georgia’s 32nd Infantry Battalion. The task force is part of NATO’s southwestern regional command led by another general from Camp Pendleton, Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills.

Marine units under Osterman’s command serving further south in Helmand province have been able to clear insurgents from the bazaars and villages and build the capacity of the Afghan security forces, government, and economy. The populated areas of Helmand province, “they develop at different stages
and different levels over time. But in particular, Nawa and Garmser are doing exceptionally well,” he said.

Marines have been operating in Nawa for about a year and a half. That area now has solar-powered street lights in the bazaar, a new district center, a new health clinic, and very little poppy cultivation, Osterman said.

In Marjah, where a major Marine offensive in February proceeded much slower than anticipated, Osterman said about a third of the area has now turned against the Taliban and come over to the side of the Afghan government and international forces. Marjah has 300 policemen where there were none a few months ago, daily attacks in the area have dropped into the single digits, and the governor and other Afghan officials feel safe enough now to travel there by road from the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah unescorted by military forces, he said.

The fighting in Sangin, however, has been fierce since the Marines took authority from the British in September. The Marines are seeking to expand their control over Sangin using an “ink blot” model of counterinsurgency.

“As they've moved out to expand the security bubble, obviously, they've run up against resistance,” Osterman said. “However, the casualties that they've taken, while seeming acute here in the near term with these last two weeks, are not unusual for the kinds of casualties that we've incurred when we've gone into other areas for the first time.”

The resistance was no surprise. But Osterman said he wanted in particular to express his condolences to the relatives of those wounded and killed in Sangin. “We as a family out here obviously feel a great sense of loss as well,” he said
News: 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment memorializes fallen Marines

SANGIN, Afghanistan – Marines and sailors from 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 2, paused to honor their fallen brothers.

Lance Corporals Joseph Rodewald, 22, Phillip Vinnedge, 19, Victor Dew, 20, and Cpl. Justin Cain, 22, with Weapons Company, were killed in action, Oct. 13, and Sgt. Ian Tawney, 25, with Lima Company was killed in action, Oct. 16. The ceremony was marked by Bible verses, prayers and personal reflections honoring the lives of the fallen warriors. Final Roll was called three times for each of the five Marines, only to be answered by silence. Taps followed in a final farewell.

“Where do we get men such as this? Where do we find men who look death in the face and push forward?” Morris asked. “Fortunately for us all, many Americans understand that freedom is not free and some must stand to defend it.”

As Morris addressed the Marines and sailors at the memorial ceremony, he acknowledged the fallen Marines for their bravery and warrior ethos.

“These Marines sacrificed their lives in the service of their country, here in Sangin, a place that none of them could find on a map 60 days ago,” said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commanding officer, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines. “It’s my privilege to stand here before you as a commander of this battalion and honor the lives of these five young men.”

The Marines of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines arrived in Afghanistan just a few weeks prior, assuming authority of the battle space, Oct. 13. They hit the ground running and immediately were seeing results. Unfortunately, those results came with a price.

“They were all here, where the fighting is the toughest. They wanted to be here and they wanted to make a difference. I give thanks every day that I have had an opportunity to serve with and lead such men; men who gave their last full measure defending their nation against its enemies and helping the people..."
of Afghanistan.”

The short, quiet ceremony was marked by Bible verses and prayers honoring these five fallen heroes. Final Roll was called three times for each of them only to be answered by silence. Taps followed in a final farewell.

“Although it is difficult to understand why these five young Marines were taken from us, I take comfort in the fact that they have upheld our core values of honor, courage and commitment,” Morris said. “They died doing their duty, taking the fight to the enemy and fulfilling their vow to do whatever it takes to defend our nation and their fellow Marines. They died with their honor and their character intact.”
3d Battalion 5th Marines
NEWSLETTER
October 2010

Dear Darkhorse family and friends,
While this deployment has started off with difficult losses, your Battalion is moving forward towards mission accomplishment in a complex and challenging environment. Success under these conditions requires the highest level of character, courage, and discipline during execution, and a degree of flexibility and innovation that is common to the American fighting man. Every day, I see your men adapting to the environment and the enemy, and coming out on top. Every day, the Darkhorse expands its control of an area that had been assumed lost to the Taliban. Every day, I see positive changes in the people, the security situation, and the confidence of the Afghan Security Forces. There is undoubtedly six more months of hard work ahead of us, but there is no doubt in my mind that the security and stability of Sangin District will improve dramatically by the time we redeploy, and success in Afghanistan will no longer be in question.

Finally, I am determined to give you all of the information you desire. While I had originally thought the information provided by HQMC was sufficient, I recognize now that there is a demand for information that can only be satisfied by a more proactive approach. In order to meet the requests for information, I have instructed my Staff to push all casualty updates out to through the Mass Communications Tool network within 24 hours of confirmation of Primary Next of Kin notification. I hope that this will alleviate concerns about information flow in the future and provide you what you need. My FRO, Ms. Kimberly Reese is a facilitator of this information flow, but the responsibility for its execution lies with me. She is quickly turning around information from the Battalion, but delays are possible from my end based on the tactical situation and my access to computers, so please be patient.

Thank you for your support and prayers. We need you to remain strong on the home front, and take comfort in the superb caliber of our men’s skill, equipment, and medical care. We are determined to do our duty and uphold the legacy of this storied Battalion.

Semper Fidelis,
LtCol Morris
Darkhorse 6
Families and Friends of the Darkhorse,

One thing that is not in short supply in a combat zone is faith. It is a necessity for many. The Marines and Sailors of 3/5 have faith in their leadership, their brothers, and most importantly, their God. This faith is evidenced by the fact that we push on toward the goal set before us. We do not waver or falter, but we press on.

I have been impressed with the Marines in every place I’ve been as I tour the battle space. I am impressed with the resiliency of the Marines and Sailors as they keep up the fight and carry on despite the challenges. We push on toward the goal we set out to accomplish – to defeat the Taliban and win the hearts and minds of the locals.

We have had the opportunity to reflect and be most thankful for the comforts and pleasures of life we so often take for granted. I say that because many places out here lack running water, meals other than MRE’s and other various amenities. Yet, despite this, Marines and Sailors are focused on the mission and take care of the needs of their brothers in arms. We have grown close as a unit and continue to support one another as we are away from our families and loved ones.

The spiritual resiliency of the Marines and Sailors of 3/5 is unlike anything I’ve seen. Men are asking the tough questions in respect to their spiritual lives and are finding the answers in God. We have seen men strengthened through church services and through their brothers. Just as Proverbs 27:17 says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” We have seen evidence of this as brothers lift one another up in encouragement and prayer. We are becoming a tighter unit because of this fact. God is working throughout the Darkhorse and giving us the power and strength necessary to complete the mission.

Please continue to pray for us as we fight the good fight and fulfill our duty to God, Country and Corps.
Semper Fidelis,
Chaplain Wesson
Helmand governor: US improving security in Sangin

By DAVID STRINGER
The Associated Press
Wednesday, November 3, 2010; 2:10 PM

LONDON -- Security has improved since U.S. Marines replaced British troops in a volatile area of southern Afghanistan that has seen some of the most intense combat of the war, a key Afghan official said Wednesday.

Gulabuddin Mangal, governor of Afghanistan's southern Helmand province, said the American military had better resources and finances to deal with insurgent violence in and around the town of Sangin.

U.S. Marines took over responsibilities for Sangin in September, taking over from British troops who had fought there since 2006 and suffered more than 100 deaths - almost a third of the 342 casualties suffered by the U.K. since operations in Afghanistan began in 2001.

"By having the marines of the U.S., we have got improved security now in some areas," Mangal told reporters in London, speaking through a translator during a four-day-visit to Britain.

American forces replaced their British allies under a reorganization of international troops in Helmand. Some critics claimed the switch followed a pattern set in Iraq, when the U.S. moved into regions around the southern city of Basra to shore up Britain's military efforts.

"At a tactical level there are differences - not many countries have the finances, logistics and equipment" of the U.S., Mangal said.

British officers have previously insisted the move out of Sangin was on tactical grounds, allowing U.S. troops to cluster in the north of Helmand, while British and other troops focus on central and southern areas of the province.

Mangal, who said he will meet with relatives of a British soldier killed in Helmand and visit the national war memorial in central England during his trip, insisted that U.K. forces had achieved successes.

"I admire the work of the British forces and the work of the British government in Afghanistan - it's noted by all of us," he said.

The governor said insurgent groups had been effectively dismantled in Helmand's Nad-e-Ali, Marjah, Nawar and Gereshk districts as a result of recent joint offensives between Afghan and international forces.

"The insurgents are not able to have 10 or 15 people in their groups, this means that they were broken into pieces and they were defeated," Mangal said.

He said he had ordered his staff to use only roads - rather than helicopters - to access those areas in the future, to demonstrate the improved security.

Mangal also said Afghan officials are likely to take lone security control for some pockets of his province within 12 months, part of the longer term NATO strategy to hand responsibility for all provinces to local forces and allow the U.S. and allies to withdraw combat troops in 2015.

"We have achieved a lot and I share the pain of families who have heard that their loved ones have been killed in Afghanistan," Mangal said. "As a father I can feel how difficult it must be for a family to hear that their son or daughter has been killed."
Two Camp Pendleton Marines killed in Afghanistan
Rogue Afghan soldier suspected in shooting on base

Two Camp Pendleton Marines fatally wounded at a patrol base in southern Afghanistan appear to have been shot by a rogue Afghan soldier, the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force and NATO representatives said Sunday.

The Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment who died Nov. 4 had been identified Saturday by the Pentagon as Lance Cpl. Brandon W. Pearson, 21, of Arvada, Colo., and Lance Cpl. Matthew J. Broehm, 22, of Flagstaff, Ariz.

Their deaths brought the toll of Marines killed in action since 3/5 moved into the Sangin area of northeastern Helmand province in October to 12, including four felled in a single bomb attack on their mine-resistant all terrain vehicle.

Initial reports indicate that the Marines were standing post on base when an Afghan National Army soldier allegedly fired on them and then fled, regional representatives for NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan said Sunday.

“Our thoughts and prayers are with the families, friends, and unit members of these fallen Marines,” said Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the Marine from Camp Pendleton who leads NATO's Regional Command Southwest. “We offer our deepest sympathies and want to ensure all know the sacrifices these Marines have made in our commitment to the safety and security of the Afghan people."

The Marines are working closely with Afghan forces in Helmand province, living with them on base and patrolling side by side, to train them to assume their own security responsibilities in advance of an eventual U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

“The allegations of this criminal act are not indicative of the quality and professionalism of Afghan soldiers whom we train, mentor, and partner with," Mills added.
A joint investigation into the attack is being conducted by Afghan National Security Forces and International Security Assistance Force authorities.

The Taliban had claimed responsibility last week for the attack.

Gen. James Amos, the commandant of the Marine Corps, said Saturday during a visit to San Diego that insurgents are fighting around Sangin and the approach to the strategic Kajaki dam to retain one of their last strongholds in Helmand province.

The Marines are cleaning out the Taliban in those areas, he said, but there is no question in light of the recent casualties that "the fight we’re in is tough right now."

The British relinquished command of the area in September to consolidate with other United Kingdom forces in central Helmand province, after suffering heavy casualties around Sangin.

Camp Pendleton's 3/5 battalion replaced Twentynine Palms Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, who served an abbreviated tour there during the British hand-over. A company of Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment had also served in the area in 2008, when they lost three Marines killed in action.

Both Pearson and Broehm had enlisted in September 2007 and were deployed on their first combat tours, the 1st Marine Division said.

Pearson's sister Ashley told the Denver Post: "He didn't want us to mourn but more or less celebrate his life." The family is thinking of toasting him with his favorite whiskey at an Irish-style funeral.
Arizona Marine dies in combat in Afghanistan
by Stephanie Snyder - Nov. 9, 2010 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

Only days after his March wedding, Matthew Broehm handed his wife a letter and boarded a bus that would take him back to Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton.

"Baby, don't open this letter until I get home," he said.

Liana Broehm struggled to put the letter aside, but decided to wait patiently for her husband's return. This week, however, she learned that her wait would be far shorter than she thought.

Broehm, 22, a Marine lance corporal from Williams, was killed Thursday while conducting combat operations in Afghanistan's Helmand province. Marine Lance Cpl. Brandon W. Pearson, 21, of Arvada, Colo., also was killed, according to the Department of Defense.

After Liana, 18, was told her husband had died in combat, she said she knew it was time to read the letter he had given her months ago.

"(The letter) said, 'If you are reading this, then I didn't make it back'," Liana said. "He apologized for not keeping his promise."

The youngest in his family, Broehm also leaves behind his parents, a sister and two brothers.

Broehm enlisted in the Marine Corps in September 2007 and was assigned to the 1st Marine Division based at Camp Pendleton, about 40 miles north of San Diego.

Broehm decided to join the Marines because he felt it was God's calling, Liana said. He planned to join the ministry after he finished his four years of military service. He had hoped to be a youth pastor and head a church some day, she said.

Alicia Broehm, 24, of Williams, said her brother's faith was strong even at a young age. When he was 10, she said, he walked up to a karate instructor and asked him, "Do you know Jesus? Because he loves you."

"From a very young age he was on fire for Christ," Alicia said.

He was deployed on Sept. 28 to Afghanistan for his first combat mission, Liana said. He had just a year of service left.

Liana was able to stay in contact with her husband while he was in Afghanistan, speaking to him about every 1 1/2 weeks. She called their last conversations "a gift from God." They were able to talk two consecutive days for more than an hour each day, which she said was very rare.

Now, she added, "We're celebrating the fact that his spirit has gone to be with Jesus. There's nothing to be mourning over. He is with God now, and he is so happy."

A service will be held at a Williams church Nov. 20 to celebrate his life.

"I will always love Matt, he will always be my husband," Liana said. "He died a hero."
Arvada Marine Brandon Pearson, 21, killed in Afghanistan

By Yesenia Robles
The Denver Post
Posted: 11/06/2010 01:00:00 AM MDT

Brandon Pearson

Knowing the dangers he would face in Afghanistan, Brandon Pearson took full advantage of life in the days before his deployment five weeks ago.

"He always said he would come home safe, but just in case, before he left, he hung out a lot and tried to do as much as possible," said his younger sister, Ashley.

Pearson, a Marine, was killed in Afghanistan on Thursday morning, according to his family. He was on his second overseas tour of duty, but his first to Afghanistan.

The Defense Department would not yet confirm the death, but family members said they are flying to Maryland today to identify the body.

In the days before his deployment, Pearson, 21, of Arvada, spent time with his family at a wedding and outdoor barbecues, and spent an entire day riding his motorcycle with his dad, Mike.

"It was great; we rode through Golden Gate Canyon and hung out in Evergreen," Pearson's dad said. "We were really close."

Family members said they were told Pearson died in an ambulance on the way to a hospital.

"It makes a huge difference that he didn't die here," his only sister said. "I keep thinking about what was going through his head; he had to know."

Pearson last contacted his family a week ago, letting them know he would be busy on patrol and unable to contact them for about a month.

"He never wrote once that he hated it, though I know he didn't want to be there anymore," Ashley said. "He couldn't wait to come home."

Pearson was set to return in April and end his military service in September. Just before his deployment, the family celebrated that Pearson had been promised a job with SWAT as soon as he returned. "He had always wanted to shoot for that but wasn't sure if he had the right qualifications," his sister said. "So he was real excited."

On Friday, she remembered an outgoing and brave brother, who also made her feel brave sometimes.

"I hate sharks, but on this trip to Hawaii he convinced me to go on a shark encounter, and I ended up loving it," Ashley said. "I definitely did it because he was the one constant person I always trusted."

As far as what her brother could have been thinking before his death, she thinks he made his peace.

"He didn't want us to mourn but more or less celebrate his life," she said.

The family is considering an Irish-style funeral with Pearson's favorite whiskey, either Crown Royal or Jameson Irish.

"We used to have a saying," said his mother, Wendy. "This too shall pass."
U.S. Marines take on Afghan valley that bled Brits

More aggressive strategy aims to finally rout Taliban from crossroads of gun running, drug trade

Dusan Vranic / AP
Lance Cpl. Andreas Padilla, left, of Los Angeles, and Sgt. Freddia Cavasos, of Visalia, Calif., with India company, 3rd Battalion 5th Marines, First Marine Division, return fire during a patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan on Sunday.

By SEBASTIAN ABBOT

SANGIN, Afghanistan — U.S. Marines who recently inherited this lush river valley in southern Helmand province from British forces have tossed aside their predecessor's playbook in favor of a more aggressive strategy to tame one of the most violent places in Afghanistan.

U.S. commanders say success is critical in Sangin district — where British forces suffered nearly one-third of their deaths in the war — because it is the last remaining sanctuary in Helmand where the Taliban can freely process the opium and heroin that largely fund the insurgency.

The district also serves as a key crossroads to funnel drugs, weapons and fighters throughout Helmand and into neighboring Kandahar province, the spiritual heartland of the Taliban and the most important battleground for coalition forces.

The U.S.-led coalition hopes its offensive in the south will kill or capture key Taliban commanders, rout militants from their strongholds and break the insurgency's back. That will allow the coalition and the Afghans to improve government services, bring new development and a sense of security.

"Sangin has been an area where drug lords, Taliban and people who don't want the government to come in and legitimize things have holed up," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. The unit took over responsibility for Sangin in mid-October nearly a month after the British withdrew.

That withdrawal — after more than 100 deaths over four years of combat — has raised concerns among some in Britain about the perception of U.S. Marines finishing a job the British couldn't handle. Many claimed that happened in the Iraqi city of Basra in 2007.

U.S. commanders denied that's the case in Sangin and said the withdrawal was just the final step in consolidating British forces in central Helmand and leaving the north and south to the Americans. Sangin is located in the north of the province.

Change in strategy

But one of the first things the Marines did when they took over Sangin was close roughly half the
22 patrol bases the British set up throughout the district — a clear rejection of the main pillar of Britain's strategy, which was based on neighborhood policing tactics used in Northern Ireland.

The bases were meant to improve security in Sangin, but the British ended up allocating a large percentage of their soldiers to protect them from being overrun by the Taliban. That gave the insurgents almost total freedom of movement in the district.

"The fact that a lot of those patrol bases were closed down frees up maneuver forces so that you can go out and take the fight to the enemy," Morris said during an interview at the battalion's main base in the district center, Forward Operating Base Jackson.

As Morris spoke, the sound of heavy machine gun fire and mortar explosions echoed in the background for nearly 30 minutes as Marines tried to kill insurgents who were firing at the base from a set of abandoned compounds about 500 feet away.

The Marines later called in an AC-130 gunship to launch a Hellfire missile, a 500-pound bomb and a precision-guided artillery round at the compounds, rocking the base with deafening explosions that shook dirt loose from the ceilings of the tents. Tribal elders later said the munitions killed seven Taliban fighters.

The battalion has been in more than 100 firefights since it arrived, and the proximity of many of them to FOB Jackson illustrates just how much freedom of movement the Taliban still have in Sangin.

The Marines have worked to improve security by significantly increasing the number of patrols compared to the British and by pushing into areas north and south of the district center where British forces rarely went. That process started when the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment deployed to Sangin in July and fought beside the British until the current battalion took over.

Call for more troops

Even though the battalion has slightly fewer forces than the 1,200-strong British Royal Marines unit that was here previously, commanders say they have been able to step up the number of patrols because they have far fewer Marines stuck guarding bases.

But some analysts have speculated that the coalition would need at least one more battalion in Sangin if it wanted to clear and hold the whole district. Some Marines said privately that more forces would be necessary, especially in the Upper Sangin Valley where coalition troops had not gone in years until recently.

The battalion's current area of operations is roughly 25 square miles and contains a mix of lush fields around the Helmand River, dense clusters of tall mud compounds and patches of barren desert. It contains some 25,000 people, but many of Sangin's residents live outside the area in which the Marines operate. The entire district is roughly 200 square miles, and district governor Mohammad Sharif said it houses about 100,000 people.

The battalion has gotten help from a pair of Marine reconnaissance companies operating in the Upper Sangin Valley and a company of Georgian soldiers based on the West side of the Helmand River. There are also several hundred Afghan army and police in Sangin, but they are fairly dependent on the Marines for supplies and logistics.

In addition to conducting more patrols, the Marine battalion has adopted a more aggressive posture than the British, according to Afghan army Lt. Mohammad Anwar, who has been in Sangin for two years.

'Marines fight back'

"When the Taliban attacked, the British would retreat into their base, but the Marines fight back," said Anwar.
Insurgents fired at members of 1st Platoon, India Company, during a recent patrol near the battalion's main base, and the Marines responded with a deafening roar of machine gun fire, grenades, and mortars. They also tried to launch a rocket that turned out to be a dud.

"The Taliban like to engage us, and I like to make it an unfair fight," said India Company's commander, Capt. Chris Esrey of Havelock, North Carolina. "If you shoot at us with 7.62 (millimeter bullets), I'm going to respond with rockets."

But Taliban attacks have taken their toll. Thirteen Marines have been killed and 49 wounded since the battalion arrived. Most of those casualties have come from IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, that the insurgents hide in compounds, along trails and in dense fields where they are hard to detect.

The Marines believe their operations are beginning to improve security, and they say tips have started to trickle in from locals on the location of IEDs.

But some villagers have complained about the increased number of patrols since the Taliban often plant IEDs along the routes the Marines travel.

"You should open more bases and patrol less because when you patrol on foot, the Taliban bury IEDs that threaten children and other civilians," local landowner Tuma Khan told a Marine during a patrol.
An infantryman from Camp Pendleton's 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment was killed in action in Afghanistan, the Pentagon announced Monday.

Lance Cpl. Randy R. Braggs, 21, of Sierra Vista, Ariz., died Nov. 6 while conducting combat operations in Helmand province, the Department of Defense said.

Braggs was the 13th member of 3/5 killed since the battalion moved into the Sangin area of northeastern Helmand province in October, including four felled in a single bomb attack on their mine-resistant all terrain vehicle.

Two other Marines were fatally shot at a patrol base last week in Sangin, the Marines said. Initial reports indicate they were attacked by a rogue Afghan soldier who then fled, according to U.S. and NATO officials in Afghanistan. An investigation into the incident is continuing.
Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment take cover on Wednesday in Sangin, Afghanistan, a town on the road to a hydroelectric dam that feeds the farms of Helmand province. — Associated Press

Fighting gets intense in key Afghan town

Camp Pendleton battalion has lost 14 Marines in a little more than a month of fighting

Written by Gretel C. Kovach 8:35 p.m., Nov. 10, 2010

Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills says Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment drew one of the toughest assignments in Marine Corps history. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

CAMP PENDLETON — Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in southwestern Afghanistan, said Wednesday that Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment drew one of the toughest assignments in Marine Corps history when it was sent in October to Sangin, a strategic crossroads town in Helmand province.

As security improves in other districts, insurgents are putting up a fierce fight with the Marines for control of Sangin, their last major population center in the province, Mills said via videoconference from Afghanistan.

“The bravery and the courage of the Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines stands with any unit in Marine Corps history, any unit,” Mills said.

Earlier that morning, the Pentagon announced the battalion’s 14th Marine killed in action in a little over a month operating in Sangin.

In the latest death, the son of a Marine general was killed on foot patrol by a roadside bomb. 2nd Lt. Robert M. Kelly, a 29-year-old infantryman serving his third combat tour, died Tuesday. His father, Lt. Gen. John F. Kelly, is the head of Marine Forces Reserve based in New Orleans; he previously led Camp Pendleton’s 1st Marine Expeditionary Force in Iraq.

“I don’t think there’s ever been a battalion in the Marine Corps at any time, in World War II, the Korean conflict, Vietnam, that has pulled a tougher mission than what 3/5 has right now,” Mills said,
“that has taken more hardship initially than 3/5, but has responded with more gallantry, with more valor, and more dedication and courage than the Marines of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines.”

Mills did not mention Kelly’s death directly. But it was an emotional day for the Marine Corps and its relatively small and tight-knit family of commanding officers. As the Corps celebrated its 235th birthday with cake-cutting ceremonies and balls, Marines from the commandant on down mourned the young officer.

“I am deeply saddened at the news of the loss of Lt. Gen. Kelly’s son, 2nd Lt. Robert M. Kelly,” Gen. James Amos, the Marine Corps commandant, said in a statement. “The Corps will always remember 2nd Lt. Kelly and all of our fallen heroes who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their country.”

British forces had suffered heavy casualties in Sangin before they relinquished command there in September, consolidating with other U.K. forces in central Helmand province. They had suffered more than 100 deaths there over four years, almost one-third of their total fatalities in Afghanistan.

The area is on the road to the strategic Kajaki hydroelectric dam, which turned the deserts of the province into Afghanistan’s bread basket. The Marines found Sangin to be a major transit point for Taliban fighters and drug runners.

Sangin “is the last piece of prime real estate that the insurgents are contesting (in Helmand province),” Mills said. “Once he (the enemy) loses that, having already lost the entire lower valley and the lower river basins, he will have a difficult time re-establishing himself in the province. He will be resigned to living in the desert, living in the fringes of the province.”

Traditionally, Afghan insurgents take the winter off to plant their crops and regroup. The Marines will not allow the enemy that luxury this year, Mills said. “We intend to keep the pressure on him,” he said, with an aggressive winter campaign.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the shooting deaths of two Marines last week at a Sangin patrol base, apparently by a rogue Afghan army soldier. The investigation is continuing, but Mills said Wednesday that the incident appeared to be an outburst of rage by an individual Afghan soldier suffering from personal problems.

“There is no indication that he was a member of the insurgency, no indication that the insurgency infiltrated us in any way, shape or form,” Mills said.

The Afghan soldier suspected of the crime fled. Although the circumstances of the deaths made the loss of the two Marines even worse, Mills said, he did not anticipate a loss of trust between the Marines and the Afghan forces on small patrol bases throughout Helmand province.

“I have been approached by Afghan officials at all levels to express their deepest sympathy for that incident, and I have accepted their apologies for being very, very sincere,” he said.

Terry Walker, a retired Marine who advises the commanding general on the training of Afghan security forces, said Wednesday that the apparently murderous actions of the Afghan soldier suspected in the Marines’ deaths did not reflect on what had been a highly successful training program.

“Our Marines live with, work with, and are in close proximity constantly with Afghan soldiers,” Walker said. “We will look at this situation to determine what things we should change, but we are not going to stop partnering man to man with the Afghan security forces, because the Afghan security force is our exit strategy. We have to give them the confidence to stand on their own two feet.”

Mills said in coming weeks the Marines will be boosting the number of Afghan police recruits in Sangin, and increasing equipment and training. They also plan to continue expanding their security perimeter around the center of Sangin, and eventually to push Marine forces all the way up the road to the dam.

“I don’t have to tell you that 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines have had a tough month. They have inherited a very difficult mission up there, and they have done it very, very well,” Mills said. “I know that body counts are not a measure we want to use these days, but I can tell you that with the heavy casualties that
they have suffered, they have inflicted 10 times that amount on the enemy.”

Despite the intense fighting near Sangin, other areas of the province have become calmer, Mills said. In Marjah, the scene of a major Marine offensive in February, hundreds of children now are able to go to school.

At a recent school opening there, Mills said he was surprised to see several teenage boys standing in the back of a third-grade class. It turned out the teenagers had not been able to attend school under the Taliban, but they wanted to read and write so much that they were willing to attend class with 7- and 8-year-olds, Mills said.

“That is probably the thing I am proudest of. I know there is a book back home that says each school in Afghanistan cost three cups of tea. Well, those schools didn’t cost three cups of tea; those schools cost dead and wounded,” Mills said.

“But we got them built. They’re up and running, they are servicing the people and they are going to change the future of Afghanistan,” he said. “Once you have an educated population, the game changes.”
Lance Cpl. James B. Stack, a 20-year-old rifleman from Arlington Heights, Ill., was killed Wednesday by small-arms fire while on foot patrol in Helmand province, Pentagon and Marine officials announced Thursday.

Stack was serving with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment on his first combat deployment. His death was the sixth fatality in a week from Camp Pendleton's 1st Marine Expeditionary Force in southwestern Afghanistan and the battalion's 15th Marine killed in combat since Oct. 8th.

The 3/5 Battalion is fighting insurgents for control of Sangin, which is the last major population center in Helmand province under Taliban control, according to NATO's southwest regional commander, Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills. The battalion deployed to Sangin in October, shortly after British forces relinquished command of the area after suffering heavy casualties.

Stack's personal service awards include the Purple Heart, Combat Action Ribbon, National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal and Afghanistan Campaign Medal.

"The Marines and sailors of the 1st Marine Division mourn the loss of Lance Cpl. Stack. Our heartfelt condolences go out to his family," the division announced.

**Honor and Sacrifice – LtGen. John F. Kelly**
Published by Matthew LoFiego at 1:15 pm under Current Events, Soldier’s Views

“Some people spend an entire lifetime wondering if they made a difference in the world. But, the Marines don’t have that problem.” – President Ronald Reagan, 1985

**Background**

There is no greater loss than that of one’s child. Military members know this loss far too well, especially when service to the nation is a family calling. For one of the Marines’ most influential generals, this Veterans Day became more meaningful and tragic due to the loss of his son just days before the holiday. Lieutenant General John F. Kelly held several command positions in the Iraq War, most recently as the Commanding General of the Multi National Force-West, a post he held until February of 2009. On November 9th of this year, his son, 1stLt. Robert M. Kelly, fell during battle while on his third combat deployment since 9/11. The overwhelming feeling of sadness would be enough to crush a normal person. Instead, General Kelly kept a commitment to speak in St. Louis in honor of the day of remembrance. This speech is becoming viral, and for all the right reasons. It exemplifies the spirit and honor of the Marine Corps, and of a terrible sacrifice.

Following the speech is a copy of the statement General Kelly put out regarding the loss of his son, as well as links to some of his other speeches that are worth every moment to read.

**Veterans Day Speech**

The following is a full transcript of the speech made by General Kelly in St. Louis to commemorate Veterans Day, November 11, 2010:

Nine years ago, four commercial aircraft took off from Boston, Newark, and Washington. Took off fully loaded with men, women and children—all innocent, and all soon to die. These aircraft were targeted at the World Trade Towers in New York, the Pentagon, and likely the Capitol in Washington, D.C… Three found their mark. No American alive old enough to remember will ever forget exactly where they were, exactly what they were doing, and exactly who they were with at the moment they watched the aircraft dive into the World Trade Towers on what was, until then, a beautiful morning in New York City. Within the hour 3,000 blameless human beings would be vaporized, incinerated, or crushed in the most agonizing ways imaginable. The most wretched among them—over 200—driven mad by heat, hopelessness, and utter desperation leapt to their deaths from 1,000 feet above Lower Manhattan. We soon learned hundreds more were murdered at the Pentagon, and in a Pennsylvania farmer’s field.

Once the buildings had collapsed and the immensity of the attack began to register most of us had no idea of what to do, or where to turn. As a nation, we were scared like we had not been scared for generations. Parents hugged their children to gain as much as to give comfort. Strangers embraced in the streets stunned and crying on one another’s shoulders seeking solace, as much as to give it. Instantaneously, American patriotism soared not “as the last refuge” as our national-cynical class would say, but in the darkest times Americans seek refuge in family, and in country, remembering that strong men and women have always stepped forward to protect the nation when the need was dire—and it was so God awful dire that day—and remains so today.

There was, however, a small segment of America that made very different choices that day…actions the rest of America stood in awe of on 9/11 and every day since. The first were our firefighters and police, their ranks decimated that day as they ran towards—not away from—danger and certain death. They were doing what they’d sworn to do—”protect and serve”—and went to their graves having fulfilled their sacred oath.

Then there was your Armed Forces, and I know I am a little biased in my opinion here, but the best of them are Marines. Most wearing the Eagle, Globe and Anchor today joined the unbroken ranks of American heroes after that fateful day not for money, or promises of bonuses or travel to exotic liberty ports, but for one reason and one reason alone; because of the terrible assault on our way of life by men they knew must be killed and extremist ideology that must be destroyed. A plastic flag in their car window was not their response to the murderous assault on our country. No, their response was a commitment to protect the nation swearing an oath to their God to do so, to their deaths. When future generations ask why America is still free and the heyday of Al Qaeda and their terrorist allies was counted in days rather than in centuries as the extremists themselves predicted, our
hometown heroes—soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines—can say, “because of me and people like me who risked all to protect millions who will never know my name.”

As we sit here right now, we should not lose sight of the fact that America is at risk in a way it has never been before. Our enemy fights for an ideology based on an irrational hatred of who we are. Make no mistake about that no matter what certain elements of the “chattering class” relentlessly churn out. We did not start this fight, and it will not end until the extremists understand that we as a people will never lose our faith or our courage. If they persist, these terrorists and extremists and the nations that provide them sanctuary, they must know they will continue to be tracked down and captured or killed. America’s civilian and military protectors both here at home and overseas have for nearly nine years fought this enemy to a standstill and have never for a second “wondered why.” They know, and are not afraid. Their struggle is your struggle. They hold in disdain those who claim to support them but not the cause that takes their innocence, their limbs, and even their lives. As a democracy—“We the People”—and that by definition is every one of us—sent them away from home and hearth to fight our enemies. We are all responsible. I know it doesn’t apply to those of us here tonight but if anyone thinks you can somehow thank them for their service, and not support the cause for which they fight—America’s survival—then they are lying to themselves and rationalizing away something in their lives, but, more importantly, they are slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to the nation.

Since this generation’s “day of infamy” the American military has handed our ruthless enemy defeat—after-defeat but it will go on for years, if not decades, before this curse has been eradicated. We have done this by unceasing pursuit day and night into whatever miserable lair Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and their allies, might slither into to lay in wait for future opportunities to strike a blow at freedom. America’s warriors have never lost faith in their mission, or doubted the correctness of their cause. They face dangers everyday that their counymen safe and comfortable this night cannot imagine. But this has always been the case in all the wars our military have been sent to fight. Not to build empires, or enslave peoples, but to free those held in the grip of tyrants while at the same time protecting our nation, its citizens, and our shared values. And, ladies and gentlemen, think about this, the only territory we as a people have ever asked for from any nation we have fought alongside, or against, since our founding, the entire extent of our overseas empire, as a few hundred acres of land for the 24 American cemeteries scattered around the globe. It is in these cemeteries where 220,000 of our sons and daughters rest in glory for eternity, or are memorialized forever because their earthly remains are lost forever in the deepest depths of the oceans, or never recovered from far flung and nameless battlefields. As a people, we can be proud because billions across the planet today live free, and billions yet unborn will also enjoy the same freedom and a chance at prosperity because America sent its sons and daughters out to fight and die for them, as much as for us.

Yes, we are at war, and are winning, but you wouldn’t know it because successes go unreported, and only when something does go sufficiently or is sufficiently controversial, it is highlighted by the media elite that then sets up the “know it all” chattering class to offer their endless criticism. These self-proclaimed experts always seem to know better—but have never themselves been in the arena. We are at war and like it or not, that is a fact. It is not Bush’s war, and it is not Obama’s war, it is our war and we can’t run away from it. Even if we wanted to surrender, there is no one to surrender to. Our enemy is savage, offers absolutely no quarter, and has a single focus and that is either kill every one of us here at home, or enslave us with a sick form of extremism that serves no God or purpose that decent men and women could ever grasp. St Louis is as much at risk as is New York and Washington, D.C… Given the opportunity to do another 9/11, our merciless enemy would do it today, tomorrow, and every day thereafter. If, and most in the know predict that it is only a matter of time, he acquires nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, these extremists will use these weapons of mass murder against us without a moment’s hesitation. These butchers we fight killed more than 3,000 innocents on 9/11. As horrible as that death toll was, consider for a moment that the monsters that organized those strikes against New York and Washington, D.C. killed only 3,000 not because that was enough to make their sick and demented point, but because he couldn’t figure out how to kill 30,000, or 300,000, or 30 million of us that terrible day. I don’t know why they hate us, and I don’t care. We have a saying in the Marine Corps and that is “no better friend, no worse enemy, than a U.S. Marine.” We always hope for the first, friendship, but are certainly more than ready for the second. If its death they want, its death they will get, and the Marines will continue showing them the way to hell if that’s what will make them happy.

Because our America hasn’t been successfully attacked since 9/11 many forget because we want to forget…to move on. As Americans we all dream and hope for peace, but we must be realistic and acknowledge that hope is
never an option or course of action when the stakes are so high. Others are less realistic or less committed, or are working their own agendas, and look for ways to blame past presidents or in some other way to rationalize a way out of this war. The problem is our enemy is not willing to let us go. Regardless of how much we wish this nightmare would go away, our enemy will stay forever on the offensive until he hurts us so badly we surrender, or we kill him first. To him, this is not about our friendship with Israel, or about territory, resources, jobs, or economic opportunity in the Middle East. No, it is about us as a people. About our freedom to worship any God we please in any way we want. It is about the worth of every man, and the worth of every woman, and their equality in the eyes of God and the law; of how we live our lives with our families, inside the privacy of our own homes. It’s about the God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable right.” As Americans we hold these truths to be self-evident. He doesn’t. We love what we have; he despises who we are. Our positions can never be reconciled. He cannot be deterred…only defeated. Compromise is out of the question.

It is a fact that our country today is in a life and death struggle against an enemy evil, but America as a whole is certainly not at war. Not as a country. Not as a people. Today, only a tiny fraction-less than a percent-shoulder the burden of fear and sacrifice, and they should it for the rest of us. Their sons and daughters who serve are men and women of character who continue to believe in this country enough to put life and limb on the line without qualification, and without thought of personal gain, and they serve so that the sons and daughters of the other 99% don’t have to. No big deal, though, as Marines have always been “the first to fight” paying in full the bill that comes with being free…for everyone else.

The comforting news for every American is that our men and women in uniform, and every Marine, is as good today as any in our history. As good as what their heroic, under-appreciated, and largely abandoned fathers and uncles were in Vietnam, and their grandfathers were in Korea and World War II. They have the same steel in their backs and have made their own mark etching forever places like Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad, Iraq, and Helmand and Sangin, Afghanistan that are now part of the legend and stand just as proudly alongside Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima, Inchon, Hue City, Khe Sanh, and Ashau Valley, Vietnam. None of them have ever asked what their country could do for them, but always and with their lives asked what they could do for America. While some might think we have produced yet another generation of materialistic, consumerist and self-absorbed young people, those who serve today have broken the mold and stepped out as real men, and real women, who are already making their own way in life while protecting ours. They know the real strength of a platoon, a battalion, or a country that is not worshiping at the altar of diversity, but in a melting point that stitches and strengthens by a sense of shared history, values, customs, hopes and dreams all of which unifies a people making them stronger, as opposed to an unruly gagle of “hyphenated” or “multi-cultural individuals.”

And what are they like in combat in this war? Like Marines have been throughout our history. In my three tours in combat as an infantry officer and commanding general, I never saw one of them hesitate, or do anything other than lean into the fire and with no apparent fear of death or injury take the fight to our enemies. As anyone who has ever experienced combat knows, when it starts, when the explosions and tracers are everywhere and the calls for the Corpsman are screamed from the throats of men who know they are dying-when seconds seem like hours and it all becomes slow motion and fast forward at the same time-and the only rational act is to stop, get down, save yourself-they don’t. When no one would call them coward for cowering behind a wall or in a hole, slave to the most basic of all human instincts-survival-none of them do. It doesn’t matter if it’s an IED, a suicide bomber, mortar attack, sniper, fighting in the upstairs room of a house, or all of it at once; when they talk, swagger, and, most importantly, fight today in the same way America’s Marines have since the Tun Tavern. They also know whose shoulders they stand on, and they will never shame any Marine living or dead.

We can also take comfort in the fact that these young Americans are not born killers, but are good and decent young men and women who for going on ten years have performed remarkable acts of bravery and selflessness to a cause they have decided is bigger and more important than themselves. Only a few months ago they were delivering your paper, stocking shelves in the local grocery store, worshiping in church on Sunday, or playing hockey on local ice. Like my own two sons who are Marines and have fought in Iraq, and today in Sangin, Afghanistan, they are also the same kids that drove their cars too fast for your liking, and played the God-awful music of their generation too loud, but have no doubt they are the finest of their generation. Like those who went before them in uniform, we owe them everything. We owe them our safety. We owe them our prosperity. We owe them our freedom. We owe them our lives. Any one of them could have done something more self-serving with their lives as the vast majority of their age group elected to do after high school and college, but no, they
chose to serve knowing full well a brutal war was in their future. They did not avoid the basic and cherished responsibility of a citizen—the defense of country—they welcomed it. They are the very best this country produces, and have put every one of us ahead of themselves. All are heroes for simply stepping forward, and we as a people owe a debt we can never fully pay. Their legacy will be of selfless valor, the country we live in, the way we live our lives, and the freedoms the rest of their countrymen take for granted.

Over 5,000 have died thus far in this war; 8,000 if you include the innocents murdered on 9/11. They are overwhelmingly working class kids, the children of cops and firefighters, city and factory workers, school teachers and small business owners. With some exceptions they are from families short on stock portfolios and futures, but long on love of country and service to the nation. Just yesterday, too many were lost and a knock on the door late last night brought their families to their knees in a grief that will never-ever go away. Thousands more have suffered wounds since it all started, but like anyone who loses life or limb while serving others—including our firefighters and law enforcement personnel who on 9/11 were the first casualties of this war—they are not victims as they knew what they were about, and were doing what they wanted to do. The chattering class and all those who doubt America’s intentions, and resolve, endeavor to make them and their families out to be victims, but they are wrong. We who have served and are serving refuse their sympathy. Those of us who have lived in the dirt, sweat and struggle of the arena are not victims and will have none of that. Those with less of a sense of service to the nation never understand it when men and women of character step forward to look danger and adversity straight in the eye, refusing to blink, or give ground, even to their own deaths. The protected can’t begin to understand the price paid so they and their families can sleep safe and free at night. No, they are not victims, but are warriors, your warriors, and warriors are never victims regardless of how and where they fall.

Death, or fear of death, has no power over them. Their paths are paved by sacrifice, sacrifices they gladly make…for you. They prove themselves everyday on the field of battle…for you. They fight in every corner of the globe…for you. They live to fight…for you, and they never rest because there is always another battle to be won in the defense of America.

I will leave you with a story about the kind of people they are…about the quality of the steel in their backs…about the kind of dedication they bring to our country while they serve in uniform and forever after as veterans. Two years ago when I was the Commander of all U.S. and Iraqi forces, in fact, the 22nd of April 2008, two Marine infantry battalions, 1/9 “The Walking Dead,” and 2/8 were switching out in Ramadi. One battalion in the closing days of their deployment going home very soon, the other just starting its seven-month combat tour. Two Marines, Corporal Jonathan Yale and Lance Corporal Jordan Haerter, 22 and 20 years old respectively, one from each battalion, were assuming the watch together at the entrance gate at the entrance gate of an outpost that contained a makeshift barracks housing 50 Marines. The same broken down ramshackle building was also home to 100 Iraqi police, also my men and our allies in the fight against the terrorists in Ramadi, a city until recently the most dangerous city on earth and owned by Al Qaeda. Yale was a dirt poor mixed-race kid from Virginia with a wife and daughter, and a mother and sister who lived with him and he supported as well. He did this on a yearly salary of less than $23,000. Haerter, on the other hand, was a middle class white kid from Long Island. They were from two completely different worlds. Had they not joined the Marines they would never have met each other, or understood that multiple America’s exist simultaneously depending on one’s race, education level, economic status, and where you might have been born. But they were Marines, combat Marines, forged in the same crucible of Marine training, and because of this bond they were brothers as close, or closer, than if they were born of the same woman.

The mission orders they received from the sergeant squad leader I am sure went something like: “Okay you two clowns, stand this post and let no unauthorized personnel or vehicles pass.” “You clear?” I am also sure Yale and Haerter then rolled their eyes and said in unison something like: “Yes Sergeant,” with just enough attitude that made the point without saying the words, “No kidding sweetheart, we know what we’re doing.” They then relieved two other Marines on watch and took up their post at the entry control point of Joint Security Station Nasser, in the Sophia section of Ramadi, Al Anbar, Iraq.

A few minutes later a large blue truck turned down the alley way—perhaps 60-70 yards in length—and sped its way through the serpentine of concrete jersey walls. The truck stopped just short of where the two were posted and detonated, killing them both catastrophically. Twenty-four brick masonry houses were damaged or destroyed. A mosque 100 yards away collapsed. The truck’s engine came to rest two hundred yards away knocking most of a house down before it stopped. Our explosive experts reckoned the blast was made of 2,000 pounds of explosives. Two died, and because these two young infantrymen didn’t have it in their DNA to run
from danger, they saved 150 of their Iraqi and American brothers-in-arms.

When I read the situation report about the incident a few hours after it happened I called the regimental commander for details as something about this struck me as different. Marines dying or being seriously wounded is commonplace in combat. We expect Marines regardless of rank or MOS to stand their ground and do their duty, and even die in the process, if that is what the mission takes. But this just seemed different. The regimental commander had just returned from the site and he agreed, but reported that there were no American witnesses to the event-just Iraqi police. I figured if there was any chance of finding out what actually happened and then to decorate the two Marines to acknowledge their bravery, I’d have to do it as a combat award that requires two eye-witnesses and we figured the bureaucrats back in Washington would never buy Iraqi statements. If it had any chance at all, it had to come under the signature of a general officer.

I traveled to Ramadi the next day and spoke individually to a half-dozen Iraqi police all of whom told the same story. The blue truck turned down into the alley and immediately sped up as it made its way through the serpentine. They all said, “We knew immediately what was going on as soon as the two Marines began firing.”

The Iraqi police then related that some of them also fired, and then to a man, ran for safety just prior to the explosion. All survived. Many were injured…some seriously. One of the Iraqis elaborated and with tears welling up said, “They’d run like any normal man would to save his life.” “What he didn’t know until then,” he said, “and what he learned that very instant, was that Marines are not normal.” Choking past the emotion he said, “Sir, in the name of God no sane man would have stood there and done what they did.” “No sane man.” “They saved us all.”

What we didn’t know at the time, and only learned a couple of days later after I wrote a summary and submitted both Yale and Haerter for posthumous Navy Crosses, was that one of our security cameras, damaged initially in the blast, recorded some of the suicide attack. It happened exactly as the Iraqis had described it. It took exactly six seconds from when the truck entered the alley until it detonated.

You can watch the last six seconds of their young lives. Putting myself in their heads I supposed it took about a second for the two Marines to separately come to the same conclusion about what was going on once the truck came into their view at the far end of the alley. Exactly no time to talk it over, or call the sergeant to ask what they should do. Only enough time to take half an instant and think about what the sergeant told them to do only a few minutes before: “…let no unauthorized personnel or vehicles pass.” The two Marines had about five seconds left to live.

It took maybe another two seconds for them to present their weapons, take aim, and open up. By this time the truck was half-way through the barriers and gaining speed the whole time. Here, the recording shows a number of Iraqi police, some of whom had fired their AKs, now scattering like the normal and rational men they were-some running right past the Marines. They had three seconds left to live.

For about two seconds more, the recording shows the Marines’ weapons firing non-stop…the truck’s windshield exploding into shards of glass as their rounds take it apart and tore in to the body of the son-of-a-bitch who is trying to get past them to kill their brothers-American and Iraqi-bedded down in the barracks totally unaware of the fact that their lives at that moment depended entirely on two Marines standing their ground. If they had been aware, they would have known they were safe…because two Marines stood between them and a crazed suicide bomber. The recording shows the truck careening to a stop immediately in front of the two Marines. In all of the instantaneous violence Yale and Haerter never hesitated. By all reports and by the recording, they never stepped back. They never even started to step aside. They never even shifted their weight. With their feet spread shoulder width apart, they leaned into the danger, firing as fast as they could work their weapons. They had only one second left to live.

The truck explodes. The camera goes blank. Two young men go to their God. Six seconds. Not enough time to think about their families, their country, their flag, or about their lives or their deaths, but more than enough time for two very brave young men to do their duty…into eternity. That is the kind of people who are on watch all over the world tonight-for you.

We Marines believe that God gave America the greatest gift he could bestow to man while he lived on this earth-freedom. We also believe he gave us another gift nearly as precious-our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines-to safeguard that gift and guarantee no force on this earth can every steal it away. It has been my distinct honor to have been with you here today. Rest assured our America, this experiment in democracy started over two centuries ago, will forever remain the “land of the free and home of the brave” so long as we never run out of tough young Americans who are willing to look beyond their own self-interest and
comfortable lives, and go into the darkest and most dangerous places on earth to hunt down, and kill, those who would do us harm.

God Bless America, and….SEMPER FIDELIS!

Statement Regarding 1stLt. Robert Kelly
On November 16th, 2010, General Kelly released a statement regarding the loss of his son, carried by Sgt Grit:

Family and Friends,

As I think you all know by now our Robert was killed in action protecting our country, its people, and its values from a terrible and relentless enemy, on 9 Nov, in Sangin, Afghanistan. He was leading his Grunts on a dismounted patrol when he was taken. They are shaken, but will recover quickly and already back at it. He went quickly and thank God he did not suffer. In combat that is as good as it gets, and we are thankful. We are a broken hearted – but proud family. He was a wonderful and precious boy living a meaningful life. He was in exactly the place he wanted to be, doing exactly what he wanted to do, surrounded by the best men on this earth – his Marines and Navy Doc.

The nation he served has honored us with promoting him posthumously to First Lieutenant of Marines. We will bury our son, now 1stLt Robert Michael Kelly USMC, in Arlington National Cemetery on 22 Nov. Services will commence at 1245 at Fort Myers. We will likely have a memorial receiving at a yet to be designated funeral home on 21 Nov. The coffin will be closed. Our son Captain John Kelly USMC, himself a multi-tour combat veteran and the best big brother on this earth, will escort the body from Dover Air Force Base to Arlington. From the moment he was killed he has never been alone and will remain under the protection of a Marine to his final resting place.

Many have offered prayers for us and we thank you, but his wonderful wife Heather and the rest of the clan ask that you direct the majority of your prayers to his platoon of Marines, still in contact and in “harm’s way,” and at greater risk without his steady leadership.

Thank you all for the many kindnesses we could not get through this without you all. Thank you all for being there for us. The pain in unimaginable, and we could not do this without you.

Semper Fidelis

John Kelly
Sangin, the Fallujah of Afghanistan, and what it means to your Marines

Posted By Thomas E. Ricks  
Wednesday, November 24, 2010 - 11:25 AM

By David J. Morris
Best Defense red cell correspondent

Heroes and myths die hard among fighting men. The troops love them for the added dimension they provide to the savage grind of field life, the feeling they can give a guy that tells him that he is part of a grand saga, something that will outlive his own individual destiny. Eccentric heroes and acts of valor exist for those who need them most as evidence that a greater depth to life is possible, that sacrifice can have meaning. That, with luck, they will be remembered by history. And yet, for some reason, outside of the ranks such ideas about heroism and destiny never fail to come across as anything other than primitive fantasy, the sort of thing that if brought up in conversation at certain hipster parties will cause people to stare at you as if you had just given them a Hitler salute.

Nevertheless, these are exactly the sorts of ideals that are being tested in extremis in Sangin, a small town in southern Afghanistan where a single unit, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, has been fighting to make good on all on the hot talk about the new, improved, industrial-strength Surge and the Undeniable Genius of David Petraeus and has, as a direct result, suffered some of the worst casualties in recent history, indicative of a vicious, locked-in fight beginning to collapse in on itself like a dying star, annihilating anything that drifts too close. Fifteen killed. Forty-nine wounded. Nearly seven percent of the entire battalion dead or wounded. All in just thirty days.

Of course, to the average American, there is nothing, absolutely nothing new here. In an age of stereotypes, what is a Marine battalion other than a gang of unfortunates and semi-literate savages, all of them hailing no doubt, from the unwashed, Jesus-addled, gun-loving middle of the country, colliding head-on into the hard facts of life for the non-college-bound? Sacrifice is for saps, so the thinking goes, God knows why people go into the service these days and to take anything more than a passing interest in the whole awful show is to somehow be complicit in it.

Still, whatever else may be wrong and misguided about the war, like the inadequacy of the Iraq-centric techniques being applied to a scene that bears little resemblance on a tribal level to that country, there is something immutable, almost Homeric, happening in Sangin. It's the story of a unit filled with boys far, far from home, consumed by ideals older than the Old Testament about death, honor and human destiny.

Within the tight-knit world of the Marine grunt, 3/5 occupies a unique position. It has seen more combat than probably any unit in the Corps and been rightly decorated for it: its members have been awarded seven Navy Crosses, more than any other Marine battalion by a significant margin. At one point, there were more Navy Cross winners from 3/5 than winners of the equivalent army award in the entire U.S. Army. During the second battle for Fallujah in November 2004, it spearheaded the offensive, seizing the notorious Jolan neighborhood, home to some of the war's most hardened insurgents and took twenty-one dead. Marines from other units have been known to talk about "Darkhorse" as 3/5 is known,
with a mixture of awe and gratitude, awe at their combat record and gratitude that their unit hadn't suffered as many casualties as they had.

Of course, there was more to it than just Glory and Honor and local Iraqis, understandably, harbored certain convictions about Darkhorse. At the height of the 2007 Surge, as 3/5 was preparing to return to Fallujah, this time for occupation duty, the local Iraqi police force caught wind of it and complained to their American counterparts, demanding that anybody else other than "the butchers of Fallujah" be allowed to patrol their city. Even the Marines who 3/5 was set to replace had their doubts.

And for some Darkhorse Marines, the battalion has, at times, come to feel like an electron shit magnet, the worst sort of hard luck outfit, a unit where even the biggest storehouse of personal karma was sure to taxed to the limit, or beyond, out into that dim country where a guy begins to think of his own life as something not to be taken too seriously, death the final trip, something to be savored first-hand. Let it bleed, son, let it bleed. When I was first embedded with 3/5 in 2006, one lance corporal complained, "We always get the shit assignments." Now, a reporter who spent any time at all in Iraq was sure to hear this sort of talk from tired grunts, it was the kind of personal Delta blues that all soldiers lapse into from time-to-time, but in this case, the Marine had a point: the day I'd arrived at their camp in Habbaniyah, word was just beginning to filter in about two of the battalion's most popular Marines who had been killed by an IED, including the gunner for the battalion commander's vehicle, a burly, joke-a-minute surfer named Morrow. Hard times are the lingua franca of the Corps, there has never been any doubt on that point, but this just seemed somehow unfair.

Standing there sweating in the battalion adjutant's office that afternoon, taking in the grim news, I could feel the heat and anger the Marines around me were giving off like an invisible sun. The fraternal mystery of the Corps never ran deeper for me than it did on that day.

And what a mystery! The idiosyncrasies that make 3/5 and the Marines in general unique were the very things that many reporters and soldiers in Iraq found outrageous and even criminal. If you'd just spent a couple months embedded in Anbar and then dropped back into Baghdad with say, the 1st or the 4th Infantry Division, you were likely to get this:

"Where'd you come from?"
"Out west, AO Denver."
"With the f______ Marines? I know how they do it, it's like 'hey diddle-diddle, straight up the middle!' – F____ that, man!"

And on a certain level, it was hard to argue with them. There was always some vague, unexplainable feeling that came with being embedded with the Marines. Call it bad fate or bad luck or a conviction that living up to your own mythology was more important than living at all, but Marine units I've embedded with have always borne a different relationship with death than any army unit I spent time with. The GIs would gripe good-naturedly about all the close calls they'd had, treating death like some carping, churlish creditor, something to be resisted, staved off, for sure, but in the end, something to be ignored if at all possible. But among many of the Marines I patrolled alongside -- and 3/5 certainly stands paramount among these -- there was a tendency to get hip to the madness, the horror and rot of it, to embrace the darker angels of human nature to a degree that made your skin flush hot for a moment until you remembered that they were the ones watching your back after all, and for you and your admittedly-selfish purposes, that was a generally good thing. Madness, mythology, bad midnight sweats, these are all temporary things, no? But death, that thing, that other thing that happened to some and not to others and no, no, not to you, never to you, that thing was permanent. It was a little bit of warped, hard Chicago faith that some guys would inevitable come up with, living proof of what Sinatra was reputed to have said to a struggling alcoholic friend of his: "Whatever gets you through the night, pal." Selah.

But -- and this must be admitted -- the mythology works both ways. To the old mujaheddin fighting the Marines in Sangin, the town must seem something like the Alamo, a place to stand and die,
a treasured redoubt where a piece of eternity resides. Just like armies, places grow their own mythologies like ivy around old academic buildings and Sangin has long been a trophy to the muj. The British Royal Marines patrolled the town for almost five years and never quite got their arms around it, and in the end, the town accounted for fully one-third of all British casualties in Afghanistan. And according to the NATO commander at the time, the troops there saw "the fiercest fighting involving British troops since the Korean War."

I suspect it would shock the hell out of a lot of Marines to learn how much they have in common with the men they are fighting. It's like what Mao said: one invariably comes to resemble one's enemies. But then, for a young man in the heat of events, this is the most inconvenient of truths and one that can only be taught over the decades and only if he survives the war. It's the same lesson that the first banzai charges taught the men of the First Marine Division on Guadalcanal, what Pacific War vet William Manchester and author of *Goodbye, Darkness*, learned when he looked into the eyes of a Japanese veteran of Okinawa at an observance forty-two years afterward: in the end we learn and are shaped by our enemies and we take on similar mythologies, because, if for no other reason than the current apathetic state of America, who else could know you better, what you've been through, other than the guy who called you there and remade you and stayed with you through to the end?

*David J. Morris is a former Marine officer and the author of Storm on the Horizon: Khafji -- The Battle that Changed the Course of the Gulf War (Free Press). His work has appeared in the Virginia Quarterly Review, Slate and The Best American Nonrequired Reading series.*
US wants tribesmen to fight Taliban in Afghanistan

SANGIN, Afghanistan — When members of the Alikozai tribe rose up against the Taliban in this critical insurgent stronghold, neither coalition forces nor the government in Kabul lifted a finger to help them.

The Taliban promptly crushed the rebellion. And just to make sure everyone got the message, they chained the uprising's leader to the back of a pickup truck and dragged him to another province.

That was three years ago, when Afghanistan was not a priority for the Bush administration, coalition forces lacked resources and the Afghan government was worried about stirring up tribal rivalries.

Now, U.S. Marines hope they can persuade the Alikozai that this time will be different. They want the tribesmen to take up arms again and help drive the Taliban out of this river valley in southern Helmand province's Sangin district - the deadliest piece of real estate for coalition forces this year.

Gen. David Petraeus, the top NATO commander in Afghanistan, cites the development of local village defense forces as key to countering the Taliban. Petraeus used a similar tactic to help turn around the war in Iraq, but the Afghan government has been somewhat reluctant because of the history of armed militias destabilizing the country.

"Local defense forces are something we will try to implement throughout Sangin district, especially in the Upper Sangin Valley," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which assumed responsibility last month for Sangin.

For years, insurgents have controlled the Upper Sangin Valley, where the Alikozai are the largest tribe. The Taliban have used it as a base to collect drug money and destabilize critical parts of Afghanistan.

The area also contains the main road to the Kajaki dam, the biggest source of electricity for southern Afghanistan. The dam is running only at partial capacity, because it has not been safe enough to transport materials and equipment needed to install a third turbine.

The top NATO commander in Helmand, Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, hopes a deal with the Alikozai could change that.

"The easiest solution would be a political solution where they said we are not going to tolerate the Taliban and we are going to start up a local police force and help provide you security for that road," Mills said. "That would be an ideal solution as opposed to forcing our way up that road in a military way."

Some Alikozai tribal leaders have expressed interest in once again taking on the Taliban, but are skeptical that the Marines and the Afghan government would provide the necessary support, according to Phil Weatherill, a British government adviser who has worked in Sangin since 2009 and has had close contact with the Alikozai.
"The Alikozai have always wanted to come back to government," Weatherill said. "Unfortunately, NATO has very little credibility up there, and that's what we have to work on and prove we can actually support them."

The Alikozai first rose up in May 2007 because they were tired of the presence of foreign Taliban fighters and insurgents from other areas of Afghanistan, many of them from a rival tribe, the Alizai. Their request for help from both coalition forces and the Afghan government was declined because of a lack of resources and concern about getting involved in a tribal dispute, according to Weatherill and the Marines.

The Alizai then killed many of the Alikozai tribal leaders or forced them to flee the area, said Weatherill.

Some Alikozai tribesmen ended up joining the Taliban because they had no other choice. But many continue to resent what they see as an occupation by foreign insurgents who have planted homemade bombs throughout the Upper Sangin Valley as a defensive measure, said Maj. Robert Revoir, the operations officer for the 1st Marine Reconnaissance Battalion, which has been in the area for the past few weeks.

"They want freedom of movement and don't want to be fed Taliban propaganda 24/7 over the radio," Revoir said. "They need access to the district government so they can have a voice to state their grievances."

The Sangin district governor, Mohammad Sharif, said it is critical for the Marines to ask Alikozai elders what they would need before standing up against the Taliban.

"They likely need logistical support, food, ammunition and weapons," Sharif said. "We need to give them support in advance so they can stand up again."

The Marines have targeted pockets of foreign Taliban fighters just south of the Upper Sangin Valley in recent months, partly because the operations were requested by the Alikozai, said Morris, the battalion commander.

Some Alikozai tribesmen have also requested that the Marines set up patrol bases in the Upper Sangin Valley as a security guarantee, said Weatherill. But he warned that the Marines must be careful that whatever operations they conduct in the area not be viewed as just another form of foreign occupation.

"You could be at risk of the young lads of the Alikozai turning around and saying these guys are in my backyard and picking up the AK-47s again," said Weatherill.

Critics of the local defense force initiative argue that arming tribesmen risks creating militias that are difficult for the Afghan government to control. The government has tried to mitigate that risk by mandating that such forces must report to the Interior Ministry.

The program also risks exacerbating tribal rivalries in a way that could benefit the Taliban. Alikozai tribal leaders who used to dominate the Helmand provincial government systematically excluded another tribe in Sangin, the Ishaqzai, from positions of power. That drove many Ishaqzai into the hands of the Taliban.

But the Marines and their advisers, desperate for a way to stabilize the bloody valley, have decided it's worth the risk.

"A local solution is the only way forward," Weatherill said.
In Afghan cauldron, realism can trump the rulebook

FILE - In this Nov. 12, 2010 file photograph, police officers return fire during a joint patrol with U.S. Marines in Sangin, Afghanistan. "Clear, hold and build" is the official formula for fighting the Taliban, but in this southern river valley, the most dangerous place in Afghanistan, the experts say you have to be a realist to succeed. (AP Photo/Dusan Vranic, File) — AP

By SEBASTIAN ABBOT, Associated Press 10:07 a.m., Dec. 2, 2010

FILE - In this Nov. 5, 2010 file photograph, Lance Cpl. Andreas Padilla of Los Angeles, with India company, 3rd Battalion 5th Marines, First Marine Division, walks through a market during a patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan. "Clear, hold and build" is the official formula for fighting the Taliban, but in this southern river valley, the most dangerous place in Afghanistan, the experts say you have to be a realist to succeed. (AP Photo/Dusan Vranic, File) — AP

SANGIN, Afghanistan — "Clear, hold and build" is the official formula for fighting the Taliban, but in this southern river valley, the most dangerous place in Afghanistan, the experts say you have to be a realist to succeed.

That may mean coordinating with the Taliban to get their approval for development projects, accepting that some money may end up in insurgents' pockets, and understanding that the best way to help certain people is simply to leave them alone.

The U.S. Marines and British civilian advisers in Helmand province's Sangin district are trying to build roads and schools in terrain which, far from being cleared, still teems with insurgents and crackles with the sounds of machine gun fire and explosions from multiple daily Taliban attacks.

"I'm definitely not trying to build the shining city upon a hill here," said Lt. Karl Kadon, head of civil affairs for the Marine battalion in Sangin. "I'm just trying to build something that is stable enough that it's not going to bother us."

Even that is a daunting task. The Marines arrived in Sangin in October following four years of fighting by British forces that suffered heavy casualties and struggled to show progress.

Now roughly a dozen Marine civil affairs operatives and British government advisers working out of Sangin's district center must maneuver through a minefield of competing forces: corrupt contractors, greedy tribal elders, insurgents, Taliban shadow government officials and, most powerful of all, drug lords who would rather keep the insurgency going than let law and order take root.

The group sees the whole point of its effort as building up public trust in the Afghan district government. But the district governor is essentially an army of one because he can't get anyone to work with him in such a dangerous environment.

A recent patrol through Sangin's main bazaar by the civil affairs team illustrated just how tough development work can be. A couple hours before the team arrived, a Marine was shot in the head and killed in an alley just off the bazaar. The team was forced to lob green smoke grenades into the alley and sprint past to avoid being shot at themselves.

As shopkeepers looked on with icy stares, a kid minding a store remarked: "If you're scared, why did you come to Sangin?"

And the bazaar is considered the safest place in the district. Outside the center, the challenge of building is even greater. Sangin is almost entirely controlled by Taliban fighters and has been the deadliest district in Afghanistan for coalition forces this year.
But the team sees working outside the center as essential.

"The district governor could work in the center and never venture out of the security bubble, but then his influence would remain here and we would never get popular support," said Phil Weatherill, a British government adviser here.

To work outside the center, the team must rely on Afghans who coordinate with the Taliban, and must also accept that some money may be directed to insurgents by local contractors or elders in return for letting development work go ahead. They believe the money makes its way to the foot soldiers who are simply fighting for cash - the so-called "small-t Taliban" - not the hardcore fighters.

"There are checks and balances, but there is an inevitability that some money is going into people's pockets," said Weatherill. "Whether it's small-t Taliban or corrupt contractors, I don't know. But this is Afghanistan."

Kadon said it can be difficult to accept that Marines are coordinating with, and possibly even helping, the enemy, but sees no choice.

"This is a tough job because I have friends who have gotten hurt or killed, and I know I'm conversing with Taliban on a daily basis," said Kadon, 25, of Cincinnati. "But it's one of those things where you have to give a little to get a little."

In some cases, the team has to accept that trying to help someone can be dangerous. Kadon recalled visiting an orphanage and being turned away by the woman who runs it.

"The woman said the Taliban told her that if they ever saw her taking any assistance from international forces, they would kill her or one of the children," he said.

Kadon said that shortly after he left her house, a suicide bomber blew himself up nearby but luckily didn't harm the woman or the children.

"That was a bad day," he said.

For all the hardships, the Marines have aggressive plans, including building roads, government offices, a high school and crop storehouses. They have spent $500,000 since arriving and predict they could spend up to $4 million before they leave around April, said Kadon. They have built a gravel road near the district center and started work on a large flood wall.

The British have spent close to $1 million in the last 18 months and Weatherill said he believes they have made some progress. Two of the so-called "shadow governors" in Sangin have been sacked by the Taliban's leadership because locals were unhappy with their opposition to coalition development projects, he said.

Coalition forces said they killed the current shadow governor during an airstrike in neighboring Kajaki district on Nov. 20.

But this is Helmand province's center for processing opium into heroin, and the team acknowledges defeat so far in its tug-of-war with drug lords for the allegiance of influential tribal leaders.

"With money comes power, and most people still look to the drug barons as the people with the most power around here," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment in Sangin. "The Taliban is closely linked with the drug trade. They use the same networks, safe havens and transport routes."

One consolation he sees is that things have been bad in Sangin for so long that they can't get worse.

"In Sangin, you can almost only go up," Morris.
A rifleman serving with Camp Pendleton's 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment was killed in Afghanistan, the 1st Marine Division announced Saturday.

Sgt. Matthew T. Abbate, 26, of Honolulu, Hawaii, was killed in action Dec. 2 in Helmand province.

Abbate had enlisted in the Marine Corps on February 1, 2006. He previously served in Iraq.

His death was the 17th since Oct. 8 for the 3/5 battalion. The unit is fighting for control of the Sangin area, a strategic crossroads for insurgents and drug smugglers in the northern end of the province, on the way to the Kajaki hydroelectric dam.

Abbate, who had attended Buchanan High School in Clovis, Calif., was the eighth former student of the school killed while serving in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Fresno Bee reported. He is survived by a wife and 2-year-old son.

Abbate's personal service awards include the Purple Heart, Combat Action Ribbon, Navy and Marine Achievement Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal, Iraq Campaign Medal and Sea Service Deployment Ribbon.

"The Marines and sailors of the 1st Marine Division mourn the loss of Sgt. Abbate. Our heartfelt condolences go out to his family," the unit said.
American forces have suffered some of their worst casualties in the Afghan war since taking over the notorious town of Sangin from British troops.

Sixteen members of the 3rd Battalion of the 5th US Marine Regiment have been killed in the six weeks since they were rotated into Sangin in mid-October, while more than 50 have been injured. The casualties amount to more than 10 per cent of the US battalion’s fighting strength.

Since British Royal Marines handed over Sangin on September 20, US commanders have sharply adjusted their approach amid criticism of previous British tactics. They closed more than half of the 22 bases built in and around the town last year at great cost to British forces, particularly the lives of men of the 2 and 3 Rifles. The closures were a rejection of the British strategy, which aimed to develop the town as a secure and economically vibrant hub.

But the American Marines have paid a heavy price in the subsequent weeks. In more than 100 firefights, they have lost more of their number than the Royal Marines from 40 Commando lost during their entire six-month tour this summer.

Between October 13-16, nine Marines died. Seven were killed by roadside bombs, including four who died when a blast destroyed their supposedly mine resistant vehicle.

While sympathetic to the scale of the casualties suffered by US forces since the takeover, British commanders have been stung by the thinly-veiled criticism of their operations, and especially the closure of their bases.

One British officer said: “It’s a hard pill to swallow that the Rifles put so much sweat and blood into establishing these patrol bases only for them to be dismantled by the Americans. They are trying a new approach but it was one tried by us in the past and gave the Taliban the chance to plant IEDs [roadside bombs] wherever they wanted.”

This entry was posted on Monday, December 6th, 2010 at 10:06 pm.
US commander inherits tough fight for Taliban state
By Claire Truscott (AFP) – Dec 6, 2010

CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan — US Marines are facing heavy losses, but their commander in Helmand says "steady" progress has been made since replacing British troops in the Taliban's most notorious flashpoint.

A US surge doubled the number of NATO troops in Afghanistan's largest province, the heartland of the global opium trade and a byword for some of the heaviest fighting that British troops have endured for decades.

Major General Richard Mills, the new overall commander for Helmand, redeployed the British to the centre of the province, leaving the district of Sangin -- perhaps the fiercest fight in the entire country -- to US Marines.

Mills told AFP in a recent interview that he has closed down smaller British bases to keep troops on the move, but daily gunbattles are haemorrhaging troop numbers and there is little sign of a traditional winter cool-down in fighting.

He claims that most of the Taliban's top command in Helmand have been eliminated, but acknowledges it may take two years to stop the flow of drugs, weapons and fighters across the border with Pakistan.

"When I got here I felt all the forces were too tied down. We had to be able to go on the attack and keep the momentum," said Mills, adding that his troops take on 500 patrols every day throughout the province.

"They've had a tough fall, they've had a lot of casualties, but they're pushing the envelope," said Mills, pointing to a map that shows his troops have moved out from Sangin's centre to remote areas further to the north and east.

"Places where ISAF (coalition) forces had not been probably forever... and we're beginning to see significant signs of crackage in the insurgency there."

The strategy shift followed years of criticism, exposed in leaked US diplomatic cables last week, that British tactics had failed miserably.

In one memo sent in April 2007, General Dan McNeill, the then NATO commander in Afghanistan, was quoted as telling a US drug-control officer that the British had "made a mess of things in Helmand, their tactics were wrong".

A US cable sent in January 2009 showed that Helmand governor Gulab Mangal thought the British were too confined to their camp.

President Barack Obama last December ordered 30,000 extra American troops into Afghanistan in a drastic strategy overhaul designed to wrest initiative from the Taliban in their strongest areas, particularly the south.

But heavier fighting and greater troop numbers mean more casualties. The US Marines alone lost 12 men in Helmand in November, according to US Defense Department data -- seven of them in Sangin.

At the Lisbon summit last month, NATO agreed to draw down its 140,000 combat troops in Afghanistan by the end of 2014 to allow local forces to take over, but Mills left open whether any such transition could begin in Helmand next year.

"I don't make that decision. I think things are moving right along nicely. There certainly could be (some handover next year)."

He says he has the support, flexibility and time to pursue a good plan laid out by the top NATO commander in Afghanistan, US General David Petraeus.

"He has given his support commanders the flexibility to execute that strategy..."
"We are making steady progress. Overall we're all pointing in the right direction. We understand where General Petraeus wants us to go, we understand the results of the Lisbon conference which has given us some more time."

Mills says that most of the Taliban's top command in Helmand have now been killed or captured: "Militarily we are hammering them."

But without efforts to secure Helmand's southern border with Pakistan, the trafficking of opium, weapons and Taliban fighters will continue.

"I would perhaps like to see some more focus perhaps on the border and stopping the flow back and forth across the border," he said.

"I think that's something that's still a year or two from being something we're able to do."

And huge political challenges remain in Helmand, an area where age-old tribal disputes feed Taliban recruitment among those who feel disenfranchised.

"The government has the challenge of connecting with everybody in the province, in some pretty remote areas... They're getting more and more successful but it's still a job," said Mills.

"It's hard to attract talented mid-level government people."

The onset of winter usually signals a slackening in the intensity of fighting, but Mills says this year will be different.

"We're going to pressure this guy every step of the way. He won't get his two weeks in Florida this year, he won't get his vacation during winter time.

"We're going to push push push, because I want this battlefield to be completely different come spring."
Marine forces in Afghanistan have launched an “aggressive winter campaign” in Helmand province that will include special operations raids, conventional military operations and efforts to improve the economy by creating jobs, said the senior Marine commander in Afghanistan.

Maj. Gen. Richard Mills told reporters at the Pentagon on Tuesday that winter is typically a slower season for military operations in Afghanistan, but Marine forces will push the Taliban hard over the next few months. Combat typically diminishes during the winter months there, giving insurgents time to re-equip, train their forces and recruit.

“We do not intend to give him that luxury this year,” said Mills, speaking from his headquarters at Camp Leatherneck. “We intend to continue to press extraordinarily hard on all fronts.”

Mills said coalition forces will attack insurgent leaders in areas where they previously felt safe and seize terrain that they want to shape before the traditional fighting season begins in the spring.

“We want to use our special forces to find him where he goes to ground, where he wants to go to rest, where he wants to go to refit, and we want to strike him there and cut off the leadership that is so vital to the continuation of the operation,” he said of the insurgent forces.

Coalition forces also will continue to assist in civil affairs projects that create jobs for Afghan civilians and improve the area’s education system, health system and infrastructure, such as roads, Mills said.

“It’s a full-court press, if you will, across the entire range of our operations at a time that has traditionally been a little slower,” Mills said. “We can take advantage of that weakness as his numbers decline and his leadership goes to Pakistan. My [Taliban] counterpart, for instance, left the province recently dressed as a woman. We intend to take advantage of that lack of leadership to press home our efforts to, again, change the battlefield by spring.”

The general said combat operations in Marjah district are “essentially over,” 10 months after 7,000 U.S. troops launched a massive assault on the Taliban stronghold in central Helmand to clear it of narcotics traffickers and enemy fighters. The fight to take control of the district took longer than expected, and the region was a hotbed of violence throughout the summer, with Marines regularly facing improvised explosive devices and ambushes by gun-toting insurgents.

Combat operations in the northern Helmand district of Sangin are still ongoing, Mills said. Marines are pushing north into new areas between the district’s center and nearby Musa Qala and Kajaki, known for its hydroelectric dam.

Third Battalion, 5th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, Calif., has sustained heavy losses fighting in Sangin this fall, but Mills said he has sufficient forces in the area. He left open the possibility that additional forces will be transferred from other locations in Helmand in the future.

On Tuesday, the Pentagon announced two of the battalion’s latest casualties.

Cpl. Derek A. Wyatt, 25, from Akron, Ohio, and Pfc. Colton W. Rusk, 20, of Orange Grove, Texas, were killed Monday while conducting combat operations in Helmand province.

News of the deaths came on a day when Commandant Gen. Jim Amos was visiting the Southern California base during his latest West Coast trip, his second to the region since he assumed the post in October. Amos and his wife, Bonnie, spent Tuesday morning in a private meeting with spouses and families of 3/5 Marines, who were very concerned about their men and the fighting in Sangin, said his spokesman, Maj. Joe Plenzler. The meeting stretched well past the schedule, cancelling the general’s planned late-morning talk with several hundred members with 11th Marine Regiment at the base’s Camp Las Pulgas.
Pendleton's 3/5 Battalion mourns loss of two Marines

Unit has seen heavy combat in Sangin area of Afghanistan

By Gretel C. Kovach 7:46 a.m., Dec. 8, 2010

Two riflemen from Camp Pendleton's 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment were killed in combat Monday in Afghanistan, the Pentagon announced. Cpl. Derek A. Wyatt, 25, of Akron, Ohio, and Pfc. Colton W. Rusk, 20, of Orange Grove, Texas served with 1st Marine Division troops in Helmand province.

The "Darkhorse" battalion has lost 19 Marines since Oct. 8, while the unit dispersed into the Sangin area of the province controlled by Taliban insurgents.

Wyatt's longtime friend Andy Falcone told the Akron Beacon Journal, that it may be a cliche, but it is true: "He loved his country, and he firmly believed in the cause." Wyatt's wife is expecting the couple's first child, Falcone said.

John Osolin, Wyatt's former high school varsity baseball coach, described Wyatt was a hard-working leader. "You knew this guy was going someplace," Osolin said. "He did what he was supposed to. ... I can't say enough good things about him."
Camp Pendleton Marines beat back insurgents
As casualties taper, commanders send in tanks in Sangin river valley in Afghanistan

In this March 26, 2010 photo, Canadian tanks belonging to the Lord Strathcona’s Horse Tank Regiment moves as part of a sweep of villages southwest of Kandahar City, in Khenjakak, Afghanistan. (AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Murray Brewster) — AP

Written by Gretel C. Kovach
6:34 p.m., Dec. 10, 2010

Camp Pendleton Marines made advances in recent weeks in their campaign to beat back insurgents in the hard-fought Sangin river valley — the Taliban’s last major stronghold in Afghanistan’s Helmand province, their commanding general said.

To help the infantrymen build on those gains, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment is getting an infusion of tanks, troops and counter-explosive equipment, said Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills, head of Marine forces in Afghanistan and NATO’s southwestern regional command.

Sangin is now the deadliest area for the Marines. The battalion has suffered heavy casualties, including the loss of at least 20 Marines in a little more than two months, since it moved into the fertile redoubt of poppy growers and Taliban fighters in October.

But Mills said casualties tapered in recent weeks even as the unit pushed up a strategic road toward the Kajaki dam, expanded security beyond the district center and held peace talks with village elders.

“The reason casualties are going down is because they are winning, plain and simple,” Mills said, in an interview with The San Diego Union-Tribune from his Camp Leatherneck headquarters in Helmand province. The 3/5 Marines have not backed down, they “have gotten more aggressive; they have taken the fight harder to the enemy.”

The White House is expected to release details next week from a National Security Council review of the war. The report will reflect a more current picture of the war campaign than the one the Pentagon delivered to Congress last month, which included statistics three to six months old, said a senior administration official: “It’s really important to look at how quickly things are moving in Afghanistan.”
Last month the Pentagon reported a nearly 55 percent spike in attacks in the summer and early fall compared to the previous quarter, noting that the sharp uptick coincided with the arrival of additional forces and “the dramatically accelerated pace of operations,” among other factors such as national elections.

“Security remains tenuous and still needs considerable improvement in many areas. Progress is slow and deliberate,” the report stated.

In the runup to the White House assessment, senior defense leaders have been touting results from the surge of troops that finished arriving in Afghanistan this summer.

Battlefield commanders told Defense Secretary Robert Gates during a tour of the warzone this week that the Islamist insurgency remains potent in some areas of eastern and southern Afghanistan, including pockets of the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, where most of the 30,000 additional forces headed.

Overall, however, Gates declared that momentum in the nine-year war had shifted. Progress “has exceeded my expectations,” he said.

Earlier in the week Mills had announced that the fight for Marjah, a poppy-growing hamlet where Marines started a major offensive in February, was “essentially over.” Marines from East Coast battalions continue to be killed in combat there, but less frequently than they were in the summer.

Gen. James Amos, the Marine commandant, said during a visit to San Diego this week that dramatic security improvements in Helmand province towns like Now Zad and Nawa since his visits in previous years should give the nation reason for optimism. “This is not wishful thinking. There have been significant differences,” he said.

But the fight in Sangin, where the British lost about a third of their war dead before pulling out in September, remains fierce, Amos added. He and the sergeant major of the Marine Corps plan to spend Christmas in Sangin, to inform the public about “the raw courage and sacrifice of those men.”

“We are now spreading out in the valley to places, quite honestly, coalition forces have never been. That is where the Taliban are squeezing out to,” Amos said.

Sangin will eventually go the way of Marjah and Fallujah, Iraq – two places Marines eventually subdued that were characterized as intractable, he said. “The enemy in Helmand province now has been pushed out of just about every place there.”

The Marines will get a boost in firepower when the first tanks are deployed by American forces in the nine-year war. Mills said his tank crews training now in Helmand will head to Sangin later this month. Eventually the tanks will also help secure provincial roads and screen the open deserts along the border with Pakistan.

Mills said his request for the tanks is not an escalation of tactics, when compared to the more lethal arsenal the U.S. already deploys in Afghanistan, including 2,000-pound bombs. But they will give the Marines a number of advantages.

“The enemy, his favorite tactic is to use a couple of his fighters as bait to lure you into IED belts. The gun on the main battle tank gives you good offset distance. You don’t need to approach; you can hit him from a long distance away,” Mills said.

The United States is deploying tanks long after the Canadians and Danes demonstrated their utility in Afghanistan, as mobile assault guns paired with infantry units, said David E. Johnson, a senior RAND Corp. researcher and retired Army colonel.

The tracked tanks are nimble and their 120 mm gun and superior optics can put a round through a window more than a mile away with less risk of “collateral damage” than other weapons, Johnson said.

Their heavy armor is also impervious to rocket-propelled grenades and all but the largest of improvised bombs. For the average insurgent, taking on a tank is “a suicide mission,” he said.
In addition to the tanks, Mills said he is adding a company of Marines to Sangin and he is shifting some equipment used against improvised bombs from calmer areas of the province, where it is no longer needed.

The 3/5 Marines are already making headway against insurgents in Sangin, Mills added. The battalion is finding three times as many improvised bombs as its Marines accidentally set off, it has pushed through old mine fields and it “has killed a whole bunch of enemy fighters. They have whittled down the enemy presence up there significantly,” Mills said.

“They are becoming savvy fighters in that kind of a jungle almost up there.”

Amid the progress by the Marines, U.S. commanders in Afghanistan are rebalancing their counterinsurgency strategy, said vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Corps Gen. James E. Cartwright. They are shifting toward more counterterrorism operations to hunt insurgent leaders and cut their supply lines across the border into Pakistan, he said.

Mills said he expects little to change for his troops in Helmand province, where conventional Marine units and Special Forces have been applying a mix of tactics - from operations to protect and serve the people to raids on insurgent safe houses.

“It is important that you hit the enemy hard,” Mills said, but “the flash to bang has got to be as quick as we can, to get the development projects started and show results for the people immediately.

“That’s the wonder of this generation of young Marines and sailors we have out here,” he added. "They understand who we are fighting and who we are not fighting. They understand they need to protect the people.”
KABUL, Afghanistan — Violence has flared in southern Afghanistan, disrupting a long period of relative quiet since the arrival of large numbers of American troops.

In the Sangin District of Helmand Province, United States Marines who took over from British troops are finding it hard going, with a heavier casualty rate in their first 90 days than the British suffered in more than three years there. Elsewhere in the province, a roadside bomb killed 15 civilians on Friday.

And in Kandahar City, the Taliban assassinated two officials on Wednesday and Thursday, according to Afghan officials.

Progress in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces had been cited recently by the NATO commander, Gen. David H. Petraeus, and was expected to figure in a White House review of the war due this week.

While the assassinations and bombing may turn out to be isolated events, the problems in Sangin — a restive region that the British had trouble subduing — have been more sustained.

Since taking over on Sept. 20, American forces, mostly Marines, have suffered 42 fatalities in Helmand Province, according toicasualties.org, an independent Web site that compiles battlefield data. About 20 of those deaths took place in Sangin, said Maj. Gabrielle M. Chapin, a spokeswoman for the Marines. By comparison, the British lost at least 76 soldiers in three and a half years.

United States State Department cables made public by the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks and posted by the British newspaper The Guardian showed that American military officers and Afghan officials were highly critical of the British effort in Helmand and particularly in Sangin.

“Stop calling it the Sangin District and start calling it the Sangin Base,” one document quoted Gov. Gulab Mangal of Helmand Province as telling the British. “All you have done here is built a military camp next to the city.”

Another memo quoted an American military commander as saying the British “had made a mess of things in Helmand,” and an American diplomat wrote that the United States and President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan “agree the British are not up to the task of securing Helmand.”

American military officials acknowledge that Sangin is proving “a very tough area,” in Major Chapin’s words.

Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the Marines’ commander in Helmand, said that “Sangin is a key crossroads, the last place where the insurgent can grow, harvest and process poppy,” whose cultivation for opium helps finance the Taliban. “It is the last bit of important terrain in Helmand, and he is fighting hard to hold it.”

He added Friday that the Marines “have taken the fight harder to the enemy.”

General Mills will soon deploy a new company of heavy tanks, the first American tanks in Afghanistan, in Sangin because of the large numbers of improvised explosive devices there, officials said.

“When the Brits were in Sangin District, they had limited control, but now the Americans are conducting operations all over the district,” said Dawoud Ahmadi, a spokesman for the governor. “There are casualties to the Americans, but also casualties to the Taliban, including key Taliban commanders.”

The bombing in Helmand on Friday occurred when a truck carrying civilians drove over a mine in the Khanashin District, close to the Pakistani border. In addition to the 15 people killed, four were seriously injured. Mr. Ahmadi said the Taliban was increasingly booby-trapping roads used by civilians.
In Kandahar Province, fighting has died down since an offensive this fall that drove out many Taliban fighters, although troops are still struggling to disarm large numbers of hidden bombs.

Until last week, there had been no Taliban assassinations in weeks — a reprieve after last summer, when there were sometimes as many as four a day, according to local and military officials.

On Thursday, however, Noor Mohammed, the leader of the shura, or council, in the Zhare District, was killed as he headed home from a mosque, according to the district’s governor, Niaz Muhammad Sarhadi.

On Wednesday, gunmen killed Muhammed Anwar, the finance officer for the narcotics department of the Kandahar provincial police force. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

Maj. Gen. Muhammad Salim Ahsas, a Kandahar police official, confirmed the assassinations, though he also cited a recent case in which two attackers who tried to assassinate police officers were killed by the authorities before they could do any harm. “We are after the enemies; they are on the run,” he said.

Others were less optimistic. “Noor Mohammed was a good friend of mine,” said a member of the Zhare shura who asked not to be named because he feared for his safety. “I am so worried now I can’t even sleep from fear,” he said.
Camp Pendleton Marines destroy more than 50 IEDs in Afghanistan

By JOSHUA SUDOCK
2010-12-12 15:19:13

Cpl. John McCall, of the 1st Marine Division, which is based at Camp Pendleton and currently has assets deployed in Afghanistan, reports that Marines with 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, 1st Marine Division (Forward), conducted an eight-day deliberate breaching operation, code named "Outlaw Wrath," in the Sangin district of Afghanistan and destroyed more than 50 IEDs.

Here is his complete report.

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SANGIN, Afghanistan – Marines with 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, 1st Marine Division (Forward), conducted an 8-day deliberate breaching operation, known as Outlaw Wrath, in the Sangin District, Nov. 29-Dec. 6.

Operation Outlaw Wrath was focused on clearing Route 611, a road known by the Marines of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, to be laced with improvised explosive devices. It is an important route used to keep Sangin District’s patrol base supplied with food and water.

Before the operation, most supplies were delivered via helicopter, or an alternate route that stretches around the 611.

At the conclusion of Outlaw Wrath, the CEB Marines successfully found and destroyed more than 50 IEDs, and for now, are able to call the route safe. A trip that normally took three hours or more is now done in forty five minutes.

“We’ve traveled that road plenty of times and every time we do, we get hit,” said Lance Cpl. Matt Dahlman, 27, a heavy equipment operator attached to 3/5 from Portland, Ore. “If eight days being stuck in a bulldozer is what it takes to stop that from happening then it was well worth it!”

Taliban checkpoints were established along portions of route 611, where locals were taxed for money and items bought at the nearby bazaar. The taxation became so serious the local economy was affected, causing prices to inflate on goods.

“Our engineers were not only able to open up the route for mobility purposes, but also better the economic problems that the citizens of Sangin were facing,” said Lt. Col. Andrew Niebel, the battalion commander for 1st CEB.

With 1st CEB’s heavy route clearance assets, 3/5 welcomed direct support to open up the route.
A mine clearing line charge, a rocket with a long line of explosives attached to it, was the main technique used to begin the clearing. The idea being that the explosive force from the MiCLCs would set off any IEDs buried in the road.

After shooting a MiCLC, bulldozers would push away the rubble and uncover any unexploded IEDs, a dangerous job for those involved in the process.

“I never stopped getting chills while I was out there working, but the training the Marine Corps gives you helps a lot when trying to manage your fear,” Dalhman explained. “It was easy to clear my mind and be unafraid. It is just one of those things that you have to deal with.”

While the road was being cleared by CEB, 3/5’s along with Afghan National Army soldiers provided security and overwatch to the left and right of the ‘611.’ Both groups worked together, ensuring that neither group got too far ahead or behind.

“It took a lot of cross communication to ensure that the mission was accomplished safely,” said Capt. Paul Bock, the commanding officer for Combat Engineer Company. “Without their help our task would have been much more difficult than it was.”

Local Afghans were friendly toward many of the Coalition forces and appreciated their work to remove IEDs and push the Taliban out of the area.

“It is important that we show them we are here to help them by keeping the roads free of IEDs,” said 1st Lt. Chris Thrasher, 28, a platoon commander from Angola, Ind.

Marines from all military operational specialties were brought together to support the main effort.

“Being part of a big ‘op’ like this really opened my eyes to a lot of the different things going on out here,” said Lance Cpl. Deonte Graves, 21, a motor transport operator from Washington, D.C. “I’m part of the headquarters platoon so we usually just hear stories from other people, but to actually be out here gives you a very different perspective.”

“It was rewarding work being part of something that gives 3/5 and the people of Sangin security,” Bock said.

After eight days of route clearing in Sangin District, the Marines of 1st CEB and 3/5, and the ANA soldiers have made Route 611 safe to travel again for the first time in three years, according to Bock.

With more than 50 IEDs found and destroyed, coalition forces have saved countless lives, and helped bring security and stability to one of Helmand provinces vital roadways.
Survival Struggle in Sangin
Local Marines are locked in a bloody battle for the last Taliban stronghold
By Alicia Dean | Sunday, Dec 12, 2010 | Updated 10:35 PM PST

It’s one of the most critical operations in the nine-year war in Afghanistan. 20 Members of Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion 5th Marine regiment have been killed in Helmand province’s Sangin district since the beginning of October. Three of those deaths occurred this past week.

“We haven’t seen such fighting really since the early days of the Marjah battle,” said MajGen Richard Mills, Commanding General of NATO Regional Command Southwest.

While insurgents may have given up the fight in other parts of the region, Mills says they’ve decided to make Sangin their last stand.

“He is fighting with a growing desperation with the realization if he loses Sangin he’s lost the fight in Helmand Province,” said Mills referring to Taliban fighters.

Sangin is a historically volatile area and a key source of opium producing poppies used to buy weapons and bomb making materials for insurgents.

British forces sustained heavy casualties there before transferring authority to San Diego based Marines over the summer. Marines and Sailors with the 3/5 are repeatedly coming under attack as they make slow advances in the area.

“We are running into prepared defenses and troops that are willing to fight to death to hold onto the ground that they have,” said Mills who added insurgents are relying more heavily on their most lethal weapon of choice, the improvised explosive device (IED).

“He plants his weapons at night. He carefully hides the pressure plates that set them off and then he runs back to his hiding places and awaits people to walk on them.”

The IED threat is what prompted Mills to request high powered and sophisticated M1A1 Abrams tanks be deployed to Helmand province.

“The tank is one more tool that we can provide to the third battalion 5th Marines who are fighting and extraordinarily gallant fight in Sangin,” said Mills.

He was quick to point out the tanks will offer a lot of advantages but they alone won’t be the silver bullet that stops the insurgency. He said the true victory lies in the hands of each Marine and Sailor on the front lines.

“They’re the greatest generation we’ve ever raised,” Mills said. “They’re volunteers, they know the threat, they don’t have to be here. 99.9 percent of their friends don’t come over here and yet, they have the courage to take the step forward and do the job that has to be done. I stand in awe of them.”
Wounded Bethalto Marine recovering in USA

By FRED POLLARD 2010-12-15 20:26:32

BETHALTO - Marine Lance Cpl. Kenny Corzine, who lost both legs last week in an IED explosion while serving in Afghanistan, returned to the United States and is in good spirits, his family says.

"Kenny is in as good a shape as can be expected," said Jim Corzine of Roxana, Kenny's uncle. "He is pretty upbeat and has been making jokes."

Kenny Corzine, who had been serving overseas in Afghanistan for the last several months, was part of a nine-man patrol, consisting of eight soldiers and one medic, when an IED explosion on Dec. 5 abruptly changed his life.

"From what I understand, the patrol came under fire and took cover behind a rock," Jim Corzine said. "When they did, (insurgents) detonated the IED. I believe four in his unit were KIA (killed in action), and three others are in very serious condition, with one soldier losing his face.

"I am very grateful to the medic that was with them; he kept the Marines alive who were not killed. The medics that serve are amazing people."

Kenny was transported to a U.S. military hospital in Germany to recover. Along with losing both legs, his arm also was "degloved," or stripped of tissue. Jim Corzine says the latest update on the arm is a good one, and doctors are confident they will be able to save it.

Last Thursday, Kenny was transported from Germany to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland. Most of his family from the local area, including his father, Kenny, his mother, Carla, his grandmother, Sharon, and Jim Corzine flew to Maryland to be by his side and show their support.

"I will be here through this week," Jim said. "I have to be home Friday to pick up my son, Blake. He does not know yet about Kenny."

Blake Corzine, who grew up with Kenny, currently is in basic training for infantry in the U.S. Army at Fort Benning, Ga. Kenny's brother, Nick Corzine, also is a Marine and has flown to Maryland, as well, to be by his brother's side.

Betty Davis of Hartford, Kenny's grandmother, was not able to travel to Maryland but expressed her love and concern for her grandson.

"He is a wonderful young man, as is his brother, Nick," Davis said. "We are grateful he is doing well. I got to spend some time with him before he left for Afghanistan. He had less than a year to go before his out date."

Davis said both of Kenny's parents, Kenny Corzine of Wood River and Carla Corzine of Moro, have been in touch and are working together to support Kenny.

"They are both glad to be able to be there for him," Davis said.

Kenny Corzine, 23, grew up in Bethalto and graduated from Civic Memorial High School. Wanting to be a Marine since he was a child, he left for boot camp in 2007 at the age of 20.

He also has a 3-year-old daughter, Macy, with his girlfriend, Precious Hart.
3rd Battalion, 5th Marines

Dear Darkhorse family and friends,

Merry Christmas from Afghanistan! Today, the Marines and Sailors of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines are all thinking about you, and wishing that we were physically closer to our families and friends. In your absence, however, we are exactly where Marines and Sailors want to be—in the fight against this Nation’s enemies. You should be extremely proud of your Marines and Sailors performance, as we have sent a shock wave through the Taliban and are starting to see their organization splinter beyond Sangin because of the pressure that 3/5 and the other Marines have applied to them across Helmand Province. We are starting to get more local tips about what the Taliban are doing, and even have more local people and Taliban wanting to lay down their arms and join the government. While there is a lot of work left to do, I want you to be assured that your loved one is making a difference in a historic battle against a ruthless and inhumane enemy. On the positive side, the Battalion recently saw the first students return to school, after the Taliban bombed the last one, and have regained control of the main road up the Sangin River Valley to enable the expansion of governance and economic development. The Battalion also ran a Health Initiative in which it trained over 200 people in basic health care education and provided basic first aid supplies to a people who have no access to modern medical care. The bottom line is that we are hurting the enemy and concurrently doing everything we can to help the Afghan people choose to support their national government over the Taliban.

Recently, it has turned cold, with lows in the high 20s and highs in the 50s. We are told that it should start raining soon, and then the rivers will rise and the wadis will fill with water. We have literally been OVERWHELMED with support through prayers and care packages from hundreds of people and patriots. Boxes and boxes of mail come in by the day, and remind us of home and our loved ones who we miss so much. We were also lucky enough today to be visited by none other than the Commandant and Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, along with our Division and Regimental Commanders and Sergeants Major. Christmas wrapped up with a wonderful holiday meal served by the Commandant and Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps at our main FOB, which many of the Marines and Sailors were able to enjoy, although we unfortunately did not have the ability to bring them all in or the time to visit all of the FOBs. The Commandant passed on his thanks and praise for a job so well done, and for the sacrifices this Battalion and its families have made for the cause of freedom. He stated that the entire country is watching what happens in Sangin, and that it is here that the tipping point towards strategic victory may be reached. I want to thank you, too, for everything that you have done and continue to do in support of your Darkhorse Marine or Sailor. We push forward against every challenge because we know that our buddies will fight beside us and that you will stand behind us regardless of the situation. We are all truly blessed.

Semper Fidelis,
LtCol Morris
Commanding Officer
3d Battalion, 5th Marines

From 3/5 Facebook page
Fallen Marine's family plans to help others

By Courtney Gousman 11:01 PM, Dec 29, 2010

Bethalto, IL (KSDK) -- A devastating Christmas for a Bethalto family. The family of Lance Corporal Kenny Corzine is dealing with his death, after his passing on Christmas Eve. The Marine was serving in Afghanistan when he was hit by an explosive device.

NewsChannel 5 first told you the story of Lance Corporal Kenny Corzine earlier in December. His family had high hopes during his recovery, and despite losing both legs, the Marine was in good spirits--even talking--before taking a turn for the worst.

Black ribbons mark a southern Illinois home to match the grief the family inside is feeling. The Corzine's family is now discussing about how his legacy will live on.

"I hung out with my brother in Japan. Not a lot of people can say that, but we were really close," said Lance Corporal Nicholas Corzine, Kenny's younger brother.

Nicholas Corzine went off to boot camp just months after his older brother, more than three years ago.

Nicholas tells NewsChannel 5 his brother was injured in Afghanistan on December 5 while on foot patrol. Kenny Corzine and his nine-man unit were confronted by enemy fire and then an IED.

"His legs were gone," said Nicholas Corzine.

Kenny managed to make it to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, where things were looking up.

"He was just like he always is. He was joking. He was really upbeat about it," Nicholas said.

Nicholas says Kenny was anxious to come home until he ran into complications with his lungs and liver. Nicholas says his brother's passing came as a surprise.

"I honestly thought he was going to make it. I kept telling the family, 'Oh, he's going to make it. He's going to make it,'" Nicholas said

Lance Corporal Kenny Corzine was awarded a Purple Heart before his death. His body is not expected to arrive in Bethalto until January 4.
Injured Marine Cpl. Christopher Montgomery had ties with Kentucky

By Victoria Grabner
Thursday, December 30, 2010

UNION COUNTY, Ky. — Marine Cpl. Christopher Montgomery was leading his unit while under fire on a maneuver in Helmand province in southwestern Afghanistan on Dec. 7 when the 23-year-old former Union County, Ky., resident stepped on a mine.

"Five (Marines) lost their lives immediately, and two of them, one being Christopher, lost their legs," said Montgomery's aunt, Lisa Ervin of Uniontown, Ky.

The blast tore off one of Montgomery's legs at the hip and the other a couple of inches above his knee.

His left wrist and elbow were shattered, and he has only two fingers on that hand, said his mother, Debi Yates, also of Uniontown.

He also had a stomach wound, a scratch on his retina, a possible concussion and shrapnel to his face when he was transferred to a field hospital, then to another hospital in Afghanistan, before being flown to a hospital in Germany and then to the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, Md.

Nevertheless, "he's in great spirits," Yates said of her son, who lived in Union County for about four years before moving to Mobile, Ala., where his father, Reggie Montgomery, lives.

"He's doing really well now." In fact, Ervin said, one thing that is helping Montgomery are the letters and cards he gets many days of the week.

"Every day I read cards to Christopher, and it's what helps him get better," Ervin quoted her sister as saying.

"That's what's helped him and my sister and everyone. When things like this happen, that's what helps everyone cope."

On Dec. 7, when Montgomery had just been thrown clear from the mine, a medic who had stood back from his unit during the maneuver came to his rescue.

Medic Thomas Parker, Ervin said, ran up to Montgomery, wrapping tourniquets before calling for a helicopter to evacuate him and the other injured men in his unit.

"He ran up to him, and they were still under fire and all. It was very heroic, I think, and he ran up there and literally saved my son," Yates said.

That same medic, incidentally, now lies in the same hospital room as Montgomery. He's missing both of his legs, too, and one of his hands, Ervin said.

Two days after he called the helicopter to his squad leader's aid, Parker also stepped on a mine, Yates said. She added that the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines unit has sustained many casualties in Helmand province. Montgomery has been in the Marines for four years and had previously earned a Good Conduct Medal.

And while seeing her son in such pain is likely very hard for her to take, Yates said she takes comfort in the fact that her son is alive.

"He said, 'God had a plan for me,'" she said. "He said 'I don't know what it is yet, but there's a plan, and whatever it is, I will fulfill it.'"
MILITARY: Bell tolls frequently for local Marines in Afghanistan

More casualties expected as thousands more local troops head to war in 2011

By MARK WALKER - mlwalker@nctimes.com | Posted: Saturday, January 1, 2011 8:52 pm

Reports of their deaths come with regularity.

Last week, there were two more battlefield deaths for Camp Pendleton's 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

The announcements were terse.

On Monday, it read: "Lance Cpl. Kenneth A. Corzine, 23, of Bethalto, Ill., died Dec. 24 of wounds received Dec. 5 while conducting combat operations in Helmand province, Afghanistan."

On Wednesday came this: "The Department of Defense announced today the death of a Marine who was supporting Operation Enduring Freedom. Cpl. Tevan L. Nguyen, 21, of Hutto, Texas, died Dec. 28, while conducting combat operations in Helmand province, Afghanistan."

After more than nine years, the outcome of the war in Afghanistan remains as uncertain now as it did when it was launched in response to the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

What is certain is that more locally based troops will be killed and wounded, as several thousand are scheduled to deploy to the southern Helmand province in 2011.

The base toll death for 2010 in Afghanistan stood at 56 through Thursday, according to a count kept by the North County Times.

Of those, nearly two dozen were from the base's 3/5, the "Dark Horse" battalion.

About 20,000 Marines are in Afghanistan, with a like number expected to be there throughout the next 12 months.

Since March, the Marines have served under the command of Camp Pendleton's Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, who claims that significant gains in rooting out the insurgent Taliban are occurring in Helmand.

"Just a year ago, Helmand was a vast Taliban stronghold, and in many areas there were no coalition forces," Mill wrote Thursday in an e-mail to the North County Times. "Since then, there has been solid progress."

Sangin bloodshed

Mills attributes the Dark Horse battalion losses to the Taliban's attempt to hold the Sangin district of Helmand, a center of illicit drug activity and roadside bomb manufacturing.

Shortly after arriving in late summer, battalion troops launched regular foot patrols and convoys searching for insurgents.

That aggressive tactic has led to numerous firefights, exposure to roadside bombs and the resulting casualties.

Mills acknowledged the losses, writing that "3/5 has done a heroic job in Sangin."

"We have incurred casualties, that is true, but Taliban insurgents are fighting in desperation because Sangin is their last toehold," Mills said. "They are willing to fight and die in place there. We are rapidly destroying them."

But the deaths have affected Camp Pendleton greatly.

In early December, the new commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. James Amos, spent several hours behind closed doors with battalion family members.

The meeting went much longer than scheduled, causing the general to cancel an address to a large group of recently returned Marines.
Shortly thereafter, Amos headed to Afghanistan, meeting with troops in the Sangin area and addressing them on Christmas Eve.

"We know that you've been in a hell of a fight for that last, almost five months, and we wanted to come out here with you," the general told the troops during a nighttime address.

**Uncertainties**

President Barack Obama has vowed to start bringing home some of the more than 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan starting in July, but only if the conditions warrant it.

The administration and its military commanders in recent months have pointed to 2014 as the year when overall responsibility will be transferred to the Afghan National Army and local security forces.

That may be a more realistic goal.

Last week, Nic Lee, the director of the independent Afghan Non-Governmental Organization Safety Office, which issues reports on security for aid groups, said the administration is wrong when it says insurgents control less territory now than a year ago.

"We don't see (that the counterinsurgency effort) has had any impact," he was quoted as telling a McClatchy newspaper, referring to the strategy employed by U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus, the overall commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan.

Insurgent attacks are up nearly 70 percent this year, according to the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, and other analysts maintain that Taliban-backed tribal leaders control nearly all of the country's 34 provinces.

Those reports are in stark contrast to Obama's statement in early December that fewer areas are under Taliban control.

**Hearts and minds**

Controlling territory is just one metric of a broader effort.

"It isn't a land-grab," said John Pike of the defense monitoring group GlobalSecurity.org in Washington. "It would be very easy to control a lot of territory. But we're not talking about controlling territory; we're talking about controlling hearts and minds."

The coming year could provide a better definition of what the U.S. will consider success, Pike said.

But he doesn't expect any massive change without a campaign that targets Afghanistan's poppy crop, which the Taliban convert to illegal drugs to fund the war.

"If we don't do anything about the drugs, we can't do anything about the corruption," he said.

Efforts to close down the insurgent "rat line" along the Pakistan border have largely been unsuccessful, prompting U.S. and NATO forces to concentrate on going after the fighters once they're a few miles into Afghanistan.

Pike said he thinks the Obama administration may face increasing pressure over the next two years to bring home most combat troops in favor of special operations forces working in concert with air and missile strikes.

"If our objective is simply to keep the Taliban pruned back and make sure the government in Kabul will let us go around blowing up their citizens, we could do that," he said. "We could do it with 20,000 or 30,000 (special operations forces) there."

**Helmand outlook**

On Pike's point about the poppy crop and how it fuels the insurgency, Mills said more farmers in the agriculturally dominated Helmand province are turning to crops other than the poppy.

"Just over 40,000 farmers took advantage of the wheat seed and alternative crop programs," he said. "Their pledge is to not grow poppy."
The Marines and Afghan and NATO forces are also developing more road systems, he said. "That not only provides more freedom of movement, but will open up bigger and better markets for farmers," Mills said.

He also maintained that Afghan security forces are rapidly maturing in the province allowing him to shift his troops to other areas under Taliban domination.

"We have been able to thin our forces out in areas such as Nawa and Garmsir (districts) as Afghan National Security Forces have taken over, Mills said. "My expectations for the months ahead are continued, deliberate progress."

The hearts and minds campaign that military strategists hold as key in an insurgent war is also going well, according to the general. Increasing numbers of U.S.-backed community councils are being formed, and more than 120 schools are now open in Helmand staffed with 1,700 trained teachers for more than 90,000 pupils, he said.

In early December, the Marine Corps for the first time dispatched tanks to Helmand. It's the first time in the war that the heavy machines ---- with long-range guns and armament able to withstand the roadside bombs or improvised explosive devices ---- are being used.

"Our tanks, counter-IED equipment and additional troops will intensify efforts," Mills said. Whether that promised intensity will result in more or fewer casualties remains to be seen. The general said he believes his force's efforts are turning the tide in their favor.

"I want this battlefield to be completely different come spring," he said.
Extremist group plans appearance for Bethalto funeral

By FRED POLLARD
2011-01-03 18:13:31

BETHALTO - An anti-gay extremist group that has disrupted military funerals around the country plans to be present for services for Lance Cpl. Kenneth Corzine, but already locals are mounting a challenge.

"By law, they need to be 200 feet away," Bethalto Chief of Police Alan Winslow said of the independent Westboro Baptist Church. "However, because of the property layout they actually will be further than that. The property around the funeral home is private property."

The organization, based in Topeka, Kan., published a flier on its website Friday stating its intent to preach a "respectful" message in "lawful proximity to the memorial" of Corzine, whose funeral is scheduled for 11 a.m. Thursday at Cornerstone Assembly of God Church, 750 South Moreland Road.

Westboro is widely recognized for its hatred of gay lifestyles and has latched onto the attention given to military funerals as the means of getting out its message.

"Military funerals have become pagan orgies of idolatrous blasphemy," says the message on the group's website. The group, consisting mainly of Fred Phelps and several of his family members, has made a name for itself by protesting funerals of homosexuals and the military, desecrating the American flag, and encouraging visits to its website.

Shirley Phelps-Roper, daughter of Fred Phelps and official spokesperson for the group, confirmed plans to be in Bethalto.

"We have a team in place and ready to go," she told The Telegraph. "From there, we are going to the St. Charles, Mo., area. We have some issues with that city and county passing ordinances. I am afraid they are not understanding First Amendment rights."

Phelps-Roper says a law requiring the group to be at least 200 feet from the funeral proceedings is unnecessary.

"I don't know why they bother," she said. "We don't get that close, anyway. They are not upset about where we are, they are upset with what we say."

Phelps-Roper says the group is intent on delivering its message.

"It is so simple, basic and fundamental that it's embarrassing," she said. "You have to obey your God. You don't get away with what this nation is doing. We send men over to Iraq and Afghanistan to commit crimes. Do you think God does not see what they are doing?"

Winslow says the village will have a number of extra officers on duty specifically assigned to this group, as well as officers working traffic and providing funeral escorts.

"This is a sad situation, but it has caused the community to begin coming together," Winslow said. "I have received several calls today already. It really is awesome to see how people are asking how they can participate and how they can help."

Winslow plans to place the group at a location he declined to disclose off Moreland Road, meeting state regulations while also keeping them at a respectable distance.

"We heard they were planning to be here," Brian Corzine, of Roxana, Kenny's cousin, said. "I guess there is nothing we can do about it."

Bob Marshall, president of Carpenters Local 377, says there is something he can do about it and plans to be present at the funeral.
"From what I understand, they cannot be within 200 feet of the funeral area," Marshall said. "Well, we have an American flag measuring something like 16 by 32 feet. We plan on mounting that so that if these people do protest, we will be able to block them."

Saying that this "is happening all over the U.S., but now it's hitting close to home," Marshall says he wants to do his part to support Corzine and his family and make the local area proud.

Twenty-three-year-old Kenny Corzine died Christmas Eve of complications from injuries sustained in an improvised explosive device attack on Dec. 5. A member of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine regiment, Corzine was part of a nine-man patrol stationed in the war-ravaged Helmand province of Afghanistan.

Corzine lost both legs in the attack. One arm also was "degloved," or stripped of tissue. After being wounded, Corzine initially was transported to a U.S. military hospital in Germany to recover. He then was transferred to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland, where he died Dec. 24.

Corzine grew up in Bethalto and graduated from Civic Memorial High School, leaving for boot camp at age 20. He has many family members in the Bethalto and Roxana areas, including a 3-year-old daughter, Macy, with his girlfriend, Precious Hart.

Crowd turns out as Marine's body comes home

By SANFORD J. SCHMIDT
2011-01-03 08:25:38

Members of the U.S. Marine Corps acted as pal bearers Monday to unload the flag draped casket carrying the body of Bethalto Marine Lance Cpl. Kenny Corzine, 23, after he was unloaded from a private jet at St. Louis Regional Airport in Bethalto. Corzine died Christmas Eve from injuries he received from an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan.

BETHALTO — Residents, military veterans, firefighters, police officers and people from across the area came together as a family Monday to welcome Kenny Corzine back to his hometown.

"We’re here for the family," said Jim Brooks of Chesterfield, Mo., a member of the Marine Corps League. In their bright red jackets and garrison caps they stood at attention, along with the regular Marines and other veterans’ group as the body of Corzine, 23, was lowered from a small jet at St. Louis Regional Airport and placed in a hearse.

Corzine died on Christmas Eve from injuries he sustained when an improvised explosive device detonated while he was on patrol Dec. 5 in Afghanistan’s Helmand Province.

Visitation will be from 3 to 8 p.m. Wednesday with funeral services at 11 a.m. Thursday. A small detachment of Marines marched in slow cadence Monday afternoon from the hearse to the plane. They rendered a slow salute before reaching, without a word, for the casket, then marched slowly to the hearse, where then rendered a salute before their sergeant dismissed them.
Dozens of members of the Patriot Guard, a large group of motorcycle enthusiasts, stood by in silence, then helped escort the casket from the airport.

Hundreds of people turned out at the airport and lined Illinois Routes 111 and 140 from the airport of the Cornerstone Assembly of God Church on Route 140.

People jammed parking lots along the way and stood at the side of the road with their hands over their hearts. Some of the signs at retail stores asked for God’s blessing on Corzine and his family.

"I know a lot of friends and family," said William Blankenship, a Marine veteran who works at the ConocoPhillips refinery. He said he has a son and a nephew in the Corps, and both served multiple tours in Iraq.

Robert Sims of South Roxana was taking pictures for his friends and family, including a bother, a former Marine, who is getting older and could not attend.

He said he was amazed at the show of support as shown by the hundreds of people and 1,000 flags lining the roads.

"We drove by all the flags. It’s unbelievable the caring shown by the community for the service people," Sims said.

Brooks said members of his group and, troops of scouts and ordinary people put up the flags on the 1,000.

Betty J. Vaughn, 81, said she had been around the family all her life and was "devastated" when she heard the news of the injuries that eventually took the young man’s life.

"I just prayed hard, but the lord took him. It’s just one of those things; it isn’t easy, but God has his plans," Vaughn of Bethalto said.

Alta Vaughn, also of Bethalto, said she recalls when Kenny’s grandmother took care of her sister. Kenny rushed over to the house when the sister fell out of her wheelchair.

"He just picked her up and said, ‘She’ll be OK. He was really nice," Vaughn said.

Family members and friends all had memories of Corzine.

"He got in trouble by the Marines when he smiled when they took his picture," said cousin Blaine Epps. Anyone familiar with tales of new recruits is aware that the young men have nothing to smile about, at least according to their drill sergeants.
http://www.marines.mil

'Men who look death in the face and continue to move forward'

1/3/2011  By Cpl. Daniel Blatter  , Regimental Combat Team 2


Wyatt and Rusk were killed in action, Dec. 6, 2010 and Corzine was killed in action Dec. 24, 2010. Many Marines in Sangin attended the memorial and paid their respects to their fallen brothers.

The short, quiet ceremony was marked by Bible verses and prayers honoring the fallen heroes.

Final Roll was called three times for Wyatt, Corzine and Rusk only to be answered by silence. Taps followed in a final farewell.

Wyatt was born in Canton, Ohio on October 6, 1985. He graduated from Akron East High School in Akron, Ohio before joining the Marine Corps. His personal decorations include the Purple Heart and Combat Action Ribbon.

Wyatt is survived by his wife Katherine and his brothers Andrew, Josh, DJ and Scott.

“Cpl. Wyatt loved his job, he loved his wife and he was a mature and proficient infantryman who led his men from the front and was well respected by everyone in first platoon,” said Lt. Col. Jason L. Morris, Battalion Commander, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. "On December 6th, Cpl. Wyatt was killed by accurate rifle fire while his fire team provided security for the rest of his platoon."

“Cpl. Wyatt will never be forgotten.”

Corzine was born in Madison, Ill., on May 4, 1987. He graduated from Civic Memorial High School in Bethalto, Ill., before joining the Marine Corps. Corzine’s personal decorations include the Purple Heart and Combat Action Ribbon.

Corzine is survived by his parents, Kenneth and Carla Corzine.

“Lance Cpl. Corzine enjoyed life and he never hesitated to carry a heavy load or walk point,” said Morris. “On December 5th, he was conducting a dismounted security patrol with the rest of his squad when he was gravely wounded from an IED strike. Unfortunately for all of us, despite his rapid evacuation and medical treatment, he never fully recovered and on Christmas Eve, he succumbed to his wounds at Bethesda. Fortunately his parents were at his side.”

“Lance Cpl. Corzine will also never be forgotten.”

Rusk was born in Corpus Christi, Texas on September 23, 1990. He graduated from Orange Grove High School in Orange Grove, Texas. Rusk’s personal decorations include the Purple Heart and Combat Action Ribbon.

Rusk is survived by his parents, Darrell and Kathy Rusk, and his two brothers, Cody and Brady.

“Lance Cpl. Colton Rusk was an outstanding Marine who was well respected by his platoon mates and his superiors for his professionalism and his proficiency as a machine gunner,” said Morris. “On December 6, as he swept for secondary improvised explosive devices, Lance Cpl. Rusk was mortally wounded by accurate rifle fire and later succumbed to his wounds."

“Lance Cpl. Rusk will never be forgotten.”

As the ceremony came to an end, Morris asked, ‘Where do we get men such as these, men who look death in the face and continue to move forward.’

“I think fortunate for all of us; many Americans still understand that the freedom that we enjoy is not free. These men knew that their calling was to serve and if necessary to sacrifice everything,” said Morris. “Now, all three of these men have been taken home on their shields as great warriors should be and are now at rest.

“I give thanks that I have had the opportunity to serve with men such as these.”
Deal reached with tribe in Taliban area

By Patrick Quinn - The Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The leaders of the largest tribe in a Taliban stronghold in southern Helmand province have pledged to halt insurgent attacks and expel foreign fighters from one of the most violent spots in the country, the senior U.S. Marine general in Afghanistan said Monday.

Marine Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, who commands coalition forces in the southwest, said the deal was struck between local elders in the Sangin district and Helmand Governor Gulabuddin Mangal with the consultation of coalition forces. The area has witnessed some of the heaviest fighting of the war.

However it is unlikely that the violence will cease immediately in Sangin as the die-hard Taliban leadership under the command of Mullah Mohammad Omar, which is based in the Pakistani city of Quetta, will keep fighting.

But the cooperation of the tribal leaders in the effort to rid the area of insurgents could help shorten the war in one of the most violent places in Afghanistan.

In the past four years, more than 100 British troops died in Sangin and more than a dozen Marine have lost their lives since their deployment in mid-October. Getting local tribal elders to renounce the Taliban and join the political process has been a key part of the U.S. counterinsurgency plan in Afghanistan.

As part of the deal, Mills said “there was also a pledge from the elders that fighting would cease by insurgents against coalition forces and foreign fighters would be expelled from the area.”

He added that “we are cautiously optimistic of this agreement and will monitor whether it leads to reduced insurgent influence and a rejection of illicit activity.”

With the nearly decade-old war growing increasingly unpopular in the United States and in many NATO capitals, success on the battlefield is an important part of President Obama’s plan to begin a gradual withdrawal of American forces in July, and eventually hand over control of the country’s security to the Afghans by the end of 2014.

The war is also very costly at a time when the U.S. is slowly starting to emerge from recession. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the United States spent an average of $5.4 billion a month in Afghanistan in the budget year that ended in September, and the total cost since the war began stands at $336 billion.

The deal was made with the Alikozai tribe, the largest in the Sarwan-Qalah area of the Upper Sangin Valley. The tribe controls the majority of the 30 villages located in a 17-square-kilometer region, said Mangal spokesman Daoud Ahmadi. The tribe last rose up against the Taliban in 2007 but failed because of a lack of resources and coalition help.

Sangin is a strategic region for the Taliban and one they do not want to lose. It is a key crossroads to funnel drugs, weapons and fighters throughout Helmand and into neighboring Kandahar province, the spiritual heartland of the Taliban. It is also one of the last remaining sanctuaries in Helmand where the Taliban can freely process the opium and heroin that largely fund the insurgency.

“The insurgents have already begun to strike back savagely at those who desire peace but so far the elders remain steadfast,” Mills said in a statement.

Mills said that his forces would continue to push into Taliban and insurgent-controlled areas and would fight back if confronted.
According to Mangal’s office, the deal was struck on Saturday in the center of Sangin after 25 days of negotiations.

“As they are the majority in that area we can say this will be a successful process in that area,” Ahmadi said.

As part of the counterinsurgency plan mapped out by Army Gen. David Petraeus, the top NATO commander in Afghanistan, once an area is cleared of insurgents, development and reconstruction aid will follow.

“They want schools, medical clinics and the freedom to move about without fear of the insurgency,” Mills said.

A senior NATO official said that coalition forces will keep pressure on insurgents in 2011 to lock in the gains made on the battlefield despite taking a record number of casualties last year.

“There will be no end of the fighting season and we will maintain pressure on the insurgency everywhere. We will do more of everything, in terms of military and kinetic activities, more development more reintegration activities,” coalition spokesman Brig. Gen. Josef Blotz said.

He said last year’s infusion of more than 30,000 troops, mostly from the United States, helped turn the tide in many parts of Afghanistan, especially in the south.

But Blotz added that “these gains are not yet irreversible, they are still fragile.”

Also unclear is what gains have been made against insurgent groups in the north and east, especially along the porous frontier with Pakistan. Many insurgent groups use safe havens in the Pakistani tribal areas to launch attacks against NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The U.S. has been carrying out drone strikes against those safe havens and has tried to pressure the Pakistani military to move against extremists in place like North Waziristan — a request Pakistan has so far refused. The Pakistani military has said it is too busy dealing with its own Taliban insurgents in other areas.

The surge in troops has also led to an increase in casualties — both from coalition countries and Afghan security forces.

“This is a necessary phase in the overall strategy and before it gets better it has to get worse. Unfortunately this is what we saw toward the end of 2010,” Blotz said.

A record 702 of the coalition’s service members were killed in 2010. But the Afghan police and the military have also shouldered a heavy toll with 1,292 members of the police force and 806 soldiers were killed last year, according to Afghan statistics.
Hope for peace arises in one Afghan district

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, January 5, 2011; A01

Nestled amid Afghanistan's southwestern foothills, the lush pomegranate orchards and dense poppy groves of Sangin have seen more combat fatalities than any other district in the country.

Relentless insurgent ambushes and roadside bombings in the district claimed the lives of more than 100 British troops from 2006 to 2010. The U.S. Marines have lost 29 men there since they took charge last summer, and the limbs of dozens more have been blown off. Top commanders had all but given up hope that the district could be salvaged.

But now, a chance at peace has emerged: On New Year's Day, leaders of a tribe that has been responsible for numerous attacks in Sangin struck a deal with the Afghan government to cease offensive acts and evict foreign fighters in the area in exchange for the release of a prisoner, the promise of development assistance and the prospect of establishing their own security force.

If the agreement with the Alikozai tribe holds - similar pacts have fallen apart elsewhere in the country - it has the potential to pacify a swath of seemingly unwinnable terrain and affect the war across southern Afghanistan. It opens up a key road in the direction of the Kajaki Dam, where the U.S. government is trying to repair a hydropower plant to provide much-needed electricity to Kandahar, the country's second-largest city.

Taliban leaders have long used Sangin as a staging area to assemble bombs and plot attacks carried out elsewhere in the south. If their ability to do so is restricted, U.S. military officials believe they will have to relocate to more remote places where it will be more challenging to operate.

The officials expressed hope that other tribes in the area, and other pockets of Alikozai in the south, could seek similar deals.

The arrangement has "a huge potential to deliver change," U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, the top operational commander in Afghanistan, said in an interview Tuesday.

Even if the Alikozai keep their promise, it will not automatically end the insurgency in Sangin, but it probably will shrink and simplify the complex mosaic of violence there, which has been colored by tribal rivalries.

When Taliban leaders came to Sangin, they forged an alliance with the Alizai tribe. The Alikozai elders chafed at the presence of Taliban fighters from Pakistan and other parts of Afghanistan, but they initially were loath to collaborate with coalition forces or the Afghan government because they were involved in the lucrative business of processing and trafficking opium.

In 2007, the Alikozai rose up against the Alizai and sought to evict non-indigenous Taliban fighters, but Alikozai requests for help from the British military were refused because of concern about getting involved in what appeared to be a tribal dispute. The Alizai eventually killed several Alikozai tribal leaders, and many Alikozai tribesmen had little choice but to surrender and join the Taliban.

The dynamics changed when the Marines replaced British forces in summer 2010. They increased the tempo of offensive operations and struck back harder at the all of the insurgents, including the Alikozai. In mid-October, a Marine reconnaissance battalion swooped into the Alikozai area and conducted a blistering barrage of attacks that commanders estimate killed more than 250 insurgents.

"That convinced the elders," said one senior Marine officer involved in the operation. "They began to see the handwriting on the wall."

At the same time, Marine commanders sought to convey to the Alikozai leadership that it would be aided if it decided to stand up to the Taliban again. The Marines described how their counterinsurgency operations in other parts of Helmand province were aimed at safeguarding the population from the insurgency.

"We've reassured them that we're going to be here for them, that we're not going to abandon them," said Marine Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills, the top U.S. commander in Helmand. "In years gone by, you had to take our word that if you came over to our side, things would get better. Now we have something we can point to. Locals can see what's happening elsewhere . . . and they can see the inability of the Taliban to come back in any meaningful way."
The pact calls for the Alikozai elders to prevent their tribesmen from participating in attacks on Afghan and coalition forces, and to deny haven to Taliban fighters from Pakistan and other parts of Afghanistan.

Mills and other Marine officers said the rapprochement began about a month ago when Helmand Gov. Gulab Mangal's top security adviser traveled to Sangin to talk to residents about a government program to reintegrate insurgents who renounce violence. He was approached by a few Alikozai elders who expressed interest in brokering a deal.

The Alikozai initially demanded that U.S. and NATO forces stay out of their areas and that several imprisoned tribesmen be freed in exchange for a cease-fire. The Marines rejected that offer but wound up compromising on the release of one Alikozai bomb-maker on the condition that he not engage in violence again. The Marines also pledged to have Afghan forces take the lead in searches of homes in the area.

There also was the emolument of development assistance. The Marines have pledged to rebuild schools, open a medical clinic and pave the main road from the Alikozai area to the district center.

Marine officials said they would seek to test the deal in the coming days with intense sweeps through the area. "We're not going to sit there with our pants down," the senior officer said. "If they're not keeping their word, we'll know."

Although the Marines said they plan to destroy any drug labs they find, they may not encounter many. Some U.S. officials say they believe the Alikozai have moved much of their processing infrastructure elsewhere, making it easier for them to countenance U.S. patrols in the area.

The 10-year Afghan war has been littered with peace deals that have fallen apart, and it is impossible to know whether this one will stick in ways others have not. In the neighboring district of Musa Qala, a 2006 agreement with a Taliban commander to join the government in exchange for being named the district governor resulted in him creating his own militia, which ran roughshod over the local population. And in eastern Afghanistan, a peace arrangement with the Shinwari tribe last year, which involved U.S. promises of substantial development projects, fell apart because of opposition from the Afghan government and tribal infighting.

U.S. commanders said the Sangin pact is different because it is built upon the lessons of previous failures. The deal was negotiated by the Afghan government, not the Americans, and it will not involve no-go zones for international forces.

But there is a dispute about whether the agreement was formally consummated. Marine officials say it was agreed to by about two dozen elders and tribal militia commanders during a Jan. 1 meeting with U.S. and Afghan government officials. But a spokesman for Mangal said no "legal protocol" has been signed making it official.

For the U.S. military, the biggest concern is Taliban retribution. It has struck at one of the negotiators, killing him and his family.

"The enemy is going to react, and they're going to react by targeting those who are supporters of this process," Rodriguez said.

Although senior commanders were eager to crow about the deal, they sought to give themselves an escape clause in case it goes the way of so many other such peace-making efforts in Afghanistan.

"It's a step," Mills said. "We'll see. We don't know yet if this will hold. We don't know how it will play out."
Protesters' voice gets lost in community chorus

By SANFORD J. SCHMIDT
2011-01-06 08:36:30

BETHALTO - A message of hate was obliterated Thursday by thousands of supporters who turned out to honor fallen Marine Kenny Corzine.

The people were there to support American troops, as well as counter the negative effects of a group that showed up to declare its hatred of gay people.

The small group from Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, around four to six people, showed up with signs depicting their spite for gays, as well as the U.S. military for allowing gays in its ranks.

A handful of the extremist group's members arrived before the 11 a.m. start of the funeral and were gone within 30 minutes, long before Corzine's supporters departed. A cheer arose from the crowd when they left.

Dozens of police officers from departments across the region were present to help keep the peace. There were no reported incidents of violence.

The Westboro contingent was kept about a quarter-mile south of the Cornerstone Assembly of God on Moreland Road, well beyond the mandatory 200 feet required by law. With the hundreds of signs and supporters lining the road, the mourners would have likely been unable to see the protesters.

The supporters along the road came from the ranks of military veterans' groups, firefighters, and ordinary people from miles away. Supporters crowded the side of Moreland Road, from the church south and then west along Illinois Route 140 to the burial site, Rose Lawn Memory Gardens.

People waved flags and held up banners supporting the Corzine family and the troops in general.

A group of American Legion and Disabled American Veterans members from the area of Jerseyville, Kane and Grafton stood near the church in their uniforms, their ceremonial rifles stacked and ready.

"We're just here to show the proper respect," said Nelson Miller.

A group of schoolteachers stood near the church in the chilly wind, one of them Joy Molloy of Jerseyville.

Others said they have some connections to the military.

"That's not why we're here. We would have come anyway," said Cindy McClintock of Alton, a Navy veteran.

Many of the onlookers said the protesters may have done more to support patriotism and unity that to spread hate.

"They're such a small group, and all they did was to bring people together," McClintock said. "We could sit home and be mad about it, or we could come here."

Dozens of members of the Patriot Guard, a group of motorcycle riders who show up to protect the grieving families of veterans from the protesters.

"We're here to show honor and respect for our veterans. Every veteran paid a blank check to the USA, up to and including my life," said Allen McGann, a member from of St. Louis.
BETHALTO - As cold winds blew through a sea of flags lined along Illinois Route 140, warm hearts inside the Cornerstone Assembly of God Church were saying a final goodbye to Lance Cpl. Kenny Corzine.

One month after receiving word Corzine had been severely injured in Afghanistan, his family saw him laid to rest, joined by approximately 500 other people inside the church - and thousands of others who lined the funeral route outside.

"We are all family," Cornerstone Pastor Phil Schneider said. "Some of you are members of his military family, come to honor a comrade, brother, and Marine. Others are here as a member of the family of God, and some of you have come to say goodbye to a son, grandson, nephew, or cousin. We promise you we will not forget his sacrifice."

Surrounded by flower arrangements lining every step of the podium, Schneider also said everyone in the church, as well as those standing outside in support, were part of "the American family, as well."

"This is our son, our brother, our friend," Schneider said. "His sacrifice was not in vain. His sacrifice has strengthened our community, our nation and our pride."

Corzine, 23, grew up in Bethalto and enlisted in the Marines at age 20. He lost his legs in an IED explosion on Dec. 5 and died from his injuries on Christmas Eve.

Friend and fellow Marine Lance Cpl. Luke Malone also spoke during the ceremony.

"I consider the Corzine family my own family," Malone said. "They have always been there for me, and I will always be there for them."

"As you can see from everybody here in this building, all of the people gathered outside, the Patriot Guard, the veterans, and the community, Kenny did not die in vain, and he will not be forgotten."

The funeral proceedings also included a reciting of the poem "Ode to a Marine," a reading of Corzine's obituary, and live renditions of "Amazing Grace" and "Proud to be an American."

Following the speakers, the Patriot Guard presented flags and plaques to Kenny's parents as well as to his grandmother, Sharon Collins. Each then lined up and saluted Kenny as they left the auditorium. As the ceremony ended, Corzine's casket was closed and the American flag was draped over the coffin as his fellow Marines somberly carried their fallen comrade out the church doors.

In the foyer, photo collages showed Corzine at all ages, scuba diving, riding dirt bikes, and cutting up with his brother and cousins.

"They look so close," one mourner said while visiting the photos. "Such a close family."
Before and after the funeral, hundreds of supporters lined Moreland Road to wave flags and show support. Fire Departments from all over the area also parked near the church and stood at attention as the cars rolled by.

The procession headed to Rose Lawn Memory Gardens, following Illinois Route 140, a road that literally came to a standstill as the funeral procession crept through town.

Thousands of people - business owners and employees, groups of schoolchildren, families, and military - flooded both sides of the highway, holding hats to chests, bowing heads in prayer, waving American flags, and wiping away tears. Some also held signs saying, "We love you Kenny" and "Cpl. Corzine died so you can be free."

The funeral procession was preceded by dozens of motorcyclists, led by the Patriot Guard. Following that were representatives of the Alton, Bethalto, Roxana, Wood River, East Alton, and Madison County sheriff's and Illinois State Police departments.

At the gravesite, light snow began to fall from the gray sky during the reciting of the Lord's Prayer, after which American flags were presented to Kenny's father, Ken, his mother, Carla, his grandmother, Sharon, and daughter, Macy, before hundreds of onlookers.

As the last of the mourners pulled out of the cemetery, the sun began peeking through the clouds as if to signal the time for mourning was over.

"I can't remember a day when Kenny didn't smile," Lance Cpl. Luke Malone said during the funeral. "Semper Fi."
U.S. sends 1,400 more Marines to Afghanistan
Troops heading to Helmand Province

Written by
Gretel C. Kovach
6:23 p.m., Jan. 6, 2011

U.S. military commanders are ramping up the war in Afghanistan this winter in advance of the typical fighting season, as they dispatch about 1,400 more Marines to the former Taliban stronghold in Helmand province.

The increase in troops is in addition to a company of tankers sent this winter to reinforce military units in Sangin, a strategic node of insurgent and narcotics activity in the northeastern corner of the province where Camp Pendleton Marines have faced heavy combat.

Infantrymen from Camp Lejeune, N.C., deployed with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, will join the fight by the end of this month, the U.S. Central Command announced Thursday.

The option to add up to 3,000 troops in Afghanistan was included in the surge of 30,000 approved by President Barack Obama a year ago. About 21,000 Marines are now in Helmand province, roughly half of them from the force based at Camp Pendleton.

“As [the enemy] desperately tries to disperse for the winter, our intent is to simply overwhelm him with an increased operational tempo that he’ll be unable to match,” said Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the Camp Pendleton Marine in command of NATO forces in southwestern Afghanistan.

The U.S. military is under pressure to show improvements in security before the start of a scheduled drawdown in troops planned in Afghanistan for July. The Marine Corps footprint in Helmand province doubled in size in the last year, contributing to significant advances against the Taliban in southern and central Helmand province, but the gains remain fragile, analysts said.

Marine commanders, like the Army leadership operating in neighboring Kandahar province, hope to solidify their control before spring thaws, when insurgent fighters normally flow into Afghanistan through formerly snowbound passes and take cover in the dense foliage of newly budded trees.

Gen. David Petraeus, commander of international forces in Afghanistan, requested the extra contingent of Marines in conjunction with the Afghan government “to exploit gains already achieved against insurgents and more rapidly complete construction of critical infrastructure,” the central command said.

The deployment “is part of a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy that will make a long-term contribution to Afghanistan’s progress toward self-governance, stability and security.”

The 1,400 Marines had deployed in late August with the Kearsarge Amphibious Ready Group to serve as the quick reaction reserve force for the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. The group is scheduled to return to its East Coast bases around May. Their Afghanistan deployment was described as “short-term” and will last probably three months.

Mills will be able to move the additional troops around Helmand province and southwestern Afghanistan as needed. But Jeffrey A. Dressler, a scholar with The Institute for the Study of War who spent six weeks researching the military in Helmand province this summer, said the influx of Marines could be decisive if they are sent to the north of the province near Sangin.

“One of the main causes of success and failure in counterinsurgency is first and foremost resourcing it properly,” Dressler said in an interview. The additional forces could be the defining factor that permits the Marines to subdue the violent northeastern areas of the province, he said.
One of the key findings of a recent report Dressler authored is that Helmand was the first province in Afghanistan to receive sufficient forces to apply comprehensive counterinsurgency operations that protect the local population.

Thanks to a buildup of forces beginning in the summer of 2009, the insurgency has been “significantly degraded” in Helmand province, according to the report released Thursday, called “Counterinsurgency in Helmand – Progress and Remaining Challenges.”

Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment is stationed in Sangin. If the 1,400 Marines are sent to join them in the northeastern corner of the province, it would amount to almost a doubling of the force, Dressler noted.

Insurgents and poppy traders use the area as a base for operations throughout the province as well as in neighboring areas such as Kandahar, so the influx of Marine forces “will have effects throughout all of southern Afghanistan,” Dressler said.
Modern warfare's lifesaving techniques give Ronan's Tomy Parker a fighting chance

By VINCE DEVLIN of the Missoulian | Posted: Saturday, January 15, 2011 10:49 pm

BETHESDA, Md. - Both of his legs are gone. The flesh was torn to shreds half a planet from here, and what little remained - mostly bone - was amputated in a field hospital in Afghanistan last month.

But on a Wednesday morning three weeks later, it is his left hand - what's left of it - that most bothers the Marine. That's the hand that was wrapped around the pistol grip of his rifle when he stepped on the improvised explosive device.

All the fingers on the southpaw's hand had to be amputated as well. The wound is still open at this point, and it can still throb.

The fateful December day when Lance Cpl. Thomas Parker of Ronan lost two legs and four fingers had begun with a local Mullah - a "power player" in Helmand Province, where they were deployed - telling Parker's unit the location of three other IEDs in the area.

"It didn't feel good," says Parker. "He could have been leading us into an ambush, or to a suicide bomber."

But it turned out to be good intelligence, Parker says. His unit hiked to the area, and successfully detonated the three bombs. Parker estimates his platoon had detonated at least 50 IEDs since arriving in Afghanistan on Oct. 1, where they began operations after about a week of further training.

It was on the trip back from this latest mission that the Marines came under fire.

"Just a couple of shots," Parker says. "It was getting late, about 4:30 in the afternoon, and our squad leader made the decision to keep pushing. It's hard having to look for IEDs in the dark."

So they turned. It was an area they had traveled through on foot many times, Parker says. He took four steps just fine.

"On the fifth step, I felt funny," he says. "I looked down, and realized I wasn't on the ground anymore. Then I realized it was because I didn't have legs anymore."

"I said a couple of colorful words, thought, 'This is going to hurt,' and smashed into the ground."

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When an IED's primary charge detonates, gases heat up and expand rapidly, sending shock waves for hundreds of yards or more.

"He showed me a video one of his buddies had posted of them blowing up an IED," Parker's mother, Lisa Jennison of Ronan, says, "and it took my breath away. You can see Tomy in the video, hear them counting it down, and then you see the biggest explosion - it's just huge. I watched that, and I honestly don't know how he survived."

The explosion fragments the bomb's container, which may also contain nails, screws, bolts and ball bearings, turning it all into shrapnel. Additionally, the makers of the homemade bombs may add toxic chemicals, or even defecate or urinate into them, in an attempt to cause problems beyond the unimaginable initial damage they inflict.

The heat from the explosion causes fire, and the blast wave leaves a partial vacuum that causes air to rush back in under high pressure, pulling debris and shrapnel back in with it.
The pressure in a blast wave can be 1,000 times that of atmospheric pressure, which can cause the brain to slam against the inside of the skull, causing concussions or blindness, and rupture eardrums, causing deafness.

Tomy Parker's left eardrum ruptured, although that's about the last thing he noticed as he lay in the swirling dust and called out to the other members of his unit.

What did he yell?
"I said I was a double amputee," Parker says.
Just like that, his life was changed forever.

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**Parker was the fifth Marine in his platoon** to be "blowed up" - their words - that week alone.
Just four days earlier it was Parker - knocked into the dirt himself by the shock waves that travel from a detonated IED at a rate of 1,600 feet per second - picking himself off the ground and running to the rescue of two fellow Marines who both lost their legs in a similar explosion.
Parker had tied the tourniquets to their stumps; now he looked for someone to do the same for him.

"They yelled back that they couldn't see me through the dust," Parker says, "but when the dust cleared they got tourniquets on both my legs, and got gauze and a pressure dressing on my hand."
There was no place for a helicopter to land there, Parker says, so he was loaded in a truck and hauled down the road.
A helicopter - "A British military bird," Parker says - transported him to a forward operating base.
Parker, who remained conscious to that point, was given drugs that knocked him out on the Medevac helicopter.
By the time he regained consciousness he would be on U.S. soil, here at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, just outside Washington, D.C.
Lisa, his mother, and uncle, Rick Jennison of Ronan, had arrived a half-hour before he did and were waiting for him.

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In previous wars, Tomy Parker most likely would never have opened his eyes again. We'd be writing about his funeral instead of his recovery.
Advances in both medicine and body armor are saving lives in Afghanistan and Iraq, and also delivering home a wave of young military people with missing limbs.
According to the Congressional Research Service, the number of military personnel who had all or parts of limbs amputated since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan started had topped 1,600 by September - 1,621, to be exact - the last time CRS delivered hard numbers.
That report came out on Sept. 28, the same day Tomy Parker was deployed to Afghanistan from Camp Pendleton, Calif.
At the Joint Theater Hospital at Afghanistan's Bagram Air Field, where Parker was taken after the explosion, the hospital commander and surgeons explained the new realities of this war to National Public Radio's Quil Lawrence just two weeks ago.
"I could probably count on one hand how many double amputations I'd had to take care of or do" prior to the war in Afghanistan, Air Force Lt. Col. Rachel Height, Bagram's head surgeon, told Lawrence.
And now?
"I don't even know," she said. "It's a lot."
They arrive almost daily, and sometimes, Lawrence explained, in large clusters when a big bomb has exploded under a foot patrol.
It's getting worse. After several years of war, the number of amputees was at about 900 in late 2009.

A little more than a year later, the number is likely threatening to top 2,000.

"An IED blast is a nasty thing," Parker says. "It takes off limbs, and it's not a clear cut. My legs still had a good chunk of the bones sticking out, with chunks of meat still attached. It was not something pretty at all.

"On my left hand, my pinkie was gone, the lower part of my ring finger was gone, my middle finger was gone and my pointer was hanging by a couple of tendons. The skin was blown off the rest of the hand."

Doctors considered amputating at the wrist before deciding they would try to save the thumb.

Tomy Parker was unconscious when he was rushed into the Bagram emergency room, where the doctors and nurses who cared for him there did so in 100-degree heat.

That's where the ER thermostat is set. Hypothermia is one of the biggest risks to patients who have lost large amounts of blood, and cranking up the ER temperature is one of the changes doctors have made since the war in Afghanistan began nine years ago.

"At the beginning of this conflict," Air Force Col. Chris Benjamin, the hospital commander, told NPR, "we were taking the best trauma medicine from the civilian sector, and we brought it to Iraq and Afghanistan. Here we are seven, eight years later, taking what we've learned in these conflicts" and applying it back home.

One thing different from past wars is the use of a catheter to pinch nerves and numb injured limbs - Parker has one in his left shoulder to deaden the feeling in his left arm, home to the hand where he lost the four fingers.

"You had so many injured veterans from Vietnam wind up addicted to painkillers," says Parker's Uncle Rick, "but now they pinch a nerve and you don't need near the narcotics."

And just a decade ago, tourniquets were thought to do more harm than good, cutting off the blood supply to injured limbs, but now they are considered a key first step to saving a life, not a last resort.

"The soldier out in the field that encounters an explosion or a gunshot wound, the most important part in his chain of survival from the explosion ... probably is what his battle buddy does," Benjamin told Lawrence.

With so many injuries now involving lost limbs, all U.S. troops carry special tourniquets that are designed so that they can be applied with one hand.

Tomy Parker says Marines are required to have three tourniquets on them.

He had five when he was blowed up.

As the 21-year-old Parker tells the story of the day he lost four fingers and two legs in Afghanistan, his mother and uncle change the bandages on his left hand in his hospital room at the National Naval Medical Center while nurses look on.

Parker shares the small room with Cpl. Chris Montgomery of Alabama, who lost his legs in Afghanistan four days before Tomy did. Montgomery is one of the Marines Tomy helped save just days before other Marines helped save Tomy.

Lisa and Rick carefully pull the bandages back, revealing a thumb attached to a bloody stump. They've been doing this twice a day for most of the three weeks.

"A wet-to-dry dressing isn't that common, and different nurses on different shifts were doing it different ways," Lisa explains. "We're here every time, and Rick knows what Tomy wants, so we just do it."

It's hopefully the second-to-last time they will. Tomy is scheduled for surgery the next day, when a chunk of skin from his back will be removed and grafted over the open wound on his left hand.
He will be in the operating room for 12 hours. Every blood vessel in the hand must be attached to the new skin to ensure optimal blood flow and give Parker the best chance at the graft taking.
"You don't want to have to do this twice," his surgeon told him.
It is Lance Cpl. Thomas Parker's 12th surgery in the three weeks since the IED exploded underneath the young man from Ronan.
The 20-pound bomb took his feet. It took his legs. It took fingers.
But it did not take his life.
As you'll learn as the Missoulian tracks his recovery over the coming months, the insurgents evidently failed to take Tomy Parker's spirit, too.

Ronan Marine Tomy Parker, 21, who lost both legs and most of his left hand when an improvised explosive device exploded under him on Dec. 11 in Afghanistan, watches while his uncle, his mother and a nurse change the dressing on his hand recently at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., where he is being treated for the injuries.
Photo by KURT WILSON/Missoulian
Survival skills: Ronan’s Lance Cpl. Thomas Parker recovering from war wounds with familiar humor, spirit

Written by VINCE DEVLIN / Photographed by KURT WILSON of the Missoulian | Posted: Sunday, January 16, 2011 2:00 am

BETHESDA, Md. - It's unbelievably tight quarters in the fifth-floor hospital room housing the two young Marines who both lost, among other things, their legs, several days earlier in Afghanistan.

Yet one more doctor squeezes her way into the far side of the room, where Lance Cpl. Thomas Parker of Ronan lies, his left hand and arm heavily bandaged, his left leg amputated at the hip and his right above the knee.

She asks how he is doing.

"I'm not a professional," Parker tells her, holding up a bandaged stump, "but I think I'm supposed to have four more fingers on this hand."

It's like this much of the time. Earlier, a nurse had pulled back the curtain and asked Parker if he was having any, in her words, "medical issues."

"Well, I don't have any legs," Parker answered. "Is that a medical issue?"

"He's still the same Tomy," says his mother, Lisa Jennison. "He's a little crankier sometimes, but that's to be expected."

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"The same Tomy," in Tomy's words, is "rather bull-headed - really stubborn, I guess."

Those traits that made him a handful to raise when he was younger - people say his high school principal had his mother on speed dial - may serve him well in the years ahead.

In the days after an improvised explosive device detonated under his feet in Afghanistan on Dec. 11, people back home in Ronan who know him best - his mom, his high school wrestling coach, his best friend's foster mother - predicted Parker would overcome the devastating injuries.

"This is not going to get him down at all," insisted Chris Briske, who taught Parker in her Ronan High School biology class and is the foster mother of Parker's best friend and fellow Marine, Frank Swan.

Not get him down? He went to war for his country, but lost two legs and most of his left hand. How could that not get him down?

And then you meet him.

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It doesn't take long for your attention to be drawn away from the missing limbs, and to the personality of the young man who is missing them.

He teases his mother, threatening to cover what's left of his body in a tattoo.

"All 4-foot-2 of me," says the one-time 6-footer, just three weeks after the explosion robbed him of his legs. "I'm the shortest person in my family now."

Discussion of a small shaved spot about the size of a quarter near the base of his skull - where his helmet, still strapped on, rubbed the wrong way as Parker was airlifted to a field hospital in Afghanistan after the blast - turns into kidding about it being an unusually placed "bald spot."
"Bald? Hey, I'm 21 years old, I have no legs or hand - I don't want to lose my hair, too," Parker says.

It's not that the jokes fly a mile a minute in the fifth-floor room at the National Naval Medical Center.

In between these occasional cracks, Parker will relive the explosion for you in a matter-of-fact manner. He'll tell you how dreams and reality confusingly wove together in the first few days after he arrived in Bethesda, and every time he woke up, he was sure he'd been moved to another room.

He'll show you the eye patch he wore after he first arrived, because he suffered from double vision. He'll tell you he's deaf in his left ear, because the eardrum was ruptured in the explosion.

He'll explain the weird sensations his nerves still transmit to his brain from feet that no longer exist - how they tickle sometimes, and feel like they are on fire at others.

How, when he swings his torso over the bed, it feels like feet that aren't there plop down on carpet fibers.

Yet the hospital floor, Parker notes, is not carpeted.

"I have some absurd sensations with my legs," he says.

"I've had some bad days," Parker admits. "There are some days when I'm just in a grumpy mood - but I was like that before this happened. It usually happens now when I don't get a good night's sleep."

One member of Montana's Congressional delegation, U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, has visited Parker at the hospital, and among Parker's most prized new possessions since the explosion is an American flag that flew over the U.S. Capitol for a day at the request of another, U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, who then sent it to him.

His most prized, of course, is the Purple Heart the commandant of the Marine Corps presented him in his hospital bed a few days after the blast.

"I guess this is the end of my Marine Corps career," Parker told Gen. James F. Amos, a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"He told me if I wanted to stay, he'd find me a job when this is over," Parker says now.

Since then, he's also learned there are jobs in other federal agencies he would likely qualify for, and college is a possibility.

"There are quite a bit of options," Parker says - including his old job back home with his Uncle Rick's business, Jennison Tree Service.

"He can come back any time he wants," Rick says. "We'll get him back up in the bucket truck trimming trees."

When he gets time in the wheelchair he's learned to hoist himself into and operate alone, Parker likes to swing by the sign in the lobby of the National Naval Medical Center that reads,

"Let it be known that those who wear the Purple Heart Medal have given of their blood in the defense of their country..."

It was, Parker's attitude suggests, his job. What happened to him was one of the risks of serving his nation.

"I'm just a regular dude," he says, "who had a bad turn of events."

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Sheep's Head Mountain rises out of the Mission Valley east of Ronan, and a snow-capped picture of it is taped to the wall behind Parker's hospital bed.

When visitors ask the Marine where he is from, Parker likes to point to the poster.

"Montana," he tells them. "That's my backyard."

The visitors have been many. Not just Amos and Tester, but people like the wife of Parker's sergeant in Afghanistan, who flew in from California to visit the Marines now at the National Naval Medical Center who were under her husband's command.
A local family that lost a Marine in Afghanistan just five months ago regularly delivers fresh fruit and cookies to the patients on the fifth floor.

At a convenience store on the base, Rick Jennison noticed a pickup with Montana plates and stopped to talk to the owner.

"It turned out he's stationed back here," Rick says. "I told him who I was, and he said his dad had been sending him newspaper articles from back home about Tomy. He came up and visited on Christmas."

Parker also appreciates the businesses back home that have put up signs asking for prayers for him, the people who have bought buttons with his likeness and wear them, and others who have written him, or donated to a fund that helps his family with expenses.

"The amount of support has been amazing," he says. "Knowing so many people are sending their love and prayers, it helps quite a bit."

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On a Tuesday night earlier this month - two days before Parker is scheduled to undergo his 12th surgery since the explosion - a doctor delivers bad news.

Parker has been lobbying various corpsmen and nurses about his craving for a Monster Energy drink.

The first says he doesn't see any problem, but he's not a member of Parker's medical team and can't OK it. The next person in says no, the caffeine in the drink will constrict the blood vessels, and you don't want that when you're about to attempt a skin graft.

"Yeah, but it's two days away," Parker argues. "Won't the caffeine have worn off by then?"

That question is relayed to someone else, who comes in and OKs not just a Monster Energy drink right now, but one for the following day as well.

After that there will be no more Monsters for a while, he says - and no chocolate either, for the same reason.

"No chocolate!" Parker says, but otherwise he's elated - not just one Monster tonight, but one tomorrow as well.

"What are you still doing here?" he asks his mother. "Go get me one! Go get me two!"

"Oh, I'm going to milk this," Lisa responds, delaying the trip to a vending machine.

Good thing, too. A short time later the doctor comes in and says absolutely not, no Monster, not now, not tomorrow and not for several days after the surgery.

She repeats the importance of good blood flow to the skin graft.

"You don't want to have to go through this twice," she tells a dejected Parker.

They'll be taking a chunk of skin off his back and grafting it over the open wound on his hand where his fingers used to be.

They call the skin graft a "flap." He's told the surgery will likely last most of the day (and, it turns out, will actually take 12 hours).

Every blood vessel must be attached. The doctor tells Parker she had one patient who had the same thing done, but wanted the skin taken from his hairy legs.

"I don't have legs, so thanks for bringing that up," Parker replies.

But there is no bitterness in his voice. She denied him his energy drink, and he got her back with a little zing.

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The next morning, the day before his 12th surgery, Parker scoots himself out of his bed and into his wheelchair, and heads for physical therapy.

He'll bump into Rick D. West, the master chief petty officer of the U.S. Navy - the service's highest ranking enlisted man - later and talk to him for several minutes.
But first, a team of therapists puts him through a grueling set of exercises that works up a healthy sweat. Tomy likes the workout, but probably not the sweat.

He has not had a real shower or bath for 77 consecutive days at this point, more than 50 of them coming during his time in Afghanistan, the remainder because of his injuries. His first sponge bath after arriving in Bethesda was welcome, and this week he got his hair washed while in his bed, using real water for the first time, a true treat.

"I look forward to physical therapy," Parker says. "It's a chance to work out, and another step to me getting out of here. I'm not one to sit still."

It's the start of a long road that will lead to Parker being fitted for prosthetics in California, and learning how to walk again, this time on the artificial legs.

The physical therapists start him out on an inflatable pillow, having him raise his arms from his sides and twirl them in the air while trying to maintain his balance. Parker does great while his arms circle in a forward motion, but tips often when they have him reverse the direction.

As Parker works, it becomes quickly clear how important it is now, and will be for the rest of his life, that doctors amputated only his fingers, and not the entire left hand, and also were able to save some of his upper right leg. Every bit of Parker that was saved gives him that much more control.

As they move on to other exercises, Tomy keeps up a steady stream of conversation with the P.T. team that bounces from food to Olympic sports to facial hair to his compatibility with occupational therapy assistant Trista Windows, a match his mother encourages.

"No kind of ice cream is better than any other one," Parker informs everyone. "All ice cream is good."

And, "Curling is stupid. They might as well make cup-stacking a sport."

Later, he makes this announcement to all in the room: "My mustache grows in like a '70s porn star."

His banter with Windows reveals that she's a neat-freak, and Tomy knows his way around a kitchen.

"I clean, you cook - I'm in!" she kids him.

"When he gets his legs, he's going to come back and visit you all," Lisa Jennison tells Petty Officer Duane Pearson, physical therapist Mary Jean Solomon and Windows.


She really shouldn't be surprised if Parker walks back into this room one day.

If you don't think so, you don't know Tomy.
In Afghanistan, Insurgents Let Bombs Do Fighting

By MICHAEL KAMBER

PATROL BASE BARIOLAI, Afghanistan — If the battlegrounds of Afghanistan are the “tip of the spear,” as Marines like to say, then the remote district of Sangin in Helmand Province may be its very point: the deadliest spot in the hardest-fought province for Marines leading the American offensive in Taliban territory.

Marines took over full responsibility for the area in September from badly bloodied British troops who had often kept to defensive positions. The Americans have been more aggressive in their four months in Sangin, but this has resulted in heavy casualties: of at least 120 confirmed Marine deaths across the huge surrounding province since a new troop rotation in mid-April, 27 have been in this tiny corner.

That is in part because the Taliban fighters here are well trained and battle-hardened, and many American units face daily firefights. But the insurgents’ bombs have been even worse than their bullets, and every move the Marines make now must come slowly, deliberately. Clustered tightly on trails, each one taking care to step in the footprints of the man before him, the Marines squint at every bump in the dirt in case it hides an improvised explosive device.

The way they have been forced to adapt highlights the intense challenges that Americans face as they try to root out an enemy that knows the terrain, can find support and shelter in many villages, and is patient enough to let booby traps do most of the fighting.

“One of our sergeants turned around, he planted his foot just outside the trail and lost both legs,” said First Lt. Daric Kleppe, an officer with the Third Battalion, Fifth Marines. Standard procedure now is for the men to shuffle their feet in a small circle when they must turn — a profound and dangerous frustration for a Marine force whose fighting philosophy is based on quick maneuvering.

“All the conventional Marine Corps tactics of enveloping and closing with the enemy are impossible in this environment. Your only choice is to fight from current location due to threat of I.E.D.’s,” said Petty Officer Third Class Royce Burgess.

The Marines’ unit, Company I, has encountered as many as 15 improvised explosive devices in a day. Four months into their seven-month tour here, one of the company’s platoons has had nearly a quarter of its men either wounded or killed. The loss of limbs is so common that the men refer to “amps,” “double amps” and “triple amps” to describe their comrades’ conditions.

“This is probably the most dangerous place on earth,” said First Lt. Stephen Cooney, as he looked out over the landscape. “Or at least in Afghanistan.”

On patrol one day last week, members of the company’s First Platoon carefully made their way down the dirt paths of a village they knew only as “The Fish Tank,” a collection of mud-walled compounds just outside the perimeter of their rudimentary base in Sangin District.

They did not have to go far to find the bomb the Taliban had planted for them.

Thirty pounds of homemade explosive, enough to blow a man to pieces, lay buried along a footpath about 100 yards outside their base’s outer wire. The enemy had crept up under cover of darkness, hidden behind the low mud walls that line the landscape. Only the diligence of Lance Cpl. Luis Garcia, who spotted a small irregularity in the dirt, saved lives.

Lance Cpl. Miguel Lizarraga, using a metal detector, found a second, partly assembled I.E.D. nearby.
An explosives disposal team was called in and quickly triggered the explosives. An enormous blast shook the ground and dirt showered down on the Marines and seven Afghan soldiers accompanying them as they took cover behind a nearby wall.

The explosive was designed to be triggered by a pressure plate made of wood and plastic foam, a very common design that makes the bomb nearly invisible to metal detectors.

“The batteries are the only thing you can find, and they bury them up to 10 feet off the trail, connecting them with low-metallic speaker wire,” Sgt. Aaron Beckett said.

“The metal detectors are often useless: we call them confidence boosters,” one officer said, with a grim laugh.

Still, though it has been hard going from the very start, the Marines are making progress. Hemmed in at nearby Forward Operating Base Jackson at the beginning of their tour, the Marines of Company I fought fierce, almost daily battles through the months of October and November.

On Dec. 6, they fought their way up Route 611, blowing up scores of I.E.D.’s along the way and taking over an abandoned and booby-trapped British Army base, Patrol Base Bariolai, on a barren hilltop here.

They sleep in the frigid cold and go weeks without showers, but they are keeping the nearby Taliban on the defensive.

The Marines can now patrol throughout the surrounding village every day, Sergeant Beckett said. And he has been encouraged by the increasing trust that local villagers are showing, sometimes offering the Marines information that has tipped them off to I.E.D.’s or potential ambushed.

As the Marines passed into a populated area on their recent patrol, some of the villagers waved and smiled. Young children gathered around as the Marines, relaxing a bit, passed out candy. The children’s presence was a sure sign that no I.E.D.’s were nearby.

“But just 50 yards up the path, three men in black head wrappings sat against a wall in the distance, watching the Marines with hateful eyes.

“Those guys are definitely shady,” Lieutenant Cooney said. “You can tell after a while which ones want us here.”

Minutes later, the Marines detected warning signs along their path: uneven earth and scatterings of hay. Proceeding would very likely result in the wounding or death of a Marine. They attached an explosive charge to the wall of a compound and blasted a hole through, then took the shortcut back to their base.

As the men removed their sweat-stained gear and took long swallows of water, a few drops of rain began to fall.

“I hate it when it rains,” Cpl. David Hernandez said. “The dirt runs together. We can’t see where they’ve dug in the I.E.D.’s.”
Sangin: US Marines take fight to the Afghan Taliban

The US Marines have pursued aggressive tactics in flashpoint town Sangin since replacing British forces in the southern Afghan town several months ago. The BBC's Paul Wood, embedded with US Marine Battalion 3/5, reports on the continuing fight against the Taliban.

"Come on, come out come and play," said the Marine sniper.

He spoke as he looked through his telescopic sight at a Taliban "spotter" who had just jumped behind a wall some 800m away. The man was not armed but was talking into a radio.

"Got P-I-D [positive identification]," said the sniper. "Cleared to engage." There was the suppressed crack of a silenced sniper round. The man fell to the ground.

"Enemy KIA (killed in action). Doin' the dead man dance."

"Good shooting, bro," came the reply.

It was the 50th kill for this sniper team. The US Marines believe they have accounted for hundreds of Taliban since they arrived in Sangin four months ago, relieving the British forces here.

Back then, the Marines say, they were coming under fire in their main bases every day. Now the fighting has moved to the countryside.

**Tactics changed**

The Marines say they have created an expanding "bubble of security" which includes Sangin town, the bazaar and the main road through the district, route 611.

This has been achieved, they believe, through new tactics. The UK forces had strung out a series of small patrol bases along route 611. The Americans closed half of them, making more forces available to pursue the Taliban.

Something happened in the British spirit about casualties - I mean right at the top - that prevented them from doing what the [US] marines are doing”

Bing West Military historian

"A change was needed and that change was to free up forces to manoeuvre against the enemy," said the Helmand commander, US Marine Corps General Richard Mills, talking about his approach over the whole of the province.

"The tactics before I got here were focused a little bit too heavily on the local areas. I wanted to regain the momentum of the attack... I wanted to put the pressure on the Taliban."

Gen Mills was full of praise for the UK military. The Marines were building on the success of the British forces who held Sangin before them, he said. But the Marines also believe they are pushing out further and harder than any unit before them.

This has come at a high cost. The battalion in Sangin, the 3/5 or "dark horse", has had at least 26 killed in four months, about a quarter of the losses the British suffered over four years.

The platoon we joined had a 20% casualty rate, two killed and nine seriously injured out of 56 men.

Most of those casualties have been from IEDs (improvised explosive devices, or home-made bombs) buried in the ground.
**Taliban support**

The military operation in Afghanistan also aims to win over the hearts and minds of local people. "The reason the Marines have pushed out from Sangin so fast, more quickly than anyone thought they could, is because they are being aggressive and because the high command is letting them be aggressive," said the military historian, Bing West, who was visiting Sangin and had joined the patrol.

"I don't think the British [soldiers and marines] were doing something wrong. But something happened in the British spirit about casualties - I mean right at the top - that prevented them from doing what the [US] marines are doing."

That is a controversial view and there may be many reasons for the American success. They have more helicopters and more cover from fast jets than the British did. But the Americans are certainly engaged in a "very high tempo of operations" and that will have an effect on the ground.

The question is, will the gains last? The Marines acknowledge that you can kill many Taliban but there will always be more volunteers. For the Marines' success to be durable, they need to win over the local population.

That may prove difficult. One military official working in "human terrain analysis" told me he thought that 75-80% of the people of Sangin supported the Taliban.

This is not an exact science and a Sangin schoolteacher - who opposed the Taliban because they were "uneducated" - told me they had support from only a quarter of the population.

But again and again, the Marines come across locals who say that a brother, a son or a cousin has been shot by the international forces.

"We don't want your help," said a group of elders going to pray for a relative who had been killed. They refused the offer of compensation from the platoon's lieutenant.

"We don't want your money. You shouldn't kill us. You shouldn't destroy our property. You even shot one of my cows yesterday. What sin did the cow commit?"

**Reprisal fears**

At a nearby mud-walled compound, the Marines met some local people who opposed the Taliban - but also said they feared the insurgents. The squad was trying to persuade the head of the household to go to Sangin to claim money for a door they've just kicked in.

"There are Taliban on the roads," he replied. "They will beat or kill me. If I go to the town for money from you, they will hang me by the neck."

The Marines are acutely aware they are in a competition for local public opinion with the Taliban.

In fact, the people the Marines need to win over are the Taliban themselves.

Only 10-15% are thought to be "irreconcilables", hardliners sent from outside the province. Most are local farmers, criminal gangs and drug-traffickers operating under a Taliban flag of convenience. It is hoped that these Taliban can be persuaded to switch sides.

By going out to fight every day, the US Marines are trying to demonstrate that they have the momentum on the battlefield. They hope to convince the different armed groups of Sangin that Nato will be the eventual winner of this contest.

When enough blood has been shed to change public opinion, security responsibilities will be handed to the Afghans. As one member of "dark horse" declared: "We cannot fight their war forever."
Dear Darkhorse family and friends,

Welcome from Sangin District, Afghanistan—the frontline in the Marine Corps’ fight against the Taliban and the enemies of Afghanistan and America! Your Darkhorse Marines and Sailors continue to make great strides in securing the Sangin District and its people, and removing the Taliban’s long, dark hold over its citizens. Despite the fact that there is a huge amount of work left to be done, the changes we have seen in this city over the last four months are remarkable. When we arrived in September, the enemy operated with impunity, security was limited, schools were closed, the economy was puttering along, and people lived in constant fear of Taliban retribution. Today, we have secured most of the Battalion’s AO, the enemy is on the run or in hiding, schools are reopening and children increasingly attend, the bazaar is booming with new signs and construction, and people long-displaced by Taliban violence are slowly returning to their homes. Our impact on Sangin District will be long-lasting. People here talk about the positive changes in their lives due to the American Marines efforts to bring security, and their Afghan Uniformed Policemen (AUP) and Afghan National Army (ANA) Soldiers expanded efforts to do things they have never done before. An example of this would be the AUP and ANA conducting independent operations in some areas of the District, and the three local Health Initiatives designed to provide health education, to include basic hygiene, limited first aid, and supplies to improve the average Sangin citizen’s quality of life. With an Afghan face on the initiatives, they have been very well received and attended, and in turn the local population has responded by providing more and more information and warnings about enemy activities. While there are many more examples of what increased security has brought to Sangin, I want you to rest assured that your Marine or Sailor is taking part in a historic mission that is proving that almost anything is possible in Afghanistan.

On a separate note, I want to congratulate two outstanding Marines who were meritoriously promoted on 2 January 2011.

First, Staff Sergeant James B. Archbell, Kilo Company, earned the ONLY meritorious Gunnery Sergeant quota in the whole Marine Corps. Unbelievable! Then, to top it off, Sergeant Michael R. Gilio, India Company, earned one of only three meritorious Staff Sergeant quotas in the Marine Corps. The selection of these fine Marines for combat meritorious promotion was a real coup for the Darkhorse, and a testament to the outstanding Marines who fill its ranks.

As we move past the halfway point of this challenging deployment, I realize that the next couple of months will be consumed with redeployment planning. As we near the end of this deployment, Kimberly Reese, my Family Readiness Officer, will facilitate information flow from the Battalion; she is the sole source for reliable return information. When authorized by me, she will publish a series of “return windows”, a three to five-day window when your Marine or Sailor is expected to return. Once your Marine or Sailor’s return flight has left Afghanistan, she will be able to provide a date and time of return. In order to maintain Operational Security, this information will only be sent via the Marine Corps Mass Communication Tool. I ask that you help protect this information. Please do not post anything on social networking sites that America’s enemies can use to their advantage. Also, please remember that flights can, and do, change. We will do everything we can to ensure our families have as much advance notice as possible. You should expect to see the first flight window announcement in about six weeks’ time.

Thank you for your support and prayers, and patience. You have remained strong on the home front, allowing your Marines and Sailors to focus on the mission and take care of each other. We are still enjoying the many, many packages that arrived during the holidays, and are forever grateful for your generosity and support.

I want you to know that your Marines and Sailors have secured their place in the rich history of the Marine Corps, and continue to fight against a determined and immoral enemy of humanity. We have sustained difficult losses of brothers-in-arms and had to continue to press forward against all of the challenges found in Afghanistan’s most dangerous district.

Now, as we succeed in gaining space for normalcy to return to this war-torn land, we must remain focused on the mission until it is successfully handed off to our sister battalion 1/5, and every Darkhorse member is back home at San Mateo.

Sincerely,
Jason L. Morris
LtCol, U.S. Marine Corps
Commanding Officer
LASHKAR GAH, Afghanistan (AP) — NATO's top commander in Afghanistan said Monday that a recent pledge by a southern Afghan tribe to stand up to the Taliban shows the military push in the country's most violent region is making headway and stifling the insurgents' "central nervous system."

U.S. Gen. David Petraeus told The Associated Press in the southern city of Lashkar Gah that a shift in thinking by the Afghan government and NATO means that the tribe's risky move is being embraced rather than ignored. And that brings the hope that others may follow suit, he said.

Later Monday, Petraeus was on hand in Kabul to greet Vice President Joe Biden, who made a surprise visit to Afghanistan to assess progress toward the key objective of handing over security from international forces to Afghans. The White House said Biden, who was last here in January 2009, was to meet with President Hamid Karzai as well as U.S. troops.

Petraeus spoke with the AP during a visit to the capital of Helmand province, where he discussed last week's tribal pledge with provincial Gov. Gulab Mangal. He told the AP that the Taliban is losing sway in volatile Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south.

Petraeus said there is increasing dissension among the fighting ranks of the insurgency and that fighters are bristling at being ordered to battle through the winter by bosses sitting far away in Pakistan. Meanwhile, targeted strikes on midlevel leaders in Afghanistan have fractured the hierarchy, Petraeus said.

"The sheer losses that they've sustained are tremendous. That in and of itself is very significant and it's caused enormous stress on the central nervous system of the command and control structure," he said.

A prime indicator of this success, Petraeus said, is the announcement by the Alikozai tribe that they would halt insurgent attacks and expel foreign fighters from one of the most violent spots in the country — Helmand's Sangin district. The expansion of both NATO and Afghan forces in the region has made such a move much more tenable that it would have been a year ago, he said.

"It has pushed out the security bubble," Petraeus said, adding "2010 was a pretty bumper year for Helmand province."

A year ago, Obama approved a troop surge of 30,000 forces, most of whom went to the south to try to beat back Taliban forces from their traditional strongholds.

The surge of forces in the south is seen as key to bolstering security enough that Afghan forces can take charge, which would in turn allow U.S. and NATO forces to draw down troops. The Obama administration has promised to start pulling troops out in July, meaning that Petraeus has only a few more months of operations before he has to start deciding where he can cut back.

The true test of recent progress will likely come just as the drawdown begins. Fighting typically lessens in the winter months in Afghanistan, when snows block fighters from traveling over mountain passes from Pakistan, then picks up again in the late spring and early summer.

And there are still plenty of hurdles ahead for NATO troops in the south. The area continues to be the most violent in the country, with daily announcements of coalition deaths. More than 20 Marines have been killed in Sangin since mid-October, when the U.S. took over the district from British forces.

In an end-of-year review of the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, the Obama administration said that while Taliban momentum has been stopped or reversed in some areas of Helmand and neighboring Kandahar province, "gains remain fragile and reversible."
And the surge does not appear to have decreased the number of insurgent fighters. A NATO official said this week that the alliance continues to estimate about 25,000 fighters in the country — the same number as a year ago.

And so Petraeus and his team are doing their best to build rapidly on the successes they've had. NATO quickly pledged to support the Alikozai tribe by bringing in schools and finishing a key road in the area.

Petraeus and the provincial governor spoke for nearly an hour, mostly about the Alikozai deal and what could be done to strengthen the hand of the elders and possibly get other tribes in the area to make similar pledges.

Success is far from guaranteed. Disenchanted Alikozai tried to rebel against the Taliban in 2007 but failed because of a lack of resources and coalition help. And a similar move by the Shinwari tribe in eastern Afghanistan last year was at first lauded as a major step forward by U.S. commanders until the Afghan government turned against the idea, saying that NATO was undermining its authority by working directly with the elders.

"That was an earlier time. That was back in the exploration stages," Petraeus said, noting that Karzai has since set up a formal reintegration process to accommodate those who want to realign themselves with the government. He said the growth of the Afghan security forces has made it easier to support those who do take a stand.

Petraeus kept to a typically fast-paced schedule Monday.

He met with the foreign minister of Estonia in the morning before rushing to board a helicopter for a quick ride to an airstrip, where a military plane flew his team to Lashkar Gah. Once there, they met with officials from the British-led provincial reconstruction team and then took armored vehicles into downtown to visit Mangal. He kept coffee at hand and used the travel time to continue consultations with advisers and officials.

On returning to Kabul, he rushed off to greet Biden.
Marines pay a price trying to secure an Afghan hot spot
What happened to them in Sangin district of Helmand province shows the sacrifices in a campaign aimed at crippling the Taliban in a stronghold and helping extricate the U.S. from a decadelong war.

By Tony Perry, Los Angeles Times
8:33 PM PST, January 22, 2011
Reporting from Camp Pendleton

Lance Cpl. Juan Dominguez, 26, left, practices using a biometric prosthetic arm with Todd Love, also from Camp Pendleton, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

Marines tell of snipers who fire from "murder holes" cut into mud-walled compounds. Fighters who lie in wait in trenches dug around rough farmhouses clustered together for protection. Farmers who seem to tip the Taliban to the outsiders' every movement, often with signals that sound like birdcalls.

When the Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, deployed to the Sangin district of Afghanistan's Helmand province in late September, the British soldiers who had preceded them warned the Americans that the Taliban would be waiting nearly everywhere for a chance to kill them.

But the Marines, ordered to be more aggressive than the British had been, quickly learned that the Taliban wasn't simply waiting.

In Sangin, the Taliban was coming after them.

In four years there, the British had lost more than 100 soldiers, about a third of all their nation's losses in the war.

In four months, 24 Marines with the Camp Pendleton-based Three-Five have been killed.

More than 140 others have been wounded, some of them catastrophically, losing limbs and the futures they had imagined for themselves.

The Marines' families have been left devastated, or dreading the knock on the door.

"We are a brokenhearted but proud family," Marine Lt. Gen. John Kelly said. He spoke not only of the battalion: His son 1st Lt. Robert Kelly was killed leading a patrol in Sangin.

The Three-Five had drawn a daunting task: Push into areas where the British had not gone, areas where Taliban dominance was uncontested, areas where the opium poppy crop whose profits help fuel the insurgency is grown, areas where bomb makers lash together explosives to kill and terrorize in Sangin and neighboring Kandahar province.

The result? The battalion with the motto "Get Some" has been in more than 408 firefights and found 434 buried roadside bombs. An additional 122 bombs exploded before they could be discovered, in many instances killing or injuring Afghan civilians who travel the same roads as the Marines.

Some enlisted personnel believe that the Taliban has developed a "Vietnam-like" capability to pick off a platoon commander or a squad or team leader. A lieutenant assigned as a replacement for a downed
colleague was shot in the neck on his first patrol.

At the confluence of two rivers in Helmand province in the country's south, Sangin is a mix of rocky desert and stretches of farmland where corn and pomegranates are grown. There are rolling hills, groves of trees and crisscrossing canals. Farmers work their fields and children play on dusty paths.

"Sangin is one of the prettier places in Helmand, but that's very deceiving," said Sgt. Dean Davis, a Marine combat correspondent. "It's a very dangerous place, it's a danger you can feel."

Three men arrived in Sangin last fall knowing they would face the fight of their lives.

1st Lt. John Chase Barghusen, 26, of Madison, Wis., had asked to be transferred to the Three-Five so he could return to Afghanistan.

Cpl. Derek A. Wyatt, 25, of Akron, Ohio, an infantry squad leader, was excited about the mission but worried about his wife, pregnant with their first child.

Lance Cpl. Juan Dominguez, 26, of Deming, N.M., an infantry "grunt," had dreamed of going into combat as a Marine since he was barely out of grade school.

What happened to them in Sangin shows the price being paid for a campaign to cripple the Taliban in a key stronghold and help extricate America from a war now in its 10th year.

When Lance Cpl. Juan Dominguez slipped down a small embankment while out on patrol and landed on a buried bomb, the explosion could be heard for miles.

"It had to be a 30- to 40-pounder," Dominguez said from his bed at the military hospital in Bethesda, Md. "I remember crying out for my mother and then crying out for morphine. I remember them putting my legs on top of me."

His legs were severed above the knee, and his right arm was mangled and could not be saved. A Navy corpsman, risking sniper fire, rushed to Dominguez and stopped the bleeding. On the trip to the field hospital, Dominguez prayed.

"I figured this was God's will, so I told him: 'If you're going to take me, take me now,'" he said.

His memories of Sangin are vivid. "The part we were in, it's hell," he said. "It makes your stomach turn. The poor families there, they get conned into helping the Taliban."

Like many wounded Marines, Dominguez never saw a Taliban fighter.

"We don't know who we're fighting over there, who's friendly and who isn't," he said. "They're always watching us. We're basically fighting blind."

His mother, Martha Dominguez, was at home the night of Oct. 23 when a Marine came to her door to tell her that her son had been gravely injured. She left her job right away and rushed to his bedside in Bethesda. She's never been far away since.

When Dominguez's father, Reynaldo, first visited the hospital, he was overcome by emotion and had to leave.

"Mothers are stronger at times like this," Martha Dominguez said.

Juan Dominguez has since been fitted with prosthetic legs and a "bionic" arm and is undergoing daily therapy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. He and his girlfriend have broken up.

"She wanted someone with legs," his mother said.

When he's discharged, Dominguez wants to return to Deming to be near his 8-year-old daughter, who lives with his ex-wife, and open a business painting and restoring cars.

But his immediate goal is to be at Camp Pendleton, in uniform and walking on his prosthetic legs, when the battalion returns in the spring.

By some accounts, no district in Afghanistan is outpacing Sangin in "kinetic activity," military jargon for combat.

"Sangin is a straight-up slug match. No winning of hearts and minds. No enlightened counterinsurgency projects to win affections," said Bing West, a Marine veteran who was an assistant
secretary of Defense under President Reagan. "Instead, the goal is to kill the Taliban every day on every patrol. Force them to flee the Sangin Valley or die."

When the Marines of the Three-Five arrived in Sangin, many were on their first deployment, eager to live up to the legacy the battalion earned at the battles of Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal, Okinawa and the Chosin Reservoir.

Some were with the battalion during the 2004 fight in Fallouja, Iraq, the bloodiest single battle the U.S. Marine Corps had fought since Vietnam. And now they were in Sangin, a place they called "the Fallouja of Afghanistan."

Marine brass, to whom heroes of the past stand as the measure of all things, say the Three-Five is writing its own chapter of combat history. Marine Commandant Gen. James F. Amos, who spent Christmas in Sangin, said the Marines there are writing "a story of heroism, of courage, of fidelity."

A victory over the Taliban in Sangin, American officials hope, would bolster the confidence of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government and possibly push the Taliban into a negotiated settlement, allowing the United States to withdraw its troops by the 2014 target set by the Obama administration.

Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the top Marine in Afghanistan, has called Sangin the last major Taliban stronghold in Helmand, although there are other pockets of insurgent activity in the province.

"We know that the senior leadership [of the Taliban] outside the country is very concerned that this area is going to slip away," said Col. Paul Kennedy, commander of Regimental Combat Team Two, which includes the Three-Five.

To get a sense of the intensity of the fighting that has killed the 24 Marines of the Three-Five, one might look at a recent deployment by another group of Marines. When the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, was deployed for seven months last year in the Helmand district of Garmsir to the south, another Taliban stronghold, 14 were killed, about half as many casualties in almost twice the time.

Four Marines from battalions assigned to assist the Three-Five by clearing roads and detonating Taliban bombs have also been killed.

U.S. military hospitals in Landstuhl, Germany; Bethesda; and San Diego have seen a steady stream of wounded Marines and sailors from the Three-Five, including at least four triple-amputees.

Less severely wounded Marines have been sent to the Wounded Warrior Battalion West barracks at Camp Pendleton. Still others among the Three-Five injured have been transferred to the Veterans Affairs facility in Palo Alto, which specializes in traumatic brain injuries.

Fifty-six replacements have been rushed from Camp Pendleton to Afghanistan to take the places of the dead and severely wounded. Priority was given to young lieutenants, who serve as platoon commanders, and Navy corpsmen.

Many of the volunteers were Marines from other battalions who had been wounded in Afghanistan, said Gunnery Sgt. Enrique MorenoRuiz.

"We're war fighters," MorenoRuiz said. "If they want to go, they can go."

1st Lt. John Chase Barghusen had served with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, when it was airlifted into the Nawa-i-Barakzayi district of Helmand province southwest of Sangin in the summer of 2009 on a mission to wrest control from the Taliban. The progress in Nawa has buoyed U.S. hopes for similar success in Sangin, Marine officials said.

A former football player at Iowa State and son of a retired Marine colonel, Barghusen transferred to the Three-Five so he could return to Helmand "to finish what we started in Nawa."

Like other Marines assigned to mentoring duty, Barghusen believes the fastest way for the U.S. to exit Afghanistan is to train and equip the Afghans to assume responsibility for fighting the Taliban and
Lt. Col. William McCollough, who commanded the One-Five in Afghanistan, wasn't surprised that Barghusen volunteered to return, calling it "exactly what I would expect from someone of his character."

Early one morning, Barghusen was reconnoitering, looking for places to establish a patrol base. The Marines and Afghan soldiers were walking "ranger style," each man stepping in the footsteps of the man in front of him, in hope of avoiding buried bombs.

The Afghan soldier in front of Barghusen stepped on a hidden explosive and was blown apart.

Barghusen's face, back, left arm and left leg were ripped by shrapnel and the hot blast of the explosion. He tried to apply a tourniquet to stop the bleeding but didn't have the strength.

"I knew my face was messed up," he said in Bethesda. "My jaw was broken so it was hard to shout. You try to shout and you can't. Your jaw just hangs there."

His father was hunting grouse in northern Wisconsin when he got the call that his son had been wounded and was being airlifted to the U.S.

"I didn't know if he was going to have arms, legs or a face," said John Clifford Barghusen, who served in Iraq as a helicopter pilot in 2003 and '04 and is now a pilot for American Airlines. "All I knew was that he was alive and not going to die in the next 72 hours. When I finally saw him, he had a face the size of a pumpkin."

Before his injuries, 1st Lt. Barghusen had enjoyed weightlifting and martial arts. After skin grafts and surgery to restore hearing in his left ear, he is back in Southern California. His arm and leg are regaining strength, and his face shows few signs of the cuts inflicted by shards of metal and rock.

He hopes to return to active duty at Camp Pendleton, possibly to share the lessons of Sangin.

He sees a marked difference between Nawa and Sangin.

"In Nawa, they wait for you and then strike," he said. "In Sangin, they come after you."

It's not unusual, U.S. military officials say, for the Taliban to "test" a newly arrived U.S. battalion by staging repeated ambush attacks in hope that the Americans will retreat to their bases.

Instead, the Marines have rushed more troops, more bomb-sniffing dogs and more firepower to Sangin. A month ago, a company of Marines with the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, was sent to Sangin. Within days, three of its members were killed.

Marines with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit began arriving last week in northern Helmand province with their own attack aircraft, long-range artillery and logistics support. Hundreds of Marines with the 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, are expected to deploy to Sangin to provide patrols, particularly at a key road construction project that the Taliban has been trying to disrupt.

The Marines have also unleashed artillery and airstrikes, both conventional and from drones. The top Taliban commander in Sangin was thought to have been killed by a drone strike.

Marine tanks from Kuwait and tank crew members from the base at Twentynine Palms have deployed to Helmand and will soon be sent into battle. Among the tank's attributes is better targeting capability, decreasing the chances of civilian casualties, Marines said.

The casualty rate of Marines has declined in recent weeks, although that could be due to numerous factors, including the weather and the ability of insurgents to infiltrate from Pakistan. Marine leaders prefer to see it otherwise.

"We've killed a lot of [roadside bomb] emplacers, several hundred maybe," Col. Kennedy said. "When you start taking that many bad guys off the battlefield, you are going to enjoy a certain reduced casualty rate."

On the day before he deployed to Afghanistan, Cpl. Derek Wyatt and his wife, Kait, walked on the beach near their home at Camp Pendleton, writing their names in the wet sand and the name they had
selected for their unborn son.

Wyatt had had a good Marine career, including assignment to the security detail for President George W. Bush, the kind of job that goes to only the elite. The young couple had talked of moving to Ohio once his enlistment was finished. But first he was being deployed to a war zone and he was excited.

"He loved adventure," said Kait, 22, a former Marine. "He hated sitting behind a desk."

Still, she knew the dangers. She and Derek had been introduced by a Marine who was later killed in Iraq.

"It doesn't matter if it's the first day they're gone, or the last day before they return home, you're scared all the time," she said. "You pretend to be happy, but you're living in fear."

One morning last month, the knock came at the Wyatt home.

"I automatically knew," Kait said. "But then I had a split second where I thought: 'Maybe he's at Landstuhl, maybe he's just injured, still alive.' But when they asked to come in, I knew."

Wyatt was killed Dec. 6 by a sniper while on patrol. Kait is convinced that he was targeted by the Taliban. It provides her with a measure of comfort that he died as a leader.

"Luckily, none of his Marines were hurt," she said.

The night after she learned of her husband's death, Kait gave birth to Michael Everett Wyatt, 7 pounds, 11 ounces, named after the patron saint of the military.

The pregnancy had been planned in case Wyatt didn't return from Afghanistan.

"We wanted to have something tangible, a physical expression of our love," she said, "just in case there wasn't another opportunity."

Wyatt had recorded passages of the Dr. Seuss book "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" During her pregnancy, Kait aimed her iPod speaker at her stomach; when she brought the baby home from the hospital, she played the recording softly to help him sleep.

Before Kait left the hospital with her baby, a casualty assistance officer decorated her home, including placing an "It's a Boy" sign on the front lawn.

"He made sure that Michael got the kind of homecoming that his father would have wanted," Kait said, her voice trembling. She paused, unable to speak.

Waiting at home was a receiving blanket for the baby, in Marine colors and with the Three-Five logo. Under a bitterly cold sky, Cpl. Wyatt was buried Jan. 7 at Arlington National Cemetery in a section reserved for the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the funeral service, Kait told of a conversation she and her husband had before he deployed about what she should do if he was killed in Afghanistan.

Kait said she told Derek that she would never remarry. He pulled the car to the side of the road, she said, looked directly at her and made her promise that she would again find love in her life.

"He told me the only thing he wanted in life was for me to be happy," Kait said.

As she spoke, there were tears in the eyes of the mourners, including Marines with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which is still fighting for a faraway place known as Sangin.
Lehigh Marine's body headed for home

By MEL TOADVINE

January 24, 2011

The arrival of the body of a Lehigh Acres Marine, who was killed in action in Afghanistan, is expected to take place some time this week.

In the late 90s while he was in Lehigh Senior High School, Sgt. Jason G. Amores was affectionately called "Mowgli." He played the saxophone and was an active member of the Lehigh Senior High School's Marching Band.

Amores, 29, was killed in Afghanistan last Thursday, Jan. 20, when he stepped on an explosive device in Helmand province, Afghanistan. He was serving in the Marine Division, I Marine Expeditionary Force out of Camp Pendleton, Calif.

The State Department said he was killed while conducting combat operations. It was his first deployment in Afghanistan and he had been deployed to Iraq twice before.

On Saturday, Amores' family, his wife, Jennifer, his parents, Beverly and Curtis Middleton and his brother, Jeremiah, and other family members were waiting for a 3 p.m. flight to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware from Afghanistan.

His father, Curtis, was the first editor of The Lehigh Acres Citizen and later was publisher of the old Lehigh Acres News Star. Sometime after he left The Star, he moved away from Lehigh.

Today, the Marine's parents live in Olive Branch, Miss., where Middleton has retired, and is writing a book.

Reached Saturday afternoon just minutes before the flight arrived, Middleton said that the family was very upset as expected, but that they were proud of their son who had served his country so valiantly.

Amore's wife, Jennifer, and their two children had been making their home at Camp Pendleton, Calif., while her husband was in combat in Afghanistan. She is from Lehigh Acres, too. Both went to school in Lehigh. Her parents are Dan and Vicki Wilson of Lehigh Acres.

His brother, Jeremiah, was also in Dover Saturday for the arrival of his brother's body. Jeremiah and Jason had joined the U.S. Marine Corps on the same day in 2004, and had gone through basic training and advanced training together. The two brothers were very close. Jason graduated from Lehigh Senior High School in 1999.

Jeremiah left the Marine Corps and moved to Colorado, where he attended college.

Middleton said both he and his wife, and his son's wife in California, all received the terrible news at the same time.

"Two Marine cars pulled up in front of our house in Mississippi. I saw them and knew the news was bad," Middleton said. At about the very same moment, the same thing was happening at Jennifer's house at Camp Pendleton.

"That's the way they do it apparently, informing the parents and the spouses at the same time even though they may live in different parts of the country," Middleton said.

Jason and Jennifer have two children, a son, Korbin, 9 and a daughter, Violet, 3.

"All the family is here in Dover," Middleton said.

"We have been told that when the flight lands, the caskets draped with the American flag will be brought off the cargo plane and that there would be a ceremony for the families and friends who went to Dover to be there when their loved one's remains arrived."

Then Middleton said the bodies are taken to a mortuary on the Air Force Base.
Middleton said it was a very difficult time for everyone in the family. Also at Dover were Jason's two sisters Rebecca, 21, and Samantha, 19.

"My wife, Beverly, has been crying ever since we got the news last Thursday afternoon. It's just very hard on her as it is with the other members of the family," Middleton said.

Sgt. Jason Amores' remains were to be brought back to Southwest Florida this week," Middleton said.

Middleton said services for his son would be private and for the family only.

"I'm doing okay," Middleton said. "But my wife and Jason's wife, and his brother and sisters are having a rough time," Middleton said.

"Our memories will always remain of just how proud of Jason we were of his serving his nation. We are very proud of him," Middleton said.
Reality check: Nearly 40 Marines killed in Sangin since September
January 24th, 2011 | Afghanistan Infantry Sangin | Posted by Dan Lamothe

Hospitalman Stephen Wescott, of 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, provides security during a Jan. 10 patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan. (Photo by Lance Cpl. Dexter S. Saulisbury)

I’d like to start by pointing out the excellent piece published yesterday by the Los Angeles Times about the sacrifices made and dedication show by Marines in Sangin, Afghanistan. It’s can’t-miss reading for anyone following the war there with any interest. Several details in the story, by longtime military correspondent Tony Perry, stuck out as noteworthy or relatively new. Some are heartbreaking. Others are heartening. Consider the following:

- The report puts the number of casualties in 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, Calif., at 24. An additional 140 others have been wounded, with numerous Marines losing limbs and a handful becoming triple-amputees.
- Four additional Marines from battalions clearing roads and detonating IEDs in the area also have been killed, Perry reports. Not noted in the story: 3/5 was preceded in Sangin by 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, out of Twentynine Palms, Calif. That unit had a relatively quiet deployment until it was called on to take over Sangin from British forces in September. They sustained five casualties and more than 150 wounded there, before turning the area over in October, 3/7 Marines said.
- A rifle company from 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., was redeployed a month ago to Sangin. Three Marines with the company died within days. The unit has been based mostly in and around Marjah, the former Taliban stronghold in central Helmand where firefightes were common last summer before Marines began to tame the area.
- As previously reported on Battle Rattle, Marines with the 26th MEU — primarily 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines — will soon deploy to the Sangin area.

That’s a lot for anyone to wrap their head around. In total, it also means that nearly 40 Marines have died in Sangin since 3/7 took over for British forces in September.
MILITARY: Psychiatrist says bloodied Camp Pendleton unit remains strong

Teams paying close attention to mental health of Marines with 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment

By MARK WALKER - mlwalker@nctimes.com | Posted: Friday, January 28, 2011 10:30 pm

Marine Corps psychiatrists closely monitoring a bloodied Camp Pendleton unit that has had 24 men killed and more than 145 wounded say the troops are not exhibiting an inordinate amount of mental distress.

The roughly 1,000 troops from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment have been engaged in some of the heaviest fighting of the 10-year-old war in Afghanistan, waging a brutal struggle with the anti-government Taliban insurgency in the Helmand province's Sangin district.

"We've spent a lot of time looking at them and trying to understand how they're doing, what their operational stress level is," said Cmdr. Charles Benson, the chief psychiatrist for the I Marine Expeditionary Force. "We really haven't seen an inordinate amount of mental health issues coming out of 3/5. Comparing them to other battalions ... the rate of mental health referrals and combat stress issues have pretty much been identical."

Benson directs the Combat Stress Center at Camp Leatherneck, the largest Marine Corps base in Helmand.

Benson and the head of the Concussion Restoration Care Center at Camp Leatherneck, Cmdr. Keith Stuessi, spoke with reporters during a teleconference from Afghanistan this week on the mental and physical well-being of the more than 20,000 Marines in Afghanistan.

Benson said one of his psychiatrists visits the troops in the Sangin area often, including tours of each the unit's forward operating bases.

"And the chaplains are also up there as well," he said. "I've got two medical officers and an independent duty corpsman ... who are really kind of looking at this situation very carefully. We're just not seeing what one might expect from a unit as heavily engaged in combat as they are in terms of a combat stress reaction."

His psychiatrists continually talk with the troops to see how they're holding up, Benson said. The troops are fighting the insurgency for control of a drug trafficking and roadside bomb manufacturing center, a fight that Camp Pendleton's Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, who is leading the Marines in Afghanistan, has described as a "last stand" for the Taliban in Helmand.

When the unit arrived in late September and took over from the British, they were warned to expect a vicious fight.

In the ensuing weeks, the Marines have been in more than 400 firefights, according to Marine Corps officials.

The concussion center that Stuessi runs is the first of its kind for the military to be established in a war zone and is intended to treat troops suffering roadside bomb-related head traumas that don't require evacuation to advanced care centers.

"Our estimate is that we're probably seeing between 20 and 30 percent of the concussions here in theater," Stuessi said. "The good news to pass along is that our feeling is that if you're given time, if you're given mental rest, if you talk about what to expect, these concussion folks do very, very well."

About 320 troops with mild to moderate traumatic brain injuries from blasts have been treated at the center at Camp Leatherneck over the last five months, he said. Typical care includes medication, acupuncture, exercise and counseling. Most of the injured troops, Stuessi said, return to their unit within a few weeks.
"We feel that what we're doing is working," he said. When more than 10,000 Camp Pendleton troops deployed to Afghanistan last year, teams of mental health specialists were assigned to an Operation Stress Control and Readiness program, or OSCAR.

Their goal is to identify troops suffering from combat stress or the precursors of post-traumatic stress disorder and treat the Marines as soon as possible. Those identified as having problems are referred to medical professionals at Camp Leatherneck for counseling and related services.

"What they do is actually live with the troops, train with the troops and get out in the field with them," Benson said. "It kind of breaks down the barriers and allows them to become very effective in their jobs delivering mental health care."

That outreach and the concussion center, Benson said, are proving valuable.

"This is really the crucible for the program to see how this is working out," he said. "We think it's doing very well."

The programs are also helping dispel the notion of a stigma being attached to a Marine who reaches out for help, he said.

"Part of the job ... is to decrease the stigma of coming forward to mental health (providers)," Benson said. "Part of our main message is that when you're in combat, when you're deployed, things are going to come up. It's best if you talk about them, seek out help, and realize that not every time you go see the mental health provider do you end up taken away from your unit or labeled.

"It really is about letting the folks know that they have a place to go, that they will be accepted and understood."
US Marines revisit 'bomb alley'

Three months after British forces in Afghanistan handed over control of Sangin to the Americans, reporter Ben Anderson went on patrol with the US 3rd Battalion 5th Marines "Lima Company" in the area still widely viewed as the country's most dangerous.

No-one knew it yet, but we were standing on a "daisy chain" of seven home-made bombs, buried inches beneath our feet and designed to wipe out the entire squad of US marines.

The bombs were attached to a wire, which led down an alleyway off the path we were nervously inching along.

Somewhere, someone with a battery at the other end of that wire was watching us, waiting for the perfect moment to connect the circuit and detonate the bombs.

We had tried to avoid walking through this very corner, knowing full well such obvious routes are favoured by the Taliban in placing their IEDs. But there was no other way forward.

Roughly 20 metres past the corner, there was a huge explosion behind me.

I turned and saw the air thick with swirling dust. Stones and rocks started landing all around. As the air began to clear I saw a crater, and could hear someone groaning.

I walked back and saw a marine known as "Big T" on his hands and knees, patting the ground around him, trying to work out where he was.

Somehow, no one had been killed - the marines walking behind me were all standing between the IEDs when they went off.

Big T was severely concussed, and temporarily blind and deaf. Two others had been badly shaken, but it seemed miraculous that no one was dead. It was four days after Christmas.

Familiar path

The area claimed the lives of 106 British soldiers in four years.

In the three months since the US forces took over from British troops, more than 20% of the combat power of 3rd Battalion 5th Marines in Sangin have been killed or injured.

The town's reputation as the most dangerous place in Afghanistan is undimmed by the arrival of Marine muscle and firepower.

So far, 27 have died and more than 140 have been injured. These numbers are staggering, even by Sangin standards.

"We are never going to quit, there are not enough IEDs to keep us from patrolling. You don't have enough bullets to keep us from accomplishing our mission"

US Marine Capt Matt Peterson

The casualties are far worse than those suffered by any British forces in such a short time.

But did the US Marines have to be doing this at all?

Incredibly, British soldiers had cleared the same route, Pharmacy Road, almost 18 months ago.

Bomb disposal specialist Olaf "Oz" Schmid was posthumously awarded the George Cross for clearing this very area of IEDs.

In a single day in October 2009, he cleared 31. He was killed doing the same thing a few days later.

His efforts ensured British soldiers were able to establish bases just 400 metres from where I now stood in Sangin, in a maze of alleyways and high walls called Wishtan.
But when the Americans took over in October, they abandoned them, believing that too many bases would spread them too thin. Now they have decided that giving up Wishtan was an error. And while in the past both the Americans and British forces in Sangin have tried to put the lives of the local civilians first, now the Americans had decided on a different approach. Once they re-established the former British base, bulldozers appeared and started flattening the walls and compounds on either side of Pharmacy Road. A mosque across the road from the new base was one of the buildings demolished. The two men who said they owned the mosque pleaded to be allowed to remove everything inside, and quickly retrieved some Korans, a gas heater and a rug before the building was reduced to rubble.

'Drastic, necessary'

I asked the marines' Commanding Officer, Capt Matt Peterson, if this tactic risked pushing the locals into the arms of the Taliban. "Short term there is a sacrifice of convenience to an extreme degree, and that's not something that's lost on us. But I think what people understand is that in order to increase security on that route and in order to prevent the enemy from putting any IEDs there, these types of drastic steps are necessary." A local mullah disagreed. "Can democracy be brought by a cannon? Is that what the meaning of democracy in the world? We don't want this democracy. We don't want this law of the infidel, we want the rule of Islam." After four years of increasing levels of violence and increasing numbers of casualties, on all sides, it feels as if hearts and minds cannot be won here.

Capt Peterson is determined that the marines will prevail here and his message to the insurgents is clear. "We are never going to quit, there are not enough IEDs to keep us from patrolling. You don't have enough bullets to keep us from accomplishing our mission." Capt Peterson said the recent decision at the Lisbon conference, which put the deadline for Nato's withdrawal at 2014, later than many expected, will have a decisive effect on the ground. "I think when the enemy saw that, at the lowest level that demoralised them to the point where he said, 'Well, we can't continue to fight him because he's better than us. We can't outlast him because he's not leaving. We'd better figure out a way to carve our way into the future of Afghanistan or we're going to get get left out in the cold.' And if that's his analysis he's exactly right."

The spring months, which are expected to mark an increase in fighting here, will either prove Capt Peterson right, or show that victory in Sangin is as far away as ever.

Panorama: The Battle for Bomb Alley, BBC One, Monday, 31 January at 2030GMT.
Fallen Marine's family adopts his best friend
by Randy Roughton
Defense Media Activity-San Antonio

2/3/2011 - LACKLAND AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AFNS) -- "Whatever is mine is his," Marine Corps Pfc. Colton W. Rusk wrote about Eli, his military working dog, in the final days of their deployment in Afghanistan. On Feb. 3, Private Rusk's family helped prove his words true when they adopted the black Labrador retriever in a retirement and adoption ceremony at the military working dog school here.

After 20-year-old Private Rusk was killed Dec. 5 in Helmand province, Afghanistan, by Taliban sniper fire, Marines officials told Darrell and Kathy Rusk, his parents, that Eli, his infantry explosives detector dog, crawled on top of their son to protect him after he was shot. The Rusks drove to Lackland Air Force Base from their home in Orange Grove, Texas, along with their sons, 22-year-old Cody and 12-year-old Brady; Private Rusk's aunt, Yvonne Rusk; and Jan Rusk and Katy and Wayne O'Neal, Private Rusk's grandparents.

Marine Staff Sgt. Jessy Eslick of the Department of Defense Military Working Dog Research and Development Section praised Eli as "a dog that brought Marines home to their families," as he handed the leash to the family. Eli immediately began licking Mrs. Rusk's palms and fell into the arms of his former handler's father.

"In his last letter we got the day before we buried him, at the very top was a little smudge that said 'Eli's kisses,'" said Mrs. Rusk, who wore a two-sided pendant with a photo of her son on one side and another snapshot of him with Eli on the other. "He thought whatever was Colton's was Eli's.

"Like Colton said, 'what's mine is his,'" she said. "We're Colton's family, so it's just right that we're Eli's family now."

Eli, who was trained in the military working dog program at Lackland AFB, is reportedly the second military working dog the Marines discharged to permit adoption by a fallen handler's family. Cpl. Dustin J. Lee's family adopted his German shepherd, Lex, after the Quitman, Miss., Marine died from wounds he received in a mortar attack in Al Anbar province, Iraq, on March 21, 2007. The corporal's family worked for nine months with an online petition and congressional help.

Mrs. Rusk said her family didn't have as many obstacles in their quest to adopt Eli. Texas Gov. Rick Perry started the process of working with the Marines on the dog's discharge, and Scooter Kelo, who trained Eli and also taught Private Rusk on working with
the dog, also worked on making the adoption possible.

"It gets our mind off the sadness of losing Colton," Mrs. Rusk said, "just knowing we're going to have a little piece of Colton in Eli. I just wished he could talk and tell us some stories. Just to know we're going to be able to share the love we have for our son with something that he loved dearly."

Private Rusk joined the Marines after he graduated from Orange Grove High School, and committed himself to the Marines the same week that his best friend, Lance Cpl. Justin Rokohl, lost both legs in southern Afghanistan. Private Rusk deployed to Afghanistan on his 20th birthday, with Eli, as part of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

"He wanted to be a Marine since he was 10 years old," his mother said. "We talked to him about maybe going to college first, but he said he had to fight for his country first."

Private Rusk often told his parents how dogs like Eli were well-trained at the DOD Military Working Dog School at Lackland AFB, and in South Carolina, where he was trained as an improvised explosive device detector dog handler.

"We've had dogs all of our lives," Mr. Rusk said. "Since all of the boys were babies, they had one. Colton was probably the better handler of the bunch. When he went to train in South Carolina, he said, 'Dad, we don't know how to train dogs. These dogs here will bring you a beer, they'll open the can for you, but sometimes they'll drink it for you, too.' He said that was how well-trained the dogs were, and he was really amazed how much you can do with a dog once you've worked with them."

The dog Private Rusk liked to call "My boy, Eli," earned a reputation for wanting to be wherever his handler was. Eli didn't want to sleep on the ground; he slept in Private Rusk's sleeping bag. They even ate together outside after Private Rusk found out that Eli wasn't allowed to eat in the chow hall.

"He told a story of when they were in the chow line one time," Mr. Rusk said. "One of the Marines kicked at the dog one time and told him to get the dog out. Colton and the Marine got into a little scuffle. They told Colton he could stay inside and leave the dog outside, but from then on, Colton and Eli ate outside. That's how tight he and the dog were."

The family met Eli once when they visited Private Rusk at Camp Pendleton the week he deployed. After the retirement and adoption ceremony, the Rusks took Eli to their home on more than 20 acres of land, which he will share with the family, as well as their horses and three German shepherds.

Jan Rusk, Private Rusk's grandmother, said this was another way to honor his memories, but it also will help the family as they continue to cope with their loss.

"Eli was a part of Colton, and now they have a little part of Colton back," she said.
Petraeus Warns of a Bloody Spring in Afghanistan

By Mandy Clark

(Credit: Getty)

General David Petraeus, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, says he is excepting a brutal fight in the spring when Taliban insurgents try to return from their winter safe havens to areas already cleared by the international forces.

"When you have 110,000 more of us than we had a year ago, we're obviously in many, many more places," he said in an interview with NATO TV. "We have taken away areas that matter to the Taliban and they have to fight back."

But he doesn't see more violence as mission failure.

"When you're on the offensive... the insurgents have to fight back and violence goes up, it's a necessary part of any counter-insurgency."

Last year was the deadliest for American troops in the 10 year war, with 499 service members dying in the line of duty.

Gen. Petraeus declined to provide any firm numbers regarding how many U.S. troops might return home as part of the July 2011 drawdown which President Obama announced in his U.S. policy review in December 2009.

"We'll have to get a good bit closer to that, needless to say, to see what the conditions on the ground may be, and then make recommendations," says Petraeus.

He assures America's war-weary public that significant gains have been made by the troop surge. International forces are controlling more areas that were once Taliban safe havens. He does see the surge continuing, but it will become more of an Afghan surge backed by U.S. forces rather than the present circumstances to the contrary.

Increasing U.S. reliance on the Afghan Security Forces, however, may come prematurely. Afghan soldiers are often ill-equipped in the field, and the Afghan forces have been plagued with myriad problems, including high rates of desertion, drug-use and infiltration by the Taliban.
Injured Marine Returns Home

By David Brown
Published: February 12, 2011, 10:12 PM

SIoux Falls, SD - Lance Corporal Jeff Grosky was serving in Afghanistan in October when he was seriously hurt by a bomb. Grosky's right foot had to be amputated and he's spent the past few months in rehabilitation in California.

But Saturday, the hero returned home to his family in Canton, along with some unexpected visitors.

Hours before Jeff Grosky's flight even arrived, veterans from across the area brought their red, white and blue spirits. "A lot of us that are Vietnam veterans feel, since we didn't really get a welcome home, we want to make sure everybody gets a welcome home from now on," Ron Havens with the Sioux Falls Marine Corps League said.

"It's really humbling to know that so many people from around the state, from out of state that want to come and give the proper greeting," Jeff's father, Joe Grosky said.

For Joe Grosky, the greeting is bittersweet. His son's battalion lost 25 members since October, with dozens more injured, including Jeff.

"This unit is a really beleaguered unit," Havens said. "It's really overtaxed. They've taken a lot of hits, and we want to make sure that he's recognized for what he's done."

Jeff Grosky arrived to hugs and tears from his family. But once he made it down the escalator, the sounds of what he stood for... echoed.

"It's not something you really expect," Lance Corporal Jeff Grosky said. "I'm very very grateful to have so many people here who support me."

Jeff says the IED he stepped on in Afghanistan didn't fully detonate, which may have saved his life, but it didn't save his foot. This soldier's still adjusting to his new prosthetic leg, but he's optimistic.

"It's kind of weird to wake up first thing in the morning and put your leg on and you have to relearn to walk every day," Jeff Grosky said. "It's different, but it's not a bad way of living life, it's just a different way of living life."

And Jeff's spirit has given his father all the assurance he needs.

"As a parent, you don't want to see your kid go through that kind of pain," Joe Grosky said. "But to see where he's at today, it was special. Real special."

Lance Corporal Grosky will be home for 30 days and then return to San Diego to continue his rehabilitation.
On Patrol With Pendleton Marines in Sangin

By Alicia Dean  
| Tuesday, Feb 15, 2011 | Updated 2:14 PM PST

For months we've been reporting on the dangers 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment Marines and Sailors are facing in the Sangin District. You've heard about their losses. Twenty-three members killed and more than 100 wounded during combat operations in the area. You've heard from their Commanding General, MajGen Richard Mills about why the fight in Sangin is so critical.

Now, for the first time, we're seeing and hearing from members of the 3/5 who are charged with one of the most difficult missions in the nine year war in Afghanistan.

"Pretty much every day we went on patrol we had to take the ground inch by inch," said 1st Lt. Thomas Schueman, a Platoon Commander with the 3/5's Kilo Company. During a video taped interview with Combat Correspondent Sgt. Dean Davis, Schueman says a series of hard fought victories are starting to add up. "After a lot of blood, sweat, and tears, we were able to penetrate that defense and establish freedom of movement in the upper Sangin Valley."

Sangin is a historically volatile area and a key source of opium producing poppies used to buy weapons and bomb making materials for insurgents. British forces sustained heavy casualties there before transferring authority to San Diego based Marines over the summer.

Marines from the 3rd battalion, 5th regiment started operations in the Sangin District in October and came under fire almost immediately. Military commanders say the fighting there is the worst they've seen since the battle for Marjah last spring.

“He is fighting with a growing desperation with the realization if he loses Sangin he’s lost the fight in Helmand Province,” said MajGen Richard Mills, Commanding General of NATO Regional Command Southwest (RC-Southwest), referring to insurgents. Mills says Taliban fighters are making Sangin their last stand. “We are running into prepared defenses and troops that are willing to fight to death to hold onto the ground that they have,” Mills said.

They've also clearly marked their line in the sand. Recent images of India Company's 3rd platoon patrol operations show areas where Taliban fighters have raised flags marking their territory. It's the 3/5's job to push beyond those lines in a place where nothing can be taken for granted. In an interview with 1st Marine Division Public Affairs team member GySgt William Price, squad leader Sgt David "Bibi" Castillo explained why picking up on even the most subtle clues, can mean the difference between life and death.
"This IED was a directional ‘frag,’ so instead of blasting upward, it was set up to blast the length of the alleyway," Castillo said moments after LCpl Nathan Peyton noticed a slight difference in the texture of a dirt on a road and ended up discovering an IED. Bomb technicians dismantled the makeshift bomb before it could be detonated. “Peyton’s alertness probably saved four to five lives -- an entire fire team,” Castillo said.

Despite the constant threat 1stLt. Schueman says members of the 3/5 haven't waivered in their resolve for a moment even during the worst firefights imaginable.

"Every square inch of where we were was getting raked by enemy PKM fire but it didn't even phase these guys," said Schueman. That courage under fire has earned them a lot of respect from top leaders like MajGen Mills who said the commitment of each Marine and Sailor putting their lives on the line each day is one of the most important weapons in the fight for Sangin.

“They’re the greatest generation we’ve ever raised,” Mills said. “They’re volunteers, they know the threat, they don’t have to be here. 99.9 percent of their friends don’t come over here and yet, they have the courage to take the step forward and do the job that has to be done. I stand in awe of them."
CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan — A familiar smell permeated the cabin on our last flight into the war zone. Our fellow passengers heading into Afghanistan had purchased huge bags of McDonald’s hamburgers at the airport and toted them on the plane. Marines and sailors stationed at Camp Leatherneck – the main base of U.S. and international military operations in Helmand province – are privy to a bountiful dining facility featuring a weekly steak and lobster night and ice cream at practically every meal, but no fast food franchises. (A steady supply of Pizza Hut might weaken the Marines’ hardcore warrior mentality, apparently.) Those living at remote patrol bases subsist on far more Spartan rations of chemically heated MREs and protein bars sent in care packages. So it was easy to understand why American and Canadian contractors and troops returning from leave suffer from Big Mac attacks. When you are at war half-way around the world, even a cold cheeseburger is a comforting taste of home.

Nelvin Cepeda, a Union-Tribune photographer I had traveled with before in Afghanistan and Iraq, embarked with me on this return trip to Helmand province to report on Camp Pendleton Marines stationed in the southwestern region of the country. Our last leg of the long journey from San Diego was a commercial flight reserved for passengers with official military travel orders, including bearded American IT experts with shaved heads and beer bellies, Bangladeshi camp workers and muscular combat vets fresh from government service, ready to make some real money. A former Navy SEAL wistful about his years in Coronado as a younger man sat in my row. President Hamid Karzai booted most of the foreign security firms that used to protect western diplomats and NGO aid workers, so the SEAL veteran and his partners set up a private venture working with Afghan special forces. “They have those?” I asked. The former SEAL smirked. “Yeah,” he said. “In Afghanistan ‘special forces’ means they can shoot straight.”

As an embedded military reporter I have limited contact with ordinary Afghans. There were few if any in the security bubble on our flight in country, so I picked my neighbor’s brain about the locals he had encountered. Infidelity is punishable by death, for both the man and the woman, one told him. “Do you stone them?” the American asked. A look of disgust crossed the face of his Afghan colleague, who clearly viewed the Taliban’s medieval punishments as absurd and barbarian. “No, of course not, they simply take them into the desert to be shot.”

The pilot announced that we would fly extra high over Iranian air space. After a few more pleasantries, he concluded by saying “hopefully” we would arrive at our final destination. “Hopefully?” the SEAL asked, amused by the captain’s candor or slip of the tongue as we flew over rogue states and into the
battlefield. God willing, as they say here, after nearly three days of travel and more than 20 hours in cramped airplane seats, flying from California through 11 1/2 zones, we began to circle Bastion airfield. The British troops who set up camp here several years before the U.S. Marines arrived chose the location well, in the middle of the desert with clear sight lines for miles. We landed without incident and stepped into the crisp and cloudless air to retrieve our bags sagging with body armor.

The winter weather that day was a boon. During our trip last summer, triple-digit heat had threatened to boil our brains as we hustled to keep up with the Marines on patrol; more recently icy rains had turned Helmand province military installations into mud pits. Camp Leatherneck appeared as bleak as ever when we arrived, but we knew conditions would grow more austere the further we moved downrange. After dinner, I quickly succumbed to jet lag and tuckered into a cozy bunk bed in the media tent, puzzling over the mystery of Afghanistan’s half a time zone. I was lulled to sleep by the whoosh of warm air from the heating vents, a rattling generator and helicopter rotors scraping an opaque dusty sky.

Afghanistan war diary: Arrival in Sangin

The Osprey flies like a plane and lands like a helicopter. — Nelvin C. Cepeda
Written by Gretel C. Kovach
midnight, Feb. 21, 2011

SANGIN, Afghanistan — We flew into Forward Operating Base Jackson in central Sangin in an Osprey. The notorious MV-22 tiltrotor aircraft still gives many Marines the willies. “I don’t like them at all,” one told me last summer in Afghanistan, as the leatherneck waited to step into the loading bay for his first Osprey flight. Many grunts remain unnerved by the history behind the hybrid aircraft’s long and troubled development, including the deaths of 19 Marines killed in a 2000 crash. The Osprey, which flies like a plane and lands like a helicopter, has since been redesigned and has proven itself in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now this strange bird with its massive futuristic rotors is an increasingly common sight in the skies above San Diego: Miramar Marines have stood up several Osprey squadrons, and more are on the way as the Corps retires its Vietnam War-era CH-46 Battle Phrog helicopters. Flying along Interstate 15 with its rotors tipped upward, the Osprey reminds me of a man flexing his biceps.

Here in Afghanistan, an East Coast Marine squadron, VMM-264, has put the Osprey through its paces in combat. Flying any rotary aircraft through a dusty war zone involves some risk, but the Osprey has become my favorite method of battlefield transit. Heavily armored MRAP vehicles and MATVs are a life-saving improvement over the thin-skinned Humvees that Marines and soldiers used to drive around Iraq. Nevertheless, I’d rather avoid the roads laced with the insurgents’ favorite weapon – improvised explosive devices. The skies are a safer bet, especially with the Osprey’s ability to shoot straight up and out of the firing zone. I’ve found the takeoffs to be so blessedly vertical that your pack is liable to tumble out the back if you don’t stick a boot out to stop its fall.

On the flight into Sangin we circled the town, getting a good view of the surrounding district with its picturesque jagged ridges and sparse patchwork of green crops checkering a dry smear of desert. The green sinews of the Helmand River twist down the center, making the cultivation of poppy and ordinary
Afghanistan war diary: The 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment rides through history

Written by Gretel C. Kovach midnight, Feb. 26, 2011

SANGIN, Afghanistan — The motto “get some!” is a battle cry favored by all Marines. Depending on its application, the phrase can mean many different things: think notches on the belt on one end of the spectrum, or the New Testament on the other. In Sangin, for instance, Marines who visit the Get Some Chapel at Forward Operating Base Jackson get religion, in one of Afghanistan’s deadliest areas for NATO coalition troops.

In its most elemental form, fighting men roar “get some!” during combat to stir their bloodlust for the enemy. It’s been around since the Vietnam War, but I wonder if the phrase harkens to the days when combat was more brutally intimate, when warriors and soldiers and Indian braves might take a scalp or some other memento of military conquest home with them. In the era of long-range missile strikes and the Geneva Conventions, most Marines seem satisfied to fly out of Afghanistan with a mujahideen-designed welcome mat woven with images of AK-47s. But they still love to “get some.”

When I heard that the saying is the official motto of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment out of Camp Pendleton, I wondered if that meant these were Marines’ Marines, the baddest and bravest infantrymen of them all? Lt. Col. Jason Morris, the battalion commander, disabused me of that idea during a chat at the forward operating base he calls home in southwestern Afghanistan. “No, we are just another infantry battalion. But for whatever reason, it became our little motto,” he said. “The Marines really like that. It is a motivational chant, if you will, before the Marines go into combat. They go ‘get some’ with the enemy.

“That’s what these guys live for,” he said.

The 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment has a long history that includes some of the most legendary battles the Marine Corps has ever fought, from Belleau Wood in World War I to Guadalcanal in World

food crops possible in southern Afghanistan’s arid climate. The Osprey eventually dropped us straight into FOB Jackson, the main base of operations for Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. (The base has been renamed, but everyone still uses the old British moniker.) FOB Jackson used to be attacked daily, but this winter an uncertain calm fell over Sangin and it became secure enough for daytime flights.

Sangin has been the scene of some of the war’s most ferocious combat, before and after the 3/5 Marines moved in here in October. A few weeks before, the British had pulled out after four bloody years in the district. The Darkhorse battalion punched through the rough first weeks suffering many casualties, but the Marines helped push the largest tribe in the area to the negotiating table in late December for a security agreement. Since then, most of the Taliban seem to have decamped for Pakistan, perhaps to rest and refit during the winter cold and rain.

On our first day at FOB Jackson the sky rumbled with the faraway sounds of fighter jets and the occasional boom of the Marines detonating an enemy bomb or shooting mortars. The base, a former drug lord’s villa, is pocked with massive holes and streaked with gunpowder, but it is rarely attacked these days. A group of Marines who returned from a patrol outside the wire remarked at how the local men sometimes stared at them with outright hostility or tried a phony friendliness that the Marines didn’t swallow. “They’ve still got some fight in them,” one concluded. The recent combat interlude is not likely to last, as far as anyone at FOB Jackson can tell. The “green zone” of trees lining the Helmand River has been bare of foliage the enemy uses to obscure their fighting positions. But after a few sunny late winter days, the leaves are now in bud. When the Taliban return, the Marines said they’ll be waiting for them.
War II and Hue City in Vietnam. Morris’ personal history with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment began several years before he took command of the battalion in September 2009 and then led his men into combat this fall in Sangin, Afghanistan. Morris was serving on the 1st Marine Division staff during the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 when the executive officer, or second in command, of the 3/5 was killed about a week into the action. Morris took over the position and advanced with the battalion onto Baghdad.

He moved on to other jobs, but the 3/5 Battalion deployed three more times to Iraq. The most famous battle in its recent history was the second onslaught of Fallujah in November 2004, when the Marines fought house to house in intense close quarters combat against jihadi insurgents, pretty much leveling the Iraqi city in the process.

During the Iraq War years, the battalion dropped its title as the “consummate professionals” and reassumed its identity as the “Darkhorse” battalion. Morris tells me the new name was the battalion’s call sign during the Korean War. The 3/5 Marines were heavily outnumbered and surrounded by Chinese troops at the Chosin reservoir, but they fought for 10 days and made it to the sea. Their call sign became “Darkhorse” because it took one to break out of that fight, according to battalion history.

Their stance as a hard-charging infantry unit is manifested in that symbol – the Darkhorse. Everyone in the battalion gets a kick out of it, because “it sounds badass,” Morris said. “The Marines would never give that up at this point. They love being a part of the Darkhorse.”

And now they are making history again during the battalion’s first deployment to Afghanistan. Sangin was called the “Fallujah of Afghanistan” before the 3/5 Marines deployed here. The comparison doesn’t signify much except a place of heavy combat in an urban labyrinth of narrow streets (though Sangin has its green zone of orchards and fields as well).

There is the sense in some military circles that the 3/5 is fated to pull the toughest fights. Whether it was the luck of the draw or a commander’s nod to the fierce battle history of this unit is hard to say. The individual members of the battalion are constantly changing, but the history of the unit stretching back long before many of the current members were born has worked its way into the battalion DNA. “It’s got a long and distinguished legacy,” Morris said. “Every Marine really carries with him the pride in the organization.”

Morris meant that literally: the battle flag propped in the corner of his forward operating base office is weighted with streamers from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment’s many campaigns. When the battalion returns from Sangin, the Darkhorse Marines will have the weight of history and another streamer to add to its heavily laden tip.
Pendleton Marines maintain uneasy calm in battle-scared Afghan town

Written by Gretel C. Kovach 3 p.m., Feb. 26, 2011

SANGIN, Afghanistan — The Afghan police and their Marine advisers walk out of the base where they live and work together and into the bazaar. Cold winter rain has given way to sunny skies, putting everyone in a good mood.

They look relaxed. But Cpl. Michael Creighton, the patrol leader, feels like a duck on water. “On top, everything is nice and calm. Underneath, everything is going 100 miles an hour,” he says. Every Marine’s mind is racing. They are all going over basically the same thought and its aftermath – who’s got the bomb?

Despite the danger, the Marines and their police partners walk around the bazaar as if they own it. They pass out candy and exchange greetings, their rifles hanging by their sides. The Americans even stop to purchase brocade scarves and energy drinks, something that would have been unthinkable a few months ago when they were popping smoke grenades and running past side streets on almost every patrol to avoid being shot.

The patrol moves through the mechanics bazaar, where a man in a long grease-stained shirt asks the Marines to fill the fetid sewer ditch in front of his shop. A boy walks up to one of the Americans and holds out his palm, smiling wide. “Hey, chocolate!” he demands in perfect English.

Creighton had positioned the Afghan police at the front and the rear of the patrol, bracketing the Marines. He wants an Afghan face to be the first thing the locals see as the joint force moves through the bazaar, and the last.

But a significant portion of the Sangin population doesn’t care who leads the patrol. For those aligned with the Taliban insurgency, anyone who works with the foreigners or the legitimate Afghan government is a target.

Creighton and the other Camp Pendleton Marines who mentor Afghan National Police in Sangin learned that lesson under fire the last 4½ months, along with the rest of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

Two dozen Marines from the 3/5 have been killed since the unit moved in this fall, many of them ripped limb from limb by hidden roadside bombs. More than 100 more have been wounded, often catastrophically.

This small district in the northeastern corner of Helmand Province had been the deadliest patch of ground for British troops in Afghanistan during their four years here. When a new sheriff came to town this fall, as one U.S. Marine put it, the enemy attacks were ferocious. On the day the battalion officially took command, after being here only a few weeks, the 3/5 had already lost five men killed in action.

The bloodletting on all sides continued for months. Then in December, the barrage of gunfire, mortars and rockets suddenly stopped. Insurgents are laying more roadside bombs than ever, but the Marines have gotten much better at finding them.

During the winter lull in small armsfire attacks, an uncertain calm settled over Sangin. None of the battle-hardened Marines stationed here expects it to last.

When the group crests the hill and enters a police checkpoint, the Afghan commander rushes over to share some unsettling news.

The policeman’s little brother works in the mechanics bazaar the patrol walked through not five minutes before. According to him, the light crowds of vendors and shoppers in that area, some friendly,
some openly hostile toward the security patrol, included three suicide bombers wearing hidden explosive vests.

Everything had seemed normal. Learning that someone was out there trying to blow the Marines up, “it puts things into perspective,” Creighton says.

The Marines get reports of imminent attacks like this several times a week. The insurgents are trying to catch them with their guard down, in his view. “We have to keep our head on a swivel, looking at everything, vehicles, people, everyone,” he says.

The threat is both internal and external. Two Marines were shot to death on base in Sangin by a rogue Afghan soldier last year. Then in January, when an Afghan policeman got into a dispute with a Marine and threatened him with his rifle, the Marine shot him dead, NATO’s International Security Assistance Force reported.

The shootings were tragic but they didn’t affect their ability to mentor the Afghan security forces, said Capt. David Wright, the officer in charge of the local police advisory teams in Sangin. The Marines sat down with Afghan commanders afterward and they agreed: “We’re all on one mission. We can’t let something like that distract us. We have to continue to push on,” Wright said.

When the Marines arrived in Sangin, the police did not want to leave their checkpoints. Now they patrol on their own and, going on tips or an increasingly keen eye for finding the insurgents’ homemade bombs, they dig up the explosive devices themselves.

The difficulties of policing Sangin are many, according to Sgt. Mohamed Raheem. Besides the bomb threat and other Taliban attacks, Raheem is frustrated by the lack of cooperation he encounters from many locals. But he became a policeman because “my country wants me and needs my help,” he says.

Another limitation has been manpower. Afghan government officials, “they honestly thought Sangin was a lost cause,” said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, the battalion commander. “When you have a limited number of resources and government officials, you have to prioritize. You have to put money and people where you think you are going to get the best return, and Sangin was not that place.”

But the game changed after the U.S. Marines moved in, Morris added. When it started to look like the Afghan government and its allies might prevail, authorities tripled the number of police assigned to Sangin.

About a month ago they sent the first contingent of Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), a more highly trained paramilitary force. One company moved into the “Fish Tank,” a volatile neighborhood of twisting alleyways and tall mud walls pocked with insurgent firing ports chipped into them. The Marines call them “murder holes.”

Soon afterward, insurgents threw two grenades into their compound, probably to distract them from the bomb connected to a command wire they tossed in the entryway window. The Marines spotted the trigger line before they ran out of the patrol base, but it was a close call.

The Marines and the Afghan police do not share the same language or culture, but the bonds among them were forged quickly amid such close combat with the enemy.

“We’re both here fighting the same cause. A lot of our first conversations were Marine good, ANCOP good, Taliban no good. That was the basis of the relationship. We built from there,” said Cpl. Ryan Stouffer.

The Afghan police face the same dangers as the Marines, said Cpl. Bidal Duran. “Especially with all the IEDs (improvised explosive devices) out here. Pressure plates don’t pick and choose their targets. It’s the first person who steps on them.”

Back at the bazaar, the Afghan police pull on their flak jackets and load a machine gun into their truck. They lock and load their rifles and peel out of the checkpoint to cordon off the mechanics bazaar and hunt for the bombers.
Staff Sgt. Dante Trujillo finishes a cup of sweet green tea the police poured for him. He doubts the bombers will be arrested. Word travels fast here, as it did to reach the Marines. They can drop the vests, stash them nearby and blend into the crowd, Trujillo notes.

The patrol walks back down the hill, and Trujillo looks around the bazaar. “It could be this guy, or this guy,” he says, pointing to the men milling about. But he doesn’t seem particularly disturbed by the thought.
MILITARY: Marine from bloodied Camp Pendleton unit faces new fight

Lt. Cameron West says he was 'lucky 'cuz I still got one leg'
By MARK WALKER - mwalker@nctimes.com | Posted: Saturday, February 26, 2011 9:00 pm

The war in Afghanistan ended in less than three weeks for Marine Lt. Cameron "Big Country" West. The battle to rebuild his life ---- after a roadside bomb tore apart his body ---- will go on for years.

"I got lucky, to tell you the truth, 'cuz I still got one leg," the 25-year-old West said.

Many of the Marines he's surrounded by at his daily rehabilitation sessions are missing both legs ---- and arms.

Most of the young men once belonged to the highly decorated 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which is bearing the brunt of the vicious fighting.

Now they're assigned to another unit: the Wounded Warrior Battalion, created for troops whose injuries require months of care.

For West, and many other injured Marines, life changed with a footprint.

'I looked down and it was gone'

On Oct. 15 of last year, West was leading his Camp Pendleton platoon on a hunt for Taliban insurgents.

The platoon was returning to its outpost in the Helmand province's deadly Sangin District when it was ordered to check a compound where suspected Taliban fighters were congregating.

"We made contact with about 10 villagers and had questioned them," the Georgia native recalled. "We also had radios that scanned for Taliban conversation. Our interpreter said there was traffic about an ambush."

West led the platoon away from the suspected ambush site, crossing an irrigation canal adjacent to a cornfield. It was about 10 a.m. on a Friday.

"I was bent down on my right knee, telling the squad leaders we needed to cut into the cornfield to use it as cover, as a safe haven," West said.

That's when his radio operator, Lance Cpl. James Boelk, 24, of Oceanside, stepped on a pressure plate buried just beneath the surface. The step triggered a massive explosion that threw Boelk into the canal and tore off his legs.

He was declared dead within minutes.

"Nobody knew what happened at first," West said. "It was a big-ass explosion. When all the dust and smoke cleared, some guys were just standing there, some guys had taken cover."

The blast lifted the 230-pound West and tossed him several feet. The explosion also took his right leg. "I looked down and it was gone," West said. "The foot was right next to me, hanging from my pants leg or something. I guess it wasn't ready to leave me quite yet." It took a couple of minutes for his men to reach him. West had landed on a belt that appeared to contain more explosives. "They were worried about coming to get me because they didn't want to set off another (improvised explosive device)," he said.

His leg wasn't the only thing missing. "It also took off the pinkie and my trigger finger," West said, gazing at his right hand while sitting in a lounge chair at his family's Oceanside home, just minutes from Camp Pendleton.
"A lot of guys get their trigger finger blown off because they have their finger in the trigger well when the bombs go off," he said.

For the now 175-pound West, the battleground has shifted ---- from the dusty plains and fertile valleys of Afghanistan to the treatment rooms of a San Diego military hospital.

**Battalion ravaged**

A purple scar snakes its way up West's remaining leg from ankle to thigh. Another lines his right arm, stretching from his mangled hand to his shoulder. He has a bald spot and raw-looking wound on the back of his head where a piece of shrapnel penetrated his skull. The vision he lost in his right eye has a good chance of being recovered, doctors have told him. His right leg is now a temporary metal prosthetic, one that allowed him to get out of the wheelchair he'd been using for the last three months.

Several other Marines were wounded in the explosion, including the platoon corpsman whose injuries left him unable to treat West.

The blast that ripped apart his platoon is all too familiar for the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, tasked with taming the agricultural region that was a center of drug trafficking and roadside bomb manufacturing.

West is among the more than 150 troops from the nearly 1,000-troop battalion who have been wounded since they arrived in Afghanistan in late September.

In addition to Boelk, 24 other troops have been killed, including one of West's best friends, Lt. Robert Kelly, the son of Marine Corps Lt. Gen. John Kelly. The battalion, officials say, has seen more casualties in the 10-year-old Afghan war than any other similar-size unit.

"It's tough to think about what a life is worth or what 25 lives are worth," West said. "But I know 3/5 is succeeding in helping free Afghanistan, and I'm pretty sure the 25 dead guys would say it's worth it and not in vain."

The losses are so severe that for the first time the Marine Corps is ordering mental health specialists to "embed" with the troops when they come home in mid-April.

The Marines and their Navy medical corpsmen also will undergo extensive mental health evaluations, and specialists will work with their children, spouses and parents.

"These guys have seen and been through things that most of us can never imagine," said Rear Adm. C. Forrest Faison III, who heads Naval Medical Center San Diego and designed the outreach program in concert with Camp Pendleton commanders. "We want to make sure we take care of them and their families."

**'Gnarly infections'**

West was on a medical evacuation helicopter less than a half-hour after being wounded. He remembers nothing of his 7,000-mile trip from the cornfield in Afghanistan to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., where he arrived on Oct. 20.

"After being put on the helicopter and being shot up with knockout juice, I don't remember anything until they woke me up after a couple of days at Bethesda," he said.

Within a week, West, a 2007 social science graduate of North Georgia College and State University, was out of the intensive care unit, but still at Bethesda for treatment of wounds, such as the one on his left leg large enough to hold two golf balls.

"Everyone getting blown up over there gets these gnarly-ass infections," said the dark-haired, blue-eyed West, who grew up wanting to follow the path of his Korean War veteran grandfather and join the Marines.

After a couple of weeks at Bethesda, he was transferred to the San Diego Naval Medical Center's Comprehensive Combat and Complex Casualty Care unit, where he spent a few days before being released to begin a daily regimen of rehabilitation and medical visits.

There, he is rebuilding his body ---- and his life.

**'Blown up already?"**
West lives at his family's Oceanside home, where his father, Artis, coordinates the appointment schedule and serves as his driver.
"I'm lucky to have him," he said of his dad.
Father and son make four or five round trips a week to the Naval Medical Center near Balboa Park. The trips start about 8:30 a.m. and the two usually get home by 1 or 2 in the afternoon.
The center is filled with troops whose bodies have been mutilated by roadside bombs.
"The real gut-wrenching thing is watching him and those guys at Balboa that are double or triple amputees," said his dad, who wears T-shirts emblazoned with logos from his son's battalion. "It makes you proud of them, but it also just tears you up."

The elder West recently lost his job and was home when he got the call informing him his son was hurt.
"It's a parent's worst nightmare," he said. "It just floored me. The main thing I kept asking was, 'Is he alive?'"

Cameron West recalls hearing what his mother, a nurse, said when she got the word: "What, he got blown up already?"
The Marine Corps flew his parents to Washington, D.C., where Artis West stayed in the bed next to his son throughout the stay at Bethesda. Artis West said that except for a couple of down days early on, his son has remained upbeat.
"But it's not as easy as you might think," he said.
Inside his room at home, his son has a picture of his platoon in full gear before they left for Afghanistan. An observer looking at the picture sees West standing at the far right, nearly a head taller than the others. He and his platoon nearly a year preparing for the deployment, during which his fellow lieutenants tagged him "Big Country" because of his Southern upbringing and love of the outdoors. Next to that shot are pictures of military officials and celebrities who came to see him in Bethesda.
"It was nonstop," his dad said. "Besides the doctors and nurses, there were people streaming in constantly, including a lot of just regular Marines who just came by on their own time to cheer him up."

Those pictures remind West that he is not alone.

Fellow troops
A couple of weeks ago, West was at the San Diego medical center for therapy on his mangled hand and to reclaim his prosthetic leg, which had gone back to the manufacturer for fine-tuning.
It's there that West sees others from the battalion who were severely wounded, including Stephen Librando, his platoon corpsman injured in the same blast.
"It was a relief when I woke up in ICU at Bethesda and he was there next to me," said Librando, who's being treated for arm, hand, leg, eye and facial injuries. Librando, a Guam native, also was on his first deployment. "It sucked because I wasn't able to take care of him or the rest of my guys," he said after hugging West. "But it was good to know (West) made it back." West, he said, was a good leader.
"He was chill," Librando said. "He did what we needed him to do, and he passed down to us the things we needed to know."

Seeing Librando is therapeutic for West, too. "He got hit with me, and it's good to be able to see how he and all the rest are doing," West said.

Another member of the platoon, Lance Cpl. Brandon Weese, 19, of Kansas, said West continued to issue orders after he was wounded. "He was directing the patrol even though he had his leg blown off," Weese said.

First week is the toughest
West's first appointment during a recent visit was with Adrianna Gaeta, who is helping him regain the use of his right hand. The 30-minute treatment started with a heat pack to work on the scar tissue and coax out dozens of small pieces of shrapnel that remain in his arm. A short time later, West was being refitted with an interim prosthetic, a column of metal with a mechanical joint for a knee that
he wore for about a week before it needed readjustment. The head prostheticist, Peter Harsch, helped
him attach it and coached him through walking exercises.

"Make sure you stride completely," Harsch said as West took a few tentative steps. "The sooner
you get rid of the wheelchair, the better."

The clinic visit also was a chance for West to chat with a battalion lance corporal, Justin
McLoud, 23, of St. Louis, who lost both legs and his left arm to a roadside bomb a short time after West
was injured.

"It's good to see people that you know," said the soft-spoken McLoud, who arrived at Balboa
earlier this month.

With him were his wife, Amber, and their 5-month-old son, Desmond. Amber McLoud said
she's amazed at the spirit and courage of the men she sees at the clinic, especially her husband.

"He's made it so easy on me," she said. "He's always in a good mood, and he's accepted what
happened to him. For us, there's no sense in dwelling on it and getting pissed off. We just have to deal
with it and move on."

West is often one of the first visitors when the severely injured arrive at the Combat Care Unit.
"I just want to let them know that I was in the same situation they're in when I first got here," he said.
"The first few weeks are the toughest."

A linebacker for his high school football team, West has a passion for the outdoors and is an
avid fisherman and hiker. Thoughts of those pursuits were on his mind when psychologists first asked
him how was doing. "I saw one guy at Bethesda," he said. "He was kind of a joke. I remember he asked
me how I was doing. 'Great, I'm doing great. I just got my leg blown off two weeks ago,'" West recalled
telling him.

He said his recovery isn't just physical. "I've got survivor's guilt ---- it's always there, especially
because James (Boelk) didn't make it, and I'm pretty pissed about that," he said.

To help his spirit, he and several other injured battalion Marines get together every couple of
weeks. "We talk, and it's good because we can let go of some of the feelings we have," he said. "Guys
need some closure, and if not now, maybe six months or a year from now."

'Just bad luck'

He's assigned to a Wounded Warrior Battalion and figures he has about a year's worth of therapy
and prosthetic work and repair on his eye. By that time, West said, he should be eligible for promotion
to captain and on track to become an infantry instructor. A few years ago, the Marine Corps adopted a
policy allowing troops injured in combat to stay in the service if the right job was available.

Within a few weeks, he hopes to have the gas and brake pedals on his 1993 Chevrolet pickup
with 185,000 miles refitted so he can drive again. "I just want to get better and get back in the fight,
whatever that may be for me," he said. "Injuries are often something that's just bad luck.
"That day, I had the bad luck."
Tribal peace deal in Afghanistan on shaky ground

In this image made on Saturday, Feb. 19, 2011, U.S. Marine Lance Cpl. Nathan Salpas, 20, from Grand Island, NE, catches a loose goat in the courtyard of a mud compound during a patrol with 3rd Platoon, India Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment in Sangin district southern Helmand province of Afghanistan. U.S. Marines battling the Taliban in this key insurgent stronghold in southern Afghanistan are increasingly dubious about the prospects for a high-profile peace deal struck two months ago between the government and the area's largest tribe. (AP Photo/Sebastian Abbot)

By SEBASTIAN ABBOT, Associated Press
11:07 a.m., March 1, 2011

In this image made on Monday, Feb. 21, 2011, Sangin District Governor Mohammad Sharif signs a document outside his office in Sangin district in southern Helmand province, Afghanistan. U.S. Marines battling the Taliban in this key insurgent stronghold in southern Afghanistan are increasingly dubious about the prospects for a high-profile peace deal struck two months ago between the government and the area's largest tribe. (AP Photo/Sebastian Abbot)

SANGIN, Afghanistan — U.S. Marines battling the Taliban in this insurgent stronghold in southern Afghanistan are increasingly dubious about prospects for a high-profile peace deal struck two months ago between the government and the area's largest tribe.

The agreement is vital to coalition efforts to win control of Helmand province's Sangin district, one of the country's biggest narcotics hubs that funds the insurgents, and a gateway for fighters to stream into Kandahar province, the Taliban's spiritual heartland.

Peace could also determine the fate of a nearby dam that provides electricity to southern Afghanistan.

High-level U.S. and Afghan officials insist the deal is working, and could become a model for other groups looking to switch allegiance from the Taliban to the government - a key goal of the top NATO commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus.

Elders of the Alikozai tribe agreed two months ago to prevent attacks on coalition forces in their section of Sangin in return for aid to build schools, clinics and other needs.

But attacks have continued against Marines in the Upper Sangin Valley, either from Alikozai who reject the deal or other fighters beyond the tribe's control, said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment in Sangin.

Fighting has been less intense than before the deal, but that applies throughout the district, a development the Marines on the ground in Sangin believe is driven by the normal winter lull and the hundreds of casualties inflicted on the Taliban.
"While some are still optimistic that the agreement is in place, others, including me, are much more suspect about whether there actually is an agreement or if they are capable of upholding an agreement," Morris, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, said in an interview.

Maj. Chris Bopp, the operations officer for the 2nd Marine Reconnaissance Battalion in the area, said it's hard to know how many Alikozai rank-and-file even know about the deal.

People in the Upper Sangin Valley say the recent attacks are being carried out by "foreign fighters," meaning fighters from outside their area, but that is a common refrain in Afghanistan and must be viewed skeptically, said Bopp, 37, from Catonsville, Maryland.

Morris estimated that at least 25 percent of the Alikozai don't agree with the peace deal and he doubted its supporters are strong enough to stand up to fighters from outside.

"It's obvious to me that the Alikozai cannot control their area or are choosing not to," said Morris, 40, from Oceanside, California.

Not everyone is pessimistic, however. The governor of Sangin, Mohammad Sharif, believes that given time, the Alikozai will manage to control their area. The top NATO commander in Helmand, Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, is also upbeat because most of the attacks following the deal have occurred away from Rt. 611, which coalition forces have worked to secure and improve.

The road runs north to the Kajaki dam, the biggest source of electricity for southern Afghanistan. The dam needs a third turbine but the road has been too dangerous for equipment to be delivered. The peace agreement includes an Alikozai promise to keep the road open.

"The road has not been attacked and the road builders have not been attacked," said Mills, 60, from Huntington, New York. Regarding its security clauses, "I'm satisfied the agreement is holding," he said in an interview.

Taliban leaders were outraged by the peace deal and put bounties on the Alikozai elders involved in negotiating it, said Morris, the battalion commander. Days later, gunmen tried to kill one of the most prominent elders, Badar Agha, outside his home. He escaped, shot in the leg.

The Alikozai have fought the insurgents before. They rose up against the Taliban in May 2007 but got no help from coalition forces or the Afghan government and were crushed. Some tribesmen ended up being forced to join the Taliban, but many continued to resent "foreign fighters" on their turf.

Likely concerned about history repeating itself, many of the elders under death threat over the peace deal traveled to the Pakistani city of Quetta to talk to the Taliban leadership, said Morris. There are conflicting reports about what was achieved and whether the elders have returned to Sangin.

The Alikozai have failed to put together a 15-man governing council that was part of the deal, a delay that Morris believes is driven by fear of Taliban retribution.

He said that during the peace negotiations the Marines pulled out of the Upper Sangin Valley as a show of faith, but had difficulty getting a response from the fiercely independent Alikozai about whether they wanted coalition forces back or would view them as another foreign occupier.

After waiting more than a week, the Marines returned lest a power vacuum develop, Morris said. "While many of them seem to want us here, they are tempering their emotions because they want to make sure that this is something that lasts and not something that's temporary," said Bopp.
Before he addressed the crowd that had assembled in the St. Louis Hyatt Regency ballroom last November, Lt. Gen. John F. Kelly had one request. "Please don't mention my son," he asked the Marine Corps officer introducing him.

Four days earlier, 2nd Lt. Robert M. Kelly, 29, had stepped on a land mine while leading a platoon of Marines in southern Afghanistan. He was killed instantly.

Without once referring to his son's death, the general delivered a passionate and at times angry speech about the military's sacrifices and its troops' growing sense of isolation from society.

"Their struggle is your struggle," he told the ballroom crowd of former Marines and local business people. "If anyone thinks you can somehow thank them for their service, and not support the cause for which they fight - our country - these people are lying to themselves. . . . More important, they are slighting our warriors and mocking their commitment to this nation."

Kelly is the most senior U.S. military officer to lose a son or daughter in Iraq or Afghanistan. He was giving voice to a growing concern among soldiers and Marines: The American public is largely unaware of the price its military pays to fight the United States' distant conflicts. Less than 1 percent of the population serves in uniform at a time when the country is engaged in one of the longest periods of sustained combat in its history.

President Obama devoted only six sentences to the war in Afghanistan in his State of the Union address in January. The 25-second standing ovation that lawmakers lavished on the troops lasted almost as long as the president's war remarks.

Kelly has largely shunned public attention since his speech and his son's death. He discussed his speech and his son to provide insight into the lives and the burdens of military families.

"We are only one of 5,500 American families who have suffered the loss of a child in this war," he said in an e-mail. "The death of my boy simply cannot be made to seem any more tragic than the others."

On Tuesday, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said he had nominated Kelly to be his senior military assistant, a powerful position by virtue of its minute-by-minute proximity to the Pentagon chief. He would serve as a key liaison between the defense secretary and the top brass.

As in many military families, Kelly's two sons followed their father into the Marine Corps. The three Kelly men have participated in 11 combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade.
As one retired Marine Corps general noted in a condolence letter to Kelly a few days after his son's death: "Service to and sacrifice for the nation have become a legacy affair for a relatively small number of families."

'Living on luck'

A few days after graduating from Florida State University in 2003, Robert Kelly surprised his family by enlisting in the Marine Corps. His elder brother, John, had joined as an officer two years earlier. Their father was leading Marines in Iraq.

The war was something new in early 2003, and like most Americans, Robert had spent the spring glued to the live television coverage of U.S. tanks converging on Baghdad.

One year later, Robert was a private first class fighting house to house in the battle for Fallujah, the largest and bloodiest urban battle for U.S. troops since Vietnam.

On the night the offensive began, the elder Kelly came home early from work and urged his wife to steel herself for the worst. "Robert is right in the middle of it," he told her.

Robert emerged from the three-week assault physically unscathed, but shaken by the violence. Six Marines in his 150-man company were killed, three dozen were wounded and the rest suffered a psychological toll. By this point, the war was no longer being beamed home to the United States on cable television.

"It was weird to read mail again, a reminder that other people's lives go on while I am here," he wrote in a letter dated Nov. 19, 2004, to his best friend from high school. "Things have not been going so well. I am having a lot of trouble dealing with this [expletive]. It is hard to explain right now. . . . I just want to go home and see my family and friends. I really want to sit down with my dad and talk."

Robert told his father that he was especially bothered by an incident in which his platoon was taking fire from insurgents in an underground bunker. The Marines' interpreter screamed at them to surrender. When they continued to shoot, Robert's unit used explosives to blow them out of the bunker.

"He mentioned that it must have been a horrible way to die," his father recalled. "It wasn't as clean as he thought it would be. He felt bad about the whole thing, and I told him that was human."

In 2008, Robert moved from the enlisted to the officer ranks and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. Because his father was deployed as commander of U.S. forces in western Iraq, Robert's brother administered the oath. The change meant Robert would be responsible for the lives of three-dozen Marines.

Robert, who inherited his father's prominent nose, bushy eyebrows and sly smile, was seven years older than most second lieutenants and one of the few platoon leaders in his brigade with combat experience.

Before his platoon deployed last September, Robert sent a blast e-mail to his friends and family. If people were wondering what to put in care packages, batteries, wet wipes and protein bars were best, he wrote. A simple letter from home was "always welcome."

Mostly, though, he wanted his friends and family to care about a war that had largely faded from the public's consciousness. The midterm congressional elections were only a month away. Hardly any candidates were talking about Afghanistan. Less than 2 percent of voters rated it their top issue.

"Try to keep your eye on the news," Robert wrote from Camp Pendleton, Calif. "It will be good to know that people are paying attention to what the 32 Marines with me will be accomplishing."

Robert's platoon occupied an isolated patrol base in Sangin district, an area where British forces had been losing ground to the Taliban. Soldiers and Marines at larger established bases speak to their families almost daily on cellphones. At Robert's isolated patrol base, there was no cellphone coverage or Internet service, just "ammo and big rats," he said in a rare letter home.

Throughout the fall, his 1,000-man battalion took part in some of the most intense fighting of the 10-year-old war, killing dozens of Taliban and slowly pushing them back. Robert's father followed his son's battalion over the Pentagon's classified Internet.
"I know you guys have taken some licks in the last few days," the elder Kelly wrote in a letter dated Oct. 15. As a platoon commander, Robert was now responsible for every patrol that left the base. Kelly knew it was an enormous burden.

"Robert you will likely lose one or more of your precious Marines if you haven't already," the elder Kelly continued. "Do not let the men mope or dwell on the loss... Do not let them ever enjoy the killing or hate their enemy. It is impossible to take the emotion out of it, but try and keep it as impersonal and mechanical as you can. The Taliban have their job to do and we have ours. That's it... Combat is so inhumane; you must help your men maintain their humanity as well as their sense of perspective and proportion."

On the day Kelly mailed the letter to his son, Lance Cpl. Colin Faust, one of Robert's Marines, stepped on a land mine and lost part of his left leg. The next day, a sergeant in Robert's platoon was killed and a lance corporal lost his right arm when a land mine detonated under them.

On Oct. 19, Robert's commanders brought satellite phones to his remote base so he and his Marines could talk to their increasingly anxious spouses. In 2007, Robert had married his girlfriend, Heather, who had asked him to a "Kappa Krush" sorority party during his senior year of college. She had stuck with him through boot camp, an Iraq tour and a seven-month sea tour in 2006. This was their first deployment as a married couple.

Robert's call from Sangin kept being dropped, so Heather ran out to the driveway hoping for better reception. He quickly told her to call his father and ask him to check in on two of his Marines who had just arrived at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda.

The elder Kelly and Robert's sister, Kathleen, had been making almost daily trips to visit Marines from Robert's unit. Second Lt. Cameron West, one of Robert's closest friends from his battalion, was still in intensive care when Kelly first visited him. West's right leg was gone and his eye was bandaged shut. He had just woken after being unconscious for six days.

Heather, who had been to West's apartment at Camp Pendleton, mentioned that he liked John Wayne memorabilia. So in late October, the elder Kelly bought him a fleece John Wayne blanket for his hospital bed.

In his last calls home, on Oct. 29, Robert sought to ease his family's growing worry. His platoon had flown into one of the larger forward operating bases to attend a memorial service for one of his Marines who had been killed a week earlier. Robert pressed his mother and sister for updates on his Marines at Bethesda.

He even managed to reach 2nd Lt. James Byler, a good friend who had lost his legs in a bomb blast and was still in intensive care. A nurse brought a phone into Byler's room, and Robert told him he'd soon be back doing CrossFit, a workout popular with Marines. Byler let out a groggy laugh.

Robert couldn't reach his father but left him a brief phone message. Before he flew back to his tiny patrol base, he dashed off a final e-mail to his wife. "I always think I do not want to call you because I will be homesick, but I end up doing it and leave the phone tent with a smile on my face," Robert wrote. "I love you so much and appreciate you being a great sport in all of this craziness... One month down and a lot of months to go, but I am doing what I want to do with my life."

About 12 hours later, the elder Kelly e-mailed his extended family in Boston, preparing them for the possibility that Robert might be maimed or killed. Kelly knew that Robert went out on almost every patrol with his men through mine-filled fields. One of the Marines at Bethesda told him that Robert was "living on luck."

"I write you all to just let you know he's in the thick of it and to keep him in your thoughts," Kelly typed. "We are doing a Novena a minute down here and there is no end in sight."

On Oct. 31, Kelly sent a second e-mail to his eldest sister, the family matriarch. "I am sweating bullets," he confided. "Pray. Pray. Pray. He's such a good boy... and Marine."
'Fight to bring us home'

At 6:10 a.m. on Nov. 9, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., one of Kelly's oldest and dearest friends, rang the doorbell at his home in the Washington Navy Yard. The instant Kelly saw Dunford, dressed in his service uniform, he knew Robert was dead.

As a Marine Corps general, Kelly had spoken with scores of grieving parents. He had written hundreds of condolence letters. In them, he tried to explain why the loss of a beloved child was meaningful, noble and worth the family's pain.

"I guess over time I had convinced myself that I could imagine what it would be like to lose a son or daughter," he said in an interview. "You try to imagine it so that you can write the right kind of letters or form the right words to try to comfort. But you can't even come close. It is unimaginable."

Months later, Kelly would struggle to describe the pain he felt on his front porch. "It was disorienting, almost debilitating," he wrote in an e-mail. "At the same time my mind went through in detail every memory and image I had of Robert from the delivery room to the voice mail he'd left a few days before he died. . . . It was as graphic as if I was watching a video. . . . It really did seem like hours but was little more than a second or so."

Kelly composed himself and moved down his front steps to speak with Dunford's wife and walk his friends into the house. His wife, Karen, was still asleep. "I then did the most difficult thing I've done in my life," Kelly said. "I walked upstairs, woke Karen to the news and broke her heart."

Four days later, Kelly stood in front of a microphone in St. Louis. He saw his speech there as a chance to remind people that the United States was still at war.

"We are in a life-and-death struggle, but not our whole country," he told the crowd. "One percent of Americans are touched by this war. Then there is a much smaller club of families who have given all."

He spoke of the anger that some combat veterans feel toward the war's opponents. "They hold in disdain those who claim to support them but not the cause that takes their innocence, their limbs and even their lives," he said.

Later, he clarified in an interview that he is opposed to indifference, not dissent. "I just think if you are against the war, you should somehow try to change it," he said. "Fight to bring us home."

Kelly's concerns have been echoed of late by generals, lawmakers and top Pentagon civilians. "I worry that we could wake up one day and that the American people will no longer know us, and we won't know them" Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote in January. Former congressman Ike Skelton (D-Mo.) recently lamented to Foreign Policy magazine that "those who protect us are psychologically divorced from those who are being protected."

He'd 'want you to have it'

In mid-February, Kelly received word that Lance Cpl. Sebastian Gallegos, one of his son's Marines from Afghanistan, had declined to accept the Purple Heart he had earned. Gallegos's right arm was severed in an October bomb blast that had killed his squad leader, Sgt. Ian M. Tawney, 25.

The 21-year-old Marine couldn't fathom accepting an honor for an event that had taken his friend's life. Gallegos was lying next to a mortally wounded Tawney as the helicopter left Sangin. "I told him I loved him and watched him die," Gallegos recalled. A few weeks later, Tawney's wife gave birth to a baby girl.

Kelly offered to fly to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, where Gallegos was being treated, to present the award. Gallegos told him it wasn't necessary.

"Robert would want you to have it," Kelly insisted over the phone.

The ceremony was held in a prefabricated building on the hospital campus. A few minutes before it began, Kelly asked Gallegos to look at a picture of Robert that had been taken on the morning he died. Robert was talking to another Marine and grimacing. "It is the only picture I can ever remember of him in which he wasn't smiling," Kelly said.
He wanted to get the name of the Marine in the picture and ask him why Robert was so irritated. Kelly knew his son as a happy, funny and gentle young man. Now he was trying to better understand him as the battle-hardened combat leader that he had become, he said. Gallegos passed along the name.

The ceremony began around noon. About a dozen of Gallegos's family members took seats on leather couches facing an American flag and a red Marine Corps banner. The women all wore black dresses and heels. Gallegos's father, a former Army Special Forces sergeant, wore a new straw cowboy hat, polished cowboy boots and a tie.

The official ceremony took about 30 seconds. Kelly and Gallegos stood facing each other at the front of the room. The young Marine looked at the ground as Kelly read the award citation and pinned the small purple-and-gold heart to his camouflage uniform. The general gripped Gallegos's left hand and squeezed his shoulder, just above his stump. Gallegos's wife beamed with pride.

After the ceremony, Gallegos's family formed a huddle around their Marine. Gallegos, who had passed up a scholarship offer from Columbia University to enlist, had 12 more months of rehabilitation and then he planned to go to college somewhere in Texas. He wanted to stay close to his family, he said.

His wife wrapped an arm around his waist, put her head on his shoulder and rested a neatly manicured hand on his chest. For the first time that day, Gallegos looked happy and relaxed. He was finally enjoying the moment that he had resisted for months.

Kelly watched from across the room. "They are kids," he whispered. "Look at them. They are just kids."
Marines await Taliban move in deadly valley

Sangin deadliest district in Afghanistan last year

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By SEBASTIAN ABBOT, Associated Press

SANGIN, Afghanistan (AP) - The cacophony of gunfire and bombing that dominated this southern river valley in the fall has dropped to a whisper, but U.S. Marines who have paid a heavy price battling the Taliban in Afghanistan's deadliest spot expect the insurgents to hit back hard.

Violence in Helmand province's Sangin district dropped sharply about a month ago, a development the Marines believe was driven by both the normal winter lull and significant casualties suffered by the Taliban. But the insurgents have been seeding the ground with bombs, pouring in new fighters and stepping up intimidation in preparation for a spring offensive.

The Marines say they hope their months of aggressive operations will help them counter the next onslaught.

The battle for control of Sangin looms large in the minds of U.S. commanders because the district is a narcotics hub that helps fund the Taliban and a crossroads for funneling weapons and fighters into Kandahar, the Taliban's spiritual heartland.

Sangin was the deadliest district for the coalition in Afghanistan last year, according to NATO. The British lost over 100 troops here in four years of fighting -- nearly one-third of their deaths in the war -- and when they handed Sangin over to the Marines in September, the Taliban effectively controlled almost all the district.

The Marine battalion currently in Sangin arrived in October and together with smaller units attached to it has waged over 500 firefights and sustained over 30 deaths, with another 175 wounded, many from homemade bombs hidden in fields and mud-walled compounds.

In November, when this reporter was last in the district, insurgents were repeatedly attacking the main base next to the district center, and even in the bazaar, considered the safest place in Sangin, Marines had to throw smoke grenades to thwart snipers.

The coalition responded by boosting Marine and Afghan force numbers by about 50 percent. The Marines in Sangin have also waged a fierce campaign of airstrikes, dropping at least 50 500-pound bombs, firing 30 Hellfire missiles and unleashing over 100 helicopter rocket and gun attacks.

"It has taken us killing hundreds of Taliban and suffering a lot of hard hits, but we literally go anywhere we want in the battle space now," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment currently in Sangin.

Also, the Afghan government has struck a deal with tribal elders in northern Sangin not to attack coalition troops, though there's no guarantee it will hold.

The Marines see signs that the Taliban are feeling the pressure. "Taliban leaders in Pakistan have called commanders back and chewed them out, saying 'Go back up there and be a man and get your jihad on,'" said Morris.

The test will come in the spring, when the weather warms and foliage returns to give the Taliban cover. Insurgent leaders are known to have told fighters in Sangin in late January to switch from gunbattles to seeding the ground with IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, and platoon leader Lt. Joe Patterson sees the results. He estimates the number of IEDs hidden in the alleyways and fields in his area have roughly doubled.

"We have traded the constant gun battles of the past with now finding multiple IEDs on every route we take," said Patterson, 31, from Owasso, Oklahoma.
The Marines have received reports of new insurgents coming into Sangin, and several new white Taliban flags have gone up in the district. The level of small-arms fire has also picked up.

"They are right now in their reconnaissance phase and are waiting for an opportunity to kick off their attacks," said Morris, 40, the battalion commander from Oceanside, California.

The British military, whose strategy in Sangin has been widely criticized, are likely to be watching closely. The arrival of the Marines raised concerns among some about the perception of the U.S. finishing a job the British couldn't handle.

The British strategy was to build a string of small patrol bases, but so many soldiers were needed to defend them that the insurgents with wide freedom of movement. The Marines immediately closed about half the 22 bases to free up troops for more aggressive patrolling. But they have since expanded outward again and now have about the same number of bases as the British had, though many of them are deeper in Taliban territory.

"It's a tough balance because if you just occupy bases, you can't do enough patrols," said company commander Capt. Matthew Peterson, 34, of Las Cruces, New Mexico. "But if you just patrol, you don't have constant overwatch."

The Marines said aggressive patrolling loosened the Taliban's grip and a battalion-size operation cleared the main road of IEDs, giving the force much more elbow room. Until then, said Morris, "if you owned a patrol base, you could perhaps influence positively and move around freely within 50 or 100 meters of where you were."

Soon it will be the Marines' turn to test whether their tactics have worked. "There is always some trepidation over whether we have pushed too far out, but we won't really know until we have experienced it and know what the enemy is capable of bringing to the fight," said Morris.

The Marines now have a couple hundred more troops than the outgoing 1,200-strong British force. The number of regular Afghan police has tripled to 350, and 200 elite police who had previously fought in the Taliban sanctuary of Marjah have been sent to Sangin.

The Marines have also spent nearly $3 million on development projects and have been rewarded with an increase in tips from the public about the location of IEDs and Taliban weapons caches.

But that support could weaken as more Taliban fighters move in. Afghans in one area who previously would chat with patrolling Marines now won't even look at them.

"The biggest challenge is that the Taliban won't quit," said Capt. Chris Esrey, a 33-year-old company commander from Havelock, North Carolina. "Right now I think they are on their heels, but we know they are resting and refitting and we are not done fighting."

Abbot spent 10 days embedded with U.S. forces in Sangin in November. He returned for another 10 days in February and March. Associated Press writer Mirwais Khan contributed to this report from Kandahar, Afghanistan.
Wounded Vets Take to Skiing
by Zachary Barr

In November, Marine Mark Litynski was in Afghanistan. One moment his body was sound. Then he stepped on an explosive.

Litynski: Both legs were severed about halfway up the shin, and then because of infection and what not they ended up where they are now.

Where they are now is mostly gone. Both legs amputated above the knee. He also lost the lower half of his left arm. Litynski’s rehabbing at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington D.C. He’s been there every single day since getting back. He hasn’t even returned home to Minnesota. Coming to Vail is his first trip outside of the hospital.

Knechtel: Step one. you are standing up on your own.

Geoff Knechtel is Litynski’s private ski instructor. Knechtel is in a wheelchair too. He uses the same kind of rig Litynski’s going to learn on.

Knechtel: Can you push forward towards me a bit, so we’re not on this hill.

The men sit in snug, bucket seats which ride a couple feet above the snow. Below the seat is a shock absorber and an aluminum frame -- and below that -- is a single ski.

Knechtel: Alright, step one conquered. Definitely. Are you tired yet?

Litynski: I haven’t done anything.

Knechtel: Why don’t we take five minutes.

The men lean on special ski poles to rest. They’re called outriggers. These poles have short skis on the ends to help with turning. Right now they’re being used like crutches, so one little slip-up and you’re going to crash.

Knechtel: first fall of the day!

Litynski: Getting started early.

Litynski’s helped up. A few minutes later he’s at the top of the beginner hill. His instructor gives some last minute advice.

Knechtel: When you’re looking down, you’re going to fall down. So your eyes are always going to be up. You’re always going to be looking at your destination. The bottom of the hill is your future.

Litynski: The same thing in therapy. the therapists always tell the guys don’t -- we have a tendency to look down because we’re concentrating on picking up one foot, and putting the other down. They always say keep your head up.
Litynski glides down the hill. He stays upright the whole time, and makes it to the bottom.

Knechtel: Alright how you feeling brother?

Litynski: Good except my arm is sweaty. And when my arm gets sweaty it kinda just wiggles around in the socket.

And that means Litynski can’t make his arm do what he wants it to do. At the bottom of the hill, his wife watches all of this. They’re newlyweds. This morning Heather anticipated this problem with Mark’s arm, so she put a lot of deodorant on it. It hasn’t worked.

Heather Litynski: If his socket was hanging on, he would be scouring these hills right now.

She hopes this trip will help her husband feel better about his future.

Heather Litynski: Help him transition and realize he’s still going to be able to do a lot of things. A little differently, but he’s still going to be able to do a lot of things.

But for today, Mark Litynski is focused on learning to ski. And he’s sticking with it. He manuevers his new body into position to ride up to the top of the hill again. Then he says:

Litynski: I wish I had my arm still. That’d be nice right now.

Immediately, his ski instructor says, “why wish for things you can’t have?”
Pendleton Marines root out Taliban "murder holes"

Troops take advantage of winter lull to destroy enemy defenses

Written by Gretel C. Kovach 3 p.m., March 5, 2011

With the Marines

U-T staff writer Gretel C. Kovach, who covers military affairs, and photographer Nelvin C. Cepeda are embedded with Camp Pendleton-based Marines in Helmand province, Afghanistan. About 10,000 troops from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force are serving in that stronghold of the Taliban.

Cpl. Sean Leahy speaks to one of the religious leaders before placing explosives at a nearby home to destroy what the Taliban have been using as a fighting position to ambush U.S. Marines during patrols. Leahy is 1st squad leader with 1st platoon, Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion 5th Marines. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

Sgt. Matthew Bland provides "support by fire" for an element of his Marine squad that advanced to destroy a known Taliban fighting position. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

U.S. Marines detain and question two Afghan men who were in the immediate area of an improvised explosive device found in Sangin. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

SANGIN, Afghanistan — A squad of Marines set out on a cold, drizzling afternoon this week for an important mission: “murder” the murder holes.

Taliban insurgents roust people from their homes in this battle-scarred corner of southwestern Afghanistan and commandeer their residences for fighting positions. They stash bombs in the fortresslike compounds where farming families live and tend their livestock; and they gouge holes through the thick mud walls to use as firing ports.

Cpl. Sean Leahy, a 23-year-old squad leader with 1st Platoon, Kilo Company, has been shot at many times from these murder holes since he deployed to Sangin this fall with Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. All the Marines and the Afghan soldiers they patrol with have.

The battalion had been locked in daily firefights since October, but the gunfire finally relented this winter. The Marines are taking advantage of the lull to destroy the enemy’s defenses, before the trees burst into leaf and provide cover for a potential Taliban spring offensive.

On this day, they plan to blow one of the insurgents’ prime firing positions away. “Getting rid of the murder holes, the fighting holes where they’ve been shooting at us for months, it takes that advantage away from them,” Leahy says.

First, they drop by the house of the mullah — the religious leader of the area — who lives next door. At least, they think he is the mullah. The man denies it. Whoever he is, after some encouragement from the Marines, he offers this tip: “There is talk about bombs in the tree line, but I don’t know…”

The Marines have found 10 homemade bombs along that two-block length of trees so far. The most recent ones were unearthed just a few days ago. “Tell us something we don’t know,” replies Lance Cpl. Travis Alley, 23, a Marine engineer who walks point, sweeping ahead of the patrol for explosives.
Leahy is similarly unimpressed. “Tell him: if he’s not working with us and there’s IEDs (improvised explosive devices) around here, then he’s obviously working with them,” he says, speaking through a translator. “If he runs into the Taliban again, tell them we’re looking for them. Tell them to man up, so we can fight them and kill them.”

The squad leader is fairly certain that the neighboring compound pocked with firing holes and surrounded by fallow fields is vacant. But he wants a “warm and fuzzy” confirmation before setting the explosives.

Would the man (who is not the mullah) accompany them to check that the home is empty before they blow a hole in the wall? “No? He doesn’t want to go over there?” Leahy asks, in mock surprise.

“He knows better,” says Sgt. Matthew Bland, a 24-year-old fire team leader on the squad.

The Afghan man’s reticence bolsters their suspicions. The empty compound is likely booby trapped with bombs meant to shred the Marines to pulp.

Bland and some of the other Marines climb onto the roof while Leahy leads a small team to the deserted compound.

In the distance Leahy can see a white Taliban flag flying from a tall pole, right where a Marine was blown up by a bomb. A second Marine who came to carry him out on a stretcher stepped on another bomb.

Both Marines lived. But the flag is the insurgents’ calling card. The site of it infuriates the Afghan translator. “Taliban flag, blow it up!” he says.

“Calm down,” Leahy says in a fatherly tone. They have other business to attend to.

When the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines deployed to Sangin this fall from Camp Pendleton, they landed in a war zone riddled with enemy fighting positions. The Taliban shot at them from anywhere and everywhere, from the fields of head-high corn to elaborate defilades fashioned from timbers.

The 3/5 Marines were engaged in something akin to traditional trench warfare. “You only had to travel 100 or 200 meters (outside the base) and you were in a firefight,” diving into canals and ditches, Leahy says.

Bland recalls how the insurgents would lay in wait for them, sleeping in the corn fields or the trees, and then pounce. “We’d take complex ambushes where literally all you could do was get down. You couldn’t return fire, it would be that much fire being rained down on us,” he says.

“We had to retake the ground every day. It was basically just a fistfight,” Bland says. The Taliban knew the terrain and how to use it to their advantage. “We had to learn.”

British troops served in Sangin for four years, suffering their worst casualty rate since World War II. An American unit, the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, took command of the area for a few weeks in September until the 3/5 Marines from Camp Pendleton finished moving in the next month.

Capt. Nickoli Johnson, the company commander overseeing this part of Sangin, says the Taliban tried to lure the Marines into belts of IEDs with machine gunfire. The idea was to bloody them and pin them down at their bases.

“Their ultimate goal was to isolate the Marines like they had the British,” Johnson says. “But the Marines penetrated their defenses every day. They found out where they were sleeping. They found them, and they chased them.”

Slowly they pushed the Taliban back. They cut their supply routes, unearthed their weapons caches and made inroads with the locals, who started pointing out the bombs.

Five months into their tour, a third of Kilo Company’s 150 or so Marines have been wounded or killed. The loss makes the Marines hunt the enemy more aggressively, Bland says. “Everyone wants to stop the Taliban. Every inch you give them could mean another Marines’ legs, or another Marines’ life.”

In early December, Bland and two squads of Marines went on a hunch to poke around an area the Taliban seemed to be protecting. They fought their way through enemy gunfire and into what turned out to be an open-air ammunition depot.
The Marines spent hours unearthing military grade ordnance, guns, and bomb-making materials. The grounds were littered with brass casings, and the trees were fixed with firing perches built from corn stalks and wood.

A little later, Bland spotted a black-clad man running out of a nearby building. He was carrying a PKM machine gun. “We chased him down. We said, screw the IEDs,” Bland recalls.

The man darted for a stand of tall marsh grass, but the Marines shot him dead. The machine gun he had tried to ferret away was loaded, with a round in the firing chamber and part of its ammunition belt expended, Bland says.

“We killed the enemy, we took the ground, and we found a big cache that is going to save a lot of Marines’ lives. And we took no casualties,” Bland says. “It was a good day.”

Other days have not been so good for the Marines, so Bland wants the team in the vacant compound to be extra cautious. After they blow the lock off the door, Bland radios over to say: “Hey man, be real careful in that compound. I don’t like you guys in there.”

“Yeah, good to go,” Leahy says.

Leahy and Bland were roommates back at Camp Pendleton. Leahy had served in Iraq with the same battalion in 2008. He was preparing to leave the Corps to study law when he heard his unit was heading to Afghanistan. He re-enlisted instead.

Bland was promoted to sergeant during this tour because of meritorious performance in combat, so he outranks Leahy. In the field, the two friends run the squad together.

“Being in combat, you have different bonds than you would anywhere else. Your life is on the line, and you have to count on your buddy next to you,” Bland says.

On his helmet Bland has written “I greet death with a smile” and drawn a smiley face. But the IEDs are serious business. His friend Leahy became first squad’s leader after another Marine lost a leg in an explosion. An engineer attached to their squad was killed by another.

Their squad alone has found about 45 homemade bombs in less than five months in Sangin. Bland has stepped right next to pressure plates that trigger the explosives, and right on top of the charges.

Bland and the other Marines are sitting on the roof waiting for the countdown to the detonation when, without warning, the ground rumbles with the force of a tremendous blast. The compound where Leahy and the others were working is enveloped in a mushroom cloud.

Bland stares at it a moment as the dust blows off the mud walls like smoke. Then he presses his radio to his mouth. “One bravo one bravo, hot dog!” he says. “One bravo one bravo, hot dog!”

The radio is silent. “Leahy, Leahy! F*!” he barks into the radio, dropping the call signs. But there is no response.

Bland sprints across the roof, yelling for the hospital corpsman: “Let’s go, I don’t know what happened!”

On their way in, the Marines had picked their way carefully through the fields where clumps of men were digging sickles into the sodden earth, planting poppy. Now the Afghan translator closest to the compound books it toward the missing Marines, heedless of the deadly crop of bombs also sown into the ground.

An agonizing few moments later, a Marine finally hollers in the distance from Leahy’s position. Bland checks his radio and realizes what happened — it had changed stations on him, cutting off communication with the maneuver team.

“Dude, that scared the s* out of me! I’m not going to lie,” Bland confesses when he links up with Leahy again. “When there was no response, I thought you were all dead.”

A large gap in the wall marks the spot where the six-inch firing port and a stick positioned to prop up a machine gun had been. When the dust settles, the Marines are surprised to find additional craters — the shock of the blasts set off two hidden bombs they hadn’t found on the way in.

They had walked right by them. Luckily they stepped carefully down the safe path Alley swept for bombs.

The explosives they missed were relatively small, Bland says: “Enough to take a leg off … and a half.” They had seen worse this tour, far worse.
Marine's dad reads between lines

By Matthew Hansen
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Rick Wimer of West Point, Neb., in his office with a photo of Cpl. Ross Wimer. The dollar he holds is a reference to a dollar coin his son was given by Rick's father-in-law — a family military tradition.

WEST POINT, Neb. — Rick Wimer pulls the tattered, dirty-white envelope out of the mailbox on a frigid winter Friday. His hands start to shake. It isn't the cold. Wimer is an old Marine, a volunteer EMT in West Point, a man who has seen things.

But the return address on this letter says Afghanistan, and the handwriting on the front is Cpl. Ross Wimer's, and even an old Marine gets jittery when his second-born son sends his first letter home from the Sangin district of Helmand province — maybe the most dangerous speck of land in the entire Afghan war.

Rick pries open the envelope, careful not to rip it. He shakes out the four-page letter and speed-reads the first paragraph, standing next to his mailbox on Centennial Road.

The words suck the air out of his lungs.

“So I thought I would start the letter writing thing today,” Marine Cpl. Ross Wimer writes. “It is a sad day for 1st Platoon as we have lost a good friend once again. ... He was shot in the head by a sniper. His wife has just given birth to a child. I am not sure if it was a boy or a girl.”

There are many places in Afghanistan where the young men and women of the U.S. military live on bases with running water and Internet access and can assure their loved ones that they sleep safely at night.

Sangin, Afghanistan, is not one of those places.

***

Cpl. Ross Wimer reached the outskirts of the southern Afghan town in October, one of about 1,000 Marines in the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment taking over a security mission long held by the British.

Since then he has lived for long stretches in a tiny outpost with sandbags for walls and a tarp for a roof.

He cannot e-mail because there are no computers, or Internet connections, or reliable electricity. He can call home on a satellite phone once or twice a month, and the calls frequently get cut off. Back in West Point, when Rick and Jayne Wimer's son calls, they have learned to tell him right away that they love him, before the line goes dead.

The young Marine hasn't showered since October.

He lives in the dirt and sleeps under the stars and never gets more than two steps from his M-32, a grenade launcher that weighs 15 pounds and can fire off six 40 mm shells in three seconds.

The enemy has shot at 1st Platoon practically every day since the 22-year-old from West Point showed up in Sangin. And the gunfire isn't the scary part.

The scary part are the homemade bombs, the IEDs that the Taliban plant on the roads and on the paths, in the fields and in the canals. The Marines have found nearly 500 IEDs buried around Sangin.

When they go on a mission, they walk “ranger style” — each man trying to walk in the footsteps of the man in front of him, worried that a stray step could be his last. 
It is hard to describe in a letter what this feels like, but Ross Wimer tries. His dad is an old Marine. His dad will understand.

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Rick Wimer carries the letter into his living room so he can get in out of the January cold and concentrate.

He rereads the first paragraph. He reads the whole first page. He does something he never does. He begins to cry.

“He was a good friend. ... I will be sure not to dwell. His fate has been determined and I know thinking about it will be bad for my mental health in a combat zone. I have no choice but to brush it off and stay positive. Negative emotions can be a poison in the Platoon. On days like these too many Marines feel as if they are waiting in line for their turn.”

Rick Wimer wipes his eyes and flips to the second page of the letter, which is dated Dec. 6. His son has made a list of names, ranks and dates.

The first is a corporal. He stepped on an IED on Oct. 15 — the week the Marines reached Sangin. “Lost his left leg and is fighting to keep his right.”

The second is a sergeant who stepped on an IED on Oct. 16. “KIA.”

The list goes on, recounting IED blasts that cost one Marine his arm and another Marine both his legs and another his left leg and left eye.

The platoon commander — the son of a three-star general — took a step into the shallow water of a canal Nov. 9. “KIA — stepped on an IED.”

Rick Wimer already knows about most of these casualties — generals and experts have written about the inordinate sacrifice borne by the Marine regiment in Sangin. Sometimes he sits in his insurance office and reads their words in military journals and magazines.

These articles say the Marines are going after the insurgents, day after day after day, in a way the British never did. They say the insurgents are desperately fighting back with everything they have, afraid to lose Sangin, their last foothold in Helmand province, and afraid to lose a main road the Taliban have long used to transport weapons and drugs.

The writers hint that the 1,000 men in the regiment are battling their way right into U.S. Marine history.

The regiment has patrolled Sangin for nearly five months. Twenty-five Marines have died. More than 150 have been wounded; many of the wounded have lost limbs.

“I don't think there's ever been a battalion in the Marine Corps at any time — in World War II, the Korean conflict, Vietnam — that's pulled a tougher mission than what 3/5 has right now,” Gen. Richard Mills, commander of U.S. and international forces in southwestern Afghanistan, told reporters in November.

Rick Wimer knows all this, but still he rereads his son's page-long list slowly. These are not just names and dates, a chronology of death in Sangin. These are his son's friends.

The lance corporal started with 33 men in his platoon.

“So with the (latest) death ... that brings our Platoon's total to 12 in just 2 months. 3 KIA. 9 WIA.”

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Rick Wimer finishes the list, still standing in his living room, still unwilling to take the time to sit down. He flips to the third page, then the fourth. For the first time, he smiles. The latter half of the letter focuses on care packages, an issue near and dear to this father's heart.

Truth is, Rick Wimer considers himself pretty much the best care-package sender in Nebraska, and quite possibly the world.

He sent his first care package in September, before his son had even reached Sangin.

He sent 16 boxes of stuff in one day early on — all 16 boxes on a day the platoon was moving to another outpost.

He has sent peaches, pears and dill pickles. He has sent eyedrops, cough drops and cold medicine.
He has sent shoelaces. He has sent mousetraps. He has sent old copies of The World-Herald so his son can keep track of the news back home.

He found a slingshot in a drawer at home. That went into a box bound for Afghanistan. He found a telescoping mirror. That went into a box, too.

“I don't know what the heck he's going to use that for,” he admits.

He has kept track of every care package, recording the contents and the weight in a notebook. So far he has sent 134 boxes and 27 bubble envelopes. The packages have weighed a total of 2,239.87 pounds.

He plans to keep sending stuff until someone tells him to stop.

So that's why he is smiling — his son writes that he doesn't want the packages to stop. He writes that he likes the seasonings that spice up his MREs, those bland, ready-to-eat military meals. He wants more magazines, and he'd love a cheap battery-powered razor.

He's good on blankets and notepads and pens. Sometimes he gives those to the Afghan kids in Sangin, and they crowd around him and happily accept the items that his father has carefully packed.

“My squad leader called dad a care package genius so you guys are doing good.”

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Rick Wimer is reaching the letter's end now, and his thoughts drift to his son's homecoming, as they do almost every day.

He and another West Point man whose son is a Marine in Sangin go to lunch at JD's Bar and Grill sometimes and try to guess what day their sons will reach their base back in California.

It won't be before Easter on April 24, Rick Wimer thinks one minute. But maybe they will get lucky. Maybe it will be early April.

He worries how his son will readjust to Nebraska life, how he will handle going from the battlefields of Sangin to a college classroom this fall.

But the end of the letter makes him worry less: The young Marine has included a couple of jokes, retaining that sense of humor his father thinks will be invaluable when he comes home.

“How much wood could a wood chuck chuck if a wood chuck would Chuck Norris? Answer: All of it.”

In West Point, on a cold winter Friday, Rick Wimer finishes the letter, refolds it and carefully places it back into its tattered envelope.

Soon he will take it to the office, copy and scan it, share it with co-workers and friends and relatives. And soon this letter, forwarded and forwarded again, will force those who read it to feel the fury and the bravery and the tragedy of Sangin, Afghanistan.

But Rick Wimer isn't thinking about any of that, not yet. He's savoring the letter's final line, the words that make an old Marine proud.

“That's it! Semper fi. Love ya'll.”
Marine from same town has close brush with bomb

By Matthew Hansen
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER
WEST POINT, Neb. — Cpl. Ross Wimer isn’t the only Marine from this small northeast Nebraska town currently deployed to dangerous Sangin, Afghanistan.

Lance Cpl. Timothy Wagner, a 20-year-old from West Point, is stationed with Kilo Company several miles north of Wimer’s Lima Company, according to Wagner’s father, Kim Wagner.

The action Kilo Company is seeing is every bit as fierce as anywhere else around Sangin, according to multiple news reports.

“I think (Tim’s) attitude is that ‘I’m a Marine. This is what I do,’” Kim Wagner said. “But that doesn’t change the fact that this is hard, really hard.”

During a recent phone conversation, Timothy Wagner told his parents that a fellow Marine was keeping track of the rounds he fired. After four months he had fired an average 200 rounds per day.

During another conversation, Wagner told his parents he had stepped just inches from an improvised explosive device, which was triggered by the Marine marching behind him. Luckily, that roadside bomb was a dud.

Wagner was also nearby when another Marine slipped down an embankment and landed on a bomb buried in the dirt.

The resulting explosion could be heard for miles, according to news reports.

Timothy Wagner helped carry the wounded man to a helicopter. He is now at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, adjusting to life as a triple amputee.

Kim Wagner said he’s worried about how well his son will readjust to life back in the United States. He’s glad the Marines are planning a new post-deployment care program, in which dozens of mental health professionals will be embedded with the regiment when it reaches Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan and then Camp Pendleton in California.

Marine officials have said it will be the most comprehensive mental health program of its kind in military history.

“It is scary,” Kim Wagner said. “After seeing what he’s seen, I couldn’t tell you how (Tim) is going to be.”

Wagner completed Marine boot camp with Ross Wimer’s younger brother, Brandt, who now is in Officer Candidate School in Virginia. Wagner and Ross Wimer haven’t seen each other since they reached Sangin, their fathers say.

The fighting is so heavy that a patrol might move only several hundred yards from the company’s outpost.

Both fathers hope their sons will be able to reconnect, and lean on each another, when they come home to West Point.

For now, Kim Wagner and Rick Wimer regularly meet for lunch to offer each other support.

“People don’t necessarily have a clue what’s happening” in Sangin, Rick Wimer said. “We get up every day, and this is what we think about. This is real.”
SANGIN, Afghanistan — The Marine battalion fighting out of this southern Afghanistan district has suffered more losses than any other in the history of the decade-long Afghan war.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates visited Sangin on Tuesday to see what gains had come from the deaths of 29 Marines here over the past five months.

“Every day, I monitor how you are doing,” he told the Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment in Sangin. “And every day you return to your [base] without a loss, I say a little prayer. I say a prayer on the other days as well.”

The Pentagon chief was accompanied on the trip by Marine Lt. Gen. John F. Kelly, the father of 2nd Lt. Robert M. Kelly, 29, who was killed in Sangin in November while leading a platoon of Marines. The general met briefly and privately with Marines from his son’s platoon, who presented him with a picture of Robert, taken a few hours before he was killed and signed by all of the Marines in his unit. Kelly was recently nominated to be Gates’s senior military assistant.

The message Gates received from the Marines in Sangin, who since arriving in October have encountered nearly 1,000 bombs buried in roads and trails, was largely positive. About 1,000 Marines are in an infantry battalion.

Although Sangin remains one of the most violent districts in Afghanistan, attacks in the area have decreased sharply as Marines have fanned out into the lush green farmland that borders the river that runs through the district. Almost 90 percent of the unit’s deaths took place during the Marines’ first three months here, Gates said.

The narrative Gates encountered in Sangin — of heavy violence last summer and fall followed by a steeper-than-expected drop in attacks during the winter — largely matched the story he heard throughout the country during his two days of travel.

“The closer you get to this fight, the better it looks,” he said at his last stop, in Kandahar province’s Arghandab Valley.

But the defense secretary and other U.S. commanders cautioned that violence in Afghanistan typically drops during the winter and that it was too early to tell how much of a setback U.S. and Afghan forces had dealt the Taliban.

“The fight this spring and summer is going to be very tough,” Gates said. “The Taliban will try to take back much of what they have lost, and that in many respects will be the acid test.”

The level of violence this spring will help determine how many troops the United States pulls out in July, when the drawdown is expected to begin.

Sangin district is critical to the Taliban because its drug-processing labs and poppy crops, which are used to produce opium, account for about 50 percent of the Taliban’s drug profits, said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, who commands the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine regiment in Sangin.

Morris echoed Gates in saying he expects that attacks in Sangin will surge this spring as mid-level Taliban leaders return from Pakistan and the foliage on the trees offers front-line fighters better cover from U.S. guns.

The Taliban, however, will be returning to a district with a much larger U.S. and Afghan military presence. In the past, largely unmanned British forces in the area had focused mostly on protecting their bases and ensuring that the main road through the district remained open. The Marines, bolstered
by a larger Afghan army presence, said they have pushed off the main road into the farmland and villages that border the highway.

Even as they took heavy losses, the Marines killed hundreds of Taliban fighters, Morris said. Despite those losses, the Taliban remains a lethal force in Sangin, so much so that the Afghan district governor’s office isn’t out in Sangin but rather behind the gates of the main U.S.-Afghan military base here.

But U.S. commanders are betting that it will be much harder for the Taliban to find sanctuaries this spring than in past years. After he met with Marines in Sangin, Gates visited with an Afghan police unit in Arghandab district, outside Kandahar city. The police are part of a relatively new initiative in which special operations forces train villagers to be police in more remote districts where the U.S. and Afghan governments cannot maintain a significant presence.

“The places the Taliban has traditionally used as support bases don’t look the same,” Lt. Gen. David M. Rodriguez, the second-highest-ranking U.S. commander in Afghanistan, told reporters. “We think they’ll be returning this spring to a significantly different environment than when they left last year.”

Gates Visits Marines in Eastern Afghanistan
By Karen Parrish
American Forces Press Service

FORWARD OPERATING BASE SABIT QADAM, Afghanistan, March 8, 2011 – Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates today visited with Marines fighting here in what the secretary said was one of the most dangerous places in the world before they arrived.

On the second day of his 13th trip to Afghanistan as defense secretary, Gates flew to Sangin district in eastern Helmand province for his visit here at a base formerly known as Forward Operating Base Jackson.

The base and its surrounding outposts are home to Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, whose unit symbol and call sign is “Dark Horse.”

“It’s an honor to be here in Dark Horse country and to see for myself the dramatic turnaround that you all have brought about here in Sangin,” Gates said. “Before you arrived here, the Taliban were dug in deep, and as the British before you can attest, this district was one of the most dangerous — not just in Afghanistan, but maybe in the whole world.”

The secretary said in the five months since the Marines arrived, they’ve killed, captured or driven away most of the Taliban who used to call Sangin home.

“In doing so, you’ve linked northern Helmand, Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces, a major strategic breakthrough,” he said.

Their success has come at a heavy price, Gates said.

“Since October, the 3/5 has suffered the heaviest losses of any battalion in this 10-year-long war,” he said. “Every day I monitor how you’re doing, and every day you return to your [base] without a loss, I say a little prayer. I say a prayer on the other days, as well.”
Defense officials say 29 Marines in the battalion have been killed, and 150 others have been wounded.

The battalion and its partnered Afghan forces have written, in sweat and blood, a new chapter in the Marine Corps’ roll of honor, the secretary said.

“I visit your wounded brothers at Bethesda,” the secretary said, referring to the National Naval Medical Center in Maryland. “I write the condolence letters to the families of your fallen.”

Gates said he feels their hardship and their sacrifice, and those of their families.

“I also relish your victories, take pride in your achievements, and take satisfaction as you strike fear into the heart of the Taliban,” he added.

During the question-and-answer period the secretary conducts during troop visits, a Marine captain stepped forward to thank Gates for increasing the use of surveillance balloons and other intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance equipment at the battalion’s outposts.

The surveillance capability allows him to track his troops on mission, to observe patterns of behavior among the local population, and to identify insurgent activity, the captain said.

“That balloon up above my forward operating base has been a game-changer for me,” the captain told the secretary.

“We’ve gone from about a dozen of those aerostats five or six months ago to … 60 or 65 throughout the country,” Gates replied. “I want to put a bunch more in. I’m just waiting on the Congress to reprogram the money so I can do it.”

Gates, dressed in khaki pants, a blue and white striped shirt and a baseball cap emblazoned, “Maneuver Center, Fort Benning,” gave a commemorative coin and had a photo taken with every troop who’d gathered to see him.

Marines paced toward him one by one, many in muddy boots and all carrying what appeared to be well-broken-in weapons.

The secretary shook each one’s hand, passing a coin with the handshake, then placed his other hand on each one’s shoulder as they turned to face the camera. All got a pat on the shoulder from the secretary as they stepped away.

Gates ended his visit with a request to the troops.

“You couldn’t be here if it weren’t for the support of your families back home,” he said. “So I hope that the next time you’re in contact with them, that you will tell them how much I, personally, thank them for the contribution they make to the contribution you make.

“You couldn’t do this without them, and we couldn’t do this without you,” Gates said.
In Afghanistan, Defense secretary praises Camp Pendleton Marines for combat success

March 8, 2011 | 10:20 am

In a visit to the front lines of Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates praised the Marines from Camp Pendleton for winning a "major strategic breakthrough" in the fight with the Taliban.

Gates' comments to the Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment came Tuesday as he visited the Sangin district of Helmand province. Twenty-four Marines from the Camp Pendleton-based battalion, called the Dark Horse, have been killed in combat and more than 150 have been wounded.

"It's an honor to be here in Dark Horse country and to see for myself the dramatic turnaround that you all have brought about here in Sangin," Gates said.

"Before you arrived here, the Taliban were dug in deep, and as the British before you can attest, this district was one of the most dangerous [places] not just in Afghanistan, but maybe in the whole world," he said.

The Three-Five has "suffered the heaviest losses of any battalion in this 10-year-long war. Everyday I monitor how you're doing, and every day you return to your [base] without a loss, I say a little prayer," Gates said.

The battalion is slated to return home in April, to be replaced in Sangin by the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, also from Camp Pendleton.

While surviving Taliban fighters appear to have fled or gone into hiding after weeks of daily fighting, Marine brass expect the insurgents to launch a counteroffensive in early spring in an attempt to retake control of Sangin.

Along with the 24 Marines from the battalion, another six Marines from battalions assigned to assist the Three-Five have also been killed in the Sangin mission since late September.

-- Tony Perry in San Diego

Photo: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates meeting with Camp Pendleton Marines in the Sangin district of Afghanistan. Credit: Department of Defense
Insurgents who were driven out of the Taliban stronghold of Sangin in southern Afghanistan are flowing back in as winter lifts, threatening fragile gains achieved by U.S. Marines over the last five months, according to American commanders.

The return of midlevel Taliban leaders, including some believed to have taken refuge in Pakistan, raises concerns that violence is likely to surge in this strategically located district in northeastern Helmand Province, long used by the Taliban as a base of operations.

"We're starting to see them come back because the Taliban leadership is furious that it lost so much ground and they are actively trying to reassert their control," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the Marine battalion in the area, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

Sangin is shaping up as a key test of whether the security gains seen in Helmand and neighboring Kandahar provinces since the influx of tens of thousands of additional U.S. troops will prove lasting — or the if Taliban will reclaim some of the areas now held by U.S. and Afghan forces in the two provinces.

The importance that the U.S. attaches to Sangin was on display Tuesday, when Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates visited the Marine base there for a briefing from Morris and to meet with troops.

"The gains are fragile and reversible," Gates later told reporters, referring to Sangin and other areas of the south where security has improved in recent months. "If we can sustain the gains we've made and expand them further, I think it'll be a powerful message."

More fighting is expected in Sangin, where 29 Marines have been killed and another 175 wounded since October, the highest casualty rates for a five-month period of any battalion during the 10-year Afghan conflict.

"Your success obviously has come at an extraordinary price," he told a group of Marines at Forward Operating Base Jackson. "Our nation owes you an incredible debt."

Even as Gates was recognizing the toll on the military, Afghan President Hamid Karzai seemed to raise questions about how much faith he puts in the U.S.-led strategy for quelling the insurgency.

In a speech in Kabul, he renewed calls for the phasing out of so-called provincial reconstruction teams — civilian-military groups that focus on development projects. He also suggested, as he has
previously, that there was no long-term military solution to the Afghan conflict.

"We are grateful to the international community," he said. "But they haven't brought us peace."

Such outbursts are common for Karzai and are almost always ignored by U.S. officials, who seem to have decided that there is little they can do to alter Karzai's penchant for criticizing his allies.

Along with an influx of insurgents, a peace deal between U.S. forces with the area's largest tribe, the Alikozai, is showing signs of fraying, deepening concerns that attacks will intensify, especially in the Upper Sangin Valley.

The tribe's elders promised two months ago to stop attacks on coalition forces in return for aid to build schools, clinics and other projects.

But attacks against Marines have continued, Morris has said.

Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, the deputy commander in Afghanistan, told reporters Tuesday that, having been driven out of Sangin and other strongholds in Helmand, Taliban leaders are less able to attack U.S. forces with hidden bombs. Taliban fighters are expected to intensify a campaign of assassination and intimidation against Afghans who cooperate with the Americans, he said.

"This is no longer their home field," he said, referring to Sangin. "They don't own it the way they used to, and they're going to change the way they come after us."
Local Marines help Afghan governor do his job
With security improved, Sangin leader can venture out from military compound

Written by Gretel C. Kovach
6 p.m., March 9, 2011
Village elders at a shura late last month, which was attended by Marines from Camp Pendleton, the Afghan National Army and the Sangin district governor. — Nelvin C. Cepeda
With the Marines

U-T staff writer Gretel C. Kovach, who covers military affairs, and photographer Nelvin C. Cepeda are embedded with Camp Pendleton-based Marines in Helmand province, Afghanistan. About 10,000 troops from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force are serving in that stronghold of the Taliban.

SANGIN, Afghanistan — Mohammad Sharif is the governor of this picturesque river valley in the heartland of the Taliban insurgency and Afghanistan’s killing fields of opium poppy. Until quite recently, however, he couldn’t see much of it. The threat of assassination and war zone violence made it too dangerous for him to travel his district to meet his constituents face to face, or even spend much time at his government offices in the Sangin town center.

Ten months after he took the job, vacancies on the district governor’s staff remained unfilled for want of anyone bold enough to serve in an area so tightly gripped by the militants. The concerns were understandable. In 2007, shortly after British troops spearheaded a NATO offensive to secure Helmand province, the Taliban hanged a 15-year-old boy from an electricity pole in Sangin. He had been accused of spying for foreign troops because of nothing more than a five-dollar bill in his pocket. After the execution, the insurgents left it stuffed in his mouth. He was innocent of the charge, local officials said at the time.

The current Sangin governor knows what the militants would do to him if they could. So Sharif has been forced to live and work on a forward operating base, which was established by the British and is run now by U.S. and Afghan security forces.

“Before the Marines came here, I was in a compound,” Sharif said. “I couldn’t go anywhere else. I was like a prisoner.”

But a lot has changed in Sangin since the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment from Camp Pendleton moved into the area last fall, he added. When insurgent attacks died down this winter, Sharif finally was able to fill a dozen civil service vacancies. Late last month, he traveled to the north of his small district, leaving the more secure center for the first time to meet the people he is meant to govern on their home turf. Last week he followed that up with a shura in the south of the district, when a council of elders agreed to represent the community and vet battle damage claims paid by the Marines.

The shura meeting with north Sangin elders late last month was merely a half-step toward peace — it is still so dangerous that it had to be held on a military base. But the Marines considered the gathering to be a watershed event in the development of the Afghan government and its ability to engage and serve its people.
“We are expanding the influence of GIROA (the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) up into a place it’s never been before,” said Capt. Nickoli Johnson, the company commander overseeing northern Sangin for the 3/5. “This is the first time he has been able to get up here. Before it was so kinetic, even military personnel had a hard time getting out of the bases.”

The Sangin governor, an elderly former schoolteacher in a gray turban and long white beard, spoke first at the shura, addressing about 80 men from north Sangin sitting cross-legged before him on woven plastic mats. They were surrounded by U.S. Marines, Afghan soldiers in black berets, policemen, and western reconstruction officials.

At the start of his nearly hourlong talk, the governor’s voice was subdued, almost feeble. But he seemed to gather strength and passion with every word. Sharif gestured to the heavens and to the audience. He hectored and cajoled and repeatedly brought his hands together in a sign of unity.

“Planting poppy is haram,” he said, reminding his pious countrymen that the narcotic drug trade is an affront to Islam.

Provincial officials have been encouraging farmers along the Helmand River Valley in Sangin and surrounding communities to switch to wheat and pomegranate crops. Religious concerns aside, the Taliban draw much of their funding from taxing the poppy growers who supply the raw product for much of the world’s opium and heroin.

After the district governor’s pitch, the Afghan Army commander for the area, Lt. Col. Najrabi Wadoo, repeated the anti-poppy harangue and said: “If the leaders of the Taliban are so righteous and brave, why do they stay in Pakistan and hire your sons to fight us?”

Insulting the Taliban guerrillas is considered good sport for both U.S. and Afghan commanders here. They like to speak of the “cowards” and “criminals” and watch the crowd to see who scowls. At this gathering, the Afghan police chief, Lt. Col. Ghullie Khan, got a big laugh from the men of this patriarchal society when he said, “The Taliban hide like women. When they see the Afghan army and police coming, they put on the burqa!”

The last to speak that day was Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the 3/5. “We came here as guests of your government to try and help the Afghan people from the enemies that try to break you apart and tear you down,” he said.

The Pashtun tribes of southern and eastern Afghanistan live by a code of conduct that requires them to protect their guests to the death. Osama bin Laden was the most famous beneficiary in recent times of this ancient writ of hospitality, when he used Afghanistan as a base to plot the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Marine battle commander invoked those same tenets when he told the Sangin elders that he and his troops were invited to their river valley flanked by jagged snow-capped peaks. To help, not to conquer.

The international community donated many millions of dollars to develop Afghanistan; Sangin can have new schools, roads and clinics too, if only the attacks would stop, Morris said. “Even though we have to fight here to defend ourselves, and to drive the criminals and the insurgents out of Sangin district and out of Afghanistan, we would much rather extend our hand in friendship and bring the development that is available to you, if the security situation allows it.”

It is up to them to decide: “Go back to your villages, talk to your people, and ask them what they want. Do they want progress, do they want education, do they want health? Do they want a future? Or do they want to continue to fight and continue to have all these things drained away from your fertile land and go down to people in Pakistan who don’t care about you?” he asked.

“If the insurgents want to fight, we are very good at fighting, and we will fight until we leave this place,” the Marine commander said, speaking calmly. “But this is not what we want to do.”
U.S. seeks surge success from lethal Afghan outpost

Wed, Mar 9 2011
By Missy Ryan

SANGIN, Afghanistan (Reuters) - Five months ago, when U.S. Marines took over this sandbagged outpost in Sangin, deep in southern Afghanistan's Taliban country, they were pounded by insurgent fire every time they stepped foot off base.

Since Colonel Jason Morris's Marines replaced British soldiers at Forward Operating Base Sabit Qadam last fall, 29 of his men from the Marine 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, have been killed.

Another 175 have been wounded, giving the unit the dubious record of suffering the most casualties in the Afghan war.

"This was just an island in a sea of insurgency for a long time," Morris said of the tiny outpost, flanked by poppy farms in the north of Helmand province.

The region promises to be a key battleground as foreign forces brace for an expected Taliban counter-attack this spring.

"Sangin is crucial because it is the last major stronghold of the Taliban in Helmand and is the final obstacle to routing the Taliban in their southern stronghold," said Jeff Dressler, a Marines expert at the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War.

U.S. commanders are now hoping that Sangin, like Marjah to the southwest, will become a model for what they say President Barack Obama's surge of 30,000 troops has done to weaken the Taliban almost ten years into the war.

U.S. commanders in Sangin say they have killed or captured about 500 insurgents in the last five months. The Taliban have also been deprived, they say, of materials used to make roadside bombs, and locals are feeding U.S. forces more tips.

They have pushed out into areas where British and Afghan forces did not go, far from the main highway bisecting Sangin. They have put surveillance balloons in the sky that can help them snare insurgents.

"The closer you are to this fight the better it looks," said U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who toured parts of southern Afghanistan, including Sangin, on Tuesday as he assesses how many troops to pull from Afghanistan under a drawdown due to begin in July.

TRANSLIT ROUTE FOR DRUGS

Yet it remains to be seen whether foreign troops can fend off the Taliban this spring in an area that remains so dangerous that the top district official lives alongside Marines on the U.S. base, and only ventures into town with armed protection.

Bloodshed remains widespread in the south, where government is still weak, the economy is depressed and serious questions remain about whether local forces can protect ordinary Afghans once NATO troops go home.

The insurgency, meanwhile, has spread to previously peaceful areas of the north and west.

Even Gates, who called improving security in Sangin "a major strategic breakthrough," is uncertain about the area's future.

Military commanders hope such a breakthrough, if it can be crystallized, will allay impatience in the U.S. Congress at the state of the war and buy the administration more time as Afghan forces inch closer to being able to take over security.

Sangin's location, along a dry river valley, is an important transit route for weapons, drugs and militants crossing into neighboring Kandahar. At one point, Morris said, half of the illicit funds going to senior Taliban leaders across the border in Quetta, Pakistan, came through the Sangin area.

Roadside bombs remain the primary threat in the area, where some 150 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have detonated since the U.S. Marines arrived. Another 750 have been found.

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Morris said there were already indications the Taliban were moving bomb-making materials back into Sangin and planning a counter-attack when "the leaves were back on the trees."

"Fighting this spring will be intense as Marines push out from their already secure areas and the Taliban try to keep hold of their remaining areas of refuge," Dressler said.

The biggest question, however, is the sustainability of such gains once foreign forces eventually withdraw from southern Afghanistan, where local officials remain under attack from militants and poverty is deep and enduring despite years of aid work.

U.S. officials say the Taliban is certain to target Afghans supporting the government or foreign forces -- another weapon in their bid to reclaim Helmand.

Lisa Curtis, an analyst at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, cautioned against rushing for the exit.

"The U.S. military strategy in Afghanistan is just beginning to pay dividends and it would be a mistake to pull back troops until it is clearer the gains are more solid and sustainable," she said.
Taliban fighters moving back into former Afghanistan stronghold

The return of Taliban leaders who had been driven from Sangin in southern Afghanistan raises concern that fragile security gains achieved by U.S. Marines could be reversed.

March 09, 2011 | By David S. Cloud and Laura King, Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Sangin and Kabul, Afghanistan — Insurgents who were driven out of the Taliban stronghold of Sangin in southern Afghanistan are flowing back in as winter lifts, threatening fragile gains achieved by U.S. Marines over the last five months, according to American commanders.

The return of midlevel Taliban leaders, including some believed to have taken refuge in Pakistan, raises concern that violence is likely to surge in this strategically located district in northeastern Helmand province, long used by the Taliban as a base of operations.

"We're starting to see them come back because the Taliban leadership is furious that it lost so much ground and they are actively trying to reassert their control," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the Marine battalion in the area, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

Sangin is shaping up as a key test of whether the security gains seen in Helmand and neighboring Kandahar province since the influx of tens of thousands of additional U.S. troops will prove lasting, or whether the Taliban will reclaim some of the areas held by U.S. and Afghan forces in the two provinces.

The importance that the United States attaches to Sangin was on display Tuesday, when Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates visited the Marine base there for a briefing from Morris and to meet with troops.

"The gains are fragile and reversible," Gates later told reporters, referring to Sangin and other areas of the south where security has improved in recent months. "If we can sustain the gains we've made and expand them further, I think it'll be a powerful message."

More fighting is expected in Sangin, where 29 Marines have been killed and 175 wounded since October, the highest casualty rates for a five-month period of any battalion during the 10-year Afghan conflict.

"Your success obviously has come at an extraordinary price," Gates told a group of Marines at Forward Operating Base Jackson. "Our nation owes you an incredible debt."

Even as Gates was recognizing the toll on the military, Afghan President Hamid Karzai seemed to raise questions about how much faith he puts in the U.S.-led strategy for quelling the insurgency.

In a speech in Kabul, he renewed a call for the phasing out of so-called provincial reconstruction teams: civilian-military groups that focus on development projects. He also suggested, as he has previously, that there was no long-term military solution to the Afghan conflict.

"We are grateful to the international community," he said. "But they haven't brought us peace."

Such outbursts are common for Karzai and are almost always ignored by U.S. officials, who seem to have decided that there is little they can do to alter Karzai's penchant for criticizing his allies.

Along with an influx of insurgents, a peace deal between U.S. forces with the area's largest tribe, the Alikozai, is showing signs of fraying, deepening concern that attacks will intensify, especially in the Upper Sangin Valley.

The tribe's elders promised two months ago to stop attacks on coalition forces in return for aid to build schools, clinics and other projects

But attacks against Marines have continued, Morris has said.
Lt. Gen. David Rodriguez, deputy commander in Afghanistan, told reporters Tuesday that, having been driven out of Sangin and other strongholds in Helmand, Taliban leaders are less able to attack U.S. forces with hidden bombs. Taliban fighters are expected to intensify a campaign of assassination and intimidation against Afghans who cooperate with the Americans, he said.

"This is no longer their home field," he said, referring to Sangin. "They don't own it the way they used to, and they're going to change the way they come after us."
Why Afghanistan Is Far from Hopeless

By Peter Bergen

In winter, a noxious fog sometimes descends on Kabul that is so acrid, you can actually taste it. It's a toxic brew of fumes from traffic jams and thousands of charcoal fires, and it's a testament to the fact that in the decade since the fall of the Taliban, Kabul's population has gone up sixfold, from 500,000 to about 3 million.

This gets to the paradox of Afghanistan today: despite the enormous level of government corruption and the Taliban's resurgence in parts of the country, there is another story here — of Afghan recovery and progress. But this story is not well understood by many Americans, 6 out of 10 of whom now oppose the war in Afghanistan. (See how lowering the national deficit will change the world.)

Consider that under Taliban rule there were only a million children in school. Now there are 6 million, many of them girls. During the Taliban era, the phone system barely existed; now 1 in 3 Afghans owns a cell phone. Basic health care has gone from being a luxury to being available to most of the population, and annual economic growth is over 20%.

These kinds of advances explain why 6 in 10 Afghans in a poll last fall said their country is going in the right direction. The positive feelings Afghans have about the trajectory of their country seem counterintuitive given Afghanistan's deep poverty and feckless government, but they become more explicable when you recall what life under the Taliban was like. The Taliban incarcerated half the population in their homes, massacred thousands of Shi'ites, hosted pretty much every Islamist terrorist and insurgent group in the world and were pariahs on the international stage. Simultaneously, they presided over the collapse of what remained of the economy. And before the Taliban, there was civil war and rule by warlords; before that, a communist dictatorship; and before that, brutal Soviet occupation.

No wonder that 6 in 10 Afghans today have a favorable opinion of the U.S. military presence in their country. They understand that the U.S. is a guarantor of a future that is somewhat better than the Afghan past. They are not, of course, expecting Afghanistan to be turned into a central Asian nirvana, but they are hoping for more security and prosperity, and there is reason to believe they are right to do so. The war in Afghanistan still claims far fewer victims than the war in Iraq, a conflict widely believed to be all but over. Last year about 4,000 Iraqi civilians were killed by warring factions, while in Afghanistan, which has a larger population than Iraq, some 2,800 civilians died in the conflict. That makes the death rate of the Afghan war 9 per 100,000. (The murder rate in Washington is 22 per 100,000.) (See how motivated youth will change the world.)

The Taliban are getting squeezed where it hurts. The southern province of Helmand is the linchpin of Afghanistan's opium trade and a region where the Taliban once roamed freely. Now it might as well be Maritime, so effectively does the U.S. control most of it. A recent BBC poll found the proportion of Helmand residents who say their security is "good" has jumped from 14% to 67% since 2009. And in Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban, the religious warriors have been pushed out of key districts. The International Council on Security & Development, a think tank that has done field work in Afghanistan for years and is generally critical of Western policy, released a report last month that concluded that the U.S. troop surge in Helmand and Kandahar had improved security significantly.

This makes the prospect of "reconciliation" with elements of the Taliban more plausible. Insurgents do not make peace deals when they think they are winning, but they might if they begin to think they are losing. Richard Barrett, the U.N. official responsible for monitoring the Taliban, says, "I have heard of 12 different initiatives designed to engage the Taliban in talks." And such initiatives are pursued with a large national consensus that this is the right way forward; more than three-quarters of Afghans favor negotiations with the Taliban.
President Obama has also shifted the calculations of the Taliban by announcing that American combat forces will stay in Afghanistan until the end of 2014, a sea change in U.S. policy that has surprised the Taliban and even dovish members of Obama's Cabinet. When Obama announced the surge of 30,000 troops into Afghanistan in December 2009, he said they would start withdrawing in 18 months. Vice President Joe Biden subsequently opined, "In July 2011, you're going to see a whole lot of people moving out. Bet on it."

Extending the deadline is enormously important. The fact that there will be large numbers of American forces in Afghanistan for the next four years has major implications for all the players in the country. Taliban detainees have told their U.S. interrogators that the prospect of fighting for another four long years is sapping their morale. And more years on the clock will allow the buildup of a much larger and more effective Afghan National Army — one that is more capable of resisting the Taliban — while giving Afghan politicians sufficient time to organize to defeat the Karzai mafia, which now dominates the country. (See how collaborative consumption will change the world.)

There is also some real hope that Afghanistan's economy can be based on more than just international aid and opium production. In January, an obscure Pentagon office, the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations, released a report about Afghanistan's mineral wealth. The 49-page study details the size and location of an estimated $900 billion worth of mineral deposits across Afghanistan, the fruits of "remote sensing technology" of satellites, buttressed by the work of geologists on the ground taking samples.

The Pentagon report concluded that Afghanistan could become a "world leader" in lithium, which is used in making batteries and other industrial processes, and it found a massive copper deposit just south of Kabul and next door to another giant copper seam for which the Chinese have already paid $3 billion for the right to mine. The report also identified substantial gold deposits; three months ago the Afghan government approved a deal brokered by JPMorgan in which Western investors will invest an estimated $50 million in a gold mine in northern Afghanistan.

With such potential wealth below the surface, Afghanistan can "become either South Korea or Somalia," an official in the Afghan Foreign Ministry explained to me. Afghans already lived through their own version of Somalia during the civil war of the early 1990s and the subsequent rule of the Taliban, who restored order at the price of imposing a brutal theocracy. They don't want more of that; fewer than 10% of Afghans in a number of polls hold a favorable view of the Taliban. There's nothing like living under Taliban rule to convince one that the group's promises of Islamist utopia here on earth don't pan out. Instead, Afghans want what everyone else wants: a slightly more prosperous and secure future. Slowly, very slowly, that goal is being met. Bergen, a frequent visitor to Afghanistan since 1993, is the author of The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and al-Qaeda and the director of the national-security studies program at the New America Foundation.
Patrol Base Fires, Sangin District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan

The view from this platoon outpost in southern Afghanistan is unobstructed, both visually and strategically. On all sides stretch flat, bare, winter farmlands dotted with walled compounds. The strategy is aggressive patrolling to kill and drive out the Taliban, who have acted as the rural government here for 15 years.

Beginning in 2006, British forces held on to a few square kilometers that constituted the district center. Their strategy was to fight defensively while trying to win over the population. According to British brigadier general Edward Butler, “the central theme of the counterinsurgency, winning the hearts and minds, was still core to our plans.” In accord with that plan, the British Provincial Reconstruction Team poured millions of pounds into development projects. As a result, the economy flourished. But the Pashtun farmers remained at best stolidly neutral and at worst sullenly hostile. Outside the district center, the Taliban remained entrenched in the farmlands, called the Green Zone. The farmers supported them, or at least obeyed their rules.

In the fall of 2010, the British forces left, having suffered 106 killed in four years. U.S. Marines took over and changed the strategy from trying to win the cooperation of the farmers into a straight-up assault to drive the Taliban from the 40-kilometer-long valley. The British lost an average of 26 men per year on the defensive; the Marines lost 26 men in 100 days on the offensive, while driving the Taliban north.

The patrol base, named Fires because of the intensity of the daily fighting, was at the northern edge of the Marine advance. When I arrived in mid-January, Lt. Vic Garcia, the seasoned platoon commander, handed me two tourniquets.

“If someone goes down near you on patrol,” he said, “wrap him real tight and watch where you step.”

Garcia explained that the Taliban roam in small gangs among the farm compounds, sow mines, and attack from the flanks. When we set out on a combat patrol, the 15 Marines walked in single file across brown, furrowed farmlands suggestive of New England in early spring. Lance Cpl. Colby Yazzie, a full-blooded Navajo Indian, swept a narrow path with his metal detector, while his Irish-American partner, Lance Cpl. Kyle Doyle, watched out for snipers.

Near a footbridge across an irrigation canal, Yaz clenched his fist to halt the platoon, then knelt down and scratched at the dirt. He took out wire cutters, snipped a few wires, and held up two small boards wrapped in tape. Glued to the underside of each board was a sliver of metal. When a foot pressed down on the boards, the metal plates came together, completing an electrical circuit connecting a flashlight battery to a plastic jug filled with explosives. Yaz attached a small charge to the IED (improvised explosive device) and blew it up, and the patrol continued.

In 100 days of patrolling four kilometers north of the Sangin district center, Kilo Company of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment had found 115 IEDs. Another 14 had exploded. Of the 136 Marines in Kilo, nine had been killed and 35 severely wounded. Of four platoon commanders, one had been killed and another had lost a leg to a mine. (The unit designations relevant to this article are, from largest to smallest, regiment, battalion, company, platoon, and squad. Lieutenant Garcia’s platoon contained 50 Marines, who were divided into three squads.)

After discovering the first IED, we walked north at a steady, careful pace. Not one farmer was out tilling the lands sown with mines. Yaz again clenched his fist, knelt down, disarmed and blew up an IED. The patrol continued for a while, then halted suspiciously at the edge of a large field. On the far side were two long compound walls, dotted with “murder holes” — small peepholes for the Taliban rifle barrels.

The Marines peered at the wall through the telescopic sights on their rifles. Suddenly, the squad leader, Sgt. Philip McCulloch, fired a single shot.

“Scratch one stinky,” he said.

(A few months earlier, in Sangin, a rocket had slammed into Mac’s vehicle, knocking him out. The doctors wanted to send him back to the States, but he kicked up such a fracas that he remained hospitalized in Afghanistan until he talked his way back to Kilo Company. A few days before I arrived, his squad had pursued a Taliban gang for two kilometers. After a bullet creased the inside of Mac’s thigh, he had avoided treatment at the aid station, fearing he might be pulled to the rear.)

Mac’s squad spread out along the edge of the field, which marked their northern patrol boundary, and waited
for a fight. The rear security stopped a man driving past on a motorcycle. He wore clean clothes and his hands bore no calluses. He said he was an out-of-work mullah.

Lieutenant Garcia sensed that the man was a “dicker,” part of the Taliban’s unarmed warning network. But, lacking any evidence, he told him to leave. On his third combat tour, Garcia was the sole officer at Patrol Base Fires. He accompanied most patrols, while letting the squad leaders run the show. Garcia was the second officer to command the platoon at Fires. His predecessor had been shot and killed. The unquestioned leader, he kept a short leash on McCulloch’s attack instincts.

After waiting a while at the field, Garcia signaled to McCulloch to head back south.

“The stinkies aren’t playing,” Garcia said. “The game’s not in their favor.”

Like football teams, fighting units at the tactical level display distinct styles. The Taliban style reminded me of the rice paddies south of Da Nang in 1966, where the Viet Cong used the same tactics and the Marines countered with small, aggressive patrols.

The tactics are simple and effective. The Taliban’s warning net allows small teams to slip into tree lines in front of the Marine patrols. When the patrol file crosses an open field, the Taliban open fire, hoping for a hit or a rash rush by the Marines across a minefield.

The Marines’ counter is equally simple. One element peels off to flank the enemy, while another keeps aimed fire on the enemy position. If the Taliban remains too long in a fixed location, indirect fire (fire without a line of sight to the target, as from artillery) is called in. Every Marine has a telescopic rifle, and most of the fleeting targets are about 400 meters distant.

Yaz was leading the patrol back by a different route across a furrowed field when he stopped a third time. Again he uncovered a pressure-plate IED.

“That’s crazy,” McCulloch said. “An IED in the middle of nowhere.”

That IED was sure to blow the legs off a passing farmer — or a Marine. Yaz pointed to three small rocks several feet away, a tipoff for a passing Taliban gang that there was a mine in the vicinity.

A few minutes later, we walked past a crumbled wall, startling two dark brown coyotes. Again Yaz stopped, knelt, and disarmed a pressure plate. Four mines in the path of one patrol, and he had found them all.

When Kilo arrived in early October, 1st Sgt. Chris Melendez said to the troops, “I’m telling you now — some of you will go home missing arms or legs. I know that sounds hard, but God won’t give you any burden you can’t handle. So go out there, kill the enemy, and don’t flinch.”

The worst incident occurred in mid-October, just after the Marines moved into Patrol Base Fires. When a squad patrol slipped into a canal to avoid machine-gun fire, one Marine stepped on a pressure plate. Rushing to staunch his bleeding, another Marine ran forward and detonated another mine. The squad leader went down next, hit by the machine gun. A corpsman running to help the injured triggered the third mine, losing both legs.

As the dead and wounded were evacuated by helicopter, the Taliban pressed forward. They had diverted a nearby canal to flood the fields around the patrol base. Capt. Nick Johnson, the Kilo Company commander, and every available Marine at the nearby company base waded through the fields in chest-high mud to carry ammunition to the patrol base. Johnson then gathered the exhausted Marines inside Fires.

“In 1950,” he said, “this battalion walked out of the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea, beating off thousands of Chinese soldiers. Now it’s your turn. Come morning, we’re taking the fight to them.”

After that, every day that the platoon went out, they killed more and learned more.

Back at the crumbled wall, Garcia decided to leave the mines that lurked among the ruins to the coyotes and return to base. As they were walking by the field where Yaz had found the third IED, the crack! from a high-powered sniper rifle sent everyone to the prone. They flopped down just as a PKM machine gun (a long-range, reliable weapon) opened up with short bursts. Garcia sent McCulloch around to the left to outflank the machine gun. Mac saw one man sprinting away, leaving behind a jug of explosives, and he heard the bolt of a sniper rifle open and close, a sure sign the sniper was nearby. But it took Yaz a while to sweep for hidden mines. This gave the sniper and the machine-gun crew time to flee the area. Mac found a pile of spent cartridges behind a wall and retraced his steps back to Garcia.

The tone of a combat outfit is set from the top. The regimental commander, Col. Paul Kennedy, insisted upon discipline and aggressiveness. That ethos permeated the regiment. The Marines shaved every morning in the field and left no plastic food wrappings in the farm fields. On-call mortars tracked every patrol movement. “Close to zero” was the watchword, meaning that every engagement should end with Marines standing on the enemy positions.
In this case, having closed to zero only to find the enemy had fled, Mac’s squad returned to Patrol Base Fires shortly before dark. The Taliban don’t move at night in areas where the American thermal sights can detect them; and the Marines don’t patrol in the dark, when they can’t detect the mines.

At Fires, there were no showers, no lights, and no Internet. Evening talk centered on how to stay alive and kill. Snail mail took three to four weeks. Bountiful packages from the States included delicious cookies, warm socks, fleece linings for the sleeping bags, touching notes from third-graders, and piles of leftover Halloween candies. The men slept warmly in their bags inside small cave-like indentations in the side of a thick compound wall.

In the morning, the patrol went out again, pushing north two kilometers to a cluster of compounds flying the white flag of the Taliban. Through the centuries, armies have held aloft their battle streamers to signify group solidarity and power. It is a way of saying, “Here we are, all ye foolish enough to give challenge.” In response, the platoon had rigged a flagpole at the patrol base and proudly flew the Stars and Stripes, with the maroon-and-gold Marine flag beneath.

The Taliban bluffed as though they would defend their flags. Their opening machine-gun burst kicked up a dust line just two feet to the right of Yaz and McCulloch. The Marines lost no time in falling prone and establishing return fire.

The Taliban were split into three firing positions. The nearest was a tree line along a ditch 300 meters to the Marines’ front. Tiny figures were darting back and forth, popping off a few shots from behind one tree trunk and then another. When the Marine snipers hit one and a first sergeant visiting from regimental headquarters hit a second one, the Taliban fire slackened.

Garcia directed Mac to flank the compound from the west. He then told another sergeant to call in mortars. An F-18 radioed to Garcia that from 8,000 feet their camera pod had zoomed in on two men with rifles on the roof of Compound 38. Garcia confirmed that a prior patrol had reported 38 as abandoned. He radioed to battalion, where the air officer cleared the F-18 to make a gun-strafing run. Unfortunately, it was low on fuel and had to return to base. So Garcia authorized a mortar strike on the tree line in front of the compound.

Garcia’s coordinated moves took about ten minutes to execute and ten decades to develop. No infantry unit in the world can match the intelligence, the teamwork, and the coordination of an American squad working with mortars, artillery, and air.

Usually Taliban in the open pull back rapidly once under indirect fire. Sure enough, the Taliban fire stopped. Mac’s squad moved forward, blew a breach in the compound wall, searched inside, and found only blankets and cooking utensils. The Marines pulled down one Taliban flag, ignored a few others, and returned to base.

When we got in from the patrol, Sgt. John Browning, the leader of the snipers in the platoon, walked over to a wall with stick figures carved into the baked mud. Taking out his knife, he carved in two more figures. The Marines at Fires loathe the Taliban. They call them “stinkies” after the repellent smell of feces. They scorn their tactic, when under fire, of running to a group of women and children, knowing the Marines will not shoot. The Pashtun farmers tolerate or cooperate with the Taliban, who walk in their midst and are not pointed out. The Taliban grab children to shield them on their motorcycles, and the parents let it happen. The people will point out mines on the roads they use, but they won’t reveal who put the mines there.

The platoon at Outpost Fires has killed 121 of the enemy. We applaud pilots who shoot down five enemy aircraft by calling them “aces”; grunts win no such public praise, but they do keep score. At Patrol Base Fires, Garcia’s 50 Marines engaged in the heaviest sustained combat in Afghanistan. In just three months, two Marines were killed, two others had limbs amputated, and eight more were evacuated with other severe wounds. In response to this 20 percent loss rate, Garcia’s platoon has asked for a larger battle space to pursue the Taliban.

In Sangin, the British had spent tens of millions of pounds on “non-kinetic” (non-shooting) counterinsurgency, trying to win support by building clinics and schools. They opened up the main market, expanding trade and production. They focused on the people, but the people did not respond. When the British left Sangin, the Taliban still held the countryside and the roads leading to the market.

The U.S. Marines focused on clearing the enemy, with no expectation that the people would shift allegiances until the Taliban were soundly beaten. This approach has a price, because you can’t clear heavily mined farmlands without losses; but you can’t win a war by staying on the defensive. On the battlefields, the British are our closest allies and comrades; they will attack side-by-side with us. At the top level, though, there is a political divergence between us and them about risk-taking and casualties.

Our grunts in Sangin view the Pashtun farmers as bystanders, often aligned with the Taliban. Generally the farmers are seen fleeing or closing the compound gates when a patrol approaches. The people know the Taliban
shoot anytime from anywhere. Whether the passivity and self-sacrifice of the farmers is due to intimidation or to religious or tribal solidarity is of no interest to the passing Marines, who know the fight is between them and the Taliban. Although they recognize the sheer hard work and misery of the farmers and say time and again that “the kids back in the States don’t know how good they have it,” there’s no talk of liberating the people.

Down to the squad level, most leaders are on their second or third combat tour. When they are hit, they hit back twice as hard. They are sympathetic to the people, but they’re not persuaded they can win over the tribes enough to make them go against the Taliban, including members of their own families.

The Americans at Sangin see themselves first and foremost as warriors, reflecting the sentiments of the regimental commander, Colonel Kennedy. I first met him in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2004, when he was a battalion commander fighting up and down the streets as the battle exploded in nearby Fallujah. Kennedy’s battalion of 800 Marines had 35 killed in action. During that battle, he wrote to the families back in the States, “Previous to yesterday the terrorists thought that we were soft enough to challenge... By the end of the evening, the local hospital was full of their dead. . . . It will be a cold day in Hell before we are taken for granted again.”

In Sangin, an assassin almost killed Kennedy during a meeting with tribal elders to discuss the withdrawal of the Taliban. The next day, Lieutenant Garcia responded by pushing his patrol base one kilometer farther north into Taliban territory. The Taliban had read the situation correctly: Kennedy was their enemy, implacably moving forward. The Taliban throughout Helmand Province were not accustomed to the warrior ethos of the Marines. Marja and Garmish, the enemy hubs at the southern end of the province, collapsed in 2010. At the northern end, the campaign in Sangin is likely to force the Taliban out of the valley by the end of this summer.

After that, it’s an open question whether the Marine battalions will stay to manage economic projects and mentor officials appointed by Pres. Hamid Karzai, or will pull back, placing Afghan soldiers with Marine advisers in the lead.

Sangin is not a microcosm of the war. It is not possible to extrapolate from Sangin to all of Afghanistan. Across the east and south of Afghanistan, the scale of the fighting and the performance of coalition units are too varied to single out any one district as typical. At the tip of the spear in the south, the morale of the grunts in Kilo Company is high. They don’t reflect on past policy errors or the future of Afghanistan. Strategy is the business of generals and elected officials. The grunts understand that American or Afghan politics may create a good, bad, or murky ending to America’s involvement. Instead of becoming entangled in academic theories about winning hearts and minds, Sergeant McCulloch, Lieutenant Garcia, and Colonel Kennedy measure themselves by whether they dominate on the battlefield.

That spirit — that warrior ethos — will always be critical to our nation’s security.
SANGIN, Afghanistan — Many Marines stationed in Sangin have a soft spot for the little girls who scamper after them on patrol. Knowing there is no chance that these bright-eyed little lasses will join the insurgency after they are grown and shoot at them is one reason, but the young Afghan girls are also simply adorable.

Despite the decline in power of the Taliban, female teenagers and women are still rarely seen in public in southern Afghanistan outside the provincial capital — not even in the peacock blue burqas the Kabulis wear or the dark shroud more common to this area that lacks an eye-slit or grille. But young girls dressed in bright red or green shifts trimmed in sparkling thread play alongside their brothers in streets and fields, or tote babies with kohl-streaked eyes on their narrow hips. (The eyeliner is thought to improve the infants’ eyesight.) If the Marines don’t stop giving these girls so much candy, there will not be a woman left in Helmand province in 20 years who has any teeth.

Under the Taliban’s fanatical interpretation of Islam, girls were not allowed to attend school, or boys for that matter unless it was one of the militants’ cultish madrasas. Women couldn’t work outside the home, and their access to quality medical care was limited since there were no women doctors. Ten years into the U.S. war against al-Qaeda and their onetime hosts in Afghanistan, the Taliban fighters that had reemerged like a poisonous weed are being rooted out from the heartland of their movement once again. But some of the old ways based in patriarchal tribal culture remain. Social mores still force girls indoors at adolescence, where they have few opportunities in life other than to marry and raise their children hidden behind high mud walls. Knowing what sort of claustrophobic existence awaits her in a few years makes the sight of a little girl running freely in the open air all the more joyous.

The Marines say they are not trying to impose American culture on Afghanistan (which is why the U.S. military builds mosques here, since almost everyone is Muslim and quite pious.) But the expansion of women’s rights and opportunities seems to be a fortunate side-effect of the war, and one that is fully in-line with mainstream Islamic beliefs. The Prophet Mohammed was married to a businesswoman after all. Now some fathers in this ultra-conservative Pashtun region are sending their young girls to school in the classrooms popping up in tents and new buildings throughout the region. Disparities are still pronounced, even when it comes to the education of very young female students. During our visit to a new school the Marines established in Marjah, we saw several hundred male students but only about 40 girls. But the FETs, the Female Engagement Team of women Marines, recruited each of those girls one by one, including the first they literally pulled off the street. So it was a good start, if a modest one.

During our last visit to Afghanistan in August and September, photographer Nelvin Cepeda and I spent some time in the Laki area of Garmser district, a hinterlands community of farmers and shepherds. We listened to infantry Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment stationed there at the time as they tried to convince
local tribal elders to allow their daughters to attend school. The negotiations were delicate, and the education of all Laki children, girls and boys, hung in the balance as the Marines solicited the local power brokers for help organizing new schools. But the Marines succeeded in the end, because there is a girl’s school today in Laki.

It is easy for the Marines to push too far and too fast and alienate the Afghan people they are trying to win over, and they have on occasion. For instance, the FET Marines in Sangin have been quite successful in gaining access to the other half of the population in one of Afghanistan’s most violent areas. Some Afghan women have adopted them as second daughters of sorts or pointed out hidden bombs. But one of their biggest disappointments involved the only female doctor in Sangin, not counting the midwives. Hundreds of Afghans had started showing up to the FET’s health initiatives in Sangin, when they teach parents about basic hygiene and health care, such as the need to hydrate children suffering from diarrhea instead of the local custom of depriving them of liquids. But when they urged the sole female doctor practicing in Sangin to attend their next health outreach, the woman removed the sign outside her office and skipped town.

A recent women’s shura meeting was also something of a bust because of low attendance, Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the senior Marine in command of NATO troops in southwestern Afghanistan, told me. In time, even the most remote and battle-scarred corners of Helmand province will nurture women leaders. For now, in an area of the country where roughly 10 percent of the men can read and write and perhaps one percent of the women, according to the Marines’ estimates, a sixth-grade education is a major accomplishment for a girl.

As a woman journalist who works with Marines in combat, I find a bit of delicious irony in the fact that infantry grunts -- that macho testosterone-fueled bunch of trained killers -- are on the front lines of this campaign to teach the daughters of Afghanistan to read. Many of these young riflemen are fathers as well as fighters. When their own daughters learn of what they’ve done, I think they will be proud.
Camp Pendleton scaling back role in Afghanistan

MILITARY: Marine unit that suffered most casualties coming home

By MARK WALKER - mlwaller@nctimes.com
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Lance Cpl. Andreas Padilla, with the 3rd Battalion 5th Marine Regiment out of Camp Pendleton, patrols a market area in Sangin, Afghanistan in November. The unit will return to the states in a couple weeks. (Dusan Vranic AP file photo)

The lead role in Afghanistan is being taken over by the II Marine Expeditionary Force based at Camp Lejeune, N.C. A transfer of command ceremony is set for Saturday at Camp Leatherneck, the main Marine base in the southern Helmand province where most Marines are assigned.

At that ceremony, Camp Pendleton Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, who has overseen the fighting by the 20,000 Marines in Afghanistan for the last year, will relinquish that command and return home.

The number of locally based troops at war in the south-central Asian nation will fall from slightly more than 10,000 to about 7,000 by the end of spring and down to about 2,000 by midsummer, said 2nd Lt. Joanna Cappeto, a Camp Pendleton spokeswoman.

Among the most anticipated homecomings is the return of the battered 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, whose nickname is the "Dark Horse Battalion."

The approximately 950-member infantry unit was engaged in heavy fighting in the Sangin District of the Helmand province from the time it arrived there at the end of the summer until recent weeks.

The region was rife with Taliban insurgents, who used the district as a haven for illicit drug trafficking and manufacturing roadside bombs.

In its aggressive pursuit of the insurgents, the battalion saw 25 of its members killed in action, most of them from the bombs that are the weapon responsible for most U.S. and NATO troop casualties.

More than 150 battalion troops were wounded, including more than a dozen who had single- or multiple-limb amputations.

One of the men wounded in that fashion was Oceanside resident Lt. Cameron West, a platoon leader who lost a leg and suffered other injuries in an Oct. 15 blast while leading a patrol less than three weeks after arriving in Afghanistan.

West, who continues to undergo therapy at Naval Medical Center San Diego, said Tuesday that he's eager to see the battalion get back to Camp Pendleton.

"I've been waiting for the last six months," West said. "These are my guys and I can't wait to see them."

When the battalion gets back, commanders have ordered that it be kept as intact as possible for three months to allow its troops to decompress from the rigors of war and violence they experienced.

"We won't transfer anybody until at least 90 days after they come," said Col. Willy Buhl, regimental commander. "We are keeping people together during that critical decompression time to enable getting them the education and the observation and natural decompression that occurs when you are with your buddies. They are the only ones who can truly understand what they've been through."

The battalion also will be closely monitored by mental health specialists under the direction of Rear Adm. C. Forrest Faison III, commander of Navy Medicine West and Naval Medical Center San Diego.

The specialists will work with the troops and their families as a part of an effort to stave off post-traumatic stress disorder and destructive behaviors.
"We're trying to see how we can take (post-combat care) to the next level of assistance after 10 years of war," was how Buhl termed the effort during a recent conversation at Camp Pendleton.

Bill Rider, president of the Oceanside-based American Combat Veterans of War that counsels troops in distress, said the post-deployment care is a wise move.

"Maintaining unit cohesion after war is good for the troops because it will allow them to talk to their brother warriors and work things out," he said. "It's not a panacea that will fix everything, but it's a good start."

Rider said the battalion will need to confront the carnage it suffered.

"They are going to have to work out in their own minds all that happened and all the little hobgoblins that come along, such as 'Why did I survive when all the others didn't?'" he said.

The 25 battalion deaths are among 61 combat fatalities for Camp Pendleton troops since March 1, 2010, according to records kept by the North County Times based on Department of Defense casualty releases.

As the 3/5 battalion comes home, troops from Camp Pendleton's 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment have been deploying to Afghanistan, where a traditional lull in fighting during the winter months is ending.

Other major Camp Pendleton units heading out include Combat Logistics Battalion 7 and the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment.
The unit of Camp Pendleton-based U.S. Marines that has seen the most casualties than any other Marine Corps unit in Afghanistan is headed home.

The 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment started operations in the Sangin District of Afghanistan in October. According to our media partners The North County Times, the unit will be headed home in just a few weeks.

A change of command ceremony is planned at Camp Leatherneck, the Marine's main base in the southern Helmand province. The II Marine Expeditionary Force based at Camp Lejeune, North Caroline will be taking over command of that volatile area.

Despite the constant threat 1stLt. Schueman says members of the 3/5 haven't waivered in their resolve for a moment even during the worst firefights imaginable.

"Every square inch of where we were was getting raked by enemy PKM fire but it didn't even phase these guys," said Schueman.

That courage under fire has earned them a lot of respect from top leaders like MajGen Mills who said the commitment of each Marine and sailor putting their lives on the line each day is one of the most important weapons in the fight for Sangin.

MajGen Richard Mills, Commanding General of NATO Regional Command Southwest (RC-Southwest) will also relinquish his command in the region and return home.

“They’re the greatest generation we’ve ever raised,” Mills said. “They’re volunteers, they know the threat, they don’t have to be here. Ninety-nine percent of their friends don’t come over here and yet, they have the courage to take the step forward and do the job that has to be done. I stand in awe of them."

The 3/5, nicknamed "The Dark Horse," has faced heavy losses while deployed. The paper reports 29 members have been killed, 175 wounded.
The top Marine commander in Afghanistan for the last year said his forces are bracing for more insurgent attacks this spring, but are prepared for them and already have degraded the Taliban’s ability to wage war in Helmand province.

Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, commander of I Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) and Regional Command-Southwest, said “they’re going to try and push back at us” in the spring. Enemy attacks historically have picked up after poppy season ends in late March and early April.

“He defended all of last year and he lost,” Mills said of the average insurgent fighter. “Now he’s run out of places to defend, so he’s going to have to figure out ways to counterattack. Our job is to stay one step ahead of him and figure out what that counterattack means, and how it will be accomplished. We’re prepared across the board with that, to counter him no matter what he brings.”

In an exclusive Marine Corps Times interview, Mills reflected on his year commanding more than 20,000 Marines in southwest Afghanistan, the situation in Sangin, Marjah, and some of the country’s other high-profile districts. He will be replaced this weekend by Maj. Gen. John Toolan, commander of II MEF (Fwd.), out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., Marine officials said.

The transition between I MEF (Fwd.) and II MEF (Fwd.) has been ongoing for weeks. Several other commanders already have been replaced by their II MEF counterparts, including Brig. Gen. Joseph Osterman, who headed 1st Marine Division (Fwd.). He was replaced by Brig. Gen. Lewis Craparotta, commander of 2nd Marine Division (Fwd.), in a March 15 ceremony at Camp Leatherneck, the Corps’ main hub of operations in Helmand.

As Marines tame violent areas, they will begin to push into other areas of the province, Mills said.

One point of emphasis will be locking down the southern Helmand border with Pakistan, where enemy fighters and drug smugglers have passed freely for years. Forces with 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, out of Twentynine Palms, Calif., have patrolled the open deserts in southern Helmand for months with Light Armored Vehicles, but Mills said Marines have made another big push in recent weeks to cut off supply lines.

“The future is going to call for the securing of the Pakistani border,” Mills said. “The geography down there channels insurgents to only a few entry points that basically have not been controlled by the government of Afghanistan for years. We raided in there with LAR last fall and took down their supply hub and did some real damage. We then revisited them here in the last few weeks, and we’re probably going to stay for awhile and interdict him through the poppy season.”

Additional Marine forces could be sent to “the fringes of the province” as fewer Marines are necessary in population centers like Garmser and Nawa, once-violent districts that have shown substantial progress in the last year. Second Battalion, 1st Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, Calif., currently patrols Garmser, while Nawa is overseen by 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines, out of Marine Corps Base Hawaii.

“The border jumps out at you,” Mills said. “It’s a big issue, a big problem, and there’s a lot of terrain down there.”

Securing Sangin

There’s plenty of other work left to do, too — including in Sangin, the former Taliban stronghold in northern Helmand where dozens of Marines have died since the Corps took over the district from British forces in September. Most of those casualties occurred in Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, which drew the assignment of taming one of the most violent places in Afghanistan.
Mills said the Corps has reinforced 3/5 with other troops, including Georgian forces and Lejeune’s 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion. The additional troops were needed as the Marines expanded the territory they cover in and around the district. Mills acknowledged there still is regular violence in the area, citing a firefight that 2nd Recon was in earlier the same day. The general was overhead in a Huey helicopter when it occurred.

“We think they’re mainly out-of-area fighters, and we think they’re desperately trying to cling to the last piece of terrain they have any control over because it’s important to them,” he said. “It’s another one of their centers for drug production and poppy growth. They’ve got to try and get that back because if they don’t get it back – and they won’t – they’re going to run out of funds very, very quickly.”

Transition will occur in the area over the next few months. For one, Pendleton’s 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, recently deployed from California to replace 3/5. Ground forces with Lejeune’s 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit that deployed to Helmand in January from Navy ships in the Indian Ocean also are nearing the end of their time in theater. The MEU’s ground combat element — Battalion Landing Team 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines — has been based in the upper Gereshk Valley, south of Sangin.

Mills declined to say when BLT 3/8 will leave Afghanistan, but said “they’ll be home on time.” The unit deployed in August from North Carolina, leaving a month earlier than initially expected so the MEU could support flood-relief efforts in Pakistan.

The general credited BLT 3/8 with providing security that allowed combat engineers to speed up construction of Route 611, which connects Sangin to Route 1, one of the main highways in Afghanistan. Mills said Helmand is significantly safer than it was a year ago, citing improvements in Marjah as one example. Marines in that former insurgent stronghold faced small-arms attacks and improvised explosive devices regularly last spring and summer. But violence dropped in the fall, and Mills said the district center there is now among the safest places in the province. It is currently manned by elements of 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines, and 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines, both out of Lejeune.

“We’ve taken most of the troops who’ve remained in Marjah and moved them,” he said. “Almost all of the kinetic activity now is on the very, very outskirts, right on the fringe of the green zone where we pushed the enemy out to. Marjah itself is kind of a remarkably settled area, I think.”
Amid praise for a job well done, the Marines from Camp Pendleton on Saturday formally relinquished responsibility for leading the fight against the Taliban in the insurgency's longtime Afghanistan stronghold of Helmand province.


Haji Abdul Manaf, governor of the Nawa district, was blunt: “This has been a very good year. We want more good years.”

Their comments came at a ceremony marking the turnover of command responsibility from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force from Camp Pendleton to the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force from Camp Lejeune, N.C.

Although geographically and culturally distant from the Afghan capital of Kabul, rural Helmand province is considered key to the Taliban insurgency. Helmand is the heart of the nation’s poppy crop -- a cash crop that is processed into heroin and provides enormous profits for the Taliban.

The mantra from military brass is that progress in routing the Taliban and gaining the trust of villagers in Helmand has been substantial but remains “fragile and reversible.”

Progress in Helmand has been costly: 136 Marines have been killed in combat since March 1, 2010 -- 61 of them from Camp Pendleton.

The hardest-hit combat unit was the Camp Pendleton-based 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which suffered 24 killed in action and more than 175 wounded since relieving a British unit in early October in the Sangin district.

One of the most recent of the regiment's wounded is Navy corpsman Stuart Fuke, 22, of Honolulu, wounded in the thigh during a foot patrol a week ago. A Marine buddy stopped Fuke’s bleeding with rolls of gauze as sniper fire snapped overhead.

In six months of patrols, Fuke, who was on his second tour in Afghanistan, has provided emergency battlefield care to numerous Marines shot by Taliban snipers or wounded by buried bombs.

Fighting the Taliban, Fuke said, “is like fighting ghosts.”

“It’s like the gangbanging school: shoot, shoot and run away,” said Fuke, now recuperating at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany before being airlifted to Naval Medical Center San Diego for additional surgery.

“These guys are quick,” he said. “It’s hit-and-miss, they don’t stand and fight.”

In one skirmish, Fuke had a Marine buddy “die in my arms” after being hit; in another he was able to stem the bleeding and save the life of an agonized Marine who lost both legs and his right arm; and in yet another incident, he watched in horror as a Navy corpsman had his legs blown off.

The weapon of choice of the Taliban in Helmand province is the improvised explosive device, sometimes dug into roads or paths, sometimes attached to fences or other waist-high objects in order to inflict maximum blast damage.

“They know they can’t take us on in a fight, that’s why they use the IEDs,” said Col. Patrick Kanewske, chief of staff for the Marine Corps Forces Central Command.
While the command unit -- led by Maj. Gen. Richard Mills -- was from Camp Pendleton, combat battalions came from several Marine bases. Of 20,000 Marines in Helmand during the last year, about half were from Camp Pendleton.


A counteroffensive by Taliban fighters is expected soon as they attempt to regain dominance over the farmers who plant the poppy crop. "I expect a counterattack," Mills said. "This area is too important to the enemy for him just to walk away."

In the last two weeks, five Marines were wounded in a firefight in the Reg-e-Khan district that left 30 Taliban fighters dead. Marines also battled Taliban in the Kajaki and Musa Qalah district; weapons caches were discovered in sites scattered throughout the province.

The number of battalions from Camp Pendleton will decrease in coming months as part of a planned rotation. The Three-Five will return home in coming weeks, replaced in Sangin by the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, also from Camp Pendleton, and the 3rd Battalion, 4th Regiment, from Twentynine Palms.

Former Marine commandant Gen. James Conway, in a visit to Helmand in August, predicted that Marines will be in the province until 2014 or 2015.

Marines say conditions in Sangin have changed greatly since fall, with more cooperation from villagers and increasing competency of Afghan security forces.

More bomb-sniffing dogs are being deployed, and the U.S. has advanced technology to catch Taliban fighters or their sympathizers burying bombs under cover of darkness.

But for the Marine grunts and the Navy corpsmen, one thing will remain the same in the coming year: Every foot patrol in Helmand province is perilous.

“You never know when you’re going to step on death,” Fuke said from his hospital bed.

-- Tony Perry in Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan

\[Photo: \textit{Corpsman Stuart Fuke, 22. Credit: Tony Perry}\]
SANGIN, Afghanistan — After a breakfast of packaged rations and chemically heated “nail polish ham,” the Marines gather outside their hooch to pull on flak jackets and check their gear.

Sgt. Ryan Sotelo, a 28-year-old former emergency medical technician from San Mateo, stands in a semi-circle of smoking Marines, inhaling sharply on his cigarette. The squad leader maintains an intense focus when patrolling outside the wire, chain-smoking when he has a free hand, chewing tobacco when he doesn’t.

It has been that kind of tour for 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which deployed to Sangin from Camp Pendleton in October. The U.S. Marines have been fighting hard to help the Afghan government reclaim this strategic crossroads long overrun by Taliban insurgents.

During his visit this month to Sangin, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that 3/5 had suffered the heaviest losses of any battalion in this 10-year war in Afghanistan. So far, 24 “Darkhorse” battalion Marines plus six from other units working among them have died, and almost 200 have been wounded. Most of the casualties occurred in the first three months.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1st Lt. William Donnelly, the 27-year-old officer in charge of Kilo Company’s 2nd platoon, was shot while bounding across a barren field. Sotelo and the other Marines who set out that day to raid a Taliban commander’s house had to fight through machine gun fire almost a mile back to base, while carrying the body of their fallen platoon commander.

Along the way they ducked into a compound and stumbled on several gunmen hiding in the garden. The Marines opened fire on them from the roof. According to the company first sergeant, Sotelo was so close to the insurgents he lobbed a grenade.

By mid-winter, Battalion 3/5 and the other Marine units arrayed across the Sangin River Valley had battled the insurgents to a near standstill. The bulk of the enemy fighting force appears to have been killed or wounded, driven into Pakistan or gone to ground to rest and resupply until the spring fighting season resumes.

Despite the relative calm, Sangin remains treacherous terrain for the Marines who pick their way on daily foot patrols through the maze of fields, twisting mud-walled alleys and canal paths laced with homemade bombs.

When the squad is fully stocked with “cc’s” — the “combat cigarettes” they buy to alleviate the stress, the sorrows and the boredom of life at war — the joint patrol of Marines and Afghan soldiers sets out. They trudge through an acrid haze emitted by the base burn pit piled with smoldering bags of human waste and plastic water bottles, their boots squishing in mud after a cold rain.

The squad heads for the remote military outpost in the far north of Sangin district where their former platoon commander was killed.

Ten minutes after leaving base, they find the first bomb.
Two corporals walking point ahead of the patrol see a depression in the ground alongside one of the ubiquitous earthen housing compounds. They dig and find a mortar shell packed with explosives, wired and ready to blow if anyone had stepped on it.

The battalion encounters so many of these improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, in Sangin — more than 1,000 and counting since October — that they started delaying their detonations until the half hour or hour, so that Marines in other areas wouldn’t be unnerved by the explosions.

The people who live nearby claim to have no idea who planted the bomb. But another man they visit that day has become a trusted ally. Lt. Charles “Chip” Broun, the 25-year-old platoon commander who replaced Donnelly, and Sgt. Sotelo greet him warmly, exchanging smiles and handshakes.

The Afghan man was shot point-blank in the chest once by Taliban fighters. He sits to chat with the Marines out of eyesight of nosy neighbors or children the insurgents hire as informants.

The manpeeks over a wall first to see if anyone is looking, then he lowers his voice. “There are mines over there,” he says, describing precisely where they can be found. “They put them in two or three days ago.

“I’m trying to help you in a way that no one knows.”

Afterward the Afghan man stands up and proclaims loudly: “You made a lot of promises, but where is my new well? I had to buy that donkey over there to haul water!”

The platoon commander is perplexed. “Did you not get the money for the well?” Broun asks. A moment later his face brightens in understanding. When the Marines walk away, Broun says quietly: “He is smart. He knows how to stay alive.”

They are pleased with the tip. But it turns out to be a win-some, lose-some day for the Marines on this patrol: later the crack of rifle shots sends them hurrying to the road. When the squad rejoins two Marines manning a temporary checkpoint on the main route through town, they find two Afghan men bleeding from bullet wounds.

A couple of vehicles had stopped to wait for the Marines to pass them through. Another car full of passengers drove off the side of the road around them and raced straight for the Marines. The infantrymen shouted for the car to halt. When it was about 5 to 10 meters away, one Marine aimed for the tires.

Bullets ricocheted and hit two men in the front seat. A woman and children in the back seat were unharmed.

The most badly injured man has a hole in his knee, the patrol leader finds. The bone is splayed in a gory sunburst pattern. He will probably lose his leg.

HM3 Redmond Ramos, the Navy corpsman attached to the squad, kneels beside him to apply a tourniquet. His gloves and camouflage uniform are soon soaked in blood and an icy rain that begins to fall around them.

“The Marines did the right thing,” Broun says. Especially in an area with a high threat of suicide car bombers, “they have to protect themselves.”

Nevertheless, shooting unarmed civilians is a serious setback in their attempts to win over the people of Sangin. Sotelo looks at the injured civilians and a pool of blood congealing on the roadside and shakes his head. “Goddamit,” he mutters to himself.

The squad is waiting for a casualty evacuation team to bring the men to a hospital when gunfire erupts in the distance. The Marines sprint onto a ridge to provide supporting fire for another squad maneuvering about a mile away near the river. They have been attacked from three different positions by enemy fighters wielding PKM machine guns.

Long peals of automatic weapons fire and blasts from grenade launchers reverberate in the air. A marksman in Sotelo’s squad spots two of the enemy fighters in a canal. The Marine fires his sniper rifle and wounds one of the men.
After five solid minutes of gunfire, the firefight devolves into a sporadic staccato. The enemy fighters, outnumbered and outgunned, run off. The Marines see them out with parting shots, as the surveillance blimp tracks the fleeing fighters with its big eye in the sky.

On the way back to base, another Afghan source points them to yet more bombs hidden nearby. “He’s told us about seven IEDs so far, and an anti-tank mine in the middle of (Route) 611,” Broun says. “A lot of the locals have stepped on IEDs themselves. The Taliban are not just killing Marines, it’s everyone.”

They find three mortar shells daisy-chained together and buried in the treeline. Down the road, the squad leader and his radio man wait for the other Marines to detonate them in place.

“I’m so tired of the f---ing rain,” Sotelo says.

“I’m so tired of Afghanistan,” replies Lance Cpl. John Torres, smiling. The 21-year-old Marine wrote the names of Battalion 3/5 Marines killed in action across the ranger band circling his helmet – Peto, Donnelly, Corzine, Boelk, Lopez, Abbate … and more.

He penned their names as they died, never expecting there to be so many. “I don’t have any space left,” he says.

Most were killed by the improvised bombs like the squad is destroying on this patrol.

Torres passes the sergeant a pinch of tobacco. A little later, Sotelo shouts to the Marines picketing the road: “one minute!”

The ground rumbles and the oxygen seems to be sucked from the air. Sotelo and Torres flinch. “Jesus!” the sergeant sputters. The detonation crew is showered with mud and shrapnel.

The blast had set off another hidden bomb. The Marines trod right over it on the way in.
Local Marines Expect Counteroffensive In Helmand Province

Tuesday, March 29, 2011
By Maureen Cavanaugh, Hank Crook

Local Marines Expect Counteroffensive In Helmand Province
Aired 3/29/11

What are the biggest challenges facing local Marines currently stationed in Afghanistan? We speak to Tony Perry of the Los Angeles Times about his recent trip to the Helmand Province, and discuss how things have progressed since his last visit to Afghanistan.

Guest
Tony Perry, San Diego Bureau Chief for the Los Angeles Times

Credit: isafmedia
Marines from 9th Engineer Support Battalion, 1st Marine Logistics Group, talk to local Afghans in Sangin, Helmand province, Afghanistan

What are the biggest challenges facing local Marines currently stationed in Afghanistan? We speak to Tony Perry of the Los Angeles Times about his recent trip to the Helmand Province, and discuss how things have progressed since his last visit to Afghanistan.

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CAVANAUGH: I'm Maureen Cavanaugh, and you're listening to These Days on KPBS. While the headlines have been filled with the new U.S. military action in Libya, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan continues to be dangerous and often deadly. One group of marines soon to come home to Camp Pendleton has suffered the largest number of casualties of any similar size U.S. force in the war. Those have been stationed in Helmand Province, where LA Times reporter, Tony Perry, has visited on several occasions. And he joins us in our studios. Tony, good morning.

PERRY: Good to be here.

CAVANAUGH: So tell us how many local marines are currently based in Helmand Province?

PERRY: In the past year, up to ten thousand Camp Pendleton marines and sailors have been in Helmand Province. This is now a turnover effect from camp Lejeune North Carolina. They are now the command unit. So units from Camp Pendleton are coming home. There will still be units from Camp Pendleton, two to three thousand in the coming year, not the 10000 but a less are number. They will still be there, though, and they have drawn as Camp Pendleton units tend to, some of the most difficult assignments. In this case the deadly area called the Sangin district.

CAVANAUGH: Now, you told us the last time you were in Afghanistan in Helmand Province, you told us about the terrible threats and -- to our troops there and the fact that there were heavy fighting going on from time to time. What kind of progress has been made since you were there last?

PERRY: Well, significant progress has been made in prying the fingers of the Taliban off the throat of the local people. They have to a large degree either fled or gone underground, and now they will be reEnforced by folks from Pakistan who will smuggle in. A great deal of progress has been made, but the mantra is, and I think it's an accurate one, is that the progress is fragile and reversible. We haven't really seen the Afghan government step up to the plate and begin to establish a government in Helmand Province, for example. And of course the competency of the Afghan police while rising apparently is not
yet to the point where they can take on the duty of protecting their own people themselves. The Marines are going to be there, as the former commandant just last August, he said the Marines are going to be there until 2014, 2015.

CAVANAUGH: Well, we have done a show, and that's been a lot written about the Camp Pendleton based third battalion 5th marine regiment. It's been hit very hard. I think it's suffered the largest number of casualties of any similar sized force over there, and it moved to the area last October. Can you tell us what this group of marines has faced in the last few months?

PERRY: They have face first degree the worst of it, frankly, from a combat perspective, they have had 24 killed, more than 175 wounded, and among those wounded, a dozen or more double amputees, and a couple of triple amputees. They crew the most difficult assignment. They drew that area that the Taliban was in control of for a number of year, and didn't want to give up, you know, and still doesn't want top give up. Now the thee five is coming home, and the expectation is that the Taliban will have a counter offensive a counter attack because they want Sangin back. And who is going to meet them? The first battalion 5th marines from Camp Pendleton, back by the third battalion 4th marines from 29 Palms.

There is the expectation that there is fighting, further fighting ahead, and with furtherance of this foreign policy being hurt rather grievously.

CAVANAUGH: You wrote about speaking to one Navy corpsman in particular.

PERRY: 22-year-old Stewart Fuke, 22 years old, and he's out on patrol with them of the things he had seen make your hair fall out. He had a marine die in is arms from wounds during a fire fight. On another occasion, they were in a combat situation, and eye marine slid down a small hill, hit a roadside bomb, lost both legs and his leg, and Fuke was there to save his life. [CHECK] he was there when another core man had both legs blown off. He has seen it. He's 22 years old. And then ten days ago, he was out on a patrol. The one of the last patrols benefit that were to come home, and he was hit, he took a rather large caliber shot to his thigh, exited through his backside, it actually cook offend a unit, a round that he was carrying in his pocket, so he had that to deal with, and he was bleeding when I will an attack was under way, and bullets snapping oaf his head. His life was saved, his bleeding was stemmed by a buddy, a marine right behind him. He's now in Landstuhl, he was absolutely matter of fact about it, he's one of these young people, your jaw drops open when you meet them. What they have been thru, how they feel about it. It has nothing to do about the politics of the situation. But what they feel about can the [CHECK] it's very hard to not be impressed by that kind of young man?

CAVANAUGH: I can imagine so. You know, Tony, we have done a program about what Camp Pendleton is preparing for as the 3/5 returns. And they're about to mount a more intense post-combat support technique that may actually become a standard for the Marines across the board, and I'm wondering in your situation with this wonderf [275x272]ul marine and also in other conversations, you think that's no, sir? That kind of support?

PERRY: I think it is. I think the things these young marines and Navy core men have seen are going to impact their life for some period of time. They're young and they're resilient and they have a lot of support. But they have seen some things that I think need addressing. And you're right. Preparing a support network unlike any -- more substantial, and they have done things in the past but more substantial this time. And the hope is that it influences the people coming home from this positively, and also can set a standard for others 'Cause this thing isn't open, as I say, the first battalion 5th marines is gonna take the 3/5's place, and they'll be coming home some day too.

CAVANAUGH: You know, I want to let our listeners know if they want to join the conversation, please do, the number is 1-888-895-5727. You noted Tony that this Sangin area in Helmand Province is dangerous, deadly, and troops have been maimed this. Is anything being done to try to mitigate these IEDs that the Marines are so vulnerable to?

PERRY: [CHECK] $17 billion looking for technology to detect and detonate these roadside bombs before somebody steps on them or drives on them bout much success, 17 billion dollars, without much
success. The best ways to detect [CHECK] some very good Labradors are over there. I saw 13 of them at Camp Pendleton ask, that'll be shipped over there soon, they were barking and jumping up and down and ready to get over with their handlers, or the sharp-eyed young lance corporal, and indeed there have been studies that show there are two kind of young enlisted who are particularly good at this, one, good old boys who grew up in a nice rural trompin' through the woods kind of background shootin' squirrels, they know when something looking strange, or guys who grew up in the hills who know innately to make a threat assessment, and what doesn't hook right. But technology has yet to find a way to guard our troops against the bearing of these, and now of course to make it even more difficult, in Sangin, in Helmand Province, there are places where the big vehicles really can't go, the soil doesn't support it. So the Marines have to get out and walk, they also get out and walk to show the locals, hey, we're here, we're not just drive-bys. Well, that puts them at greater risk. And there's a in the number and rate of double amputees and also the number and rate of urogenital injuries.

CAVANAUGH: What about that outreach to the locals and their help in trying to make sure that these roadside bombs are not being planted? Is there progress being made there?
PERRY: I think this is progress, but the Afghan, particularly the Helmand province Afghans, have seen a lot of war in the last three decades. He saw the Russians and the Mujahadin, and the Taliban, and the Brits, and now the Americans, and he is just waiting to see who the toughest tribe is, really. And so they're wary. They're wary of throwing in their lot. They don't want know if we're going home next week leaving them to the mercy of the Taliban. So they're reluctant. Some very bravely come forward. And of course the Afghan forces come [CHECK] helping from the Afghans, but yet why many of the Afghans being afraid to throw in their lot with the Americans.

CAVANAUGH: I'm speaking with Tony Perry from the LA Times about this most recent trip over to Afghanistan, and visiting the Landstuhl regional medical center in Germany. Welcome to These Days.

NEW SPEAKER: Good morning Maureen. I didn't call with a question. I just called with a comment. I wanted to thank Tony for his willingness to repeatedly go into the war zones and the hospitals and seeing these young men and to make this war real to us. I feel that so often it's hid Ken and we don't want hear about the consequences and Tony, your repeated to rays, and your willingness to come back and talk about it so generous is greatly appreciated. Thank you.
PERRY: Well, thank you, that's a very nice thing for you to say. I appreciate it. It is I local story, the numbers alone make it a local story, we mentioned the three/five, 29 if you add five more from battalions who were assigned to help the 3/5. Overall Camp Pendleton troops in the last 12 months, there have been 61 killed and hundreds wounded. You put those several dozen that are outside that one year time frame, and you've had a lot of young men and some young women from Camp Pendleton hurt grievously, killed in this war, and it makes it for us here a local story.

CAVANAUGH: Let's take another call. Ben is calling from Poway. Good morning, ben. Welcome to these Days.

NEW SPEAKER: Good morning. I wanted to thank Mr. Perry for reflecting from the war as it is back to the United States. Usually we're presented with a vision of war that is not consistent with what's actually happening on the ground. What I was going to ask confuse, apparently I heard from people who have come back that it some problems with 35's gung-ho leadership, not respecting the, procedures keep people from getting injured, and also they didn't coordinate very well with the explosive ordinance device people. So one of the reasons that casualties were so hire was because of this. And I was wondering if he could comment on that.

CAVANAUGH: Thank you, Ben.
PERRY: I can't knowledgeably. Those are common rumors in any infantry battalion. Leadership could have been better, coordination could have been better. It is one of the things and there are several things like that that I'm looking at. I can't confirm anything, what you're saying, as an actual fact. But those kinds of rumors are very common.
CAVANAUGH: I want to end, Tony, on discussing a little bit more about this idea of the progress in Helmand province being fragile and reversible if you could expand a little bit Marine Corps on what you mean by that, and also some things that we’ve been hearing about May and the opium crop and how that might make another assault by the Taliban.

PERRY: Sure. Fragile and reversible. School have now been opened, clinics have been established, all of that could go away, if the Americans and the Afghan forces move out or are not competent enough, the Taliban had thrown their flag over Helmand in many years, had conducted summary executions, had taxed the people, much of that is now ended. If the Americans go away, and the Afghan forces aren't capable of stepping up, that could come back. Schools for girls are now if being opened, which of course is anathema to the Taliban. That could certainly go away. Now, why is Helmand important? It's a long way from cabal, culturally and geographically. It is the center of the poppy crop. The poppy crop turns into heroin they need that money. They were running low on funds, U.S. officials say, they need to reestablish themselves in Helmand, get backing into that intimidation mode with the farmers, and get that crop that can be processed right there in Helmand. Or take it to western Europe [CHECK] doesn't fight as much in the winter. It's cold, and for whatever reason, they go away. However, in the spring, when the poppy crop is planted, it is said that they then go back and start their intimidation campaign with the farmers. I understand they're already place a number of roadside bombs or attempting to, in the fields [CHECK] they'll be victimized by it. We're looking at some tough months. No one is saying otherwise. This is some key terrain for them, and while the Marines from Camp Pendleton by all accounts have done a marvelous job in forcing them out, forcing them to tree or did underground, [CHECK].

CAVANAUGH: Tony thank you so much.

PERRY: My pleasure.

CAVANAUGH: I've been speaking with Tony Perry, San Diego bureau chief for the Los Angeles. If you would like to comment, please go online.
Cpl. William Sutton was injured in Afghanistan while serving with 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. He has been undergoing treatment at San Diego Naval Medical Center. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

With his family at his bedside, there was no reason for the phone in Cpl. Marcus Chischilly’s hospital room to ring. Then one day it did.

“Hey, it’s me,” the caller said.

Chischilly recognized the voice at once. It was Cpl. Yahir Moreno, a Marine he had served with phoning from Afghanistan.

The pair had been stationed in the Kajaki district of Helmand province. They were among a small group from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment sent to the far north of the province to train Afghan police, while the rest of the Camp Pendleton unit served in the neighboring district of Sangin.

A little more than a week into his fourth combat tour, Chischilly had volunteered for the patrol that sent him home early. During a firefight Oct. 9, the 23-year-old Marine stepped on an enemy bomb. The blast shredded one of his legs, which had to be amputated above the knee, and gouged his body with shrapnel.
“I’m sorry that I got hurt. I’m sorry I couldn’t continue to be there with you,” Chischilly said into the phone, tears springing from his eyes. He knew it wasn’t his fault. But in his heart he felt, “I should be there.”

Moreno had his own apology to make. They had trained and fought together, first in Iraq and then Afghanistan. But Chischilly chose to leave the wire the day he was wounded, while the other Marine stayed back. “I’m sorry you got hurt, I’m sorry I wasn’t there …” he said.

The guilt on both sides was a testament to their regard for each other and their ideals as infantrymen. But the phone call reminded Chischilly that no Marine had been left behind. They were all in it together, from the battlefield to the hospital ward, and home.

**Wounded in action**

It was a “movement to contact” patrol, when the Marines poke the enemy hornet’s nest. Not long after they set out early that morning into the desert beyond their camp, the insurgents started stinging.

When the machine-gunner called for ammunition, Chischilly hustled across a berm to grab more rounds. Don’t wander off, there are a lot of mines around here, he was warned.

“I won’t,” he said. Then his left foot stepped onto a pressure plate trigger buried in the dirt.

Chischilly flipped twice in the air and hit the ground. He tried to move his leg but it wouldn’t budge— half his shin had been blown away. Shrapnel nearly sliced his thumb from his hand.

A Navy corpsman came running. He put all his weight on Chischilly’s worst leg, stopping his femoral artery from pumping blood onto the ground. He put two tourniquets on the left leg and one on his right, and a tourniquet on each arm.

The pain was intense, but Chischilly concentrated on his breathing. He was trying to stay calm and not go into shock.

“I’m not going to die, not now, not here, he told himself. I’m not ready. Please God, let me live. They need me, my wife and son they need me. There is so much I want to come back to…

**The reunion**

A few months later, Cpl. William Sutton, a 21-year-old machine gunner sent home from Sangin to recover from gunshot wounds, was settling into the barracks at San Diego Naval Medical Center when he bumped into his new neighbor.

It was Chischilly, a Marine Sutton had looked up to for his tactical knowledge and service in combat. Sutton heard that he had gotten really messed up in Afghanistan. But there was “Chilly” rolling in his wheelchair, with one leg intact and both his arms and all his fingers, smiling.

They wrapped each other in a hug and cried. “We’re a big family,” Sutton explained. “So when you see one of your brothers hurt … it gets personal. It gets emotional.”

**Pushing each other**

From that day until Sutton recovered enough to move back to Camp Pendleton in February, they were at each other’s side, pushing each other, yelling at each other if need be, refusing to give up.

Sutton was more gravely injured than he appeared. On Nov. 24, a squad of Marines had become pinned down in the open under fire, right outside their Sangin patrol base. Sutton was lying prone, firing his “Big Baby” at the insurgents attacking from multiple positions, when he was shot in the arm.

He tried to apply a tourniquet with his teeth as he kept firing, but two more bullets blew away part of his genitals. Sutton blacked out behind his machine gun. He came to as the other Marines stuffed gauze into his wounds and dragged him across the field to safety.

“How you doing, mate?” Sgt. Joel Bailey, the machine guns section leader asked.

“Get ‘em,” Sutton said. Bailey jumped on the .50 caliber gun on the roof as Sutton was loaded into a British helicopter.

The crew gave him a medicated lollipop and flew away, strafing the enemy on another gun run. The last thing Sutton heard before he passed out was the sound of that gun. “I remember them saying ‘how you doing, mate?’ and then boom boom boom,” Sutton recalled.
“It was the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard.”

**The recovery**

“The king is here!” Chischilly had announced when he checked in for his first day of physical and occupational therapy at the Balboa Park hospital. His words put himself and everyone else on notice: I will work harder than anyone to regain my strength.

Capt. Matt Peterson, the former officer in charge of Chischilly’s police mentoring team in Kajaki, said the pronouncement was classic Chilly: “aggressive, enthusiastic, never in a bad mood. Things just don’t get him down.”

Whether it’s on the battlefield or fighting through physical therapy, the performance of young Marines like him had been an inspiration, Peterson said: “I just wonder where they get the strength to do it. It’s humbling, it’s motivating, and guys like Chilly just embody that.”

Despite his upbeat and outgoing personality, Chischilly was depressed initially about his limitations. He couldn’t lift a fork to his mouth. He couldn’t dress himself, or bathe. “I kind of thought of it as being born again,” he said.

Eventually he grew strong enough to get out of bed. He learned to walk again, on crutches and then a prosthetic leg, and to drive his family to the beach or the mall.

“Gradually I started to do those things all over again on my own,” he said. “Every step you get more strength back, more courage.”

Between his daily therapy appointments, Chischilly spent two to three hours in the gym each day. Before he was wounded he could bench press his own weight: about 180 pounds. The muscle wasted away after he was wounded, but he struggled ounce by ounce to regain it.

In January he lifted 90 pounds on the bar. He made it so far, so fast, he thought, why not keep going?

**A different life**

The pain will not last forever, he told the other wounded Marines and soldiers he met. You will not sit in that chair forever. Life is different now, but “as long as you stay positive and work really hard, it’s not over just yet,” Chischilly said.

Sutton could relate. His arm was so weak he couldn’t grip a bottle at first, and nerve damage caused him excruciating pain. But he drove himself to recover by drilling on his therapy exercises alone in his room.

The 3/5 Marines are known for their work ethic, Sutton said. “We fight and we fight hard. … We are not soft on each other and we are not soft on our guys. We push ourselves to the limit every single day no matter what we do.”

But there were some things no amount of effort could change. Sutton will never be able to return to his job as a machine gunner. His arm might remain disabled for life, though he plans to prove the doctors wrong on that one. And he will never be able to have children.

But he will become a father, he said. He proposed to his girlfriend on Christmas Day. They plan to adopt.

The hardest part of it all was “just being away from my guys. That is the hardest thing for any Marine who gets wounded in combat, just knowing that their guys are still over there.”

The last of the battalion returns from Afghanistan this month. Some of the “Darkhorse” leaders worried toward the end of the tour about the homecoming. Close to one in four Marines in the unit had been injured or killed. Would the ones marching off the buses at Camp Pendleton feel torn at the welcome back party between their relatives and the wounded Marines?

One young infantryman serving his last days in Sangin said it wasn’t a tough choice at all: “The wounded guys come first.” His other family, the one he was born with, “they can wait.”
Southern California -- this just in

Marines from the Dark Horse battalion return home to Camp Pendleton

April 11, 2011 | 10:40 pm

Exhausted yet exhilarated, Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, returned Monday night to Camp Pendleton after seven months of combat, death and survival in Afghanistan.

Hundreds of family members holding signs and waving American flags waited on a parade deck for 250 members of the battalion. Known as the Dark Horse battalion, the unit suffered 24 killed in action and more than 175 wounded as it fought to wrest control of the Sangin district in the Helmand province from the Taliban.

In deference to the battalion’s losses and its battlefield successes, Marine brass made sure this homecoming was even more festive than most. Amplified music -- including country-western, hip-hop and big band -- blared from speakers as excited family members waited.

“I just can’t believe it, that today is really here,” said Katie Cascino, 18, whose fiance is Cpl. Marcus Ferry, 25. “The days have just been so long.”

Jennie McFarling was there as an “official hugger” for Marines without family members waiting. McFarling, 59, of Escondido, said she was there to take her mind off the fact that her son, an Army soldier, was deploying Monday night to Kandahar, Afghanistan. “I’m here to try to forget that and what lies ahead,” she said.

Several young mothers held babies that had been born during their fathers’ deployment. One banner read, “I’ve Waited My Whole Life to Meet You! Welcome, Daddy.”

Many of the family members were from Southern California; others had traveled from across the country. Pam and Johnny Wiley had come from Athens, Ga., to meet their son, Cpl. Adam Wiley, 22.

“It’s been pure hell waiting for him all these months,” Pam Wiley said. “We’ve been so proud, but also so scared.”

Kelsey Robinson, 18, was there to meet her husband, Cpl. Miles Robinson, 22. The couple married a month before he deployed.

“The hardest part,” she said, “has been waking up every morning and not seeing him there.”

A cheer went up as the six buses arrived just before 8 p.m. The Marines had arrived hours earlier at March Air Reserve Base in Riverside County.

Among those in the crowd were several Marines who had been wounded early in the deployment and sent home for rehabilitation.
Lance Cpl. Mark Meirink, 21, lost his right leg in January when he stepped on a roadside bomb. He now has a prosthetic and is receiving therapy at Naval Medical Center San Diego. Meirink said he hopes to remain in the Marine Corps and is prepared to return to Afghanistan. “Absolutely,” he said.

Despite losing more personnel in combat than any of the Corps’ other battalions in the 10-year war, the Marines said they felt that their deployment was a success. “We did our job -- we never doubted that we’d do it,” Lance Cpl. Jerome Davis, 19, said as he held his month-old daughter, Janecia, for the first time.

More Marines from the battalion will return home in the coming days and weeks. The Dark Horse is being replaced in Sangin by the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, also from Camp Pendleton. Marine brass expect the Taliban to stage a counter-offensive in an effort to reclaim Sangin.

-- Tony Perry at Camp Pendleton

*Photo: Families, friends and fellow Marines await the arrival home of members of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment. Credit: Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times*
I have been on edge the past few days waiting for a phone call that you are at Leatherneck and therefore out of the danger zone.

I have not stopped praying for you and your men and the 1/5.

Your grandmother suggested that you leave your blast boxers for someone replacing you. (Of course, only after you have finished your last patrol.)

Anxious, but trusting,
love,
Mom

finally safe. the last couple patrols were the worst because it was too close to the end. i gave the boxers to the squad leader who replaced me. it was strange to leave and know that i wasn't going to lose my legs or get killed.

love you
Sweat saves Blood

Oh glorious day!
Last night at 1:22 I heard your voice yell, "Mom, I'm home" and I threw back the covers to get up and go let you in. Then I realized you couldn't possibly be at the back door.

Now I can cry.
CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan — Cpl. Ross Wimer wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with the telescoping mirror he found in a care package from his father back in West Point, Neb.

“I'm not doing any James Bond (stuff) out there,” Wimer said.

His father, Rick Wimer, became known as the king of care packages. Ross Wimer lost track of how many he received during his six months in the field.

While Ross Wimer may have lost count, his dad didn't. Rick Wimer says he mailed 146 boxes and 27 padded envelopes. The boxes to Ross weighed 2,239.87 pounds.

“Every time we picked up mail there were always a dozen just for him,” said Wimer's platoon commander, 1st Lt. Michael Owen, 24, of Tampa, Fla.

Rick Wimer even sent a few packages to Lance Cpl. Tim Wagner, another West Point native who was based down the road from Wimer's son.

The most prized items in the packages: the edible ones.

Ross Wimer, 22, and his platoon were thoroughly sick of their military meals ready to eat. Beef enchiladas were particularly loathed.

The care packages from Nebraska offered fajitas, pizza, ramen noodles. The men craved anything that didn't come in the brown plastic bag of an MRE.

The unit also received care packages from other sources: Operation Gratitude sent a Christmas delivery with more than enough toothbrushes and socks for everyone.

The men also loved getting newspaper clippings.

“We were kind of clueless about what was going on back in the States,” Wagner said.

Wimer's packages often included a head-scratching array — everything from toy tractors to tool sets. Pliers and wrenches. D-rings and carabiners.

“He sent me five hatchets,” Ross Wimer said.

While the corporal from West Point will soon head home, those care packages aren't stopping yet. Rick Wimer had his son collect names from the Marines replacing the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment. They can start checking the mail any day.
Marines walk the same path
By Joseph Morton
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER
ONLY IN THE WORLD-HERALD
CAMP LEATHERNECK, Afghanistan — A discarded blue plastic bottle cap on the ground.
A streak of spray paint in the dirt.
These are enough to remind Marines such as Cpl. Ross Wimer and Lance Cpl. Tim Wagner of their time out there, on patrol, in one of the most dangerous patches of Afghanistan.
The two grew up together, their houses a block apart, back in West Point, Neb. A couple of years older, Wimer joined the Marines first. It seemed an almost inevitable decision — that he would follow in the footsteps of his retired Marine father, Rick Wimer.
“He still thinks he's in,” a smiling Ross Wimer, 22, said of his dad's gung-ho attitude toward the Marine Corps.
Wagner, 20, said joining the Marines was just something he always wanted to do.
These two sons of West Point were deployed to Afghanistan in October, with different companies of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment — about 1,000 Marines who were taking over a security mission long held by the British.
The patrol bases where Wagner and Wimer went were just a few miles apart in the Taliban-heavy Sangin district of Helmand province. Their companies spent the past six months in the field, returning only recently to the relative safety of Camp Leatherneck.
The insurgents they fought like to plant homemade bombs — hundreds of them. One wrong step by a Marine on patrol can mean dismemberment or death.
These improvised explosive devices weigh so heavily on the Marines' minds, it's enough to make getting shot at seem like an attractive option.
“The IED threat was the scariest thing out there,” Wagner said. “We'd rather get shot at than have somebody hit an IED, any day.”
The Americans have adopted various low-tech tactics to counter the lurking explosives, such as keeping a rigid, single-file procession on patrol. Wimer's team used spray paint — typically black or yellow — to mark the ground. Everyone stayed as close to the right edge of the line as possible.

Wagner's team started with spray paint but quickly ran out and switched to using the plastic caps off their water bottles. As the lead rifleman, Wagner would set caps on the ground along the way to show everyone where to walk. The person bringing up the rear picked up the caps.

Both men are team leaders — Wimer in 1st Platoon, Lima Company, and Wagner in 3rd Platoon, Kilo Company — who have won praise from their superiors for responding well to a violent deployment.

Two weeks after arriving, a member of Wagner's platoon was killed after stepping on one of the hidden bombs.

The men gathered to talk afterward. If they hunkered down and never left the base, they realized, the enemy would have succeeded.

"Everybody knew we had to keep going," Wagner said. "It's hard seeing people get hurt, but it brought everybody closer together."

His platoon suffered at least 18 casualties, including three killed in action. Only a few of the 18 resulted from gunshot wounds.

Wimer's platoon also suffered a heavy toll. The bombs wounded six soldiers in six days last October. One of those soldiers died from his wounds. After two months, three men in the 33-man platoon had been killed in action and nine were wounded.

On Thanksgiving Day, Wagner's platoon was called out to help another platoon that had come under attack. During the ensuing firefight, Wagner's team leader was shot in the ankle.

The Nebraskan stepped up into the role of team leader. He scooped up the wounded man's gear and led his team through the mud to a nearby patrol base as gunfire raged around them — from the insurgents in the buildings behind and alongside them, from the Marines in the patrol base ahead of them and from the helicopters overhead.

Wagner held the title of team leader for the rest of the tour.

He also became known as someone who could spot an IED like no one else. His fellow soldiers credit him with sniffing out more than 30.

Lance Cpl. Trevor Halcomb, 22, of Dallas said Wagner saved his life many times.

"He's a brave dude to follow," Halcomb said.

The Marines lived in mud huts at the patrol bases, without showers, toilets or laundry facilities. Wimer didn't see a shower the entire six months he was in the field, in fact. Their uniforms turned black with dirt.

Dinner at the patrol base was usually a choice between a couple of unappealing MRE (meals ready to eat, with everything from entree to dessert sealed in plastic), such as spaghetti with Italian sausage or vegetarian lasagna.

They improved the living quarters as best they could. Wagner built a wood-burning stove out of a metal drum. For the holidays, he strung some battery-operated Christmas lights.

Wagner carried two beaten up laminated photos with him — one of his family and one of his girlfriend. He kept several coins in his shirtsleeve throughout his time in the field, including one given to him by Wimer's dad. One commemorative coin bore the phrase "The task ahead of you is never as great as the power behind you."

Someone was certainly looking out for Wagner. He stepped on a bomb, but it turned out to be defective. On his last patrol he nearly stepped on another — but decided to check the ground at the last second, and noticed it.

"It was like a sixth sense," he said. "Something just didn't feel right."
Ultimately, Wimer and Wagner each made it to the end of his time in Sangin safely and returned to Camp Leatherneck in one piece.

Life on the big base has felt like luxury compared with conditions in the field.
On his first trip to the dining facility, Wagner stacked his plate high with corn dogs, french fries and ice cream.
“I just put as much food down as I could,” he said.
Wagner isn't sure where his next deployment will be, but he figures this one has prepared him for just about anything.
“It doesn't matter where we go, it's likely not going to match up to this,” he said.
Wimer plans to leave the Marines after his enlistment ends in June. He will start classes at the University of Nebraska at Omaha this fall and might eventually try some business classes.

First, though, the two have planned their flights back to Nebraska. After they return to Camp Pendleton in California, their home base, their itinerary has them making a two-hour layover in Las Vegas, where they hope to do some quick partying.
Once back in West Point they plan to head to the lake outside of town. They spent a summer fishing and camping out there as kids, before everybody grew up and got jobs and responsibilities.
If it goes anything like their trips as youngsters, they won't catch much more than snapping turtles.
And that will be all right with them.

Lance Cpl. Tim Wagner, left, and Cpl. Ross Wimer were friends growing up together in West Point, Neb., and are now Marines serving in Afghanistan with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment. Wagner isn't sure where his next deployment will be, but Wimer plans to attend the University of Nebraska at Omaha in the fall. His enlistment ends this June.

ALYSSA SCHUKAR/THE WORLD-HERALD
MILITARY: Wounded platoon leader greets men who saved his life after Afghanistan blast

By MARK WALKER - mwalker@nctimes.com | Posted: Wednesday, April 20, 2011 8:55 pm

Wounded by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan just two weeks into his first combat assignment, Lt. Cameron West has waited for months to see the men who helped save his life after the explosion tore off his right leg.

He got that chance Wednesday afternoon, when members of the 3rd Platoon of Kilo Company returned to Camp Pendleton from a nearly eight-month deployment. The company is part of a Camp Pendleton battalion that has suffered more casualties than any other in the 10 years of fighting in Afghanistan.

"It's great to see you," Lance Cpl. Tim Wagner told West, as he greeted his former platoon leader on a parade deck deep inside the Marine Corps base, where hundreds of friends and family members greeted about 350 returning troops. "It's great to see everybody ---- it was a rough deployment."

West strode through the crowd on his prosthetic leg in search of the men he trained with for a year before deploying to Afghanistan in late September of last year.

"I just want to see as many guys as I can. It's good stuff ... now it's time for them just to relax."

On Oct. 15, West was leading his Camp Pendleton platoon on a hunt for Taliban insurgents in the Helmand province's deadly Sangin district. That's where 25 members of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment were killed and more than 150 wounded, including more than a dozen who lost one or more limbs.

As West ordered his platoon to a halt, his radio operator, Lance Cpl. James Boelk of Oceanside, stepped on a hidden bomb. The blast killed Boelk and injured West and three other Marines and the platoon's Navy medical corpsman.

Among the men there that day was Cpl. Darin Hess, who also greeted West on Wednesday. "It was the worst reality check in the world that day," Hess said, recalling West as a "very aggressive, tough and true leader."

Hess arrived home last week. Wednesday's homecoming was the next-to-last for the battalion since its more than 900 members began arriving home last week.

"These guys are all my brothers and always will be," Hess said of why he made sure he was on hand to greet the Kilo and Weapons Company troops.

The same was true for Cpl. Justin McCloud, who like West is undergoing rehabilitation at Navy Medical Center West in San Diego. McCloud lost his legs and an arm in a roadside bomb explosion shortly after West was injured.

McCloud said he misses his fellow Marines, adding, "They're all my brothers, and it's a tight brotherhood."

West, 25, also lost a finger and has little vision in his right eye, the result of shrapnel from the bomb. A surgery scheduled in June is intended to clean up the fragments in advance of optical surgery that doctors say can restore full sight.

Among those he saw was 1st Lt. Tom Schueman of Chicago, who said returning to Camp Pendleton after the bloody deployment was "fantastic."

"We really missed him," he said of West. "The company missed him, but we knew he was back here acting as a leader for the wounded guys."

Schueman's mom, Grace, a Chicago police officer, was among the dozens of parents on hand to greet their sons.

A beat patrolwoman who sees it all in her work, she said her son's deployment was the most nerve-racking time of her life.
"There's nothing they can do to you prepare you for it," she said. "The almost daily reports of deaths when they first got there were terrible. Every time someone knocked on the door, electricity just shot through me.

"My heart goes out to all those families whose sons didn't come home."

Col. Willy Buhl, the former regimental commander, said getting the battalion's troops home and back with their families will allow him to rest a little easier at night.

"It's a combination of great pride and great relief," he said. "They've been through the most significant deployment of any battalion since (the Iraq war) 2004, and they've measured up in every respect."

The unit was credited with helping wrest the Sangin district from the control of the insurgent Taliban, who used the region for illicit drug trafficking and manufacturing roadside bombs, which reports said littered the area.

Marine Corps officials have taken the unusual step of ordering the battalion to stay together for another 90 days to decompress together. A cadre of mental health specialists has been assigned to watch over the troops.

Sandy Cook of Dallas, at the base to meet her son, Cpl. Clay Cook, said she wholeheartedly supports that decision.

"I'm so glad they're staying together," she said. "I think they need each other after what they've been through. The continuity that's going to provide is important for them to heal."

West's mom, Sheryl, a registered nurse, also was at the base and said her son is still processing his difficult memories.

"It's hard, and it's going to be hard for a lot of these guys for some time," she said.
Marines turn the tide in the ‘Fallujah of Afghanistan’
3rd Battalion, 5th Marines battle for Sangin
By Gretel C. Kovach Reporter - Military

March 4, 2011 - Sangin, Afghanistan
Cpl. Jason Gaal who was promoted to squad leader in January after another Marine he admired died, looks on at his squad as he leads them on an overnight combat patrol Marines from the 3rd Battalion 5th Marines are deployed to Sangin, Afghanistan and due to return home to Camp Pendleton later this month in April. ---
MANDATORY CREDIT: NELVIN C. CEPEDA/San Diego Union-Tribune/Zuma Press

SANGIN, Afghanistan — It would be hard to forget that face, even if they hadn’t seen it just the day before.

A young Afghan man stood on the side of a narrow dirt lane, watching an open-top truckload of Marines head into a volatile neighborhood in this river valley town coveted by Taliban insurgents and drug lords.

The man smiled at the Marines and waved. Then he yanked a kite string detonation cord attached to a bomb buried in the road.

A platoon from Camp Pendleton’s 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment would have been decimated in the attack. The battalion already had suffered more casualties than any other in the 10-year war in Afghanistan, long before its seven-month tour ended this month. But the homemade device was a dud. It smoked but failed to explode until the Marines drove safely out of the way.

The next day, the Marines shot their way back into the ravine, wounding an armed fighter who was dragged into a mosque. When they reached the alley where they had been attacked, Cpl. Jason Gaal and Staff Sgt. Nathan Stocking couldn’t believe their eyes. Both recognized a guy riding by on a motorcycle.

“Lo’ and behold, there’s our trigger man,” Gaal said.

Stocking walked the trembling flex-cuffed detainee back to base, overcompensating for his fury with exaggerated gentleness. “My buddy … my buddy,” he sang, guiding his prisoner lightly by the arm.

The arrest in March of the suspected insurgent was one of many hard-fought victories the 3/5 Marines were savoring during their last weeks in Sangin. Even by Marine Corps standards and the long history of one of its most decorated battalions, their tour that ended this month was brutal.

In October, the Camp Pendleton unit was dropped into the deadliest area of the country for international troops. Their ensuing battle for Sangin extracted a grim toll from their ranks — nearly one in four wounded or killed, most in the first three months. At least 29 Marines and sailors from the battalion and its attachments died and a couple hundred more were wounded.

When Defense Secretary Robert Gates flew to Sangin last month, he said he had been praying for the 3/5 Marines daily, because they had paid an extraordinary price in sweat and blood to add their names to the Marine Corps roll of honor. But the result had been a “dramatic turnaround,” in his view, for an area of the country that had bedeviled and bloodied British troops and the Afghan government for years.
“You’ve killed, captured or driven away most of the Taliban that called this place home. And in doing so, you’ve linked northern Helmand, Uruzgan and Kandahar provinces, a major strategic breakthrough,” Gates told the Marines.

**Going in**

They had prepared for a tough fight. Anyone who Googled “Sangin,” as many of the Marines heading there did, knew that subduing the “Fallujah of Afghanistan” would be a challenge. Before the British pulled out in September, they lost more than 100 troops in Sangin, nearly a third of their war dead.

The town of mud-walled homes and concrete block bazaar stalls in the far northeast of Helmand province is flanked by jagged peaks and a patchwork of poppy fields. Its stunning beauty, remoteness and access to a strategic crossroads made it a nexus for Taliban militants.

The British had shouldered much of the security burden in Helmand province since 2006. Troop levels forced them to focus on more populated areas while they struggled in Sangin to secure the main road, the district government offices and their military bases.

With British troops penned in under constant attack, the insurgents had free rein to run weapons, fighters and drugs. The Kabul administration seemed to write off Sangin as a lost cause. Helmand governor Gulab Mangal raged at the British, “stop calling it the Sangin District and start calling it the Sangin Base. All you have done here is built a military camp next to the city,” according to U.S. diplomatic cables first publicized by the WikiLeaks website.

**A ferocious fight**

When the 3/5 Marines arrived, they literally stepped into a minefield. They were warned by another unit that took command for a few weeks after the British departed, the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines from Twentynine Palms, that the density of homemade bombs dug into the dirt roads, paths, and bullet-pocked housing compounds of the Sangin valley was unlike anything international forces had encountered in Afghanistan or Iraq.

The new battalion started the tour losing 10 Marines killed and many more wounded within nine days, most of them to improvised explosive devices, or IEDs.

Kilo Company’s introduction to Sangin began Oct. 14, when a patrol was attacked by streams of enemy machine gun fire. Amid the firefight, one Marine stepped on a homemade bomb. A minute later, a second Marine triggered another.

A Navy hospital corpsman, knowing he was surrounded by buried explosives, ran to help. He lost both his legs. Lance Cpl. Alec Catherwood and Lance Cpl. Joseph Lopez died, a squad leader was shot in the leg and incapacitated, and several other Marines suffered concussions.

With so many wounded and killed and stunned, a 26-year-old scout sniper leader operating in the distance, Sgt. Matthew Abbate, ignored the bomb threat and maneuvered in to take control. (In December, he too was killed, and the battalion nominated him for one of the Navy’s highest medals for valor in combat.)

That evening, with two platoons running low on ammunition, the company commander and his enlisted leaders walked into Patrol Base Fires to resupply the Marines. Insurgents had flooded the area to cut off the base. The only way in was a trek through mud.

“Fires was totally surrounded,” Capt. Nickoli Johnson recalled.

During the Korean War, the 3/5 Marines had been encircled by divisions of Chinese troops in the Chosin reservoir, Johnson reminded them, but the “Darkhorse” battalion broke out under extremely dire circumstances and fought its way to the sea.
Marines on patrol maneuver past a small poppy field in Helmand province. The crop is used in the international heroin trade.

“This is your opportunity to lead a breakout of your own. We’re going to go out there, we’re going to penetrate those defenses and we’re going to chase the enemy down. We’re going to punish them where they sleep and follow them wherever they go, until we break their backs,” he said.

In October, international air forces dropped more weapons on Afghanistan than in any other month since at least 2007. Most of the Hellfire missiles, 500-pound bombs and Excalibur artillery rounds, among other ordnance, supported the Marines in Sangin, where the ferocious fight continued for months.

At first the insurgents organized complex ambushes and fought toe to toe with the Marines from elaborate defenses, including perches in trees and firing ports gouged into mud walls. Later they relied increasingly on indirect attacks, including homemade bombs, assassinations and beatings to intimidate “collaborators.”

On several occasions, Marine positions were close to being overrun. At a patrol base protecting a power station, the small unit first assigned there made a warning system out of a string of soup cans. Insurgents threw death threats for their translator over the patrol base wall at night tied to corn stalks.

The mass casualties continued, but the Marines kept pushing out of their patrol bases, deep into Taliban territory.

The toll

Lt. Will Donnelly, a popular 27-year-old platoon commander known for his willingness to drive inebriated Marines home at all hours of the night, had finally convinced his longtime girlfriend to start a family. They married in the forest of Yosemite Park two weeks before he deployed to Sangin. He was shot to death on Thanksgiving Day, and his men fought back to base with his body, firing rifles and throwing grenades.

Lance Cpl. Brandon Pearson, 21, and Lance Cpl. Matthew Broehm, 22, were murdered by a turncoat Afghan soldier who gunned them down on their patrol base while they were standing post. The Afghan man drank tea and watched music videos with the Marines before the attack as if nothing was amiss. He fled that night under cover of insurgent gunfire. When the Marines later realized it had been an inside job, their blood curdled in loathing and mistrust.

Lt. Robert Kelly, another popular platoon commander who made a point of leading from the front, was killed by an insurgent bomb buried in the bank of a canal. Many of the men he served with had no idea that the 29-year-old officer, who had previously served in the enlisted ranks, was the son of a three-star Marine Corps general.

Lance Cpl. Brandon Long, whose legs were blown off, among other grave injuries, felt that he died during the bomb strike. “I was walking to the light and I heard a voice tell me it’s not your time,” he wrote in a letter to his rifle company.

“What do I do?” he asked.

“The way that you came,” the voice responded. Two days later his daughter was born. Wanting to be a father to her brought him back to life, he said.

Gaal, 22, who was promoted to squad leader in January after another Marine he admired died, said “there is really no way to prepare yourself for the first time that you see somebody’s legs get blown off, or you see one of your friends get killed.
“It sucks, but the situation that we’re in, you don’t have a lot of time to sit there and think about it. You just have to keep pressing on,” he said.

As waves of combat replacements deployed to Sangin, many seriously injured Marines hid their wounds to avoid being sent home. At least two who were shot and ordered back to Camp Pendleton to recover returned months later to Sangin to finish the tour.

At a memorial service in January for three of his Marines killed in action, Lt. Col. Jason Morris, the 3/5 Battalion commander, asked: “Where do we get men such as these, men who look death in the face and continue to move forward?”

The losses were painful, but they steeled the resolve of the Marines to punish the enemy, Johnson said. “It was like throwing gasoline on a fire that was already burning.”

During a shura meeting in January, an Afghan man approached the regimental commander in charge of northern Helmand at the time, Col. Paul Kennedy, and smashed him in the face with a rock, breaking his nose. A Marine in his security detail shot the Afghan dead.

That month, a squad reinforced with snipers and machine gunners battled the Taliban in a six-hour firefight, killing at least two dozen of them. The Marines were running low on ammunition for the second time that day, night was falling and they had chased the insurgents into another unit’s area of operations before the company commander ordered them back.

The Taliban had built a mystique of being magical warriors who appeared and disappeared like ghosts. But Sgt. Philip McCulloch, Jr., the 22-year-old squad leader, said: “There were motorcycles and dead Taliban all over the battlefield. It was something you don’t see every day out here.”

**Breakthroughs**

The closure of about half the British bases, including checkpoints lining the main route through town, had handed terrain secured at great cost back to the insurgents.

The decision was based on manpower and a more flexible patrolling strategy. By the time the Camp Pendleton 3/5 Marines arrived, the main road was full of bombs. To resupply its northern Sangin bases, the 20-minute drive required an all-day detour through the desert, where each convoy invariably hit a bomb.

In December, the Marines secured Route 611 during a two-week operation to clear the explosives. The operation was possible in part because of a mini surge of troops and other resources sent to the greater Sangin valley that helped the Marines fortify their positions and build new ones.

A company of Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment that had been operating in Marjah took over one corner of the battalion’s area of operations, while reconnaissance Marines moved into another. Reservists from the 3/25 Battalion pitched in standing post and other duties in Sangin, and a company of tankers plus a battalion landing team of about 1,000 Marines reinforced their southern flank in Gereshk.

The influx was coupled with the infusion of extra Afghan paramilitary police forces early this year and the appointment of about a dozen district government officials, as a logjam of Afghan resources that had been particularly felt in Sangin began to break free across Helmand province, British and American civilian representatives said.

The added manpower and reopening of the road were among the factors that reached a tipping point in Sangin over the winter, resulting in a steep plunge in violence and newfound cooperation by formerly recalcitrant tribal elders. Another factor was the changing of the seasons, when head-high corn was harvested and leaves fell from the trees, depriving the enemy of cover, and cold rains degraded explosives.

The Marines assigned to the most heavily bomb-laden central areas had also learned the hard way early on that no technology was infallible and even the ground they stood on was not safe. Engineers assigned to sweep ahead of the patrols couldn’t always count on their metal detectors to find the bombs, so they shuffled their feet with
An hour before taking the point man position for his squad, Lance Cpl. Zachary Stangle relaxes at his cot. As the point man during patrol, Stangle is responsible for locating IEDs and guiding his fellow Marines on the safest route.

small steps. “I make sure that I’ll be the one to step on it before any of these guys,” said 19-year-old Lance Cpl. Zachary Stangle.

The bomb threat is a numbers game in the insurgents’ favor, because the Marines may find 99 explosives, but it takes just one to kill. “Fortunately we are a learning organization, and the Marines obviously want to keep their legs. They want to stay alive. So they got very good at finding them,” said Morris, the 3/5 battalion commander.

By March the battalion had encountered more than 1,000 bombs in their area of central Sangin district. Only 145 of them were strikes. The rest were found or interdicted before they could harm. By comparison, the battalion was engaged in more than 520 firefight and killed or wounded about 470 enemy fighters in that time.

Bing West, a military historian who made several trips to Helmand province in the last year, said that the innate aggression of the U.S. Marine made the difference on the battlefield. “The Marines have won. No one wants to fight them anymore,” he said.

When Brig. Gen. Joseph Osterman, the Task Force Leatherneck commander, sent his theatre reserve of about 400 reconnaissance Marines into the far north of Sangin in late November, fighters swarmed to the area. The recon Marines killed hundreds within about five weeks, he said. “The insurgents attacked them in that position and basically just impaled themselves on the Marines.” The intense combat helped push the largest tribe in Sangin to a cease-fire, which was clinched in January after Afghan provincial officials showed the Alikozai around the bustling and relatively peaceful provincial capital of Lashkar Gah.

The tribe broke with the Taliban in 2007, but insurgents crushed the Alikozai uprising, dragging one elder out of town behind a truck. Afghan and British forces stood by, unable or unwilling to intervene.

The latest security agreement did not live up to its promise, since attacks continued in Alikozai areas. But a steep drop in enemy activity allowed Marine engineers to finish grading and graveling Route 611 in March up to the Kajaki district border, Marine commanders said.

Rebuilding the road was central to the Marine strategy of “big stick COIN,” in Sangin — counterinsurgency operations that rely on both the carrot of development and the stick of combat power, said Lt. Col. Thomas West, a civil affairs Marine from Anaheim Hills.

“Securing that 611 route and taking it away from the Taliban is opening a huge avenue of stability,” said West, who was part of a companion surge of governance and development experts sent to Sangin. “It makes a vital economic corridor that the people here depend on.”

Capt. Abdul Hamid, 29, an Afghan army commander who has been stationed in Sangin for a year and a half, said that enemy flags and bombs used to surround the international coalition’s patrol bases. “Now, with the Marines’ help, some of the Taliban have turned in their weapons, and the people feel free to come and tell us about the IEDs. Now they know the government is dominant here.”

What’s next

The true test of whether the security gains the 3/5 Marines wrought in Sangin can be sustained will come this summer, after the poppy is harvested and the traditional fighting season is in full swing. Before their replacements took over in April — the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, also from Camp Pendleton — small groups of fighters had begun to infiltrate Sangin, causing an uptick in harassing shooting attacks.

Many Sangin residents say they are weary of war. Toward the end of their tour, so were many Marines. The glamour had worn off for many gung-ho infantrymen stationed in Sangin, who declared the boring patrols to be the best.

“We’ve done what we came out here to do. This place is a lot more stable now,” said Sgt. Ivan Teran, 24. “You’re not going to hear any of these guys saying ‘yeah, let’s get some!’ … They’ve experienced just about as much as you can experience being a grunt in the Marine Corps.”

The Darkhorse Marines fought on after seeing their best friends ripped limb from limb, over and over again — five times in the case of one lance corporal this reporter spoke to. The courage of this generation of Marines in the face of such an insidious weapon, “a weapon designed to maim, a weapon designed to have psychological impact
by inflicting grotesque casualties,” made a deep impression on Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the senior Marine and NATO commander of southwestern Afghanistan for the last year.

“I’m just awed by their ability every day to disregard the danger and face the enemy,” knowing what each step could cost them, Mills said.

Back in San Diego, medical staff assembled a multipart plan to help the Marines and their families with the transition home.

Sangin changed them, the Marines conceded. They wouldn’t be human otherwise. But Stocking, the 27-year-old platoon sergeant serving his fourth combat tour, said he was not worried about their mental state. “Once everyone gets home they’re going to realize that the sky is so much bluer, the air breathes so much better,” he said.

“Guys that have been in this type of situation … they realize how good life really is.”
The story of Sangin, in their own words

Written by Gretel C. Kovach 8 p.m., April 28, 2011

Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment on patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

The 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment gathers today at Camp Pendleton with family and military dignitaries to honor the fallen from their ranks in Sangin, Afghanistan.

During their seven-month tour that ended this month, the battalion helped subdue the deadliest area of the country for international forces. The ritual roll call of names during the memorial ceremony will be answered by silence, but the Marines who gave their lives in the violent outpost coveted by Taliban insurgents and opium traders will be remembered in the annals of the Corps.

Much was written about the 3/5 Marines during their ferocious fight against an entrenched insurgency, when the battalion suffered more casualties than any other in the 10-year war, according to Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Union-Tribune staff writer Gretel C. Kovach and photojournalist Nelvin C. Cepeda spent three weeks on the Sangin front lines with the “Darkhorse” battalion in February and March.

This selection of voices recounts their battle for Sangin — how it was fought, what it meant to them and what it cost.

Capt. Richard Barclay

The battalion operations officer, Barclay said the Marines took an aggressive approach against the insurgents: “We wanted to come in here and punch them in the face. … This area and its violence needed a kind of fresh perspective going into it.” By late winter, Sangin became much quieter because “they can’t beat us on the ground in direct firefights. With the amount of intelligence surveillance equipment that we have, and the amount of arms that we can use, artillery and air, it is not a fair fight and it never was meant to be a fair fight for them. It was only a matter of time before we learned their tactics for IED (improvised explosive device) lay-in, found a way around that the best we could, and really just saturated the area with patrols.”

HM3 Sky Saintlouis a Navy hospital corpsman who immigrated to the United States from Haiti as a boy. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

HM3 Sky Saintlouis

The Navy hospital corpsman, who immigrated from Haiti as a boy, said the insurgents’ homemade bombs created wounds unlike
any seen in typical emergency rooms. On his second field operation in Sangin, he almost lost a young Marine whose legs were blown off by an IED. Saintlouis, another corpsman, the platoon commander and several others helped stanch the bleeding and save his life. There was no leg left to apply tourniquets, so Saintlouis stuffed the Marine’s wounds with gauze treated with blood clotter. “His eyes had rolled back. He was completely out, and with a little help we got him to survive. That was the best feeling,” Saintlouis said.

But months after another Marine died, Saintlouis kept brooding about the loss, wondering what more he could have done. “You’re going to make it,” he told the lance corporal before he was flown out of the war zone. When he passed away weeks later in the hospital, “that hurt.”

“I cannot choose who survives,” Saintlouis said.

Lance Cpl. Stephen Cribbs: The last corporate before he was flown out of the war zone. “I’d already missed enough time with my brothers — they were making history out here,” Cribbs said. “Every day it seemed there was news coming back about another buddy getting hit.” Cribbs earned his combat action ribbon the day after Christmas. “All day long, they were shooting at us from the green zone (of trees and fields.) You could hear the bullets whizzing by. It sounded like Star Wars lasers. You know when it’s close, it’s the scariest sound.”

Staff Sgt. Thomas Parks
Parks, who was selected for meritorious promotion to gunnery sergeant, held his platoon together after their commander was killed. “You have to stay focused, or something bad can happen. You don’t take your packs off until you’re done. … Hopefully 12, 15 years from now our kids won’t have to come here and do this.”

Linsey Becker Donnelly
The widow of 1st Lt. William Donnelly IV, a platoon commander and prior enlisted Marine shot to death on Thanksgiving Day, said her husband wanted to join the Corps since he was a boy. “He was always into guns and grew up believing that the Marines were the best and the bravest. He carved an eagle, globe, and anchor out of wood when he was eight, and there are pictures of foxholes he dug all over his mother’s lawn when he was little.”

Before they left Camp Pendleton, Donnelly and his buddies were amped about Sangin. “It was a bad area, and they were going to go clean it up,” she recalled.

“I was proud of him,” she said. Donnelly tried to discuss the possibility that he could be killed, but his wife couldn’t bear to think of it. “It never crossed my mind that he wouldn’t come back.”
local people was harder in Afghanistan than it had been for the Marines in Iraq. “The folks here have been fighting for 30 years, so there’s a numbness that has built up,” he said.

“Getting them to see that hope in the future and then realize that the best way to get to that hope is to participate, both on the governmental side of things as well as the security side, that dialogue took time,” he said. But the effort began to bear fruit in Sangin last fall, he added: “We’ve seen a lot more local leaders stepping up and saying, ‘Look, I’m tired of the Taliban, I’m tired of the fighting.’”

1st Lt. Daniel Barbeau, a 3/5 commander who served another tour in Helmand province in Now Zad in 2008. — Nelvin C. Cepeda

1st Lt. Daniel Barbeau

A 3/5 platoon commander on his second Helmand province tour, Barbeau served in Now Zad in 2008: “It was a lot like Sangin. Pretty much everyone there was straight-up Taliban. … I’ve heard since then people have moved back in, there’s actually a police force and it’s supposed to be the model city, going from horrible to pretty nice. Hopefully the same thing can happen in Sangin.”

Rear Adm. Forrest Faison III

The commander of San Diego Naval Medical Center at Balboa Park said his staff planned for months before the battalion returned home to be ready to care for the Marines’ physical and mental well-being. “When Marines come back from combat, you come back changed. So there will be a period of adjustment for the families to help bring that Marine back into the family,” he said. “That Marine is going to be different than when they left, and that sometimes creates stress for families.”

Lance Cpl. Zachary Stangle

An engineer who swept ahead of the patrols for bombs, Stangle said, “The beginning was horrible. It was so bad here. You’d step outside the wire and five minutes later you’d start getting shot at, you’d see one of your buddies get hit by an IED. But now, you hardly have to worry anymore. There are far less IEDs, far less firefight, far less Taliban in general. I hope they’re not just laying low and hiding.”

Despite the heavy combat, and because of it, “we’re finding the good things in life still. We’re not coldblooded killers now. We still appreciate flowers, and dogs. The little things. We care about the little things more than we used to,” Stangle said, because “we’ve seen a lot of good people go down.”
‘Darkhorse’ Marines honor fallen brothers
Camp Pendleton ceremony pays tribute to 25 men killed in Sangin

CAMP PENDLETON — One by one, the Marines approached the podium to speak about their brothers-in-arms killed in Sangin, Afghanistan. Each of the 25 men who died with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment during the tour that ended this month was honored Friday at Camp Pendleton by a Marine who knew him best.

Their voices quavered at times and their happiest memories were undercut by sadness, but the respect and affection they showed for the men who fought at their sides was unwavering.

Among the fallen was Lance Cpl. Joseph C. Lopez. He made everyone laugh with his modified moon walk and whistle; he considered his mom and dad to be the loves of his life, and he knew just what to say to reassure a fellow Marine who confessed before they left for Sangin: “hey brother, I’m scared.”

Sgt. Jason D. Peto always had a gorgeous girl on his arm, or a bruise from his latest dirt bike or snowboard outing. “I hate final roll call,” Peto’s friend and fellow Marine, Sgt. Joel Bailey, said.

During Friday’s ceremony, the names of the fallen were called out, but there was no answer. Instead the bell tolled for them and the guns fired in salute.

“Whisper present,” Bailey implored, because Peto’s presence was surely felt, along with all the “Darkhorse” Marines who did not make it back alive.

Several hundred family members joined the 3/5 Marines and their military commanders for the “remembrance ceremony” on a helicopter landing zone high in the clouds above Camp Pendleton. Many more wanted to attend, but the battalion leaders kept the gathering close-knit.

Seven months ago, about 1,000 Marines and sailors from the 3/5 and the 1st Combat Engineers deployed from their headquarters in the San Mateo area of Camp Pendleton for Afghanistan. They had trained together for almost a year before they left California, in snowy mountain passes and desert combat training ranges.
The unit turned over command in Sangin on April 11 to another Camp Pendleton unit from the “Fighting Fifth”: the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment. The last of the 3/5 Marines returned home last weekend.

Twenty-five Marines from that original group returned “on their shields,” as the Marines say, not including Marines from other units who died alongside them in Sangin, which has been the deadliest area for international troops in Afghanistan.

Each volunteered to join the Marine Corps during a time of war, said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, the battalion commander. “While each and every loss in this battalion hurts, we must remember how our comrades lived and what they accomplished,” Morris said.

They sent shockwaves through the insurgency by killing, capturing or wounding well over 600 insurgents in Sangin, where they turned “hopelessness to hope” and removed the yoke of the Taliban from the shoulders of the Afghan people, Morris said: “They helped turn the tide” and won a decisive victory against the enemy.

It hurts knowing they’re gone, the Darkhorse battalion Marines said. But they are comforted by the memory that they died doing what they had trained and strived to do, many while running into gunfire like Sgt. Jason Amores.

Lance Cpl. Irvin M. Ceniceros, for instance, fought to get into the battalion so he could deploy to Afghanistan, then he “rained hell” on the enemy with his 240 machine gun during the October fire fight that claimed his life, Sgt. Ryan Schmidt recalled during the ceremony.

Ceniceros’ actions protected his entire squad that day. “He is our hero and he will always be remembered,” said Maria Ceniceros, his mother, speaking in Spanish.

“Someone asked me, was it worth it? It’s worth it to them, so who are we to question that?” said Lt. Gen. John Kelly, whose son 1st Lt. Robert Kelly, died in Sangin. “They join to do this. They are never so happy as when they are doing what they were doing in Sangin.”

Close to 200 Darkhorse Marines and sailors were wounded, many gravely so. The ones sent to the rear guard to heal made memorial battle crosses for the fallen in the age-old symbol of rifle, helmet and boots.

Many relatives and friends of the fallen wept and clung to the living for support as they caressed the metal tags clinking against rifles. Others knelt with head bowed and kissed the tips of their fingers, then touched the empty boots.

Many wounded Marines flew in from military hospitals around the country to attend the ceremony, rolling over in wheelchairs or walking on prosthetic legs to pay their respects to the dead.

Lance Cpl. Juan Dominguez, a 26-year-old Marine who lost an arm and both legs in Sangin, lingered in front of the battle cross of his friend, Lance Cpl. James Boelk.

“It was an honor to be here for our fallen brothers. This was the last bit of closure that a lot of us needed, being all here together,” Dominguez said.

“I am going to live my life to the fullest,” for those who didn’t make it, he said. “That is what I am going to do for all my brothers.”

Katherine Wyatt brought her infant son Michael, who was born the day after his father Cpl. Derek Wyatt died, to meet some of his daddy’s friends. “He was the most amazing man I’ll ever know, and he will be strongly missed,” she said, “even by those who never met him, including his son.”
Marine Sgt. Maj. James Bushway salutes the battlefield crosses for the "Dark Horse" troops killed in Afghanistan. Although there was grieving at the memorial service, there also were expressions of pride in having accomplished a dangerous, deadly job. "These Marines did what Marines always do," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, the battalion commander. "They took the fight to the enemy and they won."

A Marine pauses in front of an inverted rifle display at Camp Pendleton, where dog tags and empty boots on a wooden box symbolize the death of a fallen comrade. A memorial service Friday honored 25 troops from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, who were killed and more than 200 who were wounded during a seven-month campaign to drive the Taliban from the Sangin district of Afghanistan's Helmand province.

Wearing a tiny Marine Corps uniform, Tevan Lee Nguyen Jr., looks at the memorial to his father, Marine Cpl. Tevan Lee Nguyen, as he is held by Marine Cpl. Kenneth Foehl.
A Marine fights back tears during the service. Many in the crowd -- Marines and family members -- wept openly as the Marines spoke of a special bond with the fallen. The battalion's wounded were brought from military hospitals in Palo Alto, San Diego, Texas and Washington, D.C.

Marines and family members mourn the fallen after the memorial service on a hilltop helicopter landing zone with a panoramic view of the green hills of the sprawling Camp Pendleton base.
Tears are mixed with pride at Camp Pendleton memorial for fallen Marines

Tribute is paid to 25 'Dark Horse' troops who died and more than 200 others who were wounded while routing the Taliban from the Sangin district of Afghanistan's Helmand province.

April 30, 2011|By Tony Perry, Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Camp Pendleton -- It was a gathering of the wounded in body and the wounded in spirit as hundreds of family members and friends joined a thousand Marines at a memorial service for the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, just back from Afghanistan.

But if there was grieving and the sound and sight of tears, there also were expressions of pride in having accomplished a dangerous, deadly job for their country.

"These Marines did what Marines always do," Lt. Col. Jason Morris, the battalion commander, told the gathering. "They took the fight to the enemy and they won."

When the Marines of the 3/5 arrived in the Sangin district of Helmand province in late September, Taliban flags flew boldly throughout the region, the schools were closed by Taliban order and the marketplace was virtually abandoned.

Photos: Memorial service at Camp Pendleton

Seven months later, after hundreds of firefights and the discovery of hundreds of roadside bombs, Sangin is a different place. The Taliban flags are gone; the schools, including those for girls, are open; and the marketplace is flourishing.

The long-term future of Sangin, indeed all of Afghanistan, is yet to be determined, but for the moment, the Afghan government has a chance to establish itself in a region that has long been a stronghold of the Taliban, the narcotics cartel and their allies in neighboring Pakistan.

In those seven months, 25 Marines from the 3/5 were killed in combat and more than 200 were wounded — more dead and wounded than from any Marine battalion in the 10-year war in Afghanistan.

On Friday, the Marines held a memorial for the 3/5 on a hilltop helicopter landing zone with a panoramic view of the green hills of the sprawling base.

The battalion's wounded were brought from military hospitals in Palo Alto, San Diego, Texas, and Washington, D.C. Family members of the dead and wounded came from across the country: among them, a truck driver, firefighter, car mechanic and a three-star Marine general, all of whom lost sons in the fight for Sangin.

The family of Lance Cpl. John Travis Sparks came from Chicago, wearing T-shirts bearing his picture. "He was joyous," Leona Sparks said of her grandson. "To anybody who met him, he became a true friend."

The family of Pfc. Colton Rusk came from Orange Grove, Texas, bringing with them Eli, the bomb-sniffing Labrador who was with Rusk when he was killed. When Rusk was gravely wounded by a Taliban sniper, Eli rushed to his side, guarding him against further attack.

The military arranged for the family to adopt Eli, who now roams the Rusk farm and has bonded with Colton's young brother, Brady.
"We live day by day now, taking care of Eli and making sure Colton is remembered," said his mother, Kathy Rusk. "It makes your heart full with pride to know that your son was loved by so many friends."

Under a blue sky and a light breeze, the fallen 25 were remembered by their buddies, sometimes with halting voices, often while fighting tears.

"It hurts like hell knowing he's not with us," one Marine said of Lance Cpl. Randy Braggs.

They were young: none older than 30. Some had fought in Iraq. Some had never before been away from the United States.

Lt. Robert Kelly, the son of Lt. Gen. John F. Kelly, had fought as an enlisted Marine in Iraq, then became an officer and was eager to lead Marines in Afghanistan.

He was leading a patrol when he was killed instantly by an improvised explosive device.

Many of the 25 were religious. Cpl. Tevan Nguyen had a saying scribbled on his helmet: "I won't greet death, I'll greet Jesus."

They trained together in Twentynine Palms for the Afghanistan deployment, had after-hours fun together, and exchanged confidences, sometimes admitting that the prospect of combat scared them.

Many had volunteered for the "Dark Horse" battalion in hopes of living up to the battalion motto: "Get Some."

"When I said I wanted to go to 3/5 and kill Taliban, he was right there with me," Sgt. Joel Bailey said of Sgt. Jason Peto.

And so it went for nearly two hours. In the audience were Marines in wheelchairs, some double amputees, some triple, some with severe brain injuries.

A Marine who lost both legs showed the family of Lance Cpl. Jose Maldonado that he now has a tattoo on his arm with Maldonado's name to commemorate their days together in combat.

Many in the crowd — Marines and family members — wept openly as the Marines spoke of a special bond with the fallen.

"I personally think [Lance Cpl. Alec] Catherwood was sent to me by God," said Cpl. Clancy Cheek. "If you knew Catherwood, you are a better person for it."

Sgt. Ryan Schmidt, speaking of Lance Cpl. Irvin Ceniceros, ended his remembrance with a simple farewell:

"Guns up, brother, may you rest in peace."
Cpl. Christopher Montgomery, a U.S. Marine from Mobile, at the Center for the Intrepid, a rehabilitation facility at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. On Dec. 7th Montgomery was on patrol with the 3rd Battalion 5th Marines in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, when he stepped on an improvised explosive device. "I knew my legs were gone," he says. Montgomery, 23, is determined to walk, and move on with his life. "I have to reinvent myself," he says.

At Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, Christopher Montgomery, a U.S. Marine corporal from Mobile, is learning to walk on artificial limbs.

Having lost his legs after stepping on an IED in Afghanistan, Montgomery spends arduous days in the hospital’s Center for the Intrepid, a rehabilitation unit.

“Everyone here has the same goals,” he says, “all the Marines, the Army guys, the Air Force. They want to walk again and go on with their lives.

“This place,” he says, “is pretty awesome.”

Since the explosion last December, Montgomery, 23, has received medical attention at several locales, from Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany to Walter Reed Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

The Baker High School graduate, who once bounded over playing fields as a soccer star, does not feel sorry for himself, nor want the spotlight.

“There’s a person getting injured right now over there,” he says of Afghanistan. “I’m not anybody special.

“People should be more aware of what they go through over there. Not saying me, just the average soldier.”

The time-line for his recovery is uncertain. But he is more than certain about his goals. He intends to go to college, play sports again, enjoy the beach, and relish time with his family and friends.

“I want to get in a vehicle without somebody picking up a damn wheelchair and putting it in the back,” he says.

“I’m going to do what I want to do,” he says with resolve.
At age 19, a year after graduating from Baker, Montgomery signed up with the Marines. His father, Reginald Montgomery, who lives in the Eight Mile community, had been a Marine. So had a maternal grandfather.

“My dad was proud,” he says, adding: “I think he was scared and proud. He was in Vietnam. He knew more than I did about the Marine Corps.”

Before going to Afghanistan, Montgomery was with the Marine’s Fleet Anti-Security Team, FAST.

With 2nd FAST Company he moved around the world, from Guantanamo in Cuba to Spain, Israel and Italy.

He was transferred to 3rd Battalion 5th Marines at Camp Pendleton, Calif.

In September 2010, he was on his way to Afghanistan.

The 3rd Battalion 5th Marines, nicknamed Dark Horse, sustained heavy casualties fighting in the Sangin district of Afghanistan’s Helmand Province.

As The Associated Press reported in October: “The Marines ... say they are literally in a race for their lives. They are trying to adjust their tactics to outwit Taliban fighters, who have killed more coalition forces here than in any other Afghan district this year.”

While on patrol, squads had to keep an eagle eye out for improvised explosive devices, IEDs, homemade bombs buried under rubble, hidden along the road.

Slowed by having to identify and mark the IEDs, Montgomery says it sometimes took his squad eight hours to progress 500 yards.

He had a close call in a firefight on Thanksgiving Day.

“We had taken contact,” he says, meaning that his squad was engaged in a battle with the enemy.

“We were on a hill — I was on my side, so I could shoot.

“That’s when it hit me.”

Rounds from a .308-caliber rifle struck him on the chest but were deflected by a grenade that he had sewn into his flak jacket.

“An inch up,” he says, “and I’d be dead.

“If it had hit straight on, the grenade would have gone off.”

Less than two weeks later, on Dec. 7 — Pearl Harbor Day — his time came again.

“We stepped off on patrol like normal,” he recalls. “Everything was good. We were returning to base, going down this alley that we always went down.”

They arrived at “blast hole” in the ground, created where another platoon had blown open a wall. They walked over rubble from the blast.

“I slipped off the rubble into the blast hole. The IED was meant for the person going into the blast hole.”

Montgomery triggered it.

“I recall hitting the ground and looking for a tourniquet.”

His corpsman — a medical specialist with the squad — got the tourniquet on him.

“I have flashbacks of being carried on a poncho,” he says, “of being loaded into a bird.”

That bird — a helicopter — carried him out. He woke up in a hospital. No one had to tell him the truth.

“I knew my legs were gone,” he says.

* * *

How does he carry on?

“Someone would surprise themselves when they don’t have a choice,” he says.

“If I had the choice of legs or not legs,” he says philosophically, “I’d take legs. When I don’t have legs, I have to cope.”

Loved ones sustain him.
“I wouldn’t be where I am without my family and friends. They’re unbelievable.”

His father and stepmother, his mother, his siblings, his fellow Marines — they are his frequent visitors.

He praises those who help him at the Center for the Intrepid.

“They’re right there beside you,” he says. “They put a belt around you in case you start to fall.”

The Fourth of July stirs him with thoughts of his nation.

“I’ve always been patriotic,” he says. “This is by far the greatest country in the world.

“They play Taps here every day, Reveille every day. They bring down the flag, raise up the flag. I always think about being over there and the guys that are still over there.”

He is secure in his path, he says.

“Everybody what-if’s all the time. What if I’d tried to go to college and play soccer? But I didn’t. It was my decision.”

This past week, using a walker, he took his first steps.

“It was kind of ugly,” he says, poking fun at himself before turning serious again: “It felt good.”

He is already looking ahead.

“There so much stuff out there I’ve never tried,” he says. “I have to reinvent myself.”
100 Firefights, Three Weeks: Inside Afghanistan’s Most Insane Fight

By Mark Moyar
July 12, 2011

Editor’s note: These Marines’ tour was one of the most brutal of the entire war. In its first three weeks in Afghanistan’s Sangin district, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines got into more than 100 firefights, and sustained 62 casualties. The insurgents managed negate the Marines’ night-vision gear, and rendered their traditional close-combat tactics useless. Things got so bad, the 3/5’s superior officers even suggested pulling their troops back.

That didn’t happen. Instead, the 3/5 went after the militants, hard. They went on the offensive constantly. They leveled booby-trapped compounds without apology. They didn’t bother with school-building until the insurgents were back on their heels. Nor did they mess with the poppy growers; the Marines had more than their fair share of enemies.

When the 3/5 came home, they told counterinsurgency historian Mark Moyar all about their deeply unconventional approach to what was already an unconventional war. An excerpt from Moyar’s 74-page after action report follows.—

On Oct. 13, the day 3/5 took control of Sangin, the first Marine patrol to leave the wire came under fire 150 feet from the perimeter. One member of this patrol was shot dead. Within the next four days, another eight Marines died.

The extent of the resistance encountered in Sangin surprised many of the Marines. It was stronger than any Taliban resistance that Marines had witnessed previously in Afghanistan. During prior major Marine operations in Helmand, the insurgents had fought toe-to-toe for a few days and then relied primarily on IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and small hit-and-run ambushes. The insurgents in Sangin kept attacking in large numbers, and regrouped for counter-attacks after the initial volleys instead of dispersing.

To maintain morale, officers and NCOs kept their Marines focused on the need to defeat the enemy and avenge the fallen, and kept them active so that they did not have time to mope. “You really can’t prepare a Marine to lose his good buddy or see another one of his buddies with both his legs blown off,” said Captain Chris Esrey, commander of India company. “The best way to overcome that is to get right back out on a patrol the next day because it doesn’t happen every time you go out.”
The insurgents were similarly surprised by the behavior of their new enemies. In the face of numerous and often gruesome casualties, Marine officers refused to reduce the frequency of patrols into dangerous areas or decrease the fraction of patrols conducted on foot, which remained constant at ninety-five percent to the end of the year. When confronted by insurgent fighters, the Marines did not fire warning shots or back away in order to avoid harming civilians or insurgents, but instead kept fighting until the enemy was destroyed or driven off.

The insurgents were also caught off guard by the willingness of the Marines to go on the offensive in areas that coalition forces had previously avoided. When the insurgent forces attempted to mass in areas outside the “security bubble” for attacks into the bubble, the Marines arrived in force and inflicted heavy losses. After a few such incidents, the insurgents stopped assembling in large numbers, which reduced their ability to ambush the Marines and intimidate the population.

The Marines initially patrolled in squad size, but found that one squad was not enough because the enemy was attacking in larger numbers than anticipated. They needed more firepower, and they needed more men to continue the patrol after sustaining initial casualties, for it took close to a squad to evacuate a single casualty. Consequently, they started using two squads for all their patrols. This shift would cut the number of patrols in half, a huge hindrance in a campaign that depended upon intensive patrolling, but it would not prove an insurmountable obstacle.

The magnitude of the IED threat forced the Marines to patrol in a fundamentally different way than infantrymen patrol in most counterinsurgencies. As they had learned from Marines with prior experience in Helmand, the Taliban prepared ambush zones by emplacing IEDs in all the places where soldiers were likely to move when under fire. As a consequence, the Marines had to be much more cautious in employing traditional fire-and-maneuver tactics. They had to maneuver more slowly, or not at all.

One observer commented, “All the conventional Marine Corps tactics of enveloping and closing with the enemy are impossible in this environment. Your only choice is to fight from current location due to threat of IEDs.” Accuracy and potency of firepower became paramount. So did the ability to make creative use of cover, since the best cover was most often rigged with IEDs.
They Own the Night

The prevalence of IEDs also kept the Marines from patrolling at night. The Marines’ night vision equipment did not provide adequate visibility to spot many of the telltale signs of IEDs, so night patrolling would have entailed many additional casualties, which could not be worth the benefits gained since the insurgents themselves seldom operated at night. Despite enormous U.S. expenditures on counter-IED technology, detection devices accounted for just ten percent of the IEDs that 3/5 detected and disarmed during its time in Sangin. The insurgents had devised methods of constructing IEDs that even the most advanced devices could not detect. The Marines identified the other ninety percent by visual means—by spotting small clues that revealed a device or served as a warning sign to civilians to stay away. The ability of the Marines to see these IEDs was greatly enhanced by predeployment training programs that bolstered their situational awareness, particularly the Combat Hunter program.

The Marines used explosives to clear some of the areas most thickly infested with IEDs. They took care to ensure that no civilians were nearby before detonating the charges, but the damage to civilian property was significant, considerably more significant than what most adherents of “population-centric” counterinsurgency would have condoned. To clear roads that were pockmarked with IEDs, they detonated 350-foot line charges, each foot of which was laced with five pounds of C4 plastic explosive. The explosions from the line charges usually blew out the windows of nearby houses. In certain cases, the Marines destroyed abandoned roadside compounds that insurgents were using to implant IEDs, or blasted walls down to gain access to compounds when the entrances were rigged with IEDs. One company commander destroyed a mosque that had wires running to it.

The Marines paid compensation for most of the damage, or rebuilt the structures themselves, though they did back a new policy announced by the district governor that no compensation would be paid for damage to property whose owners were found to have abetted the insurgents. In defense of the battalion’s actions, Morris told the Associated Press, “You can be nice about it and try to leave everything the way it is and allow the Taliban to own it, or you can change some things and actually plant the Afghan government flag out there and provide legitimate security.”
In addition, civilian casualty and damage claims were paid only when they could be verified firsthand. The Marines ended the practice of paying compensation to anyone who claimed civilian casualties or property damage, insisting that claimants bring them concrete evidence or direct them to it. Among the many advantages conferred by the Marine willingness to operate throughout the district was the ability to visit all sites of alleged civilian casualties and property damage. As the Marines quickly discovered, greed and Taliban pressure had spawned numerous bogus claims. The ability to disprove these claims undercut the Taliban’s propaganda and Karzai’s complaints, and ended the flow of compensation money to fraudulent claimants who were in cahoots with the enemy.

Retreat?

Because of the high rate at which 3/5 was suffering casualties, higher headquarters encouraged General Mills to withdraw the battalion from Sangin for a period of physical and psychological recuperation. Mills and Morris both rejected the proposal. The Marines of 3/5 said that they wanted to finish what they had started, and Mills and Morris thought that pulling them out in the middle of the struggle would be the most demoralizing action possible.

In January 2011, local insurgent commanders sought permission from the Taliban leadership in Pakistan to pull out of Sangin. Permission was denied. The Taliban high command decided instead to inject commanders and fighters who were natives of Pakistan or other parts of Afghanistan. Because of either a lack of will or lack of capability, however, the new arrivals did not engage the Marines with the intensity witnessed during the battalion’s first months. There was a sharp drop in insurgent attacks. For the remainder of the Marine battalion’s tour, the insurgents relied mainly on IEDs to hinder and hurt the Marines and their Afghan partners.

The influx of outside elements into the insurgent leadership was one of several factors responsible for the decline in popular support for Sangin’s insurgents that became evident in January. Others included the heavy costs of war to families that supported the insurgents, the repeated insurgent military defeats, and a shift in U.S. policy pronouncements from emphasis on a 2011 drawdown to a 2014 transition. The allure of foreign development aid for those supporting the government also exerted influence, which was intensified when Governor Mangal brought some of Sangin’s elders into other parts of Helmand to see what they were missing.

The most dramatic change in allegiance came from the Alikozai tribe, which had borne the brunt of the losses during the fighting in the Upper Sangin Valley. At the beginning of January, following negotiations with Morris and the Afghan district and provincial governors, leading figures of the Alikozai reached a peace agreement with the government. Under the terms, the Alikozai would stop fighting the Marines and the Afghan security forces, hand over IEDs and foreign fighters, provide representatives for a district governance council and keep open the road to Kajaki. In return, the Americans would provide development aid and ensure that Afghans participate in any home searches involving the Marines. The Alikozai did not have to turn over their weapons, and they vowed to return to violence if the Americans and the government did not hold up their end of the bargain.
It is also worth noting that reconciliation had occurred despite the lack of major progress in governance or development. The insistence of the Marines on reciprocity had halted most development projects. A handful of new development projects had been started in the town, but when the insurgents killed a few of the Afghan workers, the remainder quit. Efforts to develop governance capacity also accomplished little during the first months of the deployment.

The improved security situation permitted the district governor to fill twelve civil service vacancies. Educational requirements for these positions had to be lowered when it became clear that the Afghans with the preferred educational levels all lived in Lashkar Gah, Kabul or other cities and had no interest in working in a place like Sangin. Local recruitment, however, brought the valuable advantages of local knowledge and personal connections. The district governor convinced representatives from Sangin’s main tribes to participate in a 25-man district governance council that had a significant voice in the running of the district’s affairs.

The spring saw the first Marine recruitment of local self-defense forces, through the Interim Security for Critical Infrastructure (ISCI) program. The district police chief used CERP [Commanders' Emergency Response Program] funds to pay ISCI members for nonmilitary work, and in return they provided information and armed resistance to Taliban intrusion. Many Sangin residents said they wanted to participate in the program, but most of them demanded weapons, and, when the Marines said that ISCI recruits needed to use their own weapons, declared implausibly that they had none. As a consequence, only six men entered the program initially.

The big question was how strong and active the insurgents would be in May when the poppy season ended. The battalion that replaced 3/5 in April, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, continued counterinsurgency operations along the same lines as those of 3/5. April and May were quiet in Sangin, with the Marines sustaining only a handful of casualties. The gains that 3/5 achieved in security, governance and development are holding as of this writing, in late June 2011. All of the major tribes in Sangin are now participating in governmental programs that promote local governance. Rapport between Afghan security forces and the population is much improved; even those individuals with lingering insurgent sympathies are showing the Afghan forces respect, by directing their acts of violence at the U.S. Marines instead of at Afghan soldiers and policemen.

**What Worked**

**A. Military successes stimulated reconciliation and population mobilization.** The population-centric COIN that preceded the Marines had relied on political outreach and economic development to convince Sangin’s residents to abandon the insurgency and join the government side. Military force was minimized based on the theory that violence would create “accidental guerrillas,” kill off potential negotiating partners and alienate the insurgents so much that they would never consider reconciling with the government. This approach accomplished little. In fact, the counterinsurgents’ aversion to the use of force and their eagerness to negotiate most likely discouraged a political compromise because they suggested that the insurgents could win a complete victory by waiting the foreigners out. As it turned out, the Marines made much greater progress in reconciliation and population mobilization because their military successes raised the costs in lives and property that communities and families paid for supporting the insurgency and convinced the opportunists that the coalition would prevail.

**B. The Marines put stabilization ahead of transition.** Preceding military commanders and civilian officials had sought to facilitate transition by assigning greater responsibility to Afghans. The Marines concluded that the enemy was too strong and the Afghan government too weak to permit a successful transition under these conditions. Instead, they decided to take the lead in security operations in order to set the conditions for ultimate success. By reducing violence and permitting government officials freedom of movement, they put the government on a viable path to sustainable transition. This shift in approach mirrored the shift in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, when initial efforts to transition responsibility to Iraqis failed so spectacularly that the Americans chose to retake the lead in security until the situation
stabilized. In both instances, a de-emphasis on transition actually improved the prospects for transition and shortened the amount of time required for a successful handover.

C. Development aid was provided only when coalition personnel could visit the projects. The Marines stopped the funding of development projects in areas that could not be visited. This shift ensured that coalition personnel could verify firsthand whether projects were proceeding as intended, and disabused Afghans of the notion that the coalition was a collection of suckers. The Marine willingness to operate throughout the district greatly facilitated on-site inspections.

D. Counternarcotics took a back seat to stabilization. The Marines decided that they had too many enemies already to engage in large-scale counternarcotics activities. Much of the population depended on the opium industry for its livelihood, and could be expected to cling to insurgency more strongly if that livelihood were at stake. Counternarcotics could wait until the government had enough personnel and adequate security to undertake robust counternarcotics measures. Marine COIN operations did, however, have a large impact on the narcotics trade because many of the insurgents they captured or killed had been involved in it. Nevertheless, the narcotics industry continues to thrive in Sangin, and it now poses a vexing problem across Helmand, for the power brokers required for reconciliation, and at some level the officials of the Afghan government, are deeply invested in it will strongly resist actions that would harm the narcotics business.

Update 8:43 am 7/13/11: Moyar, it should be noted, has previously served as a consultant to the International Security Assistance Force, NATO’s military command in Afghanistan. Moyar’s employer, Orbis Operations, is also “continuously engaged in work for ISAF,” he says.
October 30, 2011

A year ago, nearly 1,000 U.S. Marine officers and enlisted men of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment deployed to restive Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. By the time their tour ended in April 2011, the Marines of the 3/5 — known as "Darkhorse" — suffered the highest casualty rate of any Marine unit during the past 10 years of war. This week, NPR tells the story of this unit's seven long months at war — both in Afghanistan and back home.

First of seven parts

With his brown checkered sport coat, blue shirt and tie, Jason Morris could easily be mistaken for a young professor. Only the close-cropped hair and stocky build might suggest a military life.

Lt. Col. Morris served as a Marine officer during the 2003 invasion of Iraq and witnessed heavy combat in the push toward Baghdad.

But it's his experience in Afghanistan during the past year that lingers: Morris commanded the Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, which lost 25 troops during its seven-month-long deployment, the highest casualty rate of any Marine unit during the Afghan war.

These days, he is studying for a master's degree at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. Standing on a sea wall there, Morris looks at sailboats slicing through the bay.

"Narragansett Bay probably has more water in it than probably all of Afghanistan," he says. "Seeing blue and seeing green. Anything but brown."
Morris saw a lot of shades of brown during his seven months in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province: the high beige walls of village compounds, the thick chocolate mud that passed for roads, the dung-colored fields in winter.

It was just over a year ago that Morris took nearly 1,000 Marines to a place in Helmand called Sangin. It was a haven for Taliban fighters and drug traffickers, a place where the British lost more than 100 troops in four years.

But the British failed to push out and pursue the enemy, and the Taliban continued to control much of the area. It was Morris' job to take it back.

At the time, Lt. Gen. Rich Mills was the senior Marine commander in Helmand. He says what Morris' unit went through was as brutal as anything in the history of the Marines.

"It stands alone in the Afghanistan situation as probably being one of the tougher missions ever handed to an infantry battalion," Mills says.

"It's very rare. I certainly would compare it to some of the amphibious assaults during World War II, places like Guadalcanal," he adds.

'What Were We Doing Wrong?'

By the time Morris returned home in April, his Marines suffered historic losses: 25 dead and nearly 200 more wounded, about three-dozen of whom had lost at least one limb.

For Morris, those casualties seemed to come out of nowhere. Most of his men were killed or wounded not by enemy fire, but by chance. They would go out on patrol and step on homemade bombs that seemed to be everywhere.

And even in a war in which those homemade bombs — known as improvised explosive devices, or IEDs — account for nearly three-quarters of the American deaths, the sheer number and speed of the casualties was stunning.

It started almost immediately after the unit arrived in Sangin on Sept. 27, 2010: Hostile fire killed Lance Cpl. John Sparks on Oct. 8, less than two weeks later.

More deaths followed in quick succession: The next casualties occurred back to back, on Oct. 14 and 15.

"That was what was tough. ... In two days we had lost seven Marines," Morris recalls.

Morris questioned his company commanders. Were they doing everything by the book? Were they following their training?

Back home, the families were frantic, wondering what was happening. Morris' wife, Jane Conwell, started getting a hundred emails each day. One wife was convinced she heard the doorbell ring in the middle of the night, that Marine officers were there to announce her husband's death.

"The families, especially the spouses, really almost lost their minds," Morris says.
In this age of Facebook and Twitter, what happened on the battlefield instantly affected the homefront. And what happened at home instantly reached the troops.

From Afghanistan, Morris had to reassure families back in California — he even sent a message to a town hall meeting at Camp Pendleton, where the battalion was based.

His more immediate challenge, though, was to carry out his mission — and stop the casualties. "At the time I was wondering, what were we doing wrong?" he says.

Higher-ups were wondering the same thing. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates asked about the growing number of dead and wounded and suggested pulling Darkhorse out for a while.

What do you say? You just try to make him understand his son died doing what he wanted to be doing. And that he had an impact. A positive impact on the people of Afghanistan.

- Lt. Col. Jason Morris on his talks with family members of fallen Marines

The Marine leadership said no.

"I said it would be a mistake," recalls Mills, the senior Marine officer in Helmand. "That the battalion was doing fine. Morale was high. Combat effectiveness was great. That the Marines up there wanted to finish the job. The worst thing we could have done was withdraw that battalion."

A Positive Impact As Casualties Subside

But for all the debate among the generals, it fell to Morris to figure out how to finish the job.

"I was on my own for this. I mean having to figure this out? It's up to the battalion commander," he says.

Morris pressed his Marines to slow down, to carefully search for roadside bombs when on patrol. He buried mock roadside bombs at his base so his troops could practice finding them.

Eventually, Morris got more troops and equipment. That made a big difference. The casualties started to subside. By the end of their deployment, Darkhorse spent more time rebuilding villages than shooting Taliban.

But it had come at a terrible price. When he returned home in April, Morris attended a dozen memorial services, all around the country. He tried to comfort those left behind.

"There were some that were very angry, just yelling, 'Why the hell did I lose my son for this?'" Morris recalls.

"What do you say? You just try to make him understand his son died doing what he wanted to be doing. And that he had an impact — a positive impact on the people of Afghanistan, helped rebuild their country," he says.

Courtesy of Jason Morris

Lt. Col. Jason Morris (right) is seen with his "right-hand man" Sgt. Maj. James Bushway in Sangin in April 2011, close to the time the 3/5 departed from Afghanistan.

Following A Family Tradition

Morris believes what he tells the families. Other Marines who served with Darkhorse say the same thing — that they made a difference. That's one reason Morris signed up in the first place.

After graduating from the Naval Academy in 1992, Morris wanted to lead men in combat. He wanted the mental and physical challenge. And he was following a path his father had taken: John Morris was also a Marine.

"He's very proud of me, but he said, 'You've got to want to do this, because it's a tough life,'" he says.
John Morris was also a rifle company commander — in Vietnam. His unit took 70 percent casualties, far more than Darkhorse's 20 percent.

But it was different back then. The elder Morris never got to know his Marines. Today, Marines train together, go to war together and come home together — as a unit. During Vietnam, individual replacements came, got wounded and were airlifted out.

"[My father] made a comment, 'You know, you've spent 18 months with these guys. You've met most of them. The lieutenants, you've drank beers with, you've met their spouses, you know their parents," he says.

**An Eternal Burden**

Morris still keeps in touch with the members of Darkhorse Battalion. He has visited the seriously wounded at the naval hospitals at Balboa in San Diego, Calif., and in Bethesda, Md., outside Washington, D.C.

Right now, he is on a plum assignment, studying at the Naval War College. He says it's surreal — taking classes, living by the water, trying to slow down after combat command.

"I found it difficult to get out of that battle rhythm of being constantly on guard, working 18 or 19 hours a day," Morris says.

It's not easy to shake free of Afghanistan — and the knowledge that men he led didn't make it home: "It's a burden that you bear forever."
An Afghan Hell On Earth For 'Darkhorse' Marines
by Tom Bowman    All Things Considered

October 31, 2011

A year ago, nearly 1,000 U.S. Marine officers and enlisted men of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment deployed to restive Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. By the time their tour ended in April 2011, the Marines of the 3/5 — known as "Darkhorse" — suffered the highest casualty rate of any Marine unit during the past 10 years of war. This week, NPR tells the story of this unit's seven long months at war — both in Afghanistan and back home.

Second of seven parts

The Marines of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment remember Sangin in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province as different from anywhere else they'd fought.

Sgt. Daniel Robert describes it as "hell." Lance Cpl. Jake Romo calls it "the Wild West." Lt. Col. Jason Morris says he'd heard it described as "the most dangerous place in Afghanistan."

Morris was the commander of the Marines of the 3/5, known as "Darkhorse," and Sangin had been a battleground long before he arrived.

The 3/5 Marines lost 25 men during the seven months they spent in Sangin in southern Afghanistan.
The British were there for four years, but could only fight the Taliban to a bloody stalemate. Now the British were leaving, and Darkhorse battalion moved in. Morris' orders were clear: Eliminate the Taliban as a threat.

"The fight initially was to be able to maneuver outside the patrol base without getting shot or stepping on [an improvised explosive device, or IED] that had been planted 50 yards or 100 yards outside of the patrol base. You could not move outside of the district center without getting shot," Morris recalls.

Arriving in late September 2010, they learned the place fast, slogging through canals, fighting through dense vegetation and patrolling a maze of narrow dirt roads bordered by 15-foot mud walls.

### Saying Goodbye

A few weeks earlier in California, the Marines gathered to say goodbye to their families in the middle of the night at the parade grounds at Camp Pendleton, where the unit was based.

Ashley Tawney was there with her husband, Sgt. Ian Tawney; they had known each other since they were kids. They had just bought a house, and Ashley was pregnant with their first child.

Sangin was Ian's fifth deployment. Ashley says this one felt different.

"I just remember driving in the car, and I would just say, 'I don't want you to go,' and he said, 'No, I'll be fine. I need to go and I want to go.' And he always said, 'If you're on the varsity team, why sit on the bench?" Ashley recalls.

Ian had served in Iraq. In Afghanistan, he would lead his own squad.

They stood for hours that night at Pendleton. Then, just before sunrise, it was time to say goodbye. Ashley kissed her husband.

"He said, 'I love you,' and I just nodded, and I didn't want to start crying by saying it," she says.

Sgt. Tawney boarded the bus that would take him to his plane for the long flight to Afghanistan.

### The Dying Begins Almost Immediately

A few weeks later in Afghanistan, Tawney led his men on a patrol. The situation was extremely dangerous: The Taliban had stockpiled weapons and poked holes in thick mud walls to use as shooting positions in order to ambush the Marines.

Tawney had just a part of the fight. For Lt. Col. Morris — the Darkhorse commander — the battle was everywhere.

"We had over a hundred firefights in the first three weeks. This is what we had trained for. The only thing that was different from what we had trained all our lives for as Marines was the IED threat," Morris says.

On Oct. 13 — the same day the 3/5 officially assumed control over the area — four Darkhorse Marines were killed when a blast ripped apart their vehicle.
The next day, some of Morris' Marines went out on a foot patrol. The initial report came in that they were taking mortar fire.

Then, Morris remembers three rapid explosions; they turned out to be three Marines stepping on IEDs in rapid succession. All three died.

In just two days, Morris lost seven of his men — more than his predecessor had lost in six months.

And the violence didn't let up. At the end of the week, another Marine was dead: Sgt. Ian Tawney. He was 25.

'I Couldn't Fathom That He Was Gone'

At home in California, Ashley Tawney remembers waking up from a nap on her couch. It was the middle of an October afternoon.

The house she and Ian had recently bought had several French doors. Through the glass of one of them, she watched two Marine officers pass by. She didn't have to open the door to see them standing there.

"It was just a real solemn ... very eerie sight. It's just like the movies, just like the movies," she recalls.

To this day, she doesn't know how she made it to the front door.

"I, like, floated over there or something," she says. "And everything was kind of in slow-motion. And I opened the door, and then they started off with the whole spiel ... and I was just in shock."

"I remember my cat was playing with the chaplain's uniform. ... Then they started to do the paperwork ... the whole, me going to Dover to meet his body, and that's when it hit me, and I just covered my face with my hand and was like, 'Oh my God, oh my God.' There's no goodbye and there's no nothing. I couldn't fathom that he was gone," she says.

What happened to Ashley Tawney was happening to other Marine families. The Darkhorse battalion was taking horrific casualties. Back home, the emails and phone calls flew back and forth.

To calm everyone down, the Marines convened a town hall meeting, and 150 family members showed up.

"I wasn't prepared for it to be as bad as it was. I don't think any of us really thought it was going to be like it was in October," recalls Amy Murray, the wife of Capt. Patrick Murray.

"Sometimes you got off the phone, and your heart would sink," says Melissa Fromm, wife of Lt. Brad Fromm.

Says Kait Wyatt, wife of Cpl. Derek Wyatt: "It's pretty much hell on Earth for most wives, just going day to day with not knowing."
'Every Day Someone Was Dying'

October 2010 was pretty much hell on Earth for the Marines in Sangin, too.

Cpl. Marcus Chischilly stepped on an IED on Oct. 9.

"I was probably the eighth person that stepped on that same IED. It's based on luck, really," he remembers.

Capt. Chris Esrey recalls the incident in which Lance Cpl. John Sparks died. "Sparks just grabbed his machine gun and went to his rooftop ... and began to exchange fire with the insurgents when he was struck by a bullet."

There were "IEDs everywhere," says Lance Cpl. Josue Barron. "So one of my friends just stepped on one, and it got both of us."

"Every day someone was dying, or every day someone was losing a limb," he adds. "So we were just like, when are they going to stop?"

It fell to Morris, the battalion commander, to fix things.

"I was on my own for this. I mean, having to figure this out? It's up to the battalion commander," he says.

Morris pressed his company commanders to take extra care on patrol. He stepped up training: The Marines buried mock IEDs and practiced finding them. And Morris asked for reinforcements.

His bosses back at the Pentagon had a different idea. Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggested pulling the Marines out of Sangin for a while.

The Marines' top officer, Gen. James Amos, said "absolutely not."

"We don't do business that way. You would have broken the spirit of that battalion," Amos says.

Instead of pulling Darkhorse out, the military sent hundreds more Marines, as well as mine-clearing equipment.

**Progress At A Price**

Two months went by. By January, things started to get better.

Capt. Chris Esrey remembers that getting "more boots on the deck really increased our patrolling," while Sgt. Daniel Robert says it became easier for the Marines to get some rest.

The fighting let up. Morris says life returned: markets opened; children were on the streets.

Progress came at a price: 25 dead and 184 wounded, with 34 losing at least one limb over the course of the deployment. But the Marines say it was worth it.

"Every single Marine that was over there — and saw the beginning and saw the end — saw the 180-degree change in that place," Morris says. "We changed it. We changed it completely."

"It went from total war-fighting of three months to saving lives and rebuilding homes," says Sgt. John Decker.
Even Lance Cpl. Barron, who lost one eye, one leg and some of his closest friends, agrees: "It was worth it. If I say it wasn't worth it, what about my friends that died? I'm disrespecting them, like they died for nothing."

**Remembering Those Who Were Lost**

In April, back at Camp Pendleton, the survivors of Darkhorse gathered for a memorial service.

Some stood, some sat at a helicopter landing zone, a wide patch of asphalt surrounded by low brush, mountains in the distance. They faced 25 combat crosses, one for each of the dead. Helmets and weapons and combat boots sat on a wooden base.

Morris, Darkhorse's commander, stood before the families and the wounded.

"I hope you understand how much we appreciated your sons, your husbands, your brothers in life — and how much we continue to value their sacrifice and their memory. Marines, your Marines, these Marines — they took the fight to the enemy, and they won," he told them.

As the wind kicked up, they called the names of the Marines who were lost.

Ashley Tawney was there with her infant daughter, Claire — born three months after her father died — and remembers looking out at the crowd.

"Just seeing all the people that this deployment had affected, all the wounded, just the loss is just, like, overwhelming. And it kind of felt like his work funeral. He'll never get up when it's dark outside and drive to work and come home late. And our life down there was over. That chapter was over," she says.

Ashley is starting a new chapter. She plans to move to North Carolina. Her mother lives there. And it's not far from the Marine base at Camp Lejeune.

"Being part of that Marine family, you feel real secure. It's hard, because I still longed for that, I still wanted to be part of that life, but I didn't have him anymore, and he was my connection to that life," Ashley says. "I'm still a military widow, but then I'm not — I'm back in civilian life again, so it's hard to know where to fit in."
As Casualties Mounted, So Did Marine Families' Fears

by Tom Bowman

All Things Considered

November 1, 2011

A year ago, nearly 1,000 U.S. Marine officers and enlisted men of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment deployed to restive Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. By the time their tour ended in April 2011, the Marines of the 3/5 — known as "Darkhorse" — suffered the highest casualty rate of any Marine unit during the past 10 years of war. This week, NPR tells the story of this unit's seven long months at war — both in Afghanistan and back home.

Third of seven parts

Dave Boelk works for the Navy outside Washington, D.C. Every morning when he gets to work, he has a ritual: He turns on his computer and checks the military's classified reports from Afghanistan.

On Oct. 15 last year, he noticed one report in particular.

"It was just talking about an IED explosion and how many people were injured. There was one KIA. I remember making the comment to some of my colleagues, like, wow, my son's unit, somebody died, that really hits close to home," he recalls.

Boelk went about his day. Five hours went by.

"Then I got a call from our daughter. And she said there were two Marines at our house, and immediately, kind of lost my composure at work, obviously. There was just total silence in the office. Of course, what can they say? I just shut off my computers and picked up my bags, and told them I had to go home," Boelk says.

A year after their son's death, Dave Boelk and his wife, Cilicia, sit at their dining room table, steps from the front door where the Marines appeared that morning. That door now includes a banner with a gold star to mark the loss of their son, Lance Cpl. James Boelk.

Cilicia remembers how just before she learned her son died, she felt something was wrong.

"I was uneasy. I was up most of the night," she recalls.

The next morning, she went out on an errand. She returned to their house late that morning, turned into their long driveway, and spotted Dave's car and her daughter's car parked there.

She knew something was wrong.

"Dave met me at the door. He had been crying," Cilicia says.

Dave continues: "I think I asked you to sit down. But by then you already knew."

James Boelk was just 24. He stood 6 foot, 5 inches. Other Marines called him Baloo, after the huge but gentle bear in The Jungle Book. He was on his first patrol when he was killed by a roadside bomb.

He'd made his last call home to his parents a couple of weeks before.

"He said he wanted to make sure that we knew that he loved us," his mother says.
Amy Murray at home with her daughter Harper in Oceanside, Calif. Her husband, Capt. Patrick Murray, with the Darkhorse battalion, returned home from Afghanistan, in April 2011; 25 Marines from his unit did not.

‘Worried All The Time’

October of last year was the toughest month for Boelk's unit, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, known as Darkhorse. In a matter of days, they lost not only Boelk but seven other Marines, and many more were wounded.

Amy Murray's husband, Capt. Patrick Murray, was on his fifth combat tour.

"There was a lot of confusion and worry," she says. "I mean, you're worried all the time."

Like many of the wives, Amy wanted news — any news — about what was happening. She set up Google alerts for Sangin, for 3rd Battalion 5th Marines — everything.

"I wanted all that information," she says.

The one person who really knew what was going on was halfway around the world in Afghanistan. The Darkhorse battalion commander, Lt. Col. Jason Morris, was focused on the toughest fights of the war. But he couldn't ignore the tug of the home front.

"My wife finally called me one day and said, 'You have got to do something about informing the families,' " he recalls.

Morris says his wife, Jane Conwell, was getting a hundred emails each day. And many had the same question: Why are our guys getting killed and wounded right now?

Morris had to find a way to get them more information. So he turned to Kim Reese, the battalion's family liaison back at Camp Pendleton, for help.

"It was their son who was in Afghanistan, it was their husband who is in Afghanistan. They are scared, and they want answers," Reese says.

She set up a Facebook page for the battalion and helped organized a town hall meeting at Pendleton, where top Marine officers could speak to the families.

Amy Murray, the woman who'd set up the Google alerts, showed up at that town hall meeting. She didn't hear much good news.

"They were really blunt about saying it's bad and it's going to be touchy for a while," Murray recalls.

The officers explained what the Marines were doing to protect against roadside bombs, and they explained what would happen if the worst happened — if a loved one was killed. The officers explained how families would be notified, who would arrive at their door — their worst nightmare.

Imagining The Worst

Melissa Fromm's husband, Brad, was a platoon leader with Darkhorse battalion. It was his first deployment.

"It was 3 a.m. I swear that a doorbell woke me up. And my heart just dropped, and I didn't know what to do," Melissa remembers.

Melissa scrambled for the phone and reached her father — a retired Army officer. She told him that she thought she heard the doorbell ring. That she was scared. That she didn't know what to do.
He told her she needed to go to a window, to go downstairs. So she made her way downstairs. Ten minutes had gone by. She peered through the peephole in the front door. There was nothing — just the glow of a streetlight and an empty road.

The stress was constant for the Darkhorse families, waiting for their Marines to come home. "Sometimes you'll see a name, and you're like ... I've heard that name before. Is that my husband's friend, is that one of my husband's Marines, is that one of his Marines' best friends?" Melissa says. "It affects you at some level, no matter what. But of course there's a sigh of relief when it's not your last name."

It didn't get any better over the next few weeks. Darkhorse took so many casualties that even the top officer in the Marine Corps, Gen. James Amos, came to California to meet with the families. "I was honest with them. I told them it was a tough fight there that their husbands are in, and I told them I didn't see it getting any easier over the next couple of months. I promised them that I was going to go over there and spend Christmas with them," he says.

Amos' voice breaks remembering the scene. He noticed the widow of one Marine sitting there. Her husband had been killed several weeks earlier. He saw some in the crowd wiping away tears.

Bittersweet Reunions

In the course of seven months, two dozen families would find Marine officers at their door with crisp words of sorrow and regret.

Amy Murray and Melissa Fromm were different: They got a homecoming. At Camp Pendleton in April, they gathered with other families, and as the buses rolled to a stop — and the Marines jumped off — they raced to meet their husbands.

"You run, you jump, you don't know if they're ready to catch you, but you hope they'll hold on," Fromm says.

Even with all the excitement, there's also some bitter with the sweet. "I was so happy to see my husband," remembers Murray, "but I was so sad at the same time, because people I cared about, their husband didn't get off the bus."
The Marines of Darkhorse Battalion suffered a high rate of casualties during their seven-month deployment to southern Afghanistan. Their mission was to go after the Taliban in a place called Sangin — a crossroads of insurgency and drug trafficking. At the time, officials in the military and all the way up to the secretary of defense asked why the Darkhorse Battalion was taking so many casualties. NPR Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman is reporting all week on the battalion. On Wednesday, he speaks with Guy Raz about the strategy in Sangin: whether the Marines made mistakes and what they did to reduce causalities and complete the mission.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host: From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Robert Siegel.

GUY RAZ: And I'm Guy Raz.

Now, the latest in our series on a Marine unit known as the Darkhorse Battalion. Let's go back about a year ago. It's October 2010, Afghanistan, and the battalion had only been deployed a few days. They had seven months to go. Then in just two days, seven Marines were killed, more than all units deployed before them had lost in six months.

Here's Darkhorse Battalion's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jason Morris.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JASON MORRIS: At the time, I was wondering, what are we doing wrong?

RAZ: That's the question we want to address today. NPR's Tom Bowman joins me now. All week, he's been telling the story of the Darkhorse Marines on the home front. And today, the fight in Afghanistan. Tom, good to have you here.

TOM BOWMAN: Good to be here, Guy.

RAZ: Why did this battalion take more casualties than the units that had been there before them?

BOWMAN: Well, you have to go back. The British had been there four years before Darkhorse came in. And they were in roughly the same area as the Marine battalion, but they had a different strategy. They didn't move out into this area of orchards and fields and heavy brush that they call the Green Zone. And the Marines would frankly say, they didn't take the fight to the enemy.

So, that meant that the Taliban had a relatively safe haven here. They stockpiled the area with arms and they were able to sort of lace this area with roadside bombs since the British didn't push into this area.

Now, the United States had been dealing with roadside bombs now for a decade. The key here was the volume of roadside bombs. The Marines had never seen anything like this before. They were everywhere, almost every other step.

RAZ: This all happened in a place called Sangin, this is in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. Why Sangin? Why there? And why was this place important at all?

BOWMAN: Well, the Marines in particular saw it as important. They said, listen, this is at a key intersection of important roads in the area. And, again, they were talking about the Taliban having a safe haven there. They said it's psychologically important to the Taliban. Not only did they stockpile arms and lace this whole area with roadside bombs, they also had drug labs there too, which was used to finance the insurgency.
Now, the British had a different view. Other parts of the province, the more populated areas, they saw as more important. They wanted to focus on that part of the province, a little south of Sangin. Now, listen to Lieutenant General Richard Mills. He commanded all coalition troops in Helmand province.

LIEUTENANT GENERAL RICHARD MILLS: Well, it was the area which the British command felt was not as important as, say, the center of the province.

BOWMAN: And you considered it more important than the British did then?

MILLS: I considered it absolutely key.

BOWMAN: Now, it wasn't just the British who were skeptical about this, but the American command in Kabul, as well. They also agreed that the more populated areas in Helmand had to be secured. And there was some questions about whether the Marines can secure the more populated areas, and then take on this added role of going into Sangin and taking the fight to the Taliban.

RAZ: Tom, earlier we heard the battalion commander, Colonel Morris, he was wondering what they were doing wrong. As the casualties mounted in this battalion, did anyone else wonder, you know, the same thing?

BOWMAN: Everybody was asking the same question, including back at the Pentagon. Top Pentagon leaders actually wanted to pull Darkhorse Battalion out for a rest...

RAZ: Wow.

BOWMAN: ...to try to find out what's going on. The Marines, both at the Pentagon and in Helmand province, said absolutely not. Now, here's General Rich Mills again. I asked him that question.

MILLS: There was never a question of taking 3/5 out of the fight, nor was there ever any question that they would be anything but successful. What's often lost in the story of 3/5 is the number of casualties they inflicted, a tremendous number. We were pounding the enemy. And I would say that we were taking down 10 of them to every one of us that we lost.

BOWMAN: So there's General Rich Mills who says they're being pretty successful. And also, that he refers to 3/5, that's the official name of Darkhorse Battalion - 3rd Battalion 5th Marine Regiment. Now, but at the same time, despite him saying that that this is very successful, General Mills formed what's known as a Red Team. It's basically a bunch of contrarians going in and saying: Are you sure you're doing everything right? They looked at everything from the tactics to whether or not they need more troops and mine clearing equipment.

Now, but I also asked General Mills, if you knew this was a dangerous area, if you say it was key, why didn't you send more Marines in earlier? And he said, well, listen, I had fights elsewhere in Helmand province. They needed troops there. We gave Darkhorse Battalion all we could to help them. But a few months later, they sent in hundreds more Marines. And everyone I talked with said that made a huge difference.

RAZ: So, that's at the general's level, Tom. The strategic view, if you will. What about inside the battalion? Did they change how they operated?

BOWMAN: I talked to the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Jason Morris. And he said they did make some changes. He told his company commanders to take a lot more care when they're on patrol. Make sure they stand behind the guy is using the sweeper to detect mines. And he also took it a step further. Back at his base, he actually set up a dummy IED so his Marines could practice digging them up.

And what Colonel Morris told me was, he said, listen, our Marines always prepared for a gunfight or for Marines calling in artillery, calling in airstrikes. But this volume of IEDs, we really hadn't trained enough for that. And listen to what Colonel Morris had to say.

MORRIS: I actually enjoyed the fact that guys were in firefights, because they were fighting this enemy face-to-face and had an opportunity to kill them. The problem with the IED fight is they're ghosts. The only thing that really was different from what we had trained all our lives for as Marines was the IED threat.
RAZ: So why was that, Tom? I mean why hadn't they trained for the IED threat?
BOWMAN: Well, they had trained for the IED threat back at their bases in California. They always trained for it. But again, it gets into the volume. It seemed like there was a roadside bomb in every other step. They just weren't prepared for the number of them.
RAZ: So, what did the Marines there achieve overall? I mean did they beat back the Taliban?
BOWMAN: There's absolutely no question they beat back the Taliban. And also, markets started to reopen. The kids were returning to school. The provincial governor could actually get out and see his constituents throughout this area. He hadn't been able to do that before.
And another key point is, one of the local tribe, which had been cooperating with the Taliban, eventually struck a peace deal with the Afghan government after the Marines pushed back the Taliban forces and after they realized the Marines were going to stay and take the fight to the Taliban.
And even some in the Kabul command who were skeptical of the Marines going up into Sangin, they said in the end it seems like they did achieve quite a bit. But it came, of course, at a brutal cost. And I asked one Marine officer was it all worth it? And he said to me, it depends how Afghanistan turns out.
RAZ: And, Tom, we should remind our listeners who've been following this series that 25 Marines were killed in the Darkhorse Battalion, 184 badly wounded.
That's it NPR's Tom Bowman on the strategy for the Marines Darkhorse Battalion when it was deployed in southern Afghanistan. Tom, thank you.
BOWMAN: You're welcome, Guy.
RAZ: And Tom's series continues tomorrow with a profile of a young Marine widow.
(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)
SIEGEL: This is NPR News.
A Marine's Death, And The Family He Left Behind
by Tom Bowman
All Things Considered  NPR

Kait Wyatt carries her 1-month-old son, Michael, at the burial for her husband, Marine Cpl. Derek Wyatt, at Arlington National Cemetery, Jan. 7. Wyatt was killed Dec. 6, 2010, in Afghanistan. Kait Wyatt, who was pregnant at the time of her husband's death, was induced the day after he was killed so she could attend the service.

November 3, 2011
A year ago, nearly 1,000 U.S. Marine officers and enlisted men of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment deployed to restive Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. By the time their tour ended in April 2011, the Marines of the 3/5 — known as "Darkhorse" — suffered the highest casualty rate of any Marine unit during the past 10 years of war. This week, NPR tells the story of this unit's seven long months at war — both in Afghanistan and back home.
Fifth of seven parts

Courtesy of Kait Wyatt
Cpl. Derek Wyatt is seen here with his wife, Kait, in Fresno, Calif., at a Fresno State football game. Wyatt was 25 when he died; his wife, 22.

Last year, on Dec. 6, Kait Wyatt was up early, making breakfast, when the doorbell rang at her home on the Camp Pendleton Marine base.
She opened the door. Two Marines stood there.
"I wanted it to be them telling me that he was OK, that he was hurt or something along those lines. But I knew," Kait recalls.
"I automatically knew Derek had passed away," she says.

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Her husband, Cpl. Derek Wyatt, was serving in Afghanistan with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, known as "Darkhorse."

Kait was pregnant: She was due to give birth in just a couple of weeks, in mid-December. The Marines began the ritual, and Kait, who was 22 at the time, began to sob.

"I kind of heard Derek's voice in the back of my head saying, 'There's nothing you can do about it now, sweetheart. You just need to be strong and to get through this last little bit of your pregnancy,'" she says. "And so I dried up my tears, and I asked: What do we do now?"

Jose Luis Magana/AP Marines carry the remains of Cpl. Derek Wyatt upon arrival at Dover Air Force Base, Del., on Dec. 8, 2010. He was killed by hostile fire during a deployment to Sangin in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province.

Keeping Connected

Derek Wyatt had wanted to go to war, and the deployment to Afghanistan was his chance.

"In his letters, he said he had been gearing towards this experience in his life since he was a child," Kait recalls.

As a child in Ohio, Kait says, Derek remembered running through fields and playing war in the woods with his brothers, using sticks as weapons.

While he was in Afghanistan, the 25-year-old corporal called home a few times. But he wouldn't talk about what real war was like.

"It was mostly talking about my day, because he didn't want to worry me or get me too upset, and just how much we loved each other, and how much we were looking forward to Michael being in the world," Kait says.

Michael was their as-yet unborn son.

Before her husband had gone to war, Kait had wanted him to write a letter to Michael. Derek didn't want to do that, because he knew he would make it home.

What Derek did do was to record bedtime stories for Michael. Kait stored them on her iPod.

And so for hours each day, Kait would press the iPod to her belly, so their unborn baby could hear his father's voice — hear him read the bedtime stories.

Keeping Connected

Today, Kait struggles with the meaning of Derek's death.

As a former Marine, she understands Derek had to complete the mission.

"Derek died the way he wanted to. He went out being a hero, fighting for what he believed in, and being part of something that he believed in," she says.

But she wonders if more Marines — reinforcements — might have kept Derek alive. Afghanistan might be a better place, but was it worth it?
"As a grieving widow, I would say that's great for them, but I lost my husband. Knowing that they have a school to go to is great and everything, but on my son's first day of school, his father's not going to be there," she says.

After Death, A Birth

On the day she learned that her husband died — practically the minute the Marine officers left — Kait made a decision.

"My mom and I got into the car and went directly to the naval hospital on base, where I talked to my OB-GYN and told her what was happening, and told her that I wanted to be induced," Kait says, in order to make it to Derek's funeral at Arlington National Cemetery on Jan. 7, 2011.

So the day after she learned of her husband's death, Kait gave birth to Michael Wyatt. He was two weeks early and weighed 7 pounds, 11 ounces.

"Michael looks extraordinarily like his father. It's almost eerie how much they look alike," Kait says.

At the hospital, the day he was born, Michael wouldn't stop crying. So Kate gave the nurses her iPod, the one with Derek reading the bedtime stories.

They placed it next to Michael and pushed play.

Out came Derek's voice. He was reading Dr. Seuss' Oh, the Places You'll Go!

You'll look up and down the streets. Look 'em over with care.
About some you will say, "I don't choose to go there."
With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,
You're too smart to go down any not-so-good street.

... 

You're off to Great Places! Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So get on your way!

"As soon as he heard Derek's voice," Kait says, "he stopped crying."
A year ago, nearly 1,000 U.S. Marine officers and enlisted men of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment deployed to restive Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. By the time their tour ended in April 2011, the Marines of the 3/5 — known as "Darkhorse" — suffered the highest casualty rate of any Marine unit during the past 10 years of war. This week, NPR tells the story of this unit's seven long months at war — both in Afghanistan and back home.

Sixth of seven parts

Jake Romo loved running.

"Running was my favorite thing to do. I can almost say that I loved running more than my wife and kids," he said. "I would run with weights. If I was just running with shorts and a T-shirt, I could run all day. I would run and run and run and not stop."

But these days, he can't run. Wounded in Afghanistan, Romo's legs are now just stumps, wrapped in khaki fabric.

Romo, a lance corporal, is one of dozens of Marines from the 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment — known as "Darkhorse" — who have come to the Balboa naval hospital in San Diego, Calif., for rehabilitation work after the serious injuries they suffered in southern Afghanistan. A total of 34 Marines lost limbs.

On this day, Romo is doing an upper-body workout. A physical therapist helps one Marine with weights. Just outside, another Marine who lost a leg is now climbing a rock wall.

"We have to hold these guys back," said Michael Podlenski, a physical therapist at Balboa who works with as many as 30 amputees each day. "All these guys are very motivated. They wanted to be running yesterday."

Romo, 22, was on his first deployment when he lost his legs in February.

"I knew when I got hit that I lost both my legs. I knew right away," he said.

It was a day he remembers as "straight-up miserable." There was heavy rain, lightning and mud. "If it hadn't been for the mud and all the rain and stuff, I probably wouldn't be here today. It muffled the blast," he said.

A Marine, Before And After

Scott Olson/Getty Images
Cpl. Marcus Chischilly patrols in southern Afghanistan in October 2010. This photo was taken a day before he stepped on an explosive device and lost his left leg.

David Gilkey/NPR
After losing his leg, Chischilly underwent rehabilitation in San Diego. He uses a recumbent bike equipped with hand pedals. He finished 16th in the wheelchair portion of the Marine Corps Marathon on Oct. 30 in Washington.
Making Adjustments

Now, Romo is determined he'll run again. He hopes to try in the next six to nine months, when he gets new prosthetic legs.

After Romo's workout, his wife, Michelle, drives him home. She pulls the van into their driveway. She opens the side door of the modified van, and Jake rolls down a ramp in his wheelchair. His 2-year-old son, Liam, leads the way into the townhouse. Michelle holds their son Derren, born earlier this year, and talks about the day she received the call about Jake.

"Liam was sleeping, and I got the phone call. 'Is this Mrs. Romo ... Jacob Romo's wife?' And I knew right away who it was," she said. "I started to hyperventilate, and I need to breathe because I'm pregnant. And the guy was very sweet, he was so sweet. All I needed to get out was, 'Is he alive?' 'Yes, he's alive.' And I could calm down and take a couple of breaths."

The Marine who called her was reading from a statement — something about a bilateral amputee. At first, she wasn't sure what that meant. And then she was told his legs were gone.

"The worst thing about this is that my husband loves to run," she said. "I'm just so sad for him. I didn't want him to be upset; I didn't want him to be sad; I didn't want him to hurt; I didn't want him to be in pain; and I didn't want him to be alone. So that was the first two days."

Michelle was also worried about his spirit.

"And then he called us. It was such a huge relief," she said. "We could all rest that night. We could all sleep because he called, and he was in such good spirits."

As Jake recalls: "I was so heavily medicated, I couldn't tell you what month it was, let alone what I said. You'll have to ask her."

As Michelle remembers it: "I was just so relieved that his tone of voice was so good, and he was laughing and he was calm, just himself. I could tell that he hadn't been damaged; that was my main concern — his mom's, too. After we talked to him, we got off the phone, we were like, 'He's going to be OK.' "

Jake Romo still believes that. He figures he'll get out of the Marine Corps and jokes that losing his legs might have actually improved his job prospects.

"I would never have had as many options if I hadn't gotten hit," he said. "I'm getting offers from private intelligence companies. I'm currently involved with a martial arts company I was involved with prior to the Marines Corps. For the last six months, we've been developing a serious self-defense program for guys in wheelchairs."

David Gilkey/NPR
Lance Cpl. Josue Barron lost his left leg and left eye in Sangin, Afghanistan, while serving with the 3/5 Marines from Camp Pendleton, Calif. He now has a glass eye that is emblazoned with the 3/5 insignia.

Long-Term Recovery

So far, Romo, like many of the seriously wounded Darkhorse Marines, is doing pretty well. But it's been less than a year.

"We've got to track them, we've got to track them and see how things go long term," said Rear Adm. Forrest Faison, the man in charge of medical care for all Marines and sailors on the West Coast. "Because that will be the true indication of whether or not this was all successful."

Five years from now, what do we see? How are we doing for families? How are we doing for suicide rates and things like that? All those things. It's way too early to tell."

On a bright San Diego afternoon, a handful of Marines sit on recumbent bikes, the kind equipped with hand pedals. The men all lost legs in Afghanistan in October 2010, the toughest month for Darkhorse Battalion.
Now they're getting set to do laps around a small lake. One of the men, Cpl. Marcus Chischilly, lost a leg after stepping on a roadside bomb. He'd like to go back out on patrol again in Afghanistan. But he knows it's unlikely. He doesn't want a desk job. So he's looking to leave the Marines and become an X-ray technician.

Lance Cpl. Josue Barron, who lost a leg and his left eye, also said he's going to get out of the Marines.

"It's not the same anymore," he said. "The career we wanted was infantry. That's what I joined to do. That's what the Marine Corps is all about. Might as well just get out and look for a better job."

**Still A Marine**

Then there's Lt. Cam West, who thinks there's no better job than being a Marine. West was also wounded last fall, losing a leg.

He was out on patrol, walking behind his radio operator, Lance Cpl. James Boelk, who stepped on a roadside bomb. The blast killed Boelk and wounded West.

West eventually ended up at Bethesda Naval Hospital. He was groggy. He hadn't really been speaking. He woke up one day, and his parents were in the room. It was the first time they'd seen him since he'd lost his leg.

"It's good to wake up and see your mom and pops," he said. "My dad and me, we go back and forth, and we always quote John Wayne from his movies," West said. "He was there at the foot of the bed, and he said, 'Mas frijoles mamacita.' And I finished it out: 'Por favor.' It's from a great John Wayne movie, probably the greatest, *The Searchers*. My mom looked at him, and said, 'Ah, he's gonna be fine.'"

That was about a year ago. Since then, West has been working out and getting used to his prosthetic leg. He can ride a bike.

West wants to be one of the few Marines who has lost a leg but can still lead men in combat.

"Shooting, running and gunning like I did before, it's going to be a little trickier now," he said. "Definitely possible, but I'm not going to blow smoke."

Still, he has a fallback plan — becoming a rancher in Colorado. "If I don't do the Marine Corps thing, look for me poking cows, longhorns," he said.

Kind of like John Wayne.
A general reflects on war and loss

When John F. Kelly, a three-star general, lost his son, an intense suffering came home

By Brian MacQuarrie

Globe Staff
November 11, 2011

When Lieutenant General John F. Kelly addressed a packed, cavernous function hall yesterday on the 236th birthday of the US Marine Corps, his pedigree needed no advertisement: Boston native, combat veteran, three-star general, and senior military adviser to Defense Secretary Leon Panetta.

There also was this: Kelly, 61, is the highest-ranking US military officer to lose a child in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. His speech came one day after the first anniversary of the death of his son, Marine Second Lieutenant Robert M. Kelly, in southern Afghanistan.

Kelly, the son of a postal worker from Brighton, never mentioned the death in his keynote address at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center, where more than 1,000 of his active and retired comrades had gathered.

Instead, he talked about service to country, the courage of Marines, and the deadly determination of Islamic militants.

“What I see every day scares me,’’ said Kelly, who has access to the most sensitive classified intelligence reports. The enemy, he continued, “is hurt; he is by no means defeated; and he is not giving up.’’

Later, at a secluded table in a dimly lit room, Kelly’s conversation turned to his fallen son, one of two boys who followed him into the Marine Corps, and who - with their father - combined for 11 tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Just think about their mother and their sister,’’ Kelly said with a half-smile.

Since Robert’s death, Kelly has tried to avoid mentioning his son in public or bringing attention to his family.

“We are not inclined to make ourselves out to be any different, just because I’m a lieutenant general in the Marines,’’ said Kelly, whose father worked two postal jobs, from 5 a.m. to midnight, for 40 years. “We are just one family. It’s not worse for us; it’s not easier for us.’’

Like his father, Robert first enlisted in the Marines and later received an officer’s commission. At 29 years old, an advanced age for a second lieutenant, Robert had been charged with leading a platoon of the Third Battalion, Fifth Marines, in intense, excruciating fighting in Helmand Province.
On Nov. 9, 2010, he stepped on a land mine and was killed instantly. A friend of his father’s, General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., rang a doorbell in the Washington Navy Yard to deliver the news. Dressed in his uniform, Dunford did not need to tell Kelly why he was there. His presence said everything.

“It’s a physical sadness,’” Kelly said, “that doesn’t go away.’’

Kelly, who held top commands in Iraq during and after the 2003 invasion, said his son’s death has helped enlarge his understanding of the effects of casualties at home.

“I used to think that somehow I could begin to understand how bad the loss of a son or daughter would be,’’ Kelly said. “But you don’t know what you don’t know.

“The one huge revelation was I didn’t have a clue how bad it hurt. I just had no idea. I was trying to empathize, trying to sympathize, trying to understand. And I thought like any person would. You kind of put it into terms like, well, I lost my mother, I lost my brother, it’s kind of the same thing.

“It ain’t.’’

The pain is lingering and immutable, he said, even though Marines in combat generally come to expect the worst among those they serve with and care about.

“But the tremendous thing my family has is we have tremendous pride,’’ Kelly said. “Robert was doing exactly what he wanted to do, with whom he wanted to do it. We are so proud of him. So proud.’’

The pain of losing his son, however, does not lessen his grief at the loss of other Marines.

“You can’t separate; they are all my sons,’’ said Kelly, who paused for several seconds to check his emotions. “I might never have met them, but I know them all.’’

Kelly would not comment on whether he believes Iraq, where he spent so much time, will fracture after the departure of the last US troops next month. Because he is a key adviser to the defense secretary, the subject is off limits for public comment.

But Kelly did predict that the US struggle against extremism will last for at least two more decades.

“I think we’re about to close a chapter in a 20-chapter book,’’ Kelly said. When asked which chapter is about to be closed, Kelly responded: “Two.’’

He sees hope in the continued willingness of young men and women to serve their country, even though he questions whether the 99 percent of Americans who are not in uniform fully appreciate the magnitude and fruits of that commitment.

“We never run out of tough, young Americans who are willing to look beyond their own self-interest,’’ Kelly said.

That sense of duty, however, has its consequences for the loved ones of the fallen. As he looked out over the rapt audience at the Convention Center, Kelly confided that he had received notice of another fatality, one that occurred only four hours earlier, of a young soldier in Afghanistan.

The soldier’s family, he said, had not yet been informed. But Kelly, warrior and father, knew what lay ahead.

“That family right now, somewhere in St. Louis, is in the final minutes of what amounts to be blissful ignorance,’’ Kelly said.
One incredible journey by Heather Litynski

Saturday, November 19, 2011 4:29 PM, CST

Today it has been one year since Mark was injured. I thought it would be hard but I can't stop looking at him and kissing his face. I am so so grateful and the term 'happy' does not accurately depict my joy of having my husband still at my side. We have been through such a journey together. I am so grateful for his squad and the doctors responsible for saving his life and I am so proud of his determination, will and great great attitude. In school we use to make poems made of single words or phrases. I don't remember what these are called, but I thought it was a good way to re-cap a year with as few words as possible so as to not write a novel. I'll start with the beginning being at the time of his injury and the end with being the present.

Shock Despair Disbelief Ache Panic Insomnia Fog Relief First time hearing his voice First kiss Fevers Ice baths Surgeries Long nights Pain Pep-talks Holding hands Tubes Visitors Cards Gatorade Vanilla Milkshakes Infection Hugs Tears Christmas with the family Sitting Up First Shower First time peeing X-Rays Ultrasounds Casts Waiting at the pharmacy Prosthetics First time walking Lucky Charms Skiing Georgetown basketball games Colostomy Reversal Wound Dressing Changes Wheelchair Trains Feeding Squirrels Seeing his boys come back Memorial Saying Goodbye Fishing Withdrawals Golfing Las Vegas USMC ball Going Home Family and Friends More Hugs Phantom Pain More Long Nights More Prosthetics Swimming Doctor's Appointments Pride-the good kind Pressure Ulcers Remembering Love
1st squad at Leatherneck at end of deployment in Sangin, Afghanistan
All the surviving redwood originals (1st squad since the very beginning) and the full patched in members (marines consistently with 1st squad, with at least 1 ied strike/firefight with us) the greatest honor I had during this deployment was being given the opportunity to lead such fine men.