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## The Long Walk: Afghanistan (and Its Future) as You've Never Seen It

Eight years into the war we were compelled to wage, the ground mission in Afghanistan remains just as brutal as war there has been for centuries. And now, after years of inattention from Washington, this war begins again. On the hunt with the men of Viper company.

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**Uphill Company B** moved through the darkness, step by step gaining elevation on an Afghan ridge. For the officers and soldiers equipped with GPS units and two-way tactical radios, which gave them access to information, the picture was clear enough. Company B, which calls itself Viper, was moving south, climbing a ridge that rose more than nine thousand feet above sea level and towered over the Korangal Valley, near the border with Pakistan. Its mission was to search for arms caches and insurgents and to harass the large but elusive forces that for three years have made the valley the scene of the bitterest infantry fighting in Afghanistan. And it was not alone. In the cold night air that had settled over the valley, beyond earshot, a pair of attack helicopters was flying in wide circles. Farther out, and higher, fixed-wing attack aircraft were on station. Soldiers call these *assets*, and in the event the soldiers found what they were looking for, either asset was ready to race to the ridgeline and

help with the killing. They were also ready to help if things developed along the more typical course of events in Afghanistan — as in, if what Company B was looking for found it instead.

But most of the 125 men in the column did not have radios, and though they had attended briefings and participated in rehearsals, they did not know what was happening minute by minute, beyond that they were walking through dense vegetation and snow and up a very steep hill and just about anything could happen in the days ahead. For each of these men, the infantry life was the infantry life, and the universe had shrunk in the darkness to a small space around his soaked boots: a shifting sphere of tree trunks and shrubs, mud and snow and sky, and the sweaty back of the man ahead. Even here technology snuck in. As his chest expanded and shrunk in the thinning air, and as his quadriceps and calves strained under the weight of his weapon, ammunition, grenades, helmet, flak jacket, water, food, spare batteries, chemlights, and first-aid kit, each man peered through a small eyepiece suspended from his helmet. The eyepiece hung in front of his shooting eye, just beyond the lashes; it was the transmitting end of a night-vision device. Night-vision devices do not open up the night world to the full richness of sight. But they illuminate a private keyhole: a narrow cone visible only to the man wearing the lens, who is treated to a grainy, dim, two-dimensional black-and-green version of the world. In this case, what mattered most in each man's green keyhole was the shimmering back of the man ahead. One minute that back would be five yards away. The next it would be a few feet off, as the five platoons in the line extended and shrunk like an accordion being dragged through undergrowth, snagging here and stretching, stalling there and bunching, but always moving forward. And higher.

Uphill, toward the saddle where a Navy SEAL team had been surrounded in battle in 2005 and a transport helicopter barreling toward them with reinforcements had been shot down. Eleven SEALs died that day. Their fight had been four years after the American military had arrived in Afghanistan, and almost four years before this night, during which Company B of the 1st Battalion of the 26th Infantry Regiment, in its ninth month in Afghanistan, after more firefights than many of these men could number without referring to the reports, flew away from their outpost for the most ambitious operation of a yearlong tour. Viper Shake, they called it. The company would shake up areas above, where insurgents had been unchallenged.

Eight years. Nearly eight years had passed since B-52 strikes and a Northern Alliance offensive had chased the Taliban from power in Kabul and President Bush had spoken triumphantly of American ideals and American power. Nearly four years had passed since the SEALs had died on this mountain, a battle far enough back to have been memorialized in a book. And still the Americans were here, sweeping the same ground, headed toward the wreckage ahead, somewhere up there, in the dark.

Each man silently peered down his dim green cone, breathing deeply, picking his next footstep, walking on.

### **What is the United States military doing in Afghanistan?**

The question, when not framed as a pejorative, has many answers. Depending on the soldier and the unit, at any given moment the military is likely doing one of four things. It is hunting for, and hoping to capture or kill, the top-tier Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders and their coteries. This is a direct extension of the original mission, the one that brought the United States back to Afghanistan in 2001 and that remains fired by the paired desires of justice and national security and, though the public-relations specialists do not frame it this way, a desire for revenge. Simultaneously, the United States military is working with foreign governments, nongovernment organizations, and American agencies to build a nation where ten years ago a nation existed principally in name. This reconstituted Afghanistan, anointed a democracy by foreign influence as much as by domestic will, is supposed to develop with popular consent into a self-sufficient central government and provincial governments and district governments, with honest ministries serving all three, and courts, and a diverse economy, and passable roads and reliable electricity and potable water, and robust exports besides illicit drugs. To use

the term now in favor — what one officer called the "flavor of the decade" for a nation that in recent decades has seen Islamism and warlordism and communism — this new nation is also supposed to recognize and run by *rule of law*, rather than by many other rules, opaque to most Westerners and largely unexplored by the United States, by which Afghanistan used to run, and often still runs, and might prefer to run if anyone were able to measure such things. And as this reordered nation is assuming a shape that remains tentative and wormy with corruption, the United States is pursuing a third primary mission, which is to create foundations for indigenous security. This includes a national police force and an army with enough skilled soldiers to integrate fire support and operate an air corps and stand up to an insurgency in battle anywhere. It also includes an intelligence service that can penetrate and understand myriad groups — local, regional, and transnational — that make up that insurgency, as well as the drug networks that control the shadow economy, which fuels much of the war. Last, or perhaps first, the United States military is doing what many people imagine it to be doing most: It is fighting that war. This is where Company B fits in. The long-term plan for Afghanistan is to build a competent and sturdy government and to hand off the country's affairs to this government in time. This will take many, many years. While those years pass, an essential military mission, year in and year out, is to keep the roads open and cities secure so commerce flows and Afghans can live their lives. As part of this, the military operates remote firebases and outposts far from the main roads and cities, with hopes of keeping insurgents busy away from much of the population. Each is home to squads, platoons, or companies — part of a defense-in-depth of blocking positions, or, as one colonel called them, Taliban magnets, with the organizing idea being that it is better to have the Taliban concentrating forces around a distant outpost than in Kabul, Jalalabad, or Kandahar. Company B, which occupies the Korangal Outpost and several small firebases nearby, is one of those magnets.

**Uphill Company B walked**, as the temperature dropped. Viper Shake had been planned as a roughly thirty-six-hour walk without sleep, beginning with a helicopter insert on this night from the outpost to the ridge and continuing through the next day, followed by a descent the following night down the mountain, with the hope of crossing the Korangal River and passing back into the outpost shortly after dawn. That last bit was essential. After several years of intense combat, local Afghans had scratched out fighting positions facing the approaches to the American lines. The company did not want to be caught in the low ground, trying to cross the river in the morning, when they might get raked with machine-gun fire from above. In a head-to-head fight, the insurgents were no match for the company. But if the company was caught down there, or midriver, many of its advantages would be gone.

Down was to be worried about later. Now Company B was going up. And as the minutes became hours, the soldiers were only beginning. The helicopters had picked up the company in the first hours of darkness. The pilots of transport helicopters do not like to fly in the Korangal Valley, and they rarely try by daylight because gunmen wait, armed with PK and DShK machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. They know the helicopters' routine. Two transport helicopters were downed in the valley in the past nine months. Now transport pilots prefer the night. Even then they arrive with Apache gunships as escorts, so that anyone daring to shoot risks a punishing response.

It had taken weeks to organize the operation. Company B runs several small positions in the valley, and since these positions could not be abandoned while the company worked outside the wire, the battalion had sent two extra platoons for Viper Shake. These soldiers had trickled in on recent night flights, and been ordered not to wander outside, because if spotters noticed that the outpost had been reinforced, they might suspect that Company B was about to push out for a fight. And so Company B had waited until nighttime, when the soldiers appeared and lined up in the dark, waiting for the hop onto Sawtalo Sar.

After the pickup, the helicopters had first flown to another ridge and pretended to land there — a second effort to deceive. If the spotters were not sure where the company had landed, their confusion might buy time and let the soldiers catch somebody unaware. And so it had gone. The soldiers were flown to one ridge, then another. On the second ridge the helicopters

landed in a clearing, with door gunners looking over their weapons and shouting, "Go!" and everyone rose and ran out the back ramp and fanned out as the downblast and hot exhaust blew the brush flat and the helicopters lifted away. Now Company B walked, although no one had any idea whether the feint had worked. They were silently busy with other things, each man in his own mind, walking up a hill he could barely see. Talking on patrol is discouraged; the soldiers were silent. The moon had yet to rise, and they knew that when it did, it would be a sliver, which meant that all night the mountain would be so black that when a soldier switched off his night-vision device, he would see nothing except stars overhead through gaps in the trees.

A tour in the infantry, along with nine months in the Afghan mountains, was enough to condition any young man. The soldiers of Company B were almost all lean, sinewy even, and acclimated to the air. They knew the rhythms of this place. One of the platoons, 2nd Platoon, had been in ferocious contacts twice in recent days. First it had ambushed an Afghan patrol, killing at least thirteen armed men at close range. And then it had been ambushed itself, and fought its way out of the riverbed under fire from high ground on three sides. In nine months in the valley, 2nd Platoon's casualty rate was an even 50 percent; sixteen of the thirty-two original soldiers were no longer here. Four of those soldiers had been killed, including Private First Class Richard Dewater, who died in the first instant of the last fight, when the insurgents detonated a bomb beneath him on a trail.

Second Platoon had lingered in the landing zone after the rest of Company B filed off. A pilot had seen a pile of ammunition for a recoilless rifle as he had landed, a cache hidden by brush. The platoon had scoured the field. But in the blackness the soldiers found nothing. The company commander, Captain James Howell, ordered 2nd Platoon to rejoin the company, which was walking away. Once the platoon slipped into the forest and began to catch up, the captain directed an air strike onto the zone. Explosions roared behind them. Then the night was silent again.

The climb was not easy. The mud turned greasy as more soldiers walked through it. Traction was difficult to find; in places, each step could take a man backward, as the soil and snow gave way and he slid down. Branches swept the soldiers' faces. Some soldiers fell, cursing to themselves as they pulled themselves to their feet. A few suffered already from bum ankles and knees, and now some men straggled. An Air Force sergeant in the command group, who was carrying a pack heavy with communications gear, fell behind, too. Captain Howell backtracked and stood over the sergeant, who was bent forward, head low, hands on knees, panting, spent. The captain told him to remove the backpack and carry only his weapon and water. Then he swung the radio on his back and walked off, carrying the sergeant's equipment and his own.

Even without the pack, the man was too tired.

In all, as Company B was spread in a half-mile line along the ridge, three soldiers had become too exhausted to keep up. The captain listened to radio chatter; he realized these men would slow down the job. He called for a helicopter, which appeared within minutes, landed, and lifted the men away.

Three men down. The company moved on.

**The problem with** the United States' multiple missions is not that any of them is without merit, although each has had its mix-ups and flaws. The problem lies in the relationship of missions to one another. From 2002 to 2008, the American national-security establishment devoted the larger share of its intellectual and material resources to the war in Iraq. And predictably and surely, no one was able or empowered to make the Afghan missions cohere.

Many of the ensuing problems are natural to war. Even on the most simple patrol, soldiers disagree about how things should best be done. Add diplomats and politicians and salesmen

and try to develop strategy for Afghanistan and disagreements creep into all manner of essential subjects, from the values versus the perils of air power to ways to deter the cultivation of poppy to the merits and means of democratization to the size and composition of the troop level to the best manner and locations to deploy units in the field. But the war's conduct has not suffered from only disagreements writ large. It has been undermined by disharmony. Various missions have fallen under various commands. Several NATO countries contributed forces with caveats and limits on their roles. And at the doctrinal level, the core question of how to put Western counterinsurgency theory into practice remains publicly unresolved. Even the term "Afghan war" is inadequate; the same war is being fought deep into Pakistan, where the rules change again.

No commander could be expected to juggle all of this to victory, especially in the years after Iraq exploded in violence and the message in Washington was that the United States had prevailed in Afghanistan and was running down the last few villains to mop up. Top officers rotated through the many Afghan commands. Central problems remained unresolved. By the time of Viper Shake, focus had swung back. And the current four-star, General David McKiernan, was rumored down to the level of the brigade officers to have been at odds with the brass in the United States. He was soon to be relieved, a sign that the United States was still struggling, at the highest levels, to shape itself to the work.

**By sunrise Company B** had reached the false peak of Sawtalo Sar, a knob of dark soil and stone nearly ninety-two hundred feet above sea level. The true peak was perhaps two hundred yards on. The arrival of light had revealed the surroundings, which were little like the Afghanistan most people, even many Afghans, would recognize. This was logging country, and Sawtalo Sar was cloaked in old-growth forest. Some of the tree trunks were more than four feet thick, and their branches towered above the soldiers huddling by the boulders. Captain Howell called a halt, and one platoon pushed forward to clear the top. The remaining soldiers, pulling bags of nuts and other food from their pockets, rested for the work ahead. Once the company crested the peak, the plan was to break into platoon-sized patrol bases and send out smaller groups to search the peak and the many ridges off of it. Clouds drifted overhead, and as the sun climbed, its light remained dim. The temperature held stubbornly in the 30s.

In the field, Afghanistan is rich with variable climates and terrain, not an expanse of baked hills, steppes, and ravines. Kunar Province, which includes the Korangal Valley, passes as Afghanistan's jungle — a mountainous region of forests and spires. In springtime it is laced with dark rivers and cascading streams. Away from the valleys, many of which are little more than terraced slots between ridges, its terrain is so forbidding that few roads exist. Here Afghans walk ancient trails. High on Sawtalo Sar, those trails were out of sight from the American bases, sometimes even from aircraft above, which often cannot penetrate the canopy. The United States had set up in the valley a few years before, and since then the insurgents had learned exactly where the Americans did not go and could not see. Footpaths in these areas doubled as narrow military trails.

The platoon ahead radioed back. The peak was clear. Company B stood up and began the last climb, and reached the top quickly. Captain Howell ordered the company to continue to the mostly flat ridge beyond. A new world opened up: the vista of the opposite side. In every direction were small valleys, and within each were smaller canyons, an unexplored swath of terrain, folded in uncountable ways. This was the American experience of rural Afghanistan in a microcosm — a land of seams beyond measure, with each valley and each hamlet below an area where few Americans, if any, had stepped in years. Apache helicopters barreled forward while the platoons fanned out.

Over the years, a series of infantry companies had been assigned to the Korangal Valley. In addition to trying to nudge villagers into cooperating with the government and running routine patrols, each company occasionally undertook much more difficult missions, trying to push beyond the villages immediately around the outpost and challenge the insurgents on their ground. Viper Shake was the largest mass of men Company B had assembled outside the wire

in nine months, and they were farther out than they had ventured before. They were a highly lethal force, scores of organized and armed men, in armor, with night-vision devices and precision navigation equipment, watched over by a Predator drone and connected by radios to a mortar section, to an artillery battery, to a pair of helicopter gunships, and to fixed-wing attack aircraft on call, minutes away. This was small-unit maneuver and firepower all but perfected. Company B was at this very moment a new American standard, the archetype of a forward deployed unit backed by intricate layers of firepower and material and medical support, as sophisticated and deadly a conventional infantry company as the world had ever known. It was also a wandering dot in a foreign wilderness. The soldiers could clear the area around them and beat back any force they could reasonably expect to encounter up here, high on Sawtalo Sar. But unless the insurgents presented themselves for a sustained head-to-head battle — in effect, a mass suicide by attack, the sort of video-game fantasy of gunfighting that most soldiers never see — Company B could expect to have little lasting influence on this territory or the Afghans within it a moment after it moved on. And inevitably it would move on. In hours.

**It is easier** to be descriptive in Afghanistan than prescriptive, though there is no shortage of thoughtful voices prescribing solutions: more soft-shoe counterinsurgency tactics, more conventional troops to provide security (read: show up and fight) in areas where there is little security now, more troops to train and mentor Afghan soldiers and cops, more soldiers on the Afghan — Pakistan border to plug infiltration routes, more political engagement and security collaboration with Pakistan. Some advice is interlocking and neat and aligns with the invigorated war effort being pursued by the United States. Other advice is contradictory: The United States should conduct fewer Predator and Reaper strikes against insurgent leadership in Pakistan, or maybe it should conduct more. The United States should eradicate poppy fields, or perhaps it should encourage putting the crop to legal medicinal use. And some advice points to options that are easy to imagine but hard to execute, both politically and practically, including deciding which insurgents can be negotiated with and how. To the man slated to replace General McKiernan, General Stanley McChrystal, falls the unenviable job of putting this into order. He inherits command in a country with swaths of territory out of government influence and control, with military and civilian casualties rising, and with much of the country so dangerous that Westerners cannot travel without risk of being killed or kidnapped.

**Captain Howell studied the map.** The patrols had found the far side of Sawtalo Sar less vegetated than expected, and had turned up neither caches nor men. They had detected Taliban fighters on a ridge opposite, out of range of their guns, and the attack helicopters had plunged down and opened fire. Explosions echoed up the mountain. For an infantryman, this kind of violence was almost theatric, someone else's act, and some of the men did not bother to watch.

Snow had begun to fall in small, hard pellets, and the soldiers, now twenty hours out, had not slept. It was April, but at this elevation it was cold, and the sun, dull as a nickel, brought no warmth. Clusters of snowpack remained, emanating a chill. To avoid overheating and becoming dehydrated on the walk, most of the soldiers wore a single layer of clothing; the same clothing they would wear if the temperature were 100 degrees. The command group's radio operators shivered under a shared camouflage poncho, headsets pressed to their ears.

The captain looked to his watch. It was time to begin the walk down. This was a more dangerous proposition than walking up the mountain, Company B knew, because by late afternoon, almost a full day into the mission, whatever doubts the Afghans of the Korangal Valley had had about the soldiers' whereabouts had long passed.

Viper Shake had been planned to be more aggressive than this, and more complex. The company was to sweep this ridge as part of a fuller disruption and diversion plan, and an Afghan infantry company was to be airlifted to a ridge overlooking another set of valleys, where its walk out was to include a village sweep. Many of the villages in the side canyons are essentially American no-go areas and serve as Taliban havens. The American units have tried

to enter them rarely, if ever; the villages are too far from the outpost to be reached readily on foot, and the paths in and out are ideal for ambushes, meaning that routine patrols on them would likely create regular casualties for little effect. Instead, the usual fight in the valley takes place almost entirely around a string of villages on the river, all in front of the American outpost. It is a tiny theater. Even in villages a few kilometers away, the insurgents are unmolested. In one, Yakeh Chineh, some intelligence indicates that men are so unworried about encountering an American that they have walked about with rifles openly displayed. In others there is almost no clear insight into what is going on, even though any of these soldiers, in another situation, could jog to the villages in a fraction of an hour.

One of the organizing ideas behind Viper Shake had been to get the Afghan army, which has been improving in skill in recent years, to search an important village and try to trip up, or even catch, Haji Matin, the owner of the valley's idled sawmill.

The insurgency in the valley is on one level remarkably simple, though complicated by several factors. The simple distillation is that it is a revolt against outsiders that has been fueled by economic grievances. Most of the fighters are local Korangalis, and many have been displaced from work by the American-backed Afghan government, which banned most logging. Company B's outpost is on the grounds of the sawmill that Haji Matin had been dispossessed of — a symbol of jobs lost by loggers and mill workers and truck drivers and everyone else who lived off harvesting the forests in which Company B now sat. Later, as the war here escalated, Haji Matin's house was destroyed by an air strike, which extinguished hopes that he might be peacefully convinced to set aside his guns. Instead, Haji Matin and the displaced workers fight. Lieutenant Colonel Brett Jenkinson, Captain Howell's intense battalion commander, had summed up an underlying dynamic: The insurgency drew manpower from a pool of jobless laborers to create a guerrilla force without many other ways to eat. "A lot of the insurgents up there are opportunists," he said, and then added, paradoxically, "Fighting is what keeps them alive."

The suspension of the legal timber harvest cannot alone explain the viciousness and endurance of this contest. The villages have a long history of producing rugged guerrillas; elderly Korangalis speak of the time when the Soviet army dug in its own outpost in their valley. Local men overran it. And the valley's proximity to Pakistan has meant that multiple insurgent groups — Mullah Omar's Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hizb-e-Islami and others — have capitalized on Korangali anger, the Americans said, stoking what might have been a manageable economic dispute. They send in money, which helps pay fighters' wages. On occasion, they also send in foreign jihadists, though American officers tend to smile wryly when that subject is raised. Foreign fighters are rare here, they said. And most foreigners — Pakistanis or Arabs — are not in nearly as good shape as the Afghan lumberjacks. "A fat Arab guy? A smoker from Yemen?" Colonel Jenkinson had said. "We kill them quick." Outsiders might make fearsome suicide bombers in Afghanistan's population centers; they can be valuable as ideologues, too. But here, in a mountain wilderness, they lack the stamina and knowledge of the ground and of American tactics to be of much use in a fight. Still, day in and day out the Americans often hardly know who is shooting at them. When they piece together their assessment, they describe a locally recruited force linked to larger groups, which collaborate to a degree; a syndicate. The result is a network of Korangali killers, fertilized by the larger war, with motivations ranging from drawing wages to avenging deaths to expelling outsiders along national, religious, and economic grounds. The word *Taliban*, which once suggested an organized movement loosely governing the country, is now shorthand.

Viper Shake was meant to disrupt these locals by placing an American company on the insurgents' ridge and simultaneously placing an Afghan company in position to sweep a village Haji Matin frequented. The battalion had planned it this way, and briefed it this way, and then, the day before the mission began, word came from Kabul that the village search was canceled. Under the directives of President Hamid Karzai, who has spent much of his presidential life facing popular anger over house searches and errant air strikes and traffic accidents and disputed detentions, entering Afghan houses was broadly discouraged. The Karzai rules, they called them. Someone up the chain was worried about the Karzai rules, and so in the largest

operation that Company B would do in a year in the Korangal Valley, no houses would be entered. Depending on someone's point of view, this could be seen as a good decision; the proponents of Western counterinsurgency doctrine often point out that the ambition of winning popular support is easily undercut by the perceived tactical gains of playing squarely and rough. This paradigm can make perfect sense at press conferences or over tea in Kabul. It can summon a different feeling in areas far from government control, in a seam in which the insurgents flit between episodes in which they have killed your friends and tried to kill you. Soldiers live by the decisions from above; there is not much choice. But many also say it: *Hey, can you imagine fighting a war where one side can hang out with weapons in their houses and the other side is told it can't go in? How much fucking fun is that?* And so the Afghan company was walking out this afternoon without knocking on any doors. And Company B shivered on Sawtalo Sar, where the SEALs had died by the hands of men no doubt living in houses below, in a situation as ageless as counterinsurgent war. Insurgents all around. Not an insurgent in sight.

Captain Howell issued instructions establishing the order of movement for the walk back. Up stood the soldiers. Then Company B was moving again, slipping through mud and snow, heading generally westward in the soft and fading light of late afternoon. Downhill.

**After a short while** the lead soldiers came to a steep, open hillside — an area where in years past loggers had clear-cut the old growth — and they were exposed. Each man bounded downhill, keeping his distance from the others and taking his turn, man by man, ducking behind the stumps, waiting for the soldier ahead to abandon his stump and then running forward to take his place. The brown soil smelled of loam.

As they descended, the ridges loomed above, each piece of higher ground a potential hiding area for guerrillas to begin an ambush. The Apache pilots understood this danger and buzzed the ridges repeatedly, banking and thumping and mock-rushing one likely firing position after another. Beneath them, the soldiers hustled and jogged downward to a trail, where they turned left and followed the path along a stone ledge and then climbed until the lead of Company B reached a saddle connecting to another high ridge that would lead them down, down, several thousand feet down to the river, many hours off. The tail of the company was far back, in the woods, leaving the snowpack. Sweat rolled down the soldiers' faces. They had each left with at least eight bottles of water, and many had begun the mission with a full water bladder as well, slung across their backs. Now they guzzled what was left. Company B was almost dry.

The scouts and the lead platoon crossed the saddle to the ridge, with Captain Howell following. The front of Company B was nearing known ground. Lower on this same ridge was the place where 2nd Platoon had ambushed the Taliban earlier in the month, on Good Friday. On that day, the platoon set out alone on foot and crossed the river and spent the day climbing the ridge. Its mission was to set up a patrol base and disrupt any Afghans preparing to stage attacks.

The platoon leader, Second Lieutenant Justin Smith, was new to command; this was his fourth patrol. But he was not inexperienced; he was a former noncommissioned officer and a graduate of Ranger School. As the platoon waited, he took a team forward for a reconnaissance. The ridge was narrow, the vegetation thick. Trees towered above. He had been told to search the ridge, set up a patrol base, and look for insurgents. Now he did what his training and instincts suggested. He blended the Ranger standard for a patrol base — a triangle with machine guns at each corner oriented to fire across each of the three frontages, ready to make protective walls of supersonic lead — with his sense that the insurgents, if they would be moving here on this night, would travel the trail from the higher ground down to a path junction. There at the junction he stacked his forces as the sun set, and checked the machine guns, and ordered claymore mines to be hidden in thickets nearby, and satisfied himself that he had done what a platoon leader can do to ready for night. This was a patrol

base; that was irrefutably and technically true. But it had been adapted into something more: a deliberate ambush.

Lieutenant Smith ordered everyone to be silent and perfectly still. Stand-to, Rangers in the field call this. Stand-to, a condition lasting from twilight into dark during which the silence of the woods envelops a unit. On one level, this is so the unit cannot be surprised. On another, this is so an infantry standard that is difficult to meet — stillness, discipline, alertness, control — is established for the night. With stand-to, 2nd Platoon was now arranged in a living triangle of motionless gunmen, night-vision devices on, weapons facing out, grenades beside hands. It was nestled into the ground. The soldiers were allowed to blink. And to breathe. Nothing more.

When stand-to was over, the lieutenant whispered for scouts to sneak uphill, step off trail, and set in a listening post. They slipped away and arrived at a spot they had already selected, from which they could warn the platoon if the Taliban, for once, acted the way an American unit hoped and walked down that trail and into this trap.

The scout team had been gone a few minutes when its leader, Sergeant Zachary Reese, called back. His voice was a whisper. Eight armed men, he hissed, were coming down the trail.

Stand-to had worked like instructors in infantry schools invariably say it is supposed to. The approaching men were unaware; only the first few were alert. They picked their way downhill slowly, looking, listening, rifles lowered to fight. Behind them, a few meters back, the remaining insurgents strolled in an unsuspecting knot, weapons on shoulders, in that age-old, every-unit-has-walked-this-way-when-the-platoon-sergeant-was-not-looking formation that is known, among grunts, as the clusterfuck.

Second Platoon did not have to shift to face them. Second Platoon already faced that way. Its night-vision devices illuminated the soldiers' laser sights. Each man's green keyhole showed a weirdly geometric display of crisscrossing paths down which the platoon's bullets would fly, an invisible and lethal matrix of waiting violence, fully assembled, pointing up trail. The lines were visible to the Americans only. For the Afghan fighters, the night was black. Now was a matter of the rules, which were understood, and said that no one can fire until the patrol leader gives the signal. Second Platoon waited. Nobody spoke.

One of the lead insurgents flicked on a flashlight. Picking up the path, he switched the light off and continued toward the kill zone. Man by man, each fighter emerged as a green silhouette in the soldiers' keyholes, each to be marked and panned by the vivid line of an infrared laser sight.

The scouts counted twenty-six men walk by their post. Sergeant Reese could not pass this information. The insurgents were too close.

Lieutenant Smith watched. Closer they came, closer, and closer still, until the first man was perhaps six feet away from the nearest American prone on the ground, who switched the selector lever on his rifle from safe to semiautomatic, readying it to fire. The lever made a tiny metal-on-metal noise, a click.

The lead insurgent stopped.

He lowered his head. The American was directly in front of him, a private first class, Troy Pacini-Harvey, a wiry nineteen-year-old with quick dark eyes and a small black carbine, pointed up. Pacini-Harvey's laser had been darting from the slot between the man's eyes to the center of the man's forehead. Now it stopped there. Other lasers, from other soldiers, were locked on each man visible in the column behind. The point man seemed undecided, unaware of the green dot above his brow. He had heard something, but what?

"Fire," Lieutenant Smith said. "Fire, fire, fire, fire."

Downhill and across the river, at the outpost, Captain Howell was walking to dinner when the ridge where he had sent 2nd Platoon exploded with noise and flashes of light. Machine-gun fire boomed in extended bursts, mixed with the drumroll staccato pops of M4 fire. "*What the fuck?*" a soldier shouted, and the captain was running into Company B's operations center. Up on the hill, claymore mines exploded. Then grenades. Stray tracers arced through the night sky. Every shot sounded like American weapons. The soldiers gathered and pointed at the display unfolding above, which lasted only minutes. They heard no returning Kalashnikov fire. And then the hill was silent again. Radio traffic began. In the operations center, Captain Howell, who at thirty and with three tours in Afghanistan had mastered the ability to radiate calm over the radio when others are excited, was waiting for his update. He was about to hear the news. The lead Afghans had been killed outright. The others had scattered, some to die in the claymore and grenade explosions, at least one to fall off a cliff, and others, in the rear, backtracking in a panic that carried them to safety. No Americans had been injured. Afghan corpses littered the ground.

That had been earlier in the month. Now Company B was outside the wire, spread along two ridges, and the rear platoon was calling Captain Howell by radio. Dehydration and terrain were taking a toll. They had a down man. He could not go on.

The sun was low in the western sky. Captain Howell had wanted to get everyone off the mountain and across the river before sunrise tomorrow. Twilight offered a last chance to cover ground quickly. Company B stopped.

**Even among those** with experience on the ground, the military, institutionally, has yet to resolve a central question faced by democracies fighting counterinsurgency war: how to balance the practical role of violence (raw, deliberate, and unblinking) against the constant risk that the same violence (raw, accidental, and reduced to euphemism) will miss its mark and erode support from civilians caught between competing sides. A credible and persistent threat of violence is necessary for security and success. But violence is not often as clean and pure as 2nd Platoon's gunmen-on-gunmen ambush on Sawtalo Sar. It often backfires. Air strikes are the most talked-about example, because when air strikes don't strike as planned, they level houses or kill and cripple civilians in numbers large enough to become news. But any infantryman knows that civilians suffer in smaller quantities but with much more regularity in the everyday and less-spectacular events of war. They suffer physically from rifle and machine-gun bullets, and mortar and artillery fire, and from vehicle accidents and detentions for which they have limited ability to seek recourse. They also suffer in corrosive ways from the same military presence that is meant to protect them — the hassles at checkpoints, the traffic jams caused by convoys, the damage done by vehicles moving across orchards and vineyards and fields, the searches of homes. These dangers, indignities, and inconveniences together alienate civilians that any Afghan government, if it is to survive by more than force, should court.

There are other ways, in theory, to approach this; options that are unavailable to Western democracies but illustrative of paths not taken. Counterinsurgent planners who are not part of free and open societies with checks and balances on power can worry less about the core idea of Western counterinsurgency theory. Witness Russia's handling of the second Chechen war, where the insurgency was overpowered in part by exhausting the population through mass intimidation, wide-scale destruction, and extraordinary violence, unapologetic and blunt. Or the weakening of the Lord's Resistance Army in northwestern Uganda, or Saddam Hussein's Baathist campaign against the Kurds in northern Iraq. In both of these wars, a preferred means of separating populations from insurgents was to force the people into mock communities that were actually mass detention centers, a tactic so punitive that even its euphemism is chilling: *draining the sea*. And then stomping on fish.

In Afghanistan, the United States has to play by higher rules. There are arguments as well that brutality works only if sustained; otherwise, it creates powder kegs for the generation ahead. And so the military has been trying for years to decide where on the spectrum between conventional war and counterinsurgency engagement it is supposed to be in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is not a matter of one setting. Every province, valley, and village can present new contests for influence, new grievances, new Afghan leaders, different criminal and insurgent groups, changing popular desires. And every firefight unfolds in its own way. Some situations have wide margins for restraint. Others do not. Who expects company-grade officers and NCOs to withhold violence, effectively and consistently, and according to long lists of rules, when they have wounded men exposed? These are the wars within the war, in which the tactical can become strategic, and in which intricately mixed forms of American violence are sets of tools. But how to use them? And when? And how often? And at what cost?

**Second Platoon headed** down the ridge. A Black Hawk had arrived in the near darkness and carried the injured soldier away. Now Company B moved downhill toward the river. At first the trail was wide. But after an hour or so it thinned out, then disappeared, and the terrain led the soldiers in a direction they did not want to go. By midnight, the company was in a gully that descended toward Chichal, a village where Taliban influence is strong. The ground had grown soft, wet, and spongy. In places, the soldiers sunk shin-deep into the mud. Damp soil meant dense thickets, the densest the company had encountered yet. The movement almost stopped, down to one hundred meters an hour.

Company B was nearing thirty hours out. Its soldiers had not slept in two days. They were physically drained and wobbly; almost all of them were out of water. Some were cramped, with spasms creeping up calves. They moved so slowly and stopped so often that some men dozed standing up. Zoning, soldiers call this; the act of sleepwalking in the field and under arms. Some nudged or slapped one another to stay awake; others hallucinated, shook it off, stumbled on, and hallucinated some more. Cold feet, legs tight as hardwood, helmets full of buzzing mush.

The scouts called Captain Howell: One of their soldiers had rolled his left ankle and fallen. He could not walk. The captain looked up to a rooflike mat of branches. A helicopter could not land here or even winch down a cable to lift out a man. "You'll have to carry him out," he said into his radio.

The scout leader politely objected; it seemed too far. Captain Howell repeated himself slowly: "You'll have to carry him out."

A half hour on, a patch opened above. Captain Howell thought a medic could be lowered through it and the scout could be carried away. He radioed the scout leader: a little farther on.

Back at the battalion headquarters, in Pech Valley, Colonel Jenkinson and the battalion staff listened. They realized the company was almost stalled. Perhaps helicopters could come airlift Company B away, if the company could reach a clearing farther on. But no helicopters were available for such a large lift until well after daylight, and Captain Howell knew that flying the soldiers out under the sun posed more dangers than the long walk home. Downing a helicopter full of these soldiers would be a Taliban dream, and too great a risk. An officer called Captain Howell and said an AC-130 gunship could be made available in the morning if the company had to fight its way past Chichal and across the river. The captain said he was not worried about fighting. He was worried about his men. He'd lost five soldiers to the terrain. Many others were zoning and staggering in a state of exhaustion that made difficult ground and vegetation almost impassable. Company B was dehydrated and out of water. He could start losing more fast. "I'm worried about breaking people," he said. He did not need another gunship, not yet; he needed a resupply. This was his AO. He knew the map. There was a clearing on a ridge up ahead; not far, but at this pace hours off.

The captain shifted plans. Company B would not be across the river before sunrise. He had to prepare for the next day, and perhaps for a low-ground fight. He ordered 2nd Platoon to head to the clearing and secure it.

**One reason the war** has not gone as the United States has wished is that many tasks are exceptionally difficult and complex. Take security development. The United States is creating Afghan government forces essentially from scratch. This requires thousands of American trainers and mentors and demands a huge collection of functioning and compatible arms and military materiel, enough for what could in time become nearly four hundred thousand armed men in the uniform of the nation being built around them. This is an extraordinary chore. An even harder task is finding those hundreds of thousands of young Afghan men, fit and honest and willing to serve, and enlisting and training them to perform. And if these soldiers are to become something more than the foundation for future armed gangs, then they will need committed and uncorrupted senior officers to lead them in a reasonably efficient and reliable way. Creating such a force would be hard to do in, say, Ukraine. In Afghanistan, aside from the fact that there are multiple ethnicities and an ongoing war, there is another catch: All of these men, the clay of professional units, are to be drawn from a society in which a small fraction of the men can read.

Or take modernization. The United States underwrites road construction, which encourages commerce, which can improve Afghan lives and national stability. But roads are used by the Taliban, too. And more traffic means more opportunities for insurgents to shake down motorists at illegal roadblocks and use the money to fight. Development can benefit insurgents, too, as cellular phones have since they were proudly introduced. Wireless phone networks stimulate commerce and bring a modern convenience into Afghan lives. They also provide a means for insurgents to communicate and to exercise command and control. Now insurgents in the provinces often take instructions and make plans via phone calls from Pakistan, a phenomenon that is not much different from a mob captain in Atlantic City checking on a racket in the Bronx. Before the cellular networks were here, this was much harder to do.

The point is not that the United States should discourage development and modernization. The point is that as the country develops, the insurgency develops, too. Insurgency and country, intertwined; and every step forward can bring consequences not foreseen.

**Company B drank.** In the darkness before dawn the soldiers had been guided out of the gully by an Apache helicopter, which shined an infrared laser on the clearing, marking it for 2nd Platoon. Man by man, the company snaked up out of the vegetation and into the field, where a Black Hawk landed and the crew handed out heavy body bags. The bags were stuffed with bottled water. The lead soldiers cut open the plastic, and as the platoons waited in the brush, teams from each filed by, picked up water, and carried it back to distribute. The sun would be up soon. The company had several hours of walking ahead, and the soldiers sat, drinking. And drinking more. An infantry life presents soldiers with almost infinitely variable permutations of pain. The soldiers were chasing a peculiar low-grade variation: the mixed sensations of being cold and parched.

Captain Howell allowed time to drink. He ordered two platoons to branch off for a firebase, and the rest of Company B to push on to the main outpost. Then he set a brisk pace across the landing zone and down the slope. The walk ahead would be through a broken mix of trees, shrubs, and thigh-high grass, in places grazed clean by cattle and goats and intersected with trails. Three more hours, he said, best case. He knew the soldiers would be crossing the lowest ground by daylight, but also knew they would have help. Now that the soldiers were out of the gully, they heard the fresh thumping of attack helicopters high overhead in the morning twilight.

Downhill the company walked, gathering speed as visibility improved. The soldiers switched off their night-vision devices. Daylight was welcome and dreaded, for the soldiers knew that if

they could see far ahead, it also meant that they could be seen. When they stopped, they crouched behind rocks, bushes, and trees.

Within two hours the soldiers were strung along a stone path that led to Babeyal, a village overlooking the river. Company B paused. Cliffs rose overhead. A line of women left the village and crossed the river, accompanied by old men with livestock. They walked directly through the formation. At the front of the column, Sergeant First Class Thomas Wright, 2nd Platoon's platoon sergeant, did not like what he saw. A few days before, this platoon had walked toward a village as residents slipped out, and the soldiers had been ambushed, killing Private First Class Dewater. This felt faintly familiar.

Company B backed up. The platoon sergeant sensed a bomb; the company would not continue down that trail. Man by man it recoiled backward, uphill, and after approaching the river below from another angle, the soldiers began to descend a cliff, foothold by handhold, as Apaches blew past. The cliff was sloppy with loose stone and impossible for an infantry formation to descend without knocking rocks free, which bounded downhill. The soldiers below dodged, but one, a tombstone-sized rock, bounced and fell from above, passed perhaps ten yards away from Captain Howell, and slammed squarely into Sergeant Christopher Thompson. "That was a big rock," the captain said quietly, as other soldiers scrambled to help. The sergeant was unconscious. They cradled his head, and held his hands, and spoke softly. As they tended to him, he woke, slipped back into a daze, and woke again. Perhaps thirty minutes, after half of Company B passed him, he stood and began to walk.

**Imagine reversing** the roles and contemplating the collection of signals that insurgents must sift. Seven years ago, after the United States drove much of the Taliban and Al Qaeda leadership into Pakistan, Washington's national-security establishment shifted focus to Iraq. The Afghan insurgency regrouped, bit by bit, and erupted in violence in 2006. By this time, the United States, having suffered three years of escalating violence in Iraq and led by a president with plunging popular support, might have been expected to lose its will. But now a second American president has embraced the war and devoted more resources to it, which means the next few years will likely be much more dangerous for insurgents than the past eight.

Already they must contend with more enemies than before. The Afghan military did not exist seven years ago. Now it is nearly ninety thousand armed men, and growing. These are not exceptional soldiers formed into high-performing units. But they are not mere armed bands, either, as previous Afghan enemies sometimes were. They are backed by Western mobility, communications, and firepower, and on difficult missions they are often essentially led by American advisors. And as they gain experience, they accumulate equipment. Suites of new armored vehicles, and transport trucks, and aircraft, and weapons, ordered years ago, are arriving. It all might not be sustainable. It is too soon to know whether it will work. But what if these forces become the institution their designers designed them to be? Moreover, as Afghan forces grow, more Americans are flowing into the country. Led by experienced noncommissioned officers and captains and lieutenant colonels, they are more capable than the conventional forces that arrived in 2002. And they are equipped with a counterinsurgency doctrine and appreciation for nation-building. None of this ensures the Americans and the government they prop up will succeed, just as the disappointing results to date do not necessarily mean that the war will fail. Extrapolation is difficult. Given the complexities of the Afghan ground, it is risky to use an understanding of any one place or mission, the work of any infantry company, no matter how fine, and say what effect it has had long term or what the soldiers should do next, out of all the choices. But one thing is obvious: The insurgency has evolved and grown in complexity and strength, and the United States is reorganizing to challenge it. There will be many more walks and much more blood, even if General McChrystal and Washington manage to remake the war in a way that reconciles the disparate missions and commands. The United States is eight years in. The war is old. But it feels as if it is beginning again.

**At the bottom** of the cliff, the river rushed by, brownish green and thigh-deep. Exposed in two columns, the soldiers stepped into the cold flow and stumbled and sloshed across, weapons high, with the current pulling at their pants. After several soldiers stepped onto the opposite bank, an Apache pilot spotted something he did not like and roared the gunship overhead with chain gun firing. Spent shells rained down into the riverbed, clattering on rocks. Company B's lead element was back across the river. It was late morning. The sun's rays beat down hard, and at this lower elevation the air was warm. The outpost was directly in front of them, uphill and across a dirt road. The soldiers inside, who had been left behind to guard it, were waiting up there with a hot meal — beef with gravy and powdered eggs and canned vegetables and powdered potatoes and coffee. The soldiers outside had only to make the climb.

Afghan men and boys sat along the road, watching casually. Were they spotters? Or just transfixed by the spectacle of Company B's return: a long line of mud-caked men in their twenties and late teens, moving mechanically, almost in slow-motion, steam rising from tattoos, materializing from the bush to inch and slide down a cliff, ford the river, and climb the hill? Probably that. Or maybe both. The sergeants were wary, expecting a bomb. They ordered everyone off the road and trails.

Company B changed pace. It began a rock-hop over broken ground, avoiding a bomb that may or may not have been buried in the road's soft soil. Uphill. Uphill, past the twisted ruins of a truck and scattered piles of trash. And slowing. And then the infantrymen — glaze-eyed, stinking, dehydrated, exhausted, and post-hallucination, easing out of the nagging awareness that any man's existence could end in a flash at any step, and easing into thoughts of inhaling that long-awaited cigarette, and sliding out of flak jackets and wet boots, and shitting, and eating a piled-high breakfast with a plastic knife and fork, and lying horizontal in a sleeping bag and falling instantly into sleep — *sleep* — began passing man by man back inside the wire. Head shakes. Backslaps. Foul words. *God that sucked*. Home.

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