

July 20, 2003

## Where the Enemy Is Everywhere and Nowhere

By DANIEL BERGNER

**S**tones and scrap metal are laid out on the sand. The officers gather for what they call the rock drill, a last session of planning. Strips of white cloth, along with the rocks and metal, form a map of Lowri Kariz, the village the troops will search, hunting Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Steel bars split the village into quadrants. Squads will cover each section, making sure no suspect can shift from one to another -- making sure no suspect can edge away.

In a few hours, after nightfall, the soldiers will leave their Kandahar base. They have been warned to anticipate resistance. The search zone is tight to the border; the frontier is an enemy refuge. Ambushes might be sprung and mortars might be launched, and then there are the old, unmarked minefields and others that might be newly laid. After the rock drill, platoons meet between the tents. With a quiet, cursing indifference that mitigates fear, they talk through the responses to assaults, to mines. If someone in their units takes an unlucky step and gets his body blasted into fragments, the men will squat down and inch toward the victim, using their bayonet blades to stab delicately at the desert floor.

This is America's war on terror, in the southern and least stable part of Afghanistan, over a year and a half since that war began. "This mission," Charles Flynn, the Army lieutenant colonel in charge of tonight's operation, tells me, "I expect to apprehend enemy." Then the convoy of trucks and Humvees moves out, lurching and jouncing through cratered terrain, Afghanistan's powdery sand rising from the tires, coiling and unfurling like mist, radiant in the headlights. All is obscure behind it.

Resolute strike, Valiant Strike, Carpathian Lightning: the names of recent United States military operations in Afghanistan. And beginning with the name that encompasses them all, Operation Enduring Freedom, there have been victories to go along with the grand, triumphal language. American missiles, in the fall of 2001, annihilated Al Qaeda training camps where men like Ramzi Yousef and Mohamed Atta had taught and learned. Afghan militias directed by Army Special Forces crews drove the Taliban from power and destroyed, in less than two months, the terrorist sanctuary Al Qaeda had found under the Taliban's extremist rule. It's a crucial word, sanctuary. It's one-third of the way the American military -- with about 8,500 troops on the ground, aided by 3,000 coalition soldiers -- defines its aims in the country. Kill. Capture. Deny sanctuary. These are the measures of the war's success as the 300 Americans ride out tonight on Vigilant Guardian, hoping that Flynn's prediction is more than a wish.

The troops doze, bodies packed crushingly into the open beds of the trucks. Turreted gunners peer out through night optics above each cab; for the rest, jolting at eight miles per hour through hostile territory on a scarcely marked track, closer and closer to the border, the tension of possible ambush is gradually overcome by the pain of entangled, contorted limbs and torsos. Sleep may be dangerous, but it is escape.

The best chance at killing or capture may have been deep in the past. Below the white peaks of the Spin Ghar near the Pakistani line, Osama bin Laden was spotted, in late November and early December 2001, along with at least 1,000 of his Qaeda fighters. The American high command believed this was it but didn't want to put its soldiers -- even Delta Force, renowned for risk-taking -- in severe danger; didn't want British special forces -- who also had teams in the area, eager to move in -- to claim the war's greatest prize; and couldn't compel Pakistan to close off the frontier. (Why the Americans didn't block the frontier themselves has never become clear, though the perils of landing helicopters at high altitudes in terrible weather probably played a part.) Without much support on the ground, with only the troops of Afghan warlords to rely on, a bombardment from American jets merely chased bin Laden between the ridges, most think, and across the border. He may well have bought the warlords off and been allowed to escape. He may well have had the help of the region's Pashtuns, the ethnic group most loyal to his Taliban collaborators. Months later, Canadian coalition soldiers dug up bodies from a cluster of graves that had become a local shrine, bodies from December's bombing. The hope was that one would be bin Laden's. None were.

The next time, the military chose to take more risks. In March 2002, farther southwest along the frontier, an unmanned surveillance plane, guided by C.I.A. technicians, sent back photographs of Al Qaeda fighters massing. About 200 enemy troops seemed to have gathered in the Shah-i-Kot Valley, with "H.V.T.'s" probably among them. High-Value Targets was now the military's preferred term; after bin Laden's December escape, it no longer liked to speak of him or other terrorist leaders by name. That put too much stress, and focused too much public judgment, on the killing or capturing of specific figures.

More than a thousand coalition soldiers, most of them American, surrounded the crevices of Shah-i-Kot. When Al Qaeda fled, it would be cut off. But this time, Al Qaeda didn't flee right away. It crippled Special Forces helicopters with rocket-propelled grenades and tore men apart with heavy machine guns. And the C.I.A.'s high-tech intelligence had been far wrong. There weren't 200 enemy fighters waiting behind the crags; there were more like a thousand. When two weeks of fighting wound down, 8 American and 3 Afghan coalition soldiers had been killed, about 80 wounded. No H.V.T. bodies were found. American commanders claimed 800 enemy dead, but estimates quickly shrank to less than half that. And ever since, the military has been reluctant to talk of success in terms of body counts. "You mean for the bad guys?" Maj. Bob Hepner, a public affairs officer, asks when I request casualty figures going back to the start of the Afghanistan campaign. "We don't have them. Because a lot of times you can't match the parts. We just know we've got a lot of legs and hands." He smiles as he speaks, implying that the enemy has been blown to smithereens.

But according to terrorism experts at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based policy group devoted largely to world security, the estimates run something like this: about 20,000 jihadic soldiers had graduated from Al Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan as of October 2001, when the American-led war began there. Up to 10,000 of those were inside Afghanistan at the time. Since then, the coalition campaign has killed or captured around 2,000. Ninety percent of bin Laden's forces, and more than half of his top commanders, remain free. And no one is quite sure where they are. Some of the Arabs among them have probably made their way back to the Middle East. Many of the rest seem to straddle the frontiers of Afghanistan, Pakistan and neighboring Iran. Al Qaeda is, the institute judges, "more insidious and just as dangerous" as before the 9/11 attacks.

Two weeks before the Vigilant Guardian convoy crosses the desert, a tape has surfaced, probably made recently, since it refers to the war in Iraq. "If you started suicide attacks, you will see the fear of Americans all over the world," the voice, which seems to be bin Laden's, preaches. The tape was given to The Associated Press by a source who said he had come from the Afghan borderlands, where many believe the tape was recorded.

When the soldiers reach the search zone at dawn, when they scour the village of Lowri Kariz for caches of rockets, for hidden grenade launchers, for signs of enemy safe houses, Capt. Kevin (Kit) Parker will be in charge of collecting intelligence. He will seek out village headmen, greet them and declare America's good intentions. He will try somehow to befriend them, gather whatever leads he can coax from them and whatever evidence his men turn up -- possibly pointing to Al Qaeda or Taliban suspects who might prove the missing link to finding the highest-ranking terrorist figures. He has learned to expect little. He explains that we haven't managed in the least to understand the country, let alone transform it, to keep it from serving again as an easy terrorist sanctuary as soon as we leave. Afghanistan, he says, "has a level of complexity that is almost unfathomable."

Tall and lean but with a slightly cherubic, sun-pinked face, Parker was in the reserves before 9/11. His civilian life consisted -- after a doctorate in physics from Vanderbilt and postdoctoral work in pathology and biomedical engineering at Harvard and Johns Hopkins -- of research into treatments for cardiac arrhythmia. Right after 9/11, he got himself switched to a unit that he guessed would be leaving soon for Afghanistan. But intricate lab work can seem simple compared with the intricacies of this country. He talks of the vicious rivalries among the country's seemingly infinite subtribes, how often the tips the Army receives are the attempts of one clan to spur the Americans against an ancient enemy. He speaks of the way such ethnic anarchy brought the Taliban to power and gave Al Qaeda its haven. He talks about the landscape itself, with its countless outcroppings and caves and desiccated gulches, so hard to navigate, so easy to hide in. And he tells of spending Christmas day with a village leader he felt he could trust, a man whose information he relied on. "We were sipping tea and burning dung to keep warm," he recalls. The leader told him there was no suspicious activity in the area. Soon after, Parker learned that stockpiles of weapons were moving through the village.

Vigilant Guardian's trucks and Humvees come to a stop at Lowri Kariz. Dawn barely suggests itself at the horizon, a low line of faint blanching. A few miles away, Spinbaldak, a town on the border, shows a ragged spine of lights, thinly spread.

Here and across Afghanistan, the work of "humint," as the Army calls human intelligence, has been badly frustrated. Christopher Langton, a retired British colonel and military attache in Central Asia, now with the International Institute for Strategic Studies, speaks of the attempts to befriend and the attempts to pay. The paying hasn't bought much in the way of trustworthy information, and a psychological operations officer on Vigilant Guardian tells me that the Army has mostly abandoned it. The befriending hasn't worked well either, because, Langton says, the Americans have failed "to capture the virtual territory, the territory of the mind of the population." The troops on missions like Parker's, operations that set out from American bases every two weeks or so, should pick up the kinds of details that form the foundation of military intelligence. But the troops are handicapped, Langton explains, because the people sense a shortsighted American involvement, a powerful wish to be gone.

The Afghans feel that the Taliban, with Al Qaeda behind it, could take hold again in the country as soon as the Americans go home. For the villagers, survival when that happens could depend on keeping their mouths shut now.

And without the help of the people, Langton adds, the beaming from all the satellites and unmanned planes in the sky can be futile. The jagged terrain creates blind spots, and what the high-tech systems can photograph they can't interpret. They can't calibrate for local sympathies or even, as happened in the Shah-i-Kot Valley, determine sheer numbers of bunkered, armed enemy soldiers.

"I'm not optimistic," Captain Parker says, thinking forward five years. "The smart terrorist in Afghanistan will simply wait us out, wait for us to lose interest, lose will." Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban leader who has kept himself so mysterious and secreted that, the military's top officers acknowledge, he could drift through their

bases without any chance of being recognized, sends out edicts against the invading infidels, demanding their deaths. Three weeks before Vigilant Guardian, a Special Forces convoy dipped through a gulley and found itself under ambush, taking machine-gun fire. Two soldiers were killed and one was critically wounded before the attackers disappeared.

American casualties in Afghanistan haven't been high, with about 60 dead and about 245 wounded since the beginning of the war. But the casualties -- and the forces that want America gone -- show no sign of letting up. Parker's sense of the future echoes what I've heard from another captain, Mike Gonzalez, who will be running security as the truckloads of men enter the alleys of Lowri Kariz to start searching. "As long as we're here," Gonzalez says, "it will be all right. But when we go. . . ." His voice drifts off, the implication clear: sanctuary will be waiting -- ample freedom, as before, to train jihadic soldiers and to launch their missions.

Now squads of a dozen troops take up positions, lying prone on the night-chilled sand, the guns of the different groups pointing in different directions, all on guard, all waiting for orders to step across what may be a minefield. A hundred yards away, the mud village begins with a compound's wall, everything behind it concealed. Reports say the Taliban or Al Qaeda have either been coming through the area or made themselves at home. That's about as specific as the military's information is, going in. Just behind the village surge hills where, three months before, shots exchanged with suspects sparked a gun battle that was fought cave to cave and boulder to boulder. "It's a big cat-and-mouse game," the soldier lying next to me says, with a mixture of nervousness and exhausted resignation.

And everyone is aware of the border close by. Within 70 miles of Spinbaldak lies the Pakistani city of Quetta, where rumors have placed bin Laden and Omar in the past few months. Plenty of Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters have fled to Quetta and the surrounding mountains since October 2001. Whether or not the top leaders are there, the area around Spinbaldak is a frontier transit spot for weapons and instructions aimed at breaking American will in Afghanistan. Yet beyond small-scale, discreet operations -- like the C.I.A.-aided arrest in Pakistan of one of bin Laden's lieutenants, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed -- the Americans can't venture into that country to reach the elusive enemy. They fear stirring more anti-American hatred than already exists and jeopardizing Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, who is at least somewhat compliant to American desires.

In Quetta, after 9/11, thousands chanted "Death to America." Musharraf's government has little control in the region. More than one American officer, asking to be nameless on this sensitive point, compares the situation to the war in Vietnam, to the way enemy bases in neighboring Cambodia and Laos compounded the immeasurable problems America faced. Lieutenant Colonel Flynn, leading Vigilant Guardian, says he worries about the Taliban or Al Qaeda emissary who meets his Afghan contact around Spinbaldak and tells him, "Deliver these guns in Afghanistan, lay these mines in Afghanistan, set these explosives in Afghanistan." Then Flynn imagines the attack on his troops that might follow. "You'll never see it coming," he says.

**N**ortheast of Spinbaldak, near the Shah-i-Kot, a Special Forces commander, Chris Allen, lives in a fort made of sun-bleached mud, thickened and flecked by bits of straw. His fort sits in a Pashtun region that has been among the most hostile to the Americans, the most hospitable to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Like so many of the structures of Afghanistan, its architecture seems to rise from the Dark Ages. Its low-ceilinged rooms look inward upon a square courtyard, not outward at all; to gaze outward, you have to tunnel up along a twisting set of mud stairs. Then, from the level of the parapets, you can duck into one of four guard towers to peer across the valley and keep watch for your enemy.

Allen takes boyish pleasure in the fort's storybook feel. But the enthusiasm that animates his round face goes beyond his headquarters, which include a second fort beside his home, both rented from a local owner. With unrelenting good cheer, he believes that in time, the United States military will "bring light to Afghanistan." He predicts that the Americans will be able to reduce their forces and eventually return home entirely without

leaving behind a haven and cultivating ground for terrorists. Partly, he says, this will happen through the training of a national army, a program meant to instill not only new battlefield techniques but also new values -- an allegiance to the moderate, American-backed government whose power now does not extend far outside the capital. The program's implementation has been painfully slow; after a year, there have been just 4,500 graduates toward a goal of 70,000. Yet his optimism depends, too, on small outposts like his own.

He speaks of himself as a "baby hugger," hoping to bring aid to civilians in order to win Langton's "virtual territory," to convince the people of America's long-term commitment, to draw them away from past allegiances. He wants to build schools and health clinics, to start the job of reconstruction, which foreign-aid workers still feel too unsafe to begin. But he has little budget for such things; the Pentagon has allotted just \$12 million for Army-run reconstruction projects throughout the country. So his soldiers grind their Humvees and 4-by-4's around the valley, handing out crayons to children clambering over ruins to reach them (the ruins left by Russian shells from the era before the Russians were worn down and driven away, the ruins left by American bombs last year). They talk to village elders about building schools -- projects, the soldiers have to emphasize, they may not be able to carry out.

And meanwhile, Afghanistan's children suck on bin Laden candies, sugary balls in wrappers showing the leader's face, his pointed finger and the tip of a rocket.

Rockets have been shot at Allen's base about 80 times since December. They have been poorly aimed -- not the work of top Al Qaeda operatives but apparently of low-level members or sympathizers. The rockets have struck within a hundred yards of the fort walls, exploding at thunderous volume, spewing shrapnel. So far they have done no harm. Allen can't retaliate because he can't be sure exactly who has been launching the attacks. "The hard part about intelligence here," he says, "is for every report saying this guy's Al Qaeda, there's another saying this guy's a saint." A mine recently blew up a vehicle driven by a soldier from one of the forts. A foot was lost, a face ravaged.

Between explosions, the local police often take potshots at Afghans the Americans have hired to help guard Allen's base. On a pair of round hills, a tribal warlord, with a militia of a thousand at his call, has -- or had, until lately -- two mud forts overlooking Allen's. Because the warlord is an enemy of the American-backed provincial governor and because the Americans suspect he may be supported by Al Qaeda, the superior elevation of his hilltop stations made Allen uneasy. So Special Forces raided one of the forts, chasing off the warlord's troops or -- depending on who is telling the story -- choosing a time when the place was unmanned and blew up its weaponry along with its walls. In Afghanistan, the Americans can seem lost within the world they are trying to transform and stabilize. They can seem as if they are just one more militia, staking and defending small claims. On poles atop the guard towers of Allen's fort, American flags ripple above his portion of the valley.

**"S**o we ain't got no terps?" a soldier asks, after the troops of Vigilant Guardian, fingers poised on trigger guards, cross the sand and walk into the sprawling village of Lowri Kariz. The entire operation -- with team after team disappearing into separate compounds, and with officers like Captain Parker trying to find local elders and glean intelligence -- has just two "terps." There are mixed feelings about having many Afghan interpreters along. They can distort answers or aid ambushes. "We can't tell if they're loyal," Captain Gonzalez says, telling of one the Army recently arrested for running information and instructions back and forth over the border.

But even without a common language between them, the villagers seem to know what the Americans have come to do. Silently, turbaned men in long gray tunics open doors in compound walls for five- or six-man groups of helmeted men in desert camouflage. The wooden doors are cracked, withered. The courtyards behind them hold low mud homes and lush gardens of pink and white poppies. The troops don't bother with the opium-producing crop. There's too much else to worry about. They pat down the men. (The mission's few female

soldiers mutely frisk the men's sisters and wives, who have been quartered in dark chambers.) They poke through cellars, peer for signs of trick walls and compartments full of grenade launchers. They find nothing. They smash with a gun stock into a mirrored cabinet when the owner can't find his key. The owner doesn't cry out as shards of glass hit the dirt floor. The cabinet is more or less his only piece of furniture, yet he seems to have gestured that the door should be smashed through. All seems accepted: in bitter helplessness against what the Americans are doing or -- as the Americans hope -- in gratitude for the American defeat of the repressive Taliban. It is impossible for the soldiers to know. Gonzalez speaks of trying to guess the sentiments of the locals not by their smiles but by the firmness of their handshakes. His soldiers say the compounds could be full of terrorists, and they might have no clue.

A report comes in over the radio: at Shkin, to the east along the frontier, the sighting of 20 men, armed with rifles and R.P.G.'s, draws an American platoon. In a gun battle, the Americans believe they kill three combatants. Two Americans die. The enemy vanishes over the border.

Parker stoops on plunging stairs, at the start of Vigilant Guardian's second day. He climbs down into a narrow cellar, dug beneath the desert floor of a compound on the outskirts of Lowri Kariz. Troops wait above. He sits in a cool underground chamber on a carpet of red and blue. A high portal gives a shaft of light. Beside it hangs a framed painting in the style of hotel art: white stallions prancing through a marsh of reeds. This is the meeting room of a figure Parker has been asking to see since yesterday, the village leader -- or someone representing himself that way. Nothing is clear. All that's certain to Parker and Gonzalez, and to the three other officers who accompany them, is that they feel suspicious. The headman -- features sharp as mountain ridges between beard and turban -- has avoided them throughout their first day in the village. Only now has Parker been allowed a meeting. And the man lives well beyond the perimeter of the village, with armed guards posted on each corner of his roof, above the crypt the Americans now sit inside, surrounded by Pashtun faces they cannot read.

The rooftop guards in themselves aren't unusual. It's yesterday's avoidance and the position of the compound that unnerves, as though this figure and his guards don't really belong, as though they're Taliban or Al Qaeda who have just lately taken up residence and taken on local power.

"We've got a target on this place," Gonzalez assures the other Americans, all sitting on scarlet cushions. Gonzalez assumes no Afghan except the two "terps" can understand. "We'll level this place if anything happens."

He has radioed in his coordinates. An American helicopter and plane, he says, circle overhead. The Americans may not be able to comprehend the men they face, or the circumstance they're in, or the country that surrounds them, and they may not be able to prevent their own deaths, but if they are slaughtered, the aircraft will rocket and bomb the compound into oblivion, bodies to bone chips, headquarters to dust.

Parker starts his questioning. Everyone sips tea and nibbles biscuits. All is polite, but the headman's answers, about battling Al Qaeda in the hills to the east, strike Parker as attempts to distract. "There are no bad guys here," Parker's interpreter says repeatedly, translating the leader's replies. The man claims that his militia, most of it based in Spinbaldak, has chased all the nearby enemy fighters over the border. The reports of Taliban and Al Qaeda being in this village are lies. "Other tribes are fighting against us. They are giving you bad reports." They are using the Americans. Because of this, his own men have been arrested elsewhere in the area -- even after they have fought Al Qaeda so well. They should be freed. Please, can their freedom be arranged? "There are no bad guys here."

All is polite; the headman's claims are plausible. But an hour later, by the time everyone emerges upstairs and outside, a helicopter gunship swoops 40 feet above the headman, joined by his guards who have come down off the roof and been replaced by American soldiers. The switch has occurred peacefully. The gunship, banking and

diving, its missile launchers so close and the throb of its blades so loud, has guaranteed that.

Almost wordlessly, the headman points out and relinquishes a stock of weapons. It is kept covered in the back of a pickup truck parked in his yard: a few grenade launchers, a light machine gun. Without protest he surrenders himself and his guards. They are "pucked," a new verb used by the American soldiers, taken from the military phrase "persons under control." The Americans cuff their wrists and cover their heads in burlap sacks. Maybe because of my presence or because of their uncertainty about this arrest (could the weapons, as the man says, have been used to fight Al Qaeda?), the Americans lower the hoods with a measure of delicacy. They guide the captives toward a Chinook transport helicopter. Hoods quiver in the rotor gust. The men step into the bay with such thorough compliance, such calm, I wonder if they are thinking, as Parker does, that the smart terrorist will simply wait the Americans out.

The chopper lifts off, flying to a base the Russians built in another time. The Americans now run it. There, in a dingy Soviet-style concrete block where no reporter is allowed inside, the men will be held indefinitely and interrogated, plied for information that might somehow show the way to Al Qaeda or Taliban leaders, that might somehow point to bases or hint at terrorist plots, that might somehow change everything.

That afternoon, Parker moves on with his troops to another village. He finds no suspects, but he and another officer give away three bright yellow radios, powered by hand crank, in this abject settlement where batteries scarcely exist. The radios are gestures of outreach for Parker and, for the military, tokens that might bring leads later on. Then the vehicles head for a landing zone where some of the officers will be flown back to their Kandahar base. The zone's coordinates are clear. It's a 20-minute drive, at most. An amber dusk falls over the land. We drive and drive. The Afghan desert, sectioned off by ridges and ravines, can be a bewildering place. The sky blackens. The stars appear in all their extravagance. We can't find the landing zone. For hours we search, hunting the way out, circling and retracing our route in the sand.

*Daniel Bergner is the author of "In the Land of Magic Soldiers: A Story of White and Black in West Africa," which will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in October.*

[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)

