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U.S. finds ways to find hidden bombs

(The Associated Press)

Highlights:

- U.S. troops in Afghanistan achieved one small but important victory over the past year: They found and avoided more homemade bombs meant to kill and maim them than a year ago, thanks to a surge in training, equipment and intelligence.
- Bomb-planters have picked up the pace during the summer months, placing improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, along roads or footpaths.
- In the first three months of this year, only 5 percent of the bombs planted across Afghanistan hit their mark,
- That's down from 10 percent to 12 percent over the same three-month period a year ago.
- That decrease has happened even as the military has begun to withdraw its surge of 30,000 troops, scheduled to be complete by September. Troops are often more vulnerable as they withdraw from an area.
- Officials concede that the rate of bombs that cause casualties has risen slightly from April through June, as NATO troops attacked Taliban-held areas in a return to heavy fighting with the summer months.
- Barbero attributes the slow turnaround to three years of an increase in intelligence-gathering equipment such as towers and aircraft outfitted with an array of cameras and other detection technology.
- They installed "towers and balloons that give you persistent stare" to spot Taliban militants trying to bury a bomb or approach a base in a bomb-laden car at fast speed, Barbero said. Training is the second key factor - teaching the troops how to use devices such as a hand-held remote robot equipped with a camera that they can throw over a wall and drive around, checking to see if the coast is clear or if the area shows signs of being mined with explosives.

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U.S. finds ways to find hidden bombs*(The Associated Press)*

Almost afraid to say it out loud, lest they jinx their record, U.S. troops in Afghanistan achieved one small but important victory over the past year: They found and avoided more homemade bombs meant to kill and maim them than a year ago, thanks to a surge in training, equipment and intelligence.

Bomb-planters have picked up the pace during the summer months, placing improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, along roads or footpaths. But the explosives are no longer the leading cause of death and injury in Afghanistan.

In the first three months of this year, only 5 percent of the bombs planted across Afghanistan hit their mark, according to Lt. Gen. Michael Barbero, director of the Pentagon's Joint IED Defeat Organization. That's down from 10 percent to 12 percent over the same three-month period a year ago.

The new figures show a slow but steady decline, from a high of 368 deaths caused by IEDs in 2010 to 252 in 2011, according to the privately run Icasualties.org, which tracks war casualties. That decrease has happened even as the military has begun to withdraw its surge of 30,000 troops, scheduled to be complete by September. Troops are often more vulnerable as they withdraw from an area.

Officials concede that the rate of bombs that cause casualties has risen slightly from April through June, as NATO troops attacked Taliban-held areas in a return to heavy fighting with the summer months. But the year is still on track to be lower than each of the previous three years, with 77 deaths from IEDs so far out of 162 total troops killed, halfway through 2012, according to Icasualties.org.

Barbero attributes the slow turnaround to three years of an increase in intelligence-gathering equipment such as towers and aircraft outfitted with an array of cameras and other detection technology. They have given U.S.

commanders an edge, enabling them to spot bombers as they approach often-traveled routes or revealing the signs of freshly dug earth where the explosives have been buried.

They installed "towers and balloons that give you persistent stare" to spot Taliban militants trying to bury a bomb or approach a base in a bomb-laden car at fast speed, Barbero said. "Every commander told us (they) love those, because they can see (the threat) and take action."

Training is the second key factor - teaching the troops how to use devices such as a hand-held remote robot equipped with a camera that they can throw over a wall and drive around, checking to see if the coast is clear or if the area shows signs of being mined with explosives.

The IED organization focused last year on equipment to help foot patrols, because so many troops were losing limbs, Barbero said. They rushed hundreds of devices into the field that have a telescoping pole with a hook on the end, to probe for hidden bombs on footpaths.

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Whistleblower Exposes Abuse In Afghan Army Hospital; Alleges U.S. Generals Delayed Investigation Over Politics
(CNN)

Highlights:

- An exclusive OUTFRONT investigation, egregious neglect and abuse at Afghanistan's main military hospital, a hospital that's backed by more than 100 million American taxpayer dollars.
- Afghan soldiers, starving, lying in dirty beds with festering wounds, denied pain killers. All of this at the Kabul National Military Hospital, a hospital the U.S. paid more than \$100 million to help the Afghans run.
- Things as simple as dressing changes are not done. Patients become infected and they die.
- These days, a world away, Schuyler Geller, a retired Air Force doctor, tends to his Tennessee farm.
- From February 2010 to February 2011, he oversaw training of Afghans at the hospital. These photos were taken by his American military staff.
- There are patients that are starving to death because they can't buy the food. They have to bribe for food. They have to bribe for medicine. Patients were beaten when they complained about no pain medicine or no medicine.
- Pentagon officials do not dispute that the photos from 2010 show hidden, but deliberate abuse by Afghan staff. But they insist that after a U.S. inspection, conditions have improved significantly.
- In this memo to Congress, Geller alleges, two senior U.S. generals who oversaw Afghan training, Lieutenant General William Caldwell and his deputy, Brigadier General Gary Patton, in 2010, delayed bringing in Pentagon investigators because of their political concerns over the looming midterm U.S. elections.
- Geller says Caldwell was angry his staff wanted the inspector general to investigate. And that Patton ordered a delay out of concern it would embarrass the Obama White House.
- Well, next week, there will now be the first hearing about all of this, looking into what happened at the hospital, the allegations about it, and what may happen now.
- Dr. Geller's point is, he wants to know how this all happened. It's fine

it's getting better, perhaps, but how did it even happen in the first place.

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Whistleblower Exposes Abuse In Afghan Army Hospital; Alleges U.S. Generals Delayed Investigation Over Politics
(CNN)

ERIN BURNETT: Our third story OUTFRONT: an exclusive OUTFRONT investigation, egregious neglect and abuse at Afghanistan's main military hospital, a hospital that's backed by more than 100 million American taxpayer dollars.

Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr has been looking into this story. And we want to warn you that some of the images that we're about to show you are difficult to watch.

BARBARA STARR, CNN PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT: Afghan soldiers, starving, lying in dirty beds with festering wounds, denied pain killers. All of this at the Kabul National Military Hospital, a hospital the U.S. paid more than \$100 million to help the Afghans run.

SCHUYLER GELLER, RETIRED AIR FORCE PHYSICIAN: Things as simple as dressing changes are not done. Patients become infected and they die.

STARR: These days, a world away, Schuyler Geller, a retired Air Force doctor, tends to his Tennessee farm.

GELLER: This will be kind of a little haven.

STARR: From February 2010 to February 2011, he oversaw training of Afghans at the hospital. These photos were taken by his American military staff.

GELLER: There are patients that are starving to death because they can't buy the food. They have to bribe for food. They have to bribe for medicine. Patients were beaten when they complained about no pain medicine or no medicine.

STARR: And you're not supposed to worry about that.

GELLER: That's what we were told.

STARR: Pentagon officials do not dispute that the photos from 2010 show hidden, but deliberate abuse by Afghan staff. But they insist that after a U.S. inspection, conditions have improved significantly.

In this memo to Congress, Geller alleges, two senior U.S. generals who oversaw Afghan training, Lieutenant General William Caldwell and his deputy, Brigadier General Gary Patton, in 2010, delayed bringing in Pentagon investigators because of their political concerns over the looming midterm U.S. elections. Geller says Caldwell was angry his staff wanted the inspector general to investigate. And that Patton ordered a delay out of concern it would embarrass the Obama White House.

GELLER: And then he said, but we don't want to do -- we don't want to put that request in right now, because there is an upcoming general election. And we wouldn't want this to leak out.

REP. JASON CHAFFETZ (R), UTAH: That's just not acceptable.

GELLER: Congressman Jason Chaffetz's House Oversight Subcommittee is investigating the general's alleged behavior.

CHAFFETZ: That's a very serious allegation. But it didn't come from just one high-ranking military official on the ground, it didn't come from just two. We have several of them who have stepped forward and said, yes, this was indeed the case.

STARR: Geller says he wants the truth to come out.

GELLER: The biggest frustration is our own leadership's response, and how slow that was and how inadequate that was.

BURNETT: All right. Barbara Starr is with me now.

Barbara, those pictures were awful to look at. What has the response been to the allegations?

STARR: Well, Erin, I don't think it's going to be a surprise. Spokesmen for neither general would offer a comment. Neither man is commenting, because of the new review now going on at the Pentagon about these allegations.

So far, there's no indication the White House knew anything about any of this, and the Pentagon still insists, things are getting better.

BURNETT: So they're insisting things are getting better. What is Congress saying to you?

STARR: Well, next week, there will now be the first hearing about all of this, looking into what happened at the hospital, the allegations about it, and what may happen now.

Dr. Geller's point is, he wants to know how this all happened. It's fine it's getting better, perhaps, but how did it even happen in the first place -- Erin.

BURNETT: A lot of people are asking that tonight. Thanks very much to Barbara Starr.

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Afghan Corruption Hurts Urge To Help

(Washington Post)...By Karen DeYoung and Joshua Partlow

Highlights:

-When international donors meet in Tokyo on Sunday to chart Afghanistan's economic future, they will be asked to pledge another decade of support in exchange for the Afghan government's promises to clean up rampant corruption.

-Meeting in Chicago, the alliance confirmed plans to withdraw foreign combat troops by the end of 2014 and pledged about \$4 billion a year to pay for ongoing training, equipment and financial support for Afghanistan's security forces.

-In Tokyo, donors are expected to promise \$3.9 billion in annual economic and development support at least through 2017 and ideally until 2025. The combined outlays equal roughly half of Afghanistan's \$15.9 billion gross domestic product last year, and the United States expects to contribute half the nearly \$8 billion total.

-Many Afghans are skeptical of Karzai's renewed promises. "Like the past assistance from the world, the cash from this meeting may end up in the pockets of senior government officials," Mohammad Nayeem Lalai Hamidzai, a member of the Afghan parliament from Kandahar, said in an interview.

-“If taking down organized criminal networks was easy, we would be doing it every day,” said Brig. Gen. Rick L. Waddell, who leads NATO's anti-corruption Task Force Shafafiyat.

-“When society was utterly devastated, survival meant controlling vital avenues of ingress and egress, controlling commodities and tribal trade routes,” Waddell said. “That pattern of behavior doesn't go away.”

-But “we have to be smart about it. We give assistance, then hold them accountable. Then give some more assistance, and hold them more accountable. . . . People obviously don't have patience. But we've invested

way too much in this, in money and in kids' lives.”

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Afghan Corruption Hurts Urge To Help

(Washington Post)...By Karen DeYoung and Joshua Partlow

When international donors meet in Tokyo on Sunday to chart Afghanistan's economic future, they will be asked to pledge another decade of support in exchange for the Afghan government's promises to clean up rampant corruption.

It won't be the first time such vows are made, along with pledges to respect the rule of law and the rights of women and minorities. Similar conferences have been held in London, Kabul, Istanbul and Bonn in the last two years alone.

But it may be the last time the world is willing to believe them. With U.S. and NATO troops on their way out, maintaining Afghanistan's fragile democracy and economy may seem less urgent, particularly without signs of real progress.

Despite years of U.S. pressure, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has failed to undertake significant reforms to curtail corruption, and there has not been a single high-level conviction in a corruption case. In recent months, the Obama administration has accepted that progress will continue to be slow and fitful.

The Tokyo conference, where Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton will head the U.S. delegation, is the civilian-diplomatic bookend to NATO's May summit. Meeting in Chicago, the alliance confirmed plans to withdraw foreign combat troops by the end of 2014 and pledged about \$4 billion a year to pay for ongoing training, equipment and financial support for Afghanistan's security forces.

In Tokyo, donors are expected to promise \$3.9 billion in annual economic and development support at least through 2017 and ideally until 2025. The combined outlays equal roughly half of Afghanistan's \$15.9 billion gross domestic product last year, and the United States expects to contribute half the nearly \$8 billion total.

"The numbers are relevant to some, but what's more relevant is the idea that the international community is agreeing on the need for assistance, the need to keep investing in Afghanistan, and that the Afghans themselves are also taking responsibility for the things they need to do," said a senior

Obama administration official, speaking on the condition of anonymity in advance of the meeting.

The World Bank and the Afghan government worked together to come up with the \$3.9 billion figure, along with a plan to set priorities to develop revenue-producing mines and other national resources, agriculture and education.

The money is a substantial decrease in the more than \$100 billion a year the United States currently spends in Afghanistan. Without it, the administration and its partners fear Afghanistan will slip back to where it was two decades ago, when militant factions fought for control, the economy ceased to function and the Taliban emerged victorious.

“We have to convince our partners and the Afghans and ourselves that we are not leaving Afghanistan in the lurch,” Alex Thier, director of the Afghanistan and Pakistan office at the U.S. Agency for International Development, said Tuesday at a Brookings Institution conference.

But many think more funding will simply perpetuate the waste and corruption that have permeated Afghanistan during more than a decade of U.S. involvement.

Karzai is expected to outline new anti-corruption and accountability measures in Tokyo, even as he has repeated charges that donors are partly to blame for the problems because they have been more eager to spend than to comply with government procedures, transparency and Afghan customs.

The presence of so many outsiders with unlimited money have skewed the fragile Afghan economy in immeasurable ways. Foreign governments and international organizations have employed so many Afghans, usually at inflated salaries, that brain drain and unemployment are expected to soar with their departure.

“We may manage to release a few competent people back to work for their own country if they don’t all leave,” Ronald Neumann, a former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, said at the Brookings conference. “But overall, there’s going to be a very large economic shock to Afghanistan.”

Many Afghans are skeptical of Karzai's renewed promises. "Like the past assistance from the world, the cash from this meeting may end up in the pockets of senior government officials," Mohammad Nayeem Lalai Hamidzai, a member of the Afghan parliament from Kandahar, said in an interview.

Karzai set anti-corruption as his top priority when he began his second term in 2009, and just last month he called a special session of parliament to promise a government cleanup, Hamidzai recalled. With the pending troop departures, he predicted, corruption will accelerate as "people in power make sure that they can take as much as they can, because the foreigners will not be here forever."

Since the painful public battles with the Karzai government in 2010, when members of the Afghan elite gutted the country's largest bank, the U.S. focus on fighting corruption has waned. Asked if he has seen any real progress, a former senior U.S. official who was in the thick of those battles said, "Absolutely not."

"We gave up our leverage" by continuing the money flow no matter how egregious the scandals, the former official said. "Every time a big issue happened, nobody wanted to push it." Corruption was "competing with a lot of other issues out there . . . everybody saw it as something that was going to keep them from implementing policies. It always upset Karzai, and he would push back. "

"If there's a single lesson that comes out of this," he said, "it's that you can't want it more than they want it. . . . And we wanted it worse than [Karzai] did."

Current U.S. officials in Afghanistan acknowledge that Karzai has resisted major steps to prosecute high-level corruption or weed out the culture of bribery that is pervasive in conducting business with the government at a local level.

"If taking down organized criminal networks was easy, we would be doing it every day," said Brig. Gen. Rick L. Waddell, who leads NATO's anti-corruption Task Force Shafafiyat.

“When society was utterly devastated, survival meant controlling vital avenues of ingress and egress, controlling commodities and tribal trade routes,” Waddell said. “That pattern of behavior doesn’t go away.”

Along with the departure of foreign troops, Afghanistan is facing a presidential election in 2014, and “a democratically elected government . . . is non-negotiable” for international donors, the senior administration official said.

But “we have to be smart about it. We give assistance, then hold them accountable. Then give some more assistance, and hold them more accountable. . . . People obviously don’t have patience. But we’ve invested way too much in this, in money and in kids’ lives.”

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US Declares Afghanistan Major Non-NATO Ally
(*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)...By Bradley Klapper

Highlights:

-The designation allows for streamlined defense cooperation, including expedited purchasing ability of American equipment and easier export control regulations. Afghanistan's military, which is heavily dependent on American and foreign assistance, already enjoys many of these benefits. The non-NATO ally status guarantees it will continue to do so.

-The "designation provides a long-term framework for our security and defense cooperation," a State Department statement said. "It reinforces the strong bilateral defense relationship between the United States and Afghanistan by helping support aligned defense planning, procurement and training. Only a limited number of countries have this special status."

-On July 4, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, and the country's foreign minister announced that the two countries had completed their internal processes to ratify the Agreement, which has now gone into force.

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US Declares Afghanistan Major Non-NATO Ally
(*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)...By Bradley Klapper

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Obama administration on Saturday declared Afghanistan the United States' newest "major non-NATO ally," an action designed to facilitate close defense cooperation after U.S. combat troops withdraw from the country in 2014 and as a political statement of support for Afghanistan's long-term stability.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who arrived in Kabul on an unannounced visit to meet Afghan President Hamid Karzai, disclosed the alliance to diplomats at the U.S. Embassy.

The designation allows for streamlined defense cooperation, including expedited purchasing ability of American equipment and easier export control regulations. Afghanistan's military, which is heavily dependent on American and foreign assistance, already enjoys many of these benefits. The non-NATO ally status guarantees it will continue to do so.

The "designation provides a long-term framework for our security and defense cooperation," a State Department statement said. "It reinforces the strong bilateral defense relationship between the United States and Afghanistan by helping support aligned defense planning, procurement and training. Only a limited number of countries have this special status."

Afghanistan becomes the 15th such country the U.S. has declared a major non-NATO ally. Others include Australia, Egypt, Israel and Japan. Afghanistan's neighbor Pakistan was the last nation to gain the status in 2004.

The declaration was part of a Strategic Partnership Agreement signed by Presidents Barack Obama and Karzai in Kabul at the beginning of May.

On July 4, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, and the country's foreign minister announced that the two countries had completed their internal processes to ratify the Agreement, which has now gone into force.

In their meeting, Clinton and Karzai were expected to discuss U.S.-Afghan civilian and defense ties and stalled Afghan reconciliation efforts.

From Kabul, Clinton is heading later Saturday to Japan for an international conference on Afghan civilian assistance. Donors are expected to pledge around \$4 billion a year in long-term civilian support.

Clinton arrived in Afghanistan from Paris, where she attended a 100-nation conference on Syria.

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Afghan Conflict Losing Air Power As U.S. Pulls Out
(The New York Times)

Highlights:

-The killing of Mr. Qayum and his driver, confirmed by the Taliban and reviewed by The New York Times as part of an examination of operations in Afghanistan by 44 F/A-18s from the aircraft carrier John C. Stennis, was a demonstration of the extraordinary technical and tactical abilities of American air power. For both better and worse, that power has become a defining facet of the Afghan conflict and the American way of waging war.

-Weary of the costs of a long war, Western military forces have already begun withdrawing and handing greater security responsibility to Afghan forces. One worry, several officers said, is that these air operations have become essential, necessary for ground units that are operating in contested areas of Afghanistan and hoping to maintain influence, or even survive. And the Afghan government has nothing to match the role they play.

-Another part was the nature of the rules. Even when Taliban fighters were visible, Western military restrictions devised to prevent harm to civilians and minimize damage to infrastructure, codified after prominent and deadly mistakes that fueled Afghan public outrage, sometimes limited a pilot's options. Just last month, commanders again tightened the rules for use of air power in civilian areas, after Afghans said a NATO airstrike killed 18 civilians in an eastern village.

-Asked how Afghan soldiers or police officers might manage a similar tactical problem in the same canyon, Commander Burks gave a knowing frown. "It's the Wild, Wild West, and the Afghans don't have these assets to put in the air," he said. "I don't know, but they're not going to do this."

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Afghan Conflict Losing Air Power As U.S. Pulls Out

(The New York Times)...By C.J. Chivers

Death stopped Abdul Qayum, a Taliban commander in Afghanistan's Zabul Province, in a fiery flash and roar.

It was an evening in October last year, and Mr. Qayum was meeting several Afghans in a field. Though he did not know it, a Navy F/A-18 strike fighter was circling high overhead more than five miles away, summoned by an American Special Operations team. Its engines were out of earshot, the pilot said, "so we didn't burn the target."

Mr. Qayum led a platoon-size Taliban group and was plotting to bomb an Afghan government office, an American intelligence officer said. Under Western rules guiding the use of deadly force, the pilot was barred from trying to kill him while he stood in a group of unidentified men.

Then came a chance. The meeting ended, and Mr. Qayum approached a man who had pulled up on a motorcycle, the pilot and the intelligence officer said. Soon the two men were riding together on a dirt road, illuminated on the screen of the aircraft's targeting sensor.

The pilot, Lt. Cmdr. Brian Kesselring, released an AGM-65E laser-guided missile. Visible on a video recording declassified and released to The New York Times, the missile struck the pair head-on, exploding with such energy that only fragments of Mr. Qayum's remains were found.

The killing of Mr. Qayum and his driver, confirmed by the Taliban and reviewed by The New York Times as part of an examination of operations in Afghanistan by 44 F/A-18s from the aircraft carrier John C. Stennis, was a demonstration of the extraordinary technical and tactical abilities of American air power. For both better and worse, that power has become a defining facet of the Afghan conflict and the American way of waging war.

But the tight integration and expense of air missions, which in Navy crews' case can cost up to \$20,000 an hour, also raise questions about the prospects for the continuing fight against the Taliban.

Weary of the costs of a long war, Western military forces have already begun withdrawing and handing greater security responsibility to Afghan forces. One worry, several officers said, is that these air operations have

become essential, necessary for ground units that are operating in contested areas of Afghanistan and hoping to maintain influence, or even survive. And the Afghan government has nothing to match the role they play.

Drawing from the experiences of more than a decade of fighting, and after repeatedly refining training and rules of engagement to address concerns about civilian casualties, aircrews work in close coordination with ground controllers more fully, and usually more precisely, than ever before.

In carefully choreographed killings of tactical commanders like Mr. Qayum, use of heavier ordnance to beat back Taliban attacks, and efforts to keep roads clear of improvised fertilizer bombs, conventional American warplanes are integrated into the finest details of ground war. These missions, distinct from the C.I.A.-run drone program, have allowed a relatively small Western combat force, with just tens of thousands of troops actually patrolling each day, to wage war across a sprawling nation of 30 million people.

The tactics for air-to-ground war have greatly evolved since the war's start in 2001. One pilot, saying that he dropped just a single 1,000-pound bomb during a six-month deployment, recalled that at the war's outset, planes would take off with more bombs than they were allowed to return with for landings. "When this kicked off, they were launching aircraft with unrecoverable loads," said the pilot, Lt. Cmdr. Peter Morgan. "Basically, you had to drop. That's all changed."

A Sophisticated Balance

F/A-18 strike fighters are among the world's most advanced military aircraft, with a price of roughly \$100 million each and operating costs estimated at \$18,000 to \$20,000 per flight hour. Their sorties from the Stennis, each often lasting eight hours round-trip, almost always passed without violence.

Part of this was the nature of an experienced foe. The Taliban have spent years learning to mask their movements and intentions from aircraft, making themselves hard to spot.

Another part was the nature of the rules. Even when Taliban fighters were visible, Western military restrictions devised to prevent harm to civilians

and minimize damage to infrastructure, codified after prominent and deadly mistakes that fueled Afghan public outrage, sometimes limited a pilot's options. Just last month, commanders again tightened the rules for use of air power in civilian areas, after Afghans said a NATO airstrike killed 18 civilians in an eastern village.

In all, Navy pilots released missiles or bombs, or fired their aircrafts' 20-millimeter cannon, on 41 of the 892 F/A-18 sorties from the Stennis to Afghanistan in late 2011 and early 2012, the carrier air group's data shows.

This roughly aligns with the use of air power in the recent war. In 2011, for example, the data shows that NATO fixed-wing aircraft dropped ordnance or strafed on 5.8 percent of 34,286 combat sorties flown.

None of the air-to-ground attacks from the carrier stirred up allegations of causing civilian or friendly casualties, which, statistically, have been rare over all.

For the pilots, who live far from the infantry soldier's daily physical grind and away from the dread of hidden improvised bombs, these strikes and strafing runs hit a personally satisfying chord. They know they are protecting fellow service members and punishing those trying to kill them.

Lieutenant Commander Kesselring said as much after killing the men on the motorbike. That flight was a welcome contrast to the bad days on job, he said, because often "you arrive to a smoking hole and guys calling for a medevac, and you feel pretty helpless."

Still, the current practices and sophisticated equipment were not flawless. On a few occasions the strikes missed. On another, a 500-pound bomb appeared to break apart upon hitting the ground and failed to explode.

Once a suspected Afghan bomb maker heard the approaching aircraft and sprinted madly for a dirt wall, narrowly eluding a strafe as the rounds struck nearby. The blast wave from a heavier bomb most surely would have killed him, officers said, though it would have put other villagers and their homes at greater risk.

On other days the pilots and the controllers on the ground were not entirely sure of what was happening in a fast-moving firefight. In these cases

officers held fire in favor of restraint or nonlethal displays of presence and power.

Although these were the sorts of decisions that some American ground troops have generally resented, American officers say caution and proportionality are essential to maintain support both in Afghanistan and the United States.

A senior Marine officer with command experience in Afghanistan said troops on the ground needed to be wary of impulses to “swat flies with hammers” and risk having airstrikes create more problems than they solve.

Then there were days when all of the elements for a strike or gun run came together, and the nature of the campaign’s air-to-ground violence emerged. Often these were made when ground troops were imperiled, a few times when the situation was grave.

Pushing the Taliban Back

One use of force was on Nov. 10, not long after nightfall in Kandahar Province. Two F/A-18s patrolling over the steppe were told by a ground controller that a combat outpost crowded with Afghan National Army soldiers was under attack.

From the air, the pilots in each aircraft, Lt. Travis Hartman and Lt. Paul Oyler, could see the gunfight on the infrared targeting sensors in their cockpits. They could also sense the confusion. Three Afghan outposts were soon under simultaneous fire, and a sole American ground controller, who was at a fourth post, was trying to gather information by radio and relay instructions to the fighter jets.

“It was the biggest firefight I had ever seen,” Lieutenant Oyler said. “For the next two and a half hours we were overhead and doing our best to track it.”

The Taliban, the pilots said, were under trees and in gullies. The Afghan soldiers could not fight back effectively, and seemed to fire sporadically and erratically. At one point, Taliban fighters had almost reached the walls of one outpost, which was in danger of being breached. “They were in an east-west running tree line, and were basically using that as cover and concealment to move close,” Lieutenant Hartman said. “I’d say they were within 50 meters.”

Two more F/A-18s showed up from the Stennis. Under older rules, the pilots would probably have been cleared to drop a series of bombs, at least several hundred pounds of weaponry. But with the situation not fully clear, the pilots said, and without a ground controller on scene to direct it with care, the aircraft held back their heavy weapons. “A bomb?” Lieutenant Oyler said. “We wouldn’t know where to put it.”

Instead, the pilots were cleared to strafe near the most imperiled outpost with their cannons — each F/A-18 has a large, electrically powered Gatling-style gun in its nose that shoots 20-millimeter rounds.

Lieutenant Oyler and Lieutenant Hartman strafed; then two other F/A-18s strafed, too. Each strafe was roughly 150 to 200 rounds. “We basically worked it in sections, from west to east, and cleared the whole thing,” Lieutenant Hartman said. As the F/A-18s ran low on fuel, a pair of A-10 ground-attack jets arrived to take over, and the Navy pilots headed for a tanker.

The attacks subsided. The outposts held — without the risks of dropping heavier ordnance into the confusion and darkness.

Split-Second Calibration

Similar confusion greeted Lt. Cmdr. Thomas E. Hoyt when Marines called him for help in Helmand Province last October. A Navy medical corpsman had been shot through the left arm in a complex ambush, and Taliban gunmen were still firing from several directions, preventing most of the patrol from reaching the wounded man.

“He and two other Marines were cut off from the others,” said Capt. Michael J. Van Wyk, a Marine pilot serving on the ground as a forward air controller and who was pinned down by a Taliban sniper in another part of the patrol.

Upon arriving overhead, Lieutenant Commander Hoyt did not like what he heard and saw. Captain Van Wyk, he said, asked him to drop a 500-pound bomb on one of the buildings that the Marines were taking fire from. The situation was what was known as “danger close,” with Marines right beside the area to be hit.

The Marines said that the nearest friendly forces were 100 yards away. Lieutenant Commander Hoyt's view told him the distance was shorter — the two sides were almost intermingled.

He offered his targeting sensor's infrared video feed to Captain Van Wyk, accessible via a laptoplike device known as a Rover. This would allow the Marines to see what Lieutenant Commander Hoyt saw, to be certain he was looking at the right place before he strafed or released a bomb.

The patrol had been out already 12 hours; Captain Van Wyk's Rover battery had just died.

To buy time and to get oriented, Lieutenant Commander Hoyt descended for a pass 500 feet over the firefight at about 550 miles per hour, a maneuver known as a "show of force" intended to intimidate Taliban fighters. As he roared by, he released a flare over the building to mark it. Captain Van Wyk confirmed he was looking at the right place.

Lieutenant Commander Hoyt made two more shows of force. But the Taliban fighters stayed put and kept firing. Marines on the ground fired a purple, a green and a yellow smoke grenade to mark where the Taliban fighters were hidden. The pilot's confidence rose. "As soon as we confirmed where we can and can't hit, then we could start shooting," he said. "There were friendlies all over the place."

Lieutenant Commander Hoyt suggested strafing instead of releasing a 500-pound bomb, and the controller agreed. The F/A-18 then made two passes, firing 460 rounds — one long burst into a canal, the other into a courtyard next to the building where the Marines had first asked for a bomb.

Part of the firefight started to subside, allowing Captain Van Wyk and the Marines to plan a landing zone for a helicopter to evacuate the wounded medic. A pair of Super Cobra attack helicopters showed up, freeing the F/A-18 to climb back to elevation.

The fight lasted perhaps another hour, and the corpsman was evacuated before its end. "Air power kept Marines from having to die that day," Captain Van Wyk said. "They were willing to run across that open field to get Doc, and shed their blood. But air power made it so they didn't have to."

In the quiet after the gunfire died down, Captain Van Wyk watched as Afghan civilians stepped from hiding and began to survey the village. Then a sequence unfolded that filled him with alarm, then relief. As many as 20 of them, including women and children, came from the house he had initially wanted struck with a 500-pound bomb. Marines had been taking fire from there.

Watching the villagers who would have also been killed, he realized that Lieutenant Commander Hoyt had made the better decision. Everyone involved had been spared what might have been years of doubt and regret.

“I talked to him after and said, ‘Thank you for talking me out of that 500-pounder,’ ” he said. “I don’t have to think about that the rest of my life.”

A Complex Network

A few weeks later, another pair of F/A-18s was flying at night over the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. One of the planes was watching over a five-vehicle American convoy as it passed through a canyon and suddenly began taking fire — Taliban guerrillas shooting down from higher ridges in a classic ambush.

The drivers tried to return to their outpost, but were ambushed again. They called to say they could not see all the places the gunfire was coming from.

F/A-18s shifted the dynamic. “We had a pretty good God’s-eye view and could see where the fire was coming from,” said Lt. Kyle Terwilliger, a weapon system officer flying back-seat in one of the jets.

The aircraft shined an infrared marker onto the ridge where the officers saw firing. A ground controller with the convoy, using night-vision goggles, saw the beam and confirmed that it pointed to one of the Taliban’s firing positions.

Its target identified and determined to be away from a populated area, the aircraft was cleared by the ground unit to drop a GBU-12, a 500-pound laser-guided bomb. The strike would not be simple.

There was a low cloud cover, and the ridge was almost against the border; the pilots had to be sure that neither the ordnance nor their aircraft entered Pakistan. “We had to circle around to the south and fly back north, parallel

to the border so we didn't go in," said Cmdr. Vorrice Burks, the lead pilot, who is also VFA-41 squadron commander.

The bomb struck, and the Taliban firing stopped, he said. The convoy drove on.

In its way, this strike was a model of what air power can do. It was timely, precise and effective, and it neatly integrated communications, logistics, tactics and firepower, freeing American troops from danger in a remote canyon halfway around the world.

It was also so complex — with the assistance of an aerial tanker from the Air Force that allowed Navy aircraft to loiter above a battlefield, the use of an infrared marker for a trained controller with night-vision equipment to confirm a target, the release of a laser-guided bomb near a friendly convoy and an off-limits international border — that almost nothing about it was replicable by Afghan forces.

Asked how Afghan soldiers or police officers might manage a similar tactical problem in the same canyon, Commander Burks gave a knowing frown. "It's the Wild, Wild West, and the Afghans don't have these assets to put in the air," he said. "I don't know, but they're not going to do this."

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Media Highlights for RC(SW) for 7 July 2012

Helmand's Governor Spokesman Laments Civilians Killed, Injured in Militant Attacks Daud Ahmedi, Helmand's governor spokesperson said yesterday civilians bear the brunt of militant attacks. In a TV interview he said the Afghan security forces have strengthened compared to the past. [SAP20120706624003 Kandahar Hewad TV in Pashto 0730 GMT 06 Jul 12 -- Pro-government Kandahar television station owned by Kandahar City Mayor Qazi Mohammad Omar]

Helmand's Kajaki District Suicide Attack Victims Receive Aid Food and non-food items were provided yesterday to families of victims of a suicide attack in Kajaki District in Helmand Province. [SAP20120706624002 Lashkar Gah Helmand TV in Pashto 0330 GMT 06 Jul 12 -- Lashkar Gah-based affiliate of government-controlled broadcaster RTA]

Helmand Police Kill Six Taliban, Wound Two, Seize Weapons Colonel Abdul Sattar Noorzai, commander of the 1st Battalion of Police in Helmand said yesterday that six Taliban were killed and two others wounded in operations over the past week. He said two people were killed as a mine they were planting on the Helmand-Kandahar highway exploded on the night of 5 July. The police also seized weapons and explosive devices in different operations. [SAP20120706624002 Lashkar Gah Helmand TV in Pashto 0330 GMT 06 Jul 12 -- Lashkar Gah-based affiliate of government-controlled broadcaster RTA]

Energy and Water Minister Comments on Nimroz's Kamal Khan Dam Energy and Water Minister Mohammad Esmael Khan yesterday said the construction of Kamal Khan Dam in Nimroz Province would be completed in three years. He said the completion of the project which cost \$100 million would transform people's lives in the province. [SAP20120706950048 Kabul Noor TV in Dari 1300 GMT 06 Jul 12 -- Private Noor TV]

Taliban Statement:

- Taliban report attack on US base in Nahr-e Saraj District, Helmand Province (6 Jul) (SAP20120707950003)
- Taliban report attack on US forces in Nad-e Ali District, Helmand Province (6 Jul) (SAP20120707950004)

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