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From Tal Afar to Marja: Applying Counterinsurgency to Local Conditions

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The seizure of Marja in Helmand Province was the largest operation in the Afghanistan war, conducted by approximately 2,500 American and 1,500 Afghan troops versus 400-800 insurgents. Chris Chivers of the *New York Times* moved with Battalion 3-6, Mike Phillips of the *Wall Street Journal* with 1-6, Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the *Washington Post* with 1-6 and with the brigade headquarters. I went up to Now Zad, began the operation with 1-6 and spent most of the month in southern Marja with Task Force Commando, comprised of 40 Marines and Special Forces and 400 askars and police. Marja marked my third embed with Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) units.

The basic question is whether the seizure of Marja was sui generis, with few techniques of general applicability, or was an example, like Tal Afar in the Iraq war, with wider implications.

Let's look at what happened, why, and what carries forward?

What Happened

In February of 2009, the top commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, decided to send a Stryker Brigade to Kandahar and a MEB to Helmand, where ten of the twelve districts were under Taliban control. The MEB mission was to control the southern and western districts and to seize Marja, the Taliban headquarters and the hub of the drug trade. Helmand accounted for 70% of the world's illegal opium and heroin production, with the Taliban taking between \$40 and \$100 million per annum. If Kandahar was the symbolic capital of the Taliban, then Helmand was their breadbasket.

The MEB commander, Brigadier General Larry D. Nicholson, who had commanded a regiment in Fallujah, was familiar with the complexities of fighting, assassinations, corruption and politics. He had handpicked his staff from Fallujah veterans, earning the nickname The Poacher.

McKeirnan and Nicholson agreed that taking Marja first made no sense since there were no Afghan forces to hold it. So when the MEB arrived in June, the battalions spread out along the narrow Green Zone of the Helmand River south of the province capital of Laskar Gah, allowing the overextended British troops to consolidate to the north. The farmers in the south proved surprisingly receptive to the Marine presence that consisted of 20 outposts per each of three battalions, generating an average of 60 patrols a day per battalion. By mid-July, the Taliban had

relinquished control of the Green Zone and pulled back to a picket line defending the Marja enclave, a few dozen kilometers west of the Helmand River.

Initially the ratio of Marines to askars in Helmand was 9:1, and the local police were an impediment. As success with local shuras increased, General Stanley McChrystal pressured the bureaucracies to send more Afghan forces to Helmand. Once Lieutenant General William Caldwell took command of Afghan training, Helmand was put on the fast track for receiving askars. Nicholson set up his own school to train police.

Marja was planned for months. The objective area comprised about 20 by 20 kilometers of canals and irrigation ditches holding several thousand farm compounds, generally set about 300 to 600 meters apart. Nicholson and Governor Gulab Mangal assured everyone that the attack was a certainty, in order to persuade the insurgents and druggies to leave and thus avoid large-scale destruction. The leaders did leave town. Nicholson also met with dozens of elders to set the scene for bringing in the first Afghan government in three years, working to isolate the former Afghan governor and former police chief who were seen as malign influences profiting from the drugs.

The assault began on 13 February with the night landing by helicopters of three companies, with askars attached to every squad, in central Marja. They attacked from the center out, aiming to link with two battalions moving in from the northwest and the east. Thus once the attack began, no politician could call it off. (A Fallujah lesson.) To the south, Task Force Commando – one ODA team, one kandak, a Marine engineer platoon and air controllers from ANGLICO - attacked north. Police and DEA came in at about D+3.

Mines were everywhere. At noon on D-Day, I talked with the EOD sergeant who was disarming an IED beside our MRAP. "This is my ninth today," he said. Basic movement was by platoon bounding, with snipers and the occasional PKM encountered by every platoon usually once or twice a day for the first week. The askars did well, considering they were fresh from boot camp.

Air support was problematical, requiring extended discussion between the pilot, the JTAC and the ground commander about the exact nature of the confirmed target and the degree of danger the friendly forces were facing. There had been a tragic miscalculation with a ground-launched rocket on the first day that killed 12 civilians and after that everyone was super cautious.

Battalions 1-3, 3-6 and 1-6 had some good shoots when Talibs made the mistake of closing to within 300 meters. After about the fourth day, the Talibs fell back to their usual ranges of 400 – 800 meters. There were a few good snipers intermixed, but on the whole the insidious danger were the damn mines. It was really cold a few nights, with enough rain and mud to damp down the presence of the mines.

The Talibs had no coordinated battle plan and gradually ex-filtrated or picked up hoes. The Talib line was that the Marines raped and killed. The farmers didn't buy into that, but insisted the Talibs would return. They remained very skeptical that the new sub-governor or the Afghan troops would remain.

Two Marine battalions will stay in the area for the next two months. Then there will be a turnover of US units. On the Afghan side, a new corps is standing up. The cops were trained at the brigade school and Nicholson had hand-picked their leader. The PRT has ample money.

The next stage will be the poppy harvest in late April and early May. Marines and DEA are intermingled with police making it tough to export drugs via the main roads. Odds are the Taliban have taken a large hit in finances, because they won't be able to organize the purchase and export of wet opium, let alone refine it inside Marja. Instead, many small-time dealers will resort to smuggling small amounts over the back roads, fracturing Taliban control and reducing the profit margin.

Why did Marja fall quickly?

The 400 or so Talibs were overwhelmed. Their leaders had left town. That had to affect morale. The rifle companies attacking out from the center prevented internal lines of defense, permitting nothing resembling Fallujah to occur. Once the companies linked up with the battalions coming in from the outside, it was over.

Air surveillance played a huge role. No Talib could cruise around on his motorbike, set up a checkpoint or move ammo without fearing the Big Eye in the Sky. Firefights were limited usually to ten or 15 minutes. Once rotary wing comes overhead, things quiet down. All Afghans hold our air in awe and attribute to it capabilities not even seen in Star Wars.

Canals became the equivalent of the concrete barriers in Iraq. Once outposts were set up at intersecting canals, the Talibs left before they were trapped inside.

What carries forward?

Small Advisory/Combat Task Forces

Looking forward a year, the concept behind Task Force Commando holds great promise. Nine Special Forces soldiers in the ODA provided the combat core for two platoon patrols every day. The ODA were supported by a 30-man Marine engineer platoon (in OPCON) that swept the roads, threw up the outposts and provided firepower and back-up for the ODA. In addition, four Marines from ANGLICO with extensive experience calling in air were also OPCON to the ODA. Everyone got along so well that the ANGLICO Cobra pilot served as the Task Force XO, with the ODA captain as the CO. The engineers had MRAPs with 50 cal and the ANGLICO always knew how far out the nearest air was.

The kandak fought well. There were the usual complaints about food and demands for money, etc., but nothing that interfered with the daily momentum. The Talibs could not stand up to the combination. So as we reduce our combat forces in 2011, this sort of small task force, with a ratio was one US to ten Afghans, makes a lot of sense. It's a combat and advisory unit at the same time.

The debate about who has the authority to call in air or artillery will continue. Our forces go to extraordinary lengths not to strike compounds even after receiving fire. Our grunts are often irritated when pilots question the ground commander. But it does get worked out.

While there is an admirable moral aspect to this restraint, the strategic rationale is less clear-cut. If NATO so alienates the population by accidentally killing civilians that many more join the Taliban, then why can the Taliban deliberately kill three times as many without causing three times the backlash of revenge, leading to their defeat? We have romantically exaggerated the warrior spirit called pashtunwali. We have also discounted the obligation of Afghan leaders, starting with President Karzai, not to inflame the population by railing against the accidents that will occur in any war, despite our best efforts.

It is clear that we must provide an air cap for the askars as our combat battalions withdraw. Yes, 60s and 81s have a role in mountains and in flat lands laced with ditches and defilade approaches. But we're not training the askars in mortars.

Air is the default weapon of choice, and it requires US JTACs on the ground. Thus it would seem advisable to plan now, a year in advance, for the composition (and the motivation) of task forces to work with the kandaks, as Task Force Commando did in Marja.

Patrol or Lose

Nicholson's rule-of-thumb was eight askars and Americans per patrol on foot, with no requirement for overwatch by a vehicle. ODA loved the lack of restrictions in their sector. The result was 60 patrols a day per battalion. In other provinces, some battalions averaged 24 patrols a day.

On the one hand, ODA, OGA/CIA, SEALs, Air Force and Marines set tour lengths of seven or fewer months for their front-line units, while Army grunts do twelve-month tours. After eight or nine months, you have to homestead (meaning FOBs, good food, cots with mattresses, air conditioning, etc.), and you pace yourself for a marathon of patrolling, not a sprint. Big Army talks about being expeditionary, but in nine years has not adjusted its tour length or assigned the same battalions to the same brigades or the same locales.

A grunt doing seven months can do with less and push harder than when he has to do twelve months. The argument that he makes less meaningful relations with Afghans is shallow. Most grunts don't form relationships because they don't live in the villages, and there is no evidence that twelve months yields better intelligence results. There is ample evidence that twelve months does yield fewer patrols per day.

Talk and Attack

Talk: Best counterinsurgency practices were applied in Marja. Shuras were immediately held wherever US forces went. Nicholson talked with hundreds of elders and reached out to the mullahs. The PRT came in with millions in projects. "A government in a box" - meaning Afghan officials chosen and briefed beforehand - was brought in.

"We reach out and talk to everyone," Nicholson said. "The battalions report shuras as well as TICs (Troops in Contact)."

But we have to be clear-eyed in our expectations about counterinsurgency in different locales. Since 2006, Marja was the tenth major operation in Helmand alone. The Taliban recovered from the first nine ops. So the question of regeneration, or sleeper cells, is vexing. What's going on here?

Basically, Pashtuns do not betray their cousins who are fighting with the Taliban. Beginning in Anbar in Iraq in late 2006, the inter-related Sunni tribes began to rebel against Al Qaeda. Tribesmen betrayed locations and identities. General Petraeus was able to pay 100,000 Sunni "Sons of Iraq" to act as armed militia and to drive Al Qaeda out of their neighborhoods. Nothing resembling that armed swing of the Iraqi tribes has happened among the Pashtuns in Afghanistan.

The notion that we provide security to a Pashtun population that is not excessively oppressed by the Taliban, and that in return the population informs on the Taliban in their midst remains an unproven theory. Equally troubling, in nine years of war DoD has never developed a concept and a device for the biometric identification of the male population on a large scale. Our soldiers and Marines - and the Tajik askars - have no way of knowing whether the man they are questioning comes from where he claims, or where and when he was last questioned.

Rarely is a Talib body recovered after a firefight. Given the ranges of most engagements, it's not clear how many are really killed versus those reported shot. Even fewer are captured and sent to prison to do hard time. The police fall under the National Directorate of Security. Estimates are that for every ten actual Talibs detained at the substation level, only one will eventually stand trial, be convicted and sent away under the NDS system. There is leakage and corruption at every level. Afghanistan on a per capita basis has fewer criminals (including insurgents) in prison than does Sweden.

On the other hand, Talib recruitment is low. They haven't attracted large numbers of followers, even when they have been in charge for years, as in Marja.

But if you are not killing or capturing the enemy in significant numbers, it's hard to win a war.

Attack: Nicholson took an aggressive approach, using his units like an accordion. In the summer and fall, they spread out in the river valley, in February they collapsed on Marja, and now they were spreading out again.

Once Marja settled down, he sent troops to remote Delaram, 100 kilometers to the west. Wherever the Taliban went to regroup, Nicholson attacked, a technique harkening back to General Crook in the Indian Wars. While there were some staff criticisms in Kabul about violating the precept of population protection, Nicholson was unperturbed.

"Population protection? Visit Nawa or Garmsir," he said. "Ask the farmers how we're doing. It's results that count. I won't tolerated a sanctuary anywhere in Helmand. I want to unhinge the Taliban psychologically – keep them on the run."

Local Brigade, Local Police

The askars at Marja were mostly Tajik, with no local Pashtuns. That was a national problem.

At the province level, however, Nicholson was training his own police force, with 2,000 graduates a year. The deliberate mixture was 1/3rd local and 2/3rds non-locals. The balance was intended to restrict deal-making and tribal favoritism, while including local contacts.

Summary

Four concepts from Marja have wider applicability. First, training police at the US brigade level insures that local interests are addressed, while allowing the brigade to exercise the close supervision needed to weed out the undesirables. Second, any armed force needs a resting place. Population protection must be balanced by implacable pressure to deny the insurgents a sanctuary anywhere inside the assigned battle space. Third, Big Army impedes patrolling by demanding large-size patrols and twelve-month tours. Fourth, as we withdraw, the budget for the Afghan army will plummet. The Afghan Army will not be able to stand on its own in 2011. Because they will rely upon us for fire and moral support, small task forces like Commando will play a major role in the future - if we plan now.

Bing West, a former assistant secretary of defense and combat marine, has made two dozen extended trips to Iraq and Afghanistan. The author of The Village and The Strongest Tribe, he is currently writing a book about the war in Afghanistan.

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