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Dispatch: Village Boys

Michael Yon



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Anywhere, Afghanistan**

Back in December, C-Co 1-17th Infantry battalion had been in about the worst place in Afghanistan. There is stiff competition for the position of actual worst place, and I am sure there are many contenders that remain unknown, but the Arghandab was one of them. The battalion had lost more than twenty soldiers, and C-co alone had lost 12 with more wounded. In December 2009, C-Co was moved north into Shah Wali Kot and has been running missions here for more than three months. I've only been at Shaw Wali Kot for a week.

Charlie Company headed on a mission to visit villages that had seen no formal western guests for at least the past five years, according Company Commander Max Hanlin. The soldiers drove to an area maybe two kilometers from the first village, parked, and walked in. The surrounding desert was so dry that only the hardy and small plants survived—often with thorns, and probably foul-tasting (and poisonous). How else can a plant expect to survive when the favorite Afghan meat is mutton, and foraging isn't easy for the lambs? There was the occasional brown lizard or grasshopper, but on the whole it's simply rocky desert. The place is barren but not entirely lifeless.

Charlie Company was heading into the Baghtu Valley. The general area is said to be among the most religiously conservative in Afghanistan, meaning soldiers were unlikely to stumble across any undiscovered steeples, stupas or synagogues.

Some Charlie Company soldiers are multi-tour combat veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq. Captain Max Hanlin, the Charlie Company Commander, is on his sixth combat tour. Captain Hanlin explained how Dutch convoys had been hit near the Baghtu Valley and how fights had raged. Captain Hanlin said the four villages we were to visit are a black hole. We know where they are, their names, and little more.

We knew nothing, really, about the villages ahead. We didn't know whether they are friendly, enemy or neutral. In fact, the villages could be in another category: beyond neutral. Just out of it, living in a knowledge vacuum, maybe hoping not to be dragged into a fight. That would describe much of Afghanistan.

With the Battle for Kandahar kicking off, and our troops surging in for the counteroffensive, villages previously beyond the periphery of our effective reach are becoming more accessible. Many of them have been Taliban-controlled. We don't always know whether these isolated, dusty mud-walled places support, provide sanctuary, or are the native home of Taliban fighters. The Afghanistan government remains absent from most Afghan villages. The central government hidden away in Kabul still offers zero. Not juice, justice or security. The Taliban at least offers justice in some areas.

And so Charlie Company, some Afghan police, and Haji Oboyadulah Popal (the governor of Shah Wali Kot district), headed to the hills.



Veterans watch the kids. If the kids don't like you, or are afraid: bad. The adults can lie all day and might get away with it, while kids are a collective polygraph. If the kids disappear suddenly, it's a good idea to prepare to fight, and it's always great to see a bunch of young ones return a

smile. Children also see the enemy just like everyone else does, though the children can be more likely to say something.



The soldiers walked into the first village. One kid looked as if he had been whacked in the head. A medic bandaged him up. I asked what happened and through an interpreter the kid said he fell but he seemed to be lying. The boy just behind him has a slingshot hanging around his neck, as did many of the boys. Probably got whacked in the head during a slingshot battle and lied to his dad about it, the way we used to lie about BB gun wars.



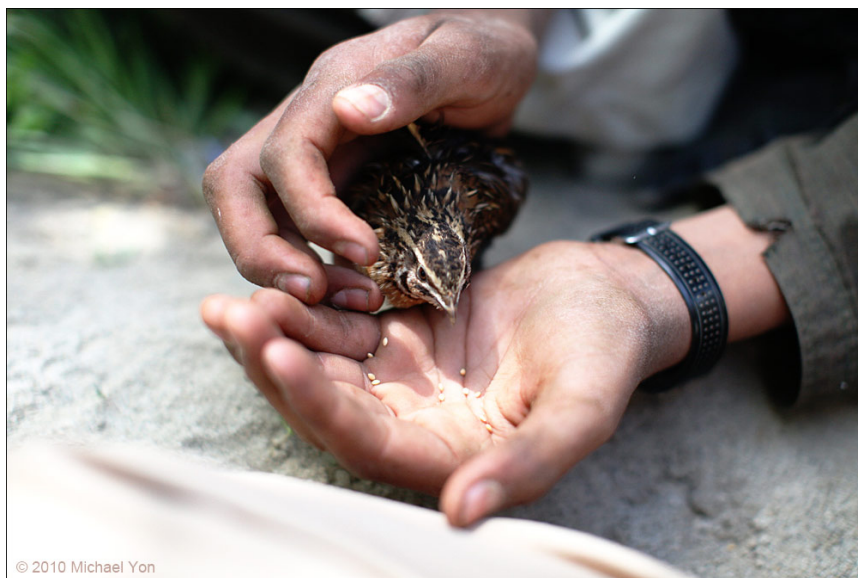
Does he look innocent? The boys use the slingshots to hunt birds, which they say they eat, but it's difficult to imagine that boys with slingshots would not shoot at each other.



Boys catch birds. And they kept shoving this one up so I would keep looking at it.



An interpreter said they will hold the bird until it becomes accustomed to being held. When the boy fed the bird, he would slightly release it.



Numerous villagers had watches, and they had shoes. All the shoes seemed to fit. In truly poor areas (“poor” being subjective on many fronts), Afghans often wear shoes that are too large or small. It’s good to watch for men wearing running shoes, which can be a sign they are fighters. The British teach this in their man-tracking school that I attended last year in Borneo. The village was lush with this year’s first crop, including fig trees, and poppy which mostly had not yet flowered.



For the first hour or so, no girls were to be seen, but the boys wanted their photos taken. Many villagers have never had their photos taken. The boys didn’t seem to know what the camera was until they saw their images. Soldiers and Marines sometimes carry Polaroid Cameras to villages. The villagers love to get the shots which often are the only photos they have ever owned.



Finally a lone girl came out. She wandered around for some time and a boy showed her to me, and when I lifted the camera he even shielded her eyes, but a moment too late. This was the first instance I saw anyone care if a young girl was photographed. Even the girl is covering her face.



There was a meeting going on with Captain Hanlin and the elders and the boys were well-behaved with them, but they were angling for attention. The boys would have been fun if there were no meeting. We could have started a slingshot competition. But they were getting to be a pain. They magically disappeared and soon were crowded around the mortar team maybe 30 meters away. The crowd of boys began laughing so loudly that the meeting stopped a couple times to see what was up. The British will designate a soldier to be the comedian during missions. When kids disrupt soldiers, the comedian can distract them away from business. Our folks were borrowing that good idea. I walked over and asked our guys how they had lured the

kids away. Why were they laughing so loud? A soldier answered that they didn't try to entertain the boys. He continued, "I just farted and they went crazy." So he did it again and so on. The soldier boys with the mortars were getting along famously with the village boys. Who knew that public corporeal depressurization is a great taboo in Afghanistan, but incredibly entertaining when done by Americans?



Unfortunately, the *circus de flatulence* ended and the village boys came back to the meeting.



And kept being boys.

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