

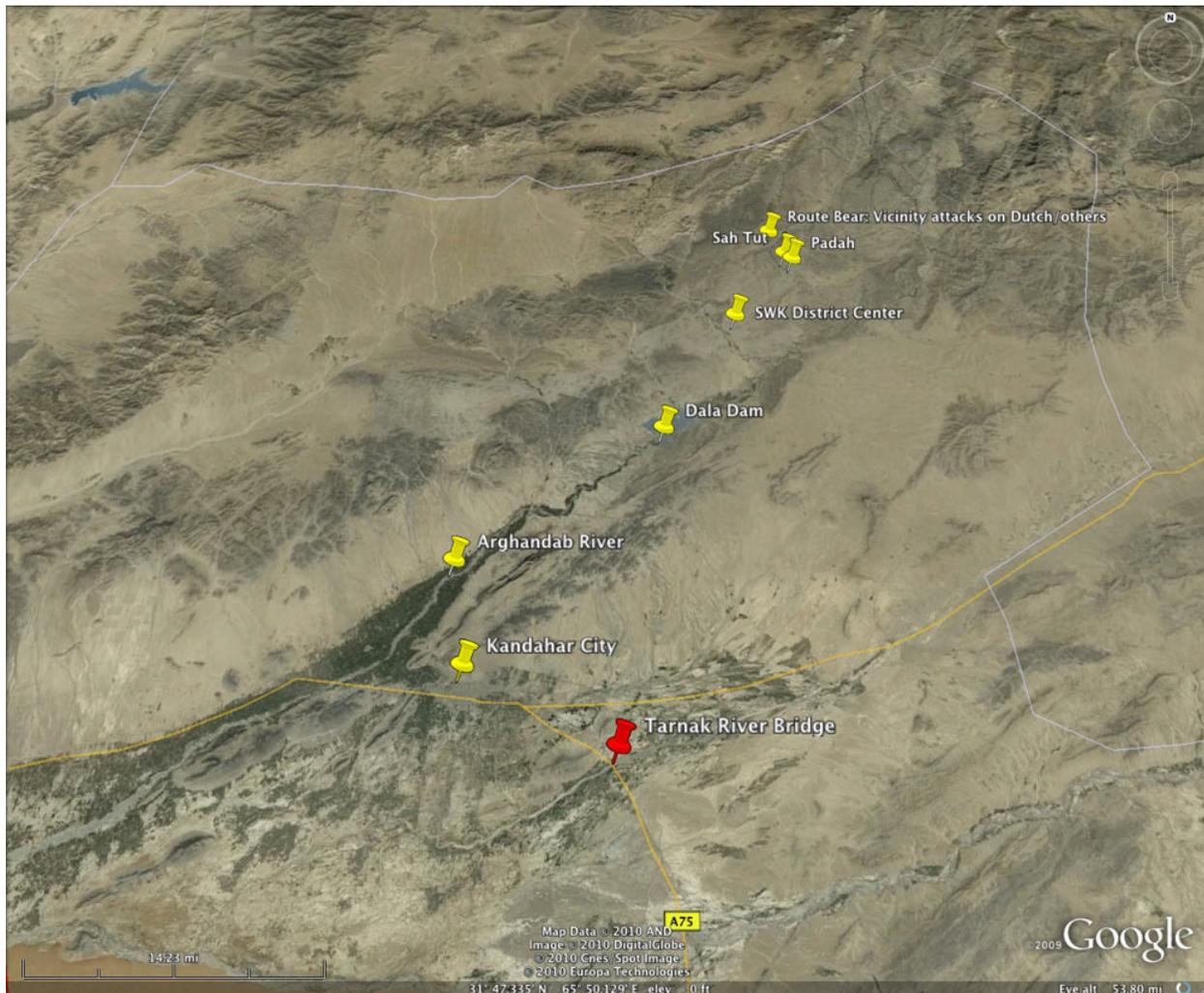


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The Battle for Kandahar

Michael Yon



Shah Wali Kot district Center: Elevation 3,953 feet

The counteroffensive has begun. More accurately, it might be called a counter-counteroffensive. Close to a decade ago, we beat the Taliban and al Qaeda here. The Taliban re-grew and waged an increasingly successful counteroffensive. And so our ninth year at war is the year of our counter-counteroffensive.

The most remarkable feature of our counter-counteroffensive likely will be the Battle for Kandahar, or BfK. Kandahar was the birthplace of the Taliban and Kandahar City is the provincial capital. The Taliban is successfully wresting Kandahar back into their control. The BfK is likely our last effort to halt and reverse Taliban influence from spreading. The winner in the BfK will be set to eventually take most or all of the chips off the table, and so BfK is crucial to the outcome of the war.

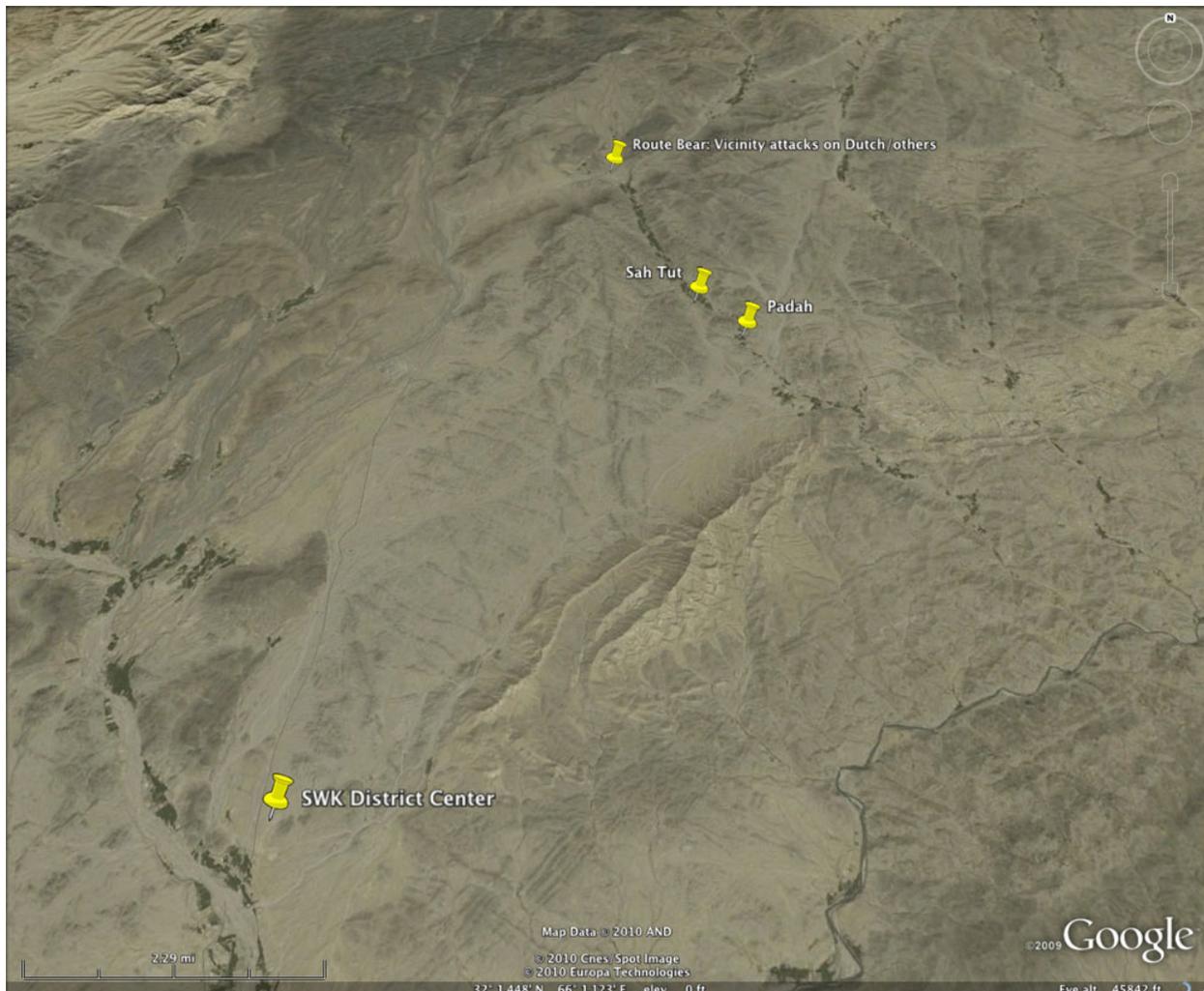
Much of the BfK will take place not in Kandahar, or even Afghanistan, but in the media-sphere, and likely will affect U.S. elections this year. The implications are vast.

This is a political war on nearly every level. Though this will almost certainly be our most deadly year so far, violence is often a minor aspect of the struggle, while in some places combat is—by far—the most prevalent feature. Insofar as combat, our plans do not include serious fighting within Kandahar City, though soon after publication of this dispatch fighting will erupt in nearby areas. BfK is more of a process for both sides than a set battle. The Taliban are succeeding in their process to take Kandahar, and we wish to reverse that process.



Charlie Company 1-17th Infantry dismounted from Strykers. The men spread out so that bombs, mines or other attacks cannot easily get several at once.

The mission for the next couple days was to visit four villages that rarely see Coalition, and never see Afghan government unless villagers travel to the Shah Wali Kot (SWK) District Center or to Kandahar City.



Part of Charlie Company is stationed at Shah Wali Kot District Center.

“Route Bear” starts at Highway 1, passes by Arghandab River Valley, by FOB Frontenac, by the district center (where this mostly was written) and on up to Tarin Kot in Urozgan Province. The Aussies, Dutch, U.S. and others use the route for convoys. Most of the areas out here are the wild unknowns where no, or almost no, Coalition or Afghan government ever goes. We know little about the villages. Route Bear and other roads follow the paths of least resistance while Afghans follow the water. If you see green down below, it’s safe to bet that Afghans live there. And so the main routes such as Bear—of which there are few—often are far away from the nearest villages, but within easy distance when Taliban decide to strike. Even if there were no bombs, our heavy armor cannot get to most villages in Afghanistan, but the Taliban can scoot all over on their motorbikes and light vehicles.

The villages of Shah Tut and Padah, in the Baghtu Valley, are mostly unknown to us. Some Dutch, however, should remember it well because they have been attacked where Route Bear crosses the Baghtu Valley. This war has been going on for so long that it's hard to know what's happened here.

Charlie Company drove out under cover of morning darkness off Route Bear into the hills a few kilometers from the villages of Shah Tut and Padah. As the Strykers approached a dangerous chokepoint, far from the villages, the soldiers fired grenades from the Mark 19 (automatic grenade launcher) and some machine gun bursts at potential ambush spots. It is important to note that there were no civilians or villages in this area but anyone hiding in ambush would likely fire back or flee. This tactic is sometimes called "recon by fire" and can be very effective.

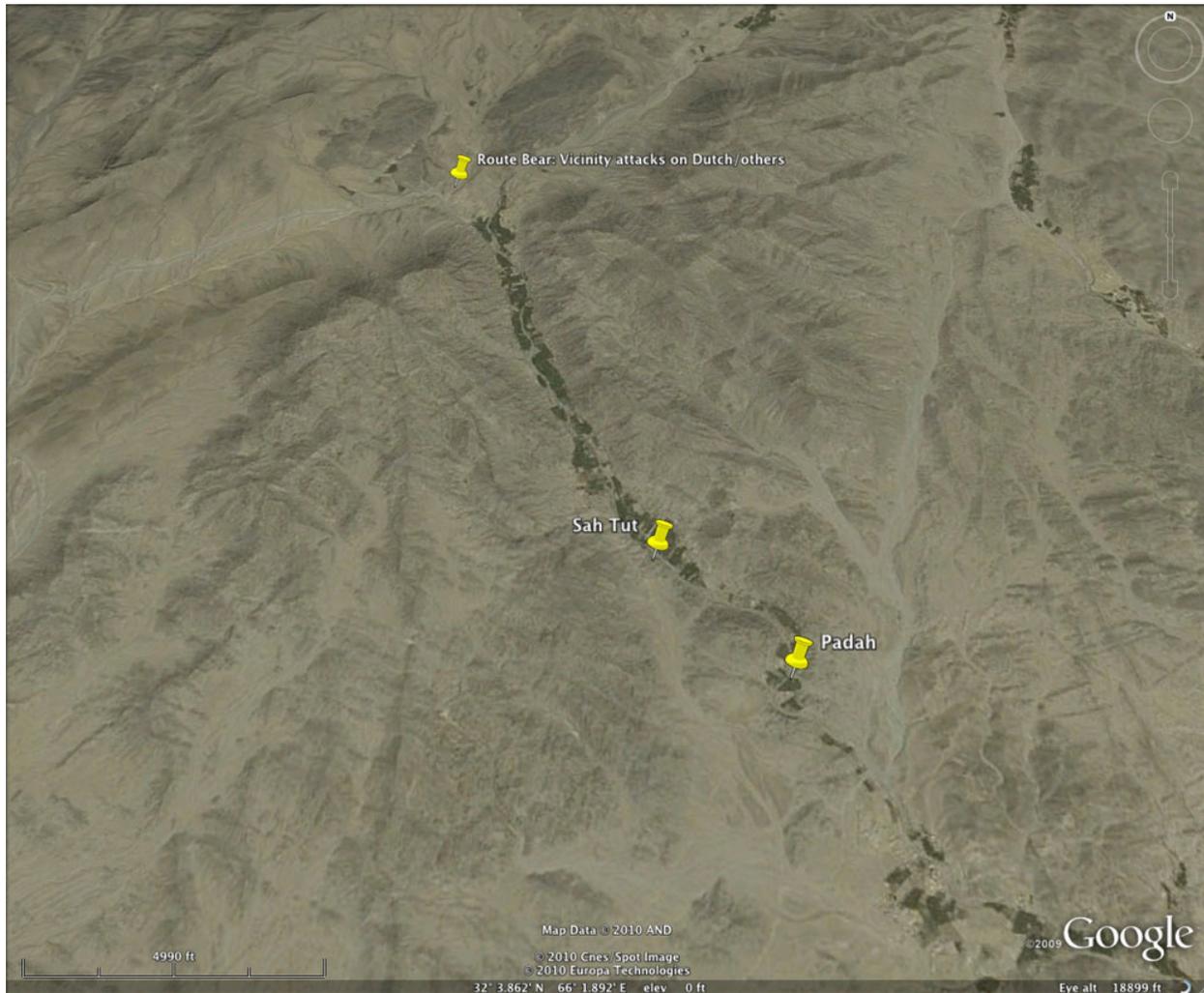
The soldiers drove to a prearranged area, dropped ramps on the Strykers and began the walk toward the villages. A lizard and a grasshopper were the only creatures to be seen. The desolate area is a work of natural art.



Road to Shah Tut

First we walked to Shah Tut, situated at about 4,500ft above sea level. Afghan National Police brought two pickups partially loaded with blankets for the villagers and extra supplies for us to spend the night in the desert, or possibly in an Afghan compound if the commander could rent one for a night. The soldiers stayed off the roads in case of bombs, but closer to the village the

terrain forced the ANP back onto the roads. The two police walking in front are looking for bombs.



Many Afghan villages share names. Variant spellings, variant names and same-names are challenging. In the United States, if someone says they are from Ellijay, Georgia, the location can be quickly narrowed and pinpointed despite that the United States has a population probably ten times greater while geographically dwarfing Afghanistan. But here, even in the limited “Central Area” of “Regional Command South” comprising part of southern Afghanistan, there are five listed villages called “Padah” or “Padeh” and there are 15 villages named Shin Ghar.

Villages often are named after terrain features. A Pashtun man explained “padah” is the word for the feature we call a “saddle,” while shin ghar means “blue mountain,” or maybe “green mountain,” depending on who you ask

Just a couple minutes of scanning the atlas index (RC-South, Central Area, and Afghanistan Atlas, produced by the British MoD) reveals replicate names from A to Z. The atlas covers but a small portion of the country that might approximate north Georgia. Imagine if there were seven

villages named Ellijay, three named Elejeje, and two named Elijeja, just in North Georgia, not to mention the rest of the United States.

There are roughly 4,000 named population centers in the Central Area of RC-South and, for a guess; there might be only 3,200 different names.



Shah Tut Village

Shah Tut means “mulberry” and Shah tut trees are said to live for centuries, though the Taliban sometimes cut down the shah tut trees of uncooperative villages. During imperial days the British made beer and wine from the fruits, and those fruits are sold in markets today. It’s possible that some of the still living trees helped make beer for the British last century.

Having avoided any bombs or ambushes, Afghan National Police and soldiers from Charlie Company 1-17th Infantry crested a saddle and saw the Baghtu Valley and the village of Shah Tut. Soldiers took security position and the governor of Shah Wali Kot District hollered down below asking that village men assemble. ANP repeated the calls on a megaphone.

From a vantage point on a nearby hill, Charlie Company soldiers could see villagers avoiding certain paths. Villagers would come to a certain spot, hop over a wall and walk through the field, then get back on the path. The soldiers on the hill radioed to soldiers who were already in Shah Tut to stay off the paths even inside the village.



Haji Obidullah Populzai, Governor of Shah Wali Kot District. The villagers assembled under shade near the dry riverbed.

Captain Max Hanlin, from San Francisco, on his sixth combat tour, sat down with interpreter Daoud, or “Popeye.” Soldiers call him Popeye because Daoud Khan says he is part owner of some Popeye restaurants back in several New England states. Interpreters remain a significant weakness for U.S. forces here. We hire Dari-speaking interpreters from places like Kabul to translate down here, in an area where they understand neither the language nor the culture. (Language and cultural translation being separate issues.) Captain Hanlin explained that he has suffered his share of bad interpreters, but Daoud is gold. His English fluency and understanding of American culture, and local culture and language are what is needed. He was born just south of here in the Arghandab.

The men assembled and Captain Hanlin must have spoken with them for a couple hours. The villagers said they could not defend against the Taliban because President Karzai had taken their weapons. Captain Hanlin would be hard to pick out as a killer who is on his sixth tour, four of which were with the Rangers who are not known for dropping in to have tea. A graduate of Duke, his seemingly lighthearted personality didn’t indicate what came next. Captain Hanlin asked how many Taliban usually come to the village and the men answered just a couple or a few. And so Captain Hanlin said they have shovels and tools, and look at all these rocks. Just bash ’em in the head. Kill them. Keep their bodies. Get on a motorbike and come tell us, and we’ll pay you for killing them and there will be no further recourse. Just kill them. You have them outnumbered. The men didn’t seem to bite.

Cell phone coverage does not exist in Baghtu Valley. They are on their own. They might kill the first group, but the one that followed would come for vengeance. Neither we nor the Afghan government can protect them. Meanwhile, information came in that the Taliban also contacted the village via radio, asking if the villagers attacked us, but a villager responded that they had not attacked us because they “didn’t have anything.”

Meanwhile, just nearby, other soldiers were collecting biometric information with the HIIDE gear. (Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment.) The HIIDE takes fingerprint, photo and retinal photo of each fighting-aged male. In the interest of political correctness for the home audience—which means nothing here—the kids are not entered into the system.

We moved from Shah Tut village to Padah. Two soldiers counted everyone as we departed. It’s easy to lose someone even in broad daylight, and so the soldiers often do a head count. Sergeant First Class Olaf Munch tapped each soldier as they passed through and counted aloud. It’s probably no exaggeration to say that Olaf and I did a hundred missions together in Iraq. He’s a well respected soldier and good at his profession. I was saddened to get the news that Olaf was sent home shortly after this mission for more medical work related to the previous bombs. Godspeed to Olaf.



We walked through the farmer’s fields, some of which were growing poppy for opium. Popeye the interpreter picked some poppy and stopped a young soldier and told him this is where the cocaine, crack, and heroin come from. The soldier cracked up as it became apparent that Popeye, though a smart man, had never been in the drug business.



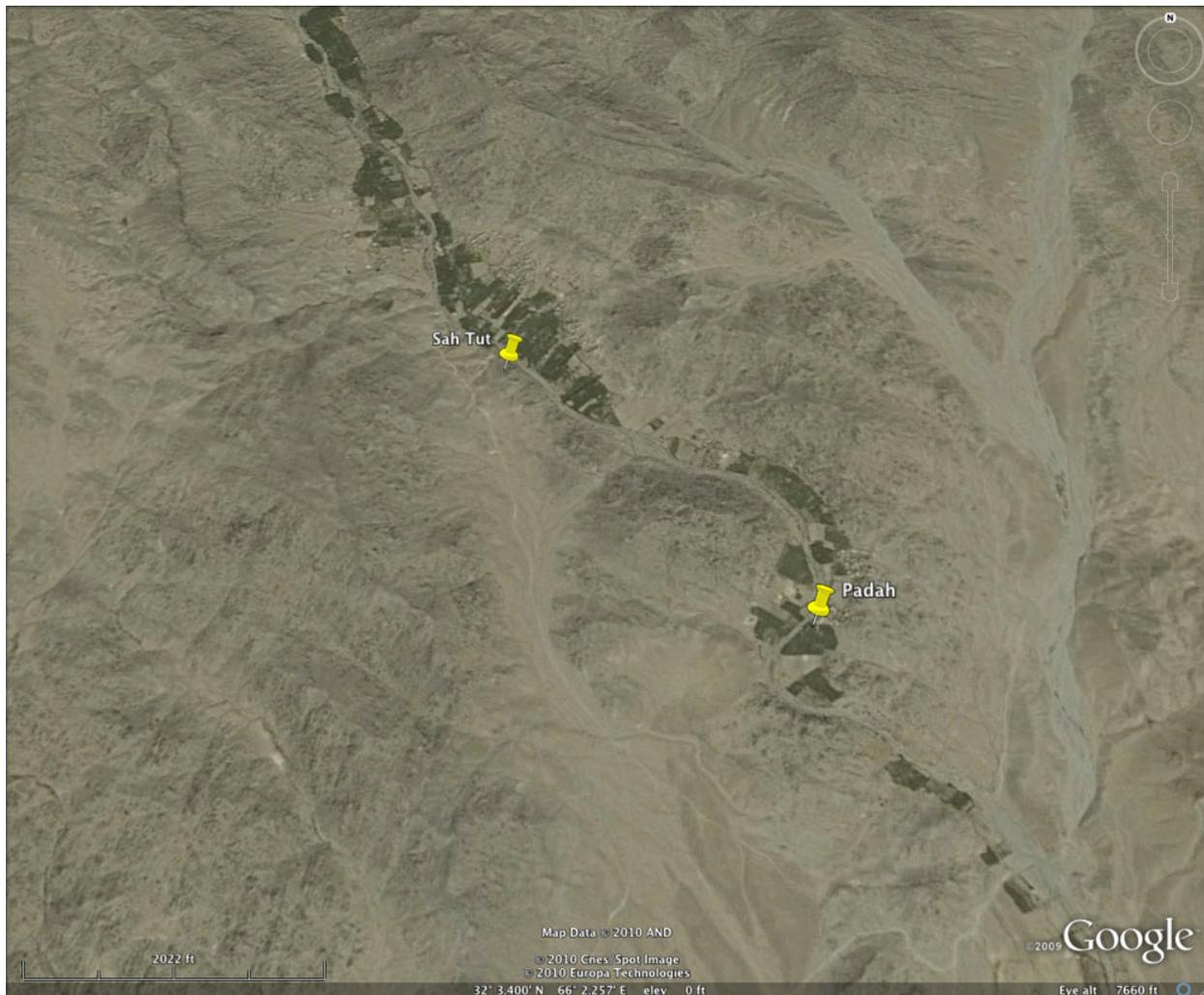
A radio transmission came in. A bomb had exploded and a soldier had disappeared. He was “DUSTWUN” (Duty Status Whereabouts Unknown), or missing in action. MIAs are relatively common in Afghanistan. Bombs detonate and people disappear. Sometimes they fly into rivers or off cliffs or simply disintegrate.



SSG Jose Rivera was recently in a Stryker that was hit with an IED. He came out fine and continues to work hard.

The experienced soldiers kept giving me tips on how to not get blown up, and I was listening with both ears. When going on missions, it's important to identify the most experienced soldiers and stay close to them during any potential rough spots. The soldiers also thought something might happen here, so I stayed close to experience.

After the DUSTWUN report, the soldiers counted again and called up that we are all accounted for. The DUSTWUN occurred in their old Area of Operations, the Arghandab, which was being covered by 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division. Staff Sergeant Scott Brunkhorst, 25 years old, was killed in action.



Padah: N32'03.213' E066'02.576' Elev 4,438ft.

Snipers and Air Force JTACs (who can call airstrikes) were watching our route from vantage points.



The riverbed doubled as a road and the ANPs took the easy route while we stayed in the fields.

An ANP saw something suspicious and started hacking into the ground with his weapon as if it were a pick axe. This speaks highly of Russian design, but not so much for ANP training. After he finished hacking, he banged the barrel against the rock to get out the gunk.



The mortar team consists of three soldiers. One carries that 60mm tube with a round inside ready to fire. The morale of that three-man crew had to be high; during any chance they were cutting up about something. They had the boys in Shah Tut in hysterics by passing gas. It was challenging at times moving with that mortar. The soldiers go over the walls because the enemy places bombs on the sides and in openings.



Charlie Company came into Padah. The men were praying at the mosque so we waited under some fig trees until they finished, and they then invited us to meet outside at the mosque. It's common knowledge that Muslims don't like us in their mosques—but this seems to be common knowledge that is untrue. Muslims in various countries don't seem to mind. They didn't mind in Iraq, here, Kashmir or other places I've been. They don't like soldiers coming in with combat in their eyes—that's a fact. Many enemies in Iraq and here used that against us and would use mosques as fighting platforms or warehouses. (If the enemy shoots from a mosque, they will get shot at.) The Islamic world is vast and so it's not good to make generalizations. It can be said that Muslims in many countries do not mind if you come into their mosque any more than Christians mind if you come into their church. It's okay so long as you respect their territory.

Captain Hanlin talked about various subjects and drifted over to asking them to use their shovels and rocks to whack any Taliban who came in. He asked if I had any questions, which turned out to be a mistake. I asked the villagers about opium production and prices which started an argument between the village elders. I had no idea what they were arguing about, but it went on for an impressive fifteen minutes, and finally, it was said, that they had settled. What do they

want? Opium production or Karzai as President. An elder said he wanted both. I smiled at Captain Hanlin, rather sheepishly, and said there are no further questions.



While talking with the elders, an ANP (r) told villagers about the ID cards they can get by going over to the soldiers who are using the HIIDE system. Many Afghans have never even had their photo taken. They don't watch Gary Sinise on *CSI New York*. Most seem to want the IDs and so they will line up and give up their fingerprints, photos and retinal images.



The villagers took off their shoes before coming into the praying area. In many places, the shoes don't fit. In this Padah everyone seemed to wear shoes that fit. The enemy often wears running shoes. None of the men or boys in the village seemed to have running shoes.



Most of the men had never had their photo taken.



HIIDE systems: Most of the men do not know their ages. Some of the older men are missing some fingerprints from farm work.



The villages gave up some information about IED(s) on our route out. The IEDs had been there for at least months, apparently, and the villagers were upset because they had to take a lengthy

detour on another road to miss the bomb(s), so they told Captain Hanlin where to find the explosives.

Some Afghans walked straight to a suspected bomb and started digging it out, Hurt Locker style.

The soldiers here think the Hurt Locker movie is trash, and so it's become an insult to call someone "Hurt Locker." I said something like, "Wow, those Afghans must have watched Hurt Locker and now they are going to die." The soldiers just laughed and kept doing their work while I hid behind the rocks.



And so Charlie Company walked back to the Strykers and slept in the desert. The intention was to visit two more villages in the morning, but due to a mine roller breaking on a Stryker, and the Governor also arranged tribal shura to discuss re-integration, we didn't go to the other two villages. (Am unsure what people are re-integrating to, but that's the word used here. Another strange phrase is "Afghanistan reconstruction.")

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And that was it.

Michael Yon is a former Green Beret who has been reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan since December 2004. No other reporter has spent as much time with combat troops in these two wars. Michael's dispatches from the frontlines have earned him the reputation as the premier independent combat journalist of his generation.

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