Afghan army soldiers keep watch at an outpost in Marjah district of Helmand province, Afghanistan May 20, 2016. REUTERS/Abdul Mailk - RTSF6IG

As the Taliban advances in Helmand, Afghan soldiers pay the price

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September 6, 2016 Updated: September 6, 2016 10:24 PM

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KABUL // Abdul Ahad Bai and the two dozen Afghan soldiers under his command had been fighting the Taliban for several hours when their ammunition ran out.

Stuck at a remote outpost in one of the last stretches of territory controlled by the government in Naw Zad district, Helmand province, they decided to surrender.

Just as one of the soldiers rose to his feet and was about to give up, he was killed by a single gunshot to the chest with no chance to explain himself.

Helmand — an unforgiving area of sweltering heat, barren deserts and verdant poppy fields — has become synonymous with the often futile nature of Afghanistan’s 15-year-long war. Hundreds of foreign soldiers were killed and wounded there before Nato’s combat mission officially ended in 2014.

Although the deteriorating security situation in the province is mirrored across much of the country, the stakes are higher than elsewhere because of the province’s symbolic and strategic importance.

Now, the Taliban are again on the offensive in Helmand, seizing new territory despite a barrage of US air strikes.

Before Mr Bai and his men were taken away to their makeshift prison that night, they were blindfolded and had their hands tied.
Throughout his captivity in May this year, Mr Bai, a sergeant, was regularly fed, allowed to exercise and left physically unharmed. After 17 days, the militants gave him and his men a fresh set of clothes, including a turban and a pair of comfortable shoes.

Each of them was also handed the equivalent of US$480 (Dh1,760) in cash and told they would be released on one condition.

"We had to swear in the name of God that we would never join the army or police again and never fight against fellow Muslims," Mr Bai told The National. "They took us to a mosque and an imam made us take an oath in Pashto."

Mr Bai, 45, had considerable battlefield experience before he was first dispatched to Helmand with the Afghan National Army a year before his capture.

A member of the country’s ethnic minority Turkmen community, he served in a notorious militia that operated under the command of Abdul Rashid Dostum, currently Afghanistan’s first vice president, in the 1992-1996 civil war that devastated much of Kabul.

Years later, Mr Bai went on to fight the Taliban regime across northern Afghanistan. He quickly noticed how effective the Taliban fighters were in combat.

"The problem is that the Taliban don’t have any fear," he said.

More than 100 American troops were sent to the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, in late August as the insurgents threatened to seize the town. But local security forces have continued to struggle against the rebels who are often well equipped and highly dedicated.

His men were not the only Afghan soldiers to surrender in the Naw Zad area, Mr Bai said. He estimated that "about 200" troops at other military positions followed suit, a number The National could not independently verify.

Stationed on the front line in a place called Bar Naw Zad, the defeat of his outpost heralded the beginning of the end for the government in a district already overwhelmingly under insurgent control.

Mr Bai said he and his men were taken to a "very big jail" housing around 1000 prisoners in a building that included steel doors and steel-framed windows. He was repeatedly questioned about his background by a member of the Taliban named Haji Daoud. He said he and his men were rewarded with money and clothes because of their decision to surrender, rather than fight.

Although it is unclear where exactly Mr Bai was held, makeshift insurgent-run prisons are not uncommon in Helmand.