Small US units lure Taliban into losing battles

By Scott Baldauf | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

QALAT, AFGHANISTAN - It's mid-morning on June 21, and Lt. Timothy Jon O'Neal's platoon has just been dropped onto a dusty field north of a mud-walled village of Chalbar. Their mission: to check out reports that a local Afghan Army commander has defected to the Taliban and burned the district headquarters, and is prepared to fight.

Within minutes, it becomes clear that the reports are true, and the platoon is in trouble. The radio crackles with Taliban fighters barking orders to surround the Americans. Gunfire comes from the hilltops. Lieutenant O'Neal's men are easy targets. The Taliban have the high ground.

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This has been the most violent year here since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. The US Army is moving in smaller numbers to lure the Taliban out of hiding for fights they cannot win. The result: More than 1,200 enemy deaths this year, including high-level commanders. But it is also a strategy with profound risks, and one that may be difficult to sustain in Zabul Province - a region so unstable that commanders call it the "Fallujah of Afghanistan" - as current troops return home, their replacements as yet undecided.

Through interviews with soldiers of Chosen Company, of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, the Monitor has reconstructed two recent battles that illustrate how this strategy works, and how it may have weakened the Taliban movement's effectiveness as a military force - for now.

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As the Taliban start shooting, O'Neal's platoon scurries for cover. But there's no panic. "They think, without a doubt, they have us outnumbered," recalls O'Neal, a native of Jeannette, Pa., and leader of 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company. "We've got only 23 people on the ground, and I would say the Taliban had over 150 before the day was over."

But O'Neal and his men are not alone. Just to the south, 1st platoon is clearing a village; to the east, the 3rd platoon are marching toward Chalbar. O'Neal's platoon calls for close air support from nearby Apache helicopters. But on the ground, 2nd platoon will have to hold its own, and fight for every inch - uphill.

Tactical advantages

Much is made about the high-tech gear that US soldiers carry: body armor, rapid-firing machine guns, night vision goggles. But the chief advantage of the US military - especially
in a low-intensity conflict, pitted against a crudely trained force like the Taliban - is training and air power.

Taliban fighters, meanwhile, appear to gain courage from numbers, the ability to swarm a smaller enemy unit. A sense of safety in numbers, however, is often the Taliban's undoing if a US platoon can fix an enemy's position long enough for aircraft or other infantry units to arrive. This is the backbone of US military strategy in Zabul, and one reason why the Taliban have lost so many fighters this year.

"We've had a lot of success with textbook tactics, getting the smallest element engaged, and then using other assets to just pile on," says O'Neal. "The Taliban are more willing to engage with us when we have smaller numbers."

**Not Taliban bait**

Lt. Col. Mark Stammer, the commander at Forward Operating Base in Qalat, is quick to clarify that the US Army is not using small units as "bait."

"I've never sent a squad in as bait," says Colonel Stammer, a native of Redfield, S.D. "I'm sure that it has emboldened the Taliban to attack. But there's no fight where our squads have made contact and lost. Whenever the Taliban fight us, they're decimated."

Darting from boulder to boulder, Sgt. Justin Hormann, a native of Melbourne, Fla., is leading a team of about six men up the hill, just behind 1st squad leader, Staff Sgt. Michael Christian of Montrose, Pa. Above them, about 50 Taliban fighters are raining down a torrent of gunfire with their Kalashnikovs and rocket-propelled grenades.

Sergeant Christian reaches a shallow plateau on the hill, and pulls himself up to establish a fire position. Almost immediately, he's shot. He crouches behind a boulder and shouts out, "I'm hit." The Talib who shot him is barely 30 feet away.

Sergeant Hormann can see his squad leader is bleeding and needs immediate help. "When he got hit, they were right in front of us," recalls Hormann, while on break between missions at the Forward Operating Base at Qalat. "He could see the fighter in front of him, but he couldn't see the Talib who was just alongside him."

Hormann makes a snap decision: He bounds up the hill to give Christian first aid. "I said 'to heck with it. I just ran up,'" says Hormann. All around him, Taliban bullets continue to ping off rocks as Hormann applies a tourniquet. Under constant fire, he sets up Bravo team to deliver suppressing fire, while he and Alpha team carry Christian off the hill. At the bottom, he regroups the squad for another assault.

"And then we all went back up the hill a second time," says Hormann, who was recently awarded a Bronze Star with valor for his actions that day. For the next four hours, Hormann and a 10-man ad hoc squad move back up the mountain within 60 feet of the enemy. Only when Pfc. Joseph Lorman of Sloughhouse, Calif., is wounded in the neck and shoulder does Hormann move the squad back down the mountain.

By that time, reinforcements from the 1st and 3rd Platoons have arrived. All escape routes are blocked. The Taliban are trapped.

"The fire was extremely close," says O'Neal, who was with a second team providing covering fire lower down the hill. "But toward the end it got dark, so we just ran to the bottom."

As night falls, American AC-130 Specter gunships arrive to engage Taliban fighters who have also decided to make a run for it. By the end of the day, 76 Talib body are
counted, and another nine Taliban fighters are captured.

To this day, the men of the 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, can't figure out what the Taliban were thinking. Were they suicidal? Why did they gather so many Taliban in one place? Did they really think they had enough men to defeat the Americans?

"They called the BBC to tell them they had taken the district headquarters," says O'Neal. "They knew we were going to come."

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It's been just over a month since the men of 2nd Platoon, Chosen (Few) Company, were in a battle with the Taliban.

O'Neal and his men are in Kandahar, on call as a quick-reaction force, when they get a call to deploy. They catch helicopters to Urugzan, a region that has been a headquarters for Taliban remnants. Their mission is to clear the village of Siahchow, where US Special Forces units have taken fire from an unknown number of Taliban fighters. The Special Forces will continue to block escape routes, while O'Neal's men take the village, one building at a time.

"The whole purpose of an infantryman is to close in on the enemy and finish them off," says Capt. Eric Gardiner, commander of Chosen Company in Qalat. "Here in Afghanistan, we've had over 75 percent of our contacts within hand grenade range."

Missions like this one, with its elements of intense urban warfare, test an infantryman like no other. The closest comparison to what is about to happen in Siahchow is what one occasionally sees in the street battles of Iraqi towns like Fallujah, Ramadi, or Najaf. But Siahchow has another hazard: a fruit orchard in the center of town, with hiding places for the enemy.

Spc. Christopher Velez, of Brooklyn, N.Y., who is in the lead squad, says he senses something is wrong. Normally, children come up to American soldiers, asking for candy or pens. Here, there is nobody. Even the roosters are silent.

The village follows the shape of the valley: narrow at one end, and then opening up, with houses along the outskirts. The men begin to search each of those houses, north to south. Specialist Velez's team searches houses. Sergeant Hormann and his men line up shoulder to shoulder and search the orchard.

The Taliban are there. "We are close enough that we could hear their movements," says Hormann. "We could see the hand of some guy reaching for his weapon."

A fierce gun battle breaks out with eight Taliban fighters in the orchard. Hormann and his team leader, Sgt. DaWayne Krepel, and his team maneuver around the Taliban. The firefight lasts an intense 15 minutes; Sergeant Krepel kills two enemy fighters just two feet away.

House to house

Lieutenant O'Neal hears the gunfire nearby, but continues with his objective of clearing houses.

For the most part, the Taliban are poorly trained, firing wildly enough that they can't hit American soldiers even at close range. "If we were that far from you," Velez says, pointing at a table just 10 feet away, "and I missed you, I would be upset at myself."
On the eastern edge of the orchard, Velez prepares to cross an open field toward a pair of mud-walled homes about 50 feet away. But as soon as he steps on the grass, he hears Kalashnikov fire aimed at him. He ducks back into the orchard, while other team members move into position, and Afghan National Army soldiers fire at the rooftops of the closest housing compound.

No one knows which home the gunfire is coming from. So O'Neal's men prepare to move in on the house to the left, while Sgt. Michael Schafer of Spring Hill, Fla., and the 2nd squad prepare to assault the house on the right.

The mission turns deadly

What happens next unfolds quickly. "I hear fire, and somebody calls for a medic," says Velez. Sergeant Schafer kicks down the front door, steps inside, and gunfire erupts. Schafer is hit, but doesn't die instantly. He pushes his team leader, Sgt. Brian Hooper, back out the door, before falling to the floor.


Finally, O'Neal peers inside the doorway at an angle, and sees Schafer slumped against the wall. He reaches for an automatic weapon, an M-249, and steps a bit closer to peer inside. The room is shrouded in darkness. He tries to turn on his tactical light on his helmet, but it doesn't work. There are no Taliban fighters in sight, but they are there.

"I'm not thinking very clearly," O'Neal admits later. "I just want to try to pull Schafer out with one hard pull."

Finally, after three attempts and several injuries, O'Neal tosses smoke grenades into the room while three soldiers pull Schafer's body out. The men toss standard grenades into the room to kill the Taliban inside. But some survive and fire back.

The Americans have now taken two gunshot casualties, one of them fatal, and five casualties from heat. Velez has been injured by shrapnel from a grenade. And they are just halfway through checking the village.

At one point, there is a massive explosion in a nearby house, perhaps an attempt by Taliban fighters to destroy a weapons cache. A Taliban fighter attempts to jump from the exploding roof, landing in a tree. Velez shoots him.

Hormann says the ferocity of the battle still leaves him surprised. "Usually the Taliban just shoot and run."

O'Neal says it's possible that there was a meeting of relatively high-level Taliban commanders on that day, and the Taliban felt obliged to fight in defense, rather than run. In any case, in Siahchow, the Taliban were trapped by Special Forces; they didn't have any choice but to fight.

"In my opinion, the reason so many Taliban got together [to fight in large groups] this year is that they're trying to get a big victory under their belt," says O'Neal. He pauses. "Well, that's not really working out for them."

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Sometime in March, the men of the 173rd Airborne Division will finish their year-long deployment in Afghanistan, and will return to their home base in Vicenza, Italy. Nobody
knows yet who will replace them, or what methods those fighters will use.

Long-term, the Afghan National Army (ANA) will have to take over the defense of their country, but US military commanders at the ground level say that time is still a long way off. ANA fighters are enthusiastic learners, and they are picking up a great deal of real-life training under American advisers in real missions.

But the ANA still have a disconcerting habit of shooting themselves with their own weapons. "The problem is muzzle discipline," says 2nd Lieut. Ben Wsnioski, a commander of an ANA unit based in Qalat. In the week before the elections, Lieutenant Wsnioski lost three ANA soldiers to self-inflicted wounds.

Instead, most American commanders expect the southern command in Kandahar will be taken over by NATO. While NATO has generally conducted peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan thus far, heading the International Security and Assistance Force that guards Kabul and other cities in the north, American commanders say that the NATO force will have a strong counterinsurgency component.

"The British have more experience than everybody in counterinsurgency," says Maj. Douglas Vincent, spokesman for Forward Operating Base at Qalat, and a native of Boca Raton, Fla. "They have very good experience from Northern Ireland."

But will the British continue to use a similar strategy of small ground forces that has worked for the 173rd Airborne? Maybe they shouldn't, says Major Vincent. "It's good to keep changing things, keep them guessing."

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