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HELMAND: THE U.S. MARINES AND COUNTERINSURGENCY IN
AFGHANISTAN, 2010-2012

by

Taylor L. Lewis

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

In the years following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, American troops contended with insurgent forces resistant to conventional tactics. General David Petraeus, along with other military experts, addressed the need for new strategies with the publication of Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 (3-33.5) in 2006. The manual laid out methods by which American troops should quell insurgent threats in Iraq and Afghanistan. This thesis is concerned with how the Marine Corps enacted the policies of 3-33.5 in Helmand Province between 2010 and 2012.

The tenants of this new manual were tested in the years following President Barak Obama's commitment of 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in 2009. Helmand Province was under the combat control of the Marines from 2010 to 2014, and during the first two years, operations near the town of Marjah and the district of Sangin closely followed principles laid out in 3-33.5. Although the withdrawal of American units in 2014 did not bode well for the Afghan National Army (ANA) in Helmand, the period in question proved the ability of the Marine Corps to effectively carry out doctrinal principles. Through an examination of command chronologies and oral history interviews, this thesis shows the process in which official counterinsurgency policy was put into action in the field.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is the culmination of several years of scholarly work, aided by some outstanding individuals. As a student at the University of Southern Mississippi's Dale Center for the Study of War and Society, I was advised by several notable scholars. Doctors Andrew Wiest, Heather Stur, Brian LaPierre, and Susannah Ural graciously lent their time and expertise to this project. Their input greatly reduced the anxiety of writing a historical thesis on such a recent topic. My time as Southern Miss has been a pleasure and has dramatically improved my abilities as a scholar.

I must also thank my friends at the United States Marine Corps History Division in Quantico, Virginia for taking me on as an intern in the summer of 2019. As someone interested in contemporary conflict, the position was an invaluable experience, one which provided insight to how official military history is done. Special thanks must go to Dr. Seth Givens and Dr. Fred Allison, who granted me access to numerous command chronologies and oral history interviews.

My journey with history largely began at Grand Valley State University. I would like to thank professors David Stark, James Smither, Jason Crouthamel, Michael Huner, Alice Chapman, and Matthew Daley for the numerous opportunities of my undergrad years. I am eternally grateful for the honest and encouraging advice as I looked toward my future.

Finally, I would like to thank my wonderful friends and family. To my parents, Dawn and Gary, your encouragement and faith in my abilities gives me the confidence to push forward. My brothers, Forrest, Lucas, and Gabe continue to make visits home a highlight of my holiday seasons. Many thanks to my friend Lucas Somers, who listened

to nearly every challenge and update of this project. To Jennifer Normand, who helped me finish strong, despite the complicated nature of our times. This work is the product of the incredible love and support from all of you.

DEDICATION

To the United States Armed Forces and veterans of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

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CHAPTER I- INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2010, Nicholas Anderson, a twenty-one-year-old private from Grand Haven, Michigan, arrived in Sangin district with the 3rd Battalion 5th Marine Regiment. In the first two days of the battalion's deployment, eight Marines were killed by roadside bombs. Anderson's own platoon moved slowly, using metal detectors to move throughout the district, often at a speed of only 50 feet per day. Though tasked with building rapport with civilians, the heavy Taliban presence in the area prevented Marine interaction with locals. However, by the spring of 2011, the persistent patrols began to have a marked effect on the district. Civilians became increasingly willing to interact with the 3/5, Anderson thought, because the Marines' actions disproved Taliban-spread rumors about their cruelty.¹ In a war largely shrouded in overarching failure, the bloody, but steady progress made by the 3/5 is indicative of the local headway within America's counterinsurgent approach in Afghanistan. Despite the Taliban's resolve and operational deficiencies within the Afghan National Army, the Marines' ability to execute both kinetic and humanitarian elements of counterinsurgency give credence the ability of American units to put doctrine into practice.

A study of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan cannot be done without addressing the ongoing debate surrounding its efficacy. One of the most widely known COIN scholars is John A. Nagl, a former army officer with first-hand knowledge of the implementation of COIN in Iraq. His familiarity with irregular warfare was a contributing factor in the publication of 3-33.5. His most notable work, *Learning to Eat Soup with a*

¹ Nicholas Anderson, oral history interview, Grand Valley State University's Veterans History Project, 2013.

Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam, examines counterinsurgency operations carried out by American and British troops. Nagl highlights the British experience in Malaya during the 1940s and 1950s in order to show what he considers the proper process of adaptation against a non-conventional enemy. He contends that the willingness to implement new strategies allowed the British to effectively reduce insurgent activity. Malaya also serves as a point of contrast to the American experience in Vietnam. The unwillingness of the American military to make necessary changes led to its failure to defeat the communists.² Nagl's work highlights the importance of adaptation in warfare. For the Marines following the principles of COIN as established in 3-33.5, their ability to adapt was far more crucial than their ability to neutralize conventional threats.

Writing in opposition to Nagl is Gian Gentile. During his time as commander of a cavalry squadron in Iraq, Gentile was no stranger to the complications of non-conventional warfare. He first read 3-33.5 while in Bagdad. He felt that the manual, and most other attempts at formulating counterinsurgency policy, failed to account for the complex nature of Iraqi society. His book *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*, elaborates on this issue in conflicts from Vietnam to Afghanistan. He contends that America's adoption of COIN was a mistake and is likely to be met with continued failure.³ Other works such as David Fitzgerald's *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq*, present a similar stance

² John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ Colonel Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: Americas Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013).

to Gentile. Fitzgerald argues that American military policymakers have, over the last 70 years, attempted to write effective COIN policy by applying the lessons of failed attempts in the past. As the title *Learning to Forget* suggests, this effort has been met with continued failure.⁴

In addition to the secondary examinations of twentieth century COIN operations, academics are beginning to look at contemporary conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the lack of availability of declassified documents prevents the field from becoming as comprehensive as that of mid twentieth century conflicts. However, several scholars have found success in studying Afghan civilians. In 2016, Metin Gurcan published *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan? Understanding Counter-Insurgency Efforts in Tribalized Rural and Muslim Environments*. Gurcan explains that a primary failure within America's counterinsurgency efforts was the failure to understand Tribalized Rural Muslim Environments (TRMEs).⁵ His study is certainly relevant, as this thesis will show that interacting with Afghan tribal leaders was crucial to establishing rapport between Marines and Afghan civilians. The means of pacifying one village may be vastly different than what is required to pacify another, even one within the same district or province. Gurcan's perspective is complimented by works such as Mike Martin's *Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978-2012*. Martin interviewed Helmand natives to highlight the complex nature of Afghan society and to ensure the

⁴ David Fitzgerald, *Learning to Forget: US Army Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Practice from Vietnam to Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁵ Metin Gurcan, *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?: Understanding Counter-Insurgency Efforts in Tribalized Rural and Muslim Environments* (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2016).

inclusion of their perspective in Afghan histories.⁶ Interviews with Helmandis are rare, making Martin's work crucial to understanding the Afghan response to Marine COIN efforts in the province.

Other secondary works examine the war in Afghanistan from multiple angles. Marine Lieutenant Aaron O'Connell brings together a collection of military and policy experts for *Our Latest and Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*. The overarching theme of this collection is the failure on part of the United States to achieve strategic victory in Afghanistan. The essays examine special operations and diplomatic efforts, along with counterinsurgency to show the flaws of the wider military effort in Afghanistan.⁷ Another key collection is Beth Bailey and Richard Immerman's *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*,⁸ which addresses military strategy in each theater, along with an assessment of popular culture and the legacies of each conflict. The articles, while not directly assessing operations in Helmand province, provide a foundation for understanding military and home front activity during America's War on Terror.

While this study is primarily concerned with contributing to the existing scholarship of America's war in Afghanistan, comparisons can be gleaned through an examination of past conflicts. The Soviet conflict with the mujahideen in the 1980s is certainly applicable to a study of American combat experiences in the early twenty-first

⁶ Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978-2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷ Aaron B. O'Connell, *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁸ Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman, ed, *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: NYU Press, 2015).

century. Though the dynamic of the Afghan guerilla force changed in the years leading up to American involvement, there are striking similarities between the two conflicts. Rodric Braithwaite's *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*, is one of few comprehensive studies of the war. A former British ambassador in Russia, Braithwaite contends that the Soviet leadership reluctantly invaded Afghanistan after their attempts to curb the impulses of the fledgling socialist government had failed.⁹ The frustrations towards the Afghan government are useful when analyzing the complications of American troops when given the task of strengthening the operational abilities of the Afghan National Army. Additionally, Braithwaite's work is largely based on the experience of the Soviet soldier. Focusing on the combatant lends itself to an in-depth investigation of the strategies employed by both insurgent and counterinsurgent forces.

In addition to scholarship on the Soviet War, Andrew Bacevich's 2016 work, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, provides useful context for a study on Helmand.¹⁰ Bacevich discusses the United States' involvement in the Middle East from the administration of President Jimmy Carter to Barak Obama. Through a discussion of nearly four decades of military operations, Bacevich highlights major shortcomings of American strategic thinking and military policy. He critiques American involvement, contending that American military action often showed both an unwillingness to commit or withdraw.¹¹ Of note is his chapter titled "Government in a Box" in which he discusses Obama's commitment of additional troops to Afghanistan. Operation Moshtarak, one of

⁹ Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, (New York: Random House, 2016).

¹¹ Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, 367.

the two case studies of this thesis, is also discussed within the larger context of the troop surge and subsequent drawdown. Bacevich concludes that the period between the troop surge drawdown in 2014 left the future of Afghanistan uncertain, for victory remained unachieved and ten thousand troops continued to operate in the country.¹²

It is important to clarify that the debate between COIN critics and proponents is a crucial component to any study of insurgent warfare. However, those who argue against its efficacy often use failure as their primary support. From the French war in Algeria, to American involvement in Vietnam, COIN has largely failed to achieve the results sought by the occupation force. COIN scholars (of which many are critics) justifiably use this fact to support their positions. However, few have attempted to look beyond the overarching narrative of failure in Iraq and Afghanistan. Shifting focus away from larger failures allows for a focused examination of all facets of strategy. A focus on Marine units in Helmand allows the particulars of COIN doctrine to shine through and proves the ability of American armed forces to put those principles into action.

Conducting research into the Helmand conflict has inherent challenges. As of 2019, Americans continue to operate against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Because of this, much of the documentary evidence on the war remains classified. However, unit command chronologies serve as a valuable source of information, as they account for activities of both deployed units and those training in the United States. This thesis utilizes the command chronologies of Marines deployed in the vicinity of Marjah and Sangin. A significant number of command chronologies are available at the Marine

¹² Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, 318-319.

Corps History Division's Archives in Quantico, Virginia, where historians work to provide digitized documents to researchers.

While accessible to public researchers, the availability of command chronologies varies from unit to unit. Preliminary research for this thesis began with requests for all Marine unit chronologies for Afghanistan from 2010 to 2012. Inconsistencies in record keeping, as well as classification, creates gaps in the historical record of many units. The Marine Corps History Division Archives at Quantico contain many relevant Helmand chronologies, but some unit records reveal little to no information on Helmand operations. Fortunately, chronologies that account for wartime experience contain an abundance of valuable insight into counterinsurgency. Additionally, battalion-level chronologies often break down activities by company, permitting a nuanced look into multiple facets of strategy such as civilian interaction.

If pertinent to the unit's mission, battalion-level records address operations conducted with Afghan units. Given the importance of training Afghans to fight the Taliban without Marine assistance, these chronologies are crucial to this study. Units with detailed records of coordinated operations give useful insight into these relationships formed and evolved over time. Meetings with village elders are recorded along with significant setbacks and casualty figures. Though oral history interviews often reveal more details on the specific discussions, command chronologies show the consistency of the meetings and general assessments of developing relationships.

In addition to Marine Corps command chronologies, oral histories conducted by field historians are essential to understanding counterinsurgency in Helmand. The oral history branch of the Marine Corps History Division is home to thousands of Marine

interviews. Those selected for this project were largely conducted by field historians, who unlike civilian interviewers, speak with military personnel throughout their deployments. Marine field historians also speak with civilian contractors working in the sphere of local government. Their perspectives illuminate the complexities of merging the traditional military function of combat with governmental roles of nation building. Examining Marine experiences as they occurred allows for heightened clarity of details concerning operations launched in Marjah and Sangin.

The Library of Congress' Veterans History Project (VHP) is another valuable source of interviews. Though interviews in the VHP archive take place years after an individual's service, time often allows veterans to contextualize their experience within the conflict as a whole. Two of the Marine interviews referenced in this thesis come from Grand Valley State University's VHP archive. Headed by Dr. James Smither, a military historian with extensive experience in oral history, GVSU's collection contains interviews with veterans from the Second World War to the War on Terror. Small collections like the one housed at Grand Valley are crucial to understanding soldiers' experiences, as field historians cannot interview each Marine.

This thesis examines two counterinsurgency operations in Helmand province. Chapter two is a discussion of Operation Moshtarak in the town of Marjah. In early 2010, troops began to arrive as part of President Obama's promise to increase the United States' commitment to the war before withdrawal in 2014. A major stronghold for Taliban fighters in northern Helmand, Marjah's threat to coalition forces mirrored that of Fallujah, Iraq which fell to American forces in late 2004. Within this chapter, the COIN principle of clearing areas from insurgent control serves as a focal point. The ambitions

behind Mosharak did not completely account for the willingness of the Taliban to endure the American presence. From February until December 2010, coalition forces fought insurgents for control of the town. This chapter accounts for the operation itself, along with subsequent fighting in 2011. As time in Marjah passed, Marines continued to fight the Taliban in sporadic engagements while working to build up local security forces and Afghan army units.

Throughout the chapter, interviews with Marines and civilian contractors provide details into how International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) personnel worked to push the Taliban out of the town and maintain security. The final portion of the chapter assesses the ability of Marine units to conduct counterinsurgency operations in an urban setting. Though sporadic firefights broke out between 2010 and 2011, the Marine presence allowed for humanitarian elements of COIN to take effect. These included regular meetings with local leaders, distribution of medical and food supplies, and construction of public facilities. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of how urban COIN differed from that in rural environments, leading into the next case study.

Chapter three critiques Marine combat operations in the district of Sangin in northeastern Helmand. In the summer of 2010, the 3rd Battalion 7th Marine Regiment arrived in the district; their mission, in line with the key tenants of COIN, was to clear the district of Taliban fighters, maintain security throughout, and begin building infrastructure there. In a district littered with Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and ambush points, the 3/7 and subsequent units slowly reduced the insurgent presence. The deployment of 3/5, beginning in the fall of 2010, saw significant casualties, however, as new units took over, attacks came less frequently. Such developments illustrate the

importance of risk-taking in counterinsurgency. Forward operating bases (FOBs) provided the only security in the district yet remaining within the confines of walls led to little progress. In the early days of the Marines' battle for Sangin, members of the 3/5 put themselves at risk to ensure the security of civilians and spark relations with them. As the Taliban's grip on the district loosened, civilians left their homes more frequently to interact with Marines on patrol.

Following the deployment of 3/5, incoming Marine units maintained the operational cadence set in 2010. One year after the 3/5's brutal introduction to Sangin, the 3rd Battalion 7th Marine regiment (which had deployed to Sangin in the summer of 2010) reassumed operational control of the district. Much like preceding units, the 3/7 maintained constant contact with Sangin's civilian population, which now frequently interacted with Marines. Marine testimonials and the personal accounts of Lieutenant Colonel Seth Folsom, the battalion's commander, highlight civilian-Marine interactions. In addition to civilian relations, Marines in Sangin trained Afghan security forces. Oral histories illuminate the complex nature of military cooperation in Afghanistan. Discussion of marijuana use, poppy cultivation and eradication, and Taliban infiltration of the Afghan army gives additional proof of the Marines' ability to perform their duties despite significant pushback from their allies. The deployment of 1st Battalion 7th Marine regiment in 2012 saw many of these issues, yet the unit remained unwavering in its purpose. By the end of 2012, the prospect of a future without the Taliban seemed unlikely. Despite the outcome that awaited Sangin upon the Marines' exit, Sangin serves as another example of strict adherence to official COIN policy.

The conclusion of this thesis is a cross-examination of the two case studies. The stories of Marjah and Sangin district do not necessarily prove the efficacy of counterinsurgency as an overarching strategy; however, evidence suggests that Marine units in Helmand abided by the COIN tenants of 3-33.5. Marines in Helmand proved that interacting with Afghanistan's populace was possible regardless of the omnipresent Taliban. Marjah and Sangin are but two examples of a much larger military effort, but humanitarian efforts and the interaction between Marines and Afghan civilians testify to the Marine Corps' ability to operate outside the bounds of conventional military operations.

CHAPTER II- PROLOGUE

Prior to the War on Terror, the American military's experience with counterinsurgency had been problematic. Its most notable brush with this type of unconventional war came in the 1960s and 1970s, when the U.S. attempted to stem the tide of communism in Vietnam. For nearly a decade, guerilla forces of the Viet Cong battled American troops for Vietnam's political future. During the conflict, the US military placed significant importance on attrition; killing insurgents was a top priority. In the early days of America's involvement, programs such as the CIA's Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) illustrated America's capability in testing new forms of irregular warfare. The program paired Vietnamese villages with American special force operators, who trained the villages in the defense of their homes. However, as the war unfolded in the mid-1960s, such programs were doxed in favor of large, offensive operations focused on enemy casualties. A popular view of the advisory years is that the US Army refused to move away from its conventional mindset, being far too rigid as an organization. Furthermore, American advisors failed to gain a proper understanding of the Vietnamese people. Such a failure meant that the ARVN created to stem the communist tide, served a conventional purpose, one ill suited to meet the challenges of an insurgency.¹³

As the war progressed, attempts were made to bring attention to the lack of American counterinsurgency knowledge. The Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN) launched a study in 1965 to highlight

¹³ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002) 128-142.

deficiencies in American strategy. Their findings showed that the American military needed to place more importance on winning the favor of Vietnamese civilians. However, even with the replacement of General William Westmoreland with more counterinsurgency-minded Creighton Abrams, the US and its Vietnamese allies ultimately failed to shore up the south against northern advances. Counterinsurgency efforts that were attempted in Vietnam included pacification missions, which were attempts to win the sentiments of Vietnamese civilians. Unfortunately, many of these efforts became entangled with the objective of attrition, leading to many displaced civilians. Most of these people were forced to move into areas of government control, creating the illusion of successful pacification. Pacification campaigns in 1971 led to reduced insurgent activity in towns in the Mekong Delta; a result that was considered an example of successful pacification. However, it is likely that the violent displacement of civilians made it difficult for insurgents to garner support in the abandoned areas. Smaller efforts were made by Marines who worked at the village level to provide security and train local forces.¹⁴ Local efforts showed some modicum of success, but did not resonate at a higher level. The failure of counterinsurgent thinking to take root in the American military psyche created a dearth of knowledge that military thinkers sought to remedy in the twenty-first century, as the American military prepared to combat the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The Taliban has been a significant part of Afghanistan's DNA since its conception in the 1990s. Prior to the group's rise to prominence, Afghans endured nearly

¹⁴ Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 73-77. See also Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 158-160.

a decade of conflict with the Soviet Union. To support a fledgling socialist government from native resistance, the Soviet military invaded in December 1979. In a war that shared similarities with America's future conflict there, the Soviet military claimed little success in Afghanistan. Mujahideen rebels resistant to the communist-supported government in Kabul, conducted a guerilla war against the Soviet military. Unwilling to yield to the government in Kabul, the mujahideen proved more than capable of outlasting their eastern European counterparts. For nearly a decade, the Soviet military fought the mujahideen in the mountains of Afghanistan. Though technologically superior, the Soviets could not effectively contend with the terrain and ambush tactics of their adversary. Soviet forces suffered more than 15,000 combat fatalities against their enemy, that frequently resorted to mountain ambushes rather than meeting the Soviets in conventional engagements. Afghan fatalities are estimated between 600,000 and 1.5 million.¹⁵ Throughout the conflict, the Soviet military failed to defeat an elusive enemy, one armed with weapons and equipment largely paid for by the United States government.

Both before and during the conflict, the Soviets expended large amounts of capital on aid projects that included, schools, irrigation, and other forms of infrastructure improvements. Additionally, advisers were sent to Afghanistan to help with improvements and adjustments to the new governing system. In total, the Soviets spent 4.7 billion roubles on nation building in Afghanistan. As the conflict progressed, Soviet advisors worked to keep production in factories going. Many of the advisors were non-

¹⁵ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

military actors who placed themselves at considerable risk of mujahideen attack, as they often worked outside the confines of major cities. However, despite these efforts, the Soviet advisors did not place much importance on the perspective of the Afghan civilian. In many instances, advisors made the final decisions on projects.¹⁶ The failure to fully understand Afghans, coupled with the Red Army's emphasis on killing the mujahideen, made its war in Afghanistan a decade-long slog.

The United States viewed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as an act of Cold War aggression. Unwilling to ignore the situation, American policymakers launched Operation Cyclone, during which the mujahideen received weapons, ammunition, and other supplies. In 1986, the American government began to send Stinger missiles in addition to the aid it was already providing. Mujahideen armed with these anti-aircraft weapons, now possessed the ability to counter Soviet aircraft.¹⁷ Weapons and supplies sent to the mujahideen came into Afghanistan through neighboring Pakistan. Additionally, Pakistan served as a haven for the Afghan rebels wishing to train and rearm themselves. Soviet leadership, unwilling to create further conflict in the Middle East, largely refrained from pursuing mujahideen fighters outside of Afghanistan. Two decades later, American forces in Afghanistan battled an enemy of similar caliber, who also utilized the Pakistan border to their advantage.¹⁸ The Soviet conflict in Afghanistan

¹⁶ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 147-148.

¹⁷ Don Oberdorfer, *The Turn: From the Cold War to a New Era, the United States and the Soviet Union, 1983-1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 239.

¹⁸ Soviet-centric scholarship on the Soviet-Afghan War, unlike many American diplomatic works such as Oberdorfer's *The Turn*, speak little about the implementation of the Stinger. Greg Feifer's, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), and Braithwaite's *Afgantsy* contend that the Stinger failed to dramatically alter the course of the war. Although evidence suggests the changing of Soviet flight patterns (more night missions), the effects of the American anti-aircraft missiles was seemingly negligible.

proved that foreign intervention, regardless of firepower, came at a high price. Strong-arming Afghans into cooperating with a larger government was not achievable at gunpoint.

Ultimately unsuccessful in its war aims and unwilling to expend further resources in Afghanistan, the Soviets withdrew in 1989. After a few years of in-fighting, mujahideen groups that once comprised the resistance against the Soviets, moved against the Afghan government and began taking cities. Urhanuddin Rabbani was placed in power. The Pashtun population of Afghanistan, which had long held the presidential position in the country, was embittered by the fact that Rabbani was Tajik. Fighting between Rabbani's government and Pashtun opposition (backed by Pakistan) soon broke out.¹⁹ Divisions in Afghanistan led to intense fighting in the early 1990s. Pashtun groups angered by the appointment of Rabbani as president launched aggressive action against the government. This state of civil war also led to the rise of another group, determined to undo much of the socialist reforms enacted during the Soviet years.

One of the causes of unrest during the Soviet years, was the push toward socialist reform by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Political moves, which included giving more freedoms to women, were staunchly opposed by traditional Afghans, many of whom lived in rural areas. Fighting between those who opposed reform and the government, was one of the contributing factors to the Soviet decision to invade in late 1979. In the early 1990's similar sentiments manifested in a new group known as the Taliban. Comprised largely of followers of Deobandi Islam, the Taliban

¹⁹ Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 46-48.

recruited likeminded individuals from Deobandi madrasas (religious schools), primarily located in Pakistan. A large portion of the Taliban's eventual strength received education and training in Pakistan and fought with the mujahideen during the Soviet war. Their fight to push foreigners out of Afghanistan during the 1980s eventually translated to the restoration of religious traditions. One factor attributed to their zeal is the fact that the long duration of the Soviet war created a generation of Afghan refugees that had never seen their home country.²⁰ The idea of reclaiming their true homes only deepened the resolve to create an Afghanistan in their own image. This vision included the limiting of women's freedom, strict laws of appearance, the restriction of music and other forms of art, and severe punishment for adulterers and murderers. To fund its crusade for control of Afghanistan, the Taliban relied on the exportation of poppy. By the time the Taliban gained power, Afghanistan was responsible for 70 percent of the world's illegal poppy.²¹ Poppy cultivation, especially prominent in Afghanistan's southern provinces, became a significant factor for American forces in post-surge counterinsurgency operations.

The civil war that emerged amongst the factions of the mujahideen was a warning to the Taliban. To prevent these rivalries from seeping into its own ranks, the Taliban did not recruit veterans of the Soviet war, rather men who were too young to have participated in the conflict. This force of young men was led by a cleric named Mullah Omar. In 1994, the Taliban set its sights on the southern city of Kandahar, capturing it in late November.²² Rabbani's appointment as president of Afghanistan provided Omar with

²⁰ Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 255-256.

²¹ Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 61-63.

²² Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 256-257.

significant opportunity in the south. Primarily Pashtun, Afghanistan's southern provinces, such as Helmand and Kandahar, provided support for the Taliban. Pashtun disdain for Rabbani made them ideal for maintaining Taliban holdings as it continued to capture provinces throughout the decade. Tribes and militias in the south were attracted to the Taliban's religious objectives. Taliban members visited villages and communicated their goals; those who disagreed were dealt with severely. Though the Taliban's rise to prominence did not happen overnight, the group successfully captured Kabul in 1996 and the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998.²³

During the late 1990s, the Taliban largely controlled Afghanistan; however, they continued to fight mujahideen groups from the north known collectively as the Northern Alliance. In 1999, the Taliban agreed to play host to Al Qaeda leaders Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri. In exchange for sanctuary in the mountains bordering Pakistan, Al Qaeda agreed to support the Taliban's ongoing fight against the Northern Alliance. From its new home, Al Qaeda orchestrated attacks against American interests both at home and abroad. These attacks included the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and culminated in the mainland attacks of September 11, 2001. In the three years leading up to 9/11, Mullah Omar expressed a staunch determination to harbor the Al Qaeda, further deepening the connection between the terror organization and the Taliban.²⁴ Though American intelligence had been investigating Al Qaeda in the years leading up to 9/11, the attacks pushed American policymakers into more aggressive action. Soon after the dust settled in New York and

²³ Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 58-60.

²⁴ Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 82-83.

Washington D.C., American special forces and intelligence operators were on the ground, hunting Al Qaeda and working with the Northern Alliance to topple the Taliban.²⁵

In the closing months of 2001, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom, to locate and destroy Al Qaeda, and to remove the Taliban from power. In mid-October, three hundred special forces operators under the command of Colonel John Mulholland, formed Task Force Dagger, and began operations with the Afghan fighters. The alliance quickly proved fruitful; on November 9, the city of Mazar-e-Sharif fell, followed by Kandahar on December 9. By mid-December, the Taliban were removed from their previous strongholds. The pace at which members of the Northern Alliance moved was largely due to precise air support directed by tier one personnel armed with laser designating targeting systems.²⁶ While the Taliban battled for control of Afghanistan's cities, other special forces personnel raced to the mountains of Tora Bora to locate and destroy Osama Bin Laden and his organization. After nearly two weeks of fighting, Osama Bin Laden and other high ranking Al Qaeda leaders escaped Tora Bora through one of the many passes and crossed the border into Pakistan. The tactical disposition of the mountain positions, coupled with potential diplomatic issues if American forces entered Pakistan, complicated the mission.²⁷ In mid-December, the

²⁵ The rise of Al Qaeda is effectively documented in Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower*. Wright documents the organization from its roots to the attacks on September 11, 2001. The latter half of the narrative documents Al Qaeda's move to Afghanistan and the support each organization lent the other. Further information on the Taliban can be found in Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban*.

²⁶ Andrew Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, (New York: Random House, 2016) 227-229.

²⁷ Donald P. Wright et al., *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001-September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 133-114. Additional information on the Battle of Tora Bora can be found in Dalton Fury, *Kill Bin Laden: A Delta Force Commander's Account of the Hunt for the World's Most Wanted Man* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2008). Fury, a former Delta Force commander, provides a detailed account of the battle and the intricacies of operating alongside Afghans.

American-Afghan alliance had successfully removed the Taliban from power; however, fighting in Afghanistan continued. In 2002, American forces launched Operation Anaconda in the Shah-i-kot valley, hoping to dislodge Taliban fighters and capture high value targets. Unfortunately for the attacking force, Taliban resistance was stronger than anticipated, requiring significant air power to prevent disaster.²⁸ American accomplishments by 2002 were certainly not insignificant; however, few signs indicated that the fight against the Taliban was over.

In the years directly following the initial removal of the Taliban, the United States military was largely concerned with the ongoing conflict against insurgents in Iraq. From 2002 until 2006, American forces in Afghanistan were concentrated on locating terrorist targets. Most security operations under the umbrella of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) which at that point, contained no more than six thousand American troops.²⁹ However, beginning in 2003, the American military also began to explore counterinsurgency, largely centered around the development of host nation security forces.³⁰ In 2002, the United States assumed responsibility for training the Afghan National Army (ANA); Afghanistan's primary military force, comprised primarily of men from northern provinces. Training was originally designed to last

²⁸ Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, 234-238.

²⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Colin Jackson, "US Strategy in Afghanistan: A Tragedy in Five Acts," in *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, ed. Aaron B. O'Connell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017) 82-83.

³⁰ Lieutenant General David W. Barno, "Fighting the Other War: Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan, 2003-2005," in Major David W. Kummer et al., *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan, 2001-2009: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, (Quantico: History Division, United States Marine Corps, 2014). Barno was one of the first American commanders to advocate for COIN in Afghanistan. In the article, he addressed the process of building the Afghan army and reducing American involvement. In fact, he noted that by the end of 2005, NATO would assume primary responsibility for the war and American strength would dramatically decrease. However, the Taliban resurgence the following year made clear that exiting Afghanistan required much more than special forces and the application of air power.

fourteen weeks, but as the Taliban reemerged in 2005-2006, units were placed haphazardly into the fight, many lacking proper training and equipment. By 2008, the ANA numbered 134,000, most of whom lacked the capacity to effectively combat the Taliban.³¹

Despite the moves toward the creation of an armed service, the Afghan government, led by newly elected Hamid Karzai, had done little to court the sentiments of traditional Afghans living in the countryside. Failure on this front largely contributed to the Taliban's resurgence in 2006. During this time, Taliban fighters and commanders crossed into Afghanistan from Pakistan, and attacked eastern and southern portions of the country. Although NATO and American troop levels increased as a result of the hostilities, the ongoing conflict in Iraq made reinforcement and resource allocation difficult. By 2009, it was clear that American troop levels were insufficient to deter Taliban attacks. The Obama administration's acknowledgement of the strategic disposition led to the decision to increase American troop levels to 100,000 by August 2010. In addition to the troop increase, American commanders now displayed a new commitment to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan.³² A major target of this new counterinsurgency campaign, was the southern province of Helmand.

Helmand Province is one of Afghanistan's southernmost provinces, neighbored between Kandahar to the east and Nimroz to the west. During the post-surge months, the aggressive insurgency inside Helmand made the province a primary objective of the American counterinsurgency campaign. In the months following 9/11, American aircraft

³¹ Dr. Martin Loicano and Captain Craig C. Felker, "In Our Own Image: Training the Afghan National Security Forces," in O'Connell, *Our Latest Longest War*, 112-115.

³² Jackson, "American Strategy in Afghanistan," 84-90.

periodically bombed Helmand, but no special forces operated in the province. From October-November 2001, little ground-level fighting occurred, the only case being several clashes between mujahideen and Taliban fighters over control of the town of Marjah. The first American and British special forces, keeping with the primary coalition focus of hunting high-priority targets, arrived in Helmand in December to look for Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders.³³ Snatch operations continued for several years (2003-2005); during that time, Helmandi civilians offered intelligence on possible targets. Listening to these tips was not always fruitful, as rivalries amongst tribal leaders often led to members giving false information that led to accidental arrests and killings. Arrests also damaged the image of the American military in a time when rebuilding required civilian support.³⁴ Although the early years of the conflict saw minimal troop commitment in Helmand, a reinvigorated Taliban soon demanded a change.

Shortly following the Taliban resurgence, British forces deployed to Helmand province. Originally focused on building security and stable government in the Helmand capital of Lashkar Gah. In June 2006, tensions began to rise as a result of Hamid Karzai's dismissal of Helmand's governor Sher Mohammad Akhundzadha. The dismissal of Sher Mohammad created an uneasy security environment, worsened by the growing Taliban threat. In the summer of 2006, the British (numbering no more than 500 troops) sent small units to protect towns in northern Helmand. The plan was met with fierce Taliban

³³ Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 112-114.

³⁴ Martin, *An Intimate War*, 125-131. Elements of counterinsurgency during the special forces period are briefly mentioned by Martin. Educational and medical facilities were constructed, and civilians received compensation when family members were killed on raids (largely due to poor intelligence). Poppy eradication is also mentioned briefly. In 2002, the British attempted to incentivize farmers with payment if they chose to change crops. However, most of the money went to Sher Mohammad (Helmand's Governor) and his allies, while other farmers abandoned poppy only to receive nothing (134).

resistance, making the hope of security unlikely unless the British units remained.³⁵ In 2007, additional troops arrived in Helmand and quickly began to seek out bands of Taliban fighters. Although British units found success in a number of conventional engagements, they had little success in maintaining territory following Taliban withdrawals. Beginning in 2008, British forces, in accordance to principals found in Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, began to work toward maintaining a hold on specific towns (primarily in northern Helmand) while also improving the capabilities of government forces.³⁶ Although the British presence in Helmand evolved to address the needs of counterinsurgency, the small number of troops made province-wide security impossible. As the Marine units arriving in 2010 would attest, Helmand was still wild country.

³⁵ Theo Farrell and Stuart Gordon “COIN Machine: The British Military in Afghanistan” (The RUSI Journal, 13 July 2009), 19-20.

³⁶ Farrell and Gordon, “COIN Machine,” 23.

CHAPTER III- TOGETHER: OPERATION MOSHTARAK

In 2014, Major General Sayed Malouk, commander of the Afghan 215th Corps, recounted his time working with American Marines. Though his experiences ranged from the Soviet war to the then ongoing fight against the Taliban and its allies, the town of Marjah held a strong memory for him. Following the major operation that significantly reduced the Taliban presence in the city, the ISAF established a presence there. Keeping with a major war aim of training Afghan security forces, Marines regularly patrolled with Soldiers of the Afghan National Army. According to Malouk, every Marine marched adjacent to an Afghan and vice versa. During one patrol, a group of men started across a wooden bridge spanning a canal in the middle of the city when an Afghan soldier fell into the canal. High water levels caused the soldier to quickly sink. Two Marines jumped into the canal in hopes of saving the man but were ultimately unsuccessful. Both the Afghan soldier and the Marines drowned. To Malouk, this incident was an impressive example of how the Marines treated their allies.³⁷ Regardless of faction, the Marines on this patrol viewed the loss of an Afghan as a loss of one of their own.

Marjah's recent history is shrouded in a larger narrative of failure. America's commitment of additional ground troops did not result in the expulsion of the Taliban from Afghanistan or Helmand province. However, incidents such as the one recounted by General Malouk are indicative of the determined effort of Marine units to not only pacify the town of Marjah, but also to ensure the development of an Afghan military capable of fighting the Taliban. These efforts were part of a larger goal of establishing an

³⁷ Major General Sayed Malouk, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2014. Though General Malouk does not specify the time during which this incident occurred, it likely took place between late 2010 and 2014 (when the interview took place).

environment in which humanitarian elements of counterinsurgency could take place. Counterinsurgency efforts in Marjah began with the conventional goal of pushing the Taliban out of the town. Although the Taliban continued to operate in Marjah following the initial ISAF assault, the environment had changed to a degree which permitted the Marines and their allies to enact COIN policies beyond traditional kinetic operations. Marine efforts in Marjah, while largely seen as ineffective in the overarching narrative, illustrated a competency in putting counterinsurgency doctrine into practice.

The town of Marjah is in eastern Helmand, to the southwest of the provincial capital of Lashkar Gah. American military command during the time of the troop surge eyed the town as a major target. Prior to the assault in early 2010, Marjah was a Taliban stronghold that afforded them space to store explosives, along with weapons and ammunition. Drug traffic also emanated from the town; the Taliban supported poppy cultivation and the storing of opium prior to export. A series of canals running through the town gave defenders a multitude of strong positions to combat any offensive move from the ISAF.³⁸ Marjah's condition in 2010 was the result of an overall lack of support from the Afghan government and its allies. In the early years of America's war, Marjah was a focus of poppy eradication for the Afghan government. However, these efforts were ostensibly ineffective, because the government did not have the logistical means to support eradication long-term. Maintaining control of Marjah between 2001 and 2008 was arduous, considering the overall lack of American support in the south prior to the surge. From 2006 to 2008, frustration with the government's inconsistent eradication

³⁸ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 67.

efforts and seeming inability to provide security, led to resentment of government forces. During this time, bombing attacks against Afghan soldiers and police became commonplace.³⁹

Festering resentment in Marjah ultimately culminated in the Taliban's seizure of the town in September 2008. The Taliban quickly established its own form of governance that largely reflecting strict adherence to their religious beliefs and strict punishment for those who failed to cooperate or committed crimes. In 2009, two raids were conducted into Marjah. The first raid, conducted in March, was undertaken by British, Afghan, and Dutch troops with the purpose of interfering with Taliban operations and making the ISAF presence known to the people. The second raid occurred in May and was centered on the Loy Chareh bazaar, a place of significant narcotics traffic. While both raids were successful, ISAF forces ultimately withdrew in both cases, as they lacked sufficient means to maintain a presence in the town.⁴⁰ In early 2010, the population of Marjah was estimated between 70,000 and 80,000 people, with a Taliban force between 400-1,000 fighters.⁴¹ Completely ousting the Taliban from Marjah required a significant ground force. The decision to inject additional American military power into Afghanistan beginning in 2010, gave the ISAF an opportunity to achieve this goal.

³⁹ Brett Van Ess "The Fight for Marjah: Recent Counterinsurgency Operations in Southern Afghanistan (Small Wars Journal and Institute for the Study of War, September 2010) 3-4. Poppy eradication involved the payment of farmers who cooperated with government forces. Though there is no way to gauge farmer sentiment during this time, inconsistencies in payment likely proved frustrating to farmers trying to earn a living.

⁴⁰ Van Ess, "The Fight for Marjah" 5.

⁴¹ Van Ess, "The Fight for Marjah" 6; *The Battle of Marjah*, Directed by Ben Anderson (2011, New York: HBO Documentary Films) DVD. Anderson's film places the Taliban numbers at 1,000 fighters. Unfortunately, the exact number of insurgents cannot be determined accurately.

The raids conducted in early 2009 proved the necessity of the counterinsurgent principle of holding onto areas of previous insurgent activity. According to Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, “HN [Host Nation] forces and other counterinsurgents must establish control of one or more areas from which to operate. HN forces must secure the people continuously within these areas.”⁴² Successful security, as far as the authors of 3-33.5 were concerned, required the partnership of host-nation and counterinsurgent forces. Together, they work to quell lingering threats (since eliminating an insurgency will not likely happen quickly) and prove themselves capable of securing a population. The two raids successfully cleared targeted areas of insurgents, but the inability to maintain a presence in Marjah resulted in the Taliban’s return once ISAF personnel withdrew. Any hope of successfully ending Marjah’s history as a Taliban stronghold required the ISAF to stay in the town and facilitate change.

Marjah posed a significant challenge to the United States and its allies. Given the overarching war aim of securing the Afghan people from Taliban influence. Brigadier General Lawrence Nicholson, ranking Marine commander in Afghanistan, was aware of the challenge that awaited ISAF forces once a full-scale counterinsurgency campaign was launched in the city:

We were very careful while we were there not to use the F-word, the Fallujah word. We didn't want to draw unfair and just not sound comparisons between Fallujah and Marjah, but at the end of the day what we found was there were a lot of similarities, in the sense that like Fallujah pre-Al-Fajr, it had become no-go terrain for us. It had become sort of an isolated area, where at one point Al Qaida

⁴² *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section 5-2, 152.

in Fallujah and the Taliban in Afghanistan had taken refuge, had taken sanctuary, and had run the area. They had their own government, they had their own jurists. They arbitrated civil disputes. They had their own defense. They had their own police. There were people in uniform running around in Marjah. Previous Taliban had started really setting up their own government, so for all intents and purposes it was an autonomous republic, and nobody from the government of Afghanistan or the Coalition ever went in there.⁴³

Nicholson drew comparisons to Fallujah, a city located in Anbar province in Iraq. In 2004, American forces launched two offensives against the city, which was held by a significant force of Sunni insurgents. Fallujah fell in late 2004, but not before coalition troops battled for nearly every square mile. Though the Marjah raids in 2009 had achieved some immediate success in clearing specific areas, completely pushing the insurgency out demanded a significant operation to fully expel the Taliban, a prospect that elicited the comparisons to Fallujah.

In May 2009, General David McKiernan, commander of all American and allied forces in Afghanistan, was replaced by General Stanley McChrystal. In the months following his appointment, McChrystal assessed the state of Afghanistan and the progress made against the insurgency. As a result of his findings, the Obama administration greenlit the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops throughout the succeeding months. The surge in troops strength, in McChrystal's mind, allowed the United States to increase its focus on counterinsurgency. However, the surge came with an eighteen-month time line,

⁴³ BrigGen Lawrence Nicholson, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011.

after which American troops were to begin transitioning out of Afghanistan altogether.⁴⁴ McChrystal wasted little time in kicking off this new phase of America's war in Afghanistan. Marjah became one of the first locations in which this newly invigorated counterinsurgent campaign would take effect. Unlike previous operations in Marjah and elsewhere, where quick disruptive strikes ended in the ceding of gained ground back to insurgent forces, the post-surge operation implied a longer time commitment. Post-surge operations in Marjah held the goal of maintaining a presence in the town and connecting with the civilians, unlike previous raids. Strategically thinking, a major move on Marjah served the benefit of reducing potential Taliban killings and bombings in nearby Lashkar Gah. Additionally, it would illustrate to the Afghan people that the Afghan government and its allies were working toward a Taliban-free Afghanistan.⁴⁵

Dubbed Operation Moshtarak (Dari word for "together"), the operation to wrestle Marjah from the Taliban was slated to begin on February 13 and involve American, Afghan, and British personnel. The primary combat units included both the 1st and 3rd Marine battalions of the 6th Marine Regiment augmented with ANA soldiers. The presence of ANA troops represented the ISAF desire to give the Afghan government a key role in the fight for central Helmand. In the days leading to the assault, aircraft flew over the town, dropping leaflets to the civilians remaining.⁴⁶ The leaflets dropped into Marjah contained a message of warning to the civilians. Removing the insurgency from Marjah was the primary objective of the operation; however, such an operational

⁴⁴ Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East*, 304-307.

⁴⁵ General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2013), 366.

⁴⁶ McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 367.

environment held the potential for significant collateral damage. The warning given to the people of Marjah was an attempt to reduce the number of civilians in the town during the upcoming battle. Sources vary in the estimated number of refugees that fled to surrounding areas; however, it was clear that many non-combatants remained in the town.⁴⁷ The task of clearing Marjah of the Taliban was simple in theory, but the presence of civilians complicated the matter. Civilian security, in the case of Marjah, held more importance than the simple elimination of insurgent forces. Once the major thrust into the town was concluded, long-term security operations would begin. Collateral damage would only damage the reputation of Marines who hoped to interact with civilians following the attack.

Operation Moshtarak began on the morning of February 13 when elements of both 1/6 and 3/6 Marines, along with their Afghan allies, began the haphazard process of clearing the town. Bravo company of the 1/6 Battalion, commanded by Captain Timothy Sparks, saw some of the heaviest fighting in and around Marjah. Prior to the operation, ISAF commanders such as McChrystal, reinforced the importance of the Rules of Engagement (ROE), which dictated that deadly force may only be used against individuals who clearly display deadly intent. Such a policy was a necessary precaution in preventing civilian casualties, but there were many who viewed the ROE as a dangerous hindrance to troops on the ground. Sparks understood this concern, but the regulations had changed little in his view. Never had he fought an engagement in which

⁴⁷ Rogene Fisher, "Countdown to an Afghan Offensive," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2010, <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/11/countdown-to-an-afghan-offensive/?searchResultPosition=4>. The article states that an estimated 200 families left the area. It also acknowledges other reports stating that the number was in the thousands.

his unit was authorized to treat a force as hostile (without verification). In the fall of 2009, prior to the battalion's deployment, the Marines were notified of a possible assault in an urban environment. Prior knowledge of what to expect in Helmand gave Sparks a chance to put his men through urban training before they deployed. The training involved running men through chest high grasses and clearing buildings. Most importantly, Sparks trained his men to make decisions within the parameters of the ROE. In his mind, the question of "can" was far less important than the question of "should" when deciding to engage enemy forces. By running his men through scenarios that required them to make quick decisions of ethics, he hoped to lessen the potential for civilian casualties and frustration with the ROE. In his mind, progress in Marjah would begin on the first day of combat operations.⁴⁸

Embedded with Bravo Company was British journalist Ben Anderson, who followed Sparks and other members of the company as they pushed into Marjah from the south. Anderson's documentary of the battle highlights the aggressive nature of the Taliban. Civilian sightings began shortly after the start of the operation; a clear sign that the leaflets failed to result in wholesale evacuation of the town. Hindered by the placement of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and stiff resistance from the Taliban defenders, progress for Bravo was slow. Training in quick moral decision-making quickly became relevant, as the Taliban sought to use the Americans' ROE to their advantage. On the third day of the operation, Bravo pushed to the northeast portion of the town, where several Marines occupied a rooftop that commanded a powerful westward

⁴⁸ Capt. Timothy Sparks, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2010.

view. From there, the Marines could easily see movement in the surrounding fields and buildings. However, this new position was clearly visible to Taliban fighters occupying positions to the west, causing intense fire to break out. As the fighting continued, a Marine armed with a marksman rifle called out a group of people moving laterally at a distance of several hundred yards, using women as cover. Anderson's footage shows the group cross into and out of the Marines' line of sight without taking fire from them.⁴⁹

The civilian presence in Marjah, as visible in Anderson's footage, placed fire discipline and leadership at great importance. Though the opening phase of ISAF COIN in Marjah was kinetic, elements of counterinsurgency doctrine were at play. The application of force was necessary in clearing Marjah, but excessive force could prove counterproductive in the long-term. Warfighting Publication 3-33.5 notes that "counterinsurgents should calculate carefully the type and amount of force to be applied and who wields it for any operation. An operation that kills five insurgents is counterproductive if collateral damage leads to the recruitment of fifty more insurgents."⁵⁰ Given the goal of establishing rapport with Afghan civilians, careful decision making was needed to ensure the safety of civilians during the assault. Captain. Sparks' readiness training seemingly proved beneficial to his marines, as they faced fire from insurgents willing to use civilians as shields. Additionally, Bravo refrained from utilizing means of indirect fire, such as mortars, on Taliban targets. Given the rapid pace in which the company maneuvered through the town, and the likelihood of civilian

⁴⁹ *The Battle of Marjah*, Directed by Ben Anderson (2011, New York: HBO Documentary Films) DVD.

⁵⁰ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section 1-141, 45. The subsequent section (1-142) argues for the assessment of the combat environment to determine the appropriate level of force needed to combat hostiles without hindering the progress of the counterinsurgency operation.

casualties, more precise means were employed. Javelins, light anti-tank weapons (LAWs), and M203 grenade launchers (attached under the barrel of an M4 rifle) were preferred over mortars and airstrikes. Though airstrikes could be called in with precision, rockets and grenades often had more accuracy and were fired by Marines who had visuals on the desired targets.⁵¹ Hesitancy in the use of artillery and air support illustrated a commitment to the counterinsurgency mission and a willingness of the American military to put its personnel at additional risk for the benefit of the COIN process.

Although Bravo Company inflicted no civilian casualties during the Marjah assault, civilian casualties in were not completely avoidable for other elements of the assault force. As with the Marines in Bravo Company, other units taking part in Moshtarak engaged Taliban fighters ensconced in positions with civilians nearby (such as homes and shops). Brigadier General Mohiudin Ghori, commander of Afghan forces during the assault, explained to media outlets that Taliban fighters forced civilians to stand in front of them while they fired at oncoming ISAF forces.⁵² Civilians wanting to leave once the assault began were prevented from doing so by the fighting itself and the IEDs placed throughout the town. By February 18, five days into the operation, NATO reported fifteen civilian fatalities while Afghan sources claimed that at least nineteen had been killed.⁵³ The physical proximity of civilians to the Taliban proved devastating to the morale of Charlie Company of the 1/6, when one of their rockets hit a house where three

⁵¹ Capt. Timothy Sparks, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011.

⁵² “Afghanistan Taliban ‘Using Human Shields’-General, *BBC News*, 17 February, 2010. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8519507.stm.

⁵³ “Civilians Who Remained Behind Endure Marjah Offensive,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, February 18, 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Civilians_Who_Remained_Behind_Endure_Marjah_Offensive/1962012.html.

families were sheltered. The blast caused fifteen casualties, four of them (a woman and three children) fatalities. To accept responsibility for the incident, Marines visited the grieving father to deliver a payment of \$10,000 (\$2,500 for each life lost). The Marine in charge of the group stated “there is no way to rationalize that this was, in any way, a good thing or justified. Its just a terrible feeling and a terrible sight.”⁵⁴

Incidents like this were harmful not only to the morale of the Marines who strove for precision when clearing civilian areas, but also to the civilians, who now found themselves surrounded by death and destruction. Though no method exists to undo the damage done to Afghan families, American forces strove to mitigate the negative perception that collateral damage attracted. Unfortunately for the counterinsurgents, accidental civilian casualties gave the Taliban opportunity to spread rumors of coalition brutality. Marjah, along with other areas in southern Afghanistan were places in which the Taliban met little resistance. Lack of significant government or coalition presence allowed them to control the information spread to civilians. Whether through meetings with tribal elders or other forms of propaganda, the Taliban expressed their determination to outlast their NATO enemy.⁵⁵ Their proximity and connections with the civilian population created the need for the ISAF to engage the Taliban both kinetically and through the spreading of information. Part of the reinvigoration of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan was openness with media outlets on the ground. Civilian casualties during 2009 and 2010 offensives were handled with transparency by ISAF leaders, who

⁵⁴ *The Battle for Marjah*, DVD.

⁵⁵ Robert M. Cassidy, *War, Will, and Warlords: Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2011* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2012.) 141.

communicated each major incident to the media.⁵⁶ Openness in the media, along with condolence visits and payments, were ways in which the Marine Corps and the ISAF as a whole, worked to express their commitment to expelling the Taliban and combat its attempt at creating false narratives regarding American intentions.

Limiting civilian casualties (though rarely possible in war) was the primary concern of American and allied forces during Operation Moshtarak. However, Operation Moshtarak also placed great importance on the cooperation between American and Afghan forces. Elements of 1/6 and 3/6 Marines, which comprised the bulk of the assault force, operated alongside government troops down to the squad level.⁵⁷ Alpha Company of 1/6 was one of several Marine companies that was augmented by Afghan soldiers. During the assault phase of Operation Moshtarak, each of Alpha's platoons operated with an additional twelve to twenty Afghan soldiers. Gunnery Sergeant Jonathan Graham recalled that the Afghan soldiers in his company were interested in knowing how the Marines operated but were afraid to do their part once combat commenced. Rather than the Afghans taking initiative, the Marines in Alpha Company had to give them more frequent instruction as the battle dragged on.⁵⁸

The experience of an Afghan soldier during the assault on Marjah was certainly a strange one. Sergeant John Trickler of Alpha Company 1/6 reflected on the assault in an interview in 2011. When Alpha Company began its assault before sunrise on February 13, the Marines were equipped with night vision equipment that the Afghans (nearly 140

⁵⁶ Cassidy, *War, Will, and Warlords*, 143.

⁵⁷ Van Ess, "The Fight for Marjah," 9.

⁵⁸ GySgt Jonathan Graham, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2010.

men total) did not have, allowing them to see things their allies could not. Adding to the confusion was the fact that most ANA soldiers did not speak English. When they arrived, the Marines in Trickler's platoon instructed their Afghan comrades to follow them. During the initial insertion, many of the ANA troops became confused; those who did not hold onto a Marine (equipped with night vision) could not see where they were supposed to go. Fortunately for the Afghan soldiers near Trickler, an Afghan squad leader was nearby (holding onto Trickler) and was able to keep the men going in the proper direction.⁵⁹ The insertion was a clear sign of the technological and tactical disparity between the Afghan soldiers and the Marines sent to Afghanistan to assist them. Despite disparity, the direction of the Marines and a handful of effective leaders kept the assault organized.

Bravo Company of 1/6 Battalion was accompanied by a company of nearly ninety Afghan troops. When the ANA arrived, they split themselves into three platoons (from an original two) and each paired with a platoon of Marines. Each Afghan platoon had a platoon leader, sergeant, and squad leaders. Each squad of Marines had an Afghan element (Afghan Squad) that was roughly the size of a Marine fire team (three to five men). The ANA company attached to Bravo was led by a man who, according to Captain Sparks, was effective in engaging with his men and Afghan civilians. However, the commander was grossly overweight and could not carry his own combat gear (a task he delegated to one of his subordinates). Sparks suspected that the commander purchased his commission in Kabul.⁶⁰ The men under his command received no more than five weeks

⁵⁹ Sgt John Trickler, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁶⁰ Cpt. Timothy Sparks, Oral History Interview, 2010.

of training before being assigned a commander and combat assignment. Bravo received their ANA guests early enough to go through training exercises during the planning phase of the operation. Training covered basic battle drills rather than situations unique to Marjah, providing the Afghan soldiers with a sense of how the Marines of Bravo would operate once Moshtarak kicked off. Bravo Company conducted ten live-fire sessions with the ANA and trained them in platoon movements. First Lieutenant Anthony Piccioni trained with the Afghans and noted how well they emulated the Marines' movements.⁶¹ The additional time afforded to the Marines of Bravo, allowed them to get a sense of how their allies would perform in combat. Combat presented challenges for the Afghan troops, but it also prepared them for future operations in a much more effective manner than their previous training.

Teaching poorly trained host nation troops how to operate in stressful combat environments is an essential component to counterinsurgency. The need to give Afghan soldiers frequent direction during the assault was, to a degree, representative of the need to adopt an approach to Helmand province that placed the training of host nation forces above killing Taliban fighters. Operation Moshtarak was far from the Marine Corps' first foray into combined action. During the Vietnam War, Marines often operated in Vietnamese villages as counterinsurgents. Long-term security often required Marine platoons to integrate with Vietnamese popular forces; men who did not serve in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but instead provided security for villages. Units of Marines and popular forces were known as Combined Action Platoons (CAP). Small,

⁶¹ 1st Lt. Anthony Piccioni in Capt. Timothy Sparks, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011.

integrated units such as a CAP were meant to create operational efficiency in local military forces and ensure long-term stability in small villages.⁶² This concept was one which the experts behind 3-33.5 sought to apply a similar concept to American interactions in counterinsurgency zones.

The minds behind 3-33.5 had a similar idea for CAP units in post 9/11 combat zones. These units are defined as a mix of American and host nation troops. Rather than operating in areas of heavy combat, CAP units worked in areas in which insurgent activity was limited. Crucial to success is the unit's ability to establish a permanent presence amongst the civilian population. Combined units should not, according to the manual, be used as a clearing force. Instead, the units were meant to operate in areas already cleared of major enemy activity. Should the need for additional strength arise, those units would be made available upon request.⁶³ Unlike Vietnam, Marines in Afghanistan integrated government troops into their units. Once major combat operations in Marjah ended, a new phase of Moshtarak began, one that required the ideological separation of the Taliban and the civilians of Marjah. Insurgent activity would continue, albeit at a smaller scale than before the operation began. Marines continued to integrate ANA troops into their units (down to the squad level) and worked with police forces. Such heavy interaction served to increase Afghan operational competency while also working to create an environment in which the locals were inclined to interact with them.

Units tasked with wresting Marjah from the Taliban focused first on seizing the center of the town and the main bazaars. Once these areas were under ISAF control

⁶² John C. McManus, *Grunts: Inside the American Infantry Combat Experience, World War II Through Iraq* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2010), 210-211.

⁶³ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section 5-81-5-84, 184-185.

(approximately ten days after D-day), Marines pushed outward and secured all major bridges spanning the canals and routes leading into the town. Once established, bridgehead positions helped control population movement. By the fifteenth day of the operation, most of the major fighting concluded. Among the first additional personnel brought into Marjah were members of the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP).⁶⁴ From the tenth day of Operation Moshtarak, ANCOP personnel began to take positions in the two Bazaars in town (Loy Chareh and Koru Chareh). Although the kinetic phase of Operation Moshtarak was largely successful in reducing the Taliban's hold on Marjah, danger continued to loom large. The days directly following the conclusion of major offensive operations were quiet, but in mid-March, Marines and Afghan security forces in peripheral positions fell under sporadic attacks from Taliban fighters. It was also reported that the Taliban was beginning to harass civilians and threaten those who worked with American and Afghan government forces.⁶⁵ Concerns for ANCOPs implementation in Marjah were perhaps justified, as ANCOP units were most frequently deployed after combat units in the ISAF and ANA restored order. However, sporadic acts of violence by the Taliban required ANCOP personnel to carry out actions typically designated to traditional military units, rather than their assigned role of ensuring stability for the Helmandis of Marjah. Many of the ANCOP personnel sent to Marjah following the launch of Moshtarak were new recruits. High casualties in the organization meant that many ANCOP units sent to Helmand in early 2010 were

⁶⁴ LtCol Calvert Worth, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁶⁵ Robert M. Perito, "Afghanistan's Civil Order Police: Victim of Its Own Success," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 307 (May 2012): 7, <https://issat.dcaf.ch/download/54552/880784/Perito%202012.pdf>

inexperienced and ill-suited to perform duties beyond the simplistic role originally given to civil order police. Furthermore, the majority of ANCOP recruits came from northern Afghanistan and spoke Dari, while most of Marjah's civilian population (like most people living in southern Afghanistan) spoke Pashto.⁶⁶

In the months following the start of Moshtarak, ANCOP units were placed at various points throughout the town. Reports assessing ANCOP's overall performance in Marjah show an organization largely unprepared to carry out the role presented to them. Instances of drug use, theft from civilians who passed through security checkpoints, and absenteeism were common occurrences in Marjah.⁶⁷ Despite cases of negligence and a seeming lack of readiness on part of ANCOP, there were members of the organization who were willing to learn from the Marines. Gunnery Sergeant Jonathan Graham worked closely with ANCOP during his time at Marjah and was often tasked with placing Afghan security at various checkpoints. ANCOP in Marjah, according to Graham, typically maintained static positions at the Bazaars and bridges to insure the safe travel of civilians and prevent potential insurgent activity. Although Graham thought the police should patrol rather than stand guard, his insistence that the ANA should perform these duties were insufficient to change the minds of those organizing ISAF and Afghan deployment in his zones. Regardless, the ANCOP personnel he interacted with effectively carried out their police duties. On one occasion, Graham received word that an armed man was attempting to rob a local pharmacy. He accompanied the police to the site, where they exchanged fire with the armed man, ultimately killing him. Events like this painted a

⁶⁶ Van Ess, "The Battle for Marjah," 22-23.

⁶⁷ Perito, "Afghanistan's Civil Order Police," 7.

hopeful picture of what ANCOP was capable of when properly utilized. In reflecting on his experiences with Afghan security forces, he contended that ANCOP was more effective in its duties than the Afghan army.⁶⁸ Graham's concerns about the use of ANCOP and his rapport with them are indicative of the Marines' ability to work with the police and make suggestions regarding the efficacy of their use in the field.

Unfortunately, events such as rapid recruitment and deployment, along with the inability to make larger tactical decisions, restricted the implementation of more effective uses of Afghan personnel.

In addition to the Marine infantry units that interacted with Afghan police forces, the Marine Corps had personnel working in the Afghan National Security Forces Cell (ANSF Cell). Marine Colonel Burke Whitman ran the ANSF Cell at the behest of Major General Nicholson. The Cell was responsible for training and placing Afghan security forces throughout Afghanistan before transitioning combat control over to them once ISAF forces withdrew en-masse. In the days following Marines' successful taking of the town center, ANCOP was sent in. By early April 500 ANCOP personnel operated in Marjah as three units. Once ANCOP began operations in Marjah, the Cell received word of corruption in one of the units. Upon hearing this news, Whitman and his team traveled to northern Marjah where the unit was stationed.⁶⁹ Initial screenings revealed twenty-five percent of the unit (of 178 police) used drugs.⁷⁰ Those that tested positive were removed from the unit and area of operation, while those remaining received additional training.

⁶⁸ GySgt Jonathan Graham, Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁶⁹ Col Burke Whitman, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁷⁰ Jeffrey Dressler, "Marjah's Lessons for Kandahar," *Institute for the Study of War*, July 9, 2010: 5. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/BackgroundunderMarjahsLessonsforKandahar.pdf>.

Whitman noticed that once the Cell was finished revamping the unit, it was a more effective force. The Cell soon began receiving reports that the unit “was focused on the right things, they’re proud to be the force they are, and were also hearing the difference from the population. The Marine battalion commander down there with 3/6 describes them as ‘an all new force.’”⁷¹ Although the opening weeks of Moshtarak were focused on kinetic operations, the presence of the Cell illustrates a significant level of commitment to the counterinsurgent mission. Marines in Marjah working with ANCOP officers, had at their disposal, personnel awaiting their assessment of Afghan security forces. Motivations and commitment certainly varied among each Afghan officer; however, the Marine Corps possessed elements able to address issues with discipline as they appeared.

In addition to ANCOP personnel, Marines working to keep Taliban strength down after the Marjah assault, also worked with soldiers of the ANA. Directly following the assault, central Marjah was the most secured area. Taliban activity in outlying areas made it necessary for Marines and Afghan forces to maintain pressure on the Taliban while also working to ease civilian tensions. Much like they had done in the assault on Marjah in mid-February. Alpha Company of the 1/6 continued to pair with Afghan soldiers as they responded to Taliban activity. Paramount to the clearing efforts was the need for the ANA troops to gain experience in urban warfare. When clearing buildings, the Marines ensured that ANA soldiers were the first to enter.⁷² Afghan participation in clearing activities also led into civilian interaction. Prior to investigating building in which insurgent activity was suspected, Marines sent ANA soldiers to speak with residents,

⁷¹ Whitman, Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁷² GySgt Jonathan Graham, Oral History Interview, 2010.

notifying them of what they were doing.⁷³ In the minds of the counterinsurgents, host nations troops must put themselves at the vanguard of operations. Doing so allows civilians to see how government troops operate, creating potential for future relationships to form.

At the end of March 2010, Battalion 1/6 welcomed the 2nd Kandak (battalion size force) into their battlespace. The Marines of Bravo company noticed a decline in the general performance of the ANA once the transition occurred. Captain Sparks of Bravo Company noted that their new ANA partners were nowhere near the level of combat readiness of the Marines or the previous ANA unit (which they had prior training with). Cases of drug use, inappropriate sexual acts in the rest areas, and poor hygiene were common among the new ANA personnel. However, the men were eager to learn from the Marines, and their leadership was much more effective than the previous one.⁷⁴ Although counterinsurgents have their own personnel to improve the operational capabilities of their host nation allies, host nation military leadership is a crucial component if healthy relationships between civilian and military actors can form. According to Manual 3-33.5, host nation military leadership is an essential element in the construction of an effective and discerning military force. Units without effective leadership are more prone to making mistakes and damaging relations with civilians.⁷⁵ According to Col. Whitman of the Cell, ANA leadership held potential for training non-commissioned officers in the police forces. Recruiting officers in southern province was

⁷³ LCpl Tommy Bellegarde, "Where Are the Taliban? Insurgents Avoiding Marines, Afghan National Army in Marjah," Defense Visual, Information Distribution Service, March 3, 2010. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/46255/taliban-insurgents-avoiding-marines-afghan-national-army-marjah>

⁷⁴ Cpt. Timothy Sparks, Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁷⁵ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section 6-63, 220.

difficult, due to a lack of literate candidates. The Cell recognized the potential in having ANA officers assist in the education of potentially effective leaders whose only perceived fault was lack of literacy. Their goal was to place proven leaders in positions where they could benefit ANA recruits.⁷⁶ In Marjah, and other areas of Helmand, host nation leadership was an essential component to any unit hoping to one day operate sans Marine support.

The presence of Afghan soldiers in areas such as Marjah both augmented the fighting strength of the Marine battalions and helped to close the gap between the ISAF and civilians. Counterinsurgency largely depends on maintaining constructive relations with native populations. In Afghanistan, such bridges were built through ISAF presence at shuras; gatherings of village elders and decision-makers. By April, Lieutenant Colonel Calvert Worth of Battalion 1/6 had begun to take a lessened role in tribal meetings and ensure that ANA commanders did most of the talking. Though civil affairs projects took time to begin in earnest, meetings between Marjah's civilian leaders and the ANA helped to clarify details on work projects and build trust.⁷⁷

Population engagement is crucial in counterinsurgency. Although men hold the most power in Afghan society, the authors of 3-33.5 recognized the crucial role women have within a family. Furthermore, counterinsurgents must recognize that insurgents may garner support from social circles formed by women. Manual 3-33.5 argues the importance of counterinsurgents appealing to women in insurgent environments. Female support of counterinsurgent efforts will increase the likelihood of support from families.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Col Burk Whitman, Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁷⁷ LtCol Calvert Worth, Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁷⁸ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section A-35, 296.

The idea that women held significant influence over familial support of an insurgency led to the creation of Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in 2009. The first FETs accompanied Afghan police forces to homes in Farah province suspected of housing Taliban fighters. Female Marines entered the homes with the police and doled out hygiene products and other supplies and spoke with women while police spoke to the men.⁷⁹ Marine Battalion 1/6 received several FETs in early April. At that time, local reception to ISAF was tepid, due to the remaining threat of Taliban fighters and the threats they continued to make.⁸⁰ However, by May 2010, four FETs operated in Marjah (two in the north, two in the south). The two southern teams had established relationships with several influential families by early June, allowing them to gather intelligence.⁸¹ Though relationship building was an ongoing process, efforts made by FETs and ANA led shuras served to close the distance between civilians and the counterinsurgents trying to keep insurgents out of their communities.

What made Marjah such a crucial stronghold for the Taliban was the farmland. Marjah is surrounded by more than 300,000 acres of arable land, most of which was utilized in the cultivation of poppy. The Taliban relied on the drug processing and trafficking from Marjah as a primary source of income. Opium exports in the years leading to Moshtarak garnered nearly three billion dollars per year (of which farmers received hardly one fifth). Drug money from areas like Marjah allowed the Taliban to recruit additional fighters and pay for weapons and ammunition. Poppy cultivation was

⁷⁹ Anna C. Coll, "Evaluating Female Engagement Team Effectiveness in Afghanistan," Wellesley College Honors Thesis Collection 8, 2012: <http://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/2>

⁸⁰ LtCol Calvert Worth, Oral History Interview, 2010.

⁸¹ Command chronology Folder 8, I MEF 2010.

far more profitable for farmers, for whom poppy earned nearly three times more than wheat or corn.⁸² In the months following the start of Moshtarak, the ISAF began to offer payment (\$300 per hectare) to farmers willing to destroy their poppy and start growing other crops. Unfortunately for the civilians, the money offered was far less than they would receive for selling the poppy.⁸³

Payment incentives were one of few apparent solutions to convince farmers that growing other crops was in their best interest. Some farmers continued to farm poppy; however, Marine and Afghan military checkpoints throughout Marjah naturally complicated the process of transporting the crop out of Marjah. Though not an official policy, some American commanders hoped that forcing poppy farmers to use other channels to conduct their business would help to reduce Taliban profits.⁸⁴ The desire to limit Taliban profits while also building trust with Marjah's civilian population made the prospect of poppy eradication problematic. Since the ISAF could not afford to enforce complete eradication out of fear of alienating the locals, the only apparent solution was to offer new options and hope that farmers would accept them. Though eradication was a concern, so too was the well-being of the Afghan farmer. Rather than force eradication, the ISAF placed importance in locating drug traffickers. Such an approach recognized the Afghan farmer as a victim of the Taliban's financial system.⁸⁵ Though the lingering presence of poppy (albeit at a smaller scale) held potential for Taliban financiers, the cost

⁸² Bing West, *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way out of Afghanistan* (New York, Random House, 2011), 198-199.

⁸³ Mark Chisholm, "Marines Pay Afghan Farmers to Destroy Opium" Reuters, April 15, 2010. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-poppy/marines-pay-afghan-farmers-to-destroy-opium-idUUSTRE63E1BL20100415>

⁸⁴ West, *The Wrong War*, 218.

⁸⁵ Gretchen Peters, "Poppies Escape Marjah Offensive," *npr*, March 14, 2010. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124667582>

of aggressive eradication would certainly alienate civilian farmers trying to make a living. In the case of Marjah, refusal to make eradication mandatory was the lesser evil.

The process of counterinsurgency in Marjah continued past the conclusion of Operation Moshtarak in 2010. Units deployed to Marjah in June 2010 maintained the operational cadence set by the Marine units who took part in the assault. In September 2010, Marine security allowed schools to reopen. A national parliamentary election also occurred in 2010, in which the ANA and ANGOP provided security (Marines serving solely as overwatch).⁸⁶ Data from the election indicated a small voter turnout (935 votes), but educational gains were much more promising. The number of enrolled students in Marjah was higher than 1,000 in 2011, an increase of 800 from the previous year.

Additionally, more than 100 girls now attended school; an opportunity denied them under Taliban control.⁸⁷ Maintaining security was certainly a priority for the Marines; however, other civil affairs projects continued at a remarkable rate. In 2011, Marine civil affairs officers of the District Stabilization Team recognized that not all projects started in the previous year. Major Timothy Flynn and Staff Sergeant Carlos Delgadomartinez worked with the district government and Afghan civilians to ensure the relevancy of projects in Marjah. During their deployment in 2011, projects were underway to construct a high school, mosque, and health clinic. Roads linking Marjah to the Helmand capital of Lashkar Gah were also under construction. Within the city, new gravel roads were created, which were more difficult to plant IEDs on. Flynn and Delgadomartinez met

⁸⁶ 2nd Battalion 6th Marines. Command Chronology for period 5 July to 5 December 2010, V26 Folder 10, Marine Corps History Division Archives.

⁸⁷ "Marjah-1 Year on" North Atlantic Treaty Organization: Media Backgrounder, 2011 https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_03/20110309_110309-ISAF-backgrounder-Marjah.pdf

with civilians in shuras and relayed their needs to the government. They ensured that requests for new projects were relayed to government decision makers and that money was not simply given to civilians.⁸⁸

Civilian counterinsurgents also worked with the Marines in Marjah. Ralph Hinds, a population and health development officer attached to Marjah's District Stabilization Team, worked to ensure sanitation standards among the civilian population. Basic sanitation created many health problems for people living in the town. Unfortunately, information was most effectively transferred through demonstration, as illiteracy was common. To better spread knowledge of proper hygienic practices, Hatton and his colleagues gave handed out pamphlets containing illustrated instructions for the prevention of various maladies. Other health efforts included the construction of public water pumps; safer alternatives to the common practice of drawing water from the canals (which often caused illness for those drinking it).⁸⁹ Philip Hatton, a civilian member of the District Stabilization Team noted in a 2011 interview, that the projects underway in 2011 were having a positive impact on life in Marjah. He also argued that civilian counterinsurgent actors in Marjah were woefully unprepared for the workload demanded of them. Fortunately, Col. Randall Newman, commander of Regimental Combat Team 7 (commanding officer during Moshtarak) recognized the issue and promoted cooperation with Marine units which were much more capable.⁹⁰ The experiences of both Hinds and

⁸⁸ Maj Timothy M. Flynn and SSgt Carlos R. Delgadomartinez, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011.

⁸⁹ Mr. Ralph Hinds, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011.

⁹⁰ Mr. Philip J Hatton, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011. In the interview, Hatton notes that Operation Moshtarak was largely considered a failure by the media. The reasoning for this narrative was the continued Taliban activity in the town's vicinity. However, he contends that the Taliban's failure to disrupt the September 2010 elections was proof of the Marines' ability to provide security.

Hatton illustrate the work done by civilian counterinsurgents, work largely supported by Marines.

In the weeks following the conclusion of the Marjah assault in 2010, General Stanley McChrystal arrived in Marjah to assess the situation. By that time, the Taliban had begun to launch attacks on peripheral areas and intimidate locals. McChrystal expressed his frustrations on the lack of progress in fully securing the town. His subordinates explained that the completion of any counterinsurgency mission in Marjah would take time. In McChrystal's mind, time was fleeting, as American drawdown was set to begin in July 2011.⁹¹ The coming drawdown likely influenced other evaluations of the Marjah campaign. A report filed by the International Council on Security and Development published in March 2010, contained statistics gathered from a series of interviews with 427 civilians from nearby Lashkar Gah, many of whom had families in Marjah. The data revealed that 61 percent of people felt worse about NATO troops than they had before Moshtarak. Another statistic revealed that most of the interviewees were unhappy with NATO forces.⁹² The sentiments shared by ranking officers, researchers, and even media sources reveal a narrative of failure. However, what they do not reveal are the processes of counterinsurgency carried out by Marine units and their civilian and Afghan allies. Counterinsurgency policy first and foremost, demands that counterinsurgents expend time to fully secure a location and build relations with civilians. Hardships in the early months (and even years) of ISAF operations reflected flaws in the overall strategy, but time constraints denied American forces the opportunity

⁹¹ Chandresekaran, *Little America*, 145-146.

⁹² The International Council on Security and Development "Operation Moshtarak: Lessons Learned" May 2010, 2-5 <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/moshtarak1.pdf>

to exploit the policies that showed promise. Narratives of failure, which started shortly after the onset of Moshtarak, betray a lack of understanding of the counterinsurgency process, and overshadows the fact that the Marjah Marines carried out policies that directly reflected those of Manual 3-33.5.

CHAPTER IV - SANGINGRAD

On one spring morning in 2012, corporal Nicolaus Solecki of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, arrived in Sangin district, Afghanistan. Having been transferred to a small patrol base, Solecki took part in regular patrols with soldiers of the Afghan National Army. The first few Afghan soldiers to arrive at the base approached Solecki in an old Ford Ranger (commonly given to Afghan soldiers by the American military). The soldier manning the machine gun loosely bolted to the floor, jumped off the back after retrieving a large garbage bag filled with marijuana. Solecki watched with bewilderment as the soldier gave him the thumbs up saying “double good” and retreated with his comrades into a small hut where they smoked with little interruption for several days. His first encounter was a telltale sign of what was to come, as the task of preparing ANA troops to operate independently was met with significant issues.⁹³ Solecki’s experience in carrying out counterinsurgency strategy, like that of so many others, was influenced by a myriad of operational hindrances in Sangin.

From the significant troop increase that led to a revamped campaign in 2010, to significant American drawdown in 2014, American Marines worked to combat a persistent and aggressive insurgency in Sangin District. Located in the northeastern portion of the province, Sangin is home to nearly 15,000 Pashtuns. Much of Sangin’s population consists of farmers, all utilizing the Helmand river to the west as their main source of irrigation.⁹⁴ Counterinsurgency in Sangin required Marines to adhere to

⁹³ Nicolaus Solecki, oral history interview, Grand Valley State University’s Veterans History Project, 2016.

⁹⁴ Bing West, *One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2014), xxi

guidelines developed in 3-33.5, such as working closely with Afghan soldiers. Additionally, the Marines consistently shouldered additional risk by conducting regular patrols in civilian areas in hopes of establishing friendly contact with Afghan civilians. As time passed, the Marines took casualties, but continued to strive for complete control of Sangin and its establishment as a Taliban-free zone. However, despite the presence of Marines in civilian areas, the gift of everyday supplies, the advising/training efforts, and the constant risk taking on part of the Marines, there was little glory to be had in the district. Progress was certainly made between 2010 and 2014, but any chance at full victory required factors beyond the power of a Marine to control. Counterinsurgency doctrine was not the arbiter of failure, rather an unwillingness of the United States Government to commit its military to Afghanistan past 2014, poor leadership within the Afghan military and its apparent unwillingness to accept the burden of complete combat control. Although the Sangin Marines closely followed official COIN doctrine, time constraints on the American presence, coupled with a lack of fighting will on part of the ANA troops, made Sangin an unwinnable district.

Sangin district had proved problematic for British Marines stationed there in the years prior to the American troop surge. The district is home to several “Green Zones,” areas prime for poppy growth and Taliban activity. Since 2006, the district was primarily under the occupation of British forces. The British took significant casualties; nearly 100 of the 300 British personnel killed in Afghanistan were killed in Sangin. The district was a hotbed of insurgent activity; British Marines regularly encountered resistance whilst on patrol; Taliban fighters placed IEDs along roadways and machinegun positions in

fields.⁹⁵ Such staunch pushback made the task of pacifying the district's towns daunting. Sangin held significant value for the Taliban and the US/Britain, as the crucial Route 611 ran through it. The Taliban sought to control the road because that linked Sangin to Lashkar Gah, Helmand's capital and a vein through which to send fighters into neighboring provinces. The road also ran to a crucial hydroelectric dam that provided electricity to more than one million civilians. In 2010, when 30,000 additional American troops were sent to assist General Stanley McChrystal's war effort, the decision was made to build another turbine. In order to achieve this goal, Route 611 needed security. In addition to the need for another turbine, the objective in controlling Sangin was to provide security to local populations and restrict Taliban activity. Roving bands of Taliban, many of whom traveled in pickup trucks and extorted the civilians, made security tenuous.⁹⁶ The ferocious effort exerted by the Taliban and the severe losses suffered when British and American troops ventured outside the security of forward operating bases, earned Sangin the nickname "Sanginrad"⁹⁷ For the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines who deployed to Sangin district in the Fall of 2010, the moniker quickly became evident. Progress in Sangin came with a steep price.

In July 2010, 3/7 arrived in Sangin to assist the 40th British Commando Battalion. In the time they had spent in the district, the British forces had made little progress in Sangin. Improvised explosive devices littered the streets, making patrols costly ventures.

⁹⁵ Wesley Morgan, "Afghanistan's Green Zone," *At War Blog* (blog), July 29, 2010, <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/07/29/afghanistans-green-zone/>.

⁹⁶ West, *One Million Steps*, xxi-xxv.

⁹⁷ "Into the Breach: How Sangin Will Enter the Annals of Marine History," *Military Times*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.militarytimes.com/2014/05/12/into-the-breach-how-sangin-will-enter-the-annals-of-marine-history/>

Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Clay Tipton, the 3/7's mission, dubbed "Operation Sangin Sunrise" was to secure the area surrounding Sangin. The thinking behind this strategy was to secure the district of Sangin and allow the commandos to continue COIN efforts without fear of Taliban reinforcement. Though these moves were kinetic in nature, clearing areas of insurgent activity is an essential component of COIN. For security to be maintained and relationships established between counterinsurgents and civilians, insurgents must have limited contact with civilian populations. According to 3-33, this separation is created by eliminating insurgent presence and replacing it with pro-government forces. The manual also states that the most effective way to accomplish this goal is by cordoning off areas of high enemy activity.⁹⁸ Once a perimeter was established around the district, Tipton focused his efforts on the "green zones" which surrounded the Helmand River. A major contributor to the slow movement in the Sangin was the threat of IEDs. The Marines dealt with this threat by deploying Assault Breacher Vehicles (ABVs) into the zone to clear it. ABVs are mine clearing vehicles; tanks equipped with large forks and Demolition Line Charges which can be shot outward to destroy strings of IEDs.⁹⁹ According to the battalion's command chronology, Kilo Company was primarily responsible for this action. Pushing from a forward operating base outside the green zone and working their way in, the battalion cleared a path into the zone and established four new patrol bases. Once the company established themselves along the Helmand River, they then began conducting COIN operations. Following the clearing of IEDs, Kilo Company began operations to disrupt insurgent activity. For more than a month, the

⁹⁸ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section 5-57, 176.

⁹⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Clay C. Tipton, USMC. United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011.

Marines in the green zone conducted security patrols, ambushes, and engaged local leaders while Weapons Company provided mortar support for Kilo and worked to reduce the number of IEDs in the routes in the eastern section of the district.¹⁰⁰

Successful counterinsurgency depends on the establishment of a permanent presence amongst local populations. However, an occupation force cannot hope to divert civilian attention from an insurgency when the insurgency effectively denies them freedom of movement within a battle space. The arrival of Tipton's Marines gave the ISAF a chance to turn the tide in Sangin. To loosen the Taliban's chokehold, the Marine battalion began pushing into areas such as the green zone. A major concern for the British in Sangin had been IEDs. Britain's presence in post-9/11 wars, while important to the progress made by coalition forces in Iraq and ISAF forces in Afghanistan, was dwarfed by that of the United States. The simple reality of low troop numbers made it difficult to establish a permanent presence for civilian engagement. For the beleaguered British forces in Sangin, the Taliban fighters in the district presented a seemingly insurmountable restriction to their movement. Insurgents in Sangin, seemingly unshaken by the British presence in Sangin, often placed explosives just outside British bases. This both restricted the ability of British soldiers to conduct patrols and establish relationships with Afghan civilians.¹⁰¹ Marine units helped remove pressure from units inside the towns and villages. Another element of this strategy involved sending a company across the

¹⁰⁰ 3rd Battalion 7th Marines. Command Chronology for period of 15 May to 15 October 2010, V37 Folder 12, Marine Corps History Division Archives: 12-14.

¹⁰¹ Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 358-360.

Helmand River to stymie Taliban reinforcements moving from neighboring Musa Qala District.

Captain Patrick McKinley, commanding officer of India Company during 3/7's Sangin deployment, led the push across the Helmand River. Counterinsurgency efforts within the district, largely under the direction of the British, required freedom of movement within Sangin's towns. Musa Qala district, according to Marine records and testimonial, held supply routes from which Taliban fighters and logistics (including IEDs) entered Sangin. McKinley and his men established fighting positions along the river, opposite from the remainder of the battalion. For nearly two months, the company maintained fighting positions near the town of Doab. Unlike a typical Marine experience of living within the walls of a FOB or Patrol Base (PB), India Company occupied fighting positions that were little more than foxholes.¹⁰² Taliban resistance in Musa Qala was staunch. Attacks coming from Doab were aggressive, often making it difficult for McKinley to organize relief for various platoons along the river. One attempt at relieving a platoon near Doab brought the civilian reality into the picture. A convoy of armored vehicles traveled through the city unaware of the combatant status of the townspeople. According to McKinley "we are kind of in a hostile country and not sure if it was full on Taliban within the Town of Doab or just the Pashtun culture itself, we're the outsiders, they don't want us there. From the locals, they had not seen coalition forces in about three years, so we were definitely new to that area."¹⁰³ Such was the reason for India's presence on the opposite side of the river. If Taliban fighters continued to pour in from

¹⁰² Tipton, USMC. United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2010.

¹⁰³ Captain Patrick McKinley, USMC. United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2011.

other districts, the crucial work within Sangin itself could not begin. The civilians in the town of Doab represented the reality the Marines sought to change.

The 2010 deployment of 3/7 was primarily focused on making Sangin district a place where counterinsurgency operations could be conducted. British forces in control of the district, while controlling nearly thirty FOBs and PBs, were focused on the establishment of those areas and seemingly unable to get out and interact with the people of Sangin. Unfortunately, the 40th Commandos transferred out of Sangin in September 2010, making the 3/7 the sole battalion in until its replacement by the 3/5 in October. Due to the reduction in force, the number of ISAF strongpoints in the district was reduced to ten. With the departure of the British battalion, the Marine Corps now held operational command of the district.¹⁰⁴ Despite the departure of the commandos, the Marines had initiated a change in direction for Sangin. Whereas prior to 2010 the Taliban had to contend only with the British in Sangin, the arrival of American reinforcements changed that. Furthermore, the simple act of pushing into the surrounding area and into untouched areas within Sangin itself, was a step toward establishing the necessary environment for COIN operations to begin in earnest. Though the summer of 2010 did not deliver Sangin from the clutches of the Taliban, the Marines displayed notable initiative and effectively initiated the long process of counterinsurgency.

Experts responsible for 3-33.5 placed significant reliance on an ever-present occupation force. American forces conducting COIN operations were expected to be on the offensive, defensive, and providing stability all at once. As doctrine dictated, the Marines were not to distinguish offensive from defensive tactics; “A Marine force

¹⁰⁴ Tipton, USMC. United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2010.

assigned an area security mission during a COIN operation executes it as a combat operation. The force establishes and maintains measures to protect people and infrastructure from hostile acts or influences while actively seeking out and engaging insurgent forces.”¹⁰⁵ In order to ensure peaceful relations and security in hostile areas, counterinsurgent forces must conduct regular patrols in civilian areas. FOBs provided security for the occupation force and a base of logistics; however, trust could not be earned by remaining behind walls.

When the 3/5 Marines arrived in Sangin in October 2010. They quickly began to patrol the villages and fields that dotted Sangin. Unfortunately for them, Sangin remained the deadliest corner of the country. Marine veteran and renowned author Bing West accompanied a platoon of 3/5 Marines throughout their stint in Sangin. In the six months 3rd Platoon, Kilo Company, spent in Sangin, they conducted more than 400 patrols and were engaged 171 times. By the conclusion of only its second day in Sangin district, the battalion suffered eight dead and dozens wounded; many of them due to roadside bombs. These casualties became a typical occurrence when Marines left the security of their FOBs.¹⁰⁶ Nicholas Anderson, who served with the 3/5 in 2010, dealt with these realities daily. His platoon moved through the district slowly, using metal detectors to pick up explosives along their path. Though their training taught them to refrain from marching in a single column, the threat of IEDs forced them to march in a line. Moving through Sangin, despite the presence of EOD specialists, was arduous, Anderson recalled

¹⁰⁵ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section 5-37, 167.

¹⁰⁶ West, *One Million Steps*, 16.

“We only moved 50 feet one day. It took us two hours, it was very slow.”¹⁰⁷ By putting themselves at almost constant risk, the Marines of 3/5 strove to improve the security of the district.

Keeping with the policies laid out in 3-33.5, the Marines of 3/5 made regular excursions beyond the confines of their FOBs and outposts. Though they strove to kill Taliban insurgents and clear IEDs, they had a second duty to the civilians of Sangin. Since insurgents often operated close to civilian areas, Marines regularly took fire from homes and village compounds. Due to the fragile nature of trust-building and necessity of confirming targets before engaging them, Marines were instructed to hold fire unless positive identification could be made.¹⁰⁸ In Nick Anderson’s experience, the local civilians had little trust for the Americans and recalled instances in which the Taliban used children (apparently with the permission of parents) to discourage return fire from the Marines. His interpreters told him and his comrades that the villagers were fearful of the Marines because Taliban fighters spread information through communities. The civilians in Anderson’s area of operation believed that Marines were in Sangin to kill civilians and cut off their heads.¹⁰⁹ As 3/5 continued its deadly deployment, it became increasingly clear that a constant presence was, in fact, one of the few ways to quell civilian fears.

Counterinsurgents, according to Manual 3-33.5, must be prepared to address civilian needs from the start of operations. Doing so allows them to reshape the

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas Anderson, oral history interview, Grand Valley State University’s Veterans History Project, 2013: Unfortunately, the writer cannot locate the specific platoon/company Anderson served with. He does, however, state that he belonged to the 3.5.

¹⁰⁸ West, *One Million Steps*, 28-29.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, Oral History Interview, 2013.

environment and make it difficult for the insurgents to maintain public sympathy. Addressing needs is essential to building rapport with civilians. For units in zones of high insurgent activity, this task must be performed under fire.¹¹⁰ The Marines of 3/5 experienced combat regularly; however, civil affairs efforts had begun despite heavy Taliban activity. In January, civil affairs officers in the 3/5 began examinations of a flood defense wall that failed to prevent annual floods in the district.¹¹¹ Other projects included the construction of new roads and schools. Unfortunately for the Marines of 3/5, these projects were heavily opposed by pockets of Taliban who attacked civil affairs officers.¹¹² Civil affairs operations rarely continued unopposed in Helmand; the willingness of the 3/5 to begin public works in the early months of American involvement in Sangin, illustrated its commitment to improving the district.

Though civil affairs efforts were taking root, patrols defined the experience of many Marines in the 3/5. Every day, patrols were sent through the district in pursuit of increased security. While the perils of regular patrols remained, their impact was tangible by the spring months of 2011. Marines on patrol began to encounter more civilians than they had upon arrival in October. Families were seen on streets that had been practically abandoned in 2010. Marines interviewed by journalists spoke of this profound shift, made even more significant by the level of violence that continued to define the district.¹¹³ Nick

¹¹⁰ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Appendix A-45, 299.

¹¹¹ Lance Cpl Jeremy Fasci, "Marines Push for Better Relationships with Afghans," I Marine Expeditionary Force. <https://www.imef.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/534854/marines-push-for-better-relationships-with-afghans/>

¹¹² Sebastian Abbot, "Realism Trumps the Rules: Troops Navigate Afghanistan's Most Dangerous Place," *The Durango Herald*, December 3, 2010. <https://durangoherald.com/articles/16972>

¹¹³ Tom Bowman "An Afghan Hell On Earth For 'Darkhorse' Marines," *NPR.org*, 2011. accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2011/10/31/141724272/an-afghan-hell-on-earth-for-darkhorse-marines>

Anderson noticed a similar change as his deployment continued into 2011. It was common to encounter families while on patrol. He felt that the presence of Marines heavily influenced this shift, “they probably felt safe because there were Marines everywhere with guns. If someone pops up, that guys not going to live long enough to kill more than a couple of people.”¹¹⁴ Anderson’s testimony addresses an intriguing aspect of Sangin in 2011. Though he does not imply complete pacification in areas of increased civilian traffic, he indicates that the concept of security by constant presence held a degree of validity. In six months, the 3/5 Marines suffered 25 deaths, with 184 wounded (including 34 who lost limbs to IEDs).¹¹⁵ By conducting regular patrols, and in turn putting themselves at high risk, the Marines had seemingly adopted the security principal of 3-33.5. The casualties taken and contact made with the Taliban, in some form, had convinced civilians in Sangin that the 3/5 was not a malicious force.

In the summer of 2011, elements of the 1st Battalion 6th Marines deployed to Sangin to assist the 1st Battalion 5th Marines, which had assumed command from the 3/5. Staff sergeant Nicholas Archut served as a platoon leader for Alpha Company during its time in Sangin district. Though some of the Marines in 3/5 noticed an increased civilian presence in the areas they patrolled, the Taliban remained active in the district. Archut and his platoon conducted regular patrols that frequently encountered insurgents (Archut claims that the platoon was engaged every day during the first month) and took casualties from IEDs. In addition to the patrols, Archut took part in shuras with local leaders. Shuras allowed Marines and civilian authorities to come together and discuss military

¹¹⁴ Anderson, Oral History Interview, 2013.

¹¹⁵ Tom Bowman, “An Afghan Hell on Earth”

operations and civilian needs. At some point during the deployment, the platoon established positions near PB Georgia, an area of significant Taliban activity. There, Archut led a shura, where he explained the best ways for civilians to avoid harm and they in turn told him about improvements their village required. While Archut spoke with the local leaders, a squad posted outside of the village fell under attack by Taliban lying in the surrounding cornfields. Taliban leaders resented the idea of Americans meeting with Afghan civilians and frequently attempted to disrupt such meetings. The ability of the Marines effectively to prevent Taliban interference of shuras likely led to increased trust between the Marines and civilians. In fact, as time passed, civilians began sharing information on the Taliban in Archut's area. According to them, the local Taliban leader returned from Pakistan with an additional twenty fighters just prior to the arrival of 1/6.¹¹⁶ Despite almost constant harassment from the Taliban, Archut and his platoon maintained a constant presence and worked to establish contact with the civilians in his area of operations.

Sergeant Bjorn Cantrell arrived in Sangin in July of 2011. Once he and his squad arrived in the district, they began conducting patrols. The area to the north of Cantrell's base of operations was relatively quiet, with much of the Taliban activity occurring in the south. When he began patrolling with his squad, he noticed that civilians tended to run away from the Marines rather than interact with them. Cantrell believed that they ran off in the direction of the Taliban. The Taliban, knowing that fleeing civilians meant Marine patrols, set up IEDs in Marines' path. Judging by the aggressiveness of the insurgents to

¹¹⁶ Staff Sergeant Nicholas B. Archut, USMC. United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2012.

the south, Cantrell believed that the area was a stronghold or proving ground for the Taliban¹¹⁷ Cantrell and his squad also noticed a difference in the way civilians from these areas interacted with them:

The people on our map to the north, they were all extremely friendly. If you saw people working in the fields, you could go up to them. You could talk to them and they would talk to you... To the south, there was no relationship at all. As soon as they saw us coming, they instantly headed south to avoid us. We were never able to build a rapport with them. The only time we ever went down there, we either found an IED, hit an IED, or got in an ambush. [The people they did talk to would typically say] ‘the Taliban don’t want us talking to you, they are going to cut off my head tonight if I talk to you for too long. I’m going to leave, have a good day.’¹¹⁸

Cantrell’s time in Sangin lasted little more than two months. In that time, he noticed that the civilians in his area seemed largely indifferent to both the Marines and the Taliban. In his mind, they were accustomed to the fighting and just waited for it to end, regardless of outcome.¹¹⁹ Though Cantrell’s experience in Sangin was fraught with hardship, it was representative of the inherent difficulty in maintaining pressure in counterinsurgency. The simple act of making themselves available for civilian interaction was crucial to any future success in the counterinsurgency process. Civilians in southern Sangin were likely hesitant because they knew the Taliban would linger. At this point, they could not say the

¹¹⁷ Sergeant Bjorn D. Cantrell, USMC. United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2012.

¹¹⁸ Cantrell, United States Marine Corps History Division Oral History Interview, 2012.

¹¹⁹ Cantrell, Oral History Interview, 2012.

same thing about the Marines, who had only just arrived. Interactions between Sangin civilians and Battalion 1/6 represented the steep cost of building trust.

In the latter half of 2011, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines was replaced by the 3rd Battalion 7th Marines commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Seth Folsom. In August, Folsom visited Sangin to gather information from Battalion 1/5's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Tom Savage. Savage introduced Folsom to the district, its dangers, and the people he would interact with in shuras. A few weeks later, Folsom returned with his battalion to conduct the Relief in Place (RIP) with Savage's battalion. To avoid unnecessary casualties, Folsom instructed his company commanders to ask questions and withhold criticism while the 1/5 transferred its knowledge of the battlespace. Ignoring advice from a unit that knew the territory was unwise if one hoped to make progress.¹²⁰ Unit rotations held a potential challenge to counterinsurgency. Building relationships with civilians required Marines to make regular appearance at shuras and other civilian gatherings. Through interaction with outgoing units, incoming Marines such as those in 3/7 educated themselves on their new battlespace and how best to interact with locals. However, the onus was on incoming commanders, like Folsom, to ensure that new units made the transition as harmless as possible for civilians living in the area.

From September to April, the 3/7 maintained the operational cadence that began in 2010 with the arrival of 3/5. However, civilians seemed to interact much more with the Marines in this period than they had in the past. Lance Corporal Thomas Bailey, in a unit-produced film, described his interactions with local civilians, "The youth are always

¹²⁰ LtCol Seth W. B. Folsom USMC, *Where Youth and Laughter Go: With "The Cutting Edge" in Afghanistan* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2015), 52-63.

running up screaming for chocolate, you've got the elders coming up and they're saying hello. Across the board, they're actually pretty welcoming.”¹²¹ Lt. Col. Folsom also dealt with children on a regular basis. Though he liked to see children approaching them, he was disheartened by older children who bullied the younger ones when they received candy. Folsom hoped that small acts such as handing out candy would help win the population over to their side, yet he acknowledged the presence of vindictive individuals. Small precautions were taken by Folsom to avoid disputes. He refused to give candy to older children and would not give it to the young when they were around.¹²² While Folsom's policy of doling out candy may seem insignificant at face value; its implications speak to the complexity of COIN strategy. A small child would pose little threat to Marines; the same cannot be said of an older child or young adult whose future was certainly up in the air. A young man angered by the conduct of Marines (however insignificant the insult), would certainly find a place in the insurgency.

While the Marines worked to maintain relations with civilians by allocating goods and services, the means by which they did so were not always effective. Throughout 2011 (during the tenure of both 1/5 and 3/7), the Marines in Sangin conducted public works projects valued at \$900,000. These projects included two roads linking American bases in the district and a four-room schoolhouse. Unlike most structures in Sangin, the school was constructed with brick. However, Afghan tribal elders refused to provide a teacher

¹²¹ Lance Corporal Bobby J. Gonzalez. Dir. “3/7 Sangin II.Mp4- YouTube,” accessed November 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSst0AH7-QGM>.

¹²² Folsom, *Where Youth and Laughter Go*, 136.

unless the Americans spent an additional \$100,000 on electricity for the building.¹²³ First Lieutenant Matthew Cancian of the 1/5 Marines wrote of these projects in 2013, showing a significant disconnect between success and the allocation of funds. While a school is far from useless, it was not something the people of Sangin required to increase their functionality. Cancian described the reluctance of farmers to grow wheat (likely as opposed to poppy) due to a lack of proper equipment. Farmers needed to pay twenty-five percent of their profits to utilize the mills of large landowners. The mills were valued at \$4,550; a proposed project would have allowed the purchase of several mills for public use. However, as Cancian put it “The project was stillborn because it was not spectacular enough in dollar amount to grab attention.”¹²⁴ Though the United States was clearly willing to expend significant capital on the development of Sangin, a debate between glamor and utility complicated the process.

Perhaps one of the greatest moral dilemmas within the logistical sphere of counterinsurgency, was the importance of the opium trade to Afghanistan’s civilians. In 2005, an estimated seventy percent of the world’s opium and heroin supply emanated from Helmand province, providing \$155 million to the Taliban.¹²⁵ For Lieutenant Colonel Folsom, the poppy eradication efforts of the Afghan government, placed him and his men in a dangerous predicament. Many farmers in Sangin refused to switch to other crops, as the production of poppy was lucrative. Additionally, the Taliban posed a threat to farmers refusing to grow it. Unfortunately for Folsom’s men, their duty to support

¹²³ First Lieutenant Matthew F. Cancian, “Counterinsurgency as Cargo Cult” in Paul W Westermeyer et al., *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan, 2010-2014: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, (Quantico: History Division, United States Marine Corps, 2017), 79.

¹²⁴ Cancian, “Counterinsurgency as Cargo Cult”, 80.

¹²⁵ West, *One Million Steps*, XX.

eradication put them at further risk of Taliban aggression. While the eradication of poppy served to damage the Taliban's financial structure, it risked the deterioration of civilian trust and the increase of enemy aggression.¹²⁶ Nicholas Solecki of the 1/7 Marines witnessed the Taliban response to poppy eradication in the summer of 2012. His small patrol base was surrounded with more than \$10 million worth of poppy. In a period of relative calm, Afghans charged with the destruction of poppy, arrived on scene with a bulldozer. The moment the machine began working, it came under fire from nearby Taliban fighters.¹²⁷ The Marines' reluctant support of poppy eradication had a seemingly insignificant effect on poppy production. A Rand Corporation study completed in 2012 showed an increase in poppy eradication from 3,810 hectares in 2011 to 9,672 hectares destroyed in 2012. Despite this 154% increase in eradication efforts, poppy cultivation in Helmand province is shown to have increased from 63,307 to 75,176 hectares. In 2012, a total of 3,637 hectares of poppy was eradicated, less than five percent of total cultivation in Helmand.¹²⁸

Civilian interactions and economic actions played a significant part in the deployments of the Marines in Sangin. The daily interactions with children were one-way Americans strove to build a foundation upon which to launch civic actions. Marines such as Lt. Col. Folsom made efforts to understand the possible implications of their actions. Unfortunately, these grassroots efforts were not always complimented by successful economic support. Building new schools certainly provided long term benefits; however,

¹²⁶ Folsom, *Where Youth and Laughter Go*, 296-297.

¹²⁷ Solecki, Oral History Interview.

¹²⁸ Victoria Greenfield et al., "Reducing the Cultivation of Opium Poppies in Southern Afghanistan," (Rand Corporation, 2015.) 6, 13.

the immediate needs of farmers were seemingly sidelined in favor of grandiose spending. Counterinsurgency policy makers argue in 3-33.5 that smaller civil affairs projects are more likely to succeed. Large projects are conspicuous to insurgents, difficult to maintain, and less financially recoverable. Projects geared towards the needs of civilians stand the best chance of success.¹²⁹ The refusal to purchase public mills was likely a factor that complicated poppy eradication efforts. Although Taliban resistance to eradication was an unchangeable reality, farmers could potentially change crops if provided the equipment to do so without sacrificing profit. Failure in this regard likely influenced the continuation of significant poppy production in Helmand and increased potential for ANA and Marine casualties.

Though civil affairs in Sangin was rife with problems, elements of the humanitarian side of COIN showed promise. Like in Marjah, Marine Female Engagement Teams worked with Afghan women to foster closer connections to Afghan families. In Sangin, members of the FET attached to 3/7 went to women's homes while their husbands were working. Speaking with women at their homes allows them to feel more comfortable and safe.¹³⁰ FET in Sangin also extended their mission to include local children. In December, FET 8, stationed in FOB Jackson (the main FOB in Sangin, located in the southeast), held a children's shura. More than 50 children traveled to the base and listened to a presentation on the dangers of the Taliban, IEDs, and the duties of Afghan security forces. The talk was followed by a puppet show which reinforced the

¹²⁹ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Appendix A-48, 300.

¹³⁰ Cpl. Meredith Brown, "Female Engagement Team Builds Trust, Rapport with Women in Sangin," dvids, December 15, 2011. <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/81422/female-engagement-team-builds-trust-rapport-with-women-sangin>.

safety lessons. Once the shura concluded, the children played soccer with Afghan soldiers and American personnel.¹³¹ Non-kinetic tasks such as family engagement served a crucial objective of counterinsurgency; patrols brought the Marines into the civilian's world, and FETs sought to capitalize on the environment of cooperation.

As the Sangin Marines established a permanent presence in the district, advising efforts took effect. The period between 2010 and 2014 was one in which the training of Afghan soldiers was a top priority. Publication 3-33.5 places great importance on these efforts, as the transfer of combat command to native forces is a major end goal of counterinsurgency campaigns. American personnel instructing native troops place a large focus on individual and group effectiveness. Americans operating in conjunction with native forces are made to do so in the smallest ratio possible. Additionally, Americans are instructed be respectful of native cultural practices, especially those that are not counterproductive to overarching counterinsurgency efforts.¹³² Though the Marines in Sangin worked to build up ANA troops, the situation in 2012 did not bode well for a future without an American military presence.

In the spring of 2012, Marine team leader Nicholas Solecki, following his eventful introduction to ANA troops, began the arduous work of advising. Located in a small patrol base thirty minutes (by foot) from the nearest FOB, he and twelve other Marines lived with twenty-three Afghan soldiers. Apart from marijuana use, Solecki noticed a significant lack of enthusiasm among the troops. There were Afghan men in the unit who showed talent for soldiering, but they seemed to be a minority. Afghan troops

¹³¹ Cpl. Katherine Keleher, "Female Engagement Team 8, Afghan Members Host Children's Shura," CENTCOM, December 29, 2011.

¹³² *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, section 6-59, 218-219.

also patrolled alone; when they made contact, the Marines were often ordered to withhold support, for their objective was to ensure the ANA could operate on their own.¹³³ Ben Anderson, a combat journalist with *Vice News*, documented similar issues in the fall of that year. In addition to the drug use, Anderson saw widespread agitation amongst the ANA ranks. Many resented the instruction they received by Marines, claiming that they were talked down to. The desire (held by many) for the Marines to leave Sangin was compounded with the misconception that all funds given to the Marines by the United States government would be given to the ANA once the Marines left.¹³⁴

Such a lack of military professionalism is perhaps best explained by simple realities of Afghan life. Many of the recruits added to the Afghan army and security forces were disinterested, illiterate men. The needs of the tribe and family often came before the needs of Afghanistan. Enlistment in the ANA held the promise of regular pay, thus financial security for families. Hatred for the Taliban was in ample supply, but if presented the opportunity to earn a living in another fashion, it is likely that many would have taken it.¹³⁵ Many who displayed a willingness to fight the Taliban often disregarded the advice given to them by American Marines. In late 2012, Ben Anderson was filming a group of Marines and ANA troops under sporadic fire from a nearby cluster of buildings. Safe behind the walls of their FOB and unable to positively identify the enemy, the Marines advised the men to hold position. This advice was ignored by an ANA

¹³³ Solecki, Oral History Interview.

¹³⁴ Ben Anderson, Dir. *This is what Winning Looks Like*, Aired May 20, 2013, (New York: Vice News, 2013), DVD. Solecki mentions this film in his interview. The fact that Anderson's film was produced one month following Solecki's departure from Sangin, suggests a degree of continuity and validity in the issues within the ANA.

¹³⁵ Dr. Martin Loicano and Captain Craig C. Felker "In Our Own Image: Training the Afghan National Security Forces" in Aaron B. O'Connell, ed. *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 124.

officer who grabbed a light machine gun and walked out of the base, firing in the direction of the Taliban. This incident resulted in little more than the unnecessary expenditure of ammunition.¹³⁶ Solecki's own experience working with the ANA made both him and his comrades wary of the amount of responsibility they placed in the hands of their Afghan Allies. Though the purpose of the combined platoon was to allow the ANA to walk point and lead, this was not always possible, especially in areas known for Taliban activity. While a Marine working towards handing control to the ANA would be wise to train his ally, the laws of self-preservation sometimes overrode these objectives. Solecki and his men often maintained control out of fear that the ANA would lead them into a deadly situation.¹³⁷

Incidents such as those documented by Anderson and Solecki were a major hindrance on advising efforts. Impending withdrawal likely provided little assurance that operational efficiency was achievable. To complicate the Marines' advising task further, the frequent infiltration of the ANA by the Taliban and internal (Marine-ANA) disputes, threatened security within bases. These green-on-blue incidents occurred when Afghan security forces attacked ISAF personnel training them.¹³⁸ In 2012 these attacks reached new heights and accounted for 15 percent of all coalition deaths in Afghanistan. Many commanders claimed that most attacks were the result of cultural differences, while Afghan officials blamed enemy infiltration. Between 2008 and 2017, nineteen green-on-blue attacks were reported in Helmand province, for a total of thirty-four killed and

¹³⁶ Anderson, *This is What Winning Looks Like*, DVD.

¹³⁷ Solecki, Oral History Interview.

¹³⁸ Ben Anderson, *No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic Struggle for Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2011), 255.

thirty-two wounded. Attacks were most common in 2012, with sixty-one total dead in Afghanistan, and eighty-one wounded.¹³⁹ In his 2012 Eid al Fitr address, Mohammed Omar, the original leader of the Taliban, addressed the green-on-blue attacks. He called upon Afghan men to abandon their posts and join the Taliban:

Mujahideen have cleverly infiltrated in the ranks of the enemy... Thanks to the infiltration of the Mujahideen, they are able to enter bases, offices and intelligence centers of the enemy. Then, they easily carry out decisive and coordinated attacks, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy both in life and equipment... I invite all personnel of the Kabul Administration, particularly, the personnel of police and army, their officers and the employees of the intelligence department to abandon support of the invaders against your religion and country; join the ranks of Mujahideen like your heroic colleagues—those who deal crushing blows at the invaders from time to time.¹⁴⁰

The threat of infiltration was an ever-present factor in the lives of Sangin Marines. Threats to their well-being, while an inherent challenge of counterinsurgency operations, meant that marines took on extreme risk in the mission to train their Afghan allies.

In the spring of 2014, the last Marines departed Sangin, leaving the 2nd Brigade, 215th Corps of the ANA in charge of the district. Some Marines interviewed in the final days of the drawdown displayed a high level of confidence in the ability of the brigade to

¹³⁹ Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist “Green-on-Blue Attacks in Afghanistan: The Data | RealClearDefense,” accessed November 24, 2018, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/03/21/green-on-blue_attacks_in_afghanistan_the_data_111015.html.

¹⁴⁰ Bill Roggio “Mullah Omar Addresses Green-on-Blue Attacks | FDD’s Long War Journal,” August 16, 2012, [//www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/mullah_omar_addresses_green-on.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/mullah_omar_addresses_green-on.php).

maintain security on their own.¹⁴¹ However, regardless of one brigade's ability to fight, the difficulties in the previous few years suggested that the ANA required much additional preparation before it was ready to stand against or defeat the Taliban. Brigadier General Daniel D. Yoo believed that a permanent solution to the Taliban would likely involve a coexisting of tribes, government, and the Taliban.¹⁴² Yoo's stance seemed to reflect a lack of faith in the maintenance of ANA strength in the district. His prediction was perhaps too optimistic, for in December 2015, the Taliban seized most of the district from the ANA and controlled all but two districts within the wider Helmand province.¹⁴³

The seizing of Sangin by the Taliban in 2015 is certainly sufficient in proving the overall failure of American counterinsurgency efforts in the long-term. However, from 2010 to 2014, the Marines stationed in the district actively worked to enact counterinsurgency principles shown in 3-33.5. In 2010, the 3/7 arrived in Sangin, greeted by an allied force trapped behind the walls of fortified bases. The work accomplished in the opening months of the Marines' tenure in the district, while costly, began to loosen the Taliban's vice grip on the district. The 3/5 Marines, despite an active Taliban and multitude of IEDs scattered across the district, patrolled regularly. Their efforts led to increased interaction with civilians whom once feared Marines. Though not every Marine shared optimistic views of the future of Sangin, they clearly demonstrated a willingness to maintain a physical presence and vigilance in relationship building. The experiences of

¹⁴¹ Corporal Joshua Young "Last Marines Exit Sangin, Afghanistan", in Westermeyer, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan*, 163.

¹⁴² Hope Hodge Seck, "Marine Commanders Reflect on 13 Years of War in Afghanistan" in Westermeyer, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan*, 185.

¹⁴³ "Afghan Taliban 'Overrun Sangin Area,'" December 23, 2015, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35167983>.

Marines like Cantrell and Archut were testament to the Marine Corps' willingness to follow the COIN tenant of risk-taking.

The Marines also attempted to transition these relationships into nation-building efforts. Unfortunately for them, protocol surrounding the allocation of funds and the eradication of poppy, overshadowed effective logistics support. Advising efforts were a major focus for the Marines, but their combat expertise was certainly one of their most valuable assets. Although there were men in the Afghan army that were motivated to fight, their inexperience, the lack of motivation displayed by many of their comrades and the threat of Taliban infiltration complicated these efforts. Unfortunately, an ostensible indifference within the ranks of the Afghan Army, coupled with the looming withdrawal, prevented the creation of the proper bulwark against Taliban resurgence. In 2019, the results of this failure resonate, as the Taliban continues to fight for the soul of Afghanistan; against a failing government and a meager force of American advisors. Despite Marines' ability to execute proper counterinsurgency strategy, a permanent, Taliban-free Sangin was unattainable; largely due to factors outside of the Marines' control.

CHAPTER V– CONCLUSION

Shortly following American withdrawal in 2014, Taliban flags began to pop up throughout Helmand province. Counterinsurgency efforts performed by so many Marine battalions remained unfinished, leaving behind a legacy of failure. Although America's war in Afghanistan failed to bring about the destruction of the Taliban, elements of counterinsurgency strategy demand exploration. Counterinsurgency is widely considered a total failure in scholarship and media coverage of the war. However, close examination of Marine units in Helmand Province between 2010 and 2012 reveal a competency in carrying out counterinsurgency operations that reflected official policies of Warfighting Publication 3-33.5. The innerworkings of COIN strategy are most apparent in the town of Marjah and district of Sangin, where Marines worked alongside Afghan forces to combat Taliban dominance, secure civilian populations, and conduct civic action programs. Through an examination of Marines on the ground in Helmand, the fine details of counterinsurgency shine through; proving the Marine Corps ability to execute military policy by the book.

Marines operating in Helmand following the troop surge, did so in varying environments. However, both Marjah and Sangin demanded the use of kinetic force to reduce Taliban activity. Marjah, one of the most significant Taliban strongholds, posed a unique challenge in this regard, as civilians often lived close Taliban defenders. Counterinsurgency, above all else, demands the fair treatment of civilians. Marine units involved in the opening phase of Operation Moshtarak, recognized that counterinsurgency began as soon as the operation commenced. Members of the assault force, such as the Marines of Battalion 1/6, relied less on artillery and air support, and

more on shoulder fired rockets and underslung grenade launchers. Precautionary measures failed to fully prevent collateral damage, but the reluctance to take full advantage of American firepower likely limited civilian casualties. Once major combat operations ceased, Marines and their Afghan allies established checkpoints and patrols that served to separate civilians from insurgents. Kinetic operations in Sangin served a similar purpose. While limiting civilian casualties was certainly important, the primary threat to COIN in Sangin was the flow of insurgents into the district from surrounding areas. Blocking positions established by Battalion 3/7 in the first half of 2010 helped to limit the Taliban's freedom of movement in the district. Although operations in both locations began kinetically, the Marines were, in fact, performing the crucial COIN phase of "clear".¹⁴⁴

Once the Taliban no longer operated unopposed, Marines and their Afghan allies maintained their presence amongst the civilian population. In Sangin, Marines conducted daily patrols throughout the district. The constant patrols sought to eliminate IED scattered throughout Sangin, engage bands of insurgents, and to show civilians that the Marines were there to separate them from the Taliban. In time, locals increased their interactions with Marines. In Marjah, similar patrols were conducted. Additionally, checkpoints were established throughout the town to restrict the movement of insurgents seeking reentry. Maintaining a presence was perhaps the most fundamental element of counterinsurgency

¹⁴⁴ *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Section 5-57, 176. The idea of "clear" in the case of Marjah and Sangin, does not suggest the complete elimination of the Taliban in those areas, rather significant reduction. However, in both cases, it was clear that once the Marines arrived and began operations, the Taliban no longer held complete control over those areas.

in Helmand. In both Marjah and Sangin, the combined units of Marines and Afghan forces put themselves at additional risk in the spirit of security and relationship building.

Marines providing security also acted as advisors to the Afghan army and police forces. Military experts behind 3-33.5 recognized the importance of host nation forces to defeating an insurgency. The purpose of the American troop surge was to not only reduce Taliban holdings in Afghanistan, but also enable the Afghanistan military to operate effectively without American assistance. Marine forces in both Marjah and Sangin patrolled and fought alongside the ANA and ANCOF. Unfortunately, these partnerships were not always productive, as poor leadership, marijuana use, and seemingly carefree attitudes toward the security situation, were common. Furthermore, instances of Taliban infiltration meant that Marines needed to be mindful of green-on-blue attacks. Operating alongside Afghan units arguably presented the Marines with their greatest challenge and threat. Careless soldiers threatened the security of their comrades and the Marines, whom already bore additional risk by placing themselves in contested areas during patrols. Still, Marines consistently pushed their allies to perform their duties with purpose and precision. Throughout the process, Marines occasionally encountered effective officers whose leadership created productive learning environments. Unfortunately, American forces could not create operational zeal where none existed, thus military success in the post-American years remained dubious. Regardless of the potential (or lack thereof) of the Afghan military, it does little to diminish the commitment the Marines displayed to the advising side of COIN.

Marines in Helmand certainly performed their share of kinetic operations. The security provided through assaults and patrols (all essential components in 3-33.5)

allowed Marine and civilian counterinsurgent elements to perform their duties. In both Marjah and Sangin, Marines met regularly with local leaders in shuras. Other actions, like doling out candy to children, or the deployment of Female Engagement Teams, allowed Marines to interact with less enfranchised members of society; giving them a chance to create a positive image in all Afghans. Marines interacted with civilians both improve relations and gather information on necessary civil affairs projects. Such projects included the improvement of water retention walls, schools, wells, and medical facilities. Additionally, the presence of the Marines allowed civilian members of District Stabilization Teams to consult Afghans on a variety of issues, such as sanitation. Marine units augmented the capabilities of civilian counterinsurgents, many of whom lacked resources necessary to perform their duties on the scale required.

Upon American withdrawal in 2014, Afghanistan remained the world's leading producer of poppy. Helmand is Afghanistan's most poppy-rich province, which made its cultivation a primary concern for the American counterinsurgency effort. By 2017, poppy production in Helmand had increased by 79 percent, indicating clear failure to transition Afghanistan agriculture to less illicit crops.¹⁴⁵ In Helmand, eradication progressed slowly. Prior to February 2010, Marjah was a Taliban stronghold largely centered on the production and exportation of poppy. American decision makers offered payment to farmers willing to switch to less illicit crops; however, few were willing to adopt new crops that earned them far less than the cultivation of poppy. Other than the maintenance of checkpoints (which were not solely geared toward drug interdiction) American forces

¹⁴⁵ Alfred w. McCoy, "How the Heroin Trade Explains the US-UK Failure in Afghanistan," *The Guardian: The long read*, January 9, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/09/how-the-heroin-trade-explains-the-us-uk-failure-in-afghanistan>.

did not strictly inhibit production. The experiences of Marines such as Nicholas Solecki suggested severe Taliban resistance to the destruction of poppy fields. Though eradication efforts seemingly lacked purpose, the fact that Marines did not aggressively push for eradication represented a level of respect for civilian farmers. Poppy produced in Helmand was largely sold illegally; however, making eradication optional was likely less damaging to the environment of cooperation the Marines hoped to cultivate.

Counterinsurgency operations in Marjah and Sangin during the post-surge months proceeded with stringent time constraints. When President Obama agreed to the troop surge, the mission was given a timetable; gradual withdrawal was set to begin in July 2011. By 2015, less than 10,000 troops remained in Afghanistan; a sharp decrease from the nearly 140,000 deployed in 2010.¹⁴⁶ An essential component to the success of counterinsurgency is the investment of time. American leaders tasked with conducting the counterinsurgency campaign of the post-surge era counted on the quick expulsion of the Taliban followed by rapid nation building. However, counterinsurgency experts contend that successful COIN requires proper time for relationships to bloom between counterinsurgents and host nation actors. While a surge in troop strength was a step in the right direction, the looming draw-down doomed post-surge counterinsurgency to failure. Discussions of counterinsurgency failure in Afghanistan, which began mere months following the launch of major operations in Helmand, indicate a profound ignorance of the commitment necessary to incite change. Failure in Afghanistan was likely due to the unwillingness to commit surge-level troop strength for a prolonged period, rather than

¹⁴⁶ Jackson, "American Strategy in Afghanistan," 98-105.

operational ineptitude on part of the Marine Corps. As operations in Marjah and Sangin prove, the Marines executed counterinsurgency policies as directed in Manual 3.-33.5

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