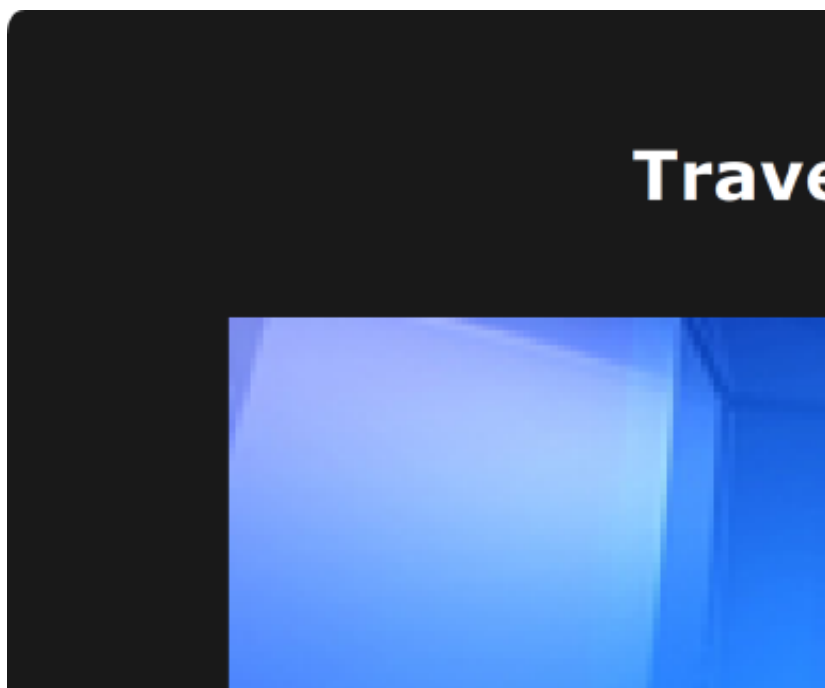


From The Times

June 18, 2008

Speechless with fear: on reconnaissance in Taleban-controlled Helmand

Deep in Taleban territory, this Sky News correspondent went on reconnaissance with The Parachute Regiment's elite Pathfinder unit. They got a hostile reception



Stuart Ramsay

The soldiers had taken to calling it "Death Valley" and, looking down from a high mountain pass, I could see why.

The village below, nestled between sheer Afghan mountain ranges, seemed peaceful enough but the final three-mile stretch snaked through a narrow pass flanked by sheer rock.

I have been with the Parachute Regiment's elite Pathfinder reconnaissance unit for the past two weeks. They have been working with no support deep in the north of Helmand province in Afghanistan. This is Taleban and drug-producing territory. No foreign troops have been here for the best part of two years, leaving the Taleban well-entrenched and armed.

This was to be a day of near-disasters. Two of the brand-new £640,000 Jackal all-terrain fighting vehicles needed repairs and I ended up in the truck being towed.

The convoy of 12 Jackals inched its way down the pass and on to the open plain that flanked the village from where we had been attacked four days earlier.

We skirted the village but could not avoid the three-mile exit point, the perfect place for an ambush.

As we approached a complex of houses and mud-walled compounds, the first salvo of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and mortars thumped into the sand around us.

This was a sophisticated attack. The Pathfinder Jackals ahead of the main body were not fired upon initially,

leaving them unaware of the attack. Instead the Taleban focused first on the rear vehicles, which stopped to engage. My vehicle and the tow vehicle pulled to a halt. AK47 rounds crackled over my head as I tried to film.

The column moved off but the Taleban had clearly identified the tempting target of the two trucks together. The firing intensified and we moved to the protection of a small hillock.

By now the trucks in front were taking fire. They rallied around our trucks as another RPG exploded into a bank 50 feet behind me.

"Watch out for the mortars and RPGs," screamed Captain Simon Chalmers, above the shooting and the revving of trucks. "My gun's f****d," he added, helpfully.

His weapon was not the only one that malfunctioned. As I huddled beneath the muzzle of one 50-cal machinegun, a soldier struggled to fire more than one round at a time. I could hear other gunners screaming "weapon jam" as they dodged incoming Taleban rounds. I watched two mortars slam into the dust to our left and right while the nearest 50-cal guns were unable to return fire.

"It's f***ing crap ammo," one soldier screamed at his patrol commander.

As we left the protection of the hill I could see movement near a wall about 200 metres to our left. I heard a bang and the sickening fizzle of an RPG fly above my head. The Taleb fighter had the shot but blew it. I looked at Jim Foster, the Sky cameraman, an experienced former soldier, and he smiled.

Our gunner had seen the firing position and began returning fire but the Taleb had gone. Radio chatter told us that we were now the target: all RPGs to fire at us.

As we moved off, three things happened that will stay with me for ever: the tow rope broke, the guns on the second vehicle stopped working and we were now taking incoming rounds from our left and right. I was speechless with fear.

Jim jumped out and helped to replace the tow rope while one of the Pathfinders pushed me to the floor of the vehicle and removed the gun. All the time AK rounds pinged off the rocks and sand around us.

Ready to go, we pulled away — a dash to the open desert, Pathfinders urging us between them as they returned fire from the last compounds on the edge of the village.

As the sun began to set I finally realised the three-mile contact was over. We had survived "Death Valley". Jim Foster grinned and gripped my knee. "That was a bit close," he said, laughing.

The Pathfinders are in effect a special forces unit that is part of The Parachute Regiment. This trip is what they are designed to do: gathering information on potential targets and testing the "atmospherics" of the region, a dreadful expression that basically means meeting local people and seeing what they think.

The next "atmospherics" meeting at HQ will not be the most comfortable. In village after village the Pathfinders were essentially asked to leave. The message was simple: when you come the fighting starts.

A group of village elders, arms aloft, strode towards the soldiers. Within moments of sitting in the sand they began.

"When you are here there is trouble. You bomb our villages, you fight with the Taleban, we don't want this," their leader shouted, gesticulating and smashing a stone into the ground.

"We don't have electricity, we don't have schools and we don't have medical centres and we don't mind. Leave us - leave us in peace, take away your weapons," he finished, turning quickly and walking away followed by the rest of the council.

One of the soldiers grinned rather weakly at me: "Now that was a bollocking."

The Pathfinders' commanding officer, Major Matt Taylor, was more concerned, and perhaps a little taken aback.

"I can see what they mean but I didn't really expect that. We turn up and don't stay for very long and these people don't really know who to believe," he said.

“We don't attack innocent people and we want to bring change here, but it is taking a long time. We are a long way from infrastructure and this is a hugely difficult job. Over time we will continue with the progress that we have made so far but it takes time. The Taleban are here and they attack us and we have to deal with that as well.”

This is a mission beyond the normal confines of military activity in Afghanistan, and it is tough.

*The author is chief correspondent for [Sky News](#) on assignment in Afghanistan for this week's *For Queen and Country* series*

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your advertisement.

Times Online Services: [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [E-paper](#)
News International associated websites: [Globrix Property Search](#) | [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2010 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

