ON November 10, 2007, an ambush in Aranas, a remote village in northeastern Afghanistan where I had spent the majority of my 16-month military deployment, killed six Americans and three Afghans, wounding 18 more. The attack set a new record for American service members killed in Afghanistan in a single year, with nearly two months left until Christmas.

Nine months later, another attack in the same valley—this time in Wanat, the district capital—killed nine U.S. soldiers, marking the largest single loss of American life in Afghanistan since 2005.

In both instances, the unit hit in the attacks was the one that had replaced mine.
TACTICAL VICTORIES AND STRATEGIC FAILURE IN NORTHEASTERN AFGHANISTAN.

LOSE THE WAIGUL VALLEY

BY ERIK MALMSTROM
I had worried about its welfare ever since departing. I hoped it would be spared the casualties we had suffered, but I knew that its mission would be even more difficult than ours. I was not optimistic about the situation I had left behind.

Nevertheless, I was still shocked by what I learned at the funeral of a friend killed in Aranas. His battalion had already lost 14 soldiers—almost double the death toll of its previous yearlong deployment in southern Afghanistan, and in just five months. By the time the guns fell silent in Wanat, the losses of a single company nearly matched those sustained by my entire battalion.

Overwhelmed by these tragedies, I envisioned the valor, courage, and heroism of the fallen soldiers. But I was also angry over the strategic blunders that stranded soldiers in impossible situations. Violence has spiked in much of Afghanistan and progress is slow or nonexistent. Incoherent, misdirected, and shortsighted coalition efforts are to blame. What makes that truth so difficult to bear, however, is the way this large-scale failure has undercut the rich potential of a strategy my unit sacrificed so dearly to carry out.

I first deployed to northeastern Afghanistan in the spring of 2006 as a rifle platoon leader of a 39-man light-infantry unit in the 10th Mountain Division. Our initiation to combat did not take long. On our first convoy in April, an improvised-explosive device (IED) struck a Humvee clearing our route. The blast, which flipped the vehicle backwards and incinerated its entire front half, only caused minor injuries, but it foreshadowed a violent and difficult tour of duty. Later that month we participated in Operation Mountain Lion, the largest U.S. operation since 2002’s Operation Anaconda. For my platoon, the mission entailed a month of dismounted patrols up to elevations of 9,000 feet, combat loads exceeding 100 pounds, and sporadic, largely inconsequential firefight.

Following Mountain Lion and the departure of our Marine predecessors, my battalion implemented a major shift in operations. Rather than commuting to problem areas from large bases, we posted platoons in enemy strongholds to stay. My company assumed responsibility for the Waigul Valley, a 25-kilometer-long trough split between the provinces of Kunar and Nuristan.

Centered on the village of Aranas, the Waigul Valley had been serving as a sanctuary for enemy groups including Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Hizb-i-Islami, and Lashkar-e-Taiba. The terrain was remote and rugged, with poor infrastructure and virtually nonexistent government. The populace was zealously religious and insular. With both American and Pakistani bases nearby but scant military presence on the ground, the area was an ideal sanctuary for insurgents.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

Two months after Erik Malmstrom C’03 returned from his tour of duty in northeastern Afghanistan, U.S. Foreign Service officer Matt Asada C’02 W’02 was posted in nearby Kunduz as part of a provincial reconstruction team. He spoke with the Gazette about the challenge during a visit to Philadelphia in June 2008. Here is an edited version of that conversation.

You’re part of a provincial reconstruction team. What exactly is your mission?

The reconstruction teams are there to extend the reach and authority of the central government, to work with the Afghan forces to provide a stable environment so that reconstruction activities can occur. I generate political support for development projects, and I lobby back in Kabul with USAID to get attention to those issues and to bring those national-level projects down to my province.

Where do you live and whom do you work with?

I live on the German military base in Kunduz, a province in the northeast. You’ll have a German implementing partner or a German NGO that’s out there on its own, that has no bodyguards and only one or two cars. It’s just a different perception of the security environment. I think that does have an impact on how we do development. The one thing I would say is that the closer you can get to the people, the more effective we are going to be in the long term.

Do you notice any difference in the way things get addressed by a predominantly German team than if you were attached to an American team?

The Germans are very planning-oriented. They like to consider the decisions on all sides before making one—but as soon as they’ve made one, they stick with it. On the other hand, some might say that the U.S. is an idea-driven culture; we’re more spontaneous, we like to try things out, we like to take more risks. So yes, you see some of those things come out in how the development work is done. Also you see some differences in how we view the security situation, and what that means for our development partners. For instance, we have USAID implementing partners who are active in the province and they may have a certain security footprint. They may require going around with bodyguards, for instance, and more vehicles, whereas you’ll have a German implementing partner or a German NGO that’s out there on its own, that has no bodyguards and only one or two cars. It’s just a different perception of the security environment. I think that does have an impact on how we do development. The one thing I would say is that the closer you can get to the people, the more effective we are going to be in the long term.

What kinds of projects have you been involved in, and what kinds of challenges have been involved?

We’re trying to do a lot with the private sector. How do we stimulate the private sector, and what does it take to grow the economy? Well, Afghanistan has been a country of trade for centuries. They were on the Silk Route. They know how to trade—it is not something that we have to teach them. But they’ve gone through a couple different regimes, and their experience under the Communist regime—where you had a command economy as opposed to our market economy—really altered people’s perceptions of how an economy should work. And I think it’s something that we’ve never truly addressed, being there in Afghanistan. The Communists...
ply methods such as air drops, sling loads, donkeys, and the purchase of local supplies. Compounding all these problems was a severe shortage of manpower and assets to effectively control the valley.

Surprisingly, we faced little enemy resistance during our first two months. Expecting to be heavily challenged upon our entry into the valley, we were engaged in only one small firefight. Our constant patrols in and around the villages were uneventful. Our intelligence indicated that we had flushed many enemy leaders and fighters to neighboring villages, where they were reportedly conducting a propaganda campaign, intimidating locals from cooperating with us, and plotting their next move. Then, on August 11, a sudden and deadly attack on one of my platoon’s patrols broke this relative calm. Caught on a narrow mountain trail between Aranas and Bella, about a dozen enemy fighters killed three and wounded three of my soldiers with RPG, machine-gun, and automatic-rifle fire in the space of 45 minutes.

Regrouping the platoon—and our relationship with the locals—was daunting. The loss of our comrades shattered our naïve feeling of invincibility and made us acutely conscious of our own mortality. After a brief mourning period, our natural inclination was to turn inward, switch into survival mode, and burn our bridges with the populace.

Our mission was to establish a permanent presence in the valley, for a dual purpose. First, we aimed to kill or capture enemy leaders. But we also wanted to empower Afghan officials and security forces, and to provide basic needs such as roads, schools, and electricity. With no base, we negotiated use of an abandoned school in Aranas for one outpost, and built a second from scratch in a neighboring village called Bella. Then we set out to work.

Achieving our objectives proved to be supremely challenging. Our soft approach, emphasizing negotiation first and the use of force as a last resort, produced mixed results. Our initial meetings with councils of elders, or shuras, created goodwill. But both sides eventually became frustrated. Local leaders denied that there were security problems in the valley, and our projects progressed sluggishly in the face of bureaucratic obstacles. The prevailing local reaction to our presence remained frosty. In contrast to the smiles, handshakes, and mobs of children that we had encountered elsewhere in Afghanistan, men stared antagonistically and women and children ran away from us in Aranas and Bella.

Moreover, the construction and maintenance of two remote mountain outposts lacking Humvee-accessible roads and sufficient flat ground for helicopter landings made for a logistical nightmare. We were forced to rely on unconventional supply methods such as air drops, sling loads, donkeys, and the purchase of local supplies. Compounding all these problems was a severe shortage of manpower and assets to effectively control the valley.

Why is there an emphasis on export-related businesses, as opposed to, say, businesses designed to serve local markets?

In my area, I think the emphasis has been on these new trade linkages because of this bridge. It’s an hour from
Instead, we attempted to cooperate more closely with them. We helped them create a locally constituted militia and a valley-wide shura tasked with demanding the surrender or expulsion of all enemy leaders and fighters. More important symbolically than substantively, our efforts were designed to force the locals to share the burden in our fight, and develop a greater responsibility for their security, development, and future.

Fighting ceased until mid-September, when we detained an Aranas shura chief suspected of collaborating with enemy leaders. It was a highly controversial and unpopular move. The arrest exacted a heavy toll over the next three weeks. The consequent backlash produced 15 firefight and the dissolution of the shura. Our action inflamed preexisting rivalries in the village, which splintered into three sections under the strain. Our main objectives stalled.

By early October, we had brokered the formation of a new shura, expedited the construction of a road, a school, and a hydroelectric plant, and restored a short-lived peace. In an effort to open a ground line to our outposts prior to the onset of winter, another platoon drove as far as possible up the primary valley road, blasting narrow sections along the way. On October 31, one of these Humvees was struck by an IED, killing three soldiers, including our company commander. A fourth soldier was seriously wounded. Again, we confronted heartbreaking losses, coped with mounting anger, resentment, and frustration, and tried to move forward.

As we continued to build a more decent relationship with the villagers over the next seven months—our deployment had been extended—it slowly became clear that our achievements simply did not have enough coalition support to last. Afghans are highly pragmatic and ultimately support whichever side brings more benefits than costs. If the coalition had done a better job creating space for effective government and developing the economy without completely destabilizing the region, ordinary Afghans would fully support us in a heartbeat. But five years in, the military occupation had only marginally improved basic infrastructure and governance. The chronic lack of sufficient military manpower, meanwhile, severely curtailed the scope of our influence on these problems.

That was not all. Failure to secure the Pakistan border ensured that our small-unit fighting would be never-ending and purposeless. In that context, the marginal improvements our small force was able to deliver to the Waigul Valley were outweighed by the destabilizing trauma of ongoing fighting where before there had been little. Our accomplishments could have been much more meaningful if we’d operated under a better strategic plan. But stepping back from our makeshift outposts, it seemed ridiculous how much we were asking Afghans like those in Waigul to risk for us.

Kunduz and it’s on the paved road. It’s part of the future Central Asian trade route. And now with this new bridge, people are starting to look north, or look south, at new markets at new opportunities. I think we’ve always said that trade builds bridges, but in this case it’s been the bridge that has built the trade.

The idea of nation-building is a subject of debate and disagreement in the United States. What is its proper role, from your perspective?

In reality, there are many places around the world that are very unstable that threaten our security and our prosperity. And there are just some things that we are going to have to address. So I’m encouraged by the fact that the Department of State and the Department of Defense are looking to develop a core group of individuals that have experience in these lands, that can go into crisis areas around the world and assist these countries. I think it’s a little premature to consider myself a part of that group—this is my first experience in a country like Afghanistan—but I think for the future I’m looking to have regional expertise in South Asia: in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. But I think all of these challenges are too large for us to address on our own. And it’s the combination and coordination between the U.S. and its Western allies, and its allies in general, that will allow us to prevail.

Your posting to Afghanistan was for one year. Do you wish you had more time?

If I could spend two years or three years, I’d definitely be more proficient and more effective in the job. At the same time, there are challenges to living on a military base—where it’s a pretty solitary existence, and where there is personal security that you have to consider. You know, the military base has been subject to 10 or 11 rocket attacks. There’s the stress of being in that kind of environment. I’m looking forward to a place where I can go out to a restaurant, go to a bar, go to a club, go to the theater—whatever it may be—and not have to think about a suicide attack or a rocket attack in the evening, or checking the intel report before I step out the door.

MY unit returned to the United States in June 2007. For many, including me, the homecoming did not feel so good. We were welcomed to a packed gymnasium with a booming marching band and screaming loved ones, but the presence of the families of our fallen soldiers served as a sobering reminder of the losses many of us had not had time to fully process overseas. I struggled to deal with my failure to bring home all my men. I visited the homes of their devastated families, and witnessed the turbulent reintegration of many of my surviving soldiers into stateside life. Difficulty coping with the hardships of our tour was compounded by the fact that some soldiers were returning to broken family lives. The combination led to post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, depression, and societal alienation.

Meanwhile, I reflected frankly on our accomplishments. On the one hand, I was proud of the relationships, security, and projects for which we had worked so hard. On the other, I questioned how lasting our impact had been. Our replacement unit suffered still greater casualties and was not supported by the provincial governor. Consequently they pulled out, burning our bridge with the Waigul Valley. It was
as though the situation was worse than if we’d never gone in the first place. Once we’d set up a permanent presence there, we took ownership of all its problems. Now, we have lost credibility and have made enemies out of potential partners.

My frustration deepened over how detached the majority of Americans were from the war in Afghanistan, which has been waged with a fraction of the manpower, publicity, and controversy that have characterized the conflict in Iraq. Nearly six years after first toppling the Taliban and yet with no end in sight, the war in Afghanistan surprisingly escapes the clamor for U.S. military withdrawal characteristic of Iraq. A major topic of debate in other NATO countries, the issue has only recently begun registering in Washington and the American media. As in the case of Iraq, we went into Afghanistan naïve and unprepared, thinking that overthrowing the ruling regime meant victory and that everything would take care of itself afterward. Additionally, Iraq served as a huge diversion that led us to pay even less attention and devote fewer resources to Afghanistan. Only now, in the face of increased violence, are we beginning to wake up to the consequences of our distraction.

In recent months the U.S. has gradually increased its combat forces and expanded its presence throughout the country. Nevertheless, three main failures will make the situation worse before it gets better.

First, inadequate control of the Pakistan border allows an endless stream of fighters, weapons, and munitions to flow into Afghanistan. Coalition military forces’ traditional inability to cross the border—coupled with Pakistan’s woefully undermanned, undertained, and under-resourced border forces—render Pakistan’s western tribal areas an insurgent sanctuary. But rather than strengthening these forces with $10 billion so far in U.S. military aid, Pakistan purchased high-end weapon systems aimed at fighting India. The lack of Pakistani political resolve to confront these problems, Taliban support from Pashtun elements in the Pakistani military and intelligence services, and inadequate American diplomatic pressure on Pakistan allow this harmful status quo to persist.

Second, the Karzai government continues to be propped up by the U.S. and NATO, no closer to real independence than it was a few years ago and more susceptible to the Taliban threat. Its modest successes are overshadowed by the fact that its influence barely extends past Kabul. The large, rural population heightens the importance of Afghanistan’s provincial, district, and village governments—such as those my unit tried to assist in Waigul. However, many of these grassroots bodies are a reflection of their duplicitious, corrupt leaders. Afghan security forces have made steady progress as a fighting force despite being treated as a secondary priority by the coalition. However, they fail to present a serious challenge to insurgents without outside help.

Finally, corruption, instability, foreign naïveté, and a lack of cooperation between military and civilian actors riddle Afghanistan’s economic development, wasting billions of aid dollars, deterring foreign investment, eroding public confidence in the government (and the U.S. and NATO), and making the Taliban seem like not such a bad alternative.

Insufficient U.S. manpower and questionable NATO willpower, in the face of a determined enemy with a long-term commitment to victory—not to mention a bet-hedging, war-weary Afghan population—exacerbate these problems. Sadly, frequent tactical successes by small units like those in the Waigul Valley occur in the context of overall strategic failure.

The U.S. must apply more diplomatic pressure upon Pakistan. We must mentor local governments and train young leaders, involving civilian agencies that have more expertise than the military in nation-building. We must formulate a coherent economic development plan that focuses on building basic infrastructure like roads, schools, and medical centers that will be the bedrock of private-sector growth—again, incorporating civilian expertise instead of pushing everything through military channels. We must give common villagers a compelling reason to support us that outweighs the substantial risk that they incur by doing so. Finally, we must surge more coalition troops to stop Taliban advances and restabilize the country. Afterwards, we must reduce our footprint and make a transition to a supporting role in order to develop the capacity of Afghan security forces to defend themselves.

When I look back at the 16 difficult months I spent in Afghanistan, I am convinced that our small unit’s tactics are the correct way to fight, but that they are useless without a real and coherent strategy supporting them. Only by addressing that costly failure will we be able to make “Operation Enduring Freedom” a reality instead of a hollow phrase.

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