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Reuters

Witness: Battlefield dead haunt U.S. Marines and Afghans alike

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Mar 12, 7:38 am ET

MARJAH, Afghanistan (Reuters) – Corporal Jacob Turbett gave out a single groan of pain before the Taliban bullet, which had pierced his heart, ended his life.

Medics had carried Turbett from the bank of dirt he was standing on, where the bullet ricocheted and entered his chest, laid him out on the dusty ground of a small Afghan home, and frantically tried to resuscitate him. Above them T-shirts and woolen sweaters on washing lines flapped in the breeze.

It was February 13, late morning. Hours earlier, I had landed by helicopter in a muddy field in Marjah in pitch darkness as last month's massive U.S.-led military assault in southern Afghanistan got underway.

As day broke, the crack of bullets erupted from a few hundred meters away and the troops of Bravo Company, First battalion, Sixth Marines were locked in an intense gunbattle.

Over the first days of the American bid to retake the initiative in the eight-year war against the Taliban, I would witness how U.S. Marines and Afghan civilians alike coped with death.

Shortly after landing in Marjah a platoon of Marines had taken over the house where Turbett now lay dying. Little chicks scurried about the grounds of the mud brick abode, pecking at the floor while above their heads bullets zipped through the air.

As Turbett struggled for breath, the Afghan family that owned the house sat in silence, holed-up inside one of their small rooms, unaware that a man was dying a few feet away. The Marines, through an interpreter, had told the family they needed to use their home as a temporary command post.

The gunfire subsided slightly as the Marines focused on saving their colleague. Then the sound of a toddler crying broke from the room where the family were.

Eventually a tiny girl in a pink dress stepped out from behind a rickety wooden door which was draped in a dirty black curtain, her wizened, bearded father clutching her hand and ushering her to the toilet.

The girl retreated back into the room, oblivious to Turbett's losing battle for his life. Moments later, the 21-year-old from Canton, Michigan, was dead.

Medic David Walden stood up and walked away. As the child cried from inside the room, Walden wept in silence outside. His cheeks were damp with tears and gleamed under the early afternoon sun. His eyes were hidden behind ballistic sunglasses.

Walden and Turbett did not know each other. A fact, Walden said, that made his death even harder to bear.

"I was angry. I think because probably that was my first casualty and he actually died and I didn't know him. First one and hopefully last," Walden said later.

"Blood was in his mouth. We put a needle in his chest to decompress one side that wasn't rising but all that came out was blood," said U.S. Navy Lieutenant Justin Weppner, a doctor from Fredricksburg, Virginia, who leads the medics.

Turbett's friends were given a few minutes to digest the news before being told to get back outside and start fighting again. Turbett's squad, Marine engineers who had been attached to Bravo Company of the First Battalion, Sixth Marines, sat in silence as Weppner told them what had happened.

"I fell apart. I haven't cried like that since I was a kid ... You know it's going to happen to somebody, you just don't expect it's going to happen to the people next to you," said Lance Corporal Robert DeBoo, a 27-year-old from Meyers, Georgia.

"Every time I think about it, I see his wife, and before we left she said 'watch him, look out for him'. So even as a friend I feel like I failed," said 23-year-old Private First Class Kevin Hostetle, another of Turbett's squad mates, from North Fort, Florida.

CIVILIANS

The gunfighting on the edge of Koru Chareh village lasted at least six hours. It fizzled out after Harrier jets were called in for a "gun run" on the Taliban's fighting positions. The aircraft roared through the air, dispensing a loud hail of bullets.

It was time to move out of the home. Turbett's body had been zipped up in a black plastic body bag -- "We keep them inside our packs. We don't like to show it to the Marines, they see it as a bad omen," said medic Joseph Hardebeck -- and floated out of Marjah on a helicopter.

Then the platoon ran along a canal, dodging insurgent rounds. They reached their destination, just behind another platoon: a building of eight bedrooms made from grey concrete blocks with high arched ceilings and surrounded by the signature low-rise mud brick walls of rural Afghanistan.

Intense gunfire aimed at Marine snipers on the roof of the building continued for three days. The Taliban fired a mortar, which landed in one of the courtyards but fell apart on impact. They also tried their luck with rocket-propelled grenades, only to overshoot the building by about 200 meters.

A few days later, Bravo Company got word of the first civilian casualties caused by the fighting. They had no idea if it was a Taliban rocket or one of their own that destroyed the side of the home of 70-year-old Abdelkareem, who like many Afghans goes by only one name.

They went to the bazaar in Koru Chareh, where fruit and vegetable stores had been deserted; tomatoes and onions left to rot in the sun.

With tears in his eyes, Abdelkareem lifted one edge of a pale blue sheet of fabric from his daughter's corpse to reveal the dead body of her three-week old baby, tucked by her side.

The bodies of two others, members of Abdelkareem's extended family, were bundled underneath the rest of the sheet.

When the rocket hit his home, his son Abdelbaki ran out in the direction of the Marines, calling out for help. Father and son were given shelter in an empty shop in the bazaar, while the bodies of their dead family members were kept in another shop next door.

All they wanted, they said, was to get to the provincial capital, Lashkar Gah, their ancestral home, to bury the dead in a family cemetery alongside their relatives.

"I have pain in my heart from my grief from yesterday, and I'm suffering a lot," Abdelbaki told a small team of U.S. Marines through their interpreter, as he sat next to his father, who was cloaked in a large woolen blanket.

The Marines apologized to him for his loss and said they would do whatever they could to help him and his family bury their dead. They handed him a large bundle of cash. Abdelbaki thanked them and pleaded to have the bodies taken to Lashkar Gah.

About a week later, residents slowly trickled back into the bazaar in Koru Chareh. The first call to prayer since the operation started bleated from the mosque.

Abdelbaki never made it to Lashkar Gah. The Marines found him an abandoned white pick-up truck to make the journey, but he did not know how to drive it. He buried his dead family in Marjah.