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American High-Tech Weapons Fail to Prevent Tragedy

by David S. Cloud
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Nearly three miles above the rugged hills of central Afghanistan, American eyes silently tracked two SUVs and a pickup truck as they snaked down a dirt road in the pre-dawn darkness.

The vehicles, packed with people, were 3 1/2 miles from a dozen U.S. special operations soldiers, who had been dropped into the area hours earlier to root out insurgents. The convoy was closing in on them.

At 6:15 a.m., just before the sun crested the mountains, the convoy halted.

"We have 18 pax [passengers] dismounted and spreading out at this time," an Air Force pilot said from a cramped control room at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, 7,000 miles away. He was flying a Predator drone remotely using a joystick, watching its live video transmissions from the Afghan sky and radioing his crew and the unit on the ground.

The Afghans unfolded what looked like blankets and knelt. "They're praying. They are praying," said the Predator's camera operator, seated near the pilot.

By now, the Predator crew was sure that the men were Taliban. "This is definitely it, this is their force," the cameraman said. "Praying? I mean, seriously, that's what they do."

"They're gonna do something nefarious," the crew's intelligence coordinator chimed in.

At 6:22 a.m., the drone pilot radioed an update: "All ... are finishing up praying and rallying up near all three vehicles at this time."

The camera operator watched the men climb back into the vehicles.

"Oh, sweet target," he said.

None of those Afghans was an insurgent. They were men, women and children going about their business, unaware that a unit of U.S. soldiers was just a few miles away, and that teams of U.S. military pilots, camera operators and video screeners had taken them for a group of Taliban fighters.

The Americans were using some of the most sophisticated tools in the history of war, technological marvels of surveillance and intelligence gathering that allowed them to see into once-inaccessible corners of the battlefield. But the high-tech wizardry would fail in its most elemental purpose: to tell the difference between friend and foe.

This is the story of that episode. It is based on hundreds of pages of previously unreleased military documents, including transcripts of cockpit and radio conversations obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, the results of two Pentagon investigations and interviews with the officers involved as well as Afghans who were on the ground that day.

The Afghan travelers had set out early on the cold morning of Feb. 21, 2010, from three mountain villages in southern Daikundi province, a remote central region 200 miles southwest of Kabul.

More than two dozen people were wedged into the three vehicles. Many were Hazaras, an ethnic minority that for years has been treated harshly by the Taliban. They included shopkeepers going for supplies, students returning to school, people seeking medical treatment and families with children off to visit relatives. There were several women and as many as four children younger than 6.

They had agreed to meet before dawn for the long drive to Highway 1, the country's main paved road. From there, some planned to go north to Kabul while others were headed south. To reach the highway, they had to drive through Oruzgan province, an insurgent stronghold.

"We traveled together, so that if one vehicle broke down the others would help," said Sayed Quadratullah, 30, who was bound for Kabul in hope of obtaining a license to open a pharmacy.

Another passenger, Nasim, an auto mechanic who like many Afghans uses one name, said that he was going to buy tools and parts.

"We weren't worried when we set out. We were a little scared of the Taliban, but not of government forces," he said referring to the Afghan national army and its U.S. allies. "Why would they attack us?"

American aircraft began tracking the vehicles at 5 a.m.

The crew of an AC-130, a U.S. ground attack plane flying in the area, spotted a pickup and a sport utility vehicle with a roof rack converge from different directions.

At 5:08 a.m., they saw one of the drivers flash his headlights in the darkness.

The AC-130 radioed the Predator crew in Nevada: "It appears the two vehicles are flashing lights, signaling."

With that, the travelers became targets of suspicion.

At Creech Air Force Base, 35 miles northwest of Las Vegas, it was 4:30 p.m., nearly dinner time.

A few hours earlier, a dozen U.S. special operations soldiers, known as an A-Team, had been dropped off by helicopter near Khod, five miles south of the convoy. The elite unit was moving on foot toward the village, with orders to search for insurgents and weapons.

Another U.S. special operations unit had been attacked in the district a year earlier, and a soldier had been killed. This time the AC-130, the Predator drone and two Kiowa attack helicopters were in the area to protect the A-Team.

The Predator's two-man team — a pilot and a camera operator — was one of the Air Force's most-experienced. The pilot, who had flown C-130 cargo planes, switched to drones after 2001 and had spent more than 1,000 hours training other Predator pilots. (The Air Force declined to name the crew or make them available for interviews.)

Also stationed at Creech were the Predator's mission intelligence coordinator and a safety observer.

In addition, a team of "screeners" — enlisted personnel trained in video analysis — was on duty at Air Force special operations headquarters in Okaloosa, Fla. They sat in a large room with high-definition televisions showing live feeds from drones flying over Afghanistan. The screeners were sending instant messages to the drone crew, observations that were then relayed by radio to the A-Team.

On the ground, the A-Team was led by an Army captain, a veteran of multiple tours in Afghanistan. Under U.S. military rules, the captain, as the ground force commander, was responsible for deciding whether to order an airstrike.

At 5:14 a.m., six minutes after the two Afghan vehicles flashed their lights, the AC-130 crew asked the A-team what it wanted to do about the suspicious vehicles.

"Roger, ground force commander's intent is to destroy the vehicles and the personnel," came the unit's reply.

To use deadly force, the commander would first have to make a "positive identification" that the adversary was carrying weapons and posed an "imminent threat."

For the next 4 1/2 hours, the Predator crew and the screeners scrutinized the convoy's every move, looking for evidence to support such a decision.

"We all had it in our head, 'Hey, why do you have 20 military age males at 5 a.m. collecting each other?'" an Army officer involved in the incident would say later. "There can be only one reason, and that's because we've put [U.S. troops] in the area."

The Afghans greeted each other and climbed back into the two vehicles, heading south, in the general direction of Khod.

At 5:15 a.m., the Predator pilot thought he saw a rifle inside one of the vehicles.

"See if you can zoom in on that guy," he told the camera operator. "Is that a ...rifle?"

"Maybe just a warm spot from where he was sitting," the camera operator replied, referring to an image picked up by the infrared camera. "Can't really tell right now, but it does look like an object."

"I was hoping we could make a rifle out," the pilot said. "Never mind."

Soon, a third vehicle, waiting in a walled compound, joined the convoy.

At 5:30 a.m., when the convoy halted briefly, the drone's camera focused on a man emerging from one of the vehicles. He appeared to be carrying something.

"What do these dudes got?" the camera operator said. "Yeah, I think that dude had a rifle."

"I do, too," the pilot replied.

But the ground forces unit said the commander needed more information from the drone crew and screeners to establish a "positive identification."

"Sounds like they need more than a possible," the camera operator told the pilot. Seeing the Afghan men jammed into the flat bed of the pickup, he added, "That truck would make a beautiful target."

At 5:37 a.m., the pilot reported that one of the screeners in Florida had spotted one or more children in the group.

"Bull—, Where!?" the camera operator said. "I don't think they have kids out at this hour." He demanded that the screeners freeze the video image of the purported child and email it to him.

"Why didn't he say 'possible' child?" the pilot said. "Why are they so quick to call kids but not to call a rifle."

The camera operator was dubious too. "I really doubt that children call. Man, I really ... hate that," he said. "Well, maybe a teenager. But I haven't seen anything that looked that short."

A few minutes later, the pilot appeared to downplay the screeners' observation, alerting the special operations unit to "a possible rifle and two possible children near the SUV."

The special operations unit wanted the drone crew and screeners to keep tracking the vehicles. "Bring them in as close as we can until we also have [attack aircraft] up," the unit's radio operator said. "We want to take out the whole lot of them."

The Predator video was not the only intelligence that morning suggesting that U.S. forces were in danger.

Teams of U.S. military linguists and intelligence personnel with sophisticated eavesdropping equipment were vacuuming up cellphone calls in the area and translating the conversations in real time. For several hours, they had been listening to cellphone chatter in the area that suggested a Taliban unit was assembling for an attack.

"We're receiving ICOM traffic," or intercepted communications, the A-Team radioed the Predator crew. "We believe we may have a high-level Taliban commander."

Neither the identities of those talking nor their precise location was known. But the A-Team and the drone crew took the intercepted conversations as confirmation that there were insurgents in the convoy.

At 6:54 a.m., the camera operator noted that the drone crew and screeners had counted at least 24 men in the three vehicles, maybe more. "So, yeah, I guess that ICOM chatter is great info," he said.

The screeners continued to look for evidence that the convoy was a hostile force. Even with the advanced cameras on the Predator, the images were fuzzy and small objects were difficult to identify. Sometimes the video feed was interrupted briefly.

The Predator crew and video analysts in Nevada remained uncertain how many children were in the group and how old they were.

"Our screeners are currently calling 21 MAMs [military age males], no females, and two possible children. How copy?" the Predator pilot radioed the A-Team at 7:38 a.m.

"Roger," replied the A-Team, which was unable to see the convoy. "And when we say children, are we talking teenagers or toddlers?"

The camera operator responded: "Not toddlers. Something more towards adolescents or teens."

"Yeah, adolescents," the pilot added. "We're thinking early teens."

At 7:40 a.m., the A-Team radioed that its captain had concluded that he had established "positive identification" based on "the weapons we've identified and the demographics of the individuals plus the ICOM."

Although no weapons had been clearly identified, the pilot replied: "We are with you."

The pilot added that one screener had amended his report and was now saying he'd seen only one teenager. "Our screener updated only one adolescent, so that's one double-digit age range."

"We'll pass that along to the ground force commander," the

A-Team radio operator said. "Twelve or 13 years old with a weapon is just as dangerous."

At 8:43 a.m., Army commanders ordered two Kiowa helicopters to get into position to attack.

By then, though, the convoy was no longer heading toward Khod. The three vehicles, which at one point were within three miles of the A-Team, had changed direction and were now 12 miles away. The drone crew didn't dwell on

that news, thinking the convoy probably was trying to flank the

A-Team's position.

The Predator crew began discussing its role in the coming attack. The drone was armed with one missile, not enough to take out a three-vehicle convoy. The more heavily-armed Kiowa helicopters, using the call sign "BAM BAM41," would fire on the vehicles; the Predator would target any survivors who tried to flee.

"We're probably going to be chasing dudes, scrambling in the open, uh, when it goes down," the pilot told his camera operator, whose job was to place the camera cross hairs on insurgents, so the pilot could fire the missile. "Stay with whoever you think gives us the best chance to shoot, um, at them."

"Roger," came the reply.

A little before 9 a.m., the vehicles reached an open, treeless stretch of road. The A-Team commander called in the airstrike.

"Understand we are clear to engage," one of the helicopter pilots declared over the radio.

Hellfire missiles struck the first and third vehicles; they burst into flames.

Qudratullah, one of the Afghan travelers, recalled, "The helicopters were suddenly on top of us, bombarding us."

Dead and wounded were everywhere. Nasim, the 23-year-old mechanic, was knocked unconscious.

"When I came to, I could see that our vehicles were wrecked and the injured were everywhere," he said. "I saw someone who was headless and someone else cut in half."

The Predator crew in Nevada was exultant, watching men they assumed were enemy fighters trying to help the injured. "'Self-Aid Buddy Care' to the rescue," one of the drone's crew members said.

"I forget, how do you treat a sucking chest wound?" said another.

Soon, however, the crew in Nevada and the screeners in Florida realized something was wrong.

"The thing is, nobody ran," one crew member said.

"Yeah, that was weird," another replied.

At 9:15 a.m., the Predator crew noticed three survivors in brightly colored clothing waving at the helicopters. They were trying to surrender.

"What are those?" asked the camera operator.

"Women and children," the Predator's mission intelligence coordinator answered.

"That lady is carrying a kid, huh? Maybe," the pilot said.

"The baby, I think, on the right. Yeah," the intelligence coordinator said.

The Predator's safety coordinator, cursing in frustration, urged the pilot to alert the helicopters and the A-Team that there were children present. "Let them know, dude," he said.

"Younger than an adolescent to me," the camera operator said.

As they surveyed the carnage, seeing other children, the Predator crew tried to reassure themselves that they could not have known.

"No way to tell, man," the safety observer said.

"No way to tell from here," the camera operator added.

At 9:30 a.m., the pilot came back on the radio.

"Since the engagement," he said, "we have not been able to PID [positively identify] any weapons."

U.S. and Afghan forces reached the scene 21/2 hours after the attack to provide medical assistance. After 20 minutes more, medevac helicopters began taking the wounded to a hospital in Tarin Kowt, in Oruzgan. More serious cases were later transferred to Kabul.

"They asked us who we were, and we told them we were civilians from Kijran district," said Qudratullah, who lost a leg.

By the U.S. count, 15 or 16 men were killed and 12 people were wounded, including a woman and three children. Elders from the Afghans' home villages said in interviews that 23 had been killed, including two boys, Daoud, 3, and Murtaza, 4.

That evening, Army Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, then the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, went to the presidential palace in Kabul to apologize to President Hamid Karzai. Two days later, he went on Afghan television and promised "a thorough investigation to prevent this from happening again."

The Army and the Air Force conducted their own investigations, reaching similar conclusions.

The Army said evidence that the convoy was not a hostile force was "ignored or downplayed by the Predator crew," and the A-Team captain's decision to authorize an airstrike was based on a misreading of the threat when, in fact, "there was no urgent need to engage the vehicles."

The Air Force concluded that confusion over whether children were present was a "causal factor" in the decision to attack and, in an internal document last year, said drone crews had not been trained to notice the subtle differences between combatants and suspicious persons who may appear to be combatants.

The military has taken some steps to address these problems. Screeners now have access to radio traffic, so if a drone pilot makes a mistake, the screeners can correct it. Drone crews and screeners are now trained to use more precise descriptions in radio transmissions. And, shortly after the incident, McChrystal banned the use of the term "military age male," saying it implied that every adult man was a combatant.

Some officers in the Pentagon drew another lesson from the incident: An abundance of surveillance information can lead to misplaced confidence in the ability to tell friend from foe.

"Technology can occasionally give you a false sense of security that you can see everything, that you can hear everything, that you know everything," said Air Force Major Gen. James O. Poss, who oversaw the Air Force investigation. "I really do think we have learned from this."

McChrystal issued letters of reprimand to four senior and two junior officers in Afghanistan. The Air Force said the Predator crew was also disciplined, but it did not specify the punishment. No one faced court-martial, the Pentagon said.

Several weeks after the attack, American officers travelled to the villages to apologize to survivors and the victims' families.

They gave each survivor 140,000 afghanis, or about \$2,900.

Families of the dead received \$4,800.