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Afghanistan's Green Zone

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Sangin, Afghanistan — To those who spent time in Baghdad during 2003-2009, the phrase "Green Zone" conjures up a walled sanctuary on the Tigris, with Americans in uniforms or suits occupying gaudy Baathist palaces and only the occasional interruption of war from the city beyond.

In Afghanistan's Helmand Province there is another place that goes by the same name, but for very different reasons.

Baghdad's green is the opposite of red, or danger. Helmand's actually is green. It is a stretch of fertile, cultivated ground along the Helmand River Valley. But in many places, this Green Zone is not safe at all.

Here in Sangin District, at the northern end of the valley, it is essentially insurgent territory — a haven of difficult terrain from which the Taliban mount daily attacks on British troops. Of the more than 300 British military fatalities in Afghanistan, one-third died in Sangin.

In the past year, British troops have pushed out from a few larger camps in Sangin to two dozen smaller patrol bases scattered along Route 611, the seam between the lush Green Zone to the west and the drier but more heavily populated areas to the east. The last unit here, Three Rifles Battle

Group, lost 30 soldiers over six months — the highest tally of any Western battalion in the war. Since the Royal Marines' 40 Commando Battle Group arrived in April, another 16 Britons and six Americans have been killed or mortally wounded.

Like many of Sangin's little outposts, Patrol Base Blenheim sits on a hill, overlooking Route 611 and the Green Zone. In June, there was barely a platoon's worth of Marines and soldiers here, and the highest-ranking officers were a trio of lieutenants.

Despite midday temperatures that pass 120 degrees Fahrenheit, the troops are limited to six liters of water per day. It is too difficult to move more supplies in on Sangin's bomb-laced roads. Supply and evacuation by helicopter are dangerous too; last month, the troops here watched as an American Pave Hawk went down from enemy fire. There are no toilets; the troops deposit waste in metallic bags and burn it.

Guard towers ("sangars," in parlance left over from the British military's days in India) overlook dusty residential compounds — the "population center" that, according to counterinsurgency doctrine, needs protecting. Machine gunners and snipers watch over fields, irrigation ditches, and wood groves of the Green Zone, from whose concealment insurgents fire.

At night, the Taliban sneak up to the road and plant bombs. Sometimes they shoot to unsettle the men on guard. "Like Apache Indians," said ONE artilleryman from South Africa.

There aren't enough men to push very far into the Green Zone or the populated residential areas, either. It's a problem throughout Sangin, according to Lt. Col. Paul James, the British Marine commander in the district. "I have a finite force and I'm pretty much stretched to my maximum," he says.

"We don't control the population centers yet. We patrol into them, but we don't control them."

The mission of the troops at Blenheim is mainly provide security for convoys of big armored trucks that slowly sweep Route 611 for bombs. The idea is simply to keep the 611 open.

"The Green Zone is like the jungle: difficult to soldier," said Maj. Ed Moorhouse, whose Charlie Company operates to the south of Blenheim.

"We watch it, we look into it, but we don't go into it very far."

One Wednesday last month, Lt. Nicholas Hill led a section of Five Troop on a dawn patrol just outside Blenheim. Their task was to take up a position on a little hillock over the route to provide covering fire while an American route clearance team rolled through.

The British Marines moved with painstaking care, in single file. Some watched the Green Zone through their weapons' sights. Others scanned the firing ports, or "murder holes," that insurgents had knocked in the walls of a nearby compound. The point man scanned every rock and pothole

with a minesweeper. No one strayed from the footsteps of the man in front of him, following the minesweeper's narrow path.

"Even if it's just a few hundred meters away, you put your men at a really high risk just going out," said Lieutenant Hill.

For about an hour, the patrol watched quietly. An Apache attack helicopter circled overhead. As the sun rose and farmers headed into their fields, the lieutenant and his noncommissioned officer, Cpl. Max Parker, took note of every antlike movement, trading observations about groves and buildings from which they had taken fire before.

The American convoy rolled up and deployed a bomb-finding robot. Some of the British Marines speculated about detecting an I.E.D. Finding one was pretty likely, they thought; whether that would be done without detonating it was the question. Finally, an hour and a half after descending from the gate of their post, the Marines got up and walked slowly back, trailing behind the minesweeper.

Suddenly automatic weapons fire crackled, and bullets hit the ground near Corporal Parker. For a moment the men dropped to the ground. Then, amid shouts of "Peel left! Peel left!" they returned fire into the Green Zone and, shielded by a smoke grenade, bounded toward the gate, sheltering behind the American armored trucks. In quick dashes, the Marines sprinted up into the relative safety of Patrol Base Blenheim. None of the Britons was hurt; there was no way of telling the toll of their return fire.

Inside the patrol base, Corporal Parker reviewed. "Do we need to practice peeling left?" he asked.

Lance Cpl. Lee Evans tried to pinpoint on a map just where the firing had come from. Another Marine said he had seen a group of people running from a building that seemed like a likely firing point but hadn't had time to say so before the shooting started.

"It feels like 5 p.m.," a Marine said. It was 8 in the morning.

Over the next hours, news from the rest of Sangin trickled in by radio, and I.E.D.s boomed occasionally in the distance. At breakfast, word came that in another company's sector, a British Marine had been caught by a bomb, losing three limbs. Some of the men knew him, and the news put a pall over the meal.

Next, the radio relayed that another outpost, called Pete's Post, was going to be abandoned: the Taliban had snuck a bomb right up to its perimeter during the night, and when it detonated in the morning one of the sangars had partially collapsed, leaving a gaping hole in the defenses.

Then there was another boom. The radio said that an American Marine with the route clearance team had been wounded farther up the 611. (The injured man, Cpl. Jeffrey Standfest, died of his wounds.)

Apaches buzzed overhead; one fired into the Green Zone in bursts. Marines clad only in shorts rushed up to the sangars to get a better look.

An hour before sunset, Scottish advisers rustled up a squad of Afghan troops and led them out on another foot patrol, this one into the Green Zone. Drawn from Charlie Company, First Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland, the advisers are spread out across Sangin in teams ranging from two "Jocks," as the Scottish soldiers are called, to 10. Beyond advice, they explained, they provide the Afghan company at Blenheim with a conduit to Medevac and air support.

They often have to provide leadership, too, added Lt. Graeme Smith, the team commander, when Afghan officers don't.

"As an officer, they don't feel it's necessary to go out," the lieutenant said. "They think that's for the sergeants."

That the Afghan troops are not bound by NATO's restrictive rules of engagement has its upside and its downside, the advisers observed. A British or American soldier can shoot only under a particular set of circumstances — if he is under attack, for instance, or can clearly see an enemy weapon. But if an Afghan soldier thinks he has a target, he'll open up, said Lance Cpl. Kevin Hope: "With them it's one round, all their rounds, or nae rounds."

In the evening light, the Scottish-Afghan patrol clambered past trees and an irrigation ditch and entered corn and poppy fields. A fighter jet passed overhead.

Trailing single-file behind the minesweeper, the troops seemed exposed. If they took fire, they wouldn't even be able to roll into one of the water-filled irrigation ditches — the risk of hidden bombs was too high.

A few hundred meters away, unarmed men and boys watched the patrol in silence. Some came and went on motorbikes. Some, the soldiers said, were likely the "dicking screen," paid by nearby Taliban to keep tabs on the patrol's movements. At one point the whoosh of an R.P.G. could be heard, and as the patrol climbed back onto the 611 a radio intercept caught insurgents talking about mounting an attack.

But by then the troops were almost back inside the wire. The Taliban, Corporal Hope speculated, were still busy to the east, where the route clearance teams had rolled off to.

Safely on base, the British marines soldiers brewed tea, bringing cups to the men in the sangars, and heated up ration packs.

After dark, two huge explosions thundered from the east. Allied jets had dropped a pair of 2,000-pound devices on Pete's Post, the outpost that had been abandoned earlier in the day. They were "denying it to the insurgents." But tomorrow there would be one fewer British base keeping watch on the Green Zone.