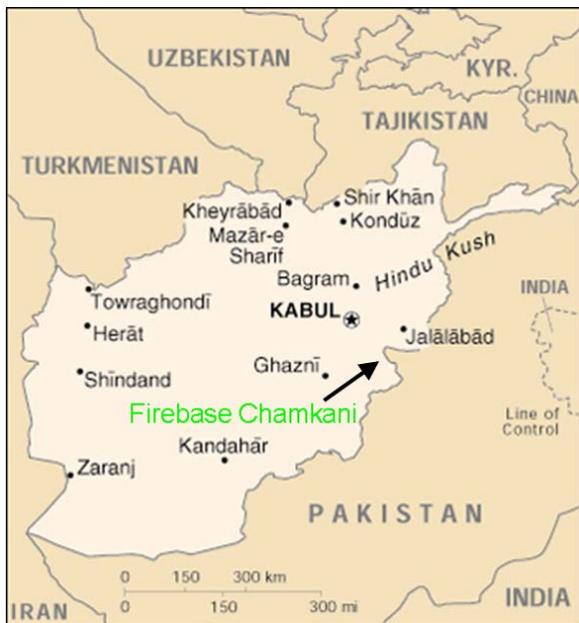


Code1 Marshall - Firebase Chamkani, Afghanistan.

By Rep. Jim Marshall

Friday, July 20, 2007: We're in a lightening storm at night over the Himalayas. The ride's pretty rough, and the worn out interior of this airplane makes me wonder about its mechanical condition. But the pilot has his wife and children on board. So I assume we'll make it to Lahore, Pakistan, the second of four stops on my way to spending about 24 hours embedded with a Special Forces A team on a small, remote firebase along the Pakistani border. If all goes well, the trip will last about eighty four hours door-to-door. Forty one of these will be in the air. I should be back in time for votes Monday night.



I've been skeptical of our Iraq strategy since the summer of 2003 and have regularly shared my misgivings with administration, congressional and military leadership. I've also repeatedly sought permission to embed with frontline troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to get an uncensored, uncontrolled, up close impression of how these engagements contrast with my counter insurgency combat experiences in Vietnam. I think my experience gives me better perspective and judgment. But don't we all, right or wrong?

This is my eleventh trip to the war zone. And I've certainly had some informative ones. Three were with the (then) Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Pete Schoomaker. That's pretty high cotton compared to my days as a snout nosed Recon platoon sergeant who didn't even know the name of his brigade commander. And it's also a long way from where the rubber meets the road in conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Effective counter insurgencies are bottom up driven. Ideally, above the platoon, company or battalion level, command should set broad rules and then take direction from, and give support to, the combat units in daily contact with local populations. Big hearted, savvy, patient troops are more effective than

good shooters. Mean tough guys are a disaster. What's needed is tough Peace Corps types, Peace Corps with a punch, a Special Forces-like operation backed by conventional power used sparingly and discreetly.

So I've been arguing for a smaller conventional presence on the ground and a more expanded Special Forces and Special Forces-like combat operation. Not so much of the direct action, Delta Force, kinetic missions, but rather more use of traditional Special Forces. We've been playing what the military calls "whack a mole." Hit the enemy here and it pops up over there. Time permitting, maybe I'll write something tomorrow that fleshes out why this may be a losing game for us. I'm not the only one that thinks it might be. Many military planners are coming around to this point of view.



I hope my frontline visit with this Special Forces A team gives some insights into our strategic/tactical military challenge. I don't like missing votes, even ones that should not be close. But after so many no goes, I can't miss this opportunity. The House Sergeant at Arms insisted that I be given a briefing about the danger, a first for any congressional trip. And thankfully, Nancy Pelosi waived

the rules to permit the trip after twice trying to talk me out of it. She said she would defer to my judgment in light of my military experience. I didn't mention that experience sometimes warps judgment.

Saturday, July 21, 2007: Firebase Chamkani is located on the foothills of a mountain overlooking the small village of Chamkani, about six miles from a road crossing into the tribal, ungoverned, western mountain regions of Pakistan. The base is only a forty five minute helicopter ride through the mountains heading southeast from Bagram Airfield. By road it is worlds away. The mountains are virtually impassable. Resupply convoys take three days to reach Chamkani by road from Bagram.



Two members of Chamkani's Special Forces A team are absent recovering from combat wounds. Besides the A team, Chamkani houses a small number of additional American soldiers, a larger force of Afghan Security Guards and two small dogs, Scrappy and Dog. Besides the dogs, I won't mention details for security reasons, although it is pretty inconceivable to me that the Opposition Military Forces (Taliban plus two tribes) don't have a good grasp of the numbers and capacity. I imagine the OMF have numerous pictures and receive regular information from one or more of the Afghans employed on the firebase. Team members know I'm a Congressman. For security reasons, they will keep that fact to themselves. Knocking off a Congressman would be quite a coup for the OMF.

We arrived on Chamkani late in the day since my escorts had planned various command briefings and a tour at Bagram. I would have moved up our arrival time had I been more attentive to the schedule's details. We all headed to dinner after finishing the formal greetings and stowing our gear in a bare room furnished with plywood bunk beds. The balance of the evening was spent breaking the ice with soldier talk. It was all pretty comfortable. Team members understood when I didn't recognize some of their acronyms and references. And I certainly understood when they didn't recognize mine. The oldest of them, Team Sergeant Girsham, was a one year old when I left the Army.

As we talked, I couldn't help but reflect on why our conventional military forces face such long odds in Iraq. We are not the Romans in Gaul. We are not the armies of Alexander the Great, the only military force to ever prevail in the tribal mountains of western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan. Both of these conquerors ruthlessly slaughtered their way to victory. America currently has the power to do so as well, but we quite rightly play by moral standards that make it difficult or impossible for our conventional military force to calm an insurgency hidden within or supported by a hostile alien population. To defeat an insurgency without the competent help of indigenous forces, alien conventional forces constrained by our rules need an extraordinarily high ratio of combat troops to the size of the population, particularly in mobile, urban settings.



For America in Iraq, without active and effective help and leadership from Iraqis, it's not just a cop on every corner. It's dozens of cops. Since we foolishly de-Bathified and then disbanded the Iraqi Army, I believe the required ratio of American troops to Iraqis is far greater than we can sustain militarily, let alone politically, assuming we continue a largely conventional approach to that conflict. I opposed the anti-surge resolution, just as I will oppose anything that lessens the likelihood that we will give this effort our best shot so long as a reasonable chance for success remains. I fervently hope the surge works. Whether it does will depend upon Iraqis. If enough good ones step up, we're okay. If they don't, we'll fall far short of the conventional force quantity needed, particularly given that the insurgency is now well organized and entrenched.

Conventional forces using conventional tactics inevitably rub the population the wrong way, typically causing collateral damage and spiraling ill will. The enemy is hidden in plain sight. And unless the conventional force is quite large, the enemy strikes with relative impunity. This frustrates and angers the conventional force. It grows quite hostile toward the alien population, rightly believing that the locals are at least passively complicit in the attacks that kill and maim. This reinforcing cycle of ill will simply heads in the wrong direction with no end in sight. And that fact, plus the toll in deaths, wounds and money wears away the political support for the effort.

That, in a nutshell, is the dilemma in Iraq. The surge is Plan A. If it doesn't produce the needed results, I think Plan B should be a smaller footprint and transition to a robust Special Forces type operational model with conventional backup.



Sunday, July 22, 2007: Besides those finishing their night shift, Scrappy and Dog were the only two coalition members up and about this morning as I wandered around Firebase Chamkani at daybreak. Dog feigned an attack on some of the Afghan help. Maybe the A Team is right about the usefulness of these two Afghan mutts. In many third world countries, barking dogs inform strangers when they get too close to their owner's claimed property. Scrappy and Dog do not bark at Americans, only Afgans.

Breakfast was scheduled from six to eight with a team briefing to follow. That left plenty of time for some exercise. So I walked to the highest bunker on the outer perimeter, joined by my Special Operations military escort, SF Col. Ray Helton, with his sidearm hidden under his shirt. At the top, I found Afghan Security Guard Sher Agha who is a member of the Stanakzai tribe according to his US issued identification card. He was sitting outside his bunker on a plywood bed eating breakfast and drinking tea, a Russian dishka machine gun wrapped in blue plastic behind him. We arm the ASG force with Russian weapons and munitions scarfed from caches. When you have little, you waste little.



I took a picture and showed it to Sher Agha. He was pleased and offered us tea. We accepted despite worries about Montezuma's revenge, although in this part of

the world it probably has a different name. Later, seeing the picture, one of the A team members commented "A bed, a bunker and a dishka. What more can a man want?"

We returned to this topmost bunker later in the day so the A team could show me the lay of the land and give me a formal meeting with the commander of this ASG force, Saeed Agha. Team members call him Gun Doctor or GD. He has been a mujhadin since the age of thirteen. I'm told he is now thirty three, which seems far too young for his striking features. But the average life expectancy in Afghanistan is one of the lowest in the world. Afghanistan's poverty, wars and harsh environment are utterly unforgiving.



During the meeting and later, through an interpreter, I spent a fair amount of time talking with GD and recalled Gen. Abizaid's quip that "Afghanistan is moving rapidly into to the fifteenth century." Actually its social fabric and mores seem a mixture of many centuries. The culture clash is quite pronounced. Individuals can't survive in these Afgan and Pakistani mountains conquered only by Alexander the Great. Individuals must ally themselves with a tribe. Tribe is everything. The system is feudal, France and England circa 1200 a.d. Like knights and yeomen, young tribal men are expected to serve the security needs of the tribe as determined by tribal leaders. It's a matter of meeting a social obligation in order to continue to enjoy esteem in the tribal society. GD knows combat. But even more so, he knows survival. His allegiance can change with the tribe's



We can't get out today. When the weather is good, no helicopters are available. They are called to more important duty – reinforcements in a fire fight, medical evacuations, critical resupply This part of Afghanistan is hot. One A team member says "Chamkani is actually in the Bermuda triangle. When you come here,

you can't get out." I will miss votes. But I insist no one whines about it on my behalf. My business pales in comparison, and I don't want Special Operations

Command or the Department of Defense to have another reason to be reluctant about front line embeds.

One of our outposts, an Afgan Border Patrol checkpoint some three miles toward Pakistan, was hit that night with RPGs (Soviet shoulder fired rockets) and small arms fire. We watched the fight from the op center roof and I was heartened when listening to the A team members discussing what to do. The outpost called for help. GD came by with an additional request. But team members were reluctant to do so. One said "We need to let them take care of this pissant little stuff or they will never build capacity." The others agreed. GD asked for at least some illumination rounds. The A team fired three, reluctantly, from their 120mm mortar. Spec. Dan Love, a young photographer with 7th Special Forces Group got a great picture of one of the mortar illumination rounds being launched. I was watching the fight, not the mortar crew.



Monday, July 23, 2007: The A team spent most of the day preparing for a night mission. The plan was to convoy about thirty kilometers in up-armored humvees, sleep for the balance of the night and then spend the next day providing medical services to the residents of a particular village. They will return to Chamkani after dark the following night. I mentioned that most Americans in Vietnam hunkered down at night. One of the team members responded "we rule the night," which reminded me of melody and words from Billy Joel's song, Goodnight Saigon: "We held the day in the palm of our hand. They ruled the night and the night seemed to last" forever.

Night vision binoculars have come a long way since the clunky, Vietnam-era Starlight scope. The ones used by the team are quite remarkable. Each member has his own pair. I tried them out last night. Both the binoculars and rifle scope converted pitch black to a surreal daylight with people and objects sharply defined. You literally could see why someone would say "we rule the

night." I didn't have even the rudimentary Starlight scope for my Recon platoon. So both sides were blind or semi-blind during my night missions and ambushes. Now, only the enemy is.

Whether it is day or night, combat engagements in Iraq or Afghanistan typically are very lopsided affairs, assuming the enemy attacks us heads up or we have a clear target. All Americans know that. But too few fully grasp how critical it is to maintain and grow our tactical advantages. Special Forces A team members are at the tip of the spear. For every frontline troop, there are dozens of military and civilian personnel that make their job easier, even possible. I think of the men and women I know so well at Robins AFB daily doing different tasks that, combined with the work of so many others, gives us remarkable military superiority.



If the A team ever needs additional combat power, we can quickly give it overwhelming, highly accurate force. Just three weeks before my visit, the team made contact with a Taliban force it was pursuing based upon local tips. The enemy was high on a mountainside, far from any civilians. So the team employed air power after an exchange of small arms fire. Dozens upon dozens (the estimates range into the hundreds) of Taliban were killed or wounded. There were no friendly casualties.

No country in the history of the world has given its war fighters such a leg up over the competition. The challenge for us is finding the right targets and using our force discreetly, minimizing collateral damage that can be so harmful to our effort. The A team's medical mission builds good will and relationships that can lead to actionable intelligence. The village of Chamkani's new school, a very simple structure built courtesy of America, has the same effect.

American infantry units in Vietnam typically would move in a company size formation (about one hundred twenty men) "poking around" to make enemy contact. Usually that contact came in the form of a booby trap or unseen snipers. The A team does little or no "poking around." It will sometimes move to an area just to show an American presence. But most of its missions have specific objectives, either military or humanitarian. Once the target is identified by reliable intelligence, team members carefully plan an engagement. These kinetic

missions are always executed in tandem with Afghan National Police, typically at night and often without a single shot fired.

Everything the team does is intelligently driven by intelligence. Good relationships with the indigenous population are critical to this effort. Special Forces teams typically rotate tour-after-tour to the same area, avoiding the learning curve posed by a new area of operations, and most importantly, maintaining and renewing relationships with their friends in the local population. I've argued for a force-wide use of this model whenever and wherever we face an insurgency.

We spend time on the shooting range zeroing in and testing different weapons, sniper rifles, M4s, a fifty caliber that tends to jam. Gun Doctor shows up with some of his men. He fires an 82 mm recoilless rifle (a Russian anti-tank bazooka) with great accuracy. I shoot an AK47 with open sights and am surprised that I can hit metal silhouette targets at two, three and four hundred yards. Those shots are easy with the scoped, 7.62 caliber M24 sniper rifle.



Word has come that we will not get out again today. The team decides to delay its mission until tomorrow. It isn't time sensitive and they do not want to leave us alone on the firebase. I ask one team member if he's relieved. He says "No. Missions don't bother me. We don't take chances." Right. And I own a bridge in Brooklyn.

Wednesday, July 25, 2007: We're on a Pakistan International Airlines flight from Islamabad, Pakistan to London, the third of four legs returning from Firebase Chamkani to Washington. This plane is much bigger than the PIA liner from Beijing to Lahore, evidence that Pakistan is more oriented toward the West. We need to keep it that way. As the saying goes – keep your allies close, your enemies closer and your potential enemies closest.

I usually get about six hours of sleep a day but only three or so on trips like these. I hate to waste time sleeping, let alone sleeping in country. This flight to London is my chance to catch up on sleep. But I still don't feel like it. I keep

thinking about the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan, about their beauty and their danger.



National borders and identities mean little to the tribes of these mountains. That's hard for me to comprehend. Individual allegiance is to tribe, not country. Tribe is the social safety net, the extended family. All outsiders are suspect. Tribe even trumps Islam. I've heard more than one American pastor say you can't bring a starving man to Christ without first giving him bread. He won't listen. He's focused on survival, not higher callings.

Like a feudal system, tribal leaders traditionally called the shots in these remote, mountainous tribal areas, typically in consultation with a broader group of lieges, akin to lords, courtiers and select others. They retained credibility and status by taking measures that furthered the comfort and survival of the tribe. Tribes are not for sale. But they are for rent. Bin Laden is renting. He can be outbid.

I am reminded of the true story of a wealthy New York farmer in the 1700s who asked a local lawyer to represent him in a land line dispute with his neighbor. The lawyer had already been retained by the neighbor. So the lawyer politely declined the farmer's request but offered to introduce the farmer to another lawyer in a nearby town who, the lawyer said, would do an excellent job representing him. The lawyer then penned a note to his fellow lawyer, sealed it

in an envelope, handed the envelope to the farmer and gave him directions to the other lawyer's office. While riding to the other town, the farmer's curiosity got the better of him. So he opened the note. It said: "Two fat geese. You pluck one. I'll pluck the other."

We're the wealthy farmer. Bin Laden, the current epitome of violent anti-western jihadists, is our opponent. Gun Doctor, his Afghan Security Guards, the tribes supporting us and those supporting Bin Laden are the lawyers. Our fight is not really their fight. They are for rent. This war is business for them. They've found two fat geese. Tribesmen are not fanatically committed to either side. They are survivors.

The same cannot be said of the mullahs, many of whom are now committed to a radical variant of Wahhabism. Historically, mullahs in these mountains deferred to tribal leaders. We unintentionally helped change that balance with our support for Islamic jihad against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Wresting tribal loyalty from Bin Laden is greatly complicated by the mullahs. We are now trying to undo that problem by strengthening the tribal leaders.

When asked about the strategic importance of our fights in Afghanistan and Iraq, former Army Chief of Staff Pete Schoomaker often referenced Pakistan as "the key to the deal." Its politics are volatile. It possesses nuclear weapons. It is technologically savvy. It is the home of A. Q. Kahn, the Pakistani scientist who exported nuclear technology. Kahn is now under arrest largely because of our influence upon Pakistan.

Our world is growing smaller while the technology of violence develops at warp speed. Robert Wright calls it the growing lethality of hatred. Much or most of the globe survives on less than two dollars a day. The global economy is essentially unregulated and apt to cause momentous disruptions. Many worry daily of global pandemics, climate change and other forces. We evidently have not reached Fukuyama's *The End of History*. Angry young men (mostly) will continue to passionately pursue righting wrongs or advancing some zealous cause, often religious. Some portion of them will war against the developed world. It won't take many to do tremendous damage unless the world is well organized to stop them. We aren't now. A conventional defense approach simply won't do.

We need indigenous security forces and tribes throughout the world as force multipliers. This takes effective diplomacy, partnering and building partner capacity. Special Forces-type combat troops, Peace Corps with a punch, have a major role to play. They leverage our resources through collaboration with indigenous peoples. Along with other resources we can provide them, both

military and humanitarian, they can keep the Gun Doctors and tribal leaders on our side.

With time and the right collaborative strategies, these mountains that challenged the armies of Alexander the Great and most recently spawned the London bombings will not pose a threat to the west, to America. But they do now. We abandon them at our risk.

