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For Female Marines, Tea Comes With Bullets

By **ELISABETH BUMILLER**

MARJA, Afghanistan — They expected tea, not firefights.

But the three female [Marines](#) and their patrol were shot at late on a recent day, when a burst of Kalashnikov rifle fire came from a nearby compound. The group hit the ground, crawled into a ditch and aimed its guns across the fields of cotton and corn.

In their sights they could see the source of the blast: an Afghan man who had shot aimlessly from behind a mud wall, shielded by a half-dozen children. The women held their fire with the rest of the patrol so as not to hit a child, waited for the all-clear, then headed back to the base, survivors of yet another encounter with the enemy.

“You still get that same feeling, like, ‘Oh, my gosh, I’m getting shot at,’ ” said Lance Cpl. Stephanie Robertson, 20, speaking of the firefights that have become part of her life in Marja. “But you know what to do. You’re not, like, comfortable, because you’re just — ” She stopped, searching for how to describe her response to experiences that for many would be terrifying. “It’s like muscle memory.”

Six months ago, Lance Corporal Robertson arrived in [Afghanistan](#) with 39 other female Marines from Camp Pendleton, Calif., as part of an unusual experiment of the American military: sending full-time “female engagement teams” out with all-male infantry patrols in Helmand Province to try to win over the rural Afghan women who are culturally off limits to outside men.

As new faces in an American counterinsurgency campaign, the female Marines, who volunteered for the job, were to meet with Pashtun women over tea in their homes, assess their need for aid, gather intelligence, and help open schools and clinics.

They have done that and more, and as their seven-month deployment in southern Afghanistan nears an end their “tea as a weapon” mission has been judged a success. But the Marines, who have been closer to combat than most other women in the war, have also had to use real

weapons in a tougher fight than many expected.

Here in Marja — which, seven months after a major offensive against the [Taliban](#), is improving but remains one of the most dangerous places in Afghanistan — the female Marines have daily skirted the Pentagon rules restricting women in combat. They have shot back in firefights and ambushes, been hit by homemade bombs and lived on bases hit by mortar attacks.

None of the 40 women have been killed or seriously injured, and a number have worked in stable areas where the shooting has stopped, but many have seen good friends die.

One of the women, Cpl. Anica Coate, 22, was on patrol in early September in southern Marja five feet behind Lance Cpl. Ross S. Carver, 21, when he was shot through the mouth and killed by an insurgent sniper. Corporal Coate was the first to reach him, but she could not stop the bleeding. A week later, at a memorial service in Marja for her friend and two other Marines killed around the same time, she said she would not volunteer for the female engagement teams again.

“It’s not the living conditions, it’s not the mission, it’s this,” she said, gesturing toward a memorial display of boots, rifles and dog tags belonging to the dead Marines. She was, she said quietly, “too much of a girl to deal with these guys getting killed.”

There have been many other strains as well, not least some male officers who question the female Marines’ purpose and young infantrymen who remain resentful of the attention from commanders and the news media that the women have received. Stress, rough conditions and patrols in 100-plus-degree heat have caused almost all of the female Marines, like their male counterparts, to lose weight in Afghanistan, some nearly 20 pounds. A number of the women have seen their marriages end or their boyfriends leave them.

“It was starting ahead of time, but this definitely didn’t help the marriage,” said Lance Cpl. Sorina Langer, 21, who was divorced during her deployment in one of the most dangerous areas of Marja. “He saw it as walking out.”

For Capt. Emily Naslund, 27, the women’s commander, the sacrifices and the frustrations have been worth it. As a graduate of the [Virginia Military Institute](#) and a state champion runner in high school, she is the kind of alpha female, athletic and competitive, who seeks out the Marine Corps as the ultimate proving ground. But she readily says that she has relied on daily prayers — she is the daughter of a Minnesota stockbroker and a flight attendant who went to church every Sunday — and faith in God to get her through. Out on foot patrols, she said, “my life’s in his hands.”

She offered no assessment of the long, grinding war, other than to call it “slow,” and to say she tried not to pay attention to critics of the war at home. She was enthusiastic, though, about her small piece within the war. “This is going to be the highlight of my life,” she said.

As she explained it, “You’ve got 19- and 20-year-olds walking around in the world’s most dangerous place, knowing what could happen to them, and they’re willing to do that anyway, and they’re willing to do that with passion.”

All in a Day’s Work

The September night was unusually cold when Captain Naslund’s alarm rang through the stillness. “It’s 3:15, guys,” she said softly to Lance Corporal Robertson and Cpl. Christina Oliver, 25.

None had slept well. They had traveled from a larger combat outpost with only their summer sleeping bags, and the unexpected chill — they were outdoors on cots in a mud-walled compound serving as a small patrol base — had kept them shivering for much of the night.

They were apprehensive about the day’s mission, a clearing operation in the village of Sistani, a Taliban haven on the far western edge of Marja that the Marines had not been to before. Units from Company F, Second Battalion, Sixth Marines, along with Afghan Army troops, were to spend the day securing a polling site and searching every compound in the village ahead of parliamentary elections. The female Marines were to follow close behind to talk to Afghan women. Capt. Manuel Zepeda, the Company F commander, expected the group at some point to take fire.

“They know pretty much nothing about these compounds and the people that live in them,” Captain Naslund had told Corporal Oliver and Lance Corporal Robertson as she briefed them before the mission.

It was critical, she said, to get a sense from the men as well as the women of Sistani of “where they sit, who do they support, how are they seeing the elections, how do they see Marja in general?” To the surprise of some commanders, the female Marines have sometimes connected more readily with Afghan men than have male Marines. Capt. Brandon Turner, the commander of G Company in southern Marja, said, “You put a lady in front of them, they’ll start blabbing at the mouth.”

Captain Naslund and the two others headed out at dawn behind another unit, wading through one of the irrigation canals that have helped make this 75-square-mile farming district the heart of Afghan opium poppy production. With Afghan Army troops in the lead to ask villagers if the Marines could search their buildings — the units were under orders not to kick down

doors — the morning stayed quiet.

By midafternoon, the female Marines had searched one terrified woman in a baby-blue **burqa** on the back of her husband's motorcycle and had talked, through their Afghan-American female interpreter, to more than a dozen other Pashtun women. Some of them were frightened and refused to give their names — "I'd be nervous, too, if I had five chicks in my living room with weapons," Captain Naslund said after one meeting, referring to her team. But other Afghan women were friendly, if wary.

Inside compounds crowded with children, cows and goats, the Marines had removed their helmets but left on their body armor and kept their M4 rifles nearby. They mixed in simple questions about the ages of a woman's children with a more pointed one: what does your husband do for a living?

Most of the women said their husbands were farmers out working the fields. But the Marines suspected that some, either insurgents or their supporters, had slipped away when news had gotten out that the Americans were in town. When one woman said her husband was in Kandahar, the spiritual home of the Taliban, Captain Naslund replied, "Oh, we'd love to meet him."

The Marines were heading back to the patrol base in the late afternoon when the Kalashnikov rifle shots rang out, sending the patrol scattering for cover. "They just shoot and run, that's all that was," Lance Corporal Robertson said dismissively afterward.

But the next day when she and the others were back in Sistani, an Afghan man served them tea, asked for a new pump for his well and told them, "If the Taliban find out we're taking care of you, they'll cut our throats."

His words seemed an ominous warning: on the way back to the base, word came over the radio of a potential Taliban ambush. On edge, the female Marines avoided the area, walking through a pungent field of five-foot-tall **marijuana** plants instead.

By the afternoon they were meeting with Marine commanders and village men outside the local mosque, where Captain Zepeda introduced them: "We realize there are needs within the community that also involve women, so we have brought some women here." The meeting ended two hours later when the closing prayer of the mullah mixed in with the bleats of nearby goats and the unmistakable buzz of American surveillance drones overhead.

Sidestepping Restrictions

In July, the female Marines were abruptly called back from their 16 outposts to more secure

military installations in Helmand for a legal review to determine if they were in compliance with Pentagon directives on women in combat. The timing, more than halfway through their deployment, bewildered them.

In a telephone interview last week, Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the commander of the 20,000 Marines in Helmand, said he had called the women back after he was contacted by Pentagon officials because a congressman — neither he nor Marines in Washington would identify him — “had shown some interest in what exactly the females were doing.” General Mills acknowledged that the female engagement teams are “out on the point of the spear many times.”

Current Pentagon policy bars women from joining combat branches like the infantry, armor and Special Forces, and Congress in the past has sought to restrict military women’s roles even more. But in a common side step during nearly a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, women are “attached,” rather than assigned, to combat units. The female engagement teams simply say they “accompany” Marine infantry units on their patrols.

The review ended after three weeks, when lawyers and Marine commanders clarified some rules: the teams could not go on foot patrols primarily intended to hunt and kill the enemy, and they were not allowed more than “temporary stays” at the combat bases where they had been living for months.

When a debate broke out over what constituted a “temporary stay,” General Mills decreed it as 45 days. To fulfill the letter but hardly the spirit of the guidelines, the female Marines now travel from their combat outposts every six weeks for an overnight stay at a big base like Camp Leatherneck, then head back out the next morning.

To Captain Naslund, the legal hoops are absurd when there are no front lines — and when members of her team are taking fire almost daily on foot patrols.

“The current policy on women in combat is outdated and does not apply to the type of war we are fighting,” she wrote to her parents, friends and this reporter in an e-mail after the legal review in July. Since then, she has grudgingly accepted that the Marine Corps, which promotes an image as the most testosterone-fueled service, is a long way from allowing women in the infantry, and that she will live within the guidelines.

“If someone gets hurt, they’re going to come back and say, ‘Were you within the D.O.D. policy on women in combat?’ ” Captain Naslund said. “And if the answer is no, someone’s going to get fired. And it’s going to be someone pretty high up. Not because someone died, but because someone died when they weren’t obeying the rules.”

Male commanders in Helmand acknowledge that they sometimes hold the female Marines back to avoid potential problems. Captain Zepeda, for example, said he had deliberately kept the women behind the lead unit for the clearing of Sistani. The next day he said he had made sure that the women were routed around the possible Taliban ambush, in part to avoid a firefight before the meeting with village elders. But he might have sent an all-male infantry unit straight into it to try to inflict casualties on the enemy.

But over all, “they’re Marines first,” said Lt. Col. Kyle Ellison, the commander of 1,000 Marines in the Second Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, in southern Marja. “I don’t see a difference.”

Beaches and BMWs Ahead

“I’m going out of my mind, let’s get on the bus,” Corporal Coate said just before Lance Corporal Carver’s memorial service got under way. More than the others, she is nervously counting the days until the end of her deployment in mid-October.

The replacements for the female Marines arrived this past week in Helmand, 45 young women, again out of Camp Pendleton. Over the next days, the old team will introduce the new team to the Pashtun women they have built relationships with and hope the contact continues.

The departing Marines, meanwhile, have made vacation plans. Captain Naslund, who, like the others, stashed away most of her pay over the past seven months, has bought a [BMW](#) online and will pick it up before a vacation to Hawaii or Fiji. Lt. Natalie Kronschnabel, a team commander, is getting out of the Marines and will spend the next year in Italy. Corporal Oliver and Lance Corporal Robertson are making plans to spend [New Year’s Eve](#) in Times Square.

Looking back, Captain Naslund said she was not surprised that Corporal Coate would not want to repeat the experience. “After you see some of the stuff Marines see, you don’t want to go through that ever again, and then you start questioning, is it worth it, are we here for a reason?” she said.

She said she told Corporal Coate: “Yes, this happened to you, but this is what’s happening in Afghanistan. This is awesome, you’re making a difference here.”

As for what that difference is, Captain Naslund did not hesitate. “Just making a small improvement in somebody’s life, that means something,” she said. “And if that means that someday women don’t have to wear a burqa, great. If it means that they’re getting beat up and they’ve got some place to go to tell somebody, great. Or if they have a well in their compound that they didn’t have before, that’s going to make a big difference.”

In the end, she said, “They’re going to remember what we did.”

