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Marines pay a price trying to secure an Afghan hot spot

What happened to them in Sangin district of Helmand province shows the sacrifices in a campaign aimed at crippling the Taliban in a stronghold and helping extricate the U.S. from a decade long war.



Lance Cpl. Juan Dominguez, 26, left, practices using a biometric prosthetic arm with Todd Love, also from Camp Pendleton, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

By Tony Perry, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Camp Pendleton

Marines tell of snipers who fire from "murder holes" cut into mud-walled compounds. Fighters who lie in wait in trenches dug around rough farmhouses clustered together for protection. Farmers who seem to tip the Taliban to the outsiders' every movement, often with signals that sound like birdcalls.

When the Marines of the [3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment](#), deployed to the Sangin district of Afghanistan's Helmand province in late September, the British soldiers who had preceded them warned the Americans that the Taliban would be waiting nearly everywhere for a chance to kill them.

But the Marines, ordered to be more aggressive than the British had been, quickly learned that the Taliban wasn't simply waiting.

In Sangin, the Taliban was coming after them.

In four years there, the British had lost more than 100 soldiers, about a third of all their nation's losses in the war.

In four months, 24 Marines with the Camp Pendleton-based Three-Five have been killed.

More than 140 others have been wounded, some of them catastrophically, losing limbs and the futures they had imagined for themselves.

The Marines' families have been left devastated, or dreading the knock on the door.

"We are a brokenhearted but proud family," Marine Lt. Gen. John Kelly said. He spoke not only of the battalion: His son 1st Lt. Robert Kelly was killed leading a patrol in Sangin.

The Three-Five had drawn a daunting task: Push into areas where the British had not gone, areas where Taliban dominance was uncontested, areas where the opium poppy crop whose profits help fuel the insurgency is grown, areas where bomb makers lash together explosives to kill and terrorize in Sangin and neighboring Kandahar province.

The result? The battalion with the motto "Get Some" has been in more than 408 firefights and found 434 buried roadside bombs. An additional 122 bombs exploded before they could be discovered, in many instances killing or injuring Afghan civilians who travel the same roads as the Marines.

Some enlisted personnel believe that the Taliban has developed a "Vietnam-like" capability to pick off a platoon commander or a squad or team leader. A lieutenant assigned as a replacement for a downed colleague was shot in the neck on his first patrol.

At the confluence of two rivers in Helmand province in the country's south, Sangin is a mix of rocky desert and stretches of farmland where corn and pomegranates are grown. There are rolling hills, groves of trees and crisscrossing canals. Farmers work their fields and children play on dusty paths.

"Sangin is one of the prettier places in Helmand, but that's very deceiving," said Sgt. Dean Davis, a Marine combat correspondent. "It's a very dangerous place, it's a danger you can feel."

Three men arrived in Sangin last fall knowing they would face the fight of their lives.

1st Lt. John Chase Barghusen, 26, of Madison, Wis., had asked to be transferred to the Three-Five so he could return to Afghanistan.

Cpl. Derek A. Wyatt, 25, of Akron, Ohio, an infantry squad leader, was excited about the mission but worried about his wife, pregnant with their first child.

Lance Cpl. Juan Dominguez, 26, of Deming, N.M., an infantry "grunt," had dreamed of going into combat as a Marine since he was barely out of grade school.

What happened to them in Sangin shows the price being paid for a campaign to cripple the Taliban in a key stronghold and help extricate America from a war now in its 10th year.



When Lance Cpl. Juan Dominguez slipped down a small embankment while out on patrol and landed on a buried bomb, the explosion could be heard for miles.

"It had to be a 30- to 40-pounder," Dominguez said from his bed at the military hospital in Bethesda, Md. "I remember crying out for my mother and then crying out for morphine. I remember them putting my legs on top of me."

His legs were severed above the knee, and his right arm was mangled and could not be saved. A Navy corpsman, risking sniper fire, rushed to Dominguez and stopped the bleeding. On the trip to the field hospital, Dominguez prayed.

"I figured this was God's will, so I told him: 'If you're going to take me, take me now,'" he said.

His memories of Sangin are vivid. "The part we were in, it's hell," he said. "It makes your stomach turn. The poor families there, they get conned into helping the Taliban."

Like many wounded Marines, Dominguez never saw a Taliban fighter.

"We don't know who we're fighting over there, who's friendly and who isn't," he said. "They're always watching us. We're basically fighting blind."

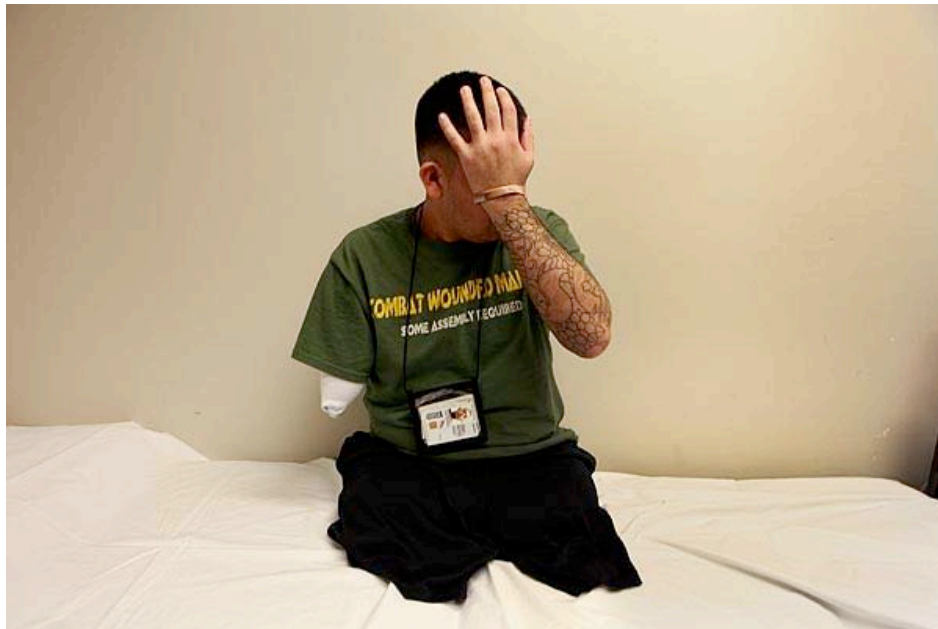
His mother, Martha Dominguez, was at home the night of Oct. 23 when a Marine came to her door to tell her that her son had been gravely injured. She left her job right away and rushed to his bedside in Bethesda. She's never been far away since.

When Dominguez's father, Reynaldo, first visited the hospital, he was overcome by emotion and had to leave.

"Mothers are stronger at times like this," Martha Dominguez said.

Juan Dominguez has since been fitted with prosthetic legs and a "bionic" arm and is undergoing daily therapy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. He and his girlfriend have broken up.

"She wanted someone with legs," his mother said.



When he's discharged, Dominguez wants to return to Deming to be near his 8-year-old daughter, who lives with his ex-wife, and open a business painting and restoring cars.

But his immediate goal is to be at Camp Pendleton, in uniform and walking on his prosthetic legs, when the battalion returns in the spring.

By some accounts, no district in Afghanistan is outpacing Sangin in "kinetic activity," military jargon for combat.

"Sangin is a straight-up slug match. No winning of hearts and minds. No enlightened counterinsurgency projects to win affections," said Bing West, a Marine veteran who was an assistant secretary of Defense under President Reagan. "Instead, the goal is to kill the Taliban every day on every patrol. Force them to flee the Sangin Valley or die."

When the Marines of the Three-Five arrived in Sangin, many were on their first deployment, eager to live up to the legacy the battalion earned at the battles of Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal, Okinawa and the Chosin Reservoir.

Some were with the battalion during the 2004 fight in Fallouja, Iraq, the bloodiest single battle the U.S. Marine Corps had fought since Vietnam. And now they were in Sangin, a place they called "the Fallouja of Afghanistan."

Marine brass, to whom heroes of the past stand as the measure of all things, say the Three-Five is writing its own chapter of combat history. Marine Commandant Gen. James F. Amos, who spent Christmas in Sangin, said the Marines there are writing "a story of heroism, of courage, of fidelity."

A victory over the Taliban in Sangin, American officials hope, would bolster the confidence of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government and possibly push the Taliban into a negotiated settlement, allowing the United States to withdraw its troops by the 2014 target set by the Obama administration.

Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, the top Marine in Afghanistan, has called Sangin the last major Taliban stronghold in Helmand, although there are other pockets of insurgent activity in the province.

Fighters from Pakistan use Sangin as a staging area before launching into other parts of Afghanistan, particularly into neighboring Kandahar province.

"We know that the senior leadership [of the Taliban] outside the country is very concerned that this area is going to slip away," said Col. Paul Kennedy, commander of Regimental Combat Team Two, which includes the Three-Five.

To get a sense of the intensity of the fighting that has killed the 24 Marines of the Three-Five, one might look at a recent deployment by another group of Marines. When the 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, was deployed for seven months last year in the Helmand district of Garmsir to the south, another Taliban stronghold, 14 were killed, about half as many casualties in almost twice the time.

Four Marines from battalions assigned to assist the Three-Five by clearing roads and detonating Taliban bombs have also been killed.

U.S. military hospitals in Landstuhl, Germany; Bethesda; and San Diego have seen a steady

stream of wounded Marines and sailors from the Three-Five, including at least four triple-amputees.

Less severely wounded Marines have been sent to the Wounded Warrior Battalion West barracks at Camp Pendleton. Still others among the Three-Five injured have been transferred to the Veterans Affairs facility in Palo Alto, which specializes in traumatic brain injuries.

Fifty-six replacements have been rushed from Camp Pendleton to Afghanistan to take the places of the dead and severely wounded. Priority was given to young lieutenants, who serve as platoon commanders, and Navy corpsmen.

Many of the volunteers were Marines from other battalions who had been wounded in Afghanistan, said Gunnery Sgt. Enrique MorenoRuiz.

"We're war fighters," MorenoRuiz said. "If they want to go, they can go."

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1st Lt. John Chase Barghusen had served with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, when it was airlifted into the Nawa-i-Barakzayi district of Helmand province southwest of Sangin in the summer of 2009 on a mission to wrest control from the Taliban. The progress in Nawa has buoyed U.S. hopes for similar success in Sangin, Marine officials said.

A former football player at Iowa State and son of a retired Marine colonel, Barghusen transferred to the Three-Five so he could return to Helmand "to finish what we started in Nawa."

Like other Marines assigned to mentoring duty, Barghusen believes the fastest way for the U.S. to exit Afghanistan is to train and equip the Afghans to assume responsibility for fighting the Taliban and protecting villagers.

Lt. Col. William McCollough, who commanded the One-Five in Afghanistan, wasn't surprised that Barghusen volunteered to return, calling it "exactly what I would expect from someone of his character."

Early one morning, Barghusen was reconnoitering, looking for places to establish a patrol base. The Marines and Afghan soldiers were walking "ranger style," each man stepping in the footsteps of the man in front of him, in hope of avoiding buried bombs.

The Afghan soldier in front of Barghusen stepped on a hidden explosive and was blown apart.

Barghusen's face, back, left arm and left leg were ripped by shrapnel and the hot blast of the explosion. He tried to apply a tourniquet to stop the bleeding but didn't have the strength.

"I knew my face was messed up," he said in Bethesda. "My jaw was broken so it was hard to shout. You try to shout and you can't. Your jaw just hangs there."

His father was hunting grouse in northern Wisconsin when he got the call that his son had been wounded and was being airlifted to the U.S.

"I didn't know if he was going to have arms, legs or a face," said John Clifford Barghusen, who served in Iraq as a helicopter pilot in 2003 and '04 and is now a pilot for American Airlines. "All I knew was that he was alive and not going to die in the next 72 hours. When I finally saw him, he had a face the size of a pumpkin."

Before his injuries, 1st Lt. Barghusen had enjoyed weightlifting and martial arts. After skin grafts and surgery to restore hearing in his left ear, he is back in Southern California. His arm and leg are regaining strength, and his face shows few signs of the cuts inflicted by shards of metal and rock.

He hopes to return to active duty at Camp Pendleton, possibly to share the lessons of Sangin.

He sees a marked difference between Nawa and Sangin.

"In Nawa, they wait for you and then strike," he said. "In Sangin, they come after you."

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It's not unusual, U.S. military officials say, for the Taliban to "test" a newly arrived U.S. battalion by staging repeated ambush attacks in hope that the Americans will retreat to their bases.

Instead, the Marines have rushed more troops, more bomb-sniffing dogs and more firepower to Sangin. A month ago, a company of Marines with the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, was sent to Sangin. Within days, three of its members were killed.

Marines with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit began arriving last week in northern Helmand province with their own attack aircraft, long-range artillery and logistics support. Hundreds of Marines with the 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, are expected to deploy to Sangin to provide patrols, particularly at a key road construction project that the Taliban has been trying to disrupt.

The Marines have also unleashed artillery and airstrikes, both conventional and from drones. The top Taliban commander in Sangin was thought to have been killed by a drone strike.

Marine tanks from Kuwait and tank crew members from the base at Twentynine Palms have deployed to Helmand and will soon be sent into battle. Among the tank's attributes is better targeting capability, decreasing the chances of civilian casualties, Marines said.

The casualty rate of Marines has declined in recent weeks, although that could be due to numerous factors, including the weather and the ability of insurgents to infiltrate from Pakistan. Marine leaders prefer to see it otherwise.

"We've killed a lot of [roadside bomb] emplacers, several hundred maybe," Col. Kennedy said.

"When you start taking that many bad guys off the battlefield, you are going to enjoy a certain reduced casualty rate."

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On the day before he deployed to Afghanistan, Cpl. Derek Wyatt and his wife, Kait, walked on the beach near their home at Camp Pendleton, writing their names in the wet sand and the name they had selected for their unborn son.

Wyatt had had a good Marine career, including assignment to the security detail for President George W. Bush, the kind of job that goes to only the elite. The young couple had talked of moving to Ohio once his enlistment was finished. But first he was being deployed to a war zone and he was excited.

"He loved adventure," said Kait, 22, a former Marine. "He hated sitting behind a desk."

Still, she knew the dangers. She and Derek had been introduced by a Marine who was later killed in Iraq.

"It doesn't matter if it's the first day they're gone, or the last day before they return home, you're scared all the time," she said. "You pretend to be happy, but you're living in fear."

One morning last month, the knock came at the Wyatt home.

"I automatically knew," Kait said. "But then I had a split second where I thought: 'Maybe he's at Landstuhl, maybe he's just injured, still alive.' But when they asked to come in, I knew."

Wyatt was killed Dec. 6 by a sniper while on patrol. Kait is convinced that he was targeted by the Taliban. It provides her with a measure of comfort that he died as a leader.

"Luckily, none of his Marines were hurt," she said.

The night after she learned of her husband's death, Kait gave birth to Michael Everett Wyatt,

7 pounds, 11 ounces, named after the patron saint of the military.

The pregnancy had been planned in case Wyatt didn't return from Afghanistan.

"We wanted to have something tangible, a physical expression of our love," she said, "just in case there wasn't another opportunity."

Wyatt had recorded passages of the Dr. Seuss book "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" During her pregnancy, Kait aimed her iPod speaker at her stomach; when she brought the baby home from the hospital, she played the recording softly to help him sleep.

Before Kait left the hospital with her baby, a casualty assistance officer decorated her home,

including placing an "It's a Boy" sign on the front lawn.

"He made sure that Michael got the kind of homecoming that his father would have wanted," Kait said, her voice trembling. She paused, unable to speak.

Waiting at home was a receiving blanket for the baby, in Marine colors and with the Three-Five logo.

Under a bitterly cold sky, Cpl. Wyatt was buried Jan. 7 at Arlington National Cemetery in a section reserved for the fallen from Iraq and Afghanistan.

At the funeral service, Kait told of a conversation she and her husband had before he deployed about what she should do if he was killed in Afghanistan.

Kait said she told Derek that she would never remarry. He pulled the car to the side of the road, she said, looked directly at her and made her promise that she would again find love in her life.

"He told me the only thing he wanted in life was for me to be happy," Kait said.

As she spoke, there were tears in the eyes of the mourners, including Marines with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, which is still fighting for a faraway place known as Sangin.

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Perry also reported from Bethesda, Md.

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