



LESSONS LEARNED

Jeanne McKinney reveals how battles of the past can help win future wars against terror

At the core of every great battle are great lessons. In these days of expanding terror, the world is plagued with over 60 terror groups, designated by the US State Department. A study of the battles during the War on Terror would behoove not only the military, but foreign policy makers.

The character of the enemy has not changed, only tactics evolve. Insurgents have a common goal – Control. Other motivations may drive them such as vengeance, bravado, virgins in heaven, but at the centre of their jihad is the installation of religious ideologies as law of the land. They will expel, injure and execute anyone getting in their way.

The Taliban, al Qaeda, Haqqani, Hamas, etc. do not care about democracy or freedom. Insurgents are

rebels, anti-government fighters with two standout traits: they will stop at nothing and they are not afraid to die. They face off with Marines, armies, navies and special forces much more advanced and still succeed at causing massive destruction and death.

Terrorists preach from their podiums and training camps to balloon their forces of criminals, drug traffickers, bombmakers, dark money merchants and death squads. No one in their targets is spared, not even their own people. These organised rebels define a patient and resilient brand of urban warfare.

Our resilience must exceed theirs to stop them. Our imaginations must work overtime to better prepare for the next attack. Impatience must drive us to end this plague of terror and civilian murder. When we have the

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chance to see how victory is won, we cannot muck it up with a cover up or teach the wrong lessons. But that is exactly what happened on 14 September, 2012, when a group of heavily armed Taliban took 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing by surprise on their airfield at Camp Bastion – a sprawling expeditionary base in Helmand Province, Afghanistan.

MASSIVE ATTACK

Little is known about this attack happening three days after the one on Benghazi. It was no less dangerous and no less dramatic when heavily armed Taliban waltzed into a wall of USMC lethality one very dark night, surely on suicide mission. This time they came out from behind civilian shields and walls with murder holes, carrying rifles, RPGs and grenades. The Taliban fighters (disguised wearing US Army uniforms) came to inflict as much damage as possible, initially killing two Marines and setting attack aircraft and jet fuel bags on fire.

The attack could have stopped at the airfield perimeter fence line, according to MajGen Gregg Sturdevant, Commander, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW), who was there. Sturdevant and his boss MajGen Mark Gurganus, Commander, Regional Command (SW) saw the red flags immediately upon their arrival at Bastion. They were sent to lead 3rd MAW with orders to conduct 24/7 counterinsurgency operations, complete a major drawdown of forces and manage a transition of combat power to the local Afghan forces, not ready for the turnover.

The Taliban were particularly good at the art of surprise and doing things no one would expect them to do. They simply cut through a chain link perimeter fence and turned an American airfield into a battle zone.

Camp Bastion (originally built by the British) was a huge forward operating base in a region notorious for insurgent violence and poppy grown there. Illegal opium fuelled the insurgency. British, US, expeditionary forces were based there, as well as the Afghan Army.

“When we first got there, we realised that security was less than perfect,” recounts Sturdevant. “A shanty town near a main gate entrance blocked all deliveries... leaving in question who friend or foe was.”

That was only one of the British lapses in security. It was, they assured, their base, their rules. Along the Eastern airfield perimeter the Brits allowed poppy fields to encroach, providing the enemy with concealment and observation. They put policing outside the wire (next door) in the hands of the locals, not to be trusted.

“We had 15 well-organised and well-trained Taliban come through the East fence exactly where those poppy fields were, exactly where we had tried to get the poppy fields eradicated,” informs Sturdevant.

Within their powers, Gurganus and Sturdevant set about to layer the missing defences. In May 2012 Sturdevant’s staff identified other security concerns and requests to fix them – denied. Unknown to all, Taliban plans to attack the base were in motion.

Gurganus strongly advocated getting rid of the poppy fields to provide clear fields of view and fires. Open undulating ground with wadis surrounded Bastion that covered 40 square miles, with 25 miles of

fence line. The Brits put tower manning in third-party hands, who were accused of sleeping on duty.

“Of the 24 towers at Camp Bastion, only 11 were routinely manned due to a lack of available personnel, a risk accepted by the [British] RAF Camp Bastion commander.” (National Defense University Press).

Roles were assigned in a suboptimal, outdated security agreement that was highly problematic. MajGen Gurganus and RC(SW) inherited the BLS Complex AT/FP C2 arrangement, established by a January 2011 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between USCENTCOM and the UK Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ). The 2011 MOU established that the separate camps would: “run on national lines,” and several personnel described the two camps as separate: “sovereign” territory”.

AVIATION MARINES WITH VARIED ROLES PUT DOWN THEIR WRENCHES AND PICKED UP THEIR RIFLES

The C-2 split command was a violation of USMC doctrine that Gurganus strongly opposed, writing up a new proposed MOU with a unified command, which was denied. The split command arrangement fell apart when the enemy breached the wire. Anyone considering putting the security of their forces in another nation’s hands should study this battle.

“The causal factors permitting this attack to happen included a convoluted force protection task organisation, lack of unit integration and failure to identify a single tactical-level commander with the responsibility for base defence...”

Government seriously failed those at Bastion by not listening to those experienced ground and air commanders that were navigating a volatile combat environment. Gurganus fought for unified command all the way to ISAF leadership, but he was denied. The political optics zeroed in on getting troops out of Afghanistan, leaving remaining forces at risk as resources were cut way back. The Taliban leveraged the reduction in manpower, plus other observable security gaps.

Sturdevant continued to fight for more layered defence, including Hesco barriers and T-walls. His main job was running 24/7 air support operations protecting ground forces. That was a challenge with reduced personnel and the Brits’ hands-off-the locals’ policies. Both he and Gurganus did what was in their control to improve force protection every day. One cannot compromise force security and they knew it and acted to fix things.

Then Commandant James Amos ignored the roles/failures of others and subverted the efforts of Gurganus and Sturdevant, Amos intent to pin “command failure” on the two despite facts saying otherwise. Investigations were classified at the time. The news exploded and the battle became about blame, loss, and excoriation instead of about courage, skill and untold lives and billions in equipment saved. “If only they would have listened,” laments Sturdevant.

In our greatest institutions – corruption unravels trust, an absolute on the battlegrounds. You watch my back, and I will watch yours is steel-clad armour that saves lives. The loss of honour, praise and ultimately truth harmed a lot of Marines that fought brilliantly with valour looking out for each other. They had to see people take credit that did not earn it. Marines had to operate with unnecessary risk given by top officials with decision-making powers. Their trust was sorely compromised when their stories were told incorrectly, and lessons learned were the wrong ones.

“WHEN WE FIRST GOT THERE, WE REALISED THAT SECURITY WAS LESS THAN PERFECT”

Other Marines who had been to Bastion before the attack have come forth: “As part of Third Marine Aircraft Wing Forward many of us had departed just weeks before the attack, however we were well-versed in the continual denial of extra security for the base, which eventually led to 15 Taliban forces getting “inside the wire,” stated USMC Harrier Pilot Phil Kendro.

You cannot always predict what a determined enemy will do. In this case you could, due to previous breaches at Camp Bastion. The investigative prowess of the British Defence Committee unearthed telling facts found in the new history of the attack entitled: *Triumph Over the Taliban: The Untold Story of US Marines’ Courageous Fight to Save Camp Bastion*. The Committee members appear as unexpected heroes.

Unique to the Marine Corps is the mantra: “Every Marine is a Rifleman”. If that had not been the case, the battle would have had a vastly different outcome. Aviation Marines with varied roles put down their

wrenches and picked up their rifles to defeat their attackers. Aircraft were launched by HMLA-469 commander LtCol Stephen Lightfoot to prevent the Taliban from setting fire to them like they did with the Harriers melting into twisted metal. The sound of exploding jets was like a rattlesnake sending its dire warning. This was the trigger for critical thinking that lasted through the night.

Once launched, finding and taking out the insurgent threats was priority. A clever way the helicopter pilots and crews identified the enemy was to determine the direction of green (Russian) tracer fire. This is a notable example of critical decision making when locations of scattered friendlies below are undetermined. Marines were building defences all over the airfield to save civilians and themselves from Taliban wrath. The best weapons to target match were chosen to minimise collateral damage. The fact no friendly casualties occurred was huge, but not the focus in news narrative.

Sgt Doman and Sgt Hawkins were fuellers, who encountered five of 15 attackers in the open. Their rifle training kicked in. Heroism dominated the night. Tactical synchronisation clicked in gear after the first explosion. It is the success you want to teach new recruits instead of lessons focused on an untruthful claim of command failure to secure the base.

Our forces became well-acquainted with the fierce, unrelenting character of terrorists, never forgotten. Yet, they found ways to out-think and out match them repeatedly. Smaller wars were won at great cost. Where was that battle wisdom in the final withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan? In those critical moments, the greater war of 20 years was lost due to poor planning, complacency, a lack of layered defence and trusting terrorists. Security for Marines and other US personnel on point was compromised by those in Washington and at the Pentagon miles from danger. Winning wars and saving lives from terror can and should be the foremost approach in future conflicts ●

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is an award-winning military journalist as well as a military documentary filmmaker. She is currently in the final stages of writing, directing, and producing *Ronin 3: The Battle for Sangin* – a three-part documentary series that follows 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines through a labyrinth of murder holes and IEDs in a heavily entrenched Taliban stronghold, on their mission to restore security to the local Afghan people. She is also the author of *Triumph Over The Taliban*, the untold story of US Marines’ courageous fight to save Camp Bastion.



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