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'We're Winning' in Helmand

Posted on 16 June 2011



By Stephanie Gaskell
The War Report

Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan – Asked point-blank “Are coalition forces winning the war in Helmand?” a senior military commander here said: “Yes.”

“I can say that definitively,” said Marine Col. Norman Cooling, the operations officer for the regional command, where 20,000 coalition troops are deployed.

Cooling said the province, in southern Afghanistan, has turned around in recent months. Attacks are down and the local population has rejected the Taliban. “Wherever you put coalition forces, one – there’s painful violence, and two – it starts settling out, and you start seeing improvements,” he said.

While “winning” isn’t a word that diplomats use – Ryan Crocker, the incoming U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan (if confirmed), said that word isn’t helpful in diplomatic circles – the Marines here surely feel like they’re making a difference in Helmand, once the most dangerous place in Afghanistan.

Still, there’s work to be done to make the Afghans here self-sufficient so they aren’t lured to work against U.S. And NATO forces.

“It’s not so much an ideological insurgency as it is a quality of life/economic mindset,” he said. “The vast majority of people here just need a livelihood.”

Cooling said U.S. and NATO troops need to “separate the population from narcotics.” The poppy season here just ended, but the Marines are still determined to try to get local farmers to grow wheat and other crops instead.

“We are not going to allow the insurgency to benefit from this product,” he said.

“I don’t want to give you the impression that we’re focused on a drug war, because we’re not,” he said. “What we’re targeting is the nexus, where the narcotics industry supports the insurgency.”

But poppy is a major target of U.S. Marines here. And it’s everywhere. The crop grows just about anywhere and is much easier and more profitable than wheat and other alternative crops. It’s not going to be easy to get a farmer to switch, but the Marines are offering to pay them not to grow the substance that is turned into heroin.

“We think we’re having a pretty good effect,” Cooling said.

That’s not to say that the war is over in Helmand. The fight is raging in Sangin and Cooling said that Now Zad, which was declared “clear and held” is now under fire again. “The majority of our casualties are in that area,” Cooling said.

Half a dozen Marines – mostly from the 3/5 Marines – have been killed in Helmand in the past two weeks and several more wounded. But in many areas, there is progress.

“Everyone’s been anticipating the spring offensive, we’ve been waiting for the Taliban to put down their farming equipment and pick up their weapons. I don’t think it’s measuring up to what we thought it would be. I don’t think the spring offensive is really taking off,” said Lt. Col. Russell Todd Zink, commander 1-23, Marine Reservists.

Still the Afghans we’ve talked to are wary of the progress – they know that when coalition troops leave the country will likely fall into a civil war.

“It’s like musical chairs,” Zink said. “They want to make sure they have a seat when the music stops.”

[Photo by Stephanie Gaskell]

Marines Press Gains As Afghans Worry They'll Leave

Posted on 14 June 2011



By Richard Sisk
The War Report

Shurab City, Afghanistan - They said it was 120 degrees as the patrol came to the wire and the big berm at one of the main gates to the sprawling Camp Leatherneck base in central Helmand province.

The Marines thought it was hotter but no matter. They locked and loaded, and nine of them plus their interpreter, Sami, climbed back aboard the two lumbering anti-mine vehicles mounted with 50-caliber machine guns and rumbled into a desert wasteland that stretched to the horizon.

The wasteland turned curiously green in spots. The Marines from Weapons Co., 1st Battalion, 23rd Regiment of reserves out of Houston, Texas, said it was from the base sewage that the locals use for irrigation of their illicit crops. The poppy harvest was over last month, so the new patch of green would be turned into hashish.

Lance Cpl. R.D. Parks II, 26, of Austin, one of the vehicle commanders, said it was a “security and presence” patrol meant to scope out any unusual activity and pick up intel from the surrounding villages.

“Every day we take different routes,” Parks said. “if the children come out, you’re okay. If none of the children come out, watch out.”

Lance Cpl. Omar Gonzalez, 27, of San Antonio, a driver who doubles as a company-level intelligence officer, said “people are receptive to us but every encounter, you’re looking for the atmospheric, the behavior.”

Helmand province has been the deadliest for the allies in nearly 10 years of war, with the death toll now nearing 800. There is more fighting to the north and east but the biggest action around Camp Leatherneck lately came a couple of weeks ago when a local welder was working on a gas tank. He emptied the tank but forgot about the vapors. The Marines said the explosion could be heard for miles around.

The Marines, being Marines, gripe about the lack of action but Gonzalez said he’d like to hear more griping. “That just means we’re doing our job.

Cpl. Randy Palos, the no-nonsense patrol leader, had his Marines dismount several times to check out the locals. A couple of guys came up to show him their bum knees. Palos said he’d see if he could get some medical help to them.

The patrol bumped out of the desert up onto Highway 1, the so-called Ring Road leading to Kabul, where the increased security has given birth to a sprawling truck stop and souk, or market, called Shurab City. A butcher hacking away with a knife that was more of a sword came out to greet the Americans.

He said life for him was better but he knew the Americans were talking about leaving. “I think things are good now but we worry maybe something very bad will happen when the Americans leave.”

Another shopkeeper said “I can see a lot of improvements. The Afghan army is better now. But if the Americans leave here there will be a problem.”

Further down the road, at another tumbledown stopping point called Souk City, a guy with crazy hair called Malik said “people feel safe at nighttime. No shots have been fired lately. But when the Americans leave here, conditions will be very bad. We can’t trust anything.”

The Marines loaded back up and headed for the base along one last stretch of blacktop before hitting the desert ruts again. The blacktop through the desert reminded Gonzalez of something. “I can never shake the feeling that I’m going into Las Vegas,” Gonzalez said with a laugh. “Except I know it’s not Las Vegas.”

[Photo by Stephanie Gaskell]

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Shura Radio 93.0

Posted on 14 June 2011



By Stephanie Gaskell and Richard Sisk
The War Report

Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan - In a small trailer at this sprawling Marine Corps base in Helmand Province, four Afghan radio Djs are at the mike 24 hours a day, 7 days a week spreading news and playing music for the locals.

Shura Radio broadcasts local news reports, important safety messages, information about health care and educational opportunities – and songs from Afghan singers.

“We take dedications from as far away as Kandahar, people call in and request songs,” said Abdul, one of the Djs. “We get 20 to 30 calls a day.” He said most people want to hear songs from singers like Nashanas, Nashma, and Mangal. But one of their most requested numbers is a song by Shakira in Pashtu.

The Djs broadcast news updates three times a day and prayer calls, too. “Under the Taliban, they didn’t have the freedom to listen to music,” said Rahaim, another DJ. “They want to keep up with the news. And there’s educational programs for children. They want to get life back to normal.”

Rahaim, Abdul, Yoda and Khan have all lived in the United States and have been working with the Marines to help open the flow of information again in Afghanistan. “I want to contribute to the mission,” said Khan, who speaks perfect English. “This is part of the mission. Some people go out and fight. We have a lot of good messages to put out. We tell kids to stay out of certain areas, we tell them about health programs. It’s good for the country.”

Thought they’re behind a microphone, the job is not without danger. The insurgents killed Yoda’s father for working with the Americans. But local Afghans also often call in with tips about IEDs and weapons caches.

Radio is a good medium, since illiteracy is high here in Afghanistan. The Marines, along with Afghan security forces, have handed out thousands of portable radios, called RIABs or radio in a box.

The station, which is broadcast across Helmand Province, reaches an estimated 40,000 listeners.