

Wish for the Impossible

... but understand the war you are fighting

by Maj Thomas Schueman

If Carl von Clausewitz’s aphorism in *On War* is true, “War is a mere continuation of policy by other means,” then what happens to a nation engaged in combat without a clearly defined policy?¹ A ship at sea without a means to navigate or ability to anchor falls victim to the currents and tides. If the same ship adrift at sea is subject to two captains with conflicting orders or two oars rowing in opposite directions, it remains in an equally perilous situation. America’s most protracted war lacked a trenchant strategy. The quagmire in Afghanistan commenced with noble intentions but floundered. Clausewitz concluded the first and most critical responsibility of the statesman and the general in respect to developing strategy is “rightly to understand in this respect the war in which he engages, *not to ... wish* to make of it something which, it is *impossible* for it to be.”² Marines will always fight and win on the battlefield, but they cannot win wars imbued with *wishes* for the *impossible*.

Infantrymen exist to locate, close with, and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver. The Marine Corps is an organization that specializes in the application of violence. The bulk of Marines’ training is devoted to tactics that induce the enemy into a combined arms dilemma. The combined arms dilemma offers the enemy two choices: The enemy can remain sheltered in place but will suffer from indirect fire and die. The enemy can displace and meet the Marines in the open but will suffer from suppressive machine gun fire combined with a maneuvering force and die. In 2010, Marines deployed to Helmand Province, Afghanistan, to wrest control of the region from the

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Taliban. British troops over a period of five years attempted and failed to pacify the volatile region. One British general compared it to “mowing the lawn” because of the fact the Taliban would return every time they left an area.³ As conditions worsened throughout Helmand Province, President Barack Obama authorized the Marines to attack. BGen Larry Nicholson gave the order to, “Run every ***** who shoots at you out of the district.”⁴ However, top government and military officials attempted to gene-edit the pugnacious Marines into a Peace Corps.

GEN Stanley McChrystal proselytized his counterinsurgency approach as gospel. McChrystal’s panacea to end the insurgency was simple, “Earn the support of the people and the war is won.”⁵ So simple he designed a “government in a box.”⁶ However, this cookie-cutter recipe refused to yield to the complexities in Helmand Province and resulted in repeated failures. McChrystal sought to “take away any incentives that might drive commanders and their men to ... kill ... insurgents.”⁷ Instead, McChrystal perpetuated a vacuous neologism of “courageous restraint.” McChrystal’s imposed limitations extended “beyond what the law of war calls for because our vibrant civil society recoils from the inexorable human suffering that goes along with achieving political aims by military force.”⁸ McChrystal’s convoluted concept created a conundrum for



1st Platoon, K 3/5 preps for combat (Sangin, Afg). (Photo by author.)

our troops on the frontlines. The intransigent Marines obstreperously pursued a more kinetic approach in Helmand. The leadership in Kabul's *raison d'être* was to win hearts and minds, but the reality on the ground quickly revealed a need for high explosive solutions and not chai tea. President Obama's deleterious announcement of an eighteen-month withdrawal gave the strategic advantage to the Taliban:

Dear shadows, now you know it all,
All the folly of a fight
With a common wrong or right.
The innocent and the beautiful
Have no enemy but time.⁹

Despite a lack of time, GEN David Petraeus was not content to "go gentle into that good night."¹⁰ Petraeus maintained the zeitgeist of his predecessors, and the imprimatur of nation-building persisted. Petraeus felt "the surge that mattered most was the surge of ideas."¹¹ The consentient rejection of these ideas in Helmand did not deter Petraeus. Rather, he concluded that the eighteen-year-old Infantryman needed to operate at "the graduate level of warfare," which required grunts to act as "constables, project managers, dispute adjudicators, and community organizers."¹² The tactical acumen of our warriors pervaded the front lines, but a Sisyphean task precluded any declaration of victory. Who were these men, and what was the cost of their leaderships' faulty machinations?

Substantial losses did not deter 3/5 Mar. Instead, day after day, they did what Marines have always done—take the fight to the enemy. While McChrystal and Petraeus pontificated chimeric approaches to ending the insurgency, scout/sniper Sgt Matthew Abbate formulated his own erudite "Rules of War":

1. Young warriors die.
2. You cannot change Rule #1.
3. Someone must walk the point.¹³

Abbate understood simple truths about the nature of war that escaped those responsible for shaping our strategy. In Kabul and Washington, DC, it was evident that all it required to win the war was to convince a tribal people with an inchoate national identity that they should embrace Western ideals; once



Sgt Matt Abbate in Sangin. (Photo by author.)

they had a taste of freedom, they would wholeheartedly abrogate the Taliban. Never mind the surveys that "confirmed widespread Pashtun resentment of our troops."¹⁴ The Marines superficially accepted whatever exegesis of the *Counterinsurgency Manual* McChrystal or Petraeus preached. They knew someone had to walk point and that you could not change Rule #1.

mander of Marine forces in Afghanistan, Gen Richard Mills, exclaimed, "I don't think there's ever been a battalion in the Marine Corps at any time, in World War II, the Korean conflict, Vietnam, that has pulled a tougher mission than what 3/5 has right now."¹⁵ I agree with Gen Mill's sentiment and offer a personal account of the confusion, anguish, and frustration.

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As the Higgins boats approached the beachheads during the invasion of Normandy or as Patton's tanks rolled into the *Battle of the Bulge*, no one would have dared utter the phrase "courageous restraint." No one would postulate the troops should "surge ideas." However, in 2010 our highest levels of leadership dared to implore such measures as brave men like Sgt Jason Peto, LCpl Arden Buenagua, and Lt William Donnelly gave their last full measure in the killing fields of Sangin, Afghanistan. The com-

September 2010, I was sitting on a beach in Camp Pendleton, CA, nursing a PBR. Nine years prior, I was sitting in theology class on the South Side of Chicago when Brother Brennan turned on the television. A plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center, and as we sat in silent nervous confusion, a second plane flew into the towers. Brother Brennan began to pray, "Holy Mary Mother of God." Now, I was praying that I would not puke as the hangover from the previous night's

debauchery was agitated by the sun, waves, and ocean breezes everyone else seemed to enjoy. Lt Robert Kelly aptly noted my hapless state and said, “Dad [Gen John Kelly], can you grab Tom another beer?” A lieutenant’s options are limited when a general offers you a beer. You accept and say, “Thank you, Sir.” A week prior, Rob invited Lt Cameron West (my best friend) and me to a beach BBQ. We came to the fleet together and wanted to share our last day stateside together. The three of us attended Infantry Officers Course 4-09, and reported to the *Darkhorse* during the fall of 2009. We spent the last year training our Marines for combat in the mountains of Bridgeport and the deserts of Twentynine Palms. Although we were the same rank, I looked up to Rob as a mentor. He was prior enlisted and fought in some of Iraq’s fiercest battles. Rob always did things the hard way. No shortcuts. He was tough and a disciplinarian but loved his troops.

A month after our beach bash, I still suffered from a hangover, but this one stemmed from carnage, chaos, and cacophony. Late in the evening of 8 November 2010, I sent Rob an email from my company’s command operation center. It was my first time since I arrived in Afghanistan that I had access to a computer, and I needed to check-in with Rob. I needed his reassurance that everything was going to be okay. A few hours later half-asleep in my mud hut, I awoke to my company commander trying to articulate something. I thought I heard him say, “Lt Kelly’s dead.” I thought I must still be asleep. Some nightmare, or maybe he mumbled something else. “Sir?” “Rob was killed this morning.” I wanted to puke again. In my mind, I was back at the beach, and there was Heather his wife, Kate his sister, his mom, the general. His brother, Cam was missing a leg, but he was there too—Rob. I buried my face in my sleeping bag and wanted my mind to go black. I wanted to see and feel nothing. But every time I closed my eyes visions of a casualty assistance calls officer in his dress blues knocking on the door to execute his solemn duty haunted me. I began to get physically ill. A few weeks prior while out on patrol, a



Lieutenant’s Schueman (L), Kelly (M), and West (R) during IOC. (Photo by author.)

similar episode occurred. I heard a casualty evacuation transmission over the radio, and one of the urgent casualties was Cam. But, at that same moment, I was engaged in a firefight of my own and pushed it out of my mind. As I reentered the patrol base, Will Donnelly (subsequently killed leading his platoon in a pitched battle on Thanksgiving Day) met me and said, “Cam’s hit. It doesn’t look good.” I searched the austere patrol base for somewhere to be alone, and the only private place I could find was our makeshift detention facility. I broke down with such a fierce intensity that I became delirious and took a day to recover.

This was the first of many worst days of my life while fighting in Sangin.

The loss of Rob started to elicit a similar response, but a call over the radio snapped me out of it. An enemy ambush trapped a squad attempting to evacuate a casualty. So, I pulled it together, assembled a quick reaction force, and launched out of the gate to help my

boys. The quick reaction force successfully alleviated pressure on the pinned down unit and started its return to base when the rear element was isolated by enemy machine-gun fire. I was located at the front of the patrol and ran to link-up with my squad leader to formulate a hasty plan. I was one meter from him when an explosion ripped through the earth. Crumpled, I regained consciousness and ran back to the blast site. Sgt Trey Humphrey lay in an enormous crater. His left foot was gone: “I’m sorry, Sir. I can’t believe I stepped on an IED.” This was the first of many worst days of my life while fighting in Sangin.

My patrol log captured another *worst day’s* events:

10 Dec 2010

Corporal Mcloud and Spivey hit an IED as we return to base. I ran up to the front and after coordinating a few things start helping with Mcloud. Teague comes up to me and hands me Mcloud’s fingers. I say thank you, and tell him to hold security. Mcloud doesn’t have a hand anymore, and I throw his fingers in a canal. Both Mcloud’s legs are gone, and I hold the meat to his legs while Nikirk wraps a bandage. Mcloud is going in and out of consciousness, and I force him to keep talking to me. He almost didn’t go on the deployment because he was worried about seeing his newborn baby

boy. But, I assured him he'd make it back and pleaded with him to deploy. Now as I choke back tears, I tell him he's got to make it home to teach his son to play baseball (Mcloud was a baseball star in high school). One of the hardest moments of my life to keep composed. We only have one pole-less litter, so Sgt Decker runs up to a compound and rips the door off to make an improvised litter. Spivey is crying that he is cold. I take off my top and wrap him in it. We return to base. I have no shirt on under my flak, and I am covered in guts. I went into COC [command operation center] to drop off the pressure plate of the IED, and Colonel Kennedy is in there. He looks pretty alarmed but doesn't say anything to me.

(EKIA): 1

(FWIA): 2

“What does Sangin mean? They sent us there to fight—so we fought.”¹⁶ Gen Kelly's acerbic summation aptly

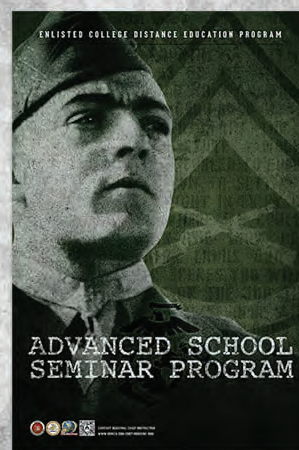
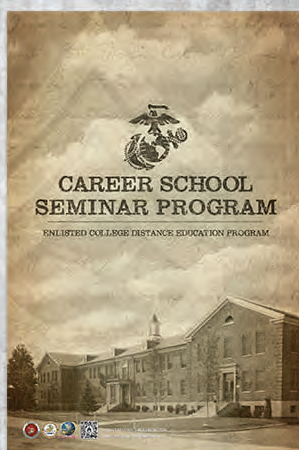


Lt Schueman conducts a KLE in Sangin. (Photo by author.)

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Kilo 3/5 in South Korea (March 2010, before the Sangin deployment). (Photo by author.)

captures the connotation of those that fought there. The Taliban overran the Sangin District less than a year after the Marines pulled out, and the Afghan Army abandoned all their posts: “That news has prompted soul-searching among veterans of the district—where more U.S. and British troops lost their lives over the years than in any other in Afghanistan.”¹⁷ Quixotic strategies aside, I am grateful for my opportunity to fight in Sangin. A survey Bing West conducted while in Sangin reflects this sentiment. In response to the question, “If you had it to do over again, you’d: I’d be right here 92%.”¹⁸ We would all do it again because it will always be the most meaningful work in our lives. Gen James Mattis conveys gratitude for his combat experiences and pity for those that did not partake, “I feel sorry for those who were not there with us when trouble loomed ... those who were not so fortunate to discover what we were privileged to learn when we were receiving our master’s and PhDs in how to live life.”¹⁹ In Gen Kelly’s address to the Semper Fi Society of St. Louis on 13 November 2010, he captures the essence of the fighting men that held the line in Sangin:

We who have served and are serving refuse their sympathy. Those of us who have lived in the dirt, sweat and struggle of the arena are not victims and will have none of that. Those with less of a sense of service to the

nation never understand it when men and women of character step forward to look danger and adversity straight in the eye, refusing to blink, or give ground, even to their own deaths. The protected can’t begin to understand the price paid so they and their families can sleep safe and free at night. No, they are not victims, but are warriors, your warriors, and warriors are never victims regardless of how and where they fall.²⁰

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3/5 Mar’s deployment to Sangin, Afghanistan, resulted in 25 Marines killed in action and hundreds wounded. These men that enter the arena deserve statesmen and generals that refuse to send young men to fight in fields of folly without a cogent strategy that offers every advantage to kill the enemy.

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, (May 2017), available at www.clausewitz.com.

2. Ibid.
3. Bing West, *One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2015).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Kori N. Schake and James N. Mattis, *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016).
9. William Butler Yeats, “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz,” *Poetry Foundation*, (2018), available at www.poetryfoundation.org.
10. Dylan Thomas, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” *Poets.org*, (February 2015), available at www.poets.org.
11. Bill Kristol, “David Petraeus on Conversations with Bill Kristol,” *Conversations with Bill Kristol*, (2018), available at www.conversation-withbillkristol.org.
12. *One Million Steps*.
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15. Ibid.
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17. Wesley Morgan, “The Outsize Legacy of Sangin, One of the Deadliest Places in Afghanistan for U.S. and British Troops,” *Washington Post*, (January 2016), available at www.washingtonpost.com.
18. *One Million Steps*.
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