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The End Operation Dragoon of a War

"Out of Afghanistan in July of 2011." These were the famous words of President Barack Obama, 18 months ago. He predicted that by 2014 all the foreign combat troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan—time for a reality check. Journalist Irene de Kruif and photographer Marielle van Uitert went to Afghanistan to see if the country was ready for an American pullout. (Note: an abbreviated version of their account previously ran in the UK's Metro newspaper in July 2011.)

For the men of the 101st Airborne Division in the province Paktika, the dream of heading home is becoming more of a reality with every day that passes. But in the interim, lying back and taking it easy is not an option. The last months of their mission are devoted to Operation Dragoon. The division is going to set up a checkpoint and police compound for the Afghan border police. But in order to do that, they first have to actively hunt down the Taliban.

Geographically, the center of Operation Dragoon is Niamatabad, an impoverished bazaar near the Pakistani border. The bazaar consists of some 20 shops, four petrol stations, two restaurants and two hotels, all spread out along a single dirt road. Some shops have roofs, others don't. Some shopkeepers are aiding and abetting Taliban, others are neutral.

Niamatabad may be a mud-hut village,



but it holds great strategic importance for the Americans. In spring, the area saw a substantial numbers of Wazaris—nomads who often work as mercenaries for the Taliban—infiltrate across the Pakistani border to fight. Niamatabad, with its four petrol stations, is essential for the Taliban and their war effort.

By building a checkpoint, the Americans hope to stop the Taliban in Niamatabad.

Opposite: Afshan, 40, wears white flowers on her jet-black burqa. She seems to be repressing the war from her mind both literally and figuratively. She's practically deaf and says she's insane. Two of her sons died five years ago during a suicide attack in a hotel in Orgun. "Their stomachs were split open," she says. "I saw everything, their intestines, everything."

Above: The Afghan Border Police consists of young men who have the dangerous job of protecting the Afghan-Pakistan border. Many times they work together with the Taliban.



Above: Everybody in the bazaar village is a suspect and everybody is watched closely.

Right: A member of the Taliban was caught while placing IEDs in Orgun (Afghanistan). He was imprisoned in the U.S. Camp Orgun-E before being transported to Fob Sharana for interrogation. Their hands are tied with zip-strips.

The operation is a textbook example of the Shape, Clear, Hold and Build strategy introduced by General Stanley McChrystal two years ago, before he retired from the post of Commander of the U.S. Forces in Afghanistan.

It's war like the White House wants it. While the infantry is hunting Taliban with the Afghan border police, American engineers are building a compound and a checkpoint. Top brass is drinking tea with the locals to win hearts and minds.

The Whiskey Company is in charge of hunting Taliban. With some 60 American soldiers and the same amount of Afghan border police, they go on daily patrols. "We don't catch many Taliban," one soldier says proudly. "Mostly we just shoot them."

There are two prisoners lying on a bench at the base of the company. They have been waiting for five days to be taken to a larger military base for questioning. Their hands are cuffed with strips and their heads are covered with bandages. "They are Talibs," says one American soldier. "Caught red-



handed placing an improvised explosive device [IED]."

Tracking down Taliban is seldom easy for the Americans, traversing the narrow mountain passageways in large, cumbersome trucks. Taliban fighters, familiar with the mountainous terrain and double-quick on the motor, are constantly one step ahead. Then there are the locals—two-thirds of them sympathize with the Taliban.

"Showing that we're here is sometimes

effective enough," says Lieutenant Yost. "We prefer to shoot Taliban. But now they're afraid of us and stay out of our sight." The column of Afghan humvees and American IED-proof trucks is impressive. "It's muscle talk," says Yost. "We're the boss here right now."

But the aim is for the Afghan border police to be the boss in and around Niamatabad, and that's a difficult task. They don't have the capacity that the American army



*Inhabitant of
Niamatabad.*



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Top: Inhabitant of Orgun (Afghanistan) whose son was killed by the Taliban.

Above: Women in Niamatabad are protected by their husbands. They are not allowed to be captured on film.

has, and they can't automatically rely on American air support. Plus the locals don't trust Afghan troops. Not so surprising, according to a study from the UN stating that 90% of Afghan soldiers are illiterate, one third have a drug addiction and a quarter deserts the army every year.

In Niamatabad, Captain Rasscher needs to advance the Afghan border police a bit. "Let me do the hearts-and-minds thing," he says, laughing. Armed with a loaded gun and dressed in a bulletproof vest jacket, he

drinks tea with Idak, one of Niamatabad's elders. Idak was involved in the plan of building a checkpoint from the start. But he decided he wanted out after learning that it would be manned by Afghan troops instead of Americans.

"The Taliban is going to arrest us all. This place is way too important for them," Idak says. He is afraid of the Taliban. "Two weeks ago after you bombed the weapons cache, they arrested two of our men and took them to Pakistan. They were held there for 10 days."

"That's why we built a security checkpoint," Rasscher says. "You agreed to it months ago. My soldiers will check up on the border police. And the commander of the Afghan border police, Lieutenant Loq-

man, is a great guy."

Rasscher is annoyed with the locals' sudden misgivings regarding the project. The Americans are putting all their money on the brand new Afghan government. They have to take over from the coalition forces. Rasscher doesn't think Idak and his villagers are afraid of Taliban. They're afraid of losing money if the Afghans are in Niamatabad rather than the Americans.

"When Americans guard the checkpoint it means all kinds of government money for the villagers: Land compensation etc.," Rasscher says. "Of course they want us to be here. But that's not how you build a country."

Foreign interference in the Afghan economy is a tricky affair. According to the World Bank, foreign military expenses and donor money account for 97% of the Afghan gross domestic product.

Also in this respect Niamatabad serves as a typical example. The bazaar sprang up in 2001, in parallel to the establishment of a nearby American compound. Shopkeepers made their money thanks to the military base. When the base was shut down in 2005, the Taliban returned and suddenly they became the main source of income for the shopkeepers in Niamatabad.

What will happen to the micro-economy if the Americans and the Taliban go away? Captain Rasscher has a ready answer on how to solve this predicament: Once again, it is the advancement of the Afghan border police.

Meanwhile, infantry are searching for Taliban. Informants say that about 200 Taliban fighters are planning an attack on the construction site in Niamatabad. The soldiers go on patrol together with the border police. On their way, they stop every male of an age appropriate for Taliban combat service.

The soldiers examine the shoes and hands of the people they stop for questioning. "Worker hands are okay, these people make their money in the field. Soft hands are suspicious, they can study inside the whole day," says Franz, a soldier on one of the patrols.

"Look at this guy, he's a bad guy!" Franz said about one soft-palmed individual. But Franz can't detain the man with the velvety hands. There's not enough proof.

They put all the men in the American HIIDE identity system. American soldiers



Left: This hotel owner in Niamatabad is losing income because of the U.S. invasion.

Middle: Tradesmen act suspiciously while being questioned. They are trembling but do not tell why. INTEL says they later met 200 Taliban who pushed them off the road to ambush us.

Bottom: On patrol from Niamatabad to the Pakistan border where men are routinely questioned.

scan irises and fingerprints using a small handheld device. If they find a fingerprint on a bomb, they may be able to trace it.

Suddenly, during the patrol about 20 kilometers from Niamatabad, three guys with army jackets run away. Together with the Americans, Afghan border police officers run after them until they're caught. "These are Taliban scouts, for sure!" Lieutenant Yost declares.

The Taliban is nearby, but they initiate no attack. "We've got too many troops here," Captain Rasscher says. "Right now they don't have the guts."

This worries Idak, the village elder. "What should we do when the Americans are gone?" he asks an American scout. "Can the Afghan border police handle two hundred Talibs?" "I hope so," answers the scout, "otherwise we just built a very expensive compound for nothing. You guys have to make it work."

Rasscher sighs. "Our job is finished when the Afghans can do it themselves," he says. But Rasscher's job is already finished. He's going home, to the United States of America.



Irene de Kruif (1985) started in 2008 as a reporter in the Middle East. Together with the famous war correspondent Conny Mus she reported from Jerusalem for p.e., the RTL News Network. Marielle van Uiter and Irene de Kruif literally met each other in the field and immediately made the deal to travel to Afghanistan together. They spoke with women without burqas on and had very unique insights in the macho world of the infantry. Right now Irene de Kruif is based in Amsterdam, but whenever there's a important story to tell, she flies out and reports for different international media.



Marielle van Uiter (1973) attended the professional school of photography in Amsterdam and Boxtel from 2005 till 2008. For her work she reported—embedded as well as not embedded—on Afghanistan. She patrolled with the American 82nd Airborne in Iraq and made reports on her own initiative in the West Bank. She also went to Kenya, Tanzania, Egypt, Israel, Nepal, Rwanda, Central African Republic, Ghana and Sri Lanka to make reports on the authority of a series of heterogeneous clients. Her photos were published in, among others, *The Guardian*, Dutch and Belgium newspapers and a great number of other specialist journals and international magazines. Van Uiter describes the world from a universal binding view, reducing the quantity of casualties to a human and impressionable tragedy.