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Combat by camera

Multiple missteps led to drone killing U.S. troops in Afghanistan

Though no dereliction of duty was found, a Pentagon investigation raised troubling questions: Among them: Was the Predator missile fired too quickly?

November 05, 2011 | By David S. Cloud and David Zucchino, Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Washington — On the evening of April 5, a pilot settled into a leather captain's chair at Creech Air Force Base in southern Nevada and took the controls of a Predator drone flying over one of the most violent areas of southwestern Afghanistan. Minutes later, his radio crackled.

A firefight had broken out. Taliban insurgents had ambushed about two dozen Marines patrolling a bitterly contested road.

The Air Force captain angled his joystick and the drone veered toward the fighting taking place half a world away, where it was already morning. He powered up two Hellfire missiles under its wings and ordered a crew member responsible for operating the drone's cameras to search for enemy fighters.

It didn't take long to find something. Three figures, fuzzy blobs on the pilot's small black-and-white screen, lay in a poppy field a couple of hundred yards from the road.

"Hey now, wait. Standby on these," the pilot cautioned. "They could be animals in the field." Seconds later, tiny white flashes appeared by the figures — the heat signature of gunfire. "There they are," he said, now sure he was looking at the enemy.

At an Air National Guard base in Terre Haute, Ind., an intelligence analyst whose job it was to monitor the video to help prevent mistakes on the mission also observed the muzzle flashes — but noticed that they were firing away from the embattled Marines.

Marines at Patrol Base Alcatraz, 12 miles from the firefight, watched their screens too, as they kept in contact with both the drone crew and the platoon members, who had set out from the base just an hour earlier. It would be their decision whether to call in a missile strike.

Thirty-one seconds after the pilot reported muzzle flashes, the Marines at Alcatraz ordered that the Predator be prepared to strike if the shooters could be confirmed as hostile. At 8:49 a.m., 29 minutes after the ambush began, they authorized the pilot to fire.

In minutes, two Americans would be dead.

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The decision to fire a missile from one of the growing fleet of U.S. unmanned aircraft is the result of work by ground commanders, pilots and analysts at far-flung military installations, who analyze video and data feeds and communicate by a system of voice and text messages.

In addition to the platoon taking fire that morning in Helmand province's Upper Sangin Valley, the mission involved Marine Corps and Air Force personnel at four locations: Marines of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion at Alcatraz, the drone crew in Nevada, the analyst in Indiana and a mission intelligence coordinator at March Air Reserve Base in California.

Senior officers say drone technology has vastly improved their ability to tell friend from foe in the confusion of battle. But the video can also prompt commanders to make decisions before they fully understand what they're seeing.

In February 2009, a crew operating a drone over Afghanistan misidentified a civilian convoy as an enemy force. The Predator pilot and the Army captain who called in the airstrike disregarded warnings from Air Force analysts who had observed children in the convoy. At least 15 people were killed.

Adding layers of personnel like the analyst in Indiana to cut down on errors also comes at a price: It may slow down the decision to strike when American lives are at risk.

The 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion operated in one of the most violent parts of Afghanistan, an area where drones patrolled virtually nonstop. It had recently revised its procedures to speed up Predator strikes, seeking to prevent "delay of missions by injection of comments" from the Distributed Ground System — military terminology for analysts like the one in Indiana.

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The embattled platoon was part of the Lone Star Battalion, a reserve unit based in Houston. The unit hadn't seen combat for five years when orders came last year to prepare for a nine-month deployment to Afghanistan.

Like any reserve unit, the battalion was a pickup team. Some Marines had combat experience, others had none at all.

It arrived in Afghanistan in early March of this year. Its 2nd Platoon was sent to Patrol Base Alcatraz.

Befitting its name, Alcatraz is a bleak outpost of mud buildings and tents, frigid in winter, sweltering in summer. "There are no showers, laundry facilities, chow hall or pretty much anything else," said a Marine who spent months there.

The platoon was put under the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion, an elite unit whose motto was "Swift Silent Deadly." Its Alpha company, which had arrived in Alcatraz five months earlier, engaged in near-daily gun battles with insurgents.

Lt. Christopher Huff, a 24-year-old on his first combat tour, and his Texas reservists were given dangerous duty: patrol Route 611, one of the country's most heavily mined roads. The road cuts north-south through opium fields laced with irrigation ditches and mud walls.

Tensions quickly emerged between the newcomers and the other Marines. A master sergeant later said the reservists were ordered "not to go more than 100 meters" off the road. The platoon had a reputation for "not knowing where their guys are located," he said.

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Among the platoon's veterans was Staff Sgt. Jeremy D. Smith, 26, who had enlisted in the Marines in 2003 after graduating from high school in Arlington, Texas. After three tours in Iraq, where his men called him "Warrior Poet" for his sensitive nature and the country music lyrics he wrote, he shifted to the reserves. He got married in April 2009 and talked of getting a job in law enforcement.

His Marine enlistment was almost up, so he didn't have to go to Afghanistan. But he had an American flag tattooed on his shoulder, and his email address included the words "last of a dying breed." He volunteered.

His proud father, Jerry, called his son "a Marine's Marine" who wanted to be in Afghanistan to lead his men in combat.

Another volunteer was Benjamin D. Rast, 23, a burly Navy hospitalman on his first tour. After graduating from high school in Niles, Mich., he went to a local college. He also played a season of semi-professional football, but tore up his knee.

Rast enlisted in the Navy in 2008 and was sent to the Naval Medical Center in San Diego. He yearned to see combat.

He was assigned to the Lone Star Battalion as a corpsman, the Marines' term for a combat medic. At Camp Pendleton, where the unit trained for five months before its deployment, he was dubbed "Doc Rast."

"What if something happens to you? What will I say to everybody?" his father, Robert, asked his son.

"Tell them I wanted to be on the front lines covering the guy on my left and on my right," the young man replied.

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Searching for buried bombs had a numbing sameness. Although more than 30 improvised bombs exploded along the road in 2nd Platoon's first month in Afghanistan, it had managed to avoid casualties. The morning of April 6 would start the same way.

Huff, Smith, Rast and the rest of the platoon, along with an Afghan interpreter and a bomb-sniffing dog named Susie, left Alcatraz about 7:20 a.m. in four armored trucks, heading north.

After half an hour, a bomb exploded beneath the third vehicle, but it caused minimal damage. Huff had planned to conduct foot patrols nearby, so they drove another 300 yards and unloaded.

Huff ordered part of the platoon to search the road for more bombs. Seven others, including Smith, Rast and a sniper squad, were told to take positions 50 yards or so west of the road to guard against an ambush.

Smith led the team single file down an irrigation canal perpendicular to the road, intending to turn and set up positions as instructed. But walls and other barriers blocked their way, so they went farther west. As they crossed a field, shots suddenly crackled in their direction.

"We all hit the deck and returned covering fire," one of the snipers recalled. No one was sure where the shots had come from, he said, but a cluster of buildings about 200 yards to the west seemed likely.

Another member of the team, Sgt. Jared Hammonds, a 27-year-old reservist from Conroe, Texas, yelled their coordinates into the radio.

Once the shooting let up, the squad ran to the nearest canal and splashed through knee-deep water. They were still trying to get a fix on the insurgents. When vegetation in the ditch forced them into a poppy field, they came under fire again.

They dropped to the ground again and fired toward the buildings.

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At the Air National Guard base in Indiana, the Air Force analyst watched the battle unfold on the drone's video feed. The analyst, a technical sergeant in a reserve unit, was to message minute-by-minute reports to the mission intelligence coordinator in California, who could pass them on to the crew controlling the drone.

Like the drone pilot, the analyst in Indiana saw three men and muzzle flashes. The analyst typed "3 friendlies in FOV," meaning three non-insurgents in the camera's field of view.

A second later, he wrote "Pers are shooting W," meaning they were firing west, away from the Marines on the road. He sent the fragmentary reports to March Reserve Air Force Base, his communications link to the drone crew. A trainee studied the video there under supervision of the mission intelligence coordinator.

Almost immediately, the analyst had doubts.

"Disregard," he wrote, followed by "Not friendlies," followed by "unable to discern who pers are." But he was certain of one thing: The shots were aimed away from the Marines.

The mission intelligence coordinator and the trainee were dubious. They thought the shots were aimed east toward the Marine convoy. The trainee messaged the Indiana analyst to "double check" his coordinates — and didn't relay the information to the drone crew.

As debate about the direction of the gunfire continued over the chat system, the analyst did not have access to radio traffic indicating a strike was imminent.

And as he was preparing to strike, the Predator pilot was unaware of the analyst's doubts.

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At Alcatraz, a captain and a gunnery sergeant from 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion's Alpha company had requested air support after the platoon first reported gunfire at 8:20 a.m. When a Marine unit comes under attack, air or artillery support is supposed to be available within 10 minutes. The Predator was circling overhead in seven minutes.

The Marines at Alcatraz asked the drone crew to search for Marines along the road and for insurgents to the west. They also pressed Huff to confirm his men's positions. Huff reported that his men were on the road, or within 50 yards of it. In fact, some were more than 200 yards away.

At 8:41 a.m., the Predator pilot in Nevada reported seeing the muzzle flashes from three prone figures in the poppy field. The Marine officers quickly issued a "preemptive" order to prepare the Predator to fire.

The captain radioed to confirm where platoon members were and told Huff that the Predator was prepared to strike near a low-slung structure marked as Building 58 on detailed military maps "if it was still a viable target." The gunnery sergeant radioed in the captain's call sign to authorize the missile strike eight minutes later.

Hearing the order, Huff warned his scattered squad over the radio: "Get your guys down — danger close."

Hammonds shouted at a corporal to find Building 58 on their map.

"I hear [Huff] on the radio for us to take cover and I relayed it to my guys," he recalled. "Near the canal on the west side is a low wall that I tell everyone to get behind."

Smith and Rast were still out in the poppy field. Hammonds' radio blared again: The Hellfire missile would hit in 17 seconds. He shouted at Smith and Rast to hustle.

Suddenly the corporal found the building on his map. It was behind them, not the suspected Taliban position farther west. He yelled out, "Building 58 is the wrong building!"

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The missile exploded almost on top of Smith. Running across the field, Hammonds found Rast face down with a large wound behind his ear. Smith lay five yards away, but his condition was clear. "I knew he was dead," Hammonds said.

Other Marines rushed to try to save Rast. They restored his pulse, but only briefly. They noticed Hammonds intently searching the ground. "What are you doing?" the sniper team leader demanded.

"Trying to find Smith's wedding ring," Hammonds replied. Smith had worn the silver band on a chain around his neck. He found the ring and would return it to Smith's wife, Rachel.

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The Pentagon investigation into the deaths of Smith and Rast, the first friendly-fire deaths known to have been caused by a drone attack, was led by Marine Col. Randy Newman, a former regimental commander in Afghanistan.

The incident raised a series of broad questions: How did the battalion's new rules for handling Predator strikes affect the decision to strike? Was the missile fired too quickly? Did the system built to help commanders make better decisions break down again?

Newman's 381-page report placed much of the blame on Huff, maintaining that up until the moment the missile was fired, he could have called it off. It criticized Huff for failing to keep track of his men, and two sergeants for sending inaccurate radio reports that misled the lieutenant about their locations — and led the Marines at Alcatraz to call in the drone strike on the wrong location. However, it said the deaths were due to "miscommunications," and that no one was "culpably negligent or derelict in their duties."

The names of everyone involved except Smith and Rast — and, in one place, Huff — were redacted in a copy of the report obtained by The Times. In addition to material contained in the report, this article is based on interviews with family members and Marine Corps and Air Force officers involved in the case. The commander of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion, Lt. Col. L.K. Hussey, declined to be interviewed.

Some ground officers appear wary of distant Air Force analysts who can delay air support for their men under fire. A senior U.S. officer familiar with the incident said the decision to strike as soon as muzzle flashes were seen was understandable "because of the urgency of supporting the guys on the ground, and to pursue a fleeting target."

Newman's report said the analysts should have been more aggressive in raising their concerns in the minutes before the missile attack. But the analysts said they were trained not to intercede when U.S. troops were in danger unless they saw women and children present, or evidence of a possible war crime.

In the minutes after the attack, an apparently distraught Huff radioed back to Alcatraz that he "didn't know why we had to hit that position," said a Marine officer who received the transmission.

While acknowledging that he didn't know some of his Marines were so far away, Huff told investigators that insurgent fire had mostly died down prior to the Predator attack and that he "felt like he had the situation under control."

Others, in both the Marine Corps and Air Force, also question the speed of the strike. "We simply ran out of time," the mission intelligence coordinator said. A sergeant in Huff's platoon said that the time between the Predator's arrival overhead and when it fired the missile "was too short to allow for assessment and actions" by Marines on the ground.

At the Pentagon, a senior Marine officer described the decision to launch the missile as "a rush to judgment."

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After the Predator pilot learned of the fatal mistake, he asked to be relieved at the controls. "The gravity of the matter overcame my ability to continue focusing on the task at hand," he explained.

Replaying the video and voice communications, he was stunned to see that the muzzle flashes were aimed away from the road. He was "completely confused as to how I saw exactly the opposite sitting in the seat."

He asked for the video to be stopped and left the building. An Air Force chaplain was waiting outside.

david.cloud@latimes.com

david.zucchino@latimes.com