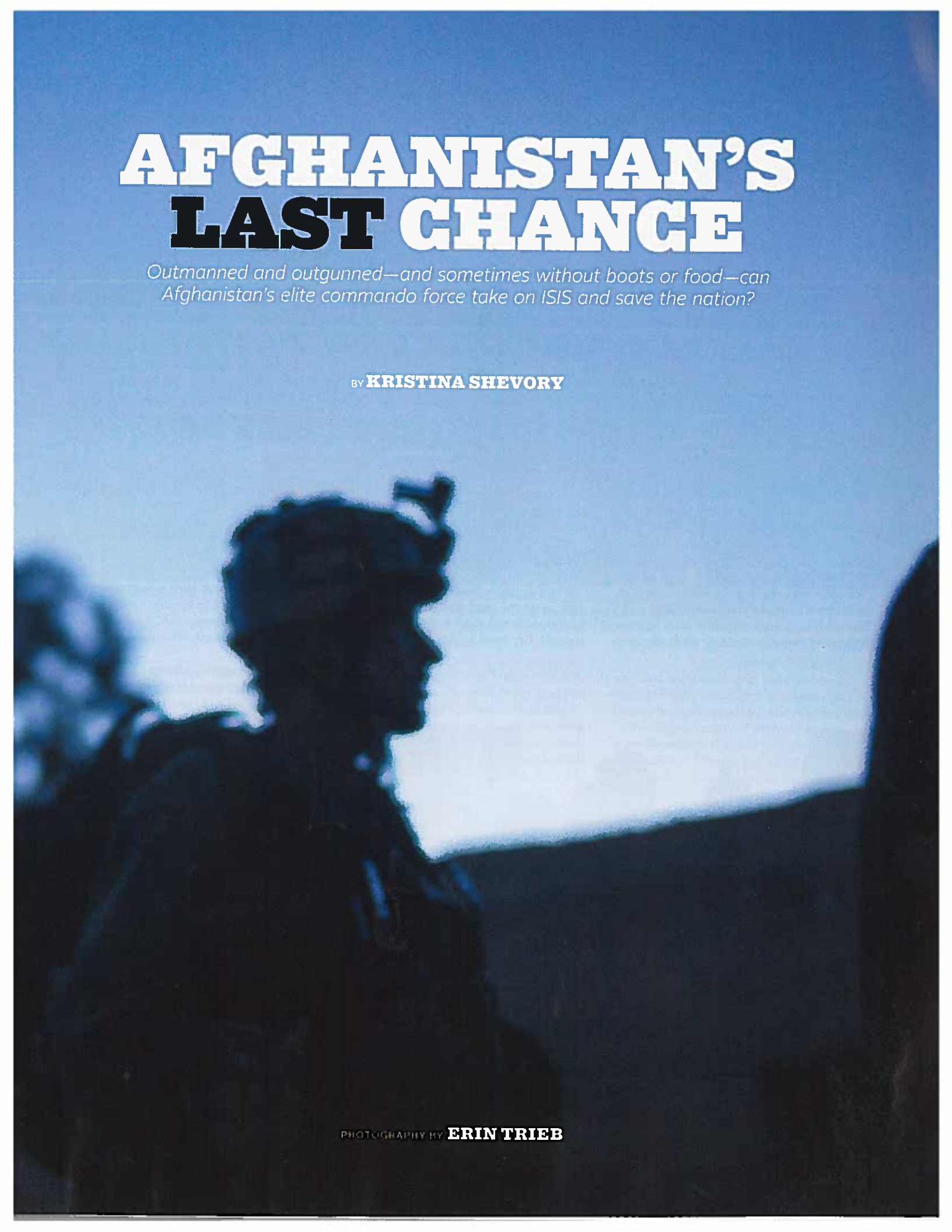


AFGHANISTAN'S LAST CHANCE

Outmanned and outgunned—and sometimes without boots or food—can Afghanistan's elite commando force take on ISIS and save the nation?

BY **KRISTINA SHEVORY**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ERIN TRIEB**



A black flag whips in the early-morning breeze. Planted in the middle of a rocky hill a few hundred yards south of the mud-walled compound where the Afghan commandos have taken shelter, the flag's message is clear: ISIS is here, waiting.

The mission of the commandos of Afghanistan's First Platoon, First Special Operations Battalion is straightforward: Find the ISIS fighters and take them out. The soldiers are eager to take on an enemy that has killed many of their own, beheaded and blown up local villagers and driven countless people from their homes.

Pakistan, the source of many of the foreign fighters, lies a few miles away, over the denuded chocolate-colored mountains that stair-step up from the hill to snowy peaks. Mud-brick compounds, abandoned when fighting escalated here in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province last summer, dot the valley floor. There is no movement except for the flag's whip. No farmers tilling their fields. No one walking. The stillness is unnerving.

An order crackles over the radio: time to go. The soldiers move out across the rolling valley floor, searching one compound after another. To the west they can see their comrades from

Third Platoon doing the same. The Afghan army and national border police are to follow behind, holding territory the commandos have secured.

The goal is to clear out the extremists so that civilians can return to their homes. Tranquility fled this region over the past year after ISIS fighters slithered in and embarked on a campaign of terror, executing locals they deemed impure and fighting pitched battles with the Taliban and anyone else in their way.

The soldiers are picking their way through a

pound serves as a lookout of sorts. Inside the adobe house are two tiny rooms: a kitchen with a small cookstove and a bedroom with three string-laced cots. Tight quarters for a platoon of 30 men to wait out a barrage in.

The commandos crouch in a line along the southern wall, popping up to take shots and slipping down to slam fresh magazines into their M-4 rifles. Waves of incoming fire—from machine guns, rifles and the occasional rocket-propelled grenade—continue in booms, cracks,

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stony field studded with poplar trees and dry grass that crunches underfoot when the first shots ring out from the hill. The commandos scatter, diving behind boulders and trees and firing back. Some sprint to a nearby compound and take shelter.

It's a lousy place to seek safety. The five-foot-high southern mud wall that necklaces the compound is too short to provide good cover. A small dirt knoll in the middle of the com-

whistles and pops. The shooting dies down for a moment, only to roar back as soon as an Afghan commando stands up to fire.

Firefights usually don't last long, maybe 10 to 15 minutes, though they can feel like years. This one is different. The shooting goes on and on. The insurgents must have a deep-pocketed source funding them to be able to throw this much ammo downrange. This is no pell-mell ragtag group attacking the commandos. This is ISIS.

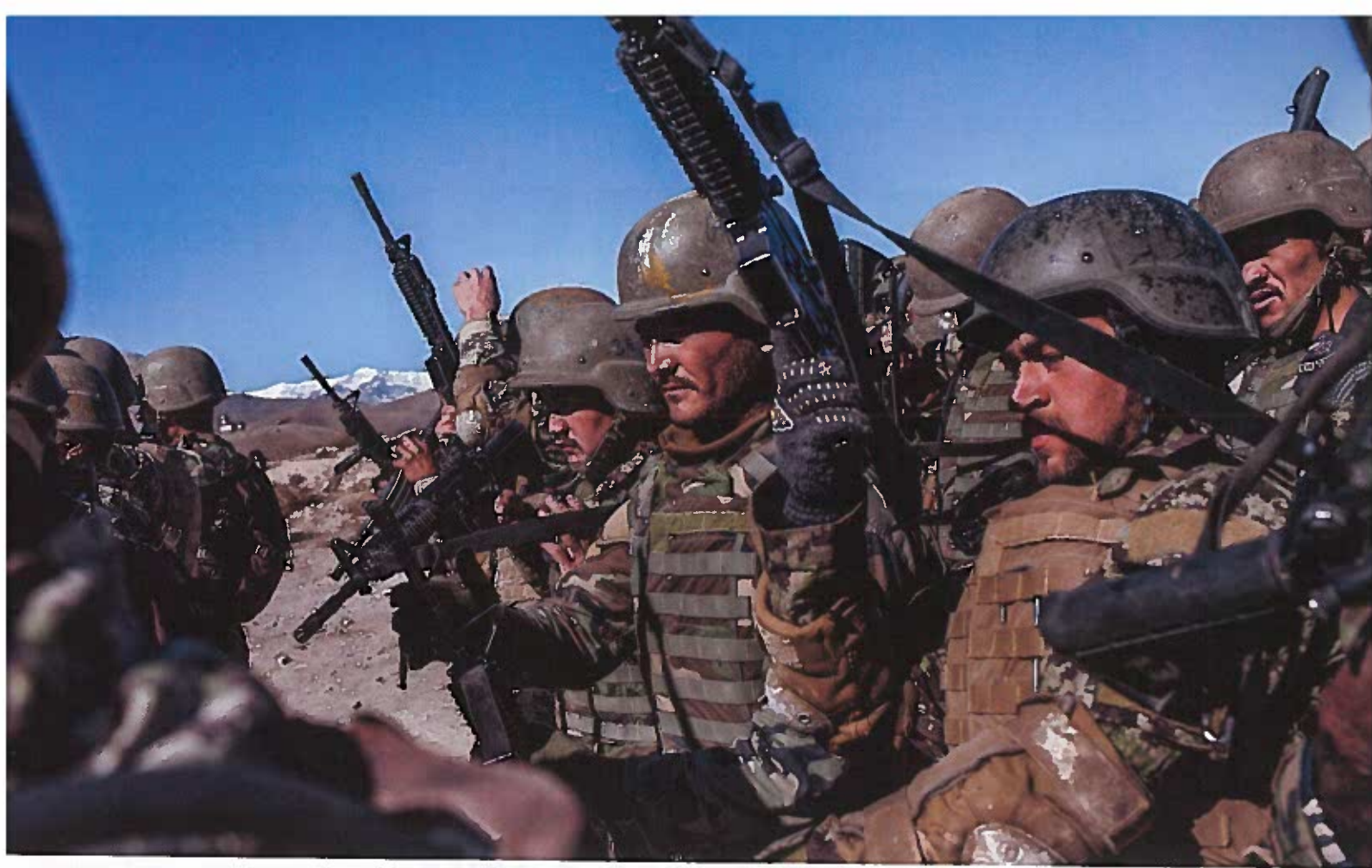
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When the regular Afghan National Army can't finish a fight, needs to clear an area or is pinned down, it calls in the commandos, the nation's best and perhaps final line of defense. Calls for the elite special-operations unit have come in faster and faster since late 2014, when the Taliban started to retake territory vacated by withdrawing U.S. troops and coalition partners. Nearly 90 percent of foreign forces have now left Afghanistan. Under Mullah Akhtar Mansour—a leader with a brutal reputation who was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan in late May—the Taliban scored a string of battlefield victories, moving from rural skirmishes to direct assaults on big cities, fueled by thousands of fighters. It now controls more of Afghanistan than at any point since 2001, when the United States invaded. About half the country is currently under Taliban control, and more is on the verge of falling. And now ISIS—or Daesh, as it's known locally—has also moved in.

Despite some \$35 billion in training and support from the U.S. and coalition partners, the Afghan army can't seem to do much to stop them. Ravaged by desertions, internal squabbling, poor coordination between units and



Afghan National Army commandos, en route to raid an insurgent compound, read an official memo from ISIS outlining sharia law for the region.



Afghan soldiers strap on their weapons during training and exercise drills at the commando "School of Excellence," also known as Camp Commando, on the outskirts of Kabul. The 10,000-man force is spread thin and is often without proper equipment.

officers so corrupt they've been known to steal soldiers' salaries and sell their equipment, the army races to respond to attacks instead of launching operations to root out the insurgents. Heavy fighting, combined with a lack of close air support and medical evacuations, has taken its toll: Around 5,000 soldiers were killed in 2015—nearly 30 percent more than in 2014.

The Afghan army has yet to hammer out a clear strategy to defeat ISIS and the Taliban; instead it relies on the special-operations troops to put out fires. The commandos wrestled back control of the northern city of Kunduz after the Taliban seized it. They're on the front lines in the south in Helmand province, buttressing a feeble army struggling to fight off waves of insurgents. And now they've been sent northeast to Nangarhar to smoke out ISIS.

But the commandos are spread increasingly thin. Their missions are supposed to last 72 hours or less—hit a target and go home—but can actually stretch on for months. When they're not babysitting an area for the army, the commandos are sometimes used to staff road checkpoints or bigwigs' security details. "The misuse of commandos is endemic," says a U.S. Green

Beret master sergeant who trains the elite troops. "One platoon I know is being used as a politician's personal protection force in Kabul."

After years of fighting and training alongside America's legendary Green Berets, the commandos are now largely on their own. They became used to their sugar daddy calling the shots and giving them money, arms, air support and intelligence when things got tight. Not anymore. Now they must run the show and operate better than their U.S. advisors—or risk a Taliban takeover.

But how long can an overworked force of 10,000 men hold together a country of 32 million people?

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On a bracingly cool December morning in the mountains south of Kabul, 1,000 soldiers stand in formation on the hard-packed parade ground at the training base known as Camp Commando. They are the latest graduates of the special-operations program, decked out in woodland-green camouflage uniforms and distinctive maroon berets, gripping M-4 rifles squarely across their chests, eyes locked straight ahead. An improvised red carpet of tribal rugs stretches from the front gate, past a viewing platform wrapped in Afghanistan's national col-

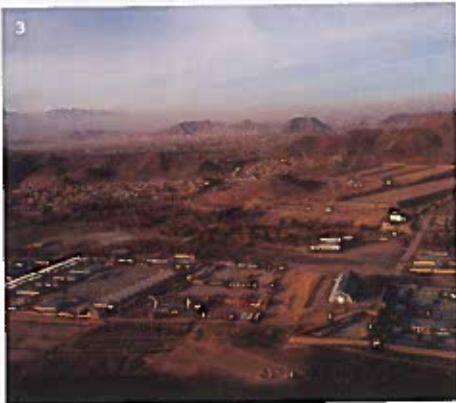
ors of red, black and green, to rows of steel risers crammed with Green Berets, Afghan officials and the foreign contractors who run the camp.

The Afghan national anthem sputters out of loudspeakers; the gate glides open, and in march five top leaders of the Afghan army, their heads turned sharply to the left, holding a firm salute as they pass the soldiers.

Colonel Jabar Wafa, the school's commander, who with his taut, sun-drenched skin and looming build looks like an Afghan stand-in for John Wayne, approaches the microphone. "My hero soldiers," he says, his eyes panning the crowd, "you are the ones with the responsibility to protect this country. Wherever and whenever the ANA has a tough fight, they call on you, the commandos. We will put the insurgents on the run."

"Allahu Akbar!" the troops roar. "God is great!"

The ceremony marks the graduation of the country's biggest class of commandos since the school's founding in 2007. Five times a year, new recruits arrive at this former Russian parachutist base to be trained to join a unit widely considered the best in the country. They are selected during basic training for their aptitude, strength and ethnicity. Overseen by



Green Berets, they undergo a rigorous three-month class of advanced infantry skills. The students are chosen to reflect the country: Nearly half are Pashtun, about 25 percent are Tajik, and the rest Uzbek, Hazara or Turkmen.

Until this fall, classes were capped at 650 students. But the uptick in casualties and fighting has pushed the Afghan Ministry of Defense to rapidly expand the commando ranks. The pass rate, once 80 percent, has been bumped to 100 percent. There's talk of a sixth class this year.

The commandos are supposed to be the best-supplied of any unit in the Afghan army, but the strain on the camp's resources is evident. Barracks are crowded, with at least four men per room, and lines for the 16 toilets are long. Recruits are allotted only 800 bullets instead of the 5,000 rounds they're supposed to receive. None of their footwear or uniforms match because there aren't enough to go around. Some wear tan or black boots; many wear sneakers secured with laces or Velcro.

Still, the quality of the recruits has improved since the school's early years, says Donnie Barber, an American contractor who has been training soldiers at the camp for the past nine years. In the early years, he says, most troops couldn't read or write, and he had to teach them to count. Half the current recruits are now illiterate. The new command staff is making an effort to take better care of soldiers and has improved meals, installed a volleyball court and opened a recreation center.



"These Afghans get it," says Barber, wearing a baseball cap and sporting a tattoo on his left arm from his old unit, the 82nd Airborne. "When we leave, they're going to be able to carry on."

In a country where most people identify with their tribes and not as Afghans, the outlook of some of the recruits is surprising. "I joined the army to serve my country," Staff Sergeant Said Jallaludin, 22, a Turkmen from the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif, tells me while cleaning his M-4 rifle. "I want peace not only in Mazar but in all of the country. If I go to Helmand, Kunduz, wherever, each place is my country."

There's more than a patriotic incentive to enlist; there's also a financial one. In the wake of the U.S. and coalition troop pullout, Afghanistan's unemployment rate skyrocketed to 25 percent. Jallaludin was a laborer and part-time student with few prospects; he thought the army would give him a career, or at least decent pay. A newly minted commando makes \$250 a month—more if he serves in especially dangerous areas—while a regular soldier receives \$200.

At the graduation ceremony, Jallaludin goose-steps forward to accept his graduation certificate, salutes the chief of the army and holds out his right hand. He then spins around and barks to the waiting platoons of commandos, "Afghanistan, I am ready to protect you."

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Nangarhar is the latest region of Afghanistan to need the commandos' protection. The province,

1. A 26-year-old Afghan commando lies on a makeshift stretcher after being shot during a gunfight with ISIS insurgents. 2. Commandos take cover in a mud-walled compound near the Pakistan border while ISIS pins them down for nearly 16 hours. 3. Overview of Camp Commando near Kabul.

home to the Tora Bora cave complex where Osama bin Laden hid early in the Iraq war, has long been a roiling stew of Taliban, Al Qaeda, foreign fighters, drug traffickers—and now ISIS. The Pakistani army launched a campaign in 2014 to drive extremists out of its country's lawless northern states. Those who weren't killed fled to Nangarhar, recruited disgruntled Taliban and rebranded themselves as Islamic State-Khorasan, the local affiliate of ISIS. Numbering as many as 3,000, they began a campaign of beheadings and bombings, sending thousands of locals fleeing to the provincial capital of Jalalabad.

The situation has so alarmed Washington that in January, U.S. forces ramped up air strikes in the country threefold. The Obama administration is considering slowing the scheduled drawdown of the remaining 9,800 U.S. troops. Lieutenant General John Nicholson, who took over as commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan early this year, declared that eliminating the Islamic State and Al Qaeda branches in Afghanistan is his "first and foremost" priority.

Early last year, ISIS announced it would use Nangarhar as a launching pad for attacks and



would advance into neighboring provinces. This angered the Taliban, and the two have been battling for supremacy since. For months the army, distracted by other problems, left them alone to kill each other off—until Islamic State fighters started attacking and killing Afghan police officers. The furious provincial police chief demanded that the army intervene.

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Days later, the commandos get the call. They're ordered to leave their base near Jalalabad and speed to Achin, a district in Nangarhar on the border with Pakistan that has long been home to a thriving Taliban-run drug trade and is now the site of near-daily clashes between ISIS and other extremists. Things had gotten so bad there that the deputy speaker of parliament who represents Nangarhar formed his own 200-man militia and led it into battle against ISIS.

The commandos roll out around six P.M. in a convoy of 18 Humvees. A stop in central Achin to coordinate with the army, police and border patrol drags on till midnight. The Afghan National Army has tentative control over a V-shape tract of ground south of town that was under fire from the Islamic State. The army needs the commandos to take enough ground to fill in the V and push south; the army will follow behind and hold that ground. At least that's the idea.

Leading the commandos this night is a young captain who recently transferred from another battalion, or *kandak*. It's his first job in the region. His inexperience worries the commandos, but the rising number of missions has left no seasoned officers available. The rookie captain won't even have a Green Beret advisor accompanying him as a backstop if he gets into trouble. After the U.S. shifted to a training and advisory role in late 2014, the Afghans were put in charge of the fight. U.S. Special Forces now rarely go on missions, unless things go sideways.

The captain sets up his command post and heavy weapons on a small hill two miles north of where the commandos will be operating—usually a commander sets his post 500 yards behind his assault team so he can see what's going on and support them. The commandos complain among themselves about his incompetence and seeming lack of courage, a damning slight in a country where a man is judged by his bravery.

There isn't much to be done except head out. The 60 men of the two platoons slip on their hydration packs, adjust their radios and stride into

the night. The darkness is so thick and complete it's difficult to see. Figures that loom threateningly in the murk turn into benign trees on closer inspection. Hours later, the moon is bright enough to illuminate the walking men.

With daybreak only a few hours away, the commandos maintain a brisk pace. The soldiers trek up and slide down stony mountains, sometimes jumping from outcropping to outcropping when the descent is too steep to walk. There are no trails, not even a goat track. Slip-sliding, the soldiers move down into a valley, finding two abandoned compounds the army has cleared. Exhausted, the commandos trudge inside, First Platoon to the far right compound, Third Platoon to the left.

They pull off their M-4s, lean them against the walls and sit down heavily. Some slip off their helmets and rest them in their laps. "What's next?" asks Ahmad (not his real name),

THE SHOOTING DIES DOWN, ONLY TO ROAR BACK AS A COMMANDO STANDS UP TO FIRE.

an interpreter who works with the commandos and Green Berets. No one seems to know.

A radio sputters. Ahmad perks up, then sits back and groans after hearing the orders. "Oh shit. Be ready to move. We're heading back the way we came in five minutes," he says. The other commandos look at one another.

There isn't much to do. An order is an order. The soldiers collect their weapons and helmets and get ready to leave.

But the radio buzzes again. Ahmad listens intently. "Okay, we're not doing that anymore," he says to everyone. "We're to wait for instructions."

The next hour and a half passes this way, commands ebbing and flowing like tides. The radio buzzes with an order to move, and a few minutes later another order reverses it. Frustration mounting, the men mutter to one another that something needs to be done.

A few soldiers sip water. No one eats. They

have little to no food. The army didn't issue any, and the soldiers don't want to pay for it. With large families to support on a salary of a few hundred dollars a month, it's better to save as much as they can.

By now it's 3:30 in the morning and dinner is a faint memory. My photographer's pack is stuffed with 10 pounds of granola bars, energy drinks and other snacks. She pours them on the dirt floor and gestures to the commandos to eat. They crowd around and snatch up the food. A few men close their eyes for a nap. The radio has gone quiet. Dawn is coming. Why aren't the commandos, who have night-vision goggles and can operate at night when the insurgents can't, moving?

"I bet you anything the captain will tell us to move at daylight," Ahmad says. "And if that happens, we're going to be shot at."

The sun slowly rises, streaking the sky with oranges, purples and pinks. Sure enough, the radio buzzes. Time to move. The instructions are vague, the captain directing the commandos to take over nearby compounds.

Ahmad curses. "This is a bad idea," he mutters. "Hey, German, don't you want to say something?" he asks the squad leader, nicknamed because of his light brown hair and pale skin. German shrugs. "We're soldiers," he says. "We follow orders."

The soldiers snake out across the valley floor, the black ISIS flag fluttering in the distance. That's when the attack starts.

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Bullets chew at the dirt walls of the compound where First Platoon has taken shelter. Third Platoon has found another several hundred yards away. An RPG occasionally sails overhead, its distinctive whine piercing the air. The commandos take turns along the southern perimeter wall, jack-in-the-boxing up to fire their M-4 rifles whenever they feel a lull in the incoming fire. A machine gunner sets up in a protected spot along the wall, his weapon's staccato *thud-thud-thud* puncturing the air.

As the hours slide by, the shooting from the unseen enemy grows thicker, advancing now from the east and west. ISIS fighters are closing in. The commandos' radio has gone quiet again; they cannot raise their captain. The men lean against the walls, cradling their rifles, looking at one another with wide eyes. "I can't believe this," says one. "What is this captain thinking?"

"*Mushkele! Mushkele! Problem! Problem!*" someone shouts outside. The commandos race to the perimeter wall and see one of their own



Left: An Afghan fighter fires his weapon at ISIS insurgents while on a mission in Achin district, Nangarhar province, Afghanistan. Right: Afghan Platoon Sergeant German, nicknamed thus because of his light hair and skin, receives news that one of his soldiers has died after being shot in the side by an ISIS sniper.

on his back, his buddies working to remove his body armor. A bullet came in through a softball-size hole in the wall, hitting his right side, close to the underarm. The wound is deep.

They bandage the downed commando and haul a cot outside to use as a stretcher. Back to the radio to try to rouse help. "We need a medevac immediately," the operator barks into the radio. The answer that crackles back churns their stomachs: "It's a three-hour wait," the voice says. "There are no helicopters available." It's a common, and lethal, issue for Afghan soldiers: Their tiny, overstretched air force is chronically short of pilots and helicopters for evacuating troops.

The commandos manage to stop their comrade's bleeding, but it's a temporary fix. They know he won't last three hours. They will have to carry him out themselves.

Four commandos lift the wounded man onto one of the string cots and wait for a lull in the shooting. When it comes, they each grab a bed leg and rush across the adjoining field, heading for the relative shelter of a stand of trees.

They make it 100 yards before one of the carriers is hit in the leg. The men drop to the ground while another commando in the compound lays down cover fire with a machine gun. The one who was hit fast-limps back to the house while the other three grab the badly wounded man and run for the trees. A volunteer sprints out to

help them. I learn later that they carried their comrade two miles back to the overwatch site where the captain sat, but the man died in an ambulance en route to the hospital in Jalalabad.

Back in the compound, the shooting gets closer and louder and closer and louder. A commando bursts in, shouting that ISIS fighters dressed in camouflage have sneaked into the neighboring compound, about 100 yards away, between this compound and Third Platoon's. The commandos can't shoot at them for fear of hitting Third Platoon.

The captain has artillery, mortars and a .50-caliber anti-aircraft heavy machine gun—all useless because they're too far away to help. Ahmad passes word by radio to one of the Green Berets he works with that the commandos are pinned down and need help. Eventually an Afghan attack helicopter arrives, circles for 10 minutes while randomly shooting and then departs.

Morale plummets; the commandos feel abandoned. No cavalry is coming to their rescue because *they* are the cavalry. Fear coils tightly in their stomachs. No one wants to say what is apparent: ISIS is pounding their compound hard before an impending invasion. Men feel for the reassuring grip of their knives and think of hand-to-hand combat.

Thak-thak-thak. Machine gun and AK-47 fire seems to be pouring in from all directions. Two RPGs overshoot the compound and sail high

overhead. The ISIS snipers looking down from a hill, however, are on target; their rounds slice into the room through windows and a hole in the wall. There is no sign of the Afghan National Army soldiers who are supposed to come to the commandos' aid. Their only chance now is to stick it out until the sun goes down and their night-vision gear gives them the advantage.

As day slips into night, the commandos in both platoons get the call they've been waiting for: Assault the nearby ISIS compound. They creep outside, fan out in all directions and storm the house, killing the handful of insurgents inside with wild bursts of gunfire.

The commandos were eager to move on to assault the main ISIS forces on the hill, take out the snipers who'd been wreaking so much havoc and burn their flag, but their commander ordered them to retreat to the compound. Not wanting to incur casualties, he decided to do nothing and wait to be ordered back to base, Ahmad tells me later.

New commandos arrived on foot a day or two later with supplies of food and water. There were still no helicopters available. The commandos spent 10 days holed up in the compound with the insurgents taking occasional potshots at them, until a general intervened and ordered them to retreat.

The black flag still fluttered high over the valley. ■