

## On the Front Line: A Night With Afghan Commandos

On a recent night raid, a Times photographer captured Afghanistan's elite forces as they disrupted Taliban operations in one of the country's most volatile provinces.

Photographs and Text by Jim Huylebroek

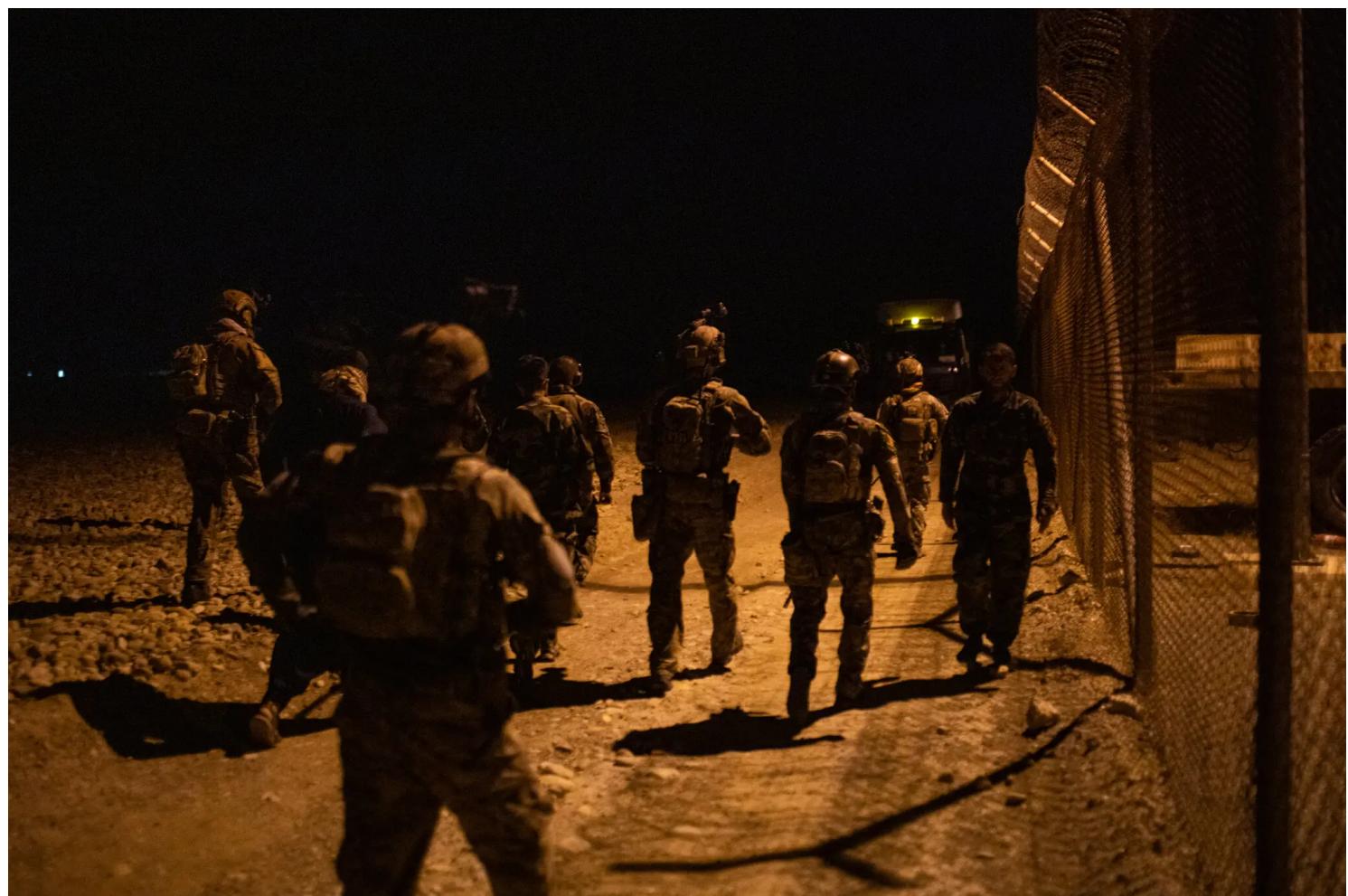
June 25, 2021

SOMEWHERE OVER HELMAND PROVINCE, Afghanistan — As the city lights faded and the Soviet-era military helicopter banked over the fields and canals of southern Afghanistan one night in May, the Afghan commandos on board made their final checks, looking at maps and adjusting their weapons before turning on their night-vision goggles.

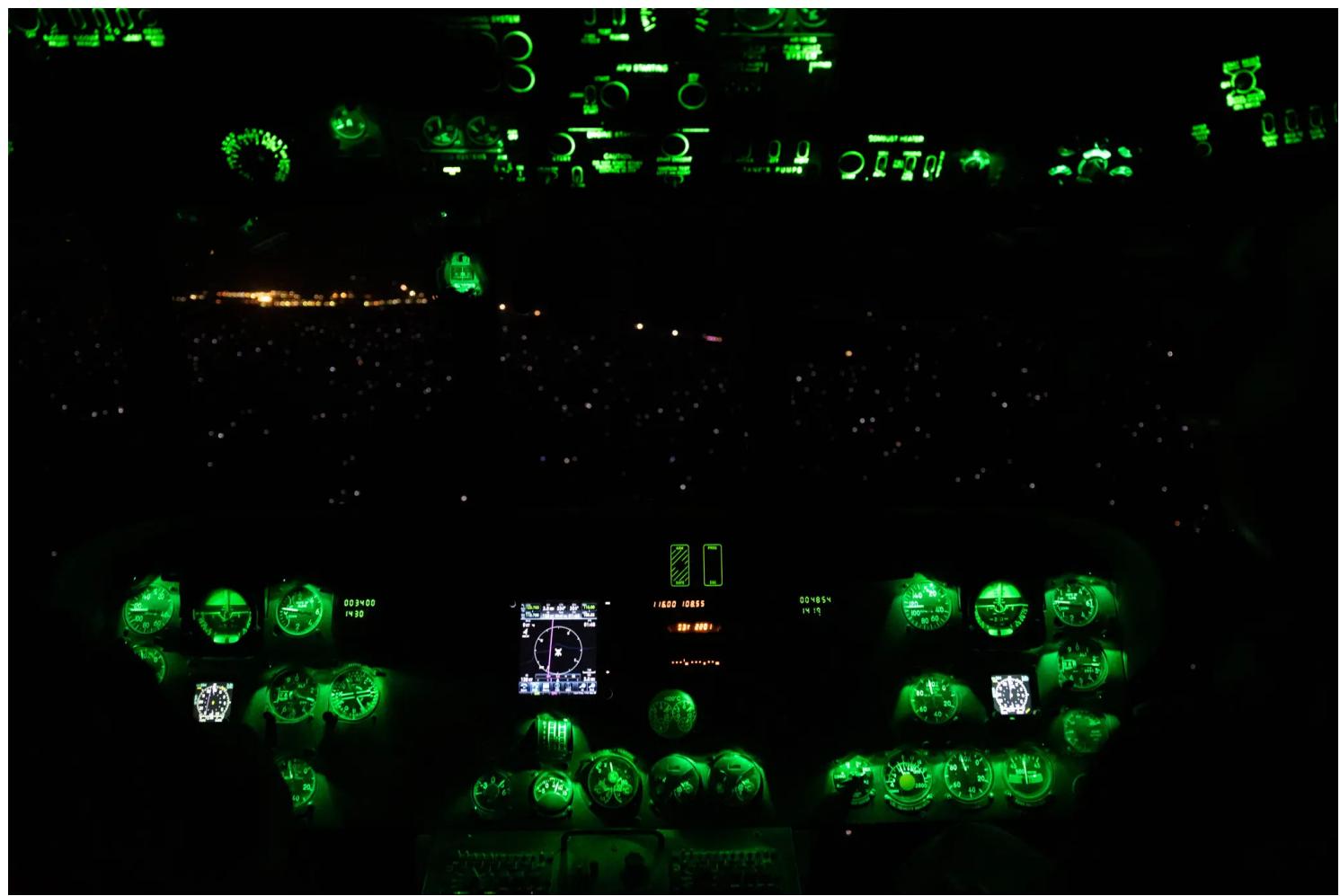
Their objective: to dismantle a bomb-making factory inside a squat mud-brick house in Chah Anjir, a village in Nadali, a district in Helmand Province that is completely under Taliban control.

Just days earlier, the Taliban had opened an offensive on Helmand's capital, Lashkar Gah. Afghan government forces had lost ground. The city was under siege. Frantic to relieve some of the pressure on the capital, security officials committed their most elite of the Afghan special operations forces to the province.

The flight of three Mi-17 transport helicopters, backed by small bubble-shaped helicopter gunships, landed in a grassy field beside the target house. Overhead, Afghan and American drones watched for movement. The commandos disembarked, their weapons readied.



Afghan commandos at Camp Bastion before a night operation.



The cockpit of an Afghan Mi-17 helicopter.



Afghan commandos making last adjustments before being dropped by helicopter behind Taliban lines in Helmand Province.

The efficiency and professionalism of the operation, carried out by one of the commando corps' smaller and more elite tiers, was a far cry from most units within the Afghan security forces, who often try to hold the line with dwindling supplies, unsteady paychecks and constant attacks.

In 2017, there were roughly 21,000 Afghans in the commando forces, with hopes to greatly expand the program.

But these specialized units are, more often than not, used as firefighters in a war without end: rushed to hot spots to retake territory and hold districts. And now to areas trying to stave a Taliban offensive that has taken dozens of districts in recent days in the country's north. The commandos' importance has increased dramatically as international forces prepare to leave by September, meaning their overuse and attrition could spell a drastic reduction of their effectiveness.

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The night missions, witnessed by a photojournalist with The New York Times, are seen by Afghan military officials as key to hitting the Taliban when the insurgents are not expecting it, or at the least disrupting future attacks on government forces.

But these tactics — perfected by the United States over its long wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq — have had arguable if little success, as insurgencies in both countries continue to adapt and endure.

Night raids in Afghanistan especially have turned people, particularly those in the country's rural areas, against the government and international forces. But the presence of these units helped government forces hold Lashkar Gah last month. For now, it is one of their best and limited ways of striking the insurgents in this two-decade-long war as government-held territory shrinks and units are stretched thin.

But even going on the offensive has deadly consequences, especially as Taliban forces have become even more emboldened with the departure of international forces. Earlier this month, more than 20 Afghan commandos were killed when their offensive operation to retake a district in the country's northwest was derailed by a vicious Taliban counterattack.



Afghan commandos on standby as a quick reaction force in Bost Airport as another team makes a night raid behind Taliban lines in Helmand.



A convoy of Afghan commandos riding through Lashkar Gah.



An Afghan commando standing on top of a Humvee in Lashkar Gah.

The outcome of the May raid, documented on the special forces team leader's cellphone, was considered a success: bomb-making materials were seized and destroyed. Four Taliban members were killed while his men took no casualties. How much that changed the broader battle's outcome in Lashkar Gah is questionable, but it kept one of the Taliban's deadliest tactics — roadside bombs and homemade mines — off the battlefield for a brief time.

The commandos returned to Bost Airfield, a civilian airport. But that night it turned into a temporary command center for the unit. Officials had set up television displays and radios atop its small terminal, under a starry sky as fighting echoed in the distance.

Inside the helicopters as the city came back into view, some commandos joked among themselves, others took forceful drags from cigarettes.

Their mission was over. For now.



An Afghan commando re-boarding the helicopter after a night operation in Helmand.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting.