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Marines use destruction to succeed in Afghanistan

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In a war where winning the hearts and minds of Afghans is the ultimate goal, damaging homes with powerful explosives and bulldozing a mosque and scores of other buildings may not sound like a wise idea.

But U.S. Marines in this key Taliban sanctuary say that's sometimes the only way to make progress, even if it risks angering the same people whose loyalties are required for success — a difficult trade-off that troops have grappled with throughout Afghanistan.

"We are here to rebuild, but sometimes that takes destruction," said Capt. Matthew Peterson, a company commander whose Marines were tasked in late December with clearing a key part of southern Helmand province's Sangin district — the most dangerous place for coalition troops in Afghanistan last year.

The Marines have used a much more aggressive strategy in Sangin than British troops who were there for four years before the U.S. took over. The contrast has sparked debate both inside and outside Afghanistan.

One of the key goals in the December operation in an area called Wishtan was clearing bombs from the main road to allow the Marines to maneuver freely and locals to go to the central bazaar without fear of being blown up.

The Marines used a powerful weapon called a MICLIC — Mine Clearing Line Charge — that is essentially a flexible tube several hundred feet (meters) long containing more than

1,500 pounds (680 kilograms) of C-4 explosive that is shot out along the road using a rocket, then detonated.

At least 25 bombs were destroyed and the Marines were able to clear the 3,000-foot (900-meter) long road in three days, but the blasts from the charges blew out windows, toppled walls and collapsed ceilings in the densely packed mud compounds that fill the area.

The Marines also bulldozed every vacant compound within 330 feet (100 meters) of the road — all but three — because their 15-foot (4.5-meter) high walls made it easy for insurgents to sneak in and plant more bombs.

U.S. troops have used this tactic in other parts of Afghanistan, including Kandahar province, the Taliban's spiritual heartland, where it also has sparked controversy.

"You can be nice about it and try to leave everything the way it is and allow the Taliban to own it, or you can change some things and actually plant the Afghan government flag out there and provide legitimate security," said Lt. Col. Jason Morris, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment in Sangin.

British troops who originally established a patrol base in Wishtan cleared the main road of explosives but left the buildings along it intact. The Marines point out, however, that the British suffered significant casualties trying to defend the base and the surrounding area.

The Marines initially opted not to use the base in Wishtan — part of a broader strategy to free up troops to do more patrolling. But they eventually decided it was critical to controlling key terrain, forcing them to launch their own operation to clear the area, said Morris, 40, from Oceanside, California.

The Marines have managed to keep the main road clear and have yet to suffer a serious casualty in Wishtan since the operation began in late December, although fighting has dropped throughout Sangin during the winter months.

The response from locals in Wishtan, however, has been mixed.

Abdul Basir, a 19-year-old whose family lives in a compound next to the patrol base, said he is happy the Marines are clearing the road and paying to have it improved — something the British never did. But he complained the Marines didn't compensate his family enough for demolishing a large mud wall on their property and destroying electrical wires that ran outside their compound.

"The British were better because they weren't damaging anything," Basir said.

He also said that the Marines' decision to bulldoze a mosque along the main road angered some in the community.

"It was a problem because we didn't have a place to go to pray, but they are rebuilding it," said Basir.

Peterson, the company commander, defended the decision to demolish the mosque, saying it was abandoned and had wires running into it that could be used to detonate roadside bombs.

"It may have been a holy site, but there is nothing sacrosanct about a building with command wires running into it," said Peterson, 34, from Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Rebuilding the mosque has also been a way to forge relationships with the locals, he said.

But some residents remain adamant that the Marines should leave.

"Why should I like you? You damaged my compound," said Khalid, a young motorcycle mechanic, when Marines visited his home on patrol.

He also criticized the Marines for blowing holes in compound walls while on patrol, a tactic the troops say is necessary so that they can avoid areas they believe the Taliban have seeded with improvised explosive devices, or IEDs.

"We try to tell the locals that blowing through walls helps us provide security for them because if we can get out on patrol, then the enemy can't lay IEDs," said Lt. Kolbe Grell, commander of the platoon based in Wishtan.

"But it's a tough balance because as with anything there is a risk and a reward," said Grell, 24, from Bellville, Texas.

The Marines have tried to mitigate the effects of their actions by paying locals for any damage they cause. But Khalid said that he was afraid the Taliban would kill him if he was seen visiting the base to pick up his compensation — a fear that may grow as additional insurgents flow in to Sangin for an anticipated spring offensive.

Peterson acknowledged it is difficult trying to juggle the interests of the locals, the safety of his Marines and actions he believes are necessary for sustainable progress. But he is confident they are on the right path.

"Anyone who doesn't think there is some pain before progress has never been to the dentist," he said.