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Mysterious ‘White Taleban’ strike fear in village hearts

Tom Coghlan
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As they got to the crest of the hill the US patrol stopped in their tracks, astonished at the scene below. In the river was a group of men, one soldier said, “just kinda frolicking about”.

For several minutes each side contemplated the other in silence. “There were about 15 of them,” said Specialist Tom Weaver, 24. “At first I thought it was some of our Navy Seals” — US special forces who are encouraged to grow beards. “They saw us and they didn’t really run away. Some just stayed and watched us.”

The men had long beards and long hair, in some cases below their shoulders, quite unlike the local style. They were shirtless and wore only Western-style shorts, a degree of nakedness alien, even offensive, to Afghan culture. But their most remarkable feature was their skin colour. They were white.

Foreign fighters remain a rarity in the Afghan war — Nato commanders insist that Kandahar, the focus of the next big campaign, is all but free of them — but Zabul is one area in which there have been consistent reports of their presence, infiltrating from Pakistan’s Waziristan province, a few days’ walk across the border.

“We’ve had reports of Arabs, Uzbeks and Chechens,” says Lieutenant-Colonel David Oclander, commander of the 1-508th Parachute Infantry Regiment of 82nd Airborne Division. “We believe there is a training camp in the Larzab Bowl” — 30 miles north of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Lane.

The identity of the white militants is a mystery. One local man with memories of the Russian invasion has told the Americans that they speak Russian, which could make them Chechens.

These are not the only ominous comings and goings. Until recently FOB Lane — a clutch of plywood buildings, watchtowers and galvanised steel walls overlooked by jagged peaks — was a quiet corner of a largely forgotten province, but in the past month it has been the scene of an increased level of Taleban activity, centred on the arrival of a group of white fighters said by locals to number about 100.

This is the time of year that always brings an increase in Taleban activity but the changing tempo of enemy movements around FOB Lane has been dramatic. “This place was dead till last month,” said Staff Sergeant Matthew Chambers, 28, the senior NCO for 3rd Platoon. At dusk on Saturday three 107mm rockets fell around the perimeter of the base without causing casualties.

It was the ninth such attack in 30 days. US spotters saw the firing point of the last rocket and two minutes later a distant hillside was splashed with fire and smoke as they responded with high explosive and white phosphorus mortar rounds.

On Monday red tracer fire arced back and forth after dark as an Afghan Army convoy moving up the valley was ambushed a mile or two from Lane. Ten days earlier the base was subjected to a two-hour attack from the surrounding hills by about 40 gunmen; it had the feel of an attack designed to test defences and probe for weaknesses and response times. Several other firefights have taken place along the Arghandab Valley, running southwest into Kandahar province.

Despite its remote location FOB Lane sits across a key infiltration route into Kandahar, where Nato forces are making final preparations for the largest offensive of the war. With reports of mysterious foreigners and a rise in Taleban activity, the key question for Western commanders is whether the insurgents will put up a fight in Kandahar or simply move elsewhere — such as Zabul.

“My gut instinct is that the Taleban won’t have the ability to oppose Nato directly in Kandahar,” Lieutenant-Colonel Oclander said. “It is more likely that they will shift to areas where the coalition is not.”

That could well mean Zabul, a grindingly poor and almost wholly illiterate desert backwater — “not particularly relevant to the Government of Afghanistan”, said Lieutenant-Colonel Oclander “but very relevant to the Taleban as a place of movement, training and command”. The Nato presence in this province is less than 2,000 strong.

The commotion caused by the arrival of the new fighters is being felt not only by the Americans. US intelligence intercepts suggest that the new arrivals are also causing divisions within the local Taleban, some of whom have taken a deep dislike to the foreigners.

Nor do the locals want them to stay. The arrival of the white Taleban has been accompanied by the imposition of a crude campaign of intimidation against the population. Last week several local tribal elders were taken away by the foreign fighters. They have not returned. The locals have been told that anyone trying to leave the area will be killed.