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## 10 Years Into Afghan War, a Thunderous Duel

By C. J. CHIVERS

10/7/2011

FORWARD OPERATING BASE TILLMAN, Afghanistan — The sun had been up less than a half-hour on the 10th anniversary of the start of the American-led war in Afghanistan when the first rocket struck. Flying in from near the border with [Pakistan](#), it shook this outpost with an explosion that hinted at the long day ahead.

Soon insurgents near the border were firing on four Afghan-American outposts simultaneously — a coordinated barrage and assault that included dozens of 107-millimeter rockets, and at one post, a suicide truck bomber, American military officers said.

Only one American soldier was wounded in the insurgent attack, which the American regional command called the largest in Paktika Province since 2009. His wounds were not life-threatening. But the events on Friday demonstrated that as the war begins its second decade and the Pentagon plans to start sending tens of thousands of soldiers home after a buildup that since last year has made significant gains, the United States remains bedeviled by a bold, resilient foe.

Most of the high-explosive rockets striking the outposts were fired from just inside Afghanistan, suggesting that the attack had been prepared and launched from Pakistan, and the rocket crews withdrew to sanctuaries there as the Americans fired back.

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And the relative weakness of Afghan soldiers and police officers living and working on the American-built bases was equally clear.

As the attacks escalated in the morning, only the American military possessed the firepower, communications and skills to fight back in what developed into a long-range, artillery-and-rocket duel — raising once more the familiar questions about how Afghan forces, underwritten at tremendous expense, will fare when the United States pulls back.

While the American soldiers organized and coordinated their part of the battle on the outpost here, the Afghan soldiers did not participate. Some simply sat and watched.

Forward Operating Base Tillman is itself a symbol of the long war. It is named for Sgt. Pat Tillman, an Army Ranger killed by friendly fire not far from here in April 2004. Sergeant Tillman had played professional football for the Arizona Cardinals. He enlisted after the Sept 11, 2001, attacks that prompted the initial American-led assault on the [Taliban](#).

On Friday, the first rocket landed near Forward Operating Base Tillman shortly after 6 a.m., beginning the anniversary with a crunching roar. It had been fired a few hundred yards from the border, on the Afghan side, soldiers said. It wounded no one.

But more rockets followed, including one that narrowly missed the base's entrance, and the Americans began to return artillery fire.

At about 9:35 a.m., another rocket hurtled toward the base.

“Incoming!” one of the soldiers shouted, as others flinched and waited for the blast. The rocket sailed overhead and struck an Afghan home.

“Hit the town,” a soldier said, flatly, at his post in the operations room.

“Killing their own people,” another answered.

Soon, Afghans emerged from the compound. No one had been hurt.

By that time, rockets were falling on three other bases as well — Forward Operating Base Orgun-E, Forward Operating Base Boris and Combat Outpost Margah, said Capt. William P. Hoffman, executive officer of Company C, Third Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment.

The company, originally a tank unit, is assigned to provisional infantry duties at Forward Operating Base Tillman as part of the Second Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, which occupies

and patrols from several outposts along the border routes trafficked by the Pakistan-based [Haqqani](#) insurgent network.

The outpost at Margah was the hardest hit.

At least 22 107-millimeter rockets struck on or near the post, officers said; other official estimates put the number of rockets at several times that. And as the attack escalated, a man drove a vehicle toward the base's walls and the vehicles exploded. The base was also hit with small-arms fire, officers said.

The soldiers prepared to repel a ground attack intended to breach the walls, but with American artillery and aircraft firing, any raid was thwarted, the soldiers said.

More rockets, meanwhile, struck this base, prompting the soldiers to fire back with 105-millimeter howitzers.

After the barrage, a fresh rumbling could be heard. It was thunder. Rain began to fall. "That's good," said Staff Sgt. Henry E. Pettigrew, 25, the artillery platoon's gunnery sergeant. "Now they won't fire anymore."

Rocket crews from the Taliban or the Haqqani network, Sergeant Pettigrew and other soldiers said, typically stop firing when it rains, perhaps because their makeshift launchers do not work as well when the soil is wet and slick.

After lunch, the sky briefly cleared, and the firing resumed. A rocket slammed to earth beside the base. Sirens wailed anew.

At the gun line, the soldiers in the howitzer platoon loaded their tubes again and returned fire with 18 rounds.

At that point, the platoon had fired more rounds than they had on any day since arriving in Afghanistan in the summer — 142 in all, half of them air-bursting, high-explosive rounds and half [white phosphorus](#) ("Willie Pete" to soldiers) with so-called point-detonating fuses, which cause the rounds to explode upon striking the ground.

White phosphorus is not forbidden in Afghanistan, though American and [NATO](#) rules restrict its use only to when its burning effects are deemed necessary and cannot be replicated by other munitions.

In this case, soldiers said, the white phosphorus rounds were intended to set fire to any Taliban rockets at the firing positions, causing them to explode and preventing them from being fired on the American outposts.

“Willie Pete is really effective at rockets sitting on pods,” said, the artillery platoon sergeant.

The battle had settled into a duel that appeared familiar to both sides, facing each other near the border, exchanging long-range fire. The insurgents would fire first, and the Americans would reply.

As the soldiers dealt with technical matters, politics was not far from their minds. One noncommissioned officer pulled aside a reporter and vented about the origins of the attacks.

“You know where it all comes from,” he said, and nodded toward a nearby ridge. “Pakistan.”

He swore, and went back to the business of making sure the return barrages landed within the Afghan side. He asked that his name be withheld.

The American military command in eastern Afghanistan declared the insurgent attack “a failure.”

It claimed that at least 25 insurgents had been killed, and that their deaths were verified by aircraft and a [Predator drone](#) watching the battle. The death count could not be independently confirmed.