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Desk Guilt

By [FIRST LT. TROY PETERSON](#)



Senior Airman Nathanael Callon/United States Air Force First Lt. Troy Peterson of the Army, right, helping his radio operator, Pfc. Justin Cobbs, across a ravine during a patrol near Combat Outpost Mizan in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, in August 2010.

COMMENTARY

**A Soldier
Writes**

ZABUL PROVINCE, Afghanistan — I deployed last June with the Second Stryker Cavalry Regiment from Vilseck, Germany, to an isolated combat outpost in a remote district of Afghanistan's Zabul Province.



The New York Times

I turned 24 two days after we arrived in Afghanistan, but I'd trained for six years to get this chance to lead soldiers in combat; four years at West Point, then infantry training and Ranger School, finally followed by training with my platoon through a frigid German winter. After a long helicopter flight to Combat Outpost Mizan, where my platoon and I would live and fight, I knew my chance had come to do what I'd trained for.

After learning as much as possible from the departing platoon for a few days, I was alone, commanding the outpost and leading the 33 soldiers of Third Platoon, Fox Company. Our mission was to secure the population of the Mizan Valley as part of Fox Company's overall effort to protect the Afghan civilians and the route running 40 kilometers from the Arghandab River to the provincial capital, Qalat.

It was an infantry platoon leader's dream job: my own base, the freedom to decide what needed to be done and how to do it, and Afghan partners to train with and conduct joint patrols. The fact that the outpost could be reached only by helicopter meant that getting supplies was very difficult, but this was overshadowed by an opportunity to effect positive change for the people in the district.

I got used to patrolling and running the outpost as the weeks and months passed, with the insurgents in the area trying to catch us off guard with ambushes, homemade bombs buried in the valley, and rocket attacks on the combat outpost.



The New York Times

In late August, my commander informed me that I would soon have to leave my platoon at the combat outpost to become the new executive officer, or XO, for my company, which meant a desk job on a more comfortable, larger base and almost no patrols. I would move to Forward Operating Base Apache, a bigger base in Qalat, leaving my platoon to continue patrolling and fighting the insurgency.

While flattered at being picked for the promotion, I was also frustrated that I was being taken from my platoon after bonding with my soldiers and working so long to prepare for the trials of being a platoon leader in combat. For my platoon's sake, my only option was to put my frustration aside and prepare the best possible handoff for my successor. I had to teach him as much as I could, despite the pain of giving "my boys" to some new guy.



Courtesy of First Lt. Troy Peterson Zabul Province, Afghanistan.

After two weeks training the new platoon leader on local patrols, I had one final mission to conduct before I departed Combat Outpost Mizan for Forward Operating Base Apache. It was a long-distance foot patrol into another valley that we had not visited and that was known to be occupied by insurgents. After meeting with the elders of the two major villages in the valley, the insurgents ambushed my patrol with machine guns, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades as we were leaving the second village.

The most intense firefight we had experienced followed, with numerous insurgents killed by my soldiers at close range as we ran low on ammunition and water.

"The only bond stronger than the one I had with my soldiers is with my wife."

— [Troy Peterson](#)

Afterwards, I was distraught. How could I now be forced to leave my boys, my platoon, in harm's way while I worked a desk job in relative safety on a large forward operating base? I felt like I was being taken out of the game when my team needed me the most. The only bond stronger than the one I had with my soldiers is with my wife. I felt like I was deserting them; even though we were mostly the same age, they trusted me to make decisions when their lives were on the line. I had brought them into this war, and now I had no way, real or perceived, to influence whether they came back.

But orders are orders, so I climbed into a helicopter, leaving my platoon in the hands of the new lieutenant. When I walked into my company's command post, I was told that my (former) platoon was already in another firefight as they tried to disarm a roadside bomb they'd found on patrol. I could only stand by the radios, listening helplessly and wishing I was still there with them. I was now a spectator of their war.



Troy Peterson Zabul Province, Afghanistan.

Courtesy of First Lt.

In the six months since I left the Third Platoon at Combat Outpost Mizan, they've had more firefights, and found and hit homemade bombs. Only amazing luck can explain multiple attacks in which my soldiers should have been seriously wounded or killed, but weren't. My new job as XO required me to manage maintenance, supply, and logistics for the five platoons in my company, supporting the platoons and soldiers doing the patrolling and fighting.

At Forward Operating Base Apache, I learned the ropes of my new job, which consisted mostly of e-mails, memos, phone calls and meetings. Being the XO is starkly different from leading patrols, talking with villagers, and trying to protect them from the insurgents. While I've built relationships with my new subordinates, it's not the same as those I had with the soldiers I led on patrols and in firefights. My commander let me go on patrols and larger missions occasionally to get a break from the monotony of the big forward operating base existence; he understood that getting back outside the wire was critical to maintaining my sanity. I even flew back to Combat Outpost Mizan a few times on resupply helicopters, bringing mail and food to my old platoon for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Third Platoon was replaced at Combat Outpost Mizan a couple of months ago by another platoon from Fox Company that had been living on Forward Operating Base Apache all year, so I now see my soldiers and my replacement every day. I fight feelings of jealousy that he's getting to lead "my boys" and bring them back home, but it's also nice seeing my old soldiers and reminiscing with them about our time patrolling at the combat outpost. While it wasn't my choice, I feel guilty for not being on the ground with them, sharing the same risks and hardships they live with every day. My soldiers might belong to someone else now, but I still feel responsible for them. I'm thankful that with our replacements here and a few days left to go in

our deployment, all the soldiers I brought with me to Afghanistan are still alive, and that I was lucky enough to lead them in combat for the time I had.

First Lt. Troy Peterson, 24, of Seattle, graduated in 2008 from West Point as an infantry officer. In 2010, he deployed to Zabul Province, Afghanistan, as a Rifle Platoon Leader with the Second Stryker Cavalry Regiment based in Vilseck, Germany. He will return to Germany in late May after completing his deployment.

The views expressed in this blog are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense or the United States government.

If you are a service member who has recently served in the Iraq or Afghan theaters and would like to submit a post, please send an e-mail to atwar@nytimes.com.