

Michael Phillips,
**Over the hump: Tense, bored
 Marines watch camels**

DECEMBER 6, 2001

*Wall Street
 Journal*

CHARLIE COMPANY'S PERIMETER, Southern Afghanistan—The Marines first spot the intruder through the lime-green glow of night-vision scopes.

It ambles across the sand, circles a foxhole and disappears back into the desert. The lieutenant alerts the sergeant, the sergeant alerts the corporals, and soon the entire Third Platoon is scanning the horizon for a suspect camel.

"It's the Taliban cavalry-suicide camel," says Lance Cpl. Chris Tone, 21 years old, from Anaheim, Calif.

Specialized Marine hunter-killer units this week started cutting off possible Taliban escape routes out of their stronghold in Kandahar. But the young grunts of Charlie Company, Battalion Landing Team 1/1, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit face night after night of cold, boredom and frustration, defending the perimeter of the desert air base they helped seize last week.

The four Marines of Second Team, First Squad, Third Platoon hold a segment of the line facing Kandahar, but haven't seen an Afghan. So far, the occasional incursion by a stray camel has been the only action. The team is wary, nevertheless, in case the creature could be rigged with explosives. It also poses a threat to helicopters and cargo planes if it ambles onto the heavily used airstrip.

Second Team spends day and night in a 6-foot by 10-foot foxhole. When their sergeant orders them to "stand to," they place their weapons atop some sandbags and peer out into the desert. The Marines will stand-to until headquarters declares the area secure enough that two of the men can sleep while the other two keep watch.

It's 7:45 p.m. when Lt. Victor Lomuscio, 25, of New York's Long Island, puts the platoon on camel watch. The platoon sergeant radios his other fighting positions, but the suspect has slipped away.

"If he's out there, [it] isn't moving," says Cpl. Alex Velazquez, 22, of Washington, D.C. The moon isn't up

yet, and the night-vision scopes, which turn midnight into noon when there is a bright moon, are less effective searching for a stationary target in low-light conditions.

After the camel scare, the Marines grow quiet. They still aren't permitted to stand down, since Marine sniper patrols are out in the desert and must pass through friendly lines, something that can only be done with everyone up and watching.

The stillness is soon broken by gunshots from Bravo Company's lines to the right. First a few rifle shots, then a burst from a machine-gun. A medic runs up with a message from the platoon commander that the platoon is still on full alert. The sergeant heads to the command post for more information and returns with word of another camel assault. Bravo Company fired to scare at least one camel away from the runway, while a C-130 Hercules circled overhead waiting for space to land.

A stand-down is ordered, but the camel watch continues through the night. When the morning sun starts to heat the desert landscape, the off-duty Marines emerge from their sleeping bags. "Unidentified vehicle approaching from south to north," the lieutenant announces, relaying a radio message from the command post. The mortar teams quickly reset their weapons to hit targets beyond the Bravo positions and the troops don their Kevlar helmets and flak vests.

In the distance, five Humvees and a pair of fast-attack vehicles streak into the desert. They break into groups, then come together in a line, leaving puffy trails of dust. In Charlie Company's command post, the lieutenant relays their report: "It's the damn camel."