

Night Visions

By Greg Stolze

There is nothing better than getting shot at and missed. It's really great.

--General James Mattis

The year is 2011, the country is Afghanistan and, unlike the alpha achievers of BLACKSAT, our protagonists are a squad of Marines kicking knee-deep in the shit of war. Stationed in Nangarhar province, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines Delta Company Squad One have mostly drawn security details. Delta Company (nicknamed "Doom School") took part in the 2001 battle of Tora Bora, though of the current troops, only Sergeant Kryptowicz was present then. Since the 2009 surge it's been patrol, intermittent firefights with diehards, and driving around State Department people pursuing one hearts and minds scheme or another. One time they sorted through the wreckage of a drone strike looking for actionable intel. (There was none.)

Like most war-zone soldiers, Squad One is tossed back and forth between the boredom of military service and the ghastly excitement of military service. But they're bound for terror of a distinctly different sort when they encounter a little-known group of Afghan hill people called the Gaths.

The Gaths--Handler Eyes Only

This information is not for the players. They should hear the word "Gath" the first time their characters do. They can learn some, maybe even most of what follows, but only in play when their characters are under the threat that faces all outsiders who come to Gath Valley.

The Marines at the center of this story could learn any of the following if you, the Handler, think it makes things more interesting and scary. It's in an overview form here so you know who the Gath are, what they do, how they act, how their neighbors treat and view them, and why.

Gath History

1,500 years ago in Thailand, an ethnic group acquired an unnatural patron and left Thailand for Afghanistan. They've stayed in Gath Valley ever since.

The valley is river-carved and riddled with caves. There was a shallow waterfall between the valley and the plains beyond when the Gaths first arrived. Since that time, they've dammed the water to create a lake. Entering the valley means going over the dam, and any modern vehicle weighing more than a light pickup truck will likely collapse it, releasing tons of water and draining their fishing pond into the plains beneath.

Thus, any invader's options are (1) come through a tight stone choke-point on foot, or in unarmored light vehicles, (2) rappel down sheer cliffs hundreds of feet tall or (3) apply air power. Except air power doesn't work well because of the unpredictable mountain winds.

Could the valley be taken? Sure, if you brought in artillery and shelled it savagely to drive the inhabitants into those deep caves, then sent troops into those caves to dig out every last cornered, desperate, Gath. But what's the point? The land is, in brief, worthless. There's no mineral wealth and the soil is poor. It has no tactical significance to speak of, either. So, like the English and Russians before them (as well as the local Afghan residents), the American invaders have learned to leave well enough alone.

"Live and let live" only goes so far for a community in the habit of sending out raiding parties to seize young people from nearby communities (typically women) whenever the Gath's numbers get a little low. "Bride theft" has been less of a problem in recent generations, though a lot of area Pashtos and Tajiks have long memories about it. But mostly, the Gaths are despised and ignored.

Abidleth, Téuthan, the Ourmat and Kunkalu

The Gath language is an isolate, similar in structure to some undiscovered antique Thai dialects that died out in their home country centuries ago. The four words in the preceding subject header are the central concepts to Gath culture.

Abidleth is the Gath's unnatural patron, what they call a "sky-howler." They worship it, and it stands between them and the various other monstrous entities in their deep mythology. Gath mythology holds that there is a nameless, indifferent creator at the core of the cosmos, and that the sky-howlers, among many others, pay homage to it. Abidleth is just one of many sky-

howlers, and it has forbidden the Gaths to meddle in the affairs of the source or, indeed, any other sentient beings.

Abidleth has convinced the Gaths it's immortal, and it's certainly old enough that it appears exempt from death. It can only materialize on Earth once every eight years and five months, to be offered a new Ourmat and to beget a Téuthan upon her. If you wanted to know how it has communicated its commands, you'd have to talk to one of its wives.

The Ourmat is a community high priestess who gets ritually married to Abidleth and gives birth to a Téuthan. If the new Ourmat survives that process, the old Ourmat retires (becoming what is known as an "Ourmat-oba") and the new one makes all meaningful decisions for the Gath for eight and a half years, until Abidleth appears again. Then the Ourmat-oba (if any) undergoes some sort of apotheosis, ascending in a boil of pestilent light into the heavens. (It's widely assumed that she becomes the next Téuthan, or even a sky-howler itself.) A new Ourmat is offered, the old one becomes Ourmat-oba (if she remains), and the cycle begins again. If an Ourmat dies before retirement, the old Ourmat-oba resumes her duties. They are, in simple language, tyrants.

Téuthan are grotesque genetic blends of human DNA and unnatural life-codes etched in exotic matter not native to our dimension. They aren't very smart and, like mules, these crossbreeds are sterile. But they are extremely dangerous.

Téuthan have long, thin torsos: 6-8 meters long and one meter wide. Their flesh is mostly transparent, though suspended within it one can see bones, orange veins and differently-shaded organs in varying degrees of opacity. Their hairless heads are their most human feature, despite having see-through skin and being a yard across. Their foreheads slope drastically, like Australopithecines or some microcephalics, and they have pronounced overbites with fist-sized teeth.

Like their faces, their arms, (3-4m long, including hands) are disturbingly human in shape, despite their clear flesh. Far less manlike is the crest that rises from their backs, just behind the shoulders, a half-crescent horizontal fan that resembles (and functions like) a hang glider. The torso ends in a broad fan and has, where one would expect hind legs, two long, powerful, bony fins. The Téuthan on the ground is a clumsy, but powerful thing, dragging itself by its forelegs, with its tail and fins flopping behind. But once it leaps to the air, it moves with liquid grace and terrifying speed.

One might reasonably wonder how the Gaths keep these fearsome, flying, demi-material protectors hidden (or fed). That's a secret restricted to the Ourmats, the Téuthan and Abidleth. When not needed, they are absent. The Ourmat summons them with a shrill, whistling song, and they appear from somewhere coterminous with her body. No outsiders have survived seeing the process, but rumors about it say that they "emerge from under her skirts"--a typically superstitious and sexualized description of a dimensional transaction that, quite probably, no one on Earth understands.

Kunkalu is the diet on which Ourmats subsist. It's a sort of toasted or pan-fried wheat dumpling filled with either human flesh, or a sort of pudding made from clotted human blood. The filling is, universally, donated by the Gaths. (They commit cannibalism on the bodies of outsiders, but only Gath flesh is ritually pure enough for the Ourmat to consume.) It's hardly the only thing the Ormat eats, but every Gath is weighed, in public, at least once a week. Anyone found weighing too much is bled or, less commonly, has a patch of flesh (usually about five square centimeters) removed. It is forbidden to serve Kunkalu to anyone but an Ourmat. (Many an Ourmat-oba longs to once more taste that sweet flavor, sometimes to the point of trying to murder the current ruler.)

The Gath Today

There are about a thousand self-identified "Gaths", but close to a third of that number are living outside the valley, sending money home. About ten percent of those travelers (call it thirty people worldwide) are true believers desperate to return. Perhaps a quarter assimilate to outside culture, staying in Qatar or Singapore and revisiting their homeland only through recurring nightmares. The other 65% might want to stay out of the Valley and remain in a country where weight gain is tolerated, but return out of fear. When they initially leave, they're told bad things impend if they don't come when called. Those threats are bluffs--the Téuthan can't survive in our reality more than a few hours at a time, and they can only arrive and exit it via the Ourmat--but few have the guts to find out for sure.

The 562 adults and 221 children native to Gath Valley grow crops for subsistence and opium for market, they herd in the hills and fish in their dammed lake. They toil, worship Abidleth and obey the Ourmat's whims.

Most modern Gaths speak some Pashto in addition to their private tongue. Beyond their lake and stream, there's no running water in the Valley, and its few electrical devices are battery-powered. There is not one Gath anywhere who recognizes more than fifty words of English.

How America Gets Involved

The connection between the USA and the Gaths is Yasir Marwat, a middleman for their opium before the arrival of the Americans. He's given up the heroin trade (in part because, between the Taliban and the 2007 Triangular Initiative, most of his network is gone). He currently works as a translator for the US State Department. He proposed the Gaths as a possible tribal ally for the US military's efforts to secure the Pakistan border.

While the Gaths are suspicious of any and all outsiders, the Taliban absolutely despise them, and everything the Gaths hear on the radio indicates that the Americans are wealthy, powerful, ruthless, and willing to slaughter Taliban. Marwat has promised them weapons and implied that the Americans are most interested in leaving them alone once the Taliban are gone. Despite their suspicions, that sounds good enough that the Gaths are willing to at least listen.

Describing Nangarhar

Nangarhar province includes fertile river valleys, scabrous scrubland, and the Himalayan heights of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Parts of it are modestly clement, parts of it are awesomely beautiful, but there are very few areas that are both. Paved roads go from town to town and to some villages, but dirt tracks are common as well. The dominant colors are tan and a weedy green, shading to white as the snow flies. This operation happens during Nangarhar's autumn. The snowfalls have been intermittent and light, but every week it seems a bit colder, a bit darker, and the snow stays longer and deeper, sucking up the dust of the roads to form a silty layer of slush everywhere there's a patch of shadow.

The valleys and plains of Nangarhar are interrupted with the occasional broad, stumpy tree, but as the terrain gets more elevated, they're replaced by tall, soaring evergreens. The buildings are generally square and the same dust-tan hue as the naked ground.

SCENE ONE: Varasek and Sutterberg

At 08:00, the Doom School PCs are called to a meeting by Lieutenant Nagel, who neither sounds nor looks particularly happy. He introduces Captain Richard Varasek, "from Intelligence," and informs them they've been temporarily assigned to serve as the captain's escort.

Varasek is from Navy Intelligence. He's tall and blonde, with skin leathered from exposure to wind and sun. His four front teeth look like plastic, porcelain-white, while the rest are smoker's-

yellow. His expression says he's itching for an excuse to tear into some jarhead for lack of discipline.

Sitting behind him is Samantha Sutterberg, a woman in brand-new bluejeans and broken-in Doc Martens boots. She's tanned, fine-featured, and looks like she's finding it hard to breathe in her flak jacket.

Varasek's Briefing

Varasek is to-the-point. He and his partner need competent, locally knowledgeable escorts to guide them while maintaining a certain level of military discretion. The PCs are those escorts and they will report directly to Varasek and his partner, Ms. Sutterberg from the State Department. The group will enter and Ms. Sutterberg will negotiate with a tribal people known as the Gaths. Varasek then asks if any of the Marines have heard of the Gaths?

The Skinny By the Numbers

The Marines can make INTx5 rolls to see what (if anything) they remember. On a fail, they've never heard of a Gath.

RIGHT STUFF

Right Stuff has heard of them--one of the locals used the phrase, "wicked as a Gath" to describe the Taliban's foreign fighters.

CHUCKLES

When he tried to get a translator to ask locals where he could get laid, they took great offense and said something about Gaths within the context of sexual deviance.

HOAGIE & RAMBAM

One time they were watching a DVD of "The Hills Have Eyes" at one of the larger bases when a local who worked in the kitchen started watching from the doorway. His English was so-so, but he'd seen "Deliverance" and said something about "American Gaths." He wasn't real easy to understand though.

RIGHT STUFF & SGT. KRYPTOWICZ

They know there's a place up in the northeast mountains where Close Air Support is just a nonstarter--something about the mountain conditions make it unsafe. That region is called "Gath Valley."

Varasek seems mildly pleased if they've heard anything and resigned if they haven't. He says he's not surprised, the Gaths are pretty obscure. He nods at Sutterberg, who gets to her feet and continues the presentation.

What Sutterberg Knows

Sutterberg seems to be the brains of the operation, and she lets these concepts spill in a short, and very businesslike, presentation: The word "Gath" isn't of Pathan or Dari origin, and no one is

really sure what it means or where it comes from. It seems clear that the Gaths are culturally distinct from their neighbors. At the very least, they speak a narrow dialect. It seems more likely they actually have their own language, the way the Basques have the Euskadi language in Europe. There's a long history of conflict between the Gaths, the local Pashto tribes, Pakistanis, the Russians when they were here but no one has ever succeeded in taking Gath Valley, despite considerable animosity.

The State Department has been making a push towards gathering up the marginalized elements of Afghan society. It is State Department's hope that if it can be shown that the coalition is inclusive even to the Gaths, it will make it easier for other other disparate elements of our alliance to get along.

Finally, if the US could base some mobile forces out of Gath Valley, it could make it a lot harder for fighters to sneak across the border, into and out of Pakistan. The Gath Valley is clearly a defensible position: The Gaths have held it for centuries against all comers. She then opens the floor to questions.

Sutterberg isn't hiding anything: The State Department really is casting a broad net, trying to create an "Afghan" identity that supersedes tribal ties or, at least, offsets religious and ethnic suspicion. Varasek has also been honest: He thinks a defensible enclave of prickly individualists could be a regional strategic asset, as long as the US can make them into "our assholes." He's fairly comfortable making some kind of under the table deal with the Gaths (who he's guessing

are opium farmers). Sutterberg, while less happy about that idea, knows how the game gets played.

The additional information they can provide, if asked, includes the following:

- The Gaths are well armed. Some Russian artillery went missing during the withdrawal--while there's no way of knowing if it wound up in the valley, or how well-supplied or maintained they are, it's certainly possible that they have it.
- They trade with their neighbors out of necessity, but are largely self-sufficient, herding on the hills and farming in their valley. Sutterberg admits that, "some opium cultivation may occur." There's also evidence that a number of Gaths have immigrated (legally or not) to Qatar, working as menials and sending money home.
- The local mistrust and dislike of Gaths is probably (in Sutterberg's opinion) due to bigotry. They're different, therefore hated.

Captain Varasek checks his watch, declares the meeting over and orders the Marines to fall in, pack their gear for a five-day visit, and be ready to roll within sixty minutes.

SCENE TWO: Hurry Up and Wait

Once the Marines have rushed about gathering their kit at top speed, it emerges that an expected truck with a local driver/translator has not yet appeared, so the whole enterprise is on hold. During this time, the Marines have a chance to log on, make some phone calls, or

otherwise sniff out Gath gossip. Each character has a chance to pursue one of the following avenues of information. These include:

Phoning Fellow Marines

Kryptowicz gets a +20% to his CHAx5 roll with this, but any character can get on the phone/Skype/email and ask around about the Gaths, their valley, anything about weird ethnic enclaves in the Hindu Kush Mountains. DO NOT suggest that Right Stuff consider Air Force sources, but if that player (or someone else who knows his history) suggests it, Right Stuff can talk informally to some pilots in the region who worked with his dad. He then gets a +20% to his CHAx5 roll.

Fail

They have no idea what a "Gath" is, and more importantly, they don't care.

Success

That valley is covered by a flight guideline recommending not flying over it due to wind hazards. The contact intimates that it's unlikely that air support will be forthcoming in that region. There's even scuttlebutt that the Russians had a no-fly zone over the area as well, back during the 80s.

Google It

The online access is decent when the PCs are investigating. The standard rolls are Anthropology or History:

Fail

Hand out the "Gath Valley Wikipedia Entry" found on page xx.

[[BEGIN SPECIAL LAYOUT]]

"Gath Valley is a mountain valley in the Goshta district of Nangarhar, Afghanistan. Its remote location has prevented industrial and commercial development for centuries. A long-suspected haven of opium growth[1], interdiction has been difficult due to the insular behavior of its inhabitants, the Gaths. Though officially a part of Afghanistan, it has resisted participation even in common defense or census activities.

While genetic testing has been unavailable to confirm the story, the Gaths themselves claim[2] that they came from a land "far to the East." Ethnographically, the Gaths appear to have much in common with their Pashto and Tajik neighbors, but share more characteristics with the Shan and Bamar peoples of Burma/Myanmar and Thailand, supporting their claims of an ancient diaspora. However, mentions of "infidels of abominable habits called the Gathi" occur as early as 720 AD[3].

While technically a part of Gosha in Nangarhar, the Gath Valley has lacked formal government representation, regulation or oversight since at least the fall of the Najibullah

government in 1992. While the Gaths appear[4] to have grudgingly accepted the Marxist revolution of 1979, there is little record of them taking part in it beyond paying taxes and, when land reform was proposed, switching sides and vigorously resisting it, even to the point of being accused of aiding Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The accusations of complicity with the enemy were used to justify harsh Taliban suppression of the Gaths after 1994.

The ethnic homogeneity of Gath Valley's inhabitants is quite high, but given their geographical isolation, and their relative poverty. Intermarriage with neighbors is not unheard-of, although it is a rare Gath who leaves his people and those who do are generally afforded very low social status among the local Pashtos and Tajiks[5]. Accusations of marital abductions seem too common to discount out of hand, but there are few official complaints in the sketchy regional records.

The Gath dialect gives every indication of being a language isolate, sharing no common antecedents among the Persian or Iranian tongues of the region.[6]

While extremely reticent to share their religious ceremonies and principles with outsiders, the central religious figures of the Gath seem to be called "Téuthan," which are intermediaries between the Gath people and their godhead. In exchange for leading lives of ascetic self-denial, the Téuthan provide defense against illness and enemies.[7]

Several sources indicate that Gath society is matriarchal. Honored ancestors are, in some instances, believed to return from death as Téuthan, giving guidance to their descendants, along with stern instruction about right action and religious ritual.

Gath Valley is extremely remote and inaccessible, perhaps explaining their ability to resist Taliban assault. The preferred mode of transport out of Gath Valley is by water, with a minor tributary to the Kunar River emerging from a dam at the valley's base. This stream serves mainly to keep a clear trade route open. When traveling to Gath Valley, horse and mule are still the most common forms of transport.

[[END SPECIAL LAYOUT]]

Success

On a success, the researcher finds a blog post entitled "My Summer With the Gaths" by Rinna Lourdes.

[[BEGIN SPECIAL LAYOUT - MAKE IT LOOK LIKE THE PRINTOUT OF A BLOG PAGE.]]

A formal ethnographic report on my weeklong visit to Gath Valley is forthcoming in the Journal of Himalayan Cultural Studies, but I've been asked to provide some of my casual observations of this shy, but proud subculture of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

I spent two weeks in Gath Valley in the summer of 1989 under the auspices of the University of Zurich. Initially, the Gaths seemed unsure what to make of me. The idea of a woman traveling on her own, with no chaperone or family, confused them. They asked if I had come from "the home valley" and whether I was "under the protection of a sky-howler." My explanation that I had come to learn seemed alien to them, as if learning for its own sake was simply not a value they possessed. Then again, my Pashto was inelegant, and while they spoke it they were clearly more comfortable with their own dialect, speaking it openly in my presence but making no attempt to teach me it.

I found the Gaths extremely respectful. The men were formal and diffident, always seeming a bit surprised that I could not speak their language. The women were a bit more forthcoming and frequently made offerings of a kind of savory meat dumpling called a 'kunkalu'--a generosity I found unbearably poignant, since it was clear that malnutrition was rife among them.

Gath Valley itself is beautiful, in an austere and unforgiving way. The entry to the valley is blocked by a large wooden dam of immense age, creating a reservoir in which the natives fish. (There was apparently a taboo about offering fish to strangers, however. It was made abundantly clear to me that the fish were not for me to eat. More of the meat dumplings, 'kunkalum' in plural, were offered when I asked about the fish diet.)

Though the dam was ancient, the Gaths attended it constantly. Several times while I was there, people examined it minutely, replacing wooden beams that had become damaged or which

were rotting. Young Gath men were enjoined to swim down to its base and inspect it, even though the water was icy even at the height of summer. I saw the men of the valley prepare a great tree trunk and carry it onto the dam before pushing it over the side and jumping in after it, apparently in some underwater construction project.

The most fluent of the Pashto speakers, an elderly man named 'Aftha,' told me that before the revolution, a group of government soldiers attempted to enter the valley and that the ramp of the dam crumbled beneath the weight of their half-track, bogging them down while the Gaths jeered and shot at them. I had not considered the defensive value of the dam, but clearly any attempt to bring a tank or heavy truck over it could crumble the whole thing, releasing the five meters of water behind it. It's a conundrum: Development would be very difficult without a paved road into the valley, but building such a road would necessitate removing (or somehow replacing) the dam, to which the Gath are very attached.

1 COMMENT

RuralLegend333 writes:

The Gaths r inbred kooks. if they ever discover chainsaws, god help us all

[[END SPECIAL LAYOUT]]

Consulting the Locals

The fire base is not an isolated island of American staff: Locals do the cooking, cleaning and menial tasks. Usually, this is just a few trusted Afghans recommended by tribal allies, but an

unusual number of local laborers are inside the perimeter. Marines could ask around, either of the builders taking a smoke break, or of the longtime commissary staff.

Of course, breaching the language barrier is an issue. Right Stuff only has to make a successful Pashto roll. Anyone else has to first find someone who speaks English and Pashto or Dari (Sutterberg speaks all three; Varasek speaks Dari but has no interest in this foolishness unless talked into it with a Persuade -20% roll). With a translator in place, a Persuade roll can be made.

Fail

The Afghani laughs and says the Gaths are primitives, buttoned up in their valley eating each other. The idea that they could serve as allies against the Taliban is foolish. The only reason no one has wiped them off the face of the earth is that their cave-riddled valley is absolutely worthless.

Success

The Afghan looks nervous and wants to know what the Americans want with the Gaths. But before they can answer, he says that if they're going in to kill them all, it's about time. They abduct little girls for wives, or for worse purposes, and when the Russians tried to take a helicopter gunship into the valley to kill them, the Gaths whistled it down to the ground with demons, whom they sleep with. The only reason the Taliban don't fear them is that they know a

demon-banishing song from long ago. Still, the song only keeps them back, it doesn't harm them.

SCENE THREE: Yasir Marwat and the Ambush

The truck shows up seven hours late, driven by a young urban Afghan named Yasir Marwat. Captain Varasek explains that he personally has never met Marwat but that Sutterberg recommended him as a State Department asset known for being "bright, ambitious and enthusiastic." If not, perhaps, prompt.

Marwat is in his twenties, dressed traditionally except for a ratty pair of Nike Air Jordans. He smiles constantly, peppers his speech with "Okay Chief!" and "Right on!" Once he learns the Americans are Marines, he spices that up with frequent outbursts of "Ooh-rah!" and "Semper Fi".

Sutterberg goes over for an intense discussion, and anyone who listens in can piece together what happened: Marwat was supposed to hire security guards, who (according to him) never showed, but lucky for Sutterberg, Marwat only gave them a down payment, so he can refund Sutterberg part of her money. (Sutterberg rolls her eyes, but accepts the fat wad of bills.) Moreover, Marwat took it upon himself to "exchange" some of the "pointless stuff" from the truck for "things the Gaths would like." When Sutterberg asks how he knows that, Marwat is vague and says he asked around.

Sutterberg tries to put the best face on this, but Varasek is clearly not amused. He demands an inventory of the truck's contents. Where the State Department initially had it loaded with antibiotics, vitamins, food supplies and blankets, Marwat traded the vitamins, half the food, and half the medicine for rocket propelled grenades. The truck now has an even dozen Chinese-made Type 69 RPGs (functionally identical to the RPG-7s popular among the Taliban) bundled in the back like firewood. It is a good idea to describe these weapons to the PCs when they're discovered (the Marines would know them well), subtly emphasizing that they take two full turns to reload. This is important info for a later ambush.

Learning about the switch, Varasek becomes amused, while Sutterberg goes livid. The Marines can involve themselves as they wish in the conversation about how this was categorically not supposed to be about military aid. Should they make any compelling arguments, Varasek might reluctantly leave the RPGs behind. Otherwise, he gets the original manifest from Marwat and says, to him and Sutterberg and the Marines, "As far as any of you assholes know, this is what we gave to the Gaths, am I loud and clear? The receipt is the reality."

Though the mission is now eight hours behind schedule, Varasek wants to press on.

With that, the convoy sets out.

[[begin deputy layout]]

Deputization Dossier: Yasir Marwat

Exciting changes are happening in Afghanistan, and if you play your cards right you can make a lot of money, and get out from under the thumb of scary, tiresome Islamists who don't even let people play music. You're a translator for the Americans, who kind of messed up the business you had going previously, but the money working for the State Department is good and there are fewer legal hassles.

You must keep Samantha Sutterberg happy. She is the source of the money you currently enjoy. She's naïve, but really does think she can help people and, stranger still, she wants to. But the Gaths don't want vitamins and blankets. They want RPG rounds, so that's what you got for them.

You were also supposed to hire more security, but there wasn't anyone you'd trust available, so you had to give Sutterberg that money back. It pains you to be honest, but you're in this for the long term.

You have no particular special information about the Gaths, except that you know they grow opium and sell it. You're not about to make something up either, when Sutterberg and her people are about to go straight to where the lie might get found out.

Deputization Dossier: Samantha Sutterberg

Yassir Marwat has been feckless, dishonest, on the take and on the make the whole time you've known him, but he is the best translator you've worked with. To his credit, he does get

things done, if not always the right things, and he does know the lay of the land in the region's criminal underworld. (You try not to think too hard about why that is.) He's practical, sometimes to a fault, but he's nonviolent and enthusiastic about America. He's what you've got.

The Gaths are an impoverished and suppressed minority who could be a tactical asset in the region. It won't surprise you if everything is complicated or turns into a disaster--you've been with State too long--but you're still going to get out there and try to make this deal work. It's your job, and everybody knows that the people who paid their dues in a war zone leapfrog over the desk-jockeys stationed in the dull countries with no crises.

[[end deputy layout]]

The Convoy

The State Department truck is heavy duty and built to go off-road, but it's not designed for combat. Its cab has 10 points of Armor. The truck is unarmed, but at least you can roll down the windows and shoot out of them. If the back gets hit with Lethality Damage from an incendiary or explosive weapon, and the Lethality roll succeeds, the supplies not only get blown to pieces, it also cooks off the RPG rounds inside (unless they were unloaded). They inflict a 30% Lethality attack on anything within 10m, including the cab.

The Marines have a pair of 2x2 Oshkosh offroad MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicles, nicknamed "Shitty" and "The Beast." Driving one is a Heavy Machinery roll, and each has 20 points of Armor.

The Beast is equipped with a turreted Mk 19 grenade launcher, which can be operated either manually or using a CROWS (Common Remotely Operated Weapon Station) from inside the cabin. The Mk. 19 is fired with Heavy Weapons, has Lethality 15% (20% if fired in a burst) and a 10m kill radius. It holds 30 rounds.

Shitty has a turreted M240 heavy machine gun, and its CROWS unit is broken. Last week it got fixed, on paper, but it still doesn't work worth a damn. The M240 is fired with Heavy Weapons, has Lethality 15% and a 3m kill radius. It's got Armor Piercing 3, too. If fired from within the cab using the CROWS, the attacker takes a -30% penalty. If fired manually while exposed, there is no penalty.

These usually operate with a four-man crew (driver, gunner, commander and radio), while the truck's cab can hold three. But without the additional security hires, Varasek dictates the soldiers' positions.

CLIFTON: Driving "Shitty", the point vehicle, with Varasek.

SAMUELSON: Manning the M240 in "Shitty".

VINCENZO: In the truck with Marwat, the translator.

KRYPTOWICZ: Driving "The Beast".

HURT: On the Mk 19 grenade launched in "The Beast".

You can include a couple talking scenes here to let the players establish their characters. If they do, keep the scenes brief. If they aren't interested, move on to the Alertness rolls (below). Should they suggest different crew assignments, Varasek permits it, though with an aggrieved squint and a comment about "picky-sticky Leathernecks" just so they remember who's in charge.

Captain Varasek is taciturn, mostly working the radio to get reports on possible enemy movement, but the weather is starting to turn; clouds blowing in off the mountains, high winds in the upper atmosphere, light snowfall picking up. Bad weather for medical dust-offs. Even the drones might go back to the barn if the snow gets heavy enough.

If engaged, he's skeptical about the value of the Gaths, but at least open to the idea. He wants any help he can get and discounts the rumors. "Have you heard the stuff they say about us? Now, are you a child-raping psycho who greases his rifle with the rendered fat of Muslim virgins? I figure this Gath crap is just about that accurate."

Yasir Marwat is an energetic chatterbox who wants to hear everything about America, but who gladly natters on about the region if asked. His English is OK as a second language, but it's heavily canted towards money and military matters. He estimates that there can't be more than

five hundred Gaths in the valley, all told, but that they're all heavily armed and tough. (If pressed, it can emerge that when he says, "five hundred" Gaths he was, of course, only counting adult males.) One thing Marwat won't do is suggest that he can get drugs or women: He's spent enough time around Sutterberg to know that sort of thing could get him cut off, and he's been making some nice sums working for State.

In the last vehicle, Sutterberg is easier to engage. She likens the stories about the Gath to the Blood Libel against the Jews. "Listen, you grow up attending the only synagogue in a county with fairly active Klan presence, you develop some sympathy for the strangers in a foreign land, trying to keep their customs and culture intact."

Keep the conversations (if any) moving along briskly, and then mention that as the sun sets and the temperature drops, the snow is coming thicker. They're winding through mountain roads, and they've had a drone providing aerial attention; all clear so far. But as the sun sets and the snow flies, the drone's recalled, just as the convoy leaves the paved road and rumbles down a steep dirt track into an enclosed plain.

The dirt road goes to a riverbed with a narrow trickle running down its center, amidst a thatch of wild grass. This is the discharge from Gath Valley's dam, and following it upstream leads to their enclave.

Call for Alertness checks. The drivers are at -20%. Gunners and passengers are unpenalized.

For every success rolled, parcel out one of the following details.

1) A glint of light from the ridge to the north, just for a moment.

2) A cloud of dust in the southern hills, the kind of thing a dirt bike would kick up on a long patch of straight path.

3) A fair number of tire tracks near the water.

(If no successes are rolled, the unit defaults to the "Face First" option described on page xx.)

If this is pointed out to Varasek, he curses and says the unit could be waltzing right into a trap. He believes if those signs are coming from enemy forces and they know the convoy are heading to the Gaths, they can arrange themselves on the ridge edges around the dam choke point and rain fire. Varasek openly asks for options. Rolling Military Science is an option:

Failure

Straight through is the best idea.

Success

Going straight in is a bad idea: It puts the Marines at the bottom of a funnel with Taliban (or Al Qaeda, or whomever) at the top, behind cover, with both sides able to shoot at them. This is

basically the "Face First" option described on page xx--exactly what the Marines would do if they didn't know they were at risk of an ambush.

Beyond the obvious "go straight towards the dam and make contact" approach, there are a couple other ways the Marines can approach the possible ambush.

1) Pick a side and race the ridge. If they go back up along the north ridge, or cross the stream and climb the south ridge, they can come up along the side of the hostile position, facing only a portion of the enemy. But the drawback to this approach is that the MRAPs might have trouble in the narrow pathways, and the truck? No way is the truck going up there. Leaving the truck behind leaves it vulnerable.

2) Deposit one or more Marines and have them take a side on foot. This would be a daring option. With night falling and NVG to even the odds substantially, the Marines might well be able to sneak up on the enemy and take them out before they realize the danger, especially if there was someone in the MRAPs providing fire support with the Mk 19. The drawback to this is that the Marines' manpower is so limited. If you send out two Marines, you either have enough remaining from the squad to drive all the vehicles (and who's going to shoot the Mk 19? Varasek? Marwat?) or you put a civilian at the wheel during a combat situation.

3) Face First. Going in alert and with guns hot could blunt a lot of the force of the ambush, if the numbers aren't overwhelming. Blacking out the dashboards and killing the headlights before heading in could mitigate the ambush advantage, since (again) the Marines have night vision goggles and their opponents don't. The crap weather makes that a greater advantage, as the

clouds are blocking out the moon and stars. But it does mean that the Gaths' first encounter with the Marines is going to come in a cloud of gunfire and explosions, so the chance for misunderstandings is pretty high. Of course, that seems to be part of the deal in any event.

4) Bugger Off. It's perfectly possible to turn around, drive all goddamn night in the snow, stand up the Gaths who are expecting visitors, and come back in the morning if the weather breaks and lets a drone scope out the ridges. But that seems like a pretty extreme reaction to what might just be a few tardy shepherds.

With these rough plans (or at least some of them) on the table, it's time to decide. As Handler, you're in a delicate position: You're controlling the character of Captain Varasek, and he's in command of the squad. You can just order them to stupidly charge up the center and they're obligated to obey. Don't do that.

Varasek is no dummy. He knows he's in the middle of nowhere with guys who have no reason to trust him, other than he's an officer from a different branch. He knows people fight a lot better with buy-in, and while he won't admit it out loud, he's aware that these guys know the terrain and the situation. He's not about to requisition a group of experienced Marines and then ignore what they advise. So have Varasek be decisive, but open to input. Let the Marines make their arguments, and then get Varasek to choose. He probably justifies his decision in brief. The only thing you might want to take off the table is option #4 (that option means no operation).

The other three options are a bit more complicated. But first, a word about the combatants.
(Their stats are in boxes at the end of the chapter.)

Varasek, Sutterberg and Marwat

Excepting Varasek, they have no combat skills at all. As Handler, you can declare them hurt, dead, fleeing or panic-stricken at will--whatever seems most entertaining at the moment, or anything that puts a tough choice on the characters. These NPCs categorically do not do anything competent in a fight. Just be sure to keep someone with language skills (see page xx) intact!

Varasek is a trained fighter, but don't bother rolling for him. If he's driving or working the radio, he always succeeds at reasonable tasks. If he's trying to shoot, he misses. He vigorously resists being put in the gunner position, since his eyesight is not what it used to be.

The Taliban Ambush

The Taliban aren't happy with the idea of the inscrutable American invaders making an alliance with the perverse Gath infidels, so they've set an ambush. They'd love it if the US assumed the attack was Gath treachery, but mostly they just want to disrupt the early meet.

Unfortunately for them, Gath vigilance kept them from planting IEDs along the stream bed, close to Gath Valley's dam/entrance.

They've fallen back to taking cover along the ridge lines to the north and south, preparing an RPG salvo when the Marines get close enough. There are ten attackers; five to the north, five to the south, evenly distributed in two squads. Each squad has two men manning RPG-7s, two using AK-47s for suppression fire, and one "sharpshooter" with a Dragunov SVD.

RPG-7 Shooters (4 total, 2/side)

Each of these heavy gunners is armed with an RPG-7 launcher and 4 rounds of ammo for it. While all can fire on the first turn, they are then stuck reloading, giving the Marines two turns without RPG fire. After that, they start staggering their fire. That is: On turn one, all four fire. On turns two and three, all four reload. On turn four, Atash and Fahran fire. On turn five, Babur fires while Atash and Fahran reload. On turn six, Delbar fires while the others reload. Then on turn seven, Atash and Fahran fire again, restarting the pattern until each has shot four rounds. At that point, they hop in their trucks (on the north ridge) or bikes (south ridge) and de-ass the area.

AK-47 Riflemen (4 total, 2/side)

These guys have AK-47s in various states of repair. Their names are Jawid, Kasra, Mahyar and Zemar.

On the first turn, the AK-47 gunmen each have a 55% chance of hitting, due to aiming and using sprays. After that, their sprays drop to 35% because of the snowfall and darkness. Each burst uses ten rounds of ammo. Keep in mind that they have Armor Piercing 3.

Sharpshooters (2 total, 1/side)

The leaders are taking single shots with Dragunov rifles (far more accurate at long distance). Their names are Shahbaz and Parsa. They have DEX 10, 12 Hit Points, and 60% in Athletics and Firearms, with 45% in Heavy Weapons, Stealth and Demolitions. They have two spare cartridges for their rifles.

Their weapons have AP 5, knocking five points of Armor off their targets before doing damage.

ATTACKS

Weapon (ammo)	Skill	Damage	AP	Base Range
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Dragunov (10)	60/40%	1d12+2	5	150m
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The Afghanis showed up in two pickup trucks (one on the north ridge) and three motorbikes (all on the south ridge). The second truck is hidden in some scrub on the far side of the south ridge.

When a Talib gets hit, consider their hit points. If they lose half their current HP in a single attack, they're stunned and can't function until they make a CONx5 roll to shake it off. None of them really wants to get killed or captured. Either squad withdraws if it (1) loses three or more of its members or (2) sees the other squad flee.

When the fight begins, the Taliban fighters start singing. Moreover, it doesn't sound like a typical battle chant or hymn. (Despite their reputation for outlawing musical instruments, there's a long Taliban history of almost hypnotic chanting as an indoctrination element.) This eerie melody is different, both from the religious songs in the mosques and the pop music imported from Turkey and India. The language isn't anything the Marines have heard before.

Face First

This is the default option if the PCs fail to clue in to the ambush. As they approach the dam, they suddenly hear a rhythmic, dissonant chant. It echoes through the valley for just a second, and then combat begins.

If the Marines spotted the ambush and are going in guns hot, ready to fire, they can act in normal DEX order. Otherwise, the Taliban act first in the first turn, and act in DEX order on following turns.

Firing up at the enemy in the dark is no easy task, though the Marines' night-sight scopes and goggles compensate somewhat. The fighters have spread themselves out, too, so even using the machine gun or the grenade launcher, it's not possible to hit more than two of them with a single roll.

If the Marines are surprised, they don't get to make Heavy Machinery rolls to defend themselves. If they're not surprised, each driver can make one Heavy Machinery roll as a reaction when attacked and, if it succeeds, avoid the damage of one attack.

Note that the MRAPs and trucks can't drive up into Gath Valley without destroying the dam (described on page xx.) But after amassing three Heavy Machinery successes per vehicle, they can get covered by the cliff face angles and a sturdy enclosure of dirt and stone the Gaths have constructed at the dam's base. From there they can meet their hosts.

Then again, some Agents are going to want to fire until the foe are killed or have fled. Or someone might amass their successes but want to stick around because their comrades are still in the shit. Assume that anyone who has achieved three successes can bug out at any time, but may opt to remain in the firefight.

Round One: As Handler, you have to make a lot of attacks at this point. If the Marines were prepared, they may have taken out a few enemies by now. Otherwise, you've got the following.

- Atash - RPG at 40%, Lethality 30% Aimed at "Shitty"
- Babur - RPG at 40%, Lethality 30% Aimed at "The Beast"
- Delbar - RPG at 40%, Lethality 30% Aimed at "The Beast"
- Fahrhan - RPG at 40%, Lethality 30% Aimed at truck
- Jawir - AK-47 burst at 55%, Lethality 10% Aimed at truck
- Kasra - AK-47 burst at 55%, Lethality 10% Aimed at truck

- Mahyar - AK-47 burst at 55%, Lethality 10% Aimed at "Shitty"
- Zemar - AK-47 burst at 55%, Lethality 10% Aimed at "The Beast"
- Shahbaz - Dragunov at 60%, 1d12+2 damage -- Aimed at truck
- Parsa - Dragunov at 60%, 1d12+2 damage -- Aimed at truck

Round Two: All the RPG gunners drop behind full cover and start reloading. Each of them is in a stone cranny that provides 10 Armor. At this point, the machine gunners start staggering their attacks too; remember that they only have 30 rounds per magazine.

- Jawir - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10% -- Aimed at truck
- Kasra - Holding his fire.
- Mahyar - Holding fire.
- Zemar - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10% -- Aimed at rear "The Beast"
- Shahbaz - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage -- Aimed at truck, or at anyone who got out of a vehicle
- Parsa - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage -- Aimed at truck
- Round Three: The RPG launchers are almost prepped, but now two of the machine gunners are running low. At this point, have the shooters aim wherever you think best. Ideally, they want mobility kills on as many vehicles as possible, then to take out the gunners.
- Jawir - Holding fire.
- Kasra - AK-47 burst at 35%, Lethality 10%

- Mahyar - AK-47 burst at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Zemar - Holding fire.
- Shahbaz - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage
- Parsa - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage

Round Four: The RPGs are reloaded, but Babur (on the north ridge) and Fahran (on the south) are holding fire. Kasra and Mahyar are ducking down to reload, though remember that they're exposed until their DEX turn comes up.

- Atash - RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%
- Delbar - RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%
- Jawir - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Zemar - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Shahbaz - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage
- Parsa - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage
- Round Five: Atash and Delbar start the laborious reload process, if they're still alive, as do Jawir and Zemar. Fahran waits for it...
- Babour - RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%
- Kasra - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Mahyar - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Shahbaz - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage
- Parsa - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage

Round Six: All the functional AKs open up, as does Fahran, while Atash and Delbar finish reloading and Babour starts.

- Babour - RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%
- Kasra - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Mahyar - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Jawir - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Zemar - AK-47 spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- Shahbaz - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage
- Parsa - Dragunov at 40%, 1d12+2 damage

By turn seven and onward, you should have the pattern: The RPGs shoot and then spend two turns reloading, the AKs shoot for two turns and then spend one reloading. Shahbaz and Parsa don't need to reload until after turn ten, at which point one side or the other should prevail.

Note that if one or both groups of Taliban fighters flee the scene, the Marines may be tempted to pursue. Unless you want to run a chase scene, Varasek orders them to break off, warning that they could be getting pulled right across the path of an IED.

Race the Ridge

This is the "divide-and-conquer" option, as it restricts each Taliban unit's chance to attack the Marines without exposing their comrades to friendly fire. On the north ridge, Atash and Babur are handling RPG-7s, Jawid and Kasra are suppressing with AK-47s and Shahbaz is in charge (and also firing single shots). The rocket-shooters to the south are Delbar and Fahran, backed up by Mahyar and Zemar with automatic fire and Parsa, the leader, taking aimed shots.

The assumption with racing the ridge is that the Marines spot the ambush, pick a side, and charge it before triggering the attack. That means they're showing their hand before they come under assault. As soon as they commit to the attack, the far unit realizes the ambush has failed and that they're in danger of being left out. Their response (after one turn) is to leave their positions, descend to the valley from the west and try to block the Marines' escape and/or come in from the rear to enclose them.

How that response turns out depends quite a bit on what the Marines do with the truck. There's no way in hell it's going up on the ridge. If they send it back the way they came, there's a possibility that some of the attackers peel off and follow it when it's unescorted and vulnerable.

If they park it and send both MRAPs up the ridge, there's a very good chance that the truck gets destroyed or, worse, captured. On the other hand, if they leave a vehicle behind to guard it, they're splitting their forces, but with the possibility that the second unit heedlessly charges face-first into the reserve jeep's weapon.

Choices:

1) Both MRAPs attack, truck runs. If this is what they advise, Varasek wants to send Sutterberg and Marwat in the truck, to keep them out of combat. (Keeping the players together is just a happy accident.) The MRAPs have to go up the path single-file, so only the front can attack easily, but the second can see the lower unit cross the valley below, out in the open. On turn four, the rear vehicle can attack the lower unit without being attacked in return. By turn five and beyond, however, both enemy units form up, pinning the Marines between them.

2) One MRAP attacks, the other guards the truck. This is pretty much the default. On the first turn, when the Marines attack the upper Taliban unit, the lower Taliban get in their vehicle(s). On the second, they get down the hill and, on the third, the lower unit crosses to the stream. On the fourth turn, they're close enough that the reserve MRAP can attack them--and if the driver of the reserve vehicle made a Stealth roll, the Taliban crossing the valley don't see the danger. If the driver didn't think to make a Stealth roll, or failed it, the Taliban see the MRAP and direct their fire at it.

3) Both MRAPs attack, truck waits. Not a great option. As mentioned above, only the lead Oshkosh can attack the upper unit. On turn four, the rear vehicle can attack the lower unit, but after that, they're on top of the truck and they can't shell the position without endangering Sutterberg (or whomever they left back there).

4) One MRAP attacks, the other waits while the truck runs. Possibly the best option. The truck gets away. The ridge Oshkosh gets its attack on the upper unit. On turn four, the lower Taliban walk into the reserve MRAP's heavy weapons, if its driver thought to get a Stealth success on turn two. Otherwise, it's a two front battle for both sides, with both vehicles having an escape route behind them.

Breaking it down turn by turn, here's how things work out. "Round One" is presumed to be after the Marines have gotten into range of the upper unit.

Round One: Any Marine driver has to make a Heavy Machinery roll to keep the vehicle upright and moving. If this roll fails, the MRAP gets stuck. The gunner doesn't take a penalty, but the driver can't make rolls to avoid being hit.

The Marines in the front MRAP get to shoot first, and at their full skill levels, thanks to night vision equipment. The upper unit isn't nearly as lucky.

- RPG-7 (Atash or Delbar) RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%, targets front MRAP
- RPG-7 (Babur or Fahran) RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%, targets front MRAP
- AK-47 (Jawir or Mahyar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targets front MRAP
- AK-47 (Kasra or Zemar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targets front MRAP

The leader (Parsa or Shahbaz) tries a Stealth roll at 45% to get to an out of the way position. He thinks his rifle isn't going to do jack to a buttoned up Oshkosh, so he plans to wait until someone gets out and then snipe him from concealment.

If both vehicles climbed the ridge, the second does not have an angle at which to attack but, on the plus side, isn't being attacked either.

Round Two: The lower unit is getting in their truck (if northern) or on their bikes (two of which have to double up--no sidecars in the mountains, after all). The upper unit is not in great shape.

The RPG gunners drop into cover (10 points of Armor behind stone) and start reloading.

One AK-47 gunner (Jawir or Mahyar) fires a spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targeting the front MRAP.

The leader either shoots, aims, or (if two or more of his soldiers are hurt) calls a retreat and runs for the truck or a motorcycle. If that's the case, you can play out a chase, or have him leave a few behind angrily fighting, or those left behind might surrender.

If an MRAP stayed behind in the valley, its driver can make a Stealth roll to put it behind some scrubby trees and set up an ambush before the lower unit gets close enough to hear. If the driver suggests this, ask him his Stealth and make the roll yourself without telling the result.

Round Three: The lower unit is on the far side of the river, out of range. Surviving upper unit RPG gunners have completed their reloading and intend to fire next turn. One AK-47 gunner (Kasra or Zemar) fires a spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targeting the front MRAP. The other drops down and reloads.

The leader keeps doing what he was doing. If he tries to drive off, you (as Handler) have to decide how the combat is going. Maybe he rolls his truck, or wipes out on his bike. Maybe the Marines pursue him. Or maybe they ensconce themselves waiting for the lower unit.

Round Four: Things can get rather hairy here, if the Marines haven't scattered or wrecked the upper group.

- RPG-7 (Atash or Delbar) RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%, targets front MRAP
- RPG-7 (Babur or Fahren) RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%, targets front MRAP
- AK-47 (Jawir or Mahyar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targets front MRAP. The other rifleman (Kasra or Zemar) is in full cover, reloading.
- The leader does whatever the Handler deems fit.

Moreover, the lower unit is now within range of the backup MRAP. If it's either up on the ridge or if its driver made a successful Stealth roll on turn two, its gunner can attack and not face return fire. Even better, in the heat of combat the lower unit is either (1) all in one truck or (2)

clumped together on three bikes. If it's the truck and the Marines hit it, everyone in it takes the Lethality. It has no armor. A hit stops it cold, too.

If the MRAP stayed below and didn't get cover, the incoming vehicles abruptly stop and people drop off or out of them, hugging the ground and then opening fire.

- RPG-7 (Atash or Delbar) RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%, targets close MRAP
- RPG-7 (Babur or Fahran) RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%, targets close MRAP
- AK-47 (Jawir or Mahyar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targets front MRAP
- AK-47 (Kasra or Zemar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targets front MRAP
-

The leader tries to bring the pickup around (if he's in it) or tries to charge past to get to the State Department truck (if he's on a motorcycle).

From there, the combat can play out normally, with all the RPG launchers reloading and firing in salvo while the machine-gunners shoot (or flee) however the Handler deems wise. The lower unit, if they dismount to fight on the ground, is spread out across about a 10 meter span, so... all of them could get hit with one good grenade launch, or a good machine gun spray could catch three.

Foot Patrol

Are you sure? Captain Varasek is dubious about this idea, and only agrees if there are a couple eager volunteers and no one else makes commanding arguments against it. This takes away both armor and turreted weapons, though the Marines' night vision gear does give a significant stealth advantage.

If the players push for this option, it means some tension and terror for those left behind. (Varasek retreats before he endorses a plan as batshit crazy as "we leave behind the vehicles and all sneak up on the enemy.") Climbing a ridge at night in the snow while remaining hidden is not a quick job, and the Taliban know the Marines saw them.

For the purposes of discussing how this can go down, the "upper" and "lower" distinctions remain for the two Taliban units: The upper unit is the five guys that the sneaky Marines try to creep up on. The lower unit is the other five Afghans, who approach more cautiously when they hear the assault begin on their buddies.

As for the Marines, this tactic divides them into the "probe team"--the guys on foot, approaching one ridge--and the "MRAP team," who are with the vehicles. The truck? Play it the same way as "Rush the Ridge." If it hauls ass, no one pursues. If it has a defender, the Taliban might frag the truck or they might concentrate on the MRAPs trying to kill them. If it's abandoned on its own, they take it and hold anyone aboard hostage.

The MRAP team can make a Stealth roll for each vehicle to try and get it in some cover. If all rolls for Stealth succeed, the Marines get a free turn of aiming as the lower team guardedly approaches and gets within range.

The probe team has a harder slog. The first thing to do is have everyone involved make a CONx5 roll to get up the hill without exhausting themselves. If the roll succeeds, all that PT was worth it. If it fails, their subsequent Stealth rolls are at -20%, because you can only be so stealthy you can be when you're trembling, clumsy, wheezing or coughing.

The Stealth rolls are where it's really at for the probe team. If they succeed at them, the enemy has no chance to detect them. If they fail, the upper unit spots them. If one fails and the other(s) succeed, the irregulars focus their fire on the only guy they can see.

Or rather, the guy they can kind of see. Remember that it's now full on dark and snowing (ankle deep by this point). The attack percentages listed below factor in their poor visibility (offset, in most cases, by burst fire).

Round One: The RPG gunners won't fire at the probe team right away--they're holding off, waiting for a vehicle. So when the probe team engages, that kicks things off. That's turn one. If the Stealth rolls all succeeded, they can attack with a +20% bonus. Otherwise, it's just their standard skill ratings.

- AK-47 (Jawir or Mahyar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targets closest soldier and forces suppression.
- AK-47 (Kasra or Zemar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%, targets closest soldier and forces suppression.
- Dragunov (Shahbaz or Parsa) 40%, 2d6+4 damage, targets any soldier who hasn't been fired at.
- When the lower unit hears the weapons go off across the valley, they discuss what to do and get orders from their leader.

Remember Suppression

Anyone who's inside the Kill Radius of a weapon doing Lethality faces suppression even if the attack fails. When suppressed, you either take your next action hitting the deck, or you pay 1 SAN and continue to act normally.

But if you're already in cover, like the upper unit, or Marines in a vehicle, you're immune to suppression.

Round Two: If the Marines have managed to take out two or more of the irregulars, one of the RPG launchers decides to let them have it. But the leader stays calm, if he hasn't been killed.

- Dragunov (Shahbaz or Parsa) 40%, 1d12+2 damage. Targets whomever of the probe team seems most effective or least hurt.

- AK-47 (Jawir or Mahyar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- AK-47 (Kasra or Zemar) spray at 35%, Lethality 10%
- RPG-7 (Atash or Delbar) RPG at 20%, Lethality 30%

By the end of this turn, the lower unit has mounted up and is proceeding down the hill.

Round Three: By the third turn, it's possible that either the probe team or the upper unit have gotten a decisive victory, with the enemy either fleeing, dead, unconscious or surrendering. Alternately, they could still be struggling, trading blow for blow. Play it by ear, taking what actions seem reasonable for each soldier and keeping in mind that the Taliban irregulars, while dedicated, aren't crazy or suicidal. They want to live to fight another day, and they have transport right nearby. Within those parameters, their general behavior is for the AK riflemen to shoot for three rounds in bursts, then reload. They may stagger their fire or both reload at the same time, as you wish. The RPG-7 gunners may be stymied if they can't get a good line on the enemy without risking hitting their comrades. If they're not sure where the Americans are, they don't risk their limited ammo.

Meanwhile, the lower group descends the hill and parks on the far side of the stream, out of range. They spread out, approaching carefully.

Round Four: As mentioned above, the upper battle can be in any one of several states by this point. The lower unit spreads out to the point that even a strafe can't target more than one

Afghan. However, during this turn, everyone in the MRAP team gets an Alertness roll and, with a success, can spot one of the approaching enemy. They can then either aim or (if at one of the mounted weapons) fire before the enemy gets within range.

Round Five: If no one in the MRAP team made an Alertness roll, they can open fire at this point, or aim. If they made their Stealth rolls, the approaching Taliban can't target them until next turn, or until they reveal their positions by opening fire.

The Point and the Purpose

Combat is complicated and has multiple contingencies. This scene can end with a group of unscathed Marines victorious (unlikely) or with them all dead (even less likely). The most likely outcome is the Marines win at cost--one or more vehicles may be damaged or completely trashed. Personnel may be injured or dead. For the purposes of this operation, the more characters wind up hurt but functional, the better.

After the battle's decided, the Gaths emerge. If the players get cold dice and end up killed, unconscious and captured, you can have them come to in the back of a pickup, tightly tied, as gunshots ring out around them. They can only see the dark sky above and the rusty truck bed beneath until the vehicle swerves and comes to a jarring halt. They hear the Taliban singing that same weird song in the cab as they fire through the windows, and then there's a single flat report that leaves only one man singing. His song starts to turn into screams and shrieks, before another

shot silences him too. Then they hear footsteps trudging near and a pair of narrow black eyes bore into them over the edge of the truck, framed above by a pakol hat and below by a scarf.

"Americans?" the man asks. He then smacks himself in the chest. "Gath!" He starts to laugh heartily, then drives them back to the valley. If they ask: No, he does not remove the dead Taliban from the cab, just shoves them over and takes the wheel.

The Gath Dam

The Gath Dam is a monument to primitive tenacity. It's about fifteen feet tall, composed of wood and stone and some kind of mortar. It has obviously been patched and re-dressed many, many, many times. There's a ramp leading up the left side, made of the same stuff; rock, timber and thickened mud. It's watched over by a large, crude blockhouse of cement and junk metal. If the Marines make it to this "fort," they're safe from the Taliban.

A light truck can go up the ramp and down into the living area without anything more ominous than snapping branches, cracks in the mortar and a few stones falling out the side. Anything heavier? Like, say, any of the vehicles the Marines brought? No way. The ramp collapses under the weight and tears a hole in the side of the dam in the process. That, in turn, provokes an eight-foot high flash flood down the streambed. Same thing happens if someone hits the dam with a grenade. (Bullets won't do too much--poke spurting little holes, but nothing a Dutch boy's thumb couldn't plug.) The few Gaths on watch in the guard box do what they can to dissuade anyone from trying any of this foolishness.

If the dam bursts, there's a flash flood as the backed-up pond flows out and empties. At the bottom of the drained lake, great skeletons show where long-dead Téuthan have been ritually dumped for decades, possibly centuries. Their remains are human-like in shape for the skull and forearms, but instead of graying and decaying like human bones, the exotic compounds of Téuthan skeletons crystallize (0/1d4 SAN to witness). Without the water, they're extremely fragile--even walking close to one is enough to turn it into dust. Within days of the dam bursting, the evidence of the Gaths' unnatural allies crumbles to crystalline powder.

Of the dam collapses and floods the plain, the water is not strong enough to pick up a truck or MRAP, but if a vehicle like that is broadside to the onslaught, the discharge could roll it. If the vehicle is right in front of the output, it gets stuck until at least an hour of hard labor is invested into getting it out. Farther away, they can get stuck or not depending on Handler whim, unless a Marine is at the wheel, in which case a Heavy Machinery roll determines whether it winds up above the flow or doorframe-deep in sudden mud.

SCENE FOUR: Doom School in Gath Valley

Most groups, at this point, wind up in Gath Valley. They may be unscathed and come bearing gifts. They may be all shot up and in desperate need of medical attention. (Remember, the weather has gone grisly and medevac is not an option.)

The outcome of their fight with the Taliban has a direct impact on how their Gath hosts treat them. You can add it up like a scorecard. They start at 0 and get +1 for each of the following factors:

- They won the battle against the Taliban.
- They still have the truck full of medicine, blankets and RPG rounds.
- Yasir Marwat is alive and unharmed, ready to translate.
- They visibly committed atrocities against their enemies.
- They brought their enemies--dead or alive--with them to Gath Valley.

On the other hand, they get -1 for each of the following factors:

- The Gath had to rescue them from the Taliban.
- The truck got stolen or destroyed.
- Any Gath they kill.
- If more of the Americans are hurt than unhurt.

Additionally, if they mess with the dam or threaten it, that's it: Negotiations cease, everyone yells at them to get the hell out and then makes haste to their houses to get any killing tool they can lay hands on.

But more commonly, the Marines arrive with a score from -4 to +5. The results?

Score Result

- **-4** They regard the Marines as total chumps and attempt to keep them captive while Marwat negotiates their release. If this is the case, they're kept hobbled but allowed to talk with the Ourmat and with the few Pashto speakers. After two days (during which they certainly get weighed, amidst much chuckling, and they also might escape, talk the Gaths into hearing their side of the story, get treated, or meet someone who wants to escape the valley with their help. A Special Forces team shows up by night to rescue them and the Téuthan get unleashed, to general destruction all about.
- **-3 to -1** The Gaths are dubious and underwhelmed, but they at least listen to Marwat and Sutterberg while the Marines get to interact with any Taliban prisoners and wander around the valley. In this instance, there are never less than five armed Gath men idly escorting the Marines around.
- **0** They're nonplussed and don't know exactly what to make of these foreigners, but they're willing to listen. The Marines have three Gath men escorting them around at all times.
- **1 to 2** They welcome them graciously, though they're somewhat stiff and reserved. The Marines' escort is two armed men.
- **3** The Marines are escorted by a single man, and pretty much have the run of the valley, except for the Ourmat's private residence and the Cave of the Source (see below). If any of them try to have sex with the inhabitants, the Gaths tolerate it. The Gaths slyly offer them a bit of opium, though they themselves don't partake.
- **4 to 5** The Gaths accept the Marines fully and invite them to join in the torture of the Taliban (if any survived).

Language Barriers

There are four languages at play in Gath Valley, and they can provide a lot of interesting frustration to the Marines when someone who knows what they need can't tell them about it or understand their question.

English: Sutterberg, Varasek and the Marines are native English speakers. Yasir Marwat's English is pretty good. No one else has any.

Gath: The Gaths, obviously, speak this. Yasir Marwat speaks a bit, but his command isn't as great as he's claimed (or, indeed, as good as he thinks it is).

Dari: The national trade language is nobody's first language, but about a third of the adult Gaths know some. Marwat is fairly fluent, Sutterberg is decent and Varasek has a light grasp of it. Any Taliban captives speak Dari as well.

Pashto: The district's dialect is spoken by about half the adult Gaths (including the Ourmat and anyone set to guard the Americans). It's Yasir Marwat's native language. Taliban captives can get by in Pashto. Varasek, Sutterberg and Right Stuff all speak it a bit.

Keeping Marwat alive, then, is clearly a very good idea for everyone, since he's a language lynchpin. Even if he's out of commission, however, Varasek and Sutterberg have a stumbling grasp of two languages that some Gaths speak. Right Stuff's basic Pashto is an ace in the hole.

As Handler, this gives you options to speed up or confine the relay of information, or to present it in a confusing, garbled fashion. ("The child of god... is in her dress? Huh?") It also lets you reveal hidden agendas if Right Stuff hears one thing pass between Marwat and the Gaths in Pashto, and Marwat gives them a different interpretation in English.

Describing The Gaths and Their Valley

The Gaths have sallow, heavily tanned skin, and their features blend the prominent noses and striking grey eyes of their Pashto neighbors with flatter faces, straighter hair, and epicanthic folds from an origin elsewhere to the east. One thing they all have in common, however, is signs of rampant malnutrition. Their gums are pale, indicating anemia or a protein-poor diet. Their skin looks loose and wrinkled, their teeth are dull and mottled, and their fingernails show warps and fissures. They're dressed in layers of robes, like their neighbors, but the women go unveiled, and with their hair long and unbound, or in simple ponytails and braids. Men, on the other hand, wear a universal, utilitarian bowl cut and keep their beards trimmed to exactly fist-length under their chins (when they can grow them out that long--those who show less Pashto in their look have thinner, patchier facial hair, particularly their mustaches). Both sexes are clean, as their culture is fastidious about washing both clothing and person.

After the Marines have had a morning hour or two among the Gath, and have met a couple dozen of them (many are curious to see the strange outsiders), let each player make an Alertness roll. If the roll fails, they notice that a few have square scars, about two inches on a side, peeking out of their sleeves or on their calves. (These are from having kunkalu filling removed, as described on page xx.) On a success, they notice that the shorter a Gath is, the more likely he or she is to look healthier, less drawn and gaunt.

As for the valley itself, it's surprisingly green, sheltered and irrigated. The walls rise up with stubborn pines jutting from cracks and ledges, but mostly they're mossy on the south and dusty gray to the north. The air smells swampy and moist between bridge and dam, but clears in the village to a refreshing mountain crispness with just a hint of dust. Noises echo off the hard walls of buildings and the soaring enclosing mountains, but between sounds the silence is hushed, as if the whole settlement is holding its breath, waiting.

The Geography

There are three general sections and a brief catalog of specific locations. To the north of the river and directly east of the dam, there's a thin, irrigated strip of farm fields growing wheat. This extends to a footbridge over the stream to the southern section before terminating in the main village area.

The southern section holds round, stone and mortar single-family homes. Interspersed among them are scruffy gardens. There are occasional pomegranate trees, but they're generally

unhealthy and suffering from mold. There is one cave to the south, used by the Gath as a storage chamber. To the western end is a few homes where fishermen live, almost all of them older than the Gath average. It's their equivalent of a retirement village.

The main part of the settlement stretches from the bridge to the easternmost point of the valley, the sacred cave from which the stream emerges. Near that cave is the largest structure in the valley, a twenty foot tall stone blockhouse--the seat of the Ourmat.

The 'town center' also holds a stable with a dozen horses and mules, and a garage with the Ourmat's fleet of vehicles. (She can't drive, they're semi-communal, being used or withheld at her whim.) There's a workshop with well-used tools in it and their communal store of fuel.

There's a third cave in the northern wall, the Weighing Cave, described below.

The Village Fleet

The collected motor vehicles of Gath Valley include one jeep (barely better than a dune buggy), two ordinary light trucks and one 'technical'--meaning, a light truck with a turreted machine gun on it. There are also parts that would add up to seven dirt bikes, with four currently assembled and functional.

The machine gun is a Russian PK, carefully maintained despite its age. They have about 500 rounds for it, boxed in 25-round belts linked together to form five hundred-round belts.

The Seat of the Ourmat

This two-story tall edifice is made of stone and mortar like all the other Gath buildings, but it's decorated; and armed. Its flat roof supports an old Soviet DShK heavy machine gun, as well as artfully arranged pieces of wreckage from that Mi-24 Hind chopper. The barrel of an 1880s era British Armstrong gun points skyward like an obelisk, its metal body dented and discolored in a curved line.

Its exterior walls have generations of human skulls cemented to it in neat, catacomb style rows. The skulls at the bottom are almost completely collapsed to dust, getting fresher and fresher as they rise. Examined closely, they bespeak a variety of ages and sizes. About one in ten has a hole or gash indicating the method of violent demise, while others are intact. Towards the top, a few can be seen with modern metal teeth.

Entering, one comes to a high-ceilinged chamber held up by carved posts--crudely decorated, but there's no other decoration on display anywhere in the village. These are carved with surprised, amazed or angry faces. As for the interior walls of this chamber, they're covered with spirals and waves and geometric designs picked out in spent shell casings, all polished to a high, brassy gleam. Again, a variety of calibers are on display, bespeaking decades of firearm discharges. The floor is swathed in carpets and, in the middle, on a giant cushion, the Ourmat reclines when holding court.

Behind the reception hall is a bedroom and a chamber where her attendants can bathe and feed her, as well as a simple ladder to the roof. On the roof is a weathertight wooden box with ammunition for the DShK.

The Cave of the Source

This is where Abidleth materializes, and where the "marriage" between it and the Ourmat occurs. It is, therefore, considered a sacred place. (Afterwards, the water emerging from it has an astringent, tinny sweetness for a couple days and fish tend to stay at the far end of the dam-pond.) While it has a high, pointed ceiling and goes very deep into the mountain, the cave is only fifteen feet across at its opening, and it rapidly narrows. The walls are covered with a multihued encrustation, dark and thin, like the rainbow sheen of oil, only it's permanent and in layers. (This is caused by unusual chemical reactions caused by Abidleth rotating into our three dimensions.) Here and there throughout there are luminous spirals arising out of these colors, burning faintly firefly-yellow.

Nothing happens in here, except that there are weird stains on the wall and floor, with the stream's erosion showing that there are many, many layers.

If the PCs are spotted going into the cave, a group of 5-6 Gath men come and shout at them to get out, possibly becoming aggressive if a CHAx5 roll fails. If they are seen trying to take stones out of the cave, or chipping away at the walls, the Gaths attack no matter how well they were getting along or how charming the Marines are.

The Storage Cave

There's nothing sinister or alarming about the storage cave, or at least not the first cave, or the five or six branching off it, or the ones going deeper off those. They're all dank and dimly lit (though any Gath tour guides enjoy this opportunity to crack one or two chemlights from the two gross that, "fell off an Mericun truck" and became components of one of their opium deals).

There are fifty gallon drums of rusty water, others full of molding grain. A dozen Type 56 rifles (the Chinese version of the AK-47) are carefully stored with box after box of ammo, along with a poorly secured crate of old Soviet hand grenades. There are boxes of MREs and of PLA Type-6 instant individual meals. All of this is packed in deeper, father crevices under the mountain. It's like a paranoid's bomb shelter, only in natural caves.

There are a couple rolls that can offer the Marines a little insight here. These aren't essential clues, so anyone who fails these rolls just gets nothing but a cryptic smirk from the Handler. However, a success at Military Science gives the Marine a disturbing sensation that this valley really, truly is a roach motel for anyone who wants to invade it. The dam precludes armor, and the Gaths could wait out any number of artillery barrages in these caves. That leaves trying to collapse the cave mouth from the air, which wouldn't be easy even in perfect weather.

The other roll is an INTx5 test. Anyone who succeeds at that doesn't get an answer, just an uncomfortable question: Why do the Gath all look so malnourished if they're stockpiling food?

The Weighing Cave

This cave is wider than the other two. In fact, it's clear that it's been chiseled wider, with crude beams across the ceiling, supported by wooden pillars. There are benches and chairs and backseats from junked sedans wreathed in mold and rust. A huge oven rests against one wall, vented to the open by welded-together pieces of truck exhaust pipe. This is the Gath community's answer to the front porch of an old General Store, or the office water cooler. People come here to hang out in the heat of the day, or to warm up in the winter.

The centerpieces of the first chamber, however, are a bit odd. They're a pair of see-saws; long, flat beams with a well-worn seat on one end and a big chunk of granite lashed to a divot in the other. If anyone asks what they are, the Gaths explain they're scales, a man scale and a woman scale. (These are what Gaths must sit on once a week, to see if they're heavy enough to be bled or cut to make kunkalum, as described on page xx.)

If anyone then asks why they're weighing everyone, the Gaths just look puzzled and say it's for the Ourmat, as if this should be perfectly obvious to anyone.

Farther back in the cave, there's a wooden wall with a door in it, and through that is the Gath infirmary, a place where nightmares come true (and where any injured Marines get taken.)

At first, the infirmary doesn't seem bad. It's ruled over by a cheerful old woman with one leg and eleven teeth. Her name is Kathka and, while her tools are primitive, she's talented. Say, Surgery, First Aid and Medicine skills at 50%; not bad for an amateur. She has a drawer full of

blades (both razor and X-acto) for detail work, and a pair of Ginsu Nuri cooking knives (one orange, one green) for bigger jobs. She has several jugs of hand sanitizer and ostentatiously rubs it on knife blades, thread or needles before beginning any cutting or sewing.

In addition to her tools, she also has a small pharmacy, including giant aspirin tablets from Kyrgyzstan, a couple dozen Serbian Z-packs, and plenty of good old fashioned home grown opium.

Kathka is almost unique among the women of Gath in that she has good color and energy-- even the tiniest hint of a developing potbelly. She's described at greater length under the heading "Get Medical Treatment," though it's possible that even a healthy Marine meets her.

The Lake

The old men at the lake are variously admired, despised and ignored, depending on the mood of the villager you ask. Some consider the men shrewd and learned, enjoying a well-earned rest doing the (relatively) easy work of fishing and inspecting the dam. (Younger men actually repair it, usually unmarried ones, since it provides a chance to show off physical strength and endurance.)

In actual fact, the old men have the fish in the pond trained. The old men stand on the end of a pier and lower a wide wooden hoop into the water, then feed any fish who swim through it. When it's time to eat, they put in a similar hoop with a net on it.

The old gents have numerous kunkalu (see page xx) marks on them and it's easier to convince them to talk about it than most villagers. Give anyone who asks the old men about the square scars +20% on their Persuade or CHAx5 roll.

Possible Interactions

Depending on their condition, Varasek, Marwat and/or Sutterberg immediately begin negotiations with the Gaths. Initially, it's just them--they don't want to walk into a conversation surrounded by armed soldiers. If the truck survived, they might ask the Marines to help haul stuff from it into the valley, since there's no way it's safely climbing that dam.

Who's going to watch over the vehicles, if any survived to get parked outside the valley entrance? The Gaths dispatch some grumpy men with rifles and RPG-7s to the Taliban's old ambush positions to defend them. Is that good enough for the Marines? Keep in mind that it's late, and dark, and snowing, and cold.

All in all, your goal at this point is to have them spend a safe night, and then a disturbing and ominous day in the valley, before meeting the Ourmat for a dinner meeting at sundown the next day (as described on page xx). So some options for the disturbing interlude in between "Taliban Ambush" and "learn the awful truth about the Gath" include:

Get Food and Rest

When they stumble into the valley, it's dark and cold and they've just been fighting. This option should be nearly mandatory for the unhurt.

The Marines get an escort of several Gath men (the exact number depending on the impression they made) and it's possible that they ask for food and a place to rest. If there's a common language, or their pantomime is sufficient, the Gaths comply.

Sleeping quarters are provided in the Weighing Cave, with that old car backseat being presented as the height of luxury. It's not the Ritz, but the oven is roaring and pleasantly warm.

Food consists of fish and home-made bread, both extremely bland and in tiny (that is, Gath-sized) portions. Any Marine can make an INTx5 roll to realize (on a fail) that this is quite different from the region's usual hospitality and (on a success) that they're not even making the pretense of being happy hosts. Good manners in Afghanistan require giving guests your best. The Gaths clearly have a different standard.

Get Medical Treatment

Kathka (from page xx) can make a 50% Surgery roll to restore 1d4 Hit Points, in addition to the 1d4 that Marines can perform in the field. If nothing else, she's generous with the opium, offering a pipe and, if it's refused, smoking it herself and then blowing it into the patient's mouth with an eleven-tooth kiss. (This is standard procedure in Gath medicine: Kathka has developed a potent tolerance for the drug.)

She seems delighted with the injured Marines, pinching their muscles and anywhere there's anything except skin and bones, marveling at their size, possibly even seeming a bit flirtatious. She speaks Pashto and is far more willing to talk than the typical Gath. Pace out the revelation of information: If she's the first person they talk to, she should be far more reticent about speaking. If they've been around or have met the Ourmat, she's more outgoing. Some suggested topics and responses are written out below, with options for early and late asking.

"What gives with the see-saws out there?"

Early: She explains--in a vague manner--that men and women need to stay little. It's never a problem for her because she has no leg. It's been gone since she was young.

Late: If people get too big in the village, "snip-snip!" They're drained, or a little "kunkalu" patch comes off. She then says that she never worries about "weigh-day" since the stone never, ever, moves for her, thanks to her missing leg.

"Who's in charge here?"

Early: The Ourmat is the ruler for Abidleth. But the Abidleth isn't going to come back for a year or more.

Late: The Ourmat bears children for the village. The village does what she says, because only she can speak to Abidleth. The Ourmat eats the most because she suffers the most.

"Wait, what's an 'Ourmat'?"

Early: She says the Ourmat is the "big woman" who rules them, and lives in the house with the "dead helicopter".

Late: The Ourmat is the "big woman" who goes into the cave of the source and "lie" with Abidleth. Doing so makes a "Téuthan" which guards the Gath valley. She lives in a house with the "dead helicopter." The people make "kunkalum" for her, so she grows larger.

"Do you guys eat human flesh?"

Early: She seems confused by this, and begins listing meats by type, including fish, goat and bird.

Late: She says for the PCs not to worry, that they are safe.

A Disturbing Interlude

A scene you can include when Hoagie is up and around the town center in the daytime allows the Marines a chance to get a more nuanced appreciation of Gath values. What happens is, assorted villagers are gawking at the Marines, and a child--maybe five or six years old--points at

Hoagie and cries "Ourmat! Ourmat!" Because as far as this kid is concerned, the only people who get to be physically large are those who have the favor of Abidleth.

This is blasphemy, and one of the Gath men deals with it by stepping up to the child and delivering an open-handed smack on the ear. But it's not really a 'slap.' The guy clearly steps into the blow, turning his body to put all his strength behind it. It's enough to knock the child, screaming, to the ground with a punctured eardrum. It's a horrific act of child abuse and make sure to describe it as such.

Also describe how all the Gath witnessing this behave as if it's no big thing. A woman picks up the child but sounds like she's scolding even as she wipes blood from his ear canal. If no one interferes, she takes the child off to Kathka.

If the Marines take exception, remind them that they're in the middle of the village, that there are unarmed people of all ages and both sexes around, but that there are also about twenty guys with AK-47s or old Mosint-Nagant rifles wandering around watching. If a Marine points a rifle, so do those twenty guys

With a successful Pashto roll, or if Marwat is present, the guy who struck the child apologizes (or at least, bemusedly goes through the form of it). He's unhappy that he upset the Americans, but insists that the child "spoke what it shouldn't," making ignorant mock of important things.

Ask Questions

The only stupid question is the one you don't ask, right? At least that's what literate people teaching college say. Interrogating the villagers is a linguistic mess, but Marines are adaptable and one of them speaks Pashto. If you want to pick up the pace a bit, have Sutterberg turn up, glowering and explaining that she (apparently) offended the Ourmat somehow, who is now only speaking to Varasek and Marwat.

Sutterberg describes the Ourmat as a "giant pile of dirty laundry piled on a tattooed walrus." She's convinced the Gaths have nothing to offer as allies.

With or without Sutterberg, some probable questions, and the answers the Marines get with a Pashto roll, or a Persuade roll at -20%, follow.

"What's the deal with everyone getting weighed?"

Fail: The answer is vague. Outsiders don't get weighed.

Success: The Gath responds that anyone who grows too big has given the tribe too little. So, the excess is taken and given to the Ourmat, so that she may hold the Téuthan to keep the Gath safe from their enemies.

"How have you stayed free of the Taliban for so long?"

Fail: Another vague answer. The enemies of the Gath face the Téuthan. This is usually followed with an almost ritualistic (and universal) waving of the Gath's arms above their heads.

Success: The Téuthan is some kind of beast that protects the Gath people and, so far, no enemy has been able to defeat it.

"What's a Téuthan?"

Fail: The tribes member makes a whistling noise and waves their arms about their head.

Success: The Téuthan is--apparently--the child of the Ourmat and Abidleth, and defends the Gath people from attack.

"What's up with the square scars on people's arms and thighs?"

Fail: Vague and evasive answers, but basically, if someone becomes too big, they are cut.

Success: The marks are for when Gath do not give enough to the tribe. The difference of what is owed is removed to sustain the Ourmat, in the form of kunkalu.

Guard the Vehicles

In addition to the dozen or so Gath positioned around the rim of the entrance, four or five curious young men with rifles tag along with the Marines as they return to their vehicles. The leader of these youths is named Malagaeg and he can be spoken to with a Pashto roll. He wants to know all about the MRAPs and their weapons and anything else the Marines have that does violence. He's hoping that these are gifts for the Gaths, and is disappointed if the Marines

indicate that they're taking them when they go. Friendly Marines who can breach the language barrier or who sprinkle their conversation with stories involving violence get a +20% bonus thereafter on social rolls with Malagaeg and his posse.

After a half hour or so, when Malagaeg realizes they didn't just come to check, they're staying, he tries to communicate with them that they can go back, he'll watch the vehicles and make sure nothing happens. If the Marines demur, he sends a couple of his buddies back to get an empty 50-gallon drum and some firewood. He soon has a fire burning merrily and offers cigarettes to the Marines from a crumpled pack. He also offers--solicitously, but with neither guile nor self-consciousness--opium tar and a pipe. (Yes, Malagaeg really is that ignorant.)

One word that both groups certainly have in common is "Taliban," which makes Malagaeg eagerly make derisive noises and gestures. If prisoners were taken from the Marines' firefight, or if enemy bodies were recovered, he vigorously mimes excising biceps and thighs, then cooking and eating them. His friends all chime in with disputations about the best parts (buttocks, cheeks, sweetbreads...) If any Language rolls have failed, the Marines probably just get disturbing pantomime.

Malagaeg is unusually tall and, if circumstances warrant, he might display the kunkalu scars on his left bicep and left calf, possibly after commenting on how large Hoagie or Chuckles are.

Phone It In

The snow is still falling and it's fairly windy, so an air rescue is not bloody likely-especially not in the village itself. If they have a badly hurt Marine and want to drive him out to a more open area, they might get a chopper to haul him to a field hospital.

Depending on what they report, the response will likely be to stay the course. Certainly that's Varasek's position. He doesn't want to go through the gauntlet and then not have a diplomatic success in his file.

Inspect the Village

The physical details are described above, on pages xx-xx. The people regard the Marines with undisguised curiosity and answer any questions that they can understand.

All in all, you want the Marines to get the impression of a tiny society, confined from without by violent enemies, and from within by strict social roles and a choking lack of opportunity.

Investigate the Caves

Again, they're described above. They can talk to Kathka (page xx), realize some of the military realities (page xx) or see some mild weirdness and maybe pick a fight.

Interrogate Taliban Prisoners

You're going to have to adjust this a little on the fly: If the prisoners are largely unhurt, they're being held in a sturdy stone room right next to the goat pen and the butcher's home. If

they're wounded, Kathka (page xx) has them and is fattening them up. If they're delirious, she's got them high on opium.

What the Marines can get from this is that (1) while the Taliban hate Americans, their hatred for the Gaths is at least as severe and (2) this guy who put up a pretty brave fight against an automatic grenade launcher is absolutely terrified by his captors.

If the Marines have Marwat, Varasek or Sutterberg with them, they don't need to make Language rolls to communicate. Otherwise, Right Stuff has to make one Language (Pashto) roll at the beginning for the entire interrogation, and then individual Marines have to make Persuade rolls to get the prisoner(s) to talk using bluster, cajoling, or promises. Every question requires a roll, until you decide the scene's bogging down and end it by (1) having Varasek order them away, (2) having the prisoners pass out or become uncooperative or (3) have the Gaths show up and escort the Marines away.

Because there are both psychological and language barriers to the interrogation, there are actually three possible outcomes (rather than the standard 'success/fail' dichotomy). If two rolls fail (the Language and the Persuade), that's a Fail. If one roll is under the requisite skill (the Language or the Persuade), that's a partial success. If both succeed, or if either gets a crit, that's a major success.

"Why did you attack us?"

Fail: Threats and swearing without any information or substance.

Partial Success: The Taliban claims that he knows the Americans are trying to convert Afghanistan to Christianity, it is no surprise the Americans have chosen to ally themselves with the "blaspheming" Gath cannibals.

Major Success: The Gaths are the bigger danger here, between America and the Gaths. But both enemies of the Taliban united? The Taliban member is clearly disturbed by this idea.

"What's your complaint with the Gaths?"

Fail: The Taliban claims they steal wives and eat men.

Partial Success: The Taliban claims they "consort" with "devils". This is not some spiritual reference. He believes they actually consort with devils.

Major Success: The Taliban claims the Gath's knowledge of magic is truly dangerous, and they are ruled by demons. America is simply a misguided world power.

"What do you think is going to happen between the US and the Gaths?"

Fail: Sputtering curses involving debased sex acts.

Partial Success: The Taliban fears that the standard operation procedure of the Americans--money, food and aid to allies--will cause the Gath to spread out of their valley.

Major Success: The Gath are the most evil force in Afghanistan by a wide margin. By comparison, the Taliban claims, they would rather face an invasion of 100 American armies.

"Why shouldn't we help them, give them medicines, or fight side by side?"

Fail: The Taliban claims they are not human.

Partial Success: The Taliban pities the Americans for fools; only idiots would not know the horrors the Gaths have inflicted on their neighbors since antiquity.

Major Success: The Taliban claims that the Gath women are "whores to Shaitain," and that they produce monstrous offspring--devil children that can fly.

"Devil children? What are you talking about?"

Fail: The Taliban calls the serviceman a part of a goat.

Partial Success: The Taliban claims that when the leader of the Gath sings, the child appears.

Major Success: The Taliban claims that the only thing which can protect from the monstrous offspring is a chant taught to all in this region.

"Will you teach us that devil-blocking song?"

Fail: No.

Partial Success: The Taliban, clearly terrified, asks the Marines to remember him when the Gath turn on them. He then sings the song, soft and with great care. Anyone who makes a successful Art (song) roll learns the spell "Gath Devil Blocking Hymn."

Major Success: As with the partial success, only now learning the spell only requires an INTx5 roll.

Gath Devil-Blocking Hymn

The words of this dissonant chant are nonsense--the melody and rhythms are what really matter. Learning it costs 1d4 SAN. Casting it costs 2 WP and requires a successful Art (song) or (musical instrument) roll. If it succeeds, no Téuthan can get within 10m of the musician for 1d4 turns, after which it must be cast again. Singing it requires a character's action, and imposes a 1/1d4 SAN loss. Note that the Willpower cost and SAN loss only occur if the roll to cast it is successful, but regardless of the roll's outcome, Gaths tend to attack anyone who sings it, as do the Téuthan should it fail. Whether it functions against other entities (and what it does to them) is entirely up to the Handler.

Get Laid

If that's how they roll, a Marine can pick out one of the underfed, sullen Gath ladies and make a CHAx5 roll. If the roll fails, she goes over to a Gath man (either her father or her husband, anyone's guess) and talks with him in low, mumbling tones for a bit before he comes over and gestures at a piece of Marine gear--a combat knife, a cell phone, his NVG or

CamelBak, you pick--and follows it up with whatever gesture or phrase the Marine proposed. It's a straight-up, oldest profession quid pro quo.

If the roll succeeds, she goes over and has the talk with husband or dad, then grudgingly comes over and nods, having been told to go along with it as a gesture of goodwill.

Meeting the Ourmat

The last element of their diplomatic visit to Gath Valley should be a meeting with the Ourmat herself. Marwat, Varasek and Sutterberg (if they survived, didn't offend anyone, and are functional) try to prepare them for their encounter.

Sutterberg informs the Marines that the Ourmat may seem unconventional by western standards, but to her and her people, she is the equivalent of the Pope or the Queen of England. She wants an alliance with America, but she doesn't want us to interfere with their customs no matter how strange or backwards they may seem from our perspective. The Marines must be respectful. The Ourmat only speaks Gath, so any questions, and your responses, must be translated. If the Ourmat asks a Marine anything, their answer should be brief and clear.

The Ourmat is in her mid-twenties, about 170cm tall and morbidly obese--pushing 135kg pounds. She cannot walk more than a few steps unassisted. Her round, cherubic face is unlined. She has pierced ears, decorated with long, day-glo plastic bangles. A gold chain from India stretches from left ear to pierced nostril, with a few dangling 9mm shell casings. Her voluminous

clothes are elaborately woven in the sorts of abstract designs that make Afghan rugs famous, but by far the most compelling aspect of her appearance is the stain on her skin and hair.

Normally, the Gaths have a dark tan complexion, and on places where skin has expanded or been worn off since her marriage (sites like her triple chins, her jowls, the rolls of fat on her wrists, her palms and fingertips), that's the tone of the stretch marks. But the skin that was exposed to the radiance of Abidleth three years ago was oxidized and stained, like the stone in the Cave of the Source. The tops of her cheeks, her forehead, her ears and knuckles and the tip of her chin, they're all marked with blackish rainbow swirls. Moreover, to see Abidleth in its glory often makes survivors' hair turn white, after which it too develops the strange oxidized hue. About 60cm of her hair is white. Another 45cm have grown out since her encounter, but it's hidden under an elaborate hairdo of the changed tresses, held in place with long, beaded wooden pins.

The Ourmat is wheeled about on a carriage about one meter by two meters. It has a metal plate foundation and wheel on each corner. Pipes come out from each hub, make a right-hand turn upward, then another at waist height. (Four attendants pull or push these to maneuver her around.) The pipes are copper, highly burnished and decorated with spirals of solder. The spokes of the wheels have bells, rings and beads threaded on them, so that she moves in a discordant rattle of glass, brass and plastic. A rim about 15cm high is decorated with more rifle-brass spirals, and contains a thick cushion on which she reclines, with a padded high back behind it to prop up her torso. It too is cushioned, and decorated behind with flakes and strips of the dark,

rainbow-stained matter from the Cave of the Source (page xx), lacquered in place. Her pillows are cased with Afghan rugs of exceptional quality.

Resting in a frame by her right hand is an immaculately maintained M4 rifle. A tray attached to the left holds cakes, dried figs, goat cheese, bread, a large brass bowl of pomegranate seeds, two prominently displayed packages of Japanese Pocky brand candy, an unopened package of Oreos, and a small Wedgwood plate holding three kunkalum.

Before entering, the Marines are asked to leave their rifles outside, leaning against the front wall of the building. Her attendants, however, remain armed. When the Americans enter, she babbles at them in Gath for a bit, with translation following on (either through Marwat, or from Gath to Pashto by a Gath and then from Pashto to English by Sutterberg, Varasek, or Right Stuff).

What the Ourmat Says

The Ourmat praises the power and size of the warriors of America. Together, she claims, the Gath and America will certainly destroy the Taliban.

She then reaches for the M4. Ask the Marines what they're doing.

If the Marines attack or do anything stupid, remember that her four attendants are there, fully armed. If they don't do anything stupid, she hands over the rifle to Varasek.

She holds the M4 out, and says that she is returning this stolen weapon to America, taken by the Taliban, and that the Americans may now thank her for doing so.

She waits expectantly as Varasek and Sutterberg thank her and, if they aren't there, expects the

Marines to do so. No matter what they say in English, Marwat or the Gaths translate it as profuse gratitude, which makes her smile. Her teeth are in great condition. She then has several questions to ask the Marines. The answers don't matter much, except to provoke disquiet or make them nervous that they've said the wrong thing.

TRANSLATOR: Do you in America obey great gods in the sky?

(If they say anything about obeying only one God, she's very pleased and says the Gath, too, have a special relationship with a deity.)

TRANSLATOR: If Americans come, will they want to take our lands and food? Or will be left alone to do as we see fit?

Whoever answers gets a shrewd, evaluating look out of her.

TRANSLATOR: Will you share food with me to seal our friendship?

As soon as she says this, have the Marines make HUMINT rolls. On a fail, they notice that the four bearers look surprised. On a success, they pick up envy.

If they agree--and Marwat, Varasek and Sutterberg all seem to think it would be offensive to refuse--she smiles and claps and summons an escort, who takes them to Kathka to be bled.

That's right, Kathka wants to take their blood (inflicting one HP of damage), though if asked if she's going to cook it into dumplings, she says that's ridiculous. She is the Ourmat. She does not cook.

If they attempt to get out of the valley, that's fine, just press on to the next scene. No one stops them, but everybody stares. Make them take a few Alertness rolls to confirm that no one is aiming at them.

But, unless they seem totally freaked out, Varasek goes along with it, as does Sutterberg. (Marwat explains that he wasn't invited because he's not American.) Watching their blood drawn, mixed with flour, and fried up in the public oven doesn't force a SAN check. But it's expected that each one of them take the dumpling and offer it to the Ourmat, (once again leaving their rifles respectfully tilted against the outside wall). That is a 0/1d4 SAN check, as she graciously accepts, eats it, and says through the translator how strong their blood is.

TRANSLATOR: You will soon be refreshed when our feast for you is ready. In the meantime, do you have any questions for me?

She answers freely, or as freely as she can across the language barrier. Some possible topics include the following.

"Why are you eating our blood in little pastries?"

She says their strength in turn flows from her to the village, and more importantly the "children" of Abidleth, a "sky-howler".

"Yeah, about that. What is a sky-howler?"

The Ourmat says they a like gods. That they protect and instruct people. The sky-howler of the Gath is called Abidleth, but he can only come for a single night every one hundred and one months.

"What happens when this Abidleth guy comes to town?"

When Abidleth comes, he marries a new Ourmat and impregnates her with a new Téuthan to protect the Gath.

"Can we see a Téuthan?"

The Ourmat shakes her head somberly. Bringing forth the "children" is as difficult as it is painful, and is only done in time of great danger. If the Americans fight by the side of the Gaths, no doubt, they will see one. Soon.

When they're tired of asking questions, or you're tired of answering, have the food arrive. It's served on beaten copper platters with wooden handles, and it is clearly the arms, legs, ribs and heads of the Taliban prisoners. Her attendants are salivating as they look at it.

TRANSLATOR: Eat, and bring our peoples together!

Time for another 1/1d4 SAN check. Regardless of how the Marines handle it, Varasek vomits right onto her cart while Sutterberg leaps to her feet and runs out of the hall. (If you want to roll dice before describing these reactions, that can be kind of fun.) With a worried look at Varasek, Marwat gets to his feet, excuses himself (in Gath) and runs after Sutterberg.

Varasek starts shouting in English, calling her a monster, saying the Gaths are all savages, ranting and raving while the Ourmat and her attendants slowly go from being perplexed to outraged.

Marines Attack!

It's not quite inconceivable that the Marines attack the Ourmat right then and there, either with concealed weapons or after rushing out to get their rifles. If that's the case, her attendants tip over her cart (its metal base has Armor 5) and take cover behind it, shielding her with their

bodies while they shoot at the Marines. They take single shots--they're not prepared to reload because they were expecting a diplomatic supper.

If things go this way, make sure the players know the Ourmat is completely concealed behind the armor. You don't want to get in a position where someone shoots at her and rolls an 01 before she even gets to drag the monsters out. Have the Ourmat summon a T  uathan from behind her total cover. Once she does that she's fair game and, as a bonus, has only 7 HP. Here's a rough timeline of a firefight in the Ourmat's house:

Round One: The attendants fire single shots and continue for the next 20 turns until they have to reload, get killed, or win. The Ourmat starts a shrill, whistling chant.

Round Two: Villagers outside start running for cover.

Round Three: Four Gath on the outside start trying to machine gun the Marines. Rather than track dozens and dozens of enemy villagers, just assume that every time the Marines hit someone, there's one less attacker the next turn, either dead, injured or just suppressed. Every turn, resolve a number of attacks equal to four minus the number of successful attacks the Marines made against the outside attackers. (Attacking the attendants or Ourmat doesn't count.) No one is up top on the ack-ack gun, but someone could think of it on turn five or six or so.

Round Four: Nothing new happens, but there's a light truck or a single motorcycle parked nearby. Someone could get to its ignition and start trying to hotwire it with an appropriate Craft roll.

Round Five: The youngest Téuthan emerges from some space coterminous with the Ourmat, and starts consuming Americans. I recommend attacking a player character, then Marwat or someone, another player character, Sutterberg, back and forth so that someone has a chance to get to a vehicle and make tracks.

The Téuthan can only attack one vehicle at a time, and the villagers hang back once it's engaged.

The Marines Chill It Out

If they don't attack and don't withdraw, the Ourmat yells and points at the door. For emphasis, one attendant lowers his rifle and makes a little shooing motion--universal sign language for "don't let the sun set on you here, asshole." Marines who don't take the hint can have a fight, as described above. Those who withdraw (with or without Varasek, who may be too angry to retreat) find a crowd of Gath gathering. Sutterberg suggests that they keep their rifles pointed at the sky or the ground while they walk swiftly out of the valley and get back to the MRAPs. They can simply start walking, though with a crowd of silent, armed Gaths shadowing them. By the time they get to the irrigated fields to the north of the stream, with the dam in sight, they can hear a weird, shrieking song begin behind them. That's when the Gaths start to chuckle, while the women, children and wise old men turn around and leave. The bloodthirsty young men stick around to see the carnage. But nothing starts before they cross the dam.

Then, when they're close to their vehicles, the Taliban attack.

On the Off-Chance the Marines Are OK With Cannibalism

People do weird things under pressure and that's doubly true for RPG characters. Maybe the Marines take charge after Sutterberg and Varasek lose their shit, or maybe those guys didn't live long enough to see the Ourmat. In those circumstances, the Marines might just take a deep breath, eat enough human flesh to be polite (spurring a 1d4/1d8 SAN check), then shake hands on the deal before trying to get the hell out of there. If that's the case, they can walk out of the hall with the Ourmat's blessing, the Gaths cheer and fire a couple shots in the air, and then the Taliban launch a rocket-and-mortar attack on the rim of the valley, the dam, and any other targets that seem fitting. Just skip to the ingredients of Scene Five, tweaked slightly.

SCENE FIVE: The Final Fight

Now remember, if your game session looked climactic before this, with Téuthan getting summoned and maybe a couple Marines making it out, doubled up on a motorcycle, you can skip straight to Scene Six. But if three or more are getting out alive, it's time to bring in the cavalry.

The Taliban-vs-Gath aspect of this fight is managed solely through Handler descriptions. The PCs' goal is to amass five Drive or Heavy Machinery successes per vehicle. A vehicle that can get that many before being immobilized or destroyed escapes the valley, avoids the Taliban forces, and outstrips the Téuthan. So at best, the Marines have five turns of live fire before they emerge. (In practice, bad rolls probably stretch that out closer to six or eight.)

A lot of the drama arises from your description, so aim for the balance between "too spare to be interesting" and "so complicated that it bogs things down and breaks tension." Every miss should be a near miss. Moreover, don't forget to cover how much the Taliban are freaking out and fleeing the Téuthan too. The players should understand that they're not even the focus of the battle once those monsters come out, and that the more their Taliban enemies attack their Gath enemies, the better off the Marines are.

With those factors in mind--that the goal is to survive long enough to succeed at five rolls; what sort of abuse do the Marines face? The answer to that depends on how offended the Gath are. They don't know that the Taliban are attacking, or at least, they don't know at first. If the Marines are fleeing the youngest Téuthan, it harries them as they emerge and the Taliban shoot at it. If the Téuthan haven't been summoned and the Marines leave the valley, the Taliban focus their attacks on the Americans. If the Americans are staying in the valley, the Taliban attack starts with shelling the ridges and any visible Marine vehicles.

No matter what happens, as soon as the Ourmat hears the attack, she starts singing out the other two Téuthan, figuring either (1) the Taliban are trying to queer her deal with the Americans or (2) the Americans have double-crossed her and were in it with the Taliban all along. It takes three turns to summon one Téuthan.

Each of these three broad possibilities is dealt with below. You can re-use the stats for Gath warriors and Taliban insurgents from the end of the scenario. Here's where they're positioned.

Gath Snipers

There are two Gath with Mosin-Nagant rifles, one on the northern ridge and one on the south. No matter what happens, they shoot at the Marines until they're erased on turns three (for the guy at the north) and seven (for the guy to the south)

Gath Riflemen

Not including the two who get blown up by the Taliban's first mortar strike, there are four Gath men with AK-47s on the ridge. They all take single shots and aim at the Marines, until one gets hit on turn three and the others get blown apart on turn seven.

Gath Heavy Weapons

Gath military doctrine assumes that the real heavy weapons are the Téuthan, but they do like having RPGs around. As mentioned, they have more launchers than rounds at the moment, so all the Gaths launch all their RPGs at once, before the Téuthan are downrange. At least three of those RPGs point at the Taliban, and two point at the Marines, if the Marines are even sort of an enemy.

Taliban Mortar Squad

The guys with the mortars never aim at the Marines or their vehicles. Their role is to wipe out the guards on the sides and accidentally (on turn five) blow up the dam. They might hit Marines who are in the valley itself, (the "Cozy With the Gath" option). In that case, assume they

have Heavy Weapons 50% and, if they roll a success, 1d3 Marines are within the damage radius of their 20% Lethality.

Taliban Heavy Weapons

Every turn, one or two Taliban irregulars launch RPGs at the Marines. If they've been doing a good job shooting, it's one. If they've missed, or aren't taking a lot of shots, it's two.

Taliban Gunners

Assume that four Taliban shoot at the Marines every round with single AK-47 shots. Reduce this number by one for every successful attack the Marines make, on anyone.

The Marines are Quietly Fleeing the Gath

In this case, the Marines have offended the Ourmat by slinking off after Varasek vomits on and yells at her, but have not yet seen the Téuthan--she's summoning it as they creep out the bottleneck towards their vehicles. They get out, they're on foot, and then they hear a loud explosion from above and to the left.

Round One: That explosion is a mortar strike taking out the Gath on the farthest northern extremity of the ridge. If the Marines haul ass now, doing nothing but run, they can reach any vehicles that were parked nearby.

Round Two: The Marines can, on their actions, get into the vehicles (or shoot). No one is shooting at them (yet) because the Téuthan appears, provoking SAN checks. The Taliban aim at it with several rockets, only hitting with one, but it does 25 points of damage, removes the critter's armor, and makes the Youngest heartily pissed.

Round Three: The mortar shelling hits along the top ridge, wiping out more Gath. Give everyone a free Military Science roll to realize that if the mortars keep tracking along the same path, the next one is going right on top of the dam. Drivers can attempt their first Drive or Heavy Machinery roll, gunners can try to shoot. The vehicles get rocketed fairly evenly, with the Téuthan taking 30 more points of damage from the Taliban and falling down dead.

Round Four: The mortar team adjusts its aim. The Largest Téuthan appears and attacks a Marine vehicle. Everyone is shooting everyone. It is extremely chaotic and loud. Gath pour out over the dam, shouting and waving rifles. On DEX 10, someone shoots at one of the MRAPs with an RPG.

Round Five: Have any of the drivers succeeded at a roll? If not, their vehicles are slammed by a wall of sludgy water revealing a glimpse of all the old Téuthan skeletons in the lakebed (0/1d4 SAN). This increases the number of vehicular rolls they need to succeed at by one (meaning, now they have to make six of them). The two Téuthan are focussing on the Taliban this turn, but one RPG round comes at Marine vehicle on DEX 10.

Round Six: The Taliban do 25 points of damage to the largest Téuthan as well, but it turns its attention to whichever Marine vehicle is most damaged. If there's another Marine vehicle, it gets targeted with another RPG.

Round Seven: The Taliban mortars clear the last Gath off the ridge and redirect fire into the valley itself. The largest Téuthan attacks a Marine vehicle (GM's pick). An RPG round gets popped at both the largest Téuthan and the vehicle with which it's engaged. If it hits it does damage to both the creature and the vehicle.

Round Eight and onward: The third Téuthan appears (the oldest) and goes after the Marine vehicle with the most Drive or Heavy Machinery successes amassed. Each Téuthan gets targeted with one RPG round. This continues until the Marines are dead, or until they get their Heavy Machinery or Drive successes.

The Marines are Cozy with the Gath

An unlikely but not impossible scenario: The Marines ate human flesh and are starting to wonder why everyone bad-mouths deals with the devil. This is when the Taliban attack.

In this case, the battle starts for the Taliban and Gath before the Marines get involved. The Marines hear the *THUD* of a mortar attack and probably realize their rides home are at serious risk. Before they leave to get their MRAPs and truck, the Ourmat stops them (perhaps by having her guards block the doors) and smiles as she sings out the youngest Téuthan. It folds out of

space, emerging like a fluttering shadow, snapping into three dimensions with a sickening thud, as it seems to gain weight and depth. It rushes out the door while the PCs make their SAN checks. The combat turns only really starts after the youngest Téuthan is dispatched.

Running to the valley entrance from the Ourmat's house takes five turns. Getting there in a commandeered truck or minibike (which their Gath allies are happy to provide) takes only two turns. Once they're there, getting to their vehicles and entering them takes two turns--or they can just start their five vehicular rolls on their loaner Gath vehicles, if they want to bug the hell out right away.

Round One: The Taliban blow up the dam (revealing, in passing, the old decayed Téuthan bodies). The Marines can get out of the Ourmat's house (or, if they wish, bunker down for a siege).

Round Two: The attackers crowd the choke point to the valley and pepper the irrigated fields with RPG rounds. Running across them requires a DEXx5 roll to avoid falling down.

Round Three: The largest Téuthan is summoned and is on its way to the Taliban buffet when a lucky mortar hit strikes it just as it's crossing the bridge between the north and south halves of the valley. It takes 25 points of damage. Without the Marines to distract them, the Taliban heavy gunners do 40 points of damage to the youngest Téuthan, which retreats to lick its wounds in the Cave of the Source.

Round Four: Mortar strikes on the center of the village leave people running and screaming and in disarray. If there are Marines exposed in that area, give the Taliban a 50% skill check. If it succeeds, 1d4 Marines take 20% Lethality. If the Marines try to get to the Storage Cave, three panicky Gaths shoot at them. (Use the stats on page xx. The village is well-lit by burning wreckage, so no penalty from darkness.)

Round Five: Direct hit on the Ourmat's house. 15% Lethality to anyone inside and, if the Marines are there, they see her die as a slab of stone crushes her odd-colored head. Taliban are starting to force their way through the mud at the neck of the valley, but the largest Téuthan is there gnawing and slashing them. RPGs are going off. If the Marines don't shoot the Téuthan, it's going to be hard getting through. If they do shoot, it might turn on them. (Handler judgment determines just how hard to get through it is and if the Téuthan attacks them.)

Round Six and Onward: If the PCs get out of the valley one way or another (possibly by blowing the dam, or scrambling out when someone else does) you can hit them with more random attacks. Or, if there are only one or two survivors, you can cut the scene there and have them make it out on foot, limping and deaf, before going to ground and managing to call in an evac the next day.

The Marines are Loudly Fleeing the Youngest Téuthan

This is what happens if they started a firefight with the Ourmat before the enemy even got there. For this option, I'm not even breaking it down turn by turn. You have the Téuthan stats, you have the Taliban forces' stats. Have one, the other, or both attack the Marines as necessary to apply maximum pressure, and have both attack each other when you need to ease off and hold out a glimmer of hope. Check the blow-by-blow descriptions in the previous two headings, and the roll-by-roll guidelines in Scene Three.

SCENE SIX: Debrief & Dénouement

Who (if anyone) lived? What happens to them? Let's find out.

I Die, You Die, the Girl Dies...

It's quite possible that all the Marines die. If that's the case, jump the PCs into a group of drone pilots on a base in New Mexico. They don't even need names: They're discussing matters as BLUEBIRD LEADER and BLUEBIRD 1-4.

BLUEBIRD LEADER has been watching this valley with lousy weather for a week, trying to get a good opportunity for surveillance. Today's the day. The usual officer tells BLUEBIRD LEADER to "obey without question" the orders from "Colonel Dass."

Describe for BLUEBIRD LEADER something the player recognizes as Gath Valley, in the aftermath of the failed Doom School mission. Was the dam burst? It's being rebuilt, with weird

gunky stuff under the water. Almost like a giant skeleton, but it crumbles as tribesmen carry logs near it. Did stuff blow up? Describe them trying to repair the damage.

Colonel Dass wants BLUEBIRD LEADER to watch a strange building with swirls and parts of an old attack chopper on top, but to stay ludicrously far back. The ancient gun on top of it is no threat to BLUEBIRD LEADER'S drone... maybe Dass doesn't know what he's doing?

The other four BLUEBIRD drones are usually scattered all over Afghanistan, doing surveillance and the occasional Hellfire strike, but at Dass' command they're all massing above the clouds near this unnamed valley.

Dass gets excited when a group of four men with some sort of cart start wheeling it towards the building. There's something on it that looks like a large, wounded animal draped in canvas. They're taking it out of a cave to the east, the cave where the stream comes from.

When that cart goes in the building with the chopper chunks, Dass orders all BLUEBIRD drones make an immediate attack run, launching all weapons at that building.

This is strange for many reasons. One, it shouldn't take more than two Hellfire missiles at most to collapse that building, and that's if it's reinforced. Two, the area's nowhere near clear-- there are a lot of people inside the shock zone, including noncombatants and children. Any

resistance is met with sharp command, and anyone who refuses to fire is warned of dire consequences. "I take full responsibility, dammit!" Dass barks.

If at least one drone strikes the building, they can hear Dass say, "This is Corporal Kit Dass, operating under code word: FERAL ECLIPSE. Deploy the package on my authority. Repeat, deploy FERAL ECLIPSE."

All five BLUEBIRD drones are sent to distant observation positions and watch as a massive cruise missile, dropping with a nearly vertical arc, plunges into the valley and detonates. It's clearly some form of incendiary, causing a massive fireball that burns for nearly a minute. Anyone with the BLUEBIRD pilots' levels of air-ordnance knowledge understands that the purpose of this sort of munition is to suck all the oxygen out of an area, burning it up so that anyone who's in cover still smothers. Survivors are unlikely. The drone strikes probably killed dozens, but that fuel-air warhead killed hundreds.

It never makes the news.

Hostage

Any character who gets blown up or injured or knocked out may come to and discover he's been captured by the Taliban, and they're discussing what to do with him. If he sings the Devil-Blocking Hymn (see page xx) they are very surprised. They don't treat him well, but there are no beatings and they bandage his injuries. After spending a few days with his head bagged, he may

be ransomed to the State Department, or a military unit or (most likely) one of the Marines' tribal allies for an undisclosed sum of money. After that, go to the "Debrief" section.

Did more than one Marine get captured? The Taliban kill (or just keep) all but one. Being the sole survivor is worth a 1/1d4 SAN roll.

Ride Out

If a character or two get out under their own power, Lieutenant Nagel is shocked and appalled at what happened. He immediately gets them hospitalized and, after they've been treated, asks them what happened. Not long after that, they go to the scene marked "Debrief."

Debrief

Start with one of the players being deputized in as a psychologist and have her (her name's Dr. Brackett) compassionately trying to deal with what the Marine has told her about the loss of his comrades and the mission to Gath Valley.

[[begin deputy layout]]

Deputization Dossier: Dr. Brackett

You're a Navy Medical Corps psychologist, and your job is to treat and diagnose the emotional wellbeing of sailors and Marines. It's a busy job in a conflict zone. Today, you're trying to both assess and console a Marine who was clearly in something serious. You, as the player, know what happened to him. In the role of Dr. Brackett, you've got what's obvious to the eye and what you learn from gentle questions. You do know he was in a disastrously failed

mission escorting a State Department liaison to someplace called "Gath Valley," and that a number of his colleagues died.

[[end deputy layout]]

Once the survivor has told some of their tale, fast forward to the security debriefing, with a woman in civilian clothes named Coretta Twain. If the survivor told people about the Téuthan, Coretta suggests that he sounds insane but that, if he's telling the truth, it's clearly a drastic security concern. If he didn't tell anyone, she picks very carefully at the weak points in his story, getting quite aggressive. Then she abruptly stops and shows him a photograph.

The photo depicts a soldier standing next to a severed human arm that has to be at least two meters long. It's damaged and slightly rotting, but not transparent like the Téuthan arms were.

Twain then says that of course, the reality of such things is need-to-know. If the Marine wants out, all they need to do is take their medical discharge and never talk about the Gath valley or its inhabitants ever again. However, if the Marine wants to know more, there is much more work on this...problem...to accomplish. A group in the Federal Government is responsible for looking in on this kind of threat. Is the Marine interested in knowing more?

Pre-Generated Agents

Lance Corporal Harlan "Hogie" Samuelson

Your Story: Maybe you could have gotten a football scholarship, though it's hard to shine as an offensive linebacker. Your grades were never better than you could get without working hard, because you were more interested in smoking a little weed and chasing as much poon as you could find. Getting Gwen pregnant made things a lot less complicated. Not easier, but at least there was no more college talk. You needed a job that could provide for your kid and pay for a wedding, and in your hometown of Flint, Michigan, there are guys with college degrees working fast food. But you have 20/20 vision, a good work ethic, and the Marines didn't give a damn about your ACT score. Your recruiter got you through your urine test, and now you're in Afghanistan. It's kind of a shithole, but at least a lifetime of Michigan winters left you prepared for the weather.

The others tease you about being fat, but you're not fat. No one stays fat on tray rations.

Gunny yells a lot, but that's kind of his job. He's been through all kinds of warfare shit and still has all his fingers and toes, so you pay close attention. Right Stuff is kind of uptight, but smart. He reminds you of the punter from your team, this honor roll kid. Chuckles is funny all the time. About half the time, it's ha-ha funny, and the rest it's don't-touch-his-stuff funny.

What You Say to the Other Guys

Lance Cpl. Tony Vincenzo - "Rambam": It ain't the cold, buddy, it's the wind-chill.

Cpl. Ray Clifton - "Right Stuff": C'mon Ray. Give the guys a break. Tony's freezing his ass off.

Cpl. Charles Hurt - "Chuckles": Shit Chuck, he's on the hill! Take him out! Take his ass out!

Gunnery Sergeant Geordain Kryptowicz: I'm on it, Sarge.

Lance Corporal Harlan "Hoagie" Samuelson

PROFESSION: Marine

STR: 14

DEX: 12

CON: 14

INT: 9

POW: 13

CHA: 10

HIT POINTS: 14

WILLPOWER: 13

SAN: 65

BREAKING POINT: 52

Accounting 10, Alertness 60, Anthropology 0, Archaeology 0, Art (_____) 0, Artillery 20, Athletics 70, Bureaucracy 30, Computer Science 0, Craft (_____) 0, Criminology 10, Demolitions 40, Disguise 10, Dodge 30, Drive 40, Heavy Machinery 50, Firearms 40, First Aid 20, Foreign Language (_____) 0, Forensics 0, Heavy Weapons 40, History 10, HUMINT 10, Law 0, Medicine 0, Melee Weapons 50, Military Science (Marines) 40, Navigate 40, Occult 10, Persuade 30, Pharmacy 0, Pilot (_____) 0, Psychotherapy 10, Ride 10, Science (_____) 0,

Search 40, SIGINT 0, Stealth 10, Surgery 0, Survival 30, Swim 20, Unarmed Combat 70,

Unnatural 0

ATTACKS

Weapon (ammo) Skill Damage Base Range Lethality Kill Radius

M16A4 rifle (30) (AP 3) 40% 1d12 100m (10%) ** 1/2/3m

M1911 pistol (15) 40% 1d10 25m --

M500 shotgun (5) 40% * * --

Fist 70% 1d3+1 ---

Knife 50% 1d4+1 ---

Hand Grenade (3) 70% -20m 15% 10m

*shotgun does 2d10 up to 10m, 1d10 up to 20m, 1d6 out to 50m

**Lethality only on burst fire

DEFENSE

Body armor and helmet: -10 HP damage from normal damage & failed Lethality rolls, unless a called shot is made at -20%.

Lance Cpl. Tony "Rambam" Vincenzo

Your Story: You were too young to sign up after your grandma got killed in 9/11, but you wanted to. Even hearing all the stuff about how it wasn't really Saddam, and how there weren't really WMDs, and even Abu Graib... you know it, but it just seems false. Being here, in Afghanistan, is real. Those pricks who shoot mortars at your firebase are real. You met a guy who got his nose cut off for teaching girls how to read, and he was real as cancer.

Maybe these assholes aren't Al Qaeda assholes, but they're all in the same league, if not exactly the same team. Afghanistan is icy cold and barren and so primitive you can barely believe it. You have to be doing some good here. It's hard to imagine how someplace so ate up and backwards could get damaged worse.

Corporal Clifton tries to keep your spirits up, which just gives Chuckles fuel for his jokes. It occurred to you one day that the Taliban might have someone like Chuckles on their side too, and it was not a comforting thought. Kryptowicz just barks orders at you, like you're a piece in his machine. Hoagie's all right though. The two of you wind up bivouacked together sometimes, and the guy's like a space heater. You're from Florida, so this icy mountain crap is your idea of hell.

What You Say to the Other Guys

Lance Cpl. Harlan Samuelson - "Hoagie": Switch gloves? Okay, but mine are all frozen. How come yours are so warm? Metabolism, huh. I should get one of those!

Cpl. Ray Clifton - "Right Stuff": Jesus, I'm fine! I'll drive the MRAP, aight? Fine, yeah, I'll drive.

Cpl. Charles Hurt - "Chuckles": I give up Chuckles, what do you get when you stick a fork in an Afghan woman's eye?

Gunnery Sergeant Geordain Kryptowicz: Any faster and we're gonna spin out, Sarge!
Pursuit's at... 5:30, call it!

Lance Corporal Tony "Rambam" Vincenzo

PROFESSION: Marine

STR: 11

DEX: 16

CON: 11

INT: 10

POW: 13

CHA: 11

HIT POINTS: 11

WILLPOWER: 13

SAN: 65

BREAKING POINT: 52

Accounting 10, Alertness 40, Anthropology 0, Archaeology 0, Art (song) 20, Artillery 0, Athletics 50, Bureaucracy 30, Computer Science 0, Craft (mechanics) 60, Criminology 10, Demolitions 0, Disguise 10, Dodge 30, Drive 60, Heavy Machinery 80, Firearms 60, First Aid 30, Foreign Language (_____) 0, Forensics 0, Heavy Weapons 60, History 10, HUMINT 10, Law 0, Medicine 0, Melee Weapons 30, Military Science (Marines) 40, Navigate 40, Occult 10, Persuade 30, Pharmacy 0, Pilot (_____) 0, Psychotherapy 10, Ride 10, Science (_____) 0,

Search 20, SIGINT 0, Stealth 50, Surgery 0, Survival 10, Swim 40, Unarmed Combat 50,
Unnatural 0

ATTACKS

Weapon (ammo) Skill Damage Base Range Lethality Kill Radius

Grenade launcher (1)* 60% 1d12 150m 15% 10m

M16A4 rifle (30) (AP 3) 60% 1d12 100m (10%)* 1/2/3m

M1911 pistol (15) 60% 1d10 25m --

Fist 50% 1d3 ---

Knife 30% 1d4 ---

*You carry five 40mm fragmentation cartridges and five smoke cartridges. It takes a turn to reload and you carry it unloaded.

**Lethality only on burst fire.

DEFENSE

Body armor and helmet: -10 HP damage from normal damage & failed Lethality rolls, unless a called shot is made at -20%.

[[end PC statbox]]

Cpl. Ray "Right Stuff" Clifton

Your Story: Ever since Ansom Clifton fought in Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, there's been someone from your family in the US armed forces. You always knew you'd wind up in uniform. You just figured it would be Air Force, like your dad, Major James Clifton.

People ask you if you knew he was selling secrets to the Chinese, and your response is always what it has to be: That he's your dad. He's innocent. He'd have died to defend this country and anyone who says different doesn't know him. No, he never said anything about it, no you never saw any hint that he was a spy because he wasn't. He raised you on honor and loyalty and patriotism.

You only saw him cry when your mother died, and at the funeral of a test pilot he'd known since his days as an airman. He didn't cry when he was found guilty or sentenced. That's how you know he's innocent. But of course, you couldn't say that stuff and hope to get anywhere in the Air Force.

The Marines, though, were more tolerant. You know you're unlikely to get trusted with anything classified, ever. But the Marines trust you with the lives of your fellow Devil Dogs, and that will have to do. Semper Fi.

You think you could go farther than Kryptowicz, but he's like an animal perfectly adapted to its niche. He's been through a lot and his instincts are solid. Charles Hurt is fearless, if a bit sadistic and undisciplined. Hogie has a good heart, and he's no stranger to hard work. You worry about Rambam though. He's a fine driver and smart enough, but Florida ain't like Afghanistan.

What You Say to the Other Guys

Lance Cpl. Harlan Samuelson - "Hoagie": It's stuck. Hoagie! Gimme a hand with this, please? On three. One, two, push...!

Lance Cpl. Tony Vincenzo - "Rambam": Here, take my soup, I don't want it. It's hot. I know it tastes like pee, but it's hot.

Cpl. Charles Hurt - "Chuckles": That's not funny, it's just disgusting.

Gunnery Sergeant Geordain Kryptowicz: I agree, send Rambam with the Oshkosh around to the east and two on foot to the west... me and Chuckles? You want to go with him? Understood.

Corporal Ray "Right Stuff" Clifton

PROFESSION: Marine

STR: 12

DEX: 12

CON: 12

INT: 13

POW: 12

CHA: 11

HIT POINTS: 12

WILLPOWER: 12

SAN: 60

BREAKING POINT: 48

Accounting 10, Alertness 40, Anthropology 20, Archaeology 0, Art (_____) 0, Artillery 0, Athletics 50, Bureaucracy 50, Computer Science 40, Craft (electronics) 20, Criminology 10, Demolitions 0, Disguise 10, Dodge 30, Drive 40, Heavy Machinery 50, Firearms 60, First Aid 30, Foreign Language (Pashto) 40, Forensics 0, Heavy Weapons 0, History 30, HUMINT 10, Law 0, Medicine 0, Melee Weapons 30, Military Science (Marines) 40, Military Science (Air Force) 20, Navigate 40, Occult 10, Persuade 30, Pharmacy 0, Pilot (_____) 0, Psychotherapy

10, Ride 10, Science (_____) 0, Search 20, SIGINT 40, Stealth 10, Surgery 0, Survival 10,
Swim 20, Unarmed Combat 50, Unnatural 0

ATTACKS

Weapon (ammo) Skill Damage Base Range Lethality Kill Radius

M16A4 rifle (30) (AP 3) 60% 1d12 100m (10%)* 1/2/3m

M1911 pistol (15) 60% 1d10 25m --

Fist 50% 1d3 ---

Knife 30% 1d4 ---

Hand Grenade (3) 50%-20m 15% 10m

*Lethality only on burst fire.

DEFENSE

Body armor and helmet: -10 HP damage from normal damage & failed Lethality rolls, unless
a called shot is made at -20%.

[[end PC statbox]]

Cpl. Charles "Chuckles" Hurt

Your Story: It's a fine line between charming and creepy and you enjoy dancing on that line, back and forth. Your family back in Nebraska was about guns, bikes and substance abuse, in assorted combinations. Meth just made you feel weird, and you keep your drinking to one a day at most because you saw it turn your dad into an asshole and your mom into a zombie. Not that you have much temptation to resist in Afghanistan, which could trademark the motto "The Crappiest Place On Earth."

Killing people is fun and anyone who says different probably hasn't tried it. If life has the highest value (which you're not sure about, but Aunt Sissy was Catholic and when you were ten something set her off and she showed you a whole album full of aborted fetus pictures), then taking it... that's real. It matters. It's important. Even if it's the life of some illiterate yak-herder who wouldn't recognize a roll of toilet paper. It's the most permanent thing, because death is forever.

You can't talk to the other guys about this stuff, of course. Right Stuff might understand it, but he wouldn't agree. He already thinks you're crazy, you don't need to upgrade that to crazy and evil. Kryptowicz likes you just fine as long as you fade Talibans without getting heebie-jeebies. He knows what you are, at least enough to appreciate it. Hoagie and Rambam are hard on the outside, but soft on the inside. You're happy to do their killing for them. You might even risk your life for 'em--that would be a real laugh, Chuckles the hero. Semper Fi.

What You Say to the Other Guys

Lance Cpl. Harlan Samuelson - "Hoagie": ...the American says, 'What's a shortage?' and the Iraqi says 'What's an opinion?' and the Afghani says, 'What's an electricity?'

Lance Cpl. Tony Vincenzo - "Rambam": ...and then the Taliban guy says 'What? Aren't they all like that under the burqua?'

Cpl. Ray Clifton - "Right Stuff": As soon as we get back to civilization I'm going to get you laid, Clifton, and I mean like nasty laid, the stuff where you can't look her in the eye afterwards. And then you'll be tolerable and all these guys will thank me.

Gunnery Sergeant Geordain Kryptowicz: I see him Sarge. He's meat.

Corporal Charles "Chuckles" Hurt

PROFESSION: Marine

STR: 13

DEX: 14

CON: 13

INT: 11

POW: 9

CHA: 12

HIT POINTS: 13

WILLPOWER: 9

SAN: 45

BREAKING POINT: 36

Accounting 10, Alertness 80, Anthropology 0, Archaeology 0, Art (song) 20, Artillery 0, Athletics 50, Bureaucracy 30, Computer Science 0, Craft (_____) 0, Criminology 10, Demolitions 40, Disguise 10, Dodge 30, Drive 40, Heavy Machinery 60, Firearms 60, First Aid 30, Foreign Language (_____) 0, Forensics 0, Heavy Weapons 60, History 10, HUMINT 10, Law 0, Medicine 0, Melee Weapons 50, Military Science (Marines) 40, Navigate 40, Occult 10, Persuade 30, Pharmacy 0, Pilot (_____) 0, Psychotherapy 10, Ride 10, Science (_____) 0,

Search 20, SIGINT 0, Stealth 50, Surgery 0, Survival 10, Swim 20, Unarmed Combat 70,
Unnatural 0

ATTACKS

Weapon (ammo) Skill Damage Base Range Lethality Kill Radius

M249 SAW (200) (AP 3) 60%-200m 10% 3m

M1911 pistol (15) 60% 1d10 25m --

Fist 70% 1d3+1 ---

Knife 50% 1d4+1 ---

Hand Grenade (3) 50%-20m 15% 10m

DEFENSE

Body armor and helmet: -10 HP damage from normal damage & failed Lethality rolls, unless
a called shot is made at -20%.

[[end PC statbox]]

Gunnery Sergeant Geordain Kryptowicz

Your Story: You can read these young punks like books. There's a little bit of you in each of 'em. Like Hurt, you're from a crazy family full of people looking for a way to self-destruct with some flair. Like Clifton, there's a history of military service, a lot of US wars and others in Poland before that. Like Samuelson you'd do anything for your team, to keep 'em alive, and like Vincenzo you're trying to balance the stupid pointlessness of this war with the even stupider and greater pointlessness of doing nothing. You aren't going to hunt down Al Qaeda's second-in-command-of-the-week, but maybe shooting or humiliating the most stupid cavemen in the hills encourages others to act smarter.

You don't know. You don't know much, but you know you're a Marine, and the guys in your squad are Marines, and that's more important to you than all the hearts and minds in the whole subcontinent.

What You Say to the Other Guys

Lance Cpl. Harlan Samuelson - "Hoagie": Get the lead out, lard-ass! Shake those flabby hams and get on the stick!

Lance Cpl. Tony Vincenzo - "Rambam": Cinch up your apple-sack and get your eyes on a swivel, dammit! Perimeter! Perimeter!

Cpl. Ray Clifton - "Right Stuff": Hurt is taking point, you're walking drag. Keep your shit wired tight.

Cpl. Charles Hurt - "Chuckles": Pucker up your butthole, shit's about to get loud.

Gunnery Sergeant Geordain Kryptowicz

PROFESSION: Marine

STR: 13

DEX: 12

CON: 15

INT: 9

POW: 13

CHA: 10

HIT POINTS: 14

WILLPOWER: 13

SAN: 65

BREAKING POINT: 52

Accounting 10, Alertness 60, Anthropology 0, Archaeology 0, Art (_____) 0, Artillery 0, Athletics 50, Bureaucracy 30, Computer Science 0, Craft (_____) 0, Criminology 10, Demolitions 40, Disguise 10, Dodge 70, Drive 40, Heavy Machinery 50, Firearms 60, First Aid 30, Foreign Language (_____) 0, Forensics 0, Heavy Weapons 60, History 10, HUMINT 10, Law 0, Medicine 0, Melee Weapons 30, Military Science (Marines) 60, Navigate 40, Occult 10, Persuade 20, Pharmacy 0, Pilot (_____) 0, Psychotherapy 10, Ride 10, Science (_____) 0,

Search 20, SIGINT 0, Stealth 30, Surgery 0, Survival 30, Swim 20, Unarmed Combat 50,
Unnatural 0

ATTACKS

Weapon (ammo) Skill Damage Base Range Lethality Kill Radius

M16A4 rifle (30) (AP 3) 60% 1d12 100m (10%)* 1/2/3m

M1911 pistol (15) 60% 1d10 25m --

Fist 50% 1d3+1 ---

Knife 30% 1d4+1 ---

Hand Grenade (3) 50%-20m 15% 10m

*Lethality only on burst fire

DEFENSE

Body armor and helmet: -10 HP damage from normal damage & failed Lethality rolls, unless
a called shot is made at -20%.

[[end PC statbox]]

Antagonists

Gath Tribesmen

The scrawny, malnourished, inbred Gaths are not individually fearsome combatants, but there
are a lot of them and occasionally (when the Handler decides it's not unsporting) they get in a
blood frenzy, chew through their own lips and cheeks in rage, and fight to the death.

STR 9 CON 8 DEX 11 INT 10 POW 9 CHA 8

HP 9 WP 9

SKILLS Athletics 40%, Dodge 40%, Firearms 25%, Heavy Weapons 20%, Unarmed

Combat 50%

ATTACKS AK-47, Damage 1d12

RPG, Lethality 30% (AP 5)

Fist, 1d4

ARMOR None

NOTES The village has a dozen RPG-7 launchers and five rounds (total) for them. So they're very sparing with them.

Téuthan

These are an entirely different category of enemy. Semi-transparent, semi-human, semi-serpent flying monsters roughly the size of a killer whale, seeing one for the first time forces a 1d4/1d8 SAN check, unless you witness it being summoned by the Ourmat. Watching space bubble and squeak as it arrives escalates the check to 1d6/1d10.

All Téuthan can either attempt to bite a target (one attack per turn) or swat and claw with their massive arms (two attacks per turn).

One final odd note is that Téuthan don't appear on NVG screens, not even as black patches or blurry areas. Same thing with cell phones and digital cameras. (Film camera? Film gets exposed with muddy multicolor swirls. So NVG offers no advantage when shooting at them, even at night.

There are three Téuthan inhabiting the current Ourmat. They don't have names, but they are slightly different.

The Youngest (Huge)

STR 40 CON 40 DEX 15(5*) INT 7 POW 10 CHA 4

HP 40 WP 10

SKILLS Bite 40%, Swat 50%

ATTACKS Bite, Lethality 50%

Swat, Lethality 30%

ARMOR 5

NOTES On the ground, Téuthan have DEX 5. They can only use their Dodge skill while flying. It can either choose its Bite attack against one target, or roll Swat twice. This is the smallest and has the smoothest skin, judging by the shine on its reflective surface.

THE OLDEST (Huge)

STR 45 CON 45 DEX 15(5*) INT 8 POW 12 CHA 4

HP 45 WP 12

SKILLS Bite 45%, Swat 75%

ATTACKS Bite, Lethality 50%

Swat, Lethality 35%

ARMOR 10

NOTES On the ground, Téuthan have DEX 5. They can only use their Dodge skill while flying. It can either choose its Bite attack against one target, or roll Swat twice. This one has scars on the front of its body, is missing several teeth and its right eye, and the top surface of its wing-parabola seems to have shallow dents on it. It's the slowest flier, but its arms move with deceptive purpose, distinct from the vigorous, almost spasmodic thrashing of its half-siblings.

THE LARGEST (Huge)

STR 50 **CON** 60 **DEX** 15(5*) **INT** 7 **POW** 10 **CHA** 4

HP 55 **WP** 10

SKILLS Bite 50%, Swat 50%

ATTACKS Bite Lethality 65%

Swat Lethality 40%

ARMOR 5

NOTES On the ground, Téuthan have DEX 5. They can only use their Dodge skill while flying. It can either choose its Bite attack against one target, or roll Swat twice. This monster is fatter and two of the fingers on its left hand won't straighten all the way. When it flies, it tends to dip or lurch a little to the left.

FOUR TALIBAN RPG SHOOTERS--ATASH, BABUR, DELBAR AND FAHRAN

STR 11 CON 11 DEX 10 INT 10 POW 10 CHA 10

HP 11 WP 10

SKILLS Athletics 40%, Drive 40% Firearms 40%, Heavy Weapons 40%

ATTACKS RPG (Armor Piercing 5), Lethality 30%

ARMOR None

NOTES On the first turn, they fire with their full, unpenalized skill despite the dark and distance, because they've been aiming. Every shot after that is at -20%. Remember that every hit from an RPG round degrades vehicle armor. Five points drop off before damage to the people inside is calculated. Also, RPGs can only fire once every three rounds.

FOUR TALIBAN AK-47 GUNNERS--JAWID, KASRA, MAHYAR AND ZEMAR

STR 10 CON 10 DEX 10 INT 10 POW 10 CHA 10

HP 10 WP 10

SKILLS Athletics 35%, Drive 35%, Firearms 35%, Heavy Weapons 35%

ATTACKS AK-47 (Armor Piercing 3), Lethality 10%

ARMOR None

NOTES On the first turn, the AK-47 gunmen each have a 55% chance of hitting, due to aiming and using sprays. After that, their sprays drop to 35% because of the snowfall and darkness. Each burst uses ten rounds of ammo. Keep in mind that they have Armor Piercing 3.

TWO TALIBAN SHARPSHOOTERS--SHAHBAZ AND PARSA

STR 10 CON 14 DEX 10 INT 11 POW 12 CHA 11

HP 12 WP 12

SKILLS Athletics 60%, Demolitions 45%, Drive 40%, Firearms 60%, Heavy Weapons 45%,
Stealth 45%

ATTACKS Dragunov (Armor Piercing 5), Damage 1d12+2

ARMOR None

NOTES On the first turn, they can attack with their full Firearms skill, but on subsequent turns they drop to 40%, due to the darkness.

THE OURMAT'S PERSONAL BODYGUARDS

STR 10 CON 10 DEX 13 INT 10 POW 14 CHA 10

HP 10 WP 14

SKILLS Firearms 45%, Heavy Weapons 35%, Melee 50%

ATTACKS AK-47, Damage 1d12

Machete 1d6+2

ARMOR None

NOTES --