



How the Karate Kid changed my life by Sathnam Sanghera

Plus the verdict on Toy Story 3 and Inception in our **arts&ents** pullout

The mission was to build a school, but we ended up under fire in Helmand

In this compelling despatch, **Deborah Haynes**, Defence Editor, reveals the brutal reality of nation-building in Afghanistan



The day began promisingly. Embedded with the military, I accompanied the small unit of American Marines across a rural stretch of Marjah, one of the most dangerous areas in Helmand, where a British-led team wants to set up four new schools.

Barely an hour after leaving the base I found myself cowering neck-deep in stinking water in an irrigation channel with bullets flying all around and two Marines wounded.

The ferocity of the attack by Taliban insurgents — against a group who thought they were doing a good deed

— underlines the massive task facing British and US forces as they try to bring stability to the province, a key element in their strategy to transfer security to the Afghan authorities and leave.

Marine Captain Amanda Freeman invited me and *Times* photographer Jack Hill to accompany her and Abdul Wakil, an Afghan engineer, on a tour of a field and a derelict building where they were considering putting two schools.

There has been no official education offered to children in Marjah for up to 20 years, making the creation of schools a priority for the US Marines



First man down: Gunnery Sergeant Matthew Austin after being hit by Taliban fire yesterday on the Marjah school project

who control the area and the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

Filing out of a combat outpost in Marjah, where a company from 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines is based, we passed through a small but lively bazaar stocked with everything from fresh grapes to cans of Red Bull. The

Hunt for Afghan rogue sergeant

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dusty road led us into a patchwork of fields divided by irrigation channels and dotted with stone compounds. After about 500 metres we trudged off the road and on to a freshly ploughed patch of land. A group of elders had told the Marines that this was government-owned — ideal for a school.

Mr Wakil, the Afghan engineer, started taking measurements to work out if the project was feasible.

Suddenly there was an ominous boom and a cloud of grey smoke mushroomed into the air about 2km away. "IED," muttered one Marine, meaning

an improvised explosive device. "Let's get moving," said First Lieutenant Taylor Williams, 24, who was heading the patrol of about 15 Marines, four civilians and two interpreters.

We ventured further into the farmland towards a sinister-looking building with a turret jutting out of its roof. The derelict madrasa, once an Islamic religious school, was seen as another potential location for classrooms.

"Watch out for pressure-plate IEDs," warned First Lieutenant Williams. These are designed to explode when

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IN THE NEWS

Squeeze for degrees

About 70,000 well-qualified school-leavers are likely to be rejected by universities this year as a surge in mature and foreign candidates creates an unprecedented squeeze on degree places. **News, page 3**

Bus pass pledge

The Treasury wants to limit the issue of free bus passes for the elderly despite David Cameron's election pledge to protect them. Ministers must hand in proposals for spending cuts today. **News, pages 6, 7**

Obama faces revolt

The prospect of a heavy defeat in midterm elections prompted revolt within the Democratic Party amid claims that Barack Obama is preparing to distance himself from his congressional allies. **World, page 27**

BP halts oil spill

BP halted the flow of oil from its ruptured well in the Gulf of Mexico for the first time since April. It is preparing to freeze dividend payouts until well into next year, hitting pension funds. **News, pages 14, 15**

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