

The background of the cover is a photograph of two soldiers in camouflage uniforms and helmets. One soldier is in the foreground, kneeling and aiming a rifle. Another soldier is behind him, also aiming a rifle. They are positioned behind green sandbags. The background shows a hazy, mountainous landscape.

W FREEDOM WATCH AFGHANISTAN

Fallen Hero memoriam

page 24

101st year in review special edition

MAY 2011

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COMMANDER, 17TH PAD
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

CAPT. KENNETH STEWART

MANAGING EDITOR
STAFF SGT. MICHAEL SPARKS

LAYOUT EDITOR
SGT. DAVID HOUSE

STAFF WRITERS
SPC. ADAM L. MATHIS
SGT. DEREK NELSON

DISTRIBUTION
PFC. JESIAH DIXON

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*Commander, CJTF-101 and
Regional Command-East
Maj. Gen. John F. Campbell*

*Public Affairs Director,
CJTF-101 and
Regional Command-East
Lt. Col. Patrick Seiber*

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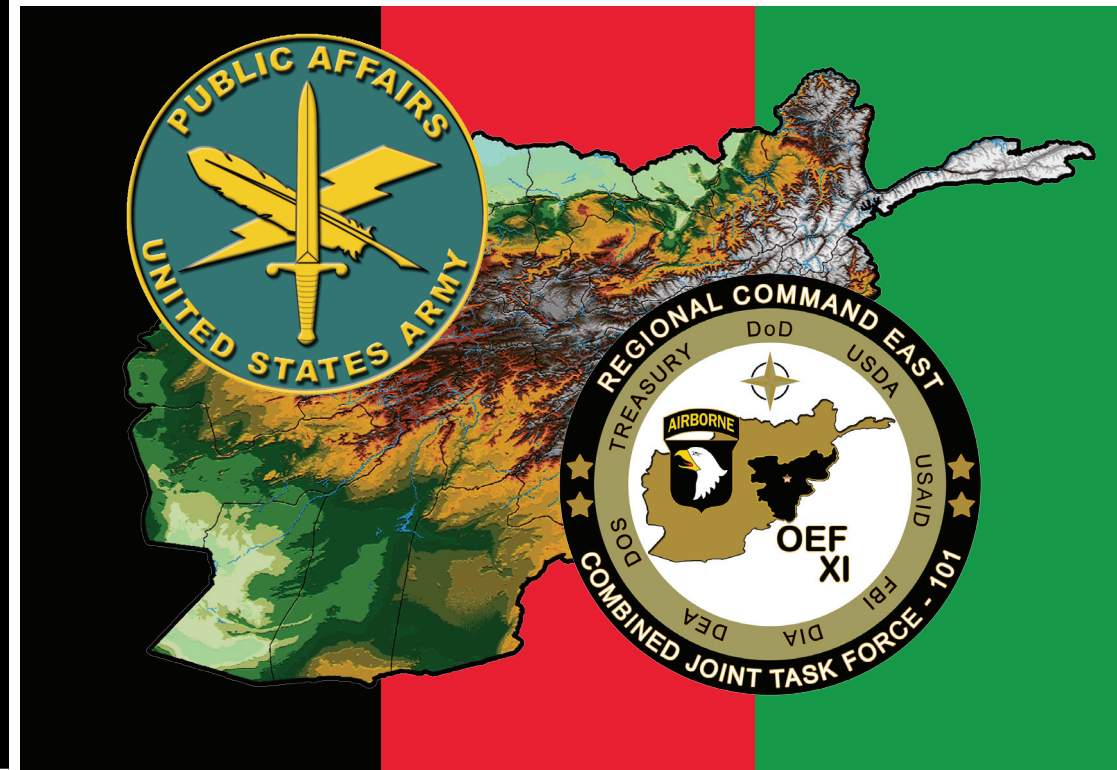
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(Cover photo) U.S. Army Soldiers with Task Force No Slack, 101st Airborne Division, return fire after receiving small-arms fire during combat operation in the valley of Barawala Kalet, Kunar province, Afghanistan, March 29.
(Photo by U.S. Army Photo by Pfc. Cameron Boyd)



Military, Civilian and Coalition Members of CJTF-101 and RC-East:

The past year has gone by quickly, and it has been our honor to serve with all of the Service Members and Civilians that comprise CJTF-101. As we travel the battlefield, your successes are evident everywhere. As we prepare to depart Afghanistan, we feel proud of all that has been accomplished in your tenure here.

Together with our Afghan partners, we have further enabled the capability and capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces. The surge of both coalition and Afghan forces has increased security across RC-East. Realignment of our Civilian and Military efforts to focus on key terrain districts is improving governance in these key areas. We have begun and continue building key infrastructure projects to facilitate development and increase economic markets. All these efforts combined, continue to increase the quality of life for Afghans. The fruits of our labors are visible as we begin to transition areas back to Afghan control.

We appreciate your efforts over the past year, and know that your success has not come without sacrifice and loss. Never forget our Fallen Heroes and their Families. Our Fallen Heroes gave all to make our mission a success, and their Families lives are forever changed. Always remember their sacrifice and the sacrifice of all our Families who enable us to fight our Country's wars. We could not do what we do without the strength of our great Families behind us.

The team from the 1st Cavalry Division has begun arriving. We wish them the greatest success during their tenure here, and will watch their achievements over the next year. As their numbers grow, our numbers will decrease. The mission is not yet complete so we ask you to push through the end of your tour...Don't count the days, make the days count!

Air Assault!

Scott C. Schroeder
Command Sergeant Major, USA
CJTF Command Sergeant Major

John F. Campbell
Major General, US Army
Commanding

Operation Enduring Freedom XI

From 15 June 2010 through May 2011 in support of the Afghan Government, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), NATO, ISAF and Combined Joint Task Force-101 (CJTF-101)/Regional Command-East (RC-E) forced conduct full-spectrum operations to develop Afghan national capability to secure its people (Security), exercise capable governance (Governance) and develop a sustainable economy (Development), while defeating terrorists and insurgents, in order to extend GIROA authority and influence, as the legitimate government of the Afghan people.

More than 710 conventional operations have been conducted under CJTF-101. Cooperation between U.S., Pakistan and Afghan forces enabled operations focused upon border development. CJTF-101 continued to facilitate the build-up of forces in Afghanistan with the combined integration of the 4th Brigade Combat Team (4/101st BCT 'Currahee'). Joint, Coalition and Alliance Forces are providing security to ensure the success of Afghan voter registration and set conditions for the 2010 Provincial Elections. CJTF-101 will provide security to polling stations in RC East in order to help GIROA conduct a secure and peaceful election.

Major Units Involved: Afghan National Army (ANA), Afghan National Police (ANP), 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), 1 BCT 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) 'Bastogne', 2 BCT 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) 'Strike', 3 BCT 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) 'Rakkasan', 4 BCT 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) 'Currahee', HHB 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) 'Gladiator', 101st SBDE (Sustainment Brigade) 'Lifeliners', 101st Combat Aviation Brigade 'Bayonet', 372nd Engineer Brigade 'Timberwolf', 176th Engineer Brigade 'Hammer', 3rd Combat Aviation Brigade 'Falcon', 1st Mechanized BDE (Poland) 'White Eagle', 3rd Mechanized BDE (France) 'Lafayette'. Coalition Forces from Egypt, Jordan, Singapore, Korea, Czech Republic, New Zealand, Turkey, Australia, Canada, Norway, Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Additionally, select U.S. Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps elements.

Major named operations include:

Operation DUSTWUN	Operation Eagle Claw 2
Operation Badpesh Kam Dergi	Operation Strong Eagle 2
Operation Azmaray	Operation Strong Eagle 3
Operation Eagle Shadow 3	Operation Storm Lightning
Operation Champion Sang/Stone	Operation Falcon Strike
Operation Strong Eagle	Operation Bulldog Bite
Operation Setara Quane Koned/Persuasive Star	Operation Brass Monkey
Operation Shield 2	Operation Promethium Puma
Operations Iron Locust	Operation Dragon Strike
Operation War Old Coffee	Operation Bull Whip
Operation Shamshir	Operation Rainbow Valley



An Afghan girl, whose feet were so severely burned two weeks before she was in danger of losing them, receives treatment from Army Capt. Norman Dupuis (left), a physician's assistant attached to A Co., 3rd Bn., 172nd Inf. Regt., and Army Staff Sgt. Dominic Ayer of Barre, Vt., the senior medic with A Co.

Step by Step: Soldiers help make a difference

Story and photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Whitney Hughes, TF Wolverine Public Affairs

The Soldier, Army Staff Sgt. Dominic Ayer, of Barre, Vt., is a medic with A Company, 3rd Battalion., 172nd Infantry Regiment. Ayer and the medical team at Combat Outpost Hererra in Paktya province were part of the team treating a child whose feet were burned after stepping on hot coals.

Her father brought her in from a village outside the outpost.

"When she first came to us, she didn't even have bandages on her feet," Ayer said. "The wounds were just open to the air. She had third-degree burns on one foot and second-degree burns on the other. It could have resulted in the loss of her feet."

Since the Soldiers began treating the 1-year-old girl two weeks ago, they have seen vast improvements in her condition which would not have been possible without the medical attention they provided.

Before coming to the gate of COP Hererra, her father had taken her to three different clinics, but she was denied treatment because they did not have any money and because the clinics were ill equipped, the man told Ayer.

The man knew the Soldiers were the only hope for his daughter's recovery.

"In the U.S., this girl would have had

skin grafts. But obviously here we don't have the technology to do that," said Ayer referring to the fact that they are at a remote COP. However, with their expertise and the supplies they do have, the Soldiers have still been able to provide successful treatment.

They have been cleaning, bandaging and applying burn cream to the wounds to help them heal. Although this treatment is slower, it is still effective and they expect her to make a full recovery, Ayer said.

"We've seen a dramatic change in her injuries. We've been taking our time and she has been doing very well," said Army Capt. Norman Dupuis of Morrisville, Vt., the physician's assistant at the clinic. "It's pretty safe to say that she is probably over the hump. She is so young that she will be able to regenerate all that skin."

They have treated her about five times since her injury. Unfortunately, her father is only able to bring her periodically because he fears retaliation from insurgents, he said through a translator.

"We know that the village they are from has a lot of insurgents from Pakistan," said Ayer. "It is definitely frustrating because we've started care and we need to continue it."

Her father, like many other residents in the local villages, was very wary of asking the Soldiers for help.

"Several people say that they heard we are infidels. But then (after being treated at the clinic) they say that their family wouldn't even help them as much as we did," said Dupuis.

During their time at Hererra, the Soldiers have treated nine major trauma cases, and they were able to save all but three patients' lives.

In addition, they also see "their regulars," like the girl with burned feet, and some with less serious injuries who they continue to treat.

"We've had some decent victories. Once they come here they see that we're not infidels. We're good people and we're here to do whatever we can to help," Dupuis said.

The father of the little girl was a firsthand witness to this as he saw the diligence and compassion with which the Soldiers treated his daughter.

As the Soldiers worked, the girl's father watched them intently as he held her in a gentle embrace, kissing her forehead as she whimpered at the more painful parts of the treatment.

When the Soldiers were done, he spoke to them through a translator thanking them profusely for their help and promised to return the next day for treatment.

"We're here to do our job and support our Soldiers, but it is nice to know that we've made an impact here," said Dupuis.

Rakkasans give trees, expansion project helps boost Afghan economy

Story and photos by U.S. Army Pfc. Chris McKenna
3rd Brigade Combat Team, Public Affairs

On a forward operating base that expects to increase its population in the coming months, space is a valuable commodity.

And in a country that is composed primarily of deserts and arid mountains, good lumber is hard to come by.

Personnel from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Brigade Combat Team have found a way to alleviate both problems – by harvesting 17 acres of olive trees and donating the wood to the Afghan government, June 29.

FOB Salerno's once-scenic olive grove is a thing of the past, making way for a second dining facility to accommodate the influx of personnel connected with force expansion in Task Force Rakkasan's battle space.

"As part of the expansion of the FOB, we needed to clear out several acres of trees," said U.S. Army Capt. Anthony Soika, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, base operations commander, from Minneapolis. "Obviously that wood had to go somewhere, so it made sense to give it to the locals since there is such a dramatic shortage of wood in Afghanistan."

Local contractors handled the cutting in late June and began shipping June 29.

The trees will be transported to Khost city and handed over to personnel from the Afghan Department of Interior, who are expected to in return sell them at a price much lower than normal market value.

The money raised from the sales will be added to the local government budget so they can better care for the people of Afghanistan, said Mohammad Safar, a representative for the Chief of Khost Agriculture.

"This will become extra income for both the government and people of Afghanistan," Safar said.

Soika said while the donation is a step toward aiding the local economy, it's only the start of the program and as more space is needed on the FOB, more felled trees will be donated to the Afghan government.

"This becomes a win-win for everyone involved," Soika said. "We win hearts and minds, the people save money and have wood for heating and cooking, and the Afghan government is able to care for its own."

Despite the aggressive construction plan, FOB Salerno won't end up treeless, Soika added.

Base engineers had planned for more expansion, so more trees were originally on the chopping block. However, with no projects currently slated that require tree removal, base personnel don't yet know if or when they will next need to clear and donate trees, said Soika.

"Part of the expansion zone had a few acres of large mature trees, but given the area is not presently intended for a specific use [we] thought it best to leave those trees alone for now," Soika said. "If we withdraw from this area without needing to cut them down, then we'll have saved 50-100 trees that are at least 25 years old so they can grow and be available in the future."



Afghan contractors cut down trees on Forward Operating Base Salerno, Afghanistan, June 29, preparing for FOB expansion. Nearly 17 acres of trees have been cut down and the wood is being handed over to the Khost Chief of Agriculture to auction it off to the people at a much lower rate than normal. The money raised from the sales will be added to the local government budget to care for the people of Afghanistan.



U.S. Army Lt. Col. (Dr.) Paul Phillips, an orthopedic surgeon assigned to the 344th CSH at FOB Salerno, performs surgery on a 14-year-old local Afghan boy who sustained a gunshot wound to his arm. Phillips is one of four surgeons at the Salerno Hospital.

World Class Trauma Care

Story and photos by U.S. Army Sgt. Brent C. Powell,
3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division PAO

“Attention on the FOB. Attention on the FOB ...” These seemingly harmless words blare from an array of loud speakers and echo across Forward Operating Base Salerno, and are usually followed by code words that describe the number of patients inbound on a medical evacuation flight.

Most people continue about their daily business unaffected, but for the medical staff of the Salerno Hospital the code words mean two things: mass casualties are coming in, and it’s about to get very busy.

In the past 38 days as of July 13, the hospital staff has responded to 39 trauma events and admitted 47 patients. They took nearly 600 x-rays, performed 57 surgeries, conducted 259 CT scans, and treated 56 battle-related injuries.

“This is a trauma hospital,” said Army Lt. Col. (Dr.) Gregory A. Kolb, commanding officer, 344th Combat Support Hospital. “It’s not a typical hospital like we have in the U.S. Most of our patients are trauma patients.”

Approximately 90 percent of those who arrive at Salerno Hospital do so by a medevac helicopter, and are coming to get treatment for injuries sustained in battle. “Most of the injuries we see here are from improvised explosive devices, shrapnel and gunshot wounds,” said Kolb, a native of Atlanta.

Once patients arrive, the hospital is equipped to provide the best care available. The facility has its own labs, CT scan equipment, radiology section, operating room, pharmacy and more.

“This hospital is completely on par with hospitals in the U.S.,” said Army Lt. Col. Paul J. Schenarts, a trauma surgeon and deputy commander of clinical services for the 344th CSH. “We don’t lack anything. We are able to get diagnostic results back very quickly here, usually within a matter of minutes. That doesn’t happen in the states.”

In addition, the hospital also has some of the most highly-trained staff available.

“Our staff here is very professional and very compassionate,” said Kolb. “But, in a trauma hospital it all boils down to the quality of the surgeons, and, without a doubt, I have the best surgeons out there.”

One of those surgeons is Schenarts, a reservist, who brings a wealth of knowledge and medical expertise with him. He is a professor of surgery and critical care, as well as the assistant dean for clinical academic affairs at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C.

“To work here, you need your funny bone, your back bone and your brain bone,” he said. “I feel like it’s not only my duty, but an honor for me to be able to do this. Being able to provide critical care to Soldiers is really wonderful.”

Although their main focus is saving Soldiers’ lives, the hospital also treats contractors, coalition forces, detainees, Afghan National Security Force members and local nationals on a case-by-case basis.

Recently, they treated several civilians who had been the target of an insurgent ambush and massacre that claimed 12 lives. One of the survivors was very happy to be treated by the hospital staff.

“I thank the ISAF forces so much,” said Gula Gha, a 28-year-old Pakistan native from Parachinar district, Pakistan. “If it was not for their help, I would have died. I had lost a lot of blood, but the American doctors saved my life. I will never forget them.”

Operation Shamshir

Story by U.S. Army 1st Lt. R. J. Peek, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment

Soldiers from Company A, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment conducted a joint air-assault operation with members of the Afghan National Civil Order Police and Afghan National Army soldiers in support of Operation Shamshir in eastern Ghazni province Aug. 6 through 9.

Operation Shamshir, held to disrupt insurgent activity, was also the first Task Force Iron Rakkasan operation to include soldiers from the 3rd Kandak, 3rd Brigade, 203rd Corps of the ANA. It helped establish a new relationship between U.S. forces and the Afghan soldiers.

On the first day of the mission, the forces air-assaulted into the area and immediately secured it.

The next phase of the operation was clearing several suspected insurgent safe havens. The Soldiers successfully searched and cleared the areas without incident.

After the area was secure, the leadership of each security element met with village elders to discuss the security conditions of the town and listen to any problems with which the elders needed assistance.

While U.S. forces were meeting with local leaders, ANSF took the opportunity to meet with the local people. One of the topics discussed was increased security the Afghans can expect to see in the coming months.

The Soldiers also talked about security for the upcoming elections and the importance of the Afghan people’s participation.

Meanwhile, the ANSOP used their expertise and knowledge to interact with and help the ANA soldiers integrate smoothly into the joint operation.

“We were glad we didn’t have a fire fight with the enemy,” said one Afghan policeman, who did not want to give his name. “It allowed us more time to work with these soldiers and help train them.”

The only enemy activity during the operation was a pair of ineffective indirect mortar rounds fired at the lead security element on the first day.

“We expected to see more activity from the enemy while we were out there,” said Mohammed Ishali, an ANA soldier from 3rd Kandak, 3rd Bde., 203rd Thunder Corps. “The fact that the enemy was intimidated by us is just fine because it allowed us to interact with the elders and the local people.”

Overall, the four-day mission was a success and laid the foundation for future joint operations, said Army 1st Lt. Vance Gonzales, a native of Weddington, N.C., and executive officer for Co. A, 3rd Bn., 187th Inf. Reg.

“This is the first major operation we’ve done with this group of Afghan Army soldiers,” said Gonzales. “They proved their strength of mind and body with this long and tiring mission, and they performed well.”

Rakkasan Soldiers from Co. C, 3rd Bn., 187th Inf. Regt., 101st Airborne Div., and ANA soldiers from the 3rd Kandak, 3rd Bde., 203rd Thunder Corps stop to take a break during a joint mission as part of Operation Tabar V in Ghazni province Aug. 8. The four-day operation was designed to disrupt insurgent operations in the area and to build relations with local village leaders and elders. Operation Tabar V was in support of ANA 203rd Thunder Corps’ Operation Shamshir, an operation to shape security conditions prior to September parliamentary elections. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Lorenzo D. Ware, 982nd Combat Camera Company)



Developing good relations

Story and photos by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Gary A. Witte
300th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

It does not take long for the kids to show up.

When Afghan and International Security Assistance Forces set foot in a community in eastern Afghanistan, they become objects of fascination to question, shake hands with and watch.

“They’ll ask us why we’re here,” said U.S. Army Spc. Cory B. Petrosky of Grapevine, Texas, a radio operator with Company A, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force Bulldog. “They’ll talk about their daily lives ... They like to let us know what they’re doing. They’ll show us their school books.”

Many of the youths ask for the pens U.S. Soldiers keep in their uniform sleeves while others want to say hello and show off their English skills.

Troops can quickly find themselves surrounded by a crowd of smiling children.

U.S. Army Capt. Robert R. Reynolds of Huntsville, Ala., the company commander of the unit based at Combat Outpost Honaker-Miracle in Kunar province, said the more contact his Soldiers have had with a village, the friendlier the residents are and the more cooperation they provide.

“I think we’re very respectful to the people,” he said. “They always want to ask us in for tea, and the kids always go up to the Soldiers and want to give them high-fives.”

Reynolds, whose base sits where the Watapur and Pech Valleys meet, said their most recent focus with residents has been crop diversification.

This program involves the Afghan government paying farmers to keep roadside cornfields at a certain height and thereby denying insurgents a place from which they can ambush traffic.

“We’re getting out there and working with the locals ... and showing them we’re here to secure the area for everyone,” Reynolds said.

Building rapport with the Afghan people can be accomplished in many ways.

Provincial reconstruction, agribusiness development and civil affairs teams across the country serve as a conduit between the people and their government to ensure the progress of public works projects.



U.S. Army Pfc. Gary W. Faust of Bowling Green, Ky., a medic with 4th Platoon, Company D, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force Bulldog, practices his fist bump with children of Andersil village in eastern Afghanistan’s Kunar province July 20. The unit, based at nearby Combat Outpost Honaker-Miracle, visited the community to discuss crop diversification programs with village elders.

Reaching out

At Combat Outpost Najil in Laghman province, the civil affairs team does its work through daily meetings with area residents – whether in their homes, at community gathering places or on the hillside base itself.

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Joshua E. Barton of Ridgefield, Conn., with Company B, 1st Battalion, 102nd Infantry Regiment, Task Force Iron Gray, said establishing trust with the Afghans can be a long process.

“If they don’t trust you, they won’t believe you,” Barton said. “They won’t work with you.”

Barton, who serves as the lead non-commissioned officer for the COP Najil civil affairs team, said they build respect through everyday interactions – getting to know the residents and letting the Afghans get to know them. He said his main goal is to mentor the Afghans and help them help themselves.

When the team makes repeated visits to villages, the residents become accustomed to their presence, Barton said.

“The next time I go, I’m not a stranger anymore,” he said.

Gaining the confidence and support of the people is essential to the mission, he noted. Demonstrating they can believe what he says is a crucial part of it. Recently, he sponsored a pre-Ramadan dinner for locals to demonstrate his respect for their culture.

“In order to get close to people, you have to build a relationship with them,” Barton said. “You have to get out every single day.”

In some cases, relationships can be built without ever seeing the person. One successful ISAF program is the sponsoring of Afghan-managed radio stations.

At COP Honaker-Miracle, the station is “The Voice of the Waterpur,” at 91.5 FM where music, advice shows and Islamic programming serve as a rallying point to bring Afghan communities from throughout the area together, U.S. Army Capt. Adam R. Alexander of Mount Airy, Md., the base executive officer, said.

The station has attracted such an audience that it receives about 200 letters a week, ranging from fan letters to song requests.

It has featured informative interviews with local public figures such as the director of the District Development Authority and the Afghan National Army commander from nearby Combat Outpost Able Main.

Most importantly, the station is run and programmed by local Afghans – not the Americans.

“We don’t use it as a propaganda tool,” Alexander said. “It’s really popular ... it’s an entertaining radio station. People are well-aware of it around here.”

The station also provides an alternative to a nearby insurgent radio station

that encourages attacks against Afghan and ISAF troops. “Voice of the Waterpur” Manager Rasol Mohammad said despite insurgent threats against his broadcasters, the local population regularly expresses its appreciation of the work they do and the message they send.

“They like us,” Mohammad said. “They respect us because we work at the radio station. It’s a service for my country.”

Being prepared

Service is also a focus at Forward Operating Base Finley-Shields in the Nangarhar province, where an Afghan scouting program has steadily built momentum.

The program, which currently involves service members and base personnel working with Afghan children, was recently awarded a \$100,000 grant by the U.S. Department of State. U.S. Army Capt. Glenn T. Battschinger of Mays Landing, N.J., a civil affairs team commander with the 404th Civil Affairs Battalion, Task Force Spartan, began the program in February.

As a Boy Scout troop leader and former Eagle Scout, Battschinger said he wanted a way to provide Afghan youth with the attention they need and to help teach them discipline and respect.

“I’m teaching these kids the way I teach my Scouts at home,” he said. “They’re the same children.”

With the support of local Afghan leaders, about 100 boys have joined the troop and meet weekly in a secure field at the base, learning such skills as knot-tying and first aid.

“It takes an hour a week and that’s more joy than we get from the rest of the week,” Battschinger said of those at the base who volunteer to help at the meetings.

One of those volunteers was U.S. Army Capt. Mary B. Danner-Jones of Neenah, Wis., the public affairs officer for the Nangarhar Provincial Reconstruction Team. Her unit’s executive officer, U.S. Army Maj. Jocelyn Leventhal, asked her to take charge of a girl’s scouting program that would mirror the boys’. In August, they had their first meeting in a separate part of the field.

Plans call for the girls to learn crafts, hygiene and first aid. Danner-Jones said she hopes the girls’ program “opens up the world for them and gives them a view outside of their compound.”

The Afghan Scouts program is currently not affiliated with the World



U.S. Army Capt. Dakota Steedsman of Harvey, N.D., company commander of Company D, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force Bulldog, discusses crop diversification programs with elders of the village of Shamun in eastern Afghanistan’s Kunar province during a July 14 meeting.

Organization of the Scout Movement, although it uses many of the same traditions. In April, Boy Scouts from the United States sent the Afghans neckerchiefs they could wear to make up for their lack of uniforms.

Uniforms won’t be a problem much longer with the State Department grant, which will fund Afghan Scout troops at 30 schools throughout the Jalalabad area for a year, Battschinger said. It will cover the costs of two troops at each school – one male and one female – in addition to uniforms and instructors.

“All those Afghan children need is a bit of attention,” he said, noting the future leaders of the country are children. “This is something that will touch everyone that comes in contact with it.”

Faridoon Malikzai, a senior patrol leader interviewed in April, said the program had encouraged the kids to go to school, stay honest and stay out of trouble. He hoped to someday work as a professional scout leader.

“I’ll train the people to do good works,” Malikzai said. “The future of the country belongs to the kids. They will know what is right and what is wrong.”

Trust during wartime

U.S. Army Capt. Dakota Steedsman of Harvey, N.D., company commander of Company D, 1st Bn., 327th Inf. Reg., at Combat Outpost Michigan, has been working with local leaders on both crop diversification and the rebuilding of the main road through the Pech Valley.

The road suffered washouts during the heavy rains of July. While the damage impacts military patrols, it also hurts residents, since they have to use the road for

transportation and commerce, he noted.

“That’s the main way for the people to get their products to market,” Steedsman said.

One recent success working with community leaders is the village of Shamun, which hasn’t been visited by officials in years locals said. His unit made contact with the village in July and is discussing potential development projects with its elders.

“It’s all been positive,” Steedsman said. “They’re happy to have us there.”

Afghan personnel can make a difference in these meetings. During the unit’s first visit to Shamun, an Afghan Army lieutenant encouraged village elders to participate in crop diversification, making the case and discussing the issues without the need of a translator.

“It definitely helps when we go to these things,” Steedsman said.

Petrosky said the reaction village children have to himself and his fellow Soldiers is a good way to tell how a community feels about them.

Some children at villages unused to them, hang back, scared of their presence.

Once the people become comfortable with them, the children move in with their questions and requests.

Before he came to Afghanistan, Petrosky was not expecting the populace to be friendly at all. He thought they would be hostile, and it makes an impact when he and other Soldiers get the opposite reaction.

“It makes me feel like we’re here for a reason,” the specialist said. “It makes you feel pretty good ... It makes us feel like we’re making a difference here.”

CMT Keeps Soldiers Supplied

Story and photo by U.S. Army Sgt. Brent C. Powell,
3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division

Like busy bees buzzing in and out of a hive full of honey, a swarm of helicopters are constantly swooping in and out of the landing zone at Forward Operating Base Sharana, Khowst province.

Instead of carrying pollen to the hive, they carry bellies full of cargo and supplies to FOBs all over Afghanistan's rugged and mountainous landscape.

And just like helper bees in the hive, a special team of Soldiers are working non-stop to load and attach a vast array of cargo to the busy choppers, ensuring Soldiers in the field have the supplies they need.

The Soldiers are from the cargo management team, Company A, 626th Brigade Support Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. They are among a select few who do aerial resupply missions on a daily basis. It's a challenging task that keeps them buzzing.

In fact, for the month of July, the cargo management team was responsible for loading 1,129,052 pounds of cargo. That figure is just over the team's monthly average of one million pounds.

"It's definitely a lot of work," said Army Sgt. Bradley A. Denno, noncommissioned officer in charge of the cargo management team and a native of Detroit, Mich., assigned to Co. A, 626th BSB, 3rd Bde., 101st Airborne Div. "It's non-stop action from the time we get here until we leave."

The team is broken into two shifts with two Soldiers working together on each one. Together, they send supplies and equipment to nearly 30 FOBs and combat outposts.

"Our mission here is to move supplies and equipment out to support the Soldiers in the field," said Denno. "We supply all the forward operating bases in Regional Command-East's area of operation with food, mail, ammunition, weapons, repair parts and construction materials. We load pretty much anything they could possibly need or use."

Although the team occasionally loads military CH-47 Chinooks, they spend the majority of their time loading large, white, civilian-owned and operated, Mi-18 helicopters they call "jingle birds."

Because the jingle birds are limited to carrying only 4,000 pounds at a time, they usually have to make multiple trips to a FOB and back to transport all the needed supplies and equipment.

"Once a bird lands, we try to have it loaded and back in the air within 20 minutes," said Denno. "That's not always possible, but that's our goal."

When the wheels of the helo touch down, the team moves into action. Using a forklift, the team will usually put between four to six pallets on each aircraft depending on the weight. However, sometimes the team has to load the birds the hard way — by hand.

"It's a difficult and physically demanding job," said Army Pvt. William W. Foote, cargo management specialist and native of Klamath Falls, Ore., attached to Co. A, 626th BSB, 3rd Bde., 101st Airborne Div. "But we are going to accomplish the mission no matter what."

Although a majority of the helos are loaded by forklift or by hand, those aren't the only methods the team uses to get supplies out; occasionally they use a special method called sling-loading.

Sling-loading involves using netting, ropes and hooks to attach cargo to the bottom of the helicopters. In order to pick-up the supplies, the helos hover above them while a Soldier standing below attaches the load. The team conducted more than 70 sling-loads during the month of July.

"We will sling-load anything that won't fit inside the birds," said Denno. "Some of the common sling-loads we do are fuel bladders, artillery pieces, generators and construction supplies. As long as the load meets the weight requirements, we will find a way to get it on the bird."

"I have a great team out here, and I'm very lucky," said Army Sgt. Patricia A. Oconnell, noncommissioned officer in charge of FOB Sharana's helicopter landing zone, assigned to Co. A, 626th BSB, 3rd Bde., 101st Airborne Div., from Clarksville, Tenn. "Everyone is well-versed and skilled in not only their specific job, but they are also capable of doing every job out here."

Although the mission keeps the Rakkasans busy, they all seem to find something they like about it.

"One of the things I like most about the job is the Soldiers I work with," said Foote. "They are really good at what they do, and I've learned a lot from my NCOs."

No matter the challenge ahead, the Soldiers of the cargo management team stand ready to meet it head on.

"This job takes a lot of dedication and devotion to the mission as well as patience," said Denno. "My team works hard and gives everything they have to support the troops outside the wire, making sure they have what they need to sustain the fight. It's a mission we've been working hard on since we got here, and it's a mission we will continue to work hard on until we leave."

Army Sgt. Patricia A. Oconnell, a native of Clarksville, Tenn., and assigned to Company A, 626th Brigade Support Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, prepares to attach a 500-gallon collapsible fuel bladder to the bottom of a helicopter at Forward Operating Base Sharana Aug. 7. Oconnell is the noncommissioned officer in charge of the helicopter landing zone.

US, ANA air assault operations

Story and photos by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Brent C. Powell,
3rd Bde., 101st Airborne Div.

In the early morning hours of Oct. 8, U.S. and Afghan National Army Soldiers conducted a successful air assault operation in the mountains of Khowst Province, resulting in the location and destruction of two insurgent weapons caches.

The operation, named War Old Coffee, came after weeks of intelligence gathering, planning and mission rehearsals by U.S. Soldiers of Apache Troop, 1st Squadron, 33rd Cavalry Regiment, with assistance from their ANA partners.

“We previously gathered intelligence from many sources on a cache site located along logistic supply routes we knew the insurgents were using,” said U.S. Army 1st Lt. Paul Corcoran, 1st Platoon leader for Apache Troop and native of North Attleboro, Mass. “We developed a mission plan with our ANA partners, and then we used an air-assault to execute the plan and move on the objective.”

The troops were transported to the site by CH-47 Chinook helicopters, using a technique known as a pinnacle landing to off load them high in the mountains. The special type of insertion allows troops to immediately claim high ground and gives them a tactical advantage over insurgent forces.

Once off the helicopters, the joint forces climbed even higher, fighting their way over sharp rocks, up steep inclines and around potentially deadly cliff faces.

“One of the biggest challenges of this mission was definitely terrain,” said Corcoran. “Terrain is always an issue during any type of mission here in Afghanistan. It was tough, but we overcame it.”

After making their way through the unforgiving terrain, the Soldiers arrived at their first objective, a bunker complex of wood and dirt, located along a winding mountain trail.

The Soldiers established security on the site and then moved in.

After quickly clearing the objective and ensuring no enemy forces were present, they searched the bunkers and found what they were looking for – a recoilless rifle, rifle-propelled grenades, a machine gun, ammunition, clothing, sleeping bags and various cooking items.

A thorough inventory was conducted, then an explosive ordnance team was called in to destroy the items. The clothing and sleeping materials were brought outside and burned to prevent future use by insurgent forces.

Although everyone seemed excited and relieved to have destroyed the objective, the day was far from over.

“After successfully clearing the first weapons cache, we received intelligence of another cache in the area,” said Corcoran. “Being flexible, we were able to adjust our mission and move on that objective as well.”

The determined forces picked up their gear and began the trek to their next target. They hiked down the side of a mountain, traversed a deep wadi, and marched nearly a mile across open ground before reaching a heavily wooded and secluded area.

In a completely harmless-looking dirt area, an Afghan citizen, whom the troops brought with them, pinpointed the spot he said contained insurgent weapons. U.S. Army Lt. Col. Stephen Lutsky, a native of Clinton, N.J., and commanding officer of 1st Sqdn., 33rd Cav. Regt., began the search by digging for the suspected cache with the only tool he had, a sharp rock.

Others quickly joined in, digging with their hands and anything they could find. After a few minutes, their exhausting efforts paid off in a big way.

Hidden under about two feet of dirt, the team located more than 40 recoilless rifle rounds, three rifle-propelled grenades, nearly 20 pounds of powdered explosives, two pressure plates, medical supplies, identification cards, clothing and various paperwork.

After inventorying all the items, EOD again stepped in to destroy them with high explosives.

“We’ve been working this area quite a bit, but the enemy forces have been making these weapons caches difficult to find,” said Lutsky. “Having an

(Afghan citizen) who knew where these caches were come on the operation with us helped us be successful today. By destroying these caches we were able to take a huge chunk of weapons capability from the enemy.”

The success of the operation was something everyone was proud of.

“It’s a great relief getting these weapons off the battlefield,” said Corcoran. “When you know there are weapon systems out there that endanger the lives of your Soldiers and others, and you are able to remove that threat from the hands of insurgents, that’s a great feeling at the end of the day.”

After destroying the second cache, the joint forces called in air support to transport them back to Camp Clark, finally allowing them to relax and reflect on the success of the mission.

“One of the things that made this operation successful was we were able to plan and do rehearsals with our ANA partners and have them execute many tasks during the operation,” he said. “They performed very well, and were able to take our guidance and the pre-mission rehearsal information and execute without any major issues.”

By working together, the U.S. and Afghan National Security Forces sent a powerful message to insurgents.

“The message we sent today is that coalition forces are able to work closely with the ANSF, allowing us to effectively move on these areas,” said Corcoran. “There really is no safe place for insurgents to hide their weapons or information from us. We have the upper hand right now and we plan to keep it.”

(background) U.S. Army Pfc. Seth Zimmer, an M203 gunner and native of Marionette, Ohio, assigned to Troop A, 1st Squadron, 33rd Cavalry Regiment, keeps an eye out for insurgents during a joint air-assault mission with Afghan National Security Forces in the mountains of Khowst Province Oct. 8. The successful operation resulted in the location and destruction of two insurgent weapons caches containing recoilless rifle rounds, rocket-propelled grenades, small-arms ammunition and a machine gun.

(Right) U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Michael Wade, company intelligence support team member and native of Auburn, Mass., assigned to Troop A, 1st Squadron, 33rd Cavalry Regiment, inventories items found buried at a weapons cache during a joint air-assault mission with Afghan National Security Forces in the mountains of Khowst Province Oct. 8.



Working Together

101st Soldiers, ANA conduct combined airborne assault into Charbaran Valley

Story and photos by U.S. Army Spc. Luther L. Boothe Jr., Task Force Currahee Public Affairs Office, 4th Brigade Combat Team

The autumn air was cold during the early morning hours as more than 250 U.S. and Afghan National Army soldiers, each with more than 120 pounds of equipment on their backs, waited for helicopters to take them on an air assault into an area known for harbouring anti-coalition militants.

Soldiers from Company E, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, successfully conducted a combined air assault into the Charbaran Valley. The mission was to enter an area known to be occupied by the Taliban and to clear the enemy from the area, ultimately disrupting their freedom of movement.

"It is not a suspicion that (Charbaran Valley) is a Taliban controlled area; it is known," said U.S. Army 1st Lt. Aaron A.

Taylor of Tecumseh, Mo., 3rd Platoon leader. "Every time other companies have patrolled through the area, they have made contact with the enemy. We were essentially doing a clearing operation.

"We push through the objective, get security and then conduct a deliberate search to look for things like (improvised explosive devices), weapons caches or any other (intelligence)," said Taylor.

The Currahees faced many challenges on the air assault. Working with any

group for the first time can be challenging, said Taylor.

"It is that much more difficult when working with the ANA because of the language barrier," said Taylor. The mission also had many moving parts and was the most complex the TF has done since arriving in Afghanistan.

"We had an air assault, a combined force, multiple (landing zones), several different movements and it all had to come together in the end," said Taylor.

The Afghan terrain was another obstacle the units found themselves up against. "In this terrain, route selection is



(Above) U.S. Army Spc. Jerry Strunk of Anderson, Ind., with E Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, assists an Afghan National Army soldier as he searches through a home in the Charbaran District during the largest combined air assault mission 4th Brigade has conducted this year in the province.

(Left) Task Force White Currahee Soldiers from E Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, move over rough terrain conducting searches through the villages in the Charbaran District during the Toccoa Tikurah, the largest combined air assault mission 4th Brigade Combat Team has conducted this year in the province.

essential in the planning phase," said U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Bartley C. Cardwell of Pineville, La., 3rd Plt. platoon sergeant, E Co., 2-506th Inf. Reg., 4th BCT. "A lot of times when you get out there, the terrain is different than what you see on the map."

Cardwell also explained how traveling through mountains made the trip seem longer than it was.

The air assault allowed the Soldiers from Company E to spend valuable time with their ANA counterparts and to use that time as a training opportunity.

"A big part of the counterinsurgency process is to give the ANA ownership of the fight," said Taylor. "We want to show the people that the government of Afghanistan and their military is legitimate, and they are out there working for their own people."


ANA soldiers were paired up with U.S. Soldiers equivalent to their rank, allowing ANA soldiers to shadow and learn first hand from their U.S. counterparts.

"The majority of (the ANA) that we work with are eager to learn from us," said Cardwell.

"We make them the primary when searching and clearing houses because it gives them the training, and it lets the local populace know they are here to help," said U.S. Army Spc. Anthony C. Stegmeier of Ritzville, Wash., an infantryman and Alpha Team leader with 3rd Squad, 3rd Plt.

After 24 hours and covering more than seven kilometers of terrain, the air assault was complete, and the soldiers had successfully met the mission's goals.

"As long as you accomplish your objectives and we get everyone back home safely without getting hurt, then I would say that it was definitely a successful mission," said Taylor.

"I have been extremely proud of the platoon since day one of the deployment," added Cardwell. "Since we got here, (everyone) has done an overwhelmingly good job." 

Through the veil



Soldiers work to build relationships with Afghan women

Story and photos by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Whitney Hughes, Task Force Wolverine Public Affairs

When U.S. Army Warrant Officer Caitlin Purinton lifted up the thin blue cloth of the burka, she would not have been surprised to see despair in the eyes of the woman who spends most of her life hidden under the head-to-toe garment. Instead, she ducked under the burka and saw the vibrant smile and heard the giggle of a young woman, who, like most Afghan women, is as curious about the American female Soldiers as they are of her.

As a member of the 86th Infantry Brigade Combat Team Female Engagement Team and a North Hero, Vt., native, Purinton has the rare opportunity to see beyond the shield of the burka that separates most Soldiers from Afghan women. The 10-woman FET was created to allow female Soldiers to act as ambassadors to the 50 percent of the population that is off-limits to male Soldiers, and build personal relationships, which are a cornerstone of the Afghan culture and a key to the success of counterinsurgency strategy.

“The FET mission to me is so critical that if I had to exchange blood for it, I would,” said U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Sawyer Alberi of Eden, Vt., the medical operations noncommissioned

officer in charge for the 86th IBCT, and a FET team leader. “Women find strength in other women’s presence. The FET mission is nested very closely in the COIN mission, and unless you do it, you’re not doing the whole COIN mission.”

Pioneers of FET

Before coming to Afghanistan, the leadership of the 86th knew that most of the units who would go “outside the wire” and interact face to face with the Afghans would be in combat arms units, which are mostly male. These interactions, called “key leader engagements,” are essential to making inroads into the Afghan culture, and give the units providing security insight into the problems, concerns and attitudes of the Afghans in the villages they are assigned.

“We basically said ‘let’s get in line with their culture,’” said U.S. Army Capt. Cathy Cappetta of Middlebury, Vt., the officer in charge of the FET. “There was an entire half of the population that the male Soldiers couldn’t interact with, and it is the part of the population that needs the most help.”

In order to ensure that the team was prepared for the delicate, yet essential mission, she helped facilitate and organize a 30-hour training course in Afghan history and culture, information collection, research methods, first aid and military tactics for the female Soldiers.

The Victories

During their nine months in Afghanistan the FET performed eight missions, ranging from air assaults to medical assistance operations.

Although all of the missions were critical to facilitating the brigade’s operations, both Cappetta and Alberi feel the largest success was their work with a local birthing clinic in the city of Charikar in Parwan Province.

The team paid two visits to the clinic. The first was to assess the facility, which had never been seen by U.S. Soldiers. The second visit was to deliver much-needed medical supplies.

“Once women get into a place and they figure out that it is OK that we’re there, it’s a whole lot easier for other people to enter the door, and I think that’s one thing that FET can be really good at,” Alberi said.

The Obstacles

Even for female Soldiers, there were plenty of barriers between them and the Afghan women. For instance, in certain parts of the brigade’s area of responsibility in the Bamyán, Parwan and Panjshir provinces, women are not allowed to leave their homes without a male escort, they must get permission from their husbands even to speak to the female Soldiers, and they are not allowed to participate in the all-male shuras that are the foundation of local society.

So, the Soldiers had to seek out the female voice.

Cappetta recalled a male shura where she was called out to talk to a group of Afghan women who were grouped in a corner in the hall outside the shura room.

“She motioned for me to come over, and it was like it was a big secret,” said Cappetta. The women had to get permission from their husbands, who hovered outside while she met with them. Once she was able to actually get to talk one on one with the women, she was surprised by their inclination to get right down to business, especially when it came to family matters.

“They know that they won’t get many chances to talk to American females, so they get right to the point,” she said. “They don’t think about themselves as much as they do their families. Their focus is how they can make their family or their village better.”

Underneath the Burkas

Despite the obstacles, planning and forethought it took to put themselves in situations where they could interact face to face with Afghan women, they found it was well worth the wait.

Most of the female soldiers expected the Afghan women to be downtrodden and defeated, but were surprised to find the shy smiles of women who epitomize survivors.

“There are strong people under those burkas,” said Alberi. “It’s a testament to the women of Afghanistan that they have managed to endure the Taliban rule here, that they have stayed, and have lived and have survived. There’s inspiration in that.”



U.S. Army Capt. Cathy Cappetta of Middlebury, Vt., the female engagement team officer in charge, shows a woman pictures during a medical aid mission at the Totem Dara Bala School.

RECOGNIZING VALOR

Gates awards medals earned during Operation Strong Eagle



Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates presents a Combat Infantryman's Badge to U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Scott H. Swanson, an infantry squad leader from Friendswood, Texas, assigned to 1st Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Panther, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, along with U.S. Army Lt. Col. William B. Johnson of Bristol, Tenn., Task Force Panther commander, at Forward Operating Base Connolly in eastern Afghanistan Dec. 7. (Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Mark Burrell, Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs)

Story by Combined Joint Task Force-101 Public Affairs

U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates presented six Silver Star Medals and six Bronze Star Medals with Valor to Task Force Bastogne Soldiers at Forward Operating Base Joyce Dec. 7. The Soldiers, all from 1st Battalion and 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, were recognized for heroic actions during Operation Strong Eagle in June and July in eastern Afghanistan.

"I feel a personal responsibility for each and every one of you since I sent you here," Gates said. "I feel the sacrifice and hardship and losses more than you'll ever imagine. So I just want to thank you and tell how much I love you guys."

During the ceremony, Gates recounted the unit's mission as it embarked upon its first

full-on encounter with an organized Taliban enemy.

"We are breaking the momentum of the enemy and will eventually reverse it," the defense secretary said. But, he added, "It will be a while and we will suffer tougher losses as we go."

The Silver Star awardees were: U.S. Army 1st Lt. Stephen R. Tangen of Naperville, Ill.; U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class John P. Fleming of Alton, Ill.; U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Brent A. Schneider of Broken Arrow, Okla.; U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Daniel J. Hayes of Wyoming, Mich.; U.S. Army Cpl. Joshua Busch of Seymour, Wis.; and U.S. Army Pfc. Richard T. Bennett of St. Charles, Ill.

The Bronze Star Medals with Valor were awarded to U.S. Army 1st Lt. David Broyles of Hilliard, Ohio; U.S. Army 1st Lt. Douglas F. Jones of Dallas; U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Matthew Loheide from Long

Island, N.Y.; U.S. Army Staff Sgt. McCarthy Phillip of Fairburn, Ga.; U.S. Army Sgt. Andrew L. Kuklis of Kansas City, Mo.; and U.S. Army Pfc. Alex J. Norzow III of Bowdoin, Maine.



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Scott R. Pearson, a medical platoon sergeant from Phil Campbell, Ala., assigned to 1st Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Panther, displays a coin he received from Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates at Forward Operating Base Connolly Dec. 7. (Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Mark Burrell, Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs)

"It's huge to have the secretary of defense come out here to recognize these Soldiers who are out there taking the fight to the enemy every day," said Maj. Gen. John F. Campbell, commander of Command Joint Task Force-101 and Regional Command-East.

One of the Silver Star recipients echoed Campbell's sentiment.

"It was an incredible honor that the secretary of defense would come; it was a little overwhelming," said Tangen, Scout Platoon leader, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Bn., 327th Inf. Tangen was formerly 1st Platoon leader of Company C, 2nd Bn., 32th Inf.

"FOB Joyce gets attacked almost every day, so just the fact that he would come to a remote FOB like this and put his life on the line — it doesn't happen every day," Tangen said.

During Operation Strong Eagle, TF No Slack was tasked with clearing out Daridam Village to stop insurgents from massing into the Ghaki Valley of eastern Kunar Province.

OPERATION EAGLE CLAW II

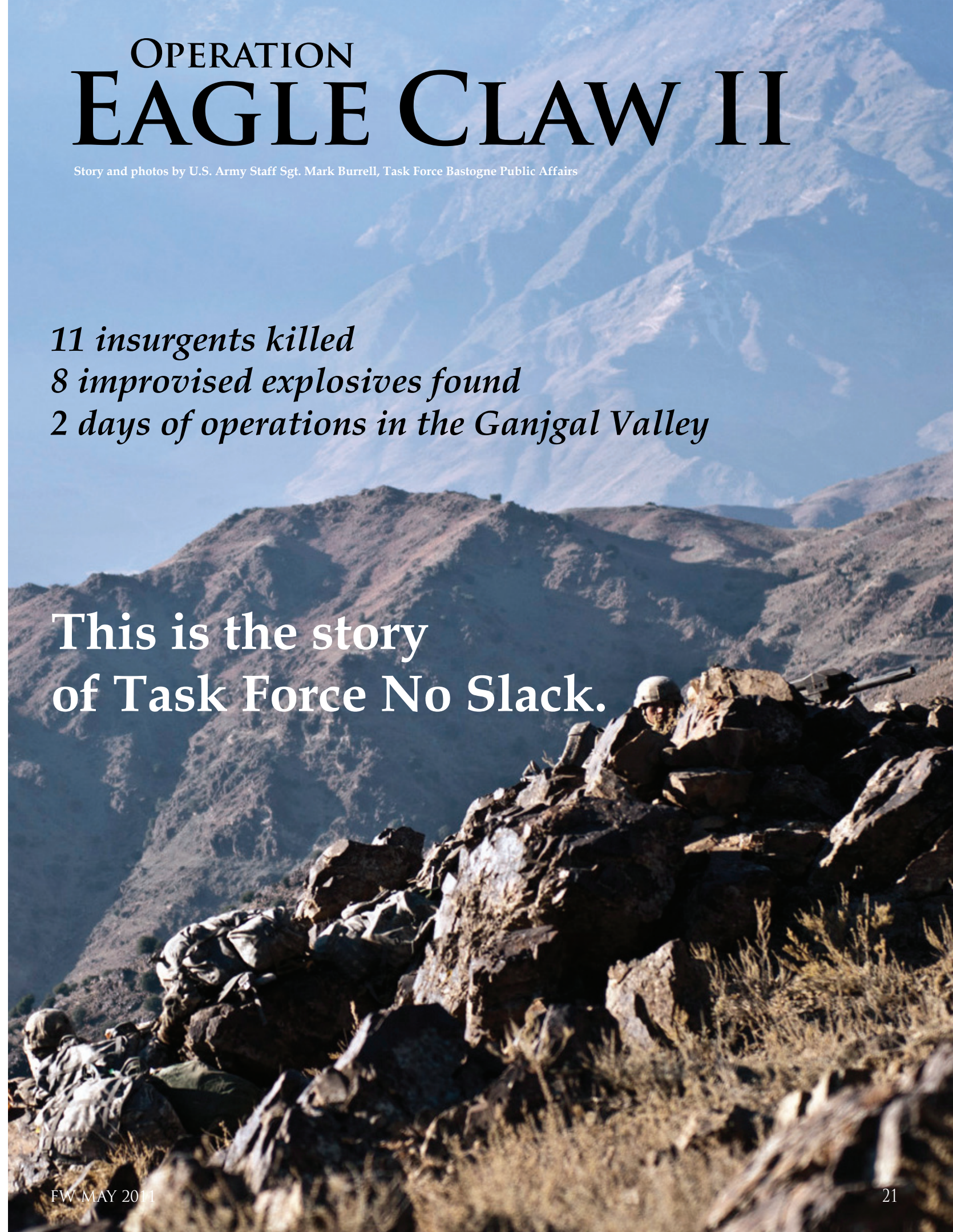
Story and photos by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Mark Burrell, Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs

11 insurgents killed

8 improvised explosives found

2 days of operations in the Ganjgal Valley

This is the story of Task Force No Slack.



Whoop. Whoop. Whoop. The sounds of helicopters echoed through the Ganjgal Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province the morning of Dec. 10.

Swarming, then hovering as expertly as hummingbirds, the CH-47 Chinooks and UH-60 Black Hawks dropped their cargo simultaneously on multiple ridges overlooking the Taliban stronghold only a few kilometers from the Pakistan border.

Task Force No Slack Soldiers, with heavy combat loads, saturated the valley's walls and Operation Eagle Claw II began.

Within the first few minutes of the mission, it became real.

"There were a number of fighters we saw," said U.S. Army Capt. Ryan A. McLaughlin, Company B commander, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, TF No Slack, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division. "You could hear them on our infill when we were moving. They did attempt to react, and very quickly they were shown that that wasn't a very good course of action."

Several volleys of hellfire missiles exploded, killing five insurgent fighters moving into position less than a few hundred meters away. They were armed and ready for a fight.

The light from the explosions faded and darkness reigned again. As the world slept, the Taliban stalked the Co. B Soldiers moving into positions high in the rocky Hindu Kush Mountains to provide maximum security for the ground assault force.

"The terrain was pretty rugged," explained McLaughlin of Tuscaloosa, Ala. "We were at about 4,800 feet with elevation changes in every direction. 'You go 300 meters, and you're dropping several hundred feet. It's pretty tricky, particularly in hours of darkness. We were looking at zero illumination with severe elevation changes.'"

(Right) During Operation Eagle Claw II, artillery fire explodes on a suspected insurgent hideout. Eleven insurgents were killed during the two-day operation, the purpose of which was to disrupt a safe haven of the insurgents in the Ganjgal Valley.

(Below) U.S. Army Sgt. Richard A. Darvial of Amery, Wis., (kneeling), a combat medic, takes cover while U.S. Army Spc. Corey C. Canterbury of Ocean Springs, Miss., a mortar man, both from Task Force No Slack, fires mortars from a mountain top overlooking the Ganjgal Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province Dec. 11.



No matter the obstacles, the Bayonet Co. Soldiers had an essential role in the overall success of the operation.

"The overarching concept for the mission was to disrupt what has become a safe haven for the insurgents that are in this valley," said McLaughlin. "It's proximity to Asad Abad, the provincial capital, was allowing the bad guys to have easy access coming through Pakistan, through this valley and into the provincial capital. Obviously that's a problem for what we want to do..."

"Asad Abad is the most populated area and the center of governance, so we need to protect that."



U.S. Army Sgt. Joseph P. Khamvoonga, an infantryman from Mililani, Hawaii, assigned to Bayonet Company, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, uses binoculars to check out the mountainside overlooking the Ganjgal Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province Dec. 11. The TF No Slack Soldiers were supporting Operation Eagle Claw II.

Freezing winds whipped the rocks as the sun crawled from Pakistan over the barren mountains. Soldiers filled sandbags and built rock walls to stay warm, but more importantly, to stay safe.

"We're (kind of) set up in a patrol base," said U.S. Army Sgt. Joseph M. McKenzie, an infantry team leader from Chicago, also assigned to Co. B. "I'm pretty sure you've heard, 'You can always fix your security.' So we keep making it better."

McKenzie and his squad meticulously piled rock after rock giving them the best cover possible from enemy fire.

"We're basically taking a page out of the Taliban book," added McKenzie. "I mean, they build theirs with just rocks, but add some sandbags and it helps lock the rocks down."

At the same time, other TF No Slack Soldiers cleared villages on the valley floor. They found eight improvised explosive devices, multiple ordnance rounds and ammunition.

"From up here, it feels pretty good to be able to give the support everybody down there needs," said U.S. Army Pfc. Benjamin J. Lohmeyer of Benton, Kan., a rifleman from Co. B. "If something bad happens down there, we're able to have their backs, and that feels pretty good."

Perched high on a rocky nest with a .50-caliber machine gun, Lohmeyer and his squad had a bird's-eye view of the action.

"Why do I do it? I don't know why really," Lohmeyer said. "I do it for the people back home to make sure they're safe and so my buddies are safe ... If I weren't here today, I'd probably have some bad job back home. I'm not going to lie; I'd be trying to get money somehow just trying to get by."

Soldiers like Lohmeyer, who aren't just trying to get by, were critical for the overall success of a mission with so many moving parts.

"We were basically able to make a fairly impenetrable cordon around the objective," said McLaughlin. "That allowed the ground element to come in and do their clearance more quickly than I actually projected, without having to fire a single shot."

Though Bayonet Co. Soldiers didn't fire a single shot, 11 insurgents were killed during the operation.

"I think it was an important operation," said McLaughlin. "We didn't kill hundreds of insurgents or find Osama bin Laden hiding in the Ganjgal Valley, but nonetheless a very important next step in

our progression. The impacts of this one will be felt in the insurgent networks.

"Insurgent propaganda has recently stated specifically 'We own the Ganjgal Valley and the coalition will never set foot here again.' And then within a matter of weeks we showed them, 'Hey, we can come here anytime we want, and we'll do whatever we want to extend the reach of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.'"

As darkness fell on the third night, the fatigued Soldiers swiftly and silently moved out from their fighting positions and started toward home.

"I think when they see the 101st patch, I don't think its fear, but it's (an) understanding that we mean business," McLaughlin said. "We have the tools and the desire to apply counterinsurgency principles successfully. We're just not here to shell the mountains and not just here to kill them, but we're actually working on a strategic victory. I think that scares insurgents more than anything else."

The beating of the helicopters coming to pick up the Soldiers signaled yet another successful mission for TF No Slack and yet another setback for the all of the insurgents who threaten Afghanistan. ★

OEF 2010-2011

FALLEN HEROES

Spc. Vincent Owens
Pfc. Jason M. Kropat
Sgt. Jonathan Richardson
Pfc. Jonathon D. Hall
Spc. Jeremy L. Brown
Spc. Christopher Barton
2nd Lt. Michael E. McGahan
1st Sgt. Robert N. Barton
Spc. Blaine E. Redding
Sgt. Joshua A. Lukeala
Spc. Charles S. Jirtle
Spc. Matthew R. Catlett
Sgt. Erick J. Klusacek
Milosz Gorka
Polish Pvt. Grzegorz Bukowski
Spc. Benjamin Osborn
Spc. Nathan W. Cox
Pfc. Gunnar R. Hotchkin
Spc. Joseph D. Johnson
Staff Sgt. Patrick Hunter
Pfc. Benjamin J. Park
French Cpl. Steeve Cocol
Spc. Andrew R. Looney
Pfc. David T. Miller
Sgt. Brandon M. Silk
1st Sgt. Eddie Turner
Pfc. Russell E. Madden
Spc. Jared C. Plunk
Spc. Blair D. Thompson
Spc. David A. Holmes
Polish Cpl. Pawel Stypula
Sgt. John M. Rogers
Staff Sgt. Eric B. Shaw
Spc. David W. Thomas
Sgt. 1st Class Kristopher D. Chapleau
Spc. Matthew Hennigan
Pfc. Ryan J. Grady
Pfc. David Jefferson
Spc. Louis Fastuca

French Staff Sgt. Laurent Mosik
Pfc. Anthony W. Simmons
Spc. Robert W. Crow Jr.
Sgt. Shaun M. Mittler
Spc. Carlos J. Negron
Spc. Joseph Whitting Dimock II
Pfc. Nathaniel D. Garvin
Pvt. Brandon M. King
Sgt. Leston M. Winters
Sgt. 1st Class John H. Jarrell
Sgt. Mario Rodriguez
Sgt. Matthew W. Weikert
PO3 Jarod Newlove
HT2 Justin McNeley
Pfc. James J. O'Quin Jr.
Spc. Michael Stansbery
Sgt. Kyle Stout
New Zealand Lt. Timothy O'Donnell
Polish Pfc. Tylenda Dariusz
Sgt. 1st Class Edgar N. Roberts
Pfc. Benjamin G. Chisholm
Pv2. Charles M. High IV
Spc. Christopher Wright
Sgt. Steven J. Deluzio
Spc. Tristan H. Southworth
French OR3 Jean-Nicolas Panezyck
French Lorenzo Mezzasalma
Pfc. Chad D. Coleman
Pv2. Adam J. Novak
Pfc. Bryn T. Raver
Spc. James C. Robinson
Capt. Ellery R. Wallace
French OR8 Herve Enaux
Spc. Andrew Castro
Sgt. Patrick K. Durham
Sgt. Vinson Adkinson
Spc. Raymond C. Alcaraz
Pfc. Matthew E. George
Pfc. James A. Page

Pfc. Diego Miquel Montoya
Capt. Jason McMahon
First Lt. Todd W. Weaver
Sgt. Aaron K. Kramer
Staff Sgt. Carlos Newman
Spc. DeAngelo B. Snow
Pfc. Barbara Vieyra
First Lt. Eric Yates
Maj. Robert Baldwin
Spc. Marvin Calhoun
CW2 Jonah McClellan
Staff Sgt. Joshua Powell
CW3 Matthew Wagstaff
Polish Sgt. Kazmierz Kasprzak
Sgt. Justin A. Officer
Staff Sgt. Willie J. Harley
Spc. Luther W. Rabon
Spc. Brian J. Pedro
Sgt. Karl Campbell
Pfc. Ryane G. Clark
Pfc. David A. Hess
Staff Sgt. David Weigle
Spc. Matthew C. Powell
Pfc. Jordan M. Byrd
Polish OR2 Adam Szada-Borzyszkowski
French OR9 Thibault Miloche
Spc. Gerald R. Jenkins
Staff Sgt. Kenneth K. McAninch
Spc. Ronnie J. Parllares
Spc. Thomas A. Moffitt
Sgt. 1st Class Philip C. Tanner
Staff Sgt. Adam L. Dickmyer
Spc. Pedro Maldonado
Sgt. Diego A. Solorzano Valdovinos
Spc. Brett Land
Spc. Jonathan Curtis
Pfc. Andrew Meari
Sgt. Jason McCluskey

Spc. Blake D. Whipple
Pfc. Shane Reifert
Spc. Aaron Cruttenden
Spc. Dale Kridlo
Spc. Andrew Hutchins
Spc. Anthony Vargas
Sgt. Edward H. Bolen
Senior Airman Andrew Bubacz
Spc. David C. Lutes
Spc. Shannon Chihuahua
Pfc. Jacob C. Carroll
Spc. Jacob R. Carver
Staff Sgt. Juan L. Rivadeneira
Spc. Shane Ahmed
Spc. Nathan Lillard
Spc. Scott Nagorski
Spc. Jesse Snow
Pfc. Christian Warriner
Staff Sgt. David P. Senft
Spc. Justin Culbreth
Staff Sgt. Sean M. Flannery
Spc. William K. Middleton
Pv2. Devon J. Harris
Pfc. Jacob Gassen
Sgt. 1st Class Barry Jarvis
Pv2. Buddy W. McLain
Staff Sgt. Curtis Oakes
Spc. Matthew W. Ramsey
Pfc. Austin G. Staggs
First Lt. Scott Milley
Sgt. 1st Class James Thode
Sgt. Vincent W. Ashlock
Sgt. Nicholas Aleman
Staff Sgt. Jason A. Reeves
Spc. Kenneth E. Necochea
Sgt. Sean M. Collins
Cpl. Patrick D. Deans
Sgt. Willie A. McLawhorn
Cpl. Derek T. Simonetta

Cpl. Jorge E. Villacis
Spc. Sean R. Cutsforth
French OF2 Benoit Dupin
French OR5 Jonathan Lefort
Sgt. Michael Beckerman
Staff Sgt. Robert Pharris
Spc. Christian Romig
Spc. Ethan Harding
Pfc. Ira Laningham
French OR4 Herve Guinaud
Maj. Evan Mooldyk
Sgt. Omar Aceves
Spc. Jarrid King
Pfc. Benjamin Moore
Pfc. Zachary Salmon
Polish OR2 Marcin Pastusiak
Polish CW Marcin Knap
Tech Sgt. Leslie D. Williams
Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Venetz Jr.
Spc. Omar Soltero
Spc. Joshua Lancaster
Spc. Nathan B. Carse
New Zealand Pvt. Kirifi Mila
Spc. Jonathan Pilgeram
French OR2 Clement Chamarier
Sgt. Kristopher J. Gould
Spc. Brian Tabada
Spc. Christopher Stark
Staff Sgt. Chauncy Mays
Spc. Rudolph Ryan Hizon
Spc. Loren M. Buffalo
Spc. Arturo Rodriguez
Sgt. Travis Tompkins
Staff Sgt. Mecolus McDaniel
Staff Sgt. Joshua Gire
Pfc. Michael Mahr
Sgt. Bryan Burgess
Spc. Jameson Lindskog
Sgt. Frank Adamski

Staff Sgt Ofren Arrechaga
Pv2. Jeremy Faulkner
Pfc. Dustin Feldhaus
Spc. Dennis C. Poulin
1st Lt. Robert F. Welch
Spc. Keith Buzinski
Spc. Brent M. Maher
Pv2. Brandon Pickering
Spc. Donald L. Nichols
Spc. Joseph A. Kennedy
Sgt. Linda Pierre
Spc. Joseph Cemper
Sgt. 1st Class Charles Adkins
Staff Sgt. Cynthia Taylor
Capt. Charles Ridgley
Spc. Sonny J. Moses
French OR3 Alexandre Riviere
Sgt. John P. Castro

Names are from RC-East and are arranged in chronological order as of April 23, 2011

“These are all my brothers. They take care of us.”

-U.S. Army Spc. Lauren Hyman

Brothers, Sisters in Arms

Story and photos by U.S. Air Force Capt. Peter Shinn,
Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs

The Soldiers of the 64th Military Police Company assigned to Combat Outpost Fortress in Afghanistan's Kunar Province have seen plenty of action since they arrived at the outpost nearly nine months ago.

Since then, the MPs have been in contact with the enemy roughly 100 times while conducting route clearance patrols and during dismounted operations with infantry elements.

Fortunately, the MPs at COP Fortress have a couple of “combat multipliers” in U.S. Army Spc. Cristine Gallagher and U.S. Army Spc. Lauren Hyman.

Gallagher, of Victorville, Calif., is a machine-launched grenade gunner. Hyman, of Texarkana, Texas, is an armored vehicle driver. They are the only female Soldiers assigned to COP Fortress.

Teammates and superiors alike praise Gallagher and Hyman's professionalism and competence.

“Spc. Hyman and Spc. Gallagher have been complete combat multipliers. We've been able to do a lot of things you wouldn't normally be able to do,” said U.S. Army Sgt. Andrew Hagerman of Lewisville, Texas, Hyman's and Gallagher's squad leader. “For example, during Operation Enterprise, when searching for a female, it was a lot easier for us to get through villages having (them) with us, because we were able to go into female rooms and search...”

Another squad leader, U.S. Army Sgt. Logan Curry of Harrisburg, Ill., echoed Hagerman's assessment of Hyman and Gallagher, though Curry did have one caveat.

“They just flat, outperform everybody sometimes; except me, of course,” Curry said with a grin.

“They're squared away,” said Pfc. Mark Diaz of Sacramento, Calif. “They know exactly what they're doing, and they do 110 percent all the time.”

When told about how superiors and peers lauded her and Gallagher, Hyman reacted modestly.

“You know, I feel like we're just like anybody else,” Hyman said. “We're just Soldiers. We do what they ask us to do and we try to get the job done. I don't think we're anything special from any of the guys.”

Gallagher, who has 28 confirmed enemy kills, described her combat experience in similar terms.

“I think of it as a learning experience,” Gallagher said. You're put in a situation where you have seconds to think on something and you just have to react. I enjoy it, but it's also something I won't forget.”

Gallagher and Hyman both spoke of their fellow Soldiers with a respect forged under fire.

“They're like my brothers,” Gallagher

said. “I protect them and they protect me.”

“These are all my brothers,” said Hyman. “They take care of us. They treat us just like they would them.”

Diaz responded with the same sentiment.

“I consider them to be sisters because we've been with each other so long that you just can't react anyway else,” he said.

Gallagher and Hyman both have dangerous jobs. A fellow Soldier with the 64th MPs, Pfc. Barbara Vieyra of Mesa, Ariz., died of wounds suffered when

insurgents attacked her convoy with an improvised explosive device and rocket propelled grenades Sep. 18. Hyman could not talk about her friend's death while Gallagher shared her feelings about their fallen comrade.

“As much as you don't want things like this to happen, it does, and you have to keep going,” Gallagher said. “I mourn her when we can, and she's always in my thoughts, but I also go out each and every day knowing, that one day, the people who did it will get their due.”



(Above) U.S. Army Spc. Cristine Gallagher of Victorville, Calif., machine-launched grenade gunner for the 64th Military Police Company at Combat Outpost Fortress, takes an overwatch position during a foot patrol through the Noor Gul District of Afghanistan's Kunar Province. Gallagher is one of two females assigned to COP Fortress. (Previous page) U.S. Army Spc. Lauren Hyman of Texarkana, Tex., armored vehicle driver for the 64th Military Police Company at Combat Outpost Fortress, takes part in a foot patrol through the Noor Gal District of Afghanistan's Kunar Province. Their team has been in contact with the enemy approximately 100 times in the nine months they have been assigned to COP Fortress.



Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan officials board a CH-47 Chinook after a women's shura held at Jaji Feb. 10. They attended the first women's shura held in the area with coalition forces. The women discussed with their government officials issues and challenges they faced in daily life.

Women's shura convenes for first time in 2 years

Story and photos by U.S. Army Staff Spc. Tobey White
Task Force Duke Public Affairs

An all-female delegation of eight Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan officials, a 330th Military Police Company personnel security detail, members of Khowst Provincial Reconstruction Team and the 3-19th Agribusiness Development Team from Indiana gathered in Jaji Maidan Feb. 10.

As the CH-47 Chinook touched down on a patch of green farmland, which stood in stark contrast from the otherwise brown countryside, local men and children lined the roads and hills staring at these newcomers while military personnel secured the surrounding area.

The group was in Jaji Maidan for one purpose: conduct the coalition's first women's shura, or formal meeting, in the last two years.

Jaji Maidan

Jaji Maidan, a town situated in eastern Khowst Province, was recently named a peace district because it experiences fewer attacks than surrounding territory. It is known locally as the land of milk and honey. Because of the relative stability of the area, the shura's goal is to further that stability by targeting members of the population who don't really have a voice, said U.S. Army Maj. Rosemary Reed of Tacoma, Wash., 95th Civil Affairs Brigade, working with Khowst PRT.

The women of Jaji Maidan possess the skill to turn a common plant in the territory into rope and use it to make intricate beadwork. It is a skill the coalition forces and government members hoped could be leveraged into small business opportunities for the women and surrounding area, said U.S. Army Lt. Col. Pam Moody of Indianapolis, 3-19th ADT.

By bringing GIRoA representatives, such as the director of Women's Affairs, the participants hope to create a sustainable

project. Reed said the representatives got the chance to speak directly to the women in their region and hear what challenges and issues these women face.

The idea for the shura began when the provincial governor requested something be done for the local women, Reed said. It took lots of coordination between many different units to be able to hold a shura of this magnitude.

"The shura is a very traditional way to solve problems," she said.

Shuras are a way for elders and key leaders in the community to address issues in the area. In the U.S., it would be the equivalent of attending a meeting between council members of a town. Since the area is tribal, their members are elders who have been elected to represent the tribes and villages in the area. Shuras can cover a wide range of topics such as security, law issues and in this case, women's rights.

"We have some very important women here," Moody said. "It is important to show the women at Jaji Maidan that women can be strong, can be studious, can go to high school and better themselves and their families."

A time for firsts

The meeting wasn't just a first for the women of Jaji Maidan. For the female Soldiers attending, it was the first time they had conducted an all-female mission. The mission entailed escorting the VIPs to the meeting, clearing the building where the meeting was conducted and securing the immediate area from all threats, said U.S. Army Sgt. Priscilla Salazar of Santa Ana, Calif., noncommissioned officer in charge for the PSD of the 330th MP Co.

"None of us had pulled high security on high females," Salazar said. "It lets Afghan women know that females are strong enough to do what we're here to accomplish."

It was by no means easy getting the number of women required for the mission, Reed said. The Army has no all-female companies. The planners for the meeting faced a challenge of gathering enough women with the capabilities and specialties needed to secure the site, providing security for the government officials and women attending the meeting, and conducting the shura.

Since in Afghanistan only women can engage women, they had to reach out to sister companies all over Khowst Province to get the women they needed.

"It's hard to be a female in the military, period; so being able to come out here with no males, with only a few weeks training and not knowing the area to do this feels pretty good," Salazar said.

To be part of the PSD team, the females had to be at the top of their game. For U.S. Army Spc. Araceli Carrill of San Diego, Calif., who served as point for the PSD, 330th MP Co., the mission was different from any other she'd undertaken in the 10 months she's been deployed to Afghanistan. Being picked as point meant her team felt safe enough with her in that role.

"The shura is important so people know, not just Afghans but Americans, too, that women are coming up, that they do have rights, are important and have a role in society," Carrill said.

To prepare for the mission, her team trained on how to keep their VIPs safe and how to move as a unit. Although it was the first time they had done an all-female mission, she said the training was not much different than the preparation she'd received back home and in basic as an MP.

"It's important that the mission was conducted by females because the Afghan women feel more comfortable with us," Carrill said. "This way they weren't intimidated by males."



Hakmina, a female provincial council member, addresses local women at a women's shura held in Jaji Maidan in Feb. 10. She attended the first women's shura held in the area to discuss challenges and issues the women were having. The meeting helped initiate dialogue between the women of Jaji Maidan and their government.

Lessons learned


While simply having the shura was progress from previous years, the participants found themselves having to take a step back once the meeting got started. Although they had a turnout of about 60 women, the women had more urgent concerns than economic growth.

Many of them were suffering from medical needs such as diarrhea, malaria, skin problems and asthma, said U.S. Army Col. Marilyn Moorse of Indianapolis, 3-19th ADT. For the next meeting, the team promised to bring a doctor to address the women's health concerns.

One of the things the Soldiers learned was how important it was for the women to have a meeting before the shura. There are 21 villages in Jaji Maidan.

For everybody to have their voice heard, the Afghan women decided two representatives from each village would be elected to bring the concerns of their area to the DOWA at the next meeting, said Moody.

"I'm honored to give these women of the government the opportunity to engage members of the population," Reed said. "The dialogue has been initiated. Now these women have a better understanding of what these people need and will be able to develop projects to help them."

The meeting shed light on how best to conduct future women's shuras. While the original objective was to help the women of Jaji Maidan sell their products in larger bazaars and make money for their families, the focus had to be adjusted to take care of more pressing needs first. Reed said the meeting was a first step toward having regular shuras to address women's needs. 

Brotherhood at the top of Afghanistan

Story and photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Mark Burrell
Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs

At the highest observation post in northeastern, a brotherhood of U.S. Army Soldiers protects a small valley that feeds into the Kunar River Valley.

Surrounded by snow-capped mountains and freezing winds a few kilometers from the Pakistan border, Observation Post Mustang weathers storms and waves of Taliban fighters.

Soldiers from Troop C, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Bandit, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, stay vigilant day and night at the small outpost located in the Hindu Kush Mountains 6,500 feet above Kunar Province.

“That ridge over there is Rocket Ridge,” said U.S. Army Spc. Brian S. Ellis, an MK46 machine gunner from Canyon Lake, Texas, as he pointed toward a snow-lined ridge in the distance.

“In the past, that’s been (the Taliban’s) main point of attack as far as rockets,” Ellis continued. “They like it up there because they used to sit on the other side of the ridge and not really worry about getting hit. Since we’ve been up here in the past few months, we’ve been raining .50-cal machine gun fire down on them and calling for fire pretty accurately.”

Ellis turned to pick up a pair of binoculars, quickly for someone wearing more than 30 pounds of combat gear. Quickly, because the Soldiers up here, like Ellis, wear their gear so often it’s a second skin to them.

He scanned the rugged terrain and the few villages tucked in the shadows of the valley.

“The biggest task is finding the bad guys,” said Ellis. “We look and look and look every single day. Since we keep raining down on them with bombs and mortars, it’s harder and harder to find them. So we have to look in specific spots in those little nooks and crannies in the mountains, on top of ridges, and on the other side of spurs just to try to find these guys. We know they’re out there, and we know they’re moving.”

The Soldiers up here live in one of the most unforgiving places in the world at the base of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

“Our mission is basically a force protection mission,” said U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Dave J. Cocchiarella, an infantry platoon leader and highest-ranking Soldier at OP Mustang. “We observe the valleys leading toward the forward operating base to make sure insurgents aren’t coming from Pakistan to shoot mortars and rockets at FOB Bostick. Lately, our mission has been a little more offensive than defensive.”

During the past month, the Soldiers here have taken the fight to the Taliban, with more than 40 insurgent fighters killed or suppressed, said Cocchiarella, a Woodbury, Minn., native.

“I think lately they’ve got the message they can’t just come through here anymore,” added Cocchiarella. “They’re going to be found, and they’re going to be killed.”

Back on guard duty, Ellis confirmed their job wasn’t just to observe but to engage.

“We’re trying to let the Taliban know we’re here and we’re not going to let them freely move around our (area of operations) without us seeing them,” said Ellis. “There’s nowhere they can go. We’re constantly watching them and they know it. So they’ve been trying to move around at night, but we see them.”



As was the case one night when one of the battle positions, perched overlooking the valley, called up some suspicious movement.

U.S. Army Spc. Andrew M. Dickerson, a team leader from Clarksville, Tenn., was on guard. He said, after intelligence reported movement in his sector, he saw three males with weapons.

“They were close enough you could see it clear as day,” said Dickerson. “One had an AK-47 (assault rifle) slung over his shoulder and another one was at the low-ready, tactically moving.”

The Soldiers quickly received approval to engage the enemies and took them out explained Dickerson.

As the Soldiers look out for the inhabitants of the valleys below, they also look out for each other.

“We’re all pretty much like family,” said Ellis whose only personal time is in the plywood outhouse or on guard duty. “You’re living not even 5 feet away from the guy next to you. We’re pretty much all best friends, like family. We joke around with each other, like brothers.”

With the sunshine melting the snow, two Soldiers wrestled in the mud for entertainment and exercise. Cocchiarella stood back, chuckled and jeered his brothers.

“When I actually got here and realized how small it was, I was a little shocked at first,” said Cocchiarella. “I’ve gotten used to the fact that there aren’t many places you can go up here....

This is home and family is up here. When I talked to my wife, it was a little hard for her to understand at first — she felt like she was being replaced. But now she understands there’s a home back in Minnesota and there’s a home here up with my guys.”

The brotherhood on the shelf of Afghanistan tucked between ‘Rocket Ridge,’ Pakistan, and the Kunar River Valley, has a mission to accomplish.

Defending its home is on the top of that list. 🇺🇸

(Above) U.S. Army Sgt. Connor J. Quinn, a combat medic from San Martin, Calif., assigned to Troop C, 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry Regiment, Task Force Bandit, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, screams after a shower with cold bottled water at Observation Post Mustang in eastern Afghanistan. Since there are no showers at the observation post, Soldiers have to take cold showers with bottled water to stay clean.

Story Snapshots



Ready, aim, fire

U.S. Army Sgt. George R. Rueda of Norwalk, Calif., weapons squad leader with 1st Platoon, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, aims his weapon using an infrared laser sight during an Aug. 23 insurgent attack on Combat Outpost Badel. The enemy attacked with small arms and mortars against the base in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province. Neither International Security Assistance Forces nor Afghan National Security Forces were injured during the assault. (Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Gary A. Witte, 300th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Joint effort

U.S. Army 1st Lt. Dan Konopa of Kokomo, Ind., platoon leader with 1st Platoon, Company D, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, talks with an Afghan leader about a project proposal in the Goshta District in eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province. TF No Slack met with local leaders to discuss current and future projects within the Goshta District Sept. 26. (Photos by U.S. Army Spc. Richard Daniels Jr., Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs)



Leadership

A malik from the Shinwari tribe addresses fellow tribal, coalition forces and provincial government leaders during a tribal shura in the Shinwar District here Aug. 4. The shura was called to discuss ways that the tribe could work with coalition forces to improve security in eastern Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Albert L. Kelley, 300th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)



Local meeting

U.S. Army 1st Lt. Rob L. Schenker of Long Island, N.Y., platoon leader for 1st Platoon, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, talks to residents of Kutgay village in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar province. In addition to defending nearby Combat Outpost Badel, the unit regularly engages with the population and works with the local government to improve the quality of life for residents. (Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Gary A. Witte, 300th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)



Break time

U.S. Army Soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, and Afghan National Army soldiers of 2nd Company, Command Outpost Penich, take a break along the way to their objective during Joint Operation Eagle Claw II in Kunar Province Dec. 10. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Andy Barrera, Task Force Bastogne)



I see you

U.S. Army Sgt. Kyle V. Johnson, of Momence, Ill., a team leader with the Scout Platoon, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, scans the valley below through a scope and a spider net while pulling security at Helicopter Landing Zone Hawk high above the Marawara District in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar province, July 4. The spider net prevents glare from giving his position away. Coalition forces pushed anti Afghan forces out of the District only days earlier and are setting up permanent outposts to prevent AAF from returning to the area. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Albert L. Kelley, 300th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Patrol

Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, maneuver through Sabari District during patrols to disrupt insurgent activity in the area Dec. 30. (Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Andrew Guffey, Task Force Rakkasan)





Rule of law

Ziya-ul-Haq Dinar Khil, deputy judicial chief for northeast Afghanistan region and chief judge of the Balkh Provincial Court of Appeals, holds a gavel presented by Regional Command-North Rule of Law Coordinator Peter Fromuth, center, at the March 27 grand opening of a courtroom built with help from the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Army's 4th Combat Aviation Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, based at nearby Camp Marmal. The courtroom, the first in the province, will offer public trials in northern Afghanistan for the first time, hailed as a step forward for civil law in Afghanistan. (Photo by U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Alexander Babcock, 4th CAB Public Affairs)

On watch

Soldiers from Company C, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, keep an eye out for enemy movement during a patrol through the Wazi Kwah District of Paktika province. The Iron Rakkasans have recently been searching buildings and conducting patrols in the Mata Khan District to cripple insurgent activity. (Photo by U.S. Army Sgt. Jeffrey Alexander, 982nd Combat Camera Company)



Roll out

U.S. Army Soldiers with Company E, 1st Battalion, 506th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, watch as a heavy expanded mobility tactical truck crosses a wide wadi with deep, soft sand during a combat logistics patrol from Forward Operating Base Sharana to FOB Kushamond in Paktika Province Jan. 24. (Photo by U.S. Army Sgt. Christina Sindere, Task Force Currahee Public Affairs)



Teamwork

U.S. Army Spc. Brit B. Jacobs (right) from Sarasota, Fla., and U.S. Army Sgt. Bryan Burgess (left), a squad leader from Cleburne, Texas, help out fellow Soldier U.S. Army Spc. Ronnie Vargas, a mortar man from Alice, Texas, make his way to the landing zone for medical evacuation during a firefight on a hilltop in the Shal Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Nuristan Province Nov. 7. "I want to try to make sure any injuries they sustain are going to be the only injuries so I can take care of them and get them out of here," said Jacobs. All three Soldiers are assigned to Company C, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack. (Photo by U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Mark Burrell, 210th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)



Bastogne Soldiers navigate ‘most dangerous road in Afghanistan’

Story and photos by U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Mark Burrell
Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs

Tortured mountains and skeletal vehicles litter the pock-marked Jalalabad-Kabul highway as it snakes its way along the Kabul Gorge between the Hindu Kush Mountains.

-continued page 40



U.S. Army Sgt. Rickey D. Cupp, a service and recovery sergeant from Albertville, Ala., assigned to Forward Support Company G, 2nd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, Task Force Balls, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, ground guides a wrecker back toward a Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicle with a flat tire during a recent convoy in eastern Afghanistan. The Soldiers traveled on what *The New York Times* dubbed as one of the most dangerous roads in Afghanistan.

As the last leg of the famed Grand Trunk Highway, it is an essential route for caravans heading into Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul.

Late Feb. 28, it was an essential route for Soldiers from Forward Support Company G, 2nd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, Task Force Balls, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, escorting a convoy through the shadow of the mountains.

"I had faith in our guys' ability," said U.S. Army Capt. Jose M. Gamboa, Co. G commander. "The whole unknown of what we were about to go through, you really couldn't describe it to somebody and have them grasp the whole magnitude of what we were facing."

The highway's hairpin turns and sharp drops contrast the natural beauty of the surrounding mountains.

Dubbed the most dangerous road in Afghanistan by *The New York Times*, the tension mounted with the elevation as the convoy pressed on.

Vehicles ignored posted speed limit signs and gravity as snow began to fall, making the roads slippery and even more unpredictable.

"The Afghan driver is a greedy type of driver with everyone jockeying for position as if it were a horse race," added Gamboa, who is from Crestview, Fla. "That type of mentality makes it difficult to drive."

After passing a burned-out vehicle, the convoy rounded the first hairpin turn and it became clear that these Soldiers were in for a long haul.

"You're talking about an operator driving an extremely heavy vehicle in extreme conditions," explained Gamboa.

"Once we got to that first hairpin, we saw the lights up on the mountain, not knowing where the road was or who was up there, not knowing the tightness of the curves... It starts to hit you."

With just about 7 feet to maneuver past gridlocked trucks hugging the side of the mountain, there isn't much room for error.

The cliffs dropped off into complete darkness as the vehicles slowly made their way up the mountainside.

"Most of my guys have multiple deployments. For some of them, it's their first deployment," said Gamboa, "but my guys have seen a lot and experienced a lot in the past 11 months to help them navigate those tight spots."

The Co. G Soldiers' mission was to escort seven Afghan trucks carrying supplies from the realignment of the Pech



U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Kevin J. Stanfield (left), a platoon sergeant from Walkerville, Mich., and U.S. Army Spc. Damian C. Caldino, a food service specialist from Oxnard, Calif., both assigned to Forward Support Company G, 2nd Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, Task Force Balls, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, pull security as Jinga trucks pass behind them, during a recent convoy in eastern Afghanistan.

River Valley bases from Jalalabad Airfield back to Bagram Airfield via Kabul.

Just then, the convoy reached a dark tunnel about 300 meters long and the Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles couldn't go any further. The tunnel was packed with stalled trucks.

"It was the longest tunnel of the route," Gamboa said. "That was the decision point. Our MRAPs are wide and bulky. The Jinga trucks didn't pull all the way to the side, because if they have a high load, then they'll scrape the top of the tunnel."

Taking decisive action, while always mindful of a Taliban ambush, the Soldiers dismounted their MRAPs to coax the sleeping trucks out of hibernation.

"They went to the other side of the tunnel and told them to back up and hug the side of the tunnel," said Gamboa. "Then at the entrance portion, they had pushed them forward."

"A little nerve-wracking isn't it?" said U.S. Army 1st Lt. Todd C. Castles, a platoon leader from Greenwood, S.C. "A lot of these trucks, I don't see how they're going to make it."

With a cacophony of horns, Pashtu, Dari and English, the trucks slowly were repositioned in order to make room for the convoy to squeeze through.

After a precious half hour slipped by, emerging from the tunnel was a small victory.

Yet, the jagged drop and crumbling infrastructure of the road up ahead didn't spell relief for the Soldiers just yet.

"It's OK to be scared but, more or less, it's how you handle it," said Castles. "You can see down the cliff and there's no end in sight... None of the other roads we've traveled are this slim."

Hulking MRAP tires squeaked over the asphalt while skirting the edge of the road.

"Some of the turns are real tough, the terrain is real rough," explained U.S. Army Spc. Tommy J. Porter, a light-wheeled vehicle mechanic from Warren, Mich. "I probably had a couple of inches on either side from smashing into the Jinga trucks."

Porter, driving a heavy expanded mobility tactical truck wrecker, maneuvered one of the heaviest vehicles on the road. Squeezing between the Afghan trucks pushed against the mountain and the deadly fall of the steep cliffs, Porter had a unique perspective.

"When I'm making tight turns, our cab was going over the side of the mountain," said Porter. "Our wrecker has its wheels

behind the cab, so my wheels are actually still on the mountain while my cab is looking over the edge."


Zigzagging back and forth up to about 5,000 feet, the convoy slowly crested the mountain, leaving behind the other vehicles to fend for themselves as the fog descended.

"The weather is pretty cold, pretty crappy, there's snow everywhere," said Castles. "We're moving at 5 mph. Also, we're all pretty tired, 'cause we've been up close to 24 hours. The road sucks, it's muddy with lots of bumps."

After more than 12 hours of driving, the Soldiers finally turned off the highway toward the security of Bagram Airfield.

"I don't even know if there's a word for how tired I am," said Castles over the drone of his MRAP. "You can't really quit, you get to the point where you want to, but you can't until we get inside the FOB. It's a weird feeling."

Safely inside Bagram Airfield, the Soldiers said goodbye to their Afghan trucks and headed for hot chow and sleep.

The very next day, they played cards, napped and did maintenance on their trucks preparing for the long ride back through the most dangerous road in Afghanistan. 



(Above) U.S. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, International Security Assistance Forces commander, awards a Silver Star Medal to U.S. Army Capt. Edward B. Bankston, Headquarters and Headquarters Company commander from Decatur, Ga., assigned to 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, at Forward Operating Base Joyce in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province April 11.
(Left) U.S. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, International Security Assistance Forces commander, awards a Silver Star Medal to U.S. Army Sgt. Joshua L. Bostic, an infantry squad leader from Spring City, Tenn., assigned to Company C, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, at Forward Operating Base Joyce in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province April 11.

Gen. Petraeus awards Silver Stars to TF No Slack Soldiers

Story and photos by U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Mark Burrell
Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs

As the sun shone brightly, U.S. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus awarded two Silver Star Medals to Task Force No Slack Soldiers at Forward Operating Base Joyce in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province April 11.

The Silver Star recipients, U.S. Army Capt. Edward B. Bankston, commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company from Decatur, Ga., and U.S. Army Sgt. Joshua L. Bostic, a squad leader from Spring City, Tenn., assigned to Company C, both from 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, said the weather during Operation Strong Eagle III in Marawara District was anything but sunny.

As soon as the battalion air assaulted into the Taliban stronghold March 28, they realized something was wrong. More than 200 insurgent fighters were positioned inside and outside of the villages of Barawolo Kalay and Sarowbay with the possibility of an additional 200 fighters reinforcing the area in 24 hours.

That's when a snowstorm moved in and air support became impossible.

Taliban fighters launched a barrage of rocket-propelled grenades and machine-gun fire using the weather as concealment.

"Capt. Bankston had a tough situation on his hands with one platoon in the high ground and two platoons clearing villages, plus attachments, and every single company was in contact in the entire valley at the same time," said U.S. Army Capt. Kevin W. Mott, a platoon leader from San Rafael, Calif.

With some of his Soldiers killed in action or wounded during the fighting, Bankston regained control in the chaos, repositioned troops and reported casualties and troop strength consistently, said Mott.

"He was extremely calm and didn't get excited; just regular Capt. Bankston," said Mott. "He set the tone for everyone else to follow with his demeanor. He's what a leader needs to be in that situation. He managed the fight and managed assets expertly."

Bankston, who is on his third deployment and was previously shot in the knee a few months earlier, said other Soldiers that day acted more heroically than him.

"The way I look at it is that I was walking in the footsteps of heroes throughout the mission, so I was covered," explained Bankston.

With a quiet demeanor and a genuine smile, Bankston said it was easy to be a commander when his troops acted so valiantly that day.

He also said it was good to have Gen. Petraeus and higher headquarters recognize the hard work Task Force No Slack demonstrated in Kunar Province. For the past year, Soldiers constantly attacked Taliban safe havens and performing selfless acts of valor for each other in combat.

"The bonds that are forged through combat are stronger bonds than any other you can think of," said U.S. Army Capt. Tye L. Reedy, Co. C commander from Dade City, Fla.

The next day, March 29, Reedy and his company's bonds would be tested.

Bostic and his platoon just got word they had to travel back up to the high ground through menacing gunfire to refortify a position.

"We fight as a company and move as a company, so we all went to the high ground," said Reedy. "That's when three Soldiers were pinned down behind a two-foot wall taking fire."

Bostic and his men were the those Soldiers.

During concentrated fire on his position, one of the Soldiers

was shot and Bostic was wounded while trying to pull him to cover.

"Although he feels his actions were part of his job and his duty, they were undoubtedly valorous. In his mind, there was no hesitation," said Reedy.

Bostic led the rest of his team back to the company.

Waiting for a lull in the fire, he then led another element under direct enemy fire to recover the body of his fallen comrade.

Later, he refused to be medically evacuated for his injuries in order to stay with his troops.

"Bostic was walking wounded at risk of infection," explained Reedy. "But he didn't want to leave his guys. The mission and his Soldiers were more important to him. That's what type of noncommissioned officer he is."

After being awarded the Silver Star, Bostic said it was a humbling experience because he doesn't believe he did anything more extraordinary than his fellow Soldiers.

"I know the other guys would do the same for me; it really wasn't a thought," said Bostic about that fateful day.

During the mission, six U.S. Soldiers would be killed in action as well as scores of others injured.

More Silver Star Medals are pending approval for that operation, but Bankston said what was on everybody's mind, "I would trade all the medals to get our lost guys back."

Retention Watch



U.S. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, International Security Assistance Forces commander, recites the oath of re-enlistment to 113 Soldiers assigned to 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, at Forward Operating Base Joyce in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province April 11. (Photo by U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Mark Burrell, Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs)

From the Heart

I left active duty Army in 1990 as a Specialist (SPC/E4) after serving two and a half years as a Combat Medic with a mechanized infantry unit.

Being the youngest of eight children (six boys and two girls) I was not used to being away from my family for more than a weekend. I was not comfortable with making decisions for myself because many times they were made for me. I figured if I joined the military, I would be making a decision that was mine and mine alone and would assist me on my journey into manhood.

I expected the Army to continue to mold me from where my family had taken me. Unfortunately my experience on active duty was not what I had anticipated. The leadership qualities of my noncommissioned officers during my first year were substandard. I chose to go on multiple field exercises to get away from garrison, infact I volunteered so much that I wasn't allowed to go on any more field exercises. As time progressed and as I grew more disappointed with the Army and my career, NCOs who knew how to lead took charge of our unit but by that time it was too late. I had already made up my mind to separate from the military.

Still having five years left to do on my eight year commitment and heading for the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR), I met with a Reserve Component Career Counselor (RCCC) because that was a requirement when out processing and clearing any installation (just as it is today).

Although I was head strong about getting out and "no" to continuing in the military was my final answer but after conversing with a master sergeant at the transition point, I learned quite a bit about the Army Reserve. Not only was I offered a job, I was offered an opportunity to excel.

It was another decision that I had to make and me alone. I just had to go for it!

Although I did not have the Montgomery GI Bill at the time, the Army Reserves saw my potential and sent me to nursing school at their expense. Of which I received a paycheck, free education, a nursing license and opportunities galore.

I was a detachment NCO (equivalent to a first sergeant) for two Army Reserve units (at the rank of a sergeant promotable and a staff sergeant). You ask, how can you take on the responsibilities of a first sergeant at a rank where you are just learning how to be an NCO? Again, the Army Reserve saw my capabilities, my commitment, and my potential. It's not the "Army" that realizes one's potential but the people who make the Army what it is who see it.

It is the same potential that is rated in part five of the Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER) that asks the senior rater to evaluate you on your "overall potential for promotion and/or service in positions of greater responsibility". That block doesn't look at your rank but your ability to do the job. Once your potential is recognized and you are recommended for promotion, your order states "In view of these qualities and his [her] leadership potential and dedicated service to the U.S. Army, he [she] is, therefore promoted....."

As I progressed in my Army Reserve career, I became an Operations noncommissioned officer in charge for a 500 bed hospital, a Retention NCO, and then a Career Counselor. On the civilian side, I was a nurse supervisor and after being laid off twice because of the economy at that time, I decided to come back on active duty in 1998. After moving up the ranks, I now have the opportunity to help guide Soldiers like that master sergeant guided me.

I took into consideration that those NCOs who possessed poor leadership skills were going to retire and have a paycheck for life and I, on the other hand, if I had followed my initial plan of getting out, I would have been back on the block with little to show. So I say that to say this, never make a permanent decision in a temporary situation and give the Army Reserve or the Army National Guard a chance to help maximize your potential and help you reach your endeavors.

You may never know that you could reach the top of a mountain until you start climbing it.

Never accept defeat, never give up, and always keep it moving.

From the Heart,

Master Sergeant Clarence Johnson
Reserve Component Career Counselor (RCCC)
Ft. Campbell, KY

Mailing something home?

A few things to keep in mind to make the process quick and painless.

- Have your box ready for inspection.
- Be sure your container, box or footlocker is in good shape with old markings blacked out.
- Items may not be larger than 130 inches in combined size (length+width+depth).
- Registered mail items may not be larger than 108 inches in combined size.
- Items may not weigh more than **70 pounds**.
- Have your address label and customs form already filled out, be sure include a copy of the address label inside the package.
- No checks or credit cards, only cash or the Eagle Cash Card is accepted for payment.

Some items that **cannot** be mailed include:

- Alcohol of any kind
- Plants, plants products, sand or soil
- Live or dead animals
- Live poisonous insects (camel spiders)
- Cigarette lighters
- Weapons (pistols, rifles, replicas, toy guns)
- Weapon parts (magazines, barrels, bolts, receivers, stocks)
- Ammunition (live or spent, including brass)
- Exploded and unexploded ordnance (mines, grenades, fragments there of)
- Switchblades or knives with a blade longer than 6 inches
- Military equipment (TA-50, radios, any chemical defense equipment, compasses)
- No War trophies

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the final Watch

A UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter flies away after dropping off U.S. Army Maj. Gen. John F. Campbell, 101st Airborne Division and Regional Command-East commander, and other members, at observation post two in the Galush Valley during Operation Bull Whip March 28. Campbell visited the mountain top to check on the status of the largest air assault mission ever conducted by the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Task Force Red Bulls. This air assault mission also had the distinction of being the largest conducted by the Combined Joint Task Force-101 during its current rotation in Afghanistan. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Kristina L. Guppon, Task Force Red Bulls Public Affairs)

