

SENTINEL

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Serving the men and women of Regional Command East, Operation Enduring Freedom - Afghanistan

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Cpl. Rich Mattingly

Facing steep hillsides, Marines from India Co., 3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Regiment search houses in Korangal Valley last week during Operation Cornhuskers.

3/3 Marines track down clues, insurgents in Korangal Valley

By Cpl. Rich Mattingly
3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Rgt.

KORANGAL VALLEY, Afghanistan - Marines of India Company, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, have been operating at the forward edge of Operation Enduring Freedom, often in isolated areas where support for insurgency against the Afghan government and Coalition Forces remains.

Last week, India Co. entered the Korangal Valley in Konar Province with the mission to capture or kill terrorists suspected of conducting attacks against Coalition Forces, while working to win over the trust of the local villagers.

"We get intelligence that lets us know where the bad guys are," explained 2nd Lt. Roy Bechtold, 2nd platoon commander, India Co. "After we get grid locations, we work with our assets to plan the best way to go in and get them."

The Korangal Valley is infamous for its inac-

cessibility and the numerous defeats the Russians suffered there during their ill-fated campaign to control Afghanistan.

After vertically inserting in CH-47 Chinook helicopters, India Co. set into blocking positions along the roads and maneuvered into their positions.

"The best way to come in is on foot or by air," said Bechtold. "We have to leave as small a signature as possible in order to not spook the guys were looking for into running. If you come in with vehicles, they'll be long gone before you have a chance."

Bechtold admitted that Marines in the past have had difficulty getting into villages sympathetic to Anti-Coalition Forces without having the targets flee.

Once in place, the mission of India Co. evolved to house-by-house searches as the clock started ticking on how long the Marines had until it was

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Command Sergeant Major's Corner

New year a time for azimuth check



Command Sgt. Maj. Edmund Murrell
CTF Thunder command sergeant major

Now that the holiday season is behind us and we prepare to enter a new year, I ask that the members of Combined Task Force Thunder to conduct an azimuth check.

I ask that the Soldiers, Marines, Airmen and Sailors of the task force continue to focus on the center of gravity of our mission. That mission is winning the hearts of the Afghanistan people and ridding them of the terrorists who wish to harm them.

By our continued presence, positive attitudes, and our sincerity, the people of Afghanistan will understand we will not leave until our mission is complete.

The tireless efforts of the Soldiers, Marines, Sailors and Airmen of this task force, including our members from the New Zealand Defence Forces, have

already paid huge dividends. Our efforts helped enable the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to hold its first national elections on less than three months ago.

What a huge accomplishment both for the people of this country and for the members of this task force.

Just last month, President Hamid Karzai was sworn in as president. Next up, the country will hold parliamentary elections in the spring

Afghanistan has come a long way since the Taliban was ousted over three years ago, but our mission is not complete yet. We must and will stay the course.

For some of us in the task force, this deployment is in the home-stretch, and for others, it is just beginning. Regardless, we all must remain focused and pay attention to detail to ensure that this deployment ends successfully.

The holidays are also an important time of year for not so obvious reasons. During this time of year, leaders must clearly understand how important it is to stay connected to their subordinates and their families during this time of year.

Many younger service members who have never spent the holidays away from home can get depressed. Being so far away from family and friends can lead to service members becoming depressed.

Leaders must stay tuned in and be able to recognize the signs of depression before their subordinates try to do something drastic. Ensure they are staying focused on the mission and their minds aren't drifting back home already.

We have planned many activities and entertainment for our service members, and I encourage leaders to show support and allow their subordinates to participate.

I am proud and honored to be the command sergeant major of this great task force. We have accomplished a lot in such a short while here in Afghanistan. First

we had to relocate the brigade headquarters from Bagram Airfield to Forward Operating Base Salerno. During that move we had to stay focused and continue our mission here in Regional Command East.

Throughout my time in country, I have witnessed first-hand the great things our Soldiers, Marines, Airmen and Sailors are doing. I could not ask for better Americans to serve with.

We have had Soldiers from this task force who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in support of the task force's mission, the Global War on Terrorism and bringing the democratic process to Afghanistan. To them we should all remain eternally grateful.

As leaders, we want to continue to emphasize the importance of safety and not becoming complacent.

Complacency kills! It is very important to stay focused on our mission, pay attention to detail and finish strong.

Thunder Seven out!

“As leaders, we want to continue to emphasize the importance of safety and not becoming complacent.”

- Command Sgt. Maj.
Edmund Murrell,
CTF Thunder command
sergeant major

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Wolfhounds patrol Paktika, hand out winter gear

By Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen
Editor

WAZA KHWA, Afghanistan - The Soldiers of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment did not use Christmas as an excuse to let up on their daily patrols in southern Paktika Province.

One such patrol Dec. 22 lasted about three hours and took them through three villages in what isn't much more than a barren wasteland that surrounds their base here.

The Soldiers first checked on the construction of a school the battalion funded in Khezer Kheyl and asked locals if they were satisfied with it.

The patrol then headed to Khoday Nazar Kor, a small hamlet built into the side of a mountain. There they searched for the point of origin - or POO - of rockets that have been fired at their base.

After climbing to the top of a hill and finding no evidence of rockets, the Soldiers headed out.

Finally, the Soldiers stopped in Marjaneh where they patrolled the mostly-deserted bazaar before handing out blankets and winter coats to some of the locals.

The mission was a prime example of the diversity of the



Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen

Spc. Jonathan Low, a designated marksman for Co. C, 2nd Bn., 27th Inf. Rgt., uses the scope on his M14 rifle to look at an approaching person Dec. 22 in Khoday Nazar Kor, Afghanistan.

war here, with the Soldiers hunting for insurgents one instance, then handing out items to help the locals keep warm during the upcoming winter.

According to 1st Lt. Neil Armstrong, a platoon leader in Co. C, 2nd Bn., 27th Inf. Rgt., one of the battalion's goals is to deny the enemy [the ability to

influence] the people.

"With an insurgency, they try to influence the people, and by us going out and building things and giving out humanitarian aid, we're denying the enemy the people, because we're bringing them over to our side," he said.

For the Soldiers, that means switching back and forth between warfighter and good will ambassador. Spc. Jonathan Low, a designated marksman for Co. C, 2nd Bn., 27th Inf. Rgt., said he doesn't find it a difficult transition to make.

"I look at it this way: these people are our friends and they need our help," Low said. "Anybody who wants to pick up a weapon and fight us, then they become the enemy and only then. If I don't see a weapon, I look at them like they need my help."

Like every other mission the Wolfhounds conduct, this patrol's underlying purpose was to show a presence in the area, letting any anti-Coalition militants and Taliban know there is an American force here.

"We do patrols like that pretty much every day," Armstrong said. "We're always out with a mounted force, just doing the presence patrols. We always attempt to give out humanitarian aid on those patrols too, especially in the smaller villages."

Low said the mission was a routine one, but nevertheless, it should not be taken lightly.

"Even on a routine mission, complacency kills is what they say," he said. "Even on a routine mission it can be dangerous."

At one point in the mission while on a hilltop in Khoday Nazar Kor, Low dropped to one knee and brought his M14 sniper rifle up as if he were going to fire it.

"I noticed somebody on a bike and I was just checking to make sure they weren't carrying any weapons or anything like that," he said.

The Soldiers returned to their base cold and dusty as usual, but safe and with the knowledge they are helping the people of the surrounding communities.



Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen

A Soldier from Co. C, 2nd Bn., 27th Inf. Rgt. hand out Skittles candy to Afghan kids Dec. 22 in Khezer Kheyl, Afghanistan.

CTF Thunder begins winter offensive

By Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen
Editor

FORWARD OPERATING BASE SALERNO, Afghanistan – Taliban and al Qaeda holdouts operating in Regional Command East will not be getting a winter vacation this year.

In conjunction with Combined Joint Task Force-76's Operation Lightning Freedom, Combined Task Force Thunder recently launched "Operation Thunder Freedom."

The operation is designed to capitalize on the success of the Oct. 9 Afghan presidential election and continue that success through parliamentary elections scheduled for the spring, said Maj. Duke Davis, operations officer for CTF Thunder.

Part of that entails hunting Taliban and al Qaeda militants through the Afghan winter, and sapping their strength ahead of the elections. Traditionally, fighters in Afghanistan lay low during the harsh winter months and come back out

strong in the spring.

"It's not all about killing the bad guys," Davis said. "It's perhaps more so about how we get this country fully back on its feet and capable of managing itself."

Davis said the winter hibernation has been a trend for quite a while, if not eons in this country.

"I would expect that next spring, when the snow melts, that we will see an attempt to increase activity," he said. "But it will be interesting to see how much better our police, how much better our Kandaks, how much more the people are in support of what we're trying to do, and how much they push away the enemy's ability to initiate actions."

Thunder Freedom will involve all the command's assets, including the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, Davis said.

Operation Lightning Freedom was initiated after the Dec. 7 inauguration of Afghan

president Hamid Karzai, according to Maj. Mark McCann, a spokesman for Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan in Kabul. The operation is going on throughout the country, he said.

"It's designed basically to search out and destroy the remaining remnants of Taliban forces who traditionally we believe go to ground during the winter months," McCann said.

Maj. Gen. Eric Olson, commander of CJTF-76, told reporters last month that the operation would include a redeployment to tighten security on the border with Pakistan and raids by Special Forces to snatch rebel leaders.

Olson said Soldiers deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom shouldn't discount the resilience of the enemy, even during the winter.

"I don't think we should underestimate what's left of al Qaeda," he said. "The al Qaeda itself is still a viable organization. In some instances, they

may be more dangerous because of their need to launch some kind of high visibility success which may cause some to revert to desperate acts."

The operation is also aimed at persuading militants to take up an offer of amnesty from the coalition and the Afghan government.

Davis reiterated that Thunder Freedom is not just a "combat" operation, and it involves a wide array of assets, including reconstruction projects and security assistance programs.

"The election was successful. Thunder Freedom is an attempt to exploit the successes of the elections focused on the opportunities that present themselves to continue in assisting this new, democratically elected government in any capacity necessary," Davis said. "We believe that continuing that press throughout the winter will make the enemy that much less capable of an effective spring offensive."

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unlikely that their targets remained.

Up and down the bluffs and rocky faces that double as paths between the impossi-

bly stacked-up houses of the valley, the Marines and their Afghan National Army counterparts talked to village elders, shook hands and searched houses from top to bottom.

"It all goes back to attention to detail,"

said Sgt. Shawn Kelly, an acting platoon sergeant in India Co. "You can't skip anything, it could be that one cache or that one guy you miss that could help us stop an improvised explosive device emplacement or attack on Coalition Forces."

India Co.'s attentiveness paid off on the second day of the operation as Lance Cpl. Sean Decoursey, rifleman from Jacksonville, Fla., crawled through a small opening in a floor to find a cache of weapons and ammunition hidden under a pile of hay.

"I found the AK-47s and ammunition," said Decoursey, modest about the find. "I almost didn't look in that hole either - it looked like maybe it only went back about two or three feet until I crawled in there."

With the discovery of the weapons, the Marines held one Afghan man for questioning, confiscating his illegal weapons and ammunition. Their find was a good one. After being questioned, the man named several other anti-Coalition militants operating in the area which put India Co. right back to work in the villages.

"It feels really good to be here and to be getting something done," said Decoursey, who has been in the Marine Corps just over a year. "It feels like we're really making a difference when we can catch one of them."



Cpl. Rich Mattingly

Marines take a security posture as an Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter leaves the landing zone they were inserted into during operations in the Korangal Valley.

CJTF-76 CG switches places with grunts for Christmas

By Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen
Editor



Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen

Maj. Gen. Eric T. Olson, commander of CJTF-76, toasts Soldiers with sparkling grape juice during Christmas dinner Dec. 25 at Waza Khwa, Afghanistan.

and a brief tour of the base, Olson accompanied other Soldiers from Co. C on a patrol to two nearby villages.

Much to the chagrin of the company commander and first sergeant, Olson insisted on riding in the back of a cargo Humvee with other Soldiers, rather than in an up-armored version.

"It's always good to get out, show presence in the local community, interact with some of the community leaders, and that's exactly what these guys are doing," Olson said. "There's

always risk when you do it, but these guys are absolutely unafraid of accepting that risk. They know it's a job that they've got to do."

Spc. Eric Rigsby, an M240B gunner with Co. C, was the gunner on Olson's Humvee and said Olson was talking and joking with the Soldiers throughout the mission. He said the fact Olson chose to spend the holiday at such a remote location says a lot since he came here even though he doesn't have to.

"To show the guys he has

done this before, to sit in a cav truck in one of the worst seats and ride with us, to come and pull guard with us, to sit here and eat chow with us - it really makes lower enlisted Soldiers like myself feel good about him as our leader," Rigsby said.

Rigsby said Olson joked and talked with the Soldiers throughout the patrol and was constantly waving to Afghan children who gathered along the roads.

"He was just joking about the situation, waving to everybody, talking about how much we've improved this area and about how much he enjoys getting out of where he's at to come out here and hang out with us," Rigsby said.

Rigsby verified that all of the general's jokes were funny, and all the Soldiers laughed at all of them.

Following the patrol, Olson gathered the Soldiers and told them all what a fine job they were doing and that he loved each and every one of them.

"The quality of Soldiers here is top notch, just like we see across the CJOA," he said. "This is a great battalion, a great company in that battalion, and they're just doing super things out here."

USMC Commandant visits Marines in Afghanistan

By Cpl. Rich Mattingly
3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Rgt.

CAMP BLESSING, Afghanistan - The 33rd Commandant of the Marine Corps and the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps visited the Marines and Sailors of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines Regiment operating in support of Operation Enduring Freedom just before Christmas.

Gen. Michael Hagee and Sgt. Maj. John Estrada congratulated the troops for their dedication to duty at the forward edge of the battle area.

"The American people know what a good job you're doing here," said Hagee, hands on his hips surveying the crowd. "And we know what a good job you're doing here, too."

Estrada echoed the sentiments of the commandant and assured the troops that they were making a difference by

being in the fight.

"Stay vigilant. You're doing important things here and you must always remember that you are a Marine," said Estrada.

The senior enlisted man and the commandant then took questions from the gathered Marines and Sailors who were eager to ask about future deployments, even as they were still in the first few months of their current deployment.

"It was exciting to get to see the commandant and sergeant major" said Lance Cpl. Tim Davis, rifleman with India Company, 3rd Bn., 3rd Marines. "We asked him about maybe going to Iraq. A lot of guys are interested in going where a lot of our friends have gone."

After answering the Marines' questions and passing out coins, the heads of the Marine Corps took time to take pictures with all of the Marines.

"Meeting the 'boss' got me totally

pumped up," said Lance Cpl. James O'Brien, team leader with India Co. "Getting to meet him before we went out [for operations] in the Korangal Valley was motivating."



Cpl. Rich Mattingly

Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Michael Hagee thanks service members for their efforts in the Global War on Terrorism

Marines deliver school supplies in Nangalam

By Cpl. Rich Mattingly
3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Rgt.

NANGALAM, Afghanistan - Marines from 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment manning a base along the Pakistan border recently began a campaign to distribute much-needed school supplies to the children of Nangalam in Kunar Province.

"Whenever we can get out and we have the supplies to distribute, we go out," explained Spc. Chris Ifill, an Army civil affairs specialist from Philadelphia who has been attached to India Company.

The coupling of Marine and Army personnel has been effective in realizing the humanitarian portion of the Marines' current mission to stabilize and support the democratic government of Afghanistan.

"Having a civil affairs Soldier with us has added another tool for us to interact with the local populace, a way to provide something to them that would otherwise be hard for us," said Gunnery Sgt. Joseph Yantosca, a logistics chief and information opera-



Cpl. Rich Mattingly

Gunnery Sgt. Joseph Yantosca, Camp Blessing logistics chief and information operations officer, passes out school bags and supplies to children in Nangalam, Afghanistan.

tions officer.

Instead of adopting a purely combat-oriented mission posture, America's Battalion has become multi-faceted in its approach to its security and support mission in Afghanistan. By winning "hearts and minds," as the adage goes, the Marines and

Sailors are able to undercut remaining support for insurgency in an area where attacks on Coalition Forces are not infrequent.

"When you start helping them, they start helping us out," said Ifill. "They can directly see the benefit of working with us when we can

hand them supplies their children need."

"You've got to be able to flip the script," shared Yantosca. "One minute you're on a patrol, the next minute you're passing out school supplies."

On a trip last week to a school in Nangalam, Ifill and Yantosca passed out book bags full of pens and pencils and notepads to school children.

The first thing most children who approach Marines in southern Afghanistan ask for is pens.

Thanks to donations, the Marines can start to provide these supplies on a regular basis as Afghanistan still struggles to recover economically.

Yantosca says the school supplies donation goes deeper than just helping Afghan children for the short term.

"These children are the future of president Karzai's country," said Yantosca while distributing book bags. "Building a relationship with the kids in this way means that as they get older, the relationship can be one of mutual respect."



Staff Sgt. Mark Turney

FOB Ghazni celebrates Christmas with parade

Forward Operating Base Ghazni celebrated Christmas with several tournaments, games, traditional Christmas foods and topped it all off with a Christmas parade. The parade featured floats made by each unit and slice element at the remote FOB and the winner was awarded a prize - a cherished exemption from details for one week. Detachment 2, 1/143rd Fire Support Element (shown here), a California National Guard unit, and the 25th Military Police company, from Schofield, Hawaii, both won the much-coveted prize.

New chapel dedicated at Salerno

By Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen
Editor

FORWARD OPERATING BASE SALERNO, Afghanistan - Those seeking a place to worship here no longer have to settle for a cramped tent that leaks when it rains.

A newly-built, wooden chapel was dedicated here Dec. 15 that replaced the tent that was previously used as a chapel for the 1,500 service members and civilians living here.

The new building is more than twice the size of the old chapel, said Chap. (Maj.) Judith Hamrick, Combined Task Force Thunder chaplain.

"This facility is available to all our personnel, military and civilian," she said. "It's a place they can all feel at home, and it's their house of worship."

Hamrick said the new building is a much welcome change from the tent. Even before deploying here, Hamrick said she heard from other units that the chapel was already out of space.

With the new chapel as well as a separate Bee Hut behind it that serves as Hamrick's office, space no longer seems to be an issue.

The Army's chief of chaplains, Chap. (Maj. Gen.) David H. Hicks, who is visiting with Soldiers around Afghanistan, was on hand to help dedicate the new facility.

He said it was very special to be able to take part in a chapel dedication in a combat zone.

"We need to recognize this as a very unique setting, a place that we have been given," Hicks said, adding that the chapel will be a place for worshippers to get away



Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen

Spc. Eric Loche, Co. A, 528th Eng. Bn. (left), leads the Forward Operating Base Salerno Gospel Choir during the dedication of a new chapel Dec. 15 at FOB Salerno.

for a moment of reflection, and place to be in touch with God.

"That's what's beautiful about having a place set apart, and that's what we want to do with this facility today," he said. "We don't want to hinder, and we don't want to be hindered in our worship because we don't have adequate facilities."

The chapel was built by Soldiers of the 528th Engineer Battalion of the Louisiana Army National Guard.

Sgt. Charles Johnson, who was in charge of the project, said the Soldiers

put a lot of extra work into the project because they wanted to make the building special.

"Instead of just building a bland, regular building like you see in the military, we wanted to spruce it up a little," said Johnson, a carpentry and masonry specialist with Company A, 528th Eng. Bn.

To do so, the Soldiers installed a cathedral roof instead of a flat roof, seven-paneled "peak" windows, and wooden beams across the ceiling of the main room.

Many of the Soldiers working on the building put in late nights over the past week to get the chapel ready for the dedication, Johnson said.

Because there is still a threat of rocket attacks to the base, the Soldiers had to practice light discipline and were forced to use small pen-sized flashlight to see so they could cut wood.

Eventually there will be shutters on the windows so worshippers can practice light discipline during night services.

Johnson, a native of Mangham, La., also helped build a chapel last year at Kandahar Airfield, and said they plan to put more work into the Salerno chapel to make it even nicer.

Although the majority of the personnel stationed here still live and eat in tents, they will now at least be able to worship in a facility with sturdy walls and a ceiling.



Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen

Although some finishing work remained, the new chapel at Forward Operating Base Salerno opened its doors Dec. 15, replacing a cramped tent that previously served as the base chapel.

3/3 Marines train with Afghan Security Forces

By Cpl. Rich Mattingly
3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Rgt.

KUNAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan - The Marines and Sailors of "America's Battalion," 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment have been training side-by-side with Afghan Security Forces near the Pakistan border since the Battalion arrived in Afghanistan early last month.

In the northern province of Kunar, India Co., 3/3, has taken control of a small forward operating base in the heart of the Hindu Kush mountain range. The Marines' efforts there have focused on preparing Afghan Forces, employed by the Coalition, to take an even larger role in the protection of their country from its enemies in the form of Al Qaeda and remnants of the Taliban.

"Take a stance!" yells Marine 2nd Lt. Gary Bechtold of Green Brook, N.J., to his pupils, a group of ASF soldiers quickly springing into the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program's "basic warrior's stance" next to the concertina wire perimeter of Camp Blessing.

Bechtold, a green-belt martial arts instructor, has been training the ASF soldiers living and working with the Marines in MCMAP for about a month. The Marines hope to have their Afghan counterparts tan-belt qualified soon, the first level of the Marines' mixed martial arts program.



Cpl. Rich Mattingly

Cpl. James Rogers, platoon commander of the Afghan Security Forces and India Co. squad leader reminds one of his ASF Soldiers to always be ready to block and react.

"We've been working with the ASF soldiers to train them in military operations in urban terrain, patrolling and MCMAP," said Bechtold. "We're teaching them our leadership traits and core values in addition to some of our basic fight-

ing skills. It's the same training Marines get," he continued.

While the Marine martial arts instructor and platoon commander was putting his eager pupils through body-hardening drills and basic MCMAP movement skills, other Marines were sitting side-by-side with their Afghan counterparts in Camp Blessing's fortified outposts.

"We try to always have an equal number of Marines and ASF soldiers on post and with us on patrol," explained 1st Lt. Justin Bellman, India Co. executive officer, from Newark, Del.

Bellman says that with over 100 ASF soldiers currently stationed at Camp Blessing to augment his Marines, conditions couldn't be better for positioning the Afghan forces to take greater responsibility for providing security for local Afghans.

"Several of these guys are former mujahadeen fighters. Many of them have lost family. They've had brothers killed or been injured themselves because of them having the courage to work with us in fighting the anti-Afghan forces," said Bellman. "What we've learned from the ASF is that people really do want peace in this area, and they're willing to let us help them achieve their goals."

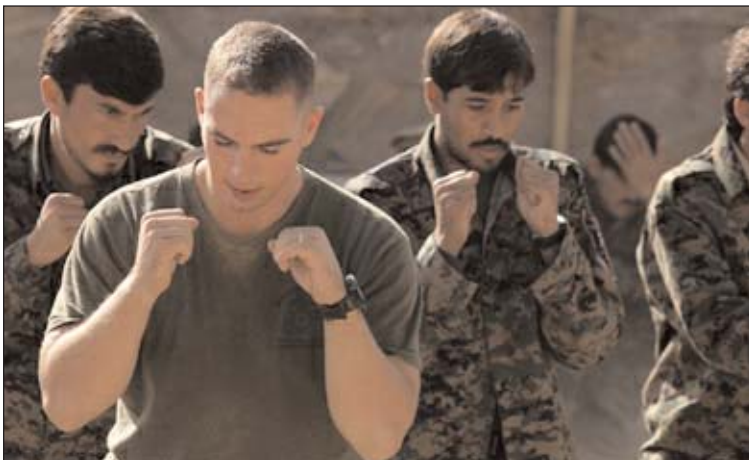
With the ASF squads now divided into Marine-like ranks with Marine squad leaders overseeing their training and employment, the commanders of India Co. are also pleased with how their noncommissioned officers have stepped up to the challenge of integrating with the Afghans.

"We've been doing a left-seat, right-seat with them since we got here," explained Bechtold. "My job has been easy; it's the NCOs who have really run with it. They're 'alone and unafraid' here. The corporals and sergeants have taken ownership of their squads a lot more than if we were doing standard platoon operations," he added.

The Marines say their time with the ASF has also been eye-opening on many levels. On convoys and on patrol, the Afghan forces have proven adept and skillful. Many times, the Marines have been surprised by how perceptive the Afghan Security Forces are to subtle changes in their surroundings, changes which could have been hostile threats.

"One second, they'll be smoking and laughing, and the next they'll be aimed in, deadly serious," explained Lance Cpl. Tim Davis, India Co. rifleman from Enfield, Conn. "They've got this sixth sense about them. I've looked where they're aiming in, and even with my optics I can't see what they just know is out there."

"They're the most courteous people I've ever met," Davis continued. "We've seen nothing but the good side of the Afghan people by working with them."



Cpl. Rich Mattingly

2nd Lt. Gary Roy Bechtold drills Afghan Security Forces Soldiers in the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program.



Left - Spc. David Baker, a carpenter from the 367th Eng. Bn., uses a tape measure to check the dimensions on a new guard tower at Waza Khwa, Afghanistan.

Carpenters improve life at Waza Khwa

By Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen
Editor

WAZA KHWA, Afghanistan - From nearly sun up to sun down, the sounds of power tools and hammers pounding nails fill the air at this base in southern Paktika Province.

Just about anything that can be made of wood, from shelves and tables to guard towers and generator shelters, are produced daily by two Soldiers from the 367 Engineer Battalion, an Army Reserve unit from Duluth, Minn.

Staff Sgt. Brian Damon and Spc. David Baker are here on loan from their unit at Bagram Airfield. The two arrived here on Dec. 18 and were scheduled to stay "until the job is done," according to Baker.

The conditions here are much more spartan than what they're used to at BAF, but Damon and Baker are doing their part to help make life better for the Soldiers who call this place home.

Damon, who is originally from the 457th Quarry Detachment, an Army Reserve unit in Milwaukee, Wisc., said he's glad he can help improve the quality of life of the Soldiers here.

"It makes me feel real good here knowing that this base when I got here really had nothing, and to know that I'm here to help make sure the Soldiers are comfortable, and they're living a little easier," he said.

The Milwaukee native said he enjoys working with wood and sees this mission as a break from his usual job as a heavy equipment operator and supervisor.

"It's kind of a hobby of mine to do

some carpentry on the side at home, so to do this is fun," Damon said.

For Baker, who is originally from the 611th Eng. Bn., an Army Reserve unit in Sharonville, Ohio, this is the second time during the deployment he's come to a forward operating base for this type of mission.

The West Chester, Ohio, native said it's gratifying to stand back at the end of the day and see the Soldiers actually using the things he and Damon built for them.

"It's nice that I can help out in some way," Baker said. "Even though I'm not an infantryman, I might be able to help make their day when they get back from a patrol or something."

One of the carpenters' tasks was to build tables and benches for the dining facility that were used for Christmas dinner.

"Hopefully everybody has a nice meal and they can sit down and eat instead of sitting on their bunk or looking for a chair," Baker said.

The two also used the tables and benches they built since they stayed

here through the holiday.

Baker said the fact had to spend Christmas here is sort of "a bummer," but it's something he knows he just has to deal with.

"You just got to make the best of it," he said. "Supposedly they're going to make it real nice for us here, so that's going to be good."

Damon, however, said he was happy to spend Christmas here.

"It makes it worthwhile to know that I'm here making somebody else's Christmas just a little bit better by making things for them," he said. "I know I'm not going to be at home, so I might as well be here doing something that I enjoy doing."



Photos by Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen

Staff Sgt. Brian Damon, a carpenter from the 367th Eng. Bn., cuts wood for a new guard tower at Waza Khwa, Afghanistan, Dec. 22.

You've got mail

America's Battalion makes it mail call to mail call

By Cpl. Rich Mattingly
3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Rgt.

BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan - Even as their thoughts remain securely on the task of securing Afghanistan, the Marines and Sailors of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment have found reassurances that "life goes on" back home to be increasingly important during the holiday season.

"With being half a world away from family and loved ones, and at what seems to be the furthest edge of the battle area, mail for the platoon is a driving force," explained Staff Sgt. Timothy Ledbetter, platoon sergeant with India Co., 3/3 during a recent mail drop to Camp Blessing. "It greatly improves morale and it brings a little bit of home to the boys."

Letters from home are a time-tested tradition when it comes to American service men and women deployed to combat zones. Even with the modern technology that allows deployed troops to make satellite phone calls and, more often than not, access to e-



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With up to 70 bags of mail a day, Pfc. Matt Cole stays busy sorting out America's Battalion mailroom.



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Marine Pfc. Matt Cole, administrative clerk with Headquarters and Service Co., 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, faced a mountain of mail every day during the holiday season.

mail and other instant-gratification forms of communication, the Marines of America's Battalion said nothing beats a hand-written letter.

Marines at even America's Battalion's farthest outlying posts recently received a much-needed lift when mail arrived just in time for Christmas.

"It brings the morale level up big-time whenever a bird comes and drops off mail for us," said Lance Cpl. Louis Ihrig, a scout observer for India Co., 3/3.

Mail heading for the large area America's Battalion currently covers in eastern Afghanistan funnels through Bagram Airfield, where Pfc. Matt Cole from Concord, N.C., administrative clerk, handles well over a thousand pieces of mail each week. Cole says that the mail keeps him very busy, especially as holiday packages fill his "mail hooch" to the rafters.

"I'm doing my job as fast as I can because I know how

important getting stuff from home is," said Cole, who is responsible for sorting the mail of well over 1200 Marines, Sailors and attachments to the Battalion.

Cole mentioned that he has also learned that mail has a much higher status as a force-multiplier than he first imagined.

"A couple of things I've learned while sorting the mail is that I'm not allowed to have a trash can in the mail room, just in case something were to get thrown away accidentally, and I've learned that no one, not even a four-star general can bump mail off of a flight to one of our bases," said Cole.

Letters and packages can take up to a month to reach deployed Marines and Sailors in Afghanistan, but the length of time just makes it that much more worthwhile when it arrives.

"Supplies, food, candy, anything we can't get here is always great to get in the mail," added Ihrig. "No matter

how long it takes to get here, it shows us that people support us."

And it's not just friends and families that have been supporting the deployed Hawaii Marines. Thanks to web sites like www.anysoldier.com, www.adoptaplatoon.com and www.adoptasniper.com, America's Battalion's troops have gotten some extra attention.

"I signed up my squad to receive care packages on the internet and we've gotten deluged with mail," said Lance Cpl. Tim Davis, India Co. fire team leader from Enfield, Conn. "It's awesome to get that kind of support when we can't usually get a lot of things here that they send to us."

High on the list of "must-haves" for Marines and Sailors were baby wipes, foot powder and any reading material.

With the help of regular mail delivery, morale remains high and Marines can remain informed even when deployed half a world away.

USO tour passes through RC East

By Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen
Editor

KHOST, Afghanistan - Two Hollywood celebrities rolled through several bases in Regional Command East Dec. 16 and 17.

Author, speaker and lead singer of the rock group Rollins Band, Henry Rollins, and actor Patrick Kilpatrick visited with service members and civilians in Ghazni, Sharana, Khost and Gardez during their two-day tour.

For Rollins, it was his fourth USO tour in the last 12 months. He's also been to Iraq, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Honduras and Qatar during the last year.

He said he does these tours in the hopes he can brighten someone's day.

"When you see what you guys are up against, what you do for a living, your relative pay scale for what is potentially your fate, I have nothing but awe, admiration and respect," Rollins said. "And if someone says 'Wow, you made my day,' why wouldn't I show up to perpetuate more of that?"



Staff Sgt. Bradley Rhen

Henry Rollins signs an autograph for a member of the Khost Provincial Reconstruction Team Dec. 17 in Khost.

"I'm a very busy person, but there's nothing I can't move around to make this possible every couple of months," he added.

Despite a hectic schedule, Rollins has spent a total of one month doing USO tours over the past year. He said he will keep doing tours as long

as the USO keeps asking him to.

"That's a big chunk of a year, but I don't care," he said. "I'm happy to do it."

Kilpatrick, whose father received a Silver Star while serving with the Navy during World War II, said when 9/11 happened he tried to enlist in

the Marines, but they said he was too old. These tours, he said, are a way for him to show his patriotism.

"So that I can serve you guys and serve the country in the best way I can," Kilpatrick said.

He added that he gets annoyed at the notion that everyone in Hollywood is against the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq, and that Hollywood is not supportive of the military.

"The truth is, there are lots of us who are really supportive," he said. "If I can give to troops the notion that there are millions of us, and we're all behind you, and we think you're heroes, every one of you, just for being here, that's why I'm here."

Kilpatrick also said he will continue to do these tours as long as USO asks him, and he's already asked to visit troops Iraq.

"I'm involved in the production of movies and the writing of scripts - which I think are very important - but you got to take time to address things in the larger world, and this is really important," he said.

Fox Battery practices slingloading big guns

Soldiers from Battery F, 7th Field Artillery Regiment hook up an M198 155mm howitzer to a Chinook helicopter Dec. 17 during elevator training at Forward Operating Base Salerno, Afghanistan.



Sgt. David West

Interpreters aid America's Battalion in War on Terrorism

By Cpl. Rich Mattingly
3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Rgt.

KUNAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan - The author Rollo May once said, "Communication leads to community, understanding and mutual valuing."

In eastern Afghanistan, where mutual understanding and communication between vastly different cultures is the cornerstone of Operation Enduring Freedom, the Marines of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment are making sure that they are able to bridge the lingual and cultural barriers between Afghans and Marines with a new breed of "warrior-interpreters."

With skilled interpreters embedded with platoons they operate with, Marines have been able to not only increase the effectiveness of their work with the Afghan National Army, but have also dramatically expanded their ability to locate and close with the enemy in many areas where Afghans might otherwise be hesitant to cooperate with Marines for fear of repercussions from Anti-Coalition Forces.

Wadeer, an interpreter with Afghan Security Forces operating side-by-side with America's Battalion, was just finishing his medical school studies when the Taliban took power six years ago.

"I was two weeks away from finding out the results of my final medical school exams when everything changed," said the soft-spoken man who is now as comfortable wielding an AK-47 assault rifle as he is a stethoscope. Before he could find out the results of his tests, the Taliban had overthrown Jalalabad.

"The Taliban didn't care about education," said Wadeer, "I was thrown out of class by a Taliban-approved professor because I did not cut my hair a certain way," continued the interpreter in disgust.

Wadeer is fluent in both



Cpl. Rich Mattingly

Sgt. Shawn Kelly, squad leader with India Co., 3rd Bn., 3rd Marine Rgt., speaks with Wadeer, an interpreter working for America's Battalion about an unauthorized weapon his squad seized from a house in the Korangal Valley.

English and Pashtu, the language of primarily used in America's Battalion's area of responsibility. With two years of medical practice adding to his experience and ability to communicate, Wadeer brings a lot to the fight. With his and the other interpreters' help, Marines are gaining more ground than ever on anti-coalition forces.

"They're our lifeblood for communicating with local nationals and our Afghan Security Forces," said 2nd Lt. Roy Bechtold, platoon commander with India Co. "They'll fight with us to the death, and they're extremely protective of the Marines," said Bechtold.

Wadeer and his fellow interpreters are extremely loyal to the Marines they often find themselves fighting alongside.

"They are good people," said Wadeer, breaking into an easy smile. "They treat us as equals, like we're the same because we fight together."

The general consensus in Afghanistan is that the presence of the Marines is a welcome change. The interpreters echo this sentiment,

happy to share that they are happy to see the new peace and stability that has been a direct result of the Marine Corps' involvement in Afghanistan.

"I think we as Afghans are all happier now," explained Wadeer. "The most important thing is security. There used to be these local commanders and no one had freedom," he continued, referring to tribal warlords who abused the land and its people, allowing terrorism to spread before the Coalition overthrew the Taliban.

"Now we live equal, now there is a chance for us to live free and have a free Afghanistan," he added.

Wadeer plans on returning to the medical field one day, but for now, he feels his place is with the ASF and the Marines of America's Battalion, fighting for his country. With its economy still recovering from the fallout of decades of internal strife, Wadeer can also earn more money for his family working with the Marines than he can practicing medicine in Kabul.

For Afghanistan to recover and completely remove the stigma that terrorists have brought to the war-torn country, the interpreter says that it is imperative that Americans keep faith in his people.

"I think it's necessary for the Marines to stay here," he shared. "The situation is still critical."

Many Afghans share Wadeer's view. With only about 20,000 Afghan National Army troops currently recruited out of the 70,000 the Afghan government says they hope to eventually have, Coalition Forces must still bear the brunt of security and stability operations in Afghanistan.

"The Marines help us to make our government more powerful so that we can take care of the terrorists ourselves," said Wadeer.

With the help of Wadeer and the Afghan Security Forces as well as the entire Joint Task Force operating in Afghanistan, America's Battalion continues to fight to bring a brighter future to Afghanistan.