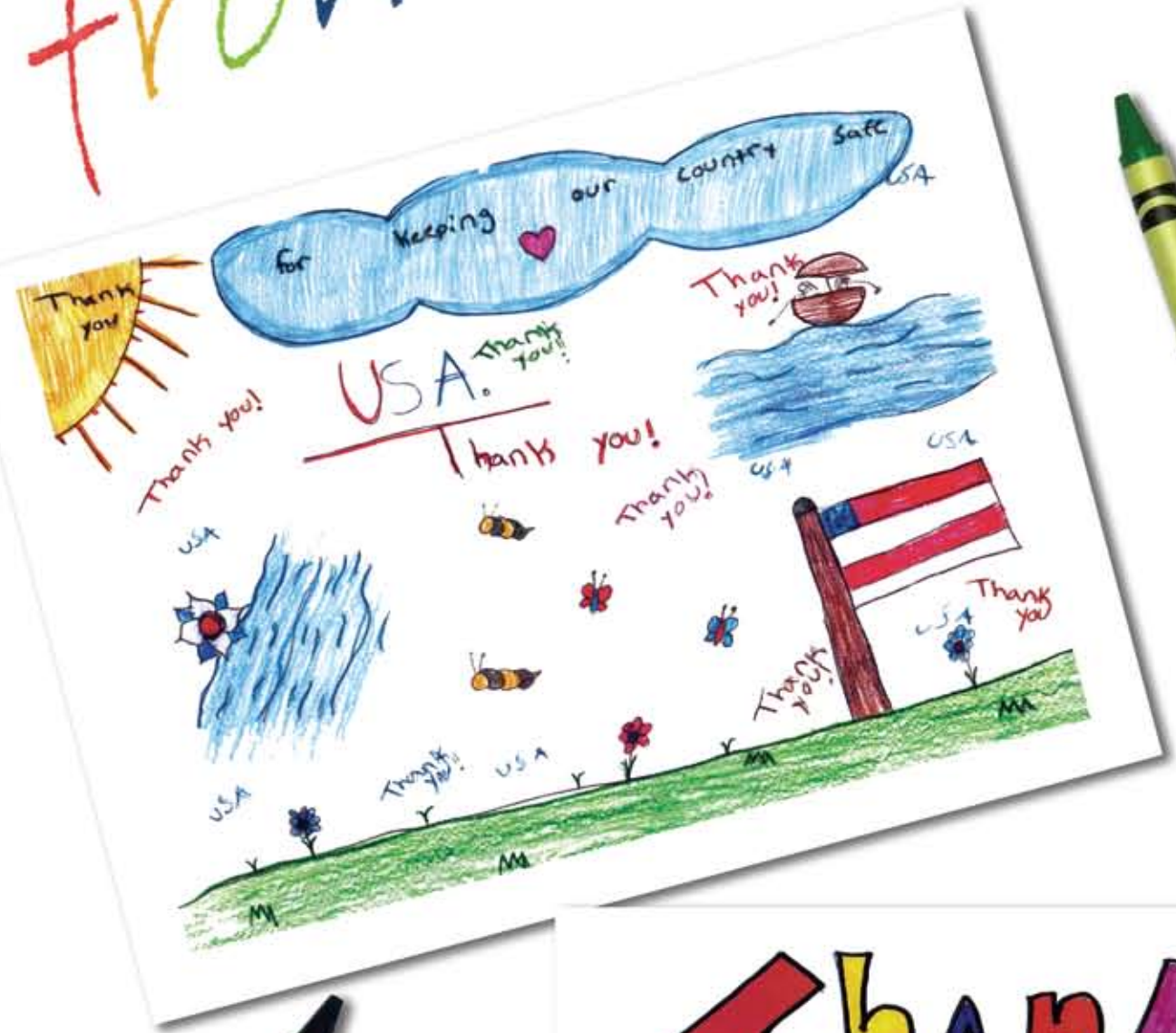
CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW: RTOs ANSWER CALL

FREEDOM WATCH AFGHANISTAN

SEPT. 29, 2008

FIREPOWER: SOLDIERS MAN THE GUN LINE

from the kids



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Maj. Mike Claridge, 7th Transport Regiment, British Army, conducts a foot patrol for an International Security Assistance Force mission. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech Sgt. Laura Smith)

An Army UH-60 Black Hawk flies over Afghanistan. The Black Hawk serves as the backbone of the Army's airlift capability. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Samuel Morse)

Contents

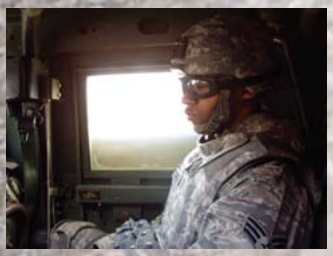
SEPT. 29, 2008

2 SECDEF looks at support mission

3 Leaders, elders discuss security

6 Marine MEDCAP tip scales

8 Building skills in Patika



9 RTOs answer the call

Gates looks at Bagram's close-air support mission

By Jim Garamone
American Forces Press Service

Department of Defense photo by Tech. Sgt. Jerry Morrison

Defense Secretary Robert Gates meets with U.S. Soldiers at Kabul International Airport.

Avoiding civilian casualties is a high priority for U.S. aircrews, Defense Secretary Robert Gates said at Bagram Air Field Sept. 17.

Gates came to Bagram to get a full picture of the American aviation effort in Afghanistan. Civilian casualties from American and NATO bombing attacks are causing fury in parts of Afghanistan.

"We're very concerned about this; it's a high priority for us," Gates said. "We work at that hard, work at it harder and then take another look to see what more we can do to limit innocent people who are killed when we go after our enemies."

An attack on the village of Shindand in Herat province Aug. 22 killed at least seven innocent bystanders and allegedly many more. U.S. Central Command has ordered an investigation.

Gates spoke with F-15E Strike Eagle and A-10 Thunderbolt II crews and maintainers who provide close-air support to ground forces in Afghanistan. Earlier in the day, he met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

"President Karzai told me this morning that the Afghan people still very much believe we are here to help them and overcome their enemies," Gates said. "They are still very friendly toward the United States. The key for us on those rare occasions when we do make a mistake – when we do make an error – is to apologize quickly, compensate the victims quickly and then carry out the investigation."

That's what Coalition forces do in Iraq and it should be the model in Afghanistan "so that people know we do care about them and that we have very deep regret if there is an accident," the secretary said. Air Force Brig. Gen. Mike Holmes, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, released a DVD showing a typical engagement.

A ground unit spotted a truck fleeing an area. It had what appeared to be a launcher on it, and the truck's occupants had just used it to fire on Coalition forces. There were 10 to 15 enemy personnel aboard the truck, in rugged terrain, at night.

Ground controllers vectored an F-15E Strike Eagle to attack the truck. The F-15 pilot – call sign "Dude Zero-5" – spotted the truck and was prepared to attack.

"Dude, he's going through a village," the air ground controller radioed. "Dude Zero-5, at this time he is passing by several compounds."

Dude acknowledged the transmission and was 15 seconds away from dropping.

"Dude, are you seeing this? All these compounds right next to him?" the controller asked.

Even as that question was coming out, Dude radioed "Abort, abort, abort."

"Dude Zero-5, copy: abort, abort, abort," the controller replied.

The U.S. personnel stopped the attack, even though it almost surely would have killed 10 to 15 enemy fighters, rather than possibly kill innocent people in the compounds.

The pilot and ground forces managed to keep tracking the vehicle and finally used a guided bomb to destroy it well clear of any houses, villages or compounds.

Army Gen. David McKiernan, International Security Assistance Force commander, addressed the issue of civilian casualties the day before while speaking with reporters traveling with Gates.

> ***"... the Afghan people still very much believe we are here to help them and overcome their enemies."***
>
> *Secretary Gates*

"Any civilian casualty caused by NATO or American forces is inadvertent," McKiernan said. "It's a tragic mistake. But the enemy we fight on purpose mixes in with the population."

The general reaffirmed every effort is made to avoid civilian casualties.

"We have reviewed our procedures for the application of lethal force," he said. "I've just revised a tactical directive that tries to be very measured in how we apply lethal force."

Afghan leaders, village elders meet to discuss security

U.S. Army photo

Government officials, village elders and people of the Kapisa province gather Sept. 15 to introduce a new National Directorate of Security and discuss security issues.

By Army 1st Lt. Lory Stevens
Task Force Warrior

Parliament leaders, village elders and other government officials attended a meeting at the Glass House Jirga Center in the Mahmood Raqi District of the Kapisa province.

Kapisa Gov. Khuweja Abubaker and Army Col. Scott Spellmon, Task Force Warrior commander, addressed a crowd of 350 attendees. Both leaders talked about Afghans working together with the government to increase security.

"It is very hard when the enemy is hiding in the population like the weeds in the flower garden," Abubaker said.

Coalition forces are resolved to help the Afghan government, Spellmon told the group. "There are still more enemies out there, and we will continue to pressure them," he said.

Village elders welcomed the new National Directorate of Security, as the province has lacked a full-time NDS for some time. Abubaker said he hopes the addition of this office will greatly affect security in the province.

"The government of Kapisa, in conjunction with their Coalition force partners, are making significant improvements in security throughout the province," Spellmon said. "I agree with Governor Abubaker. The leaders and people of Kapisa have a window of opportunity to get behind the Afghan security forces and support their efforts in the local communities."

Infrastructure projects such as bridges, roads and schools are in the works, designed to improve the lives of people in Kapisa, Spellmon said. A $6 million road from the capital of Kapisa to Nijrab and a $4 million dollar road from Nijrab to Sarobi represent two of the biggest development projects in the province.

1st Infantry Division medics help locals in Nuristan province

By Army Pfc. Charles Wolfe
3rd Brigade Combat Team

In the rural, mountainous province of Nuristan, acute or primary medical care has been nearly nonexistent for the local population in the past.

Local Afghans have long been without reasonable means to cure and prevent disease, treat wounds or receive medications.

Soldiers of the 6th Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division's medical platoon are changing this.

"We are really making a difference here," said Sgt. 1st Class Adrian Davenport, 6-4 Cav. Medical Platoon Sergeant. "The Soldiers are starting to recognize the locals and when they see the kids at the gate they all wave."

Armed with bandages, ibuprofen and various balms and creams, the 6-4 medics opened a morning sick call for local nationals of every age and gender.

The clinic starts with a short screening process, where a medic determines who can be given simple drugs, like aspirin or vitamins, and who needs more attention.

The platoon's work goes beyond the scope of just health care. By offering free medical services to resident Afghans, the Soldiers build a relationship with locals, adding to the positive and progressive work of the U.S. Army in Afghanistan. The Soldiers are reaching out to the locals in the area and the children are taking notice.

"The children go home and tell their little friends about it, and the next morning we have an abundance of kids outside," Davenport said.

The medics work together with the 126th Forward Surgical Team, who can provide surgical care to Soldiers and locals in need. The Soldiers begin the local national sick call around 9:30 a.m. everyday.

U.S. Army photo

Spc. John Washburn, 6-4 Calvary medic, cleans a spider bite on a resident of a small village in the Nuristan province.

Locals appreciate the medical help, but they get more from 6-4 than just medicine.

"They all appreciate the care we provide," said Army Capt. Amanda Cuda, family physician for 6-4, "but I don't know if the kids like the medical treatment or the toys and candy more."

Afghanistan launches first neighborhood watch program

By Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Shawn Graham
Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan

The Afghan Interior Ministry announced the creation of the country's first neighborhood watch program at a news conference in Kabul.

Interior Minister Zarar Ahmad said he wanted to give the people of Afghanistan a way to report crime anonymously without fear of reprisals. He consulted with his Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan counterparts and the neighborhood watch program was born.

"The people of Afghanistan will play a large role in this program," Ahmad said. "The program is for the Afghan people to take care of their own communities and report suspicious activities."

The program is designed as a defense system for neighborhoods and communities. Army Maj. Gen. Robert Cone, Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan commander, touted the benefits the program would have on local communities. He cited more than 100 reports of recovered improvised explosive devices and illegal weapons that were confiscated by the Afghan National Police.

"The best security systems for Afghan communities are designed by Afghans," Cone said. "We will help provide training and financial assistance to make sure this program is successful."

The Interior Ministry provides a training class for volunteers and national police officers who patrol the communities. One police representative attends the training, and then takes back the information to share with other officers.

U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Shawn Graham

Afghanistan Interior Minister Zarar Ahmad and Army Maj. Gen. Robert Cone, Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan commander, conduct a news conference to launch the neighborhood watch program.

Bee boxes get economy buzzing in Bazarak District

By Air Force Capt. Jillian Torango
Task Force Cincinnatus

One hundred fifty bee boxes were delivered to Bazarak District as part of an overall $180,000 province-wide project conducted by the local government and the Panjshir Provincial Reconstruction Team to help both the local economy and boost agricultural production.

Seventy-five families in each of the six lower districts throughout Panjshir will receive two of the $200 bee boxes, training, a centrifuge and protective equipment. Bazarak is the fourth district to receive the bees.

> ***"We worked together and were successful in bringing the bee project to Panjshir."***
>
> *Hashmat-Ullah Enyat*
> ***Provincial Director of Agriculture***

"We worked together and were successful in bringing the bee project to Panjshir," said Hashmat-Ullah Enyat, the Provincial Director of Agriculture. "We've already delivered the bees to Anaba, Rokha, and Shotul districts, today we do Bazarak, and we'll do the last two districts soon."

"In agriculture, the bees are most necessary. They help all of the agriculture grow faster," said Mir Weis, the beekeeper overseeing the distribution of the bees. "The bees are the main ingredient in the pollination process and they are always good to have around the crops. Successful and plentiful pollination is crucial to getting a good strong crop."

Gregory Schlenz, a U.S. Department of Agriculture representative with the Panjshir PRT, has been working with the civil affairs team and the province's director of agriculture to get the bees into the province. Each colony is expected to produce approximately 10 kilograms of honey after the first year, which means the Bazarak District could see 1,500 kilograms of honey once they start to produce.

U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Shawn Graham

Beekeeper Mir Weiss shows Capt. Jayson Stewart, Panjshir PRT's director of operations a sleeve of bees from one of the bee boxes during the bee delivery ceremony Sept. 17 at Bazarak High School.

Willow Grove unit completes last A-10 deployment

By Air Force Staff Sgt. Rachel Martinez
455th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

The Pennsylvania Air National Guard unit stationed at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Willow Grove will be transitioning to a Joint Interagency Installation as a result of the Department of Defense's 2005 Base Realignment and Closure recommendations.

With the new mission coming onboard, the 111th Fighter Wing is scheduled to lose its fleet of A-10 Thunderbolt IIs beginning in the spring of 2009. As they wrap up their deployment to Bagram Air Field, it could very well be their last combat deployment with their "warthog."

The 103rd Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, part of the 111th FW, gave it their all as they dropped more than 30,000 pounds of ordnance and fired more than 25,000 30-mm rounds while supporting the close-air support missions over Afghanistan.

Lt. Col. Mike Shenk, 103rd EFS assistant director of operations, is completing his second rotation at Bagram.

"As far as kinetic ops, we are much busier this time," he said, comparing this rotation to his previous deployment. "Everyone in the squadron has been a part of a mission that dropped bombs or shot the gun."

It's not necessarily dropping bombs the aircrew likes to do; it's having the opportunity to help troops on the ground.

"The A-10 air-to-ground mission gives us the opportunity to go out and do something specifically to help the guys on the ground. To be able to go out, take the pressure off, or get the enemy off of their back for even a little while is real gratifying," Shenk said. "It's not too uncommon to walk into the BX and run into some ground guys who ask us if we fly the A-10. They routinely tell us how much they appreciate us taking care of them."

U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Rachel Martinez

Staff Sgt. Kevin Bliem, 455th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron crew chief, marshals out an A-10 Thunderbolt II. Riem is deployed from the 111th Fighter Wing, an Air National Guard unit located in Willow Grove, Pa.

Despite being the last A-10 deployment for this unit, spirits have remained high.

"It's been pretty impressive," said Lt. Col. Thomas Fennell, 103rd EFS mission planning cell chief. "Everyone focuses on the task at hand and the things we can control versus those we can't."

Fenty Idol regional competition gets Soldiers in tune

By Army Sgt. Charles Brice
3rd Brigade Combat Team,
1st Infantry Division

With nervousness looming in the air, the flickering of the strobe lights in the background and speakers booming with the latest music of today's artists, Soldiers compete in music and dance.

Fenty Idol, modeled after the popular television show American Idol, took place at Forward Operation Base Fenty.

The competition is the beginning of a series of events that will follow in the coming months.

"The 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team started the Idol fever; I just continued the tradition," Spc. Gilberto Geronimo of 201st Brigade Support Battalion said. "I coordinated most of the events, along with some support from my battle buddies and the MWR personnel."

U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Charles Brice

2nd Lt. David Houston serenades the crowd with his guitar while playing a song he wrote as part of the initial Fentry Idol competition.

There will be a series of performances each week for the next three weeks offering the contestants the chance to win a trip to Bagram Air Field and compete in the finals.

"The first three events are just for practice and to get the Soldiers interested in participating, and the fourth event will be the real deal to compete for the finals at Bagram," said Spc. Michael Greiser, Headquarter Headquarters Command 201st Special Troops Battalion.

This was a practice run, but there will be more to come.

"There isn't a limit to how things can be for the Soldiers," Geronimo said. "But it's up to each individual to make a change to their own situation."

Tipping the Scales

By Marine Corps Cpl. Steve Cushman
Task Force 2d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division

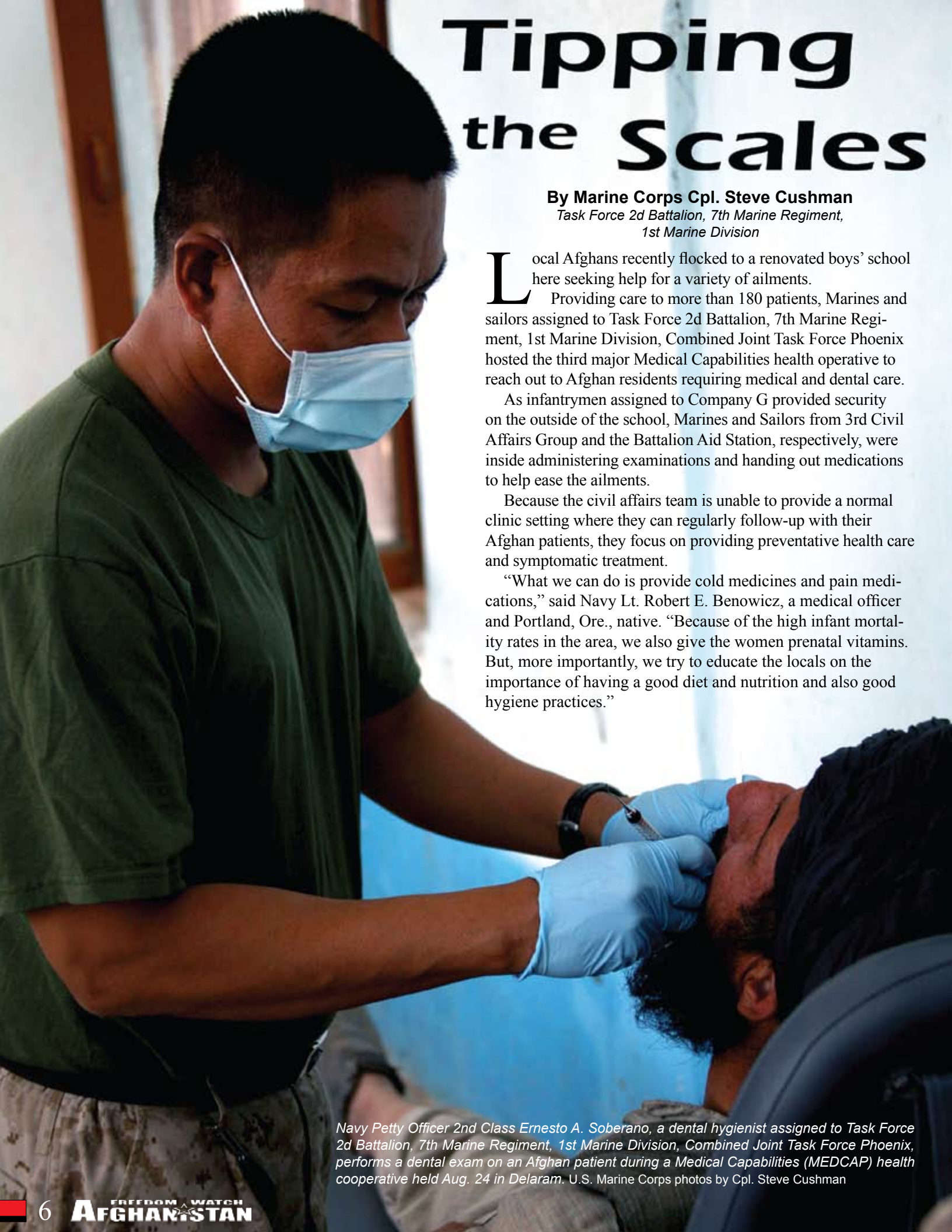
Local Afghans recently flocked to a renovated boys' school here seeking help for a variety of ailments.

Providing care to more than 180 patients, Marines and sailors assigned to Task Force 2d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix hosted the third major Medical Capabilities health operative to reach out to Afghan residents requiring medical and dental care.

As infantrymen assigned to Company G provided security on the outside of the school, Marines and Sailors from 3rd Civil Affairs Group and the Battalion Aid Station, respectively, were inside administering examinations and handing out medications to help ease the ailments.

Because the civil affairs team is unable to provide a normal clinic setting where they can regularly follow-up with their Afghan patients, they focus on providing preventative health care and symptomatic treatment.

"What we can do is provide cold medicines and pain medications," said Navy Lt. Robert E. Benowicz, a medical officer and Portland, Ore., native. "Because of the high infant mortality rates in the area, we also give the women prenatal vitamins. But, more importantly, we try to educate the locals on the importance of having a good diet and nutrition and also good hygiene practices."



Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Ernesto A. Soberano, a dental hygienist assigned to Task Force 2d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix, performs a dental exam on an Afghan patient during a Medical Capabilities (MEDCAP) health cooperative held Aug. 24 in Delaram. U.S. Marine Corps photos by Cpl. Steve Cushman

"We also see a lot of malnutrition, so we give the adults multivitamins and the children vitamins and iron supplements to fight effects from not eating properly," Benowicz said.

Residents who are financially stable have access to medical care. The vast majority, however, don't have good access.

"The first time, we had so many children who had stomach issues and malnutrition," said Seaman Michael McCarthy, a corpsman assigned to Combined Anti-Armor Team 2 and a Newport, R.I., native. "We've seen some improvements, especially with teaching them to live a little healthier lifestyle. They may not have a lot of access to vegetables or other nutritious foods, but trying to get them to get a more varied diet is what we've been teaching them. That's probably the best improvement we see."

Many of the people who came to the MEDCAP don't have a good concept of healthy living. Whether it's as simple as showing the Afghans how to take better care of their teeth and gums, eat healthier foods, or how to take proper care of their wounds, these simple lessons are an important aspect of hosting the MEDCAPs.

"As far as health is concerned, we try to teach them dental hygiene. They also have a poor concept of how to take care of wounds," McCarthy explained. "They'll cut themselves and the next thing you know, they have some serious infections. Each time they come in with bad infections, we try to teach them that if they have a cut or burn, this is how they need to clean it if they don't want another infection."

The people, some traveling as far as 300 kilometers, seemed quite excited to take advantage of the MEDCAP. Through radio messages and by word of mouth, news that the Marines would be back to host another MEDCAP spread quickly.

"We are having greater turnouts with each major MEDCAP we host," Benowicz said. "The people are hearing good things about what we're providing to them. They understand the Americans are here to help them. We've been building good relationships with the locals… this is a good way to show that we're here to stay and to help the people out."

The CAG team has hosted several MEDCAPs, varying in size. While some are much smaller than the ones held here in Delaram, each MEDCAP has turned into a learning experience for the Marines and sailors supporting the MEDCAPs. In the first two major MEDCAPs, it was discovered that most of the people complained of dental pain. Consequently, a dental hygienist was included to help in this area.

"This is the first MEDCAP with dental support," said Petty Officer 2nd Class Ernesto A. Soberano, a registered dental hygienist and Vacaville, Calif., native. "Most of the people have some form of gingivitis or other gum disease. In general, they have bad oral hygiene practices."

As the CAG team examined the Afghan patients, they referred those with either missing or rotten teeth to Soberano. In addition to providing examinations and treatments, Soberano handed out toothbrushes and other oral hygiene supplies.

The MEDCAPS are one of many civil military operations projects conducted by TF 2/7 reaping immediate success. Despite threats of harm by Taliban forces, more Afghans have come forward to take advantage of the help being offered them.

"My team's job out here is to tip the scales in our favor," said Gunnery Sgt. Omar Palaciosreal, team chief for CAG Team 2 and a Moreno Valley, Calif., native. "People are the center of gravity, we know that. Every day that we do a good deed or show the people that we care and that we want the best for them and their interest, we're tipping the scales in our favor."

Seaman Oscar Medrano, a corpsman assigned to Task Force 2d Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix, examines an Afghan patient during a Medical Capabilities (MEDCAP) health cooperative held Aug. 24 in Delaram, Afghanistan.

Building Skills

By Army Capt. Wade Sweeny

Afghan-American partnerships are building the skilled work force within Afghanistan through the Engineer Skills Development Workshops.

Afghan local-national contractors instruct and resource the workshops, which train area students in vertical construction disciplines on FOB Sharana.

The program is building on the work started by Task Force Pacemaker, 864th Engineer Battalion, from Fort Lewis, Wash. The major difference is Task Force Hammer's workshops are year-long programs taught and resourced entirely by Afghan local nationals.

The intent of the program is to transition workers into more permanent construction trade schools in the city of Sharana.

The Engineer Skills Development Workshops take a progressive approach to construction skills development. Three tiers of the Engineer Skills Development Workshop, skilled laborer, foreman, and subcontractor, allow the exceptional students to potentially attend the second and third tiers of the course. Additionally, each tier of the program is run entirely by Afghans – professional engineers and construction contractors – to develop local nationals in construction management disciplines.

According to Lt. Col. Ronald Zimmerman, Task Force Hammer commander, "Afghan instructors better expand technical, interpersonal, and skilled knowledge because of the mentoring-type relationship. More importantly, the benefit is a sharing of knowledge and construction ideas well beyond what coalition forces could teach."

The skilled laborer classes are broken into eight 15-day classes for specific disciplines in both vertical fields, such as carpentry, masonry, electrical, and plumbing, and horizontal construction. Each class goes through the fundamentals of construction, including safety practices and U.S. standards of construction, and serve up to 32 students.

The foreman course for vertical construction covers all four construction disciplines and focuses on the supervisor's role. The course implements quality control and quality assurance methods, and has a strong emphasis on safety and risk management.

Subcontractor training implements project management methods and covers topics such as critical path method, resource management and project crashing.

After this course, subcontractors are encouraged to conduct further study in the emerging Building Construction Management program at the American University of Afghanistan at Kabul. The course is newly-planned and currently being developed.

The Engineer Skills Development Workshops are Commanders' Emergency Relief Program funded and utilize a partnership between Afghan construction contractors and engineers, US Army Engineers, and the American University of Afghanistan.

The Engineer Skills Development Workshops is just one effort in achieving progress for the good of all Afghans.

Afghan instructors at the Engineer Skills Development Workshop at FOB Sharona practice wood frame construction during train-the-trainer. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Wade Sweeny)

Answering the Call

By Air Force Capt. J. Elaine Hunnicutt
Nangarhar PRT

As the team is returning from a long mission, the gunner of the first vehicle in the four-vehicle convoy spots a suspected vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. The team halts.

This is a tense moment, because they know their lives and the lives of civilians around them are potentially at risk.

During this critical time, the most important call they make is to their base for support. The person who answers the call is the Radio Telephone Operator. He is their life-line for reinforcements, for air support and for medical evacuations.

Senior Airmen Blake Manuel from Louisiana and Antuoine Clowers from Charlotte, N.C,. are the RTOs for the Nangarhar Provincial Reconstruction Team in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

They are responsible for monitoring communications with all convoys in their battle space, for calling in air support and medical evacuation and for dispatching Quick Reaction Forces and Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams for unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices. They keep tabs on where people are when outside the wire.

"They ensure we are accounted for and in constant contact with the Provincial Reconstruction Team," said Lt. Col. Paul Donovan, Nangarhar PRT commander.

"They are our lifeline to the assets and resources that rain down fire or bring us life support – without them we can't function," Donovan said. "They are our sentinels and ensure that we come home alive at the end of the day."

"The RTOs are the critical link between the operations cell and our elements operating in the battle space; they have direct knowledge and up to date information on what is going on," said 1st Sgt. John Okerson, Nangarhar PRT.

"I monitor and track coalition forces' movement within Nangarhar Province," said Manuel. "I answer the radios and relay all information about convoys in the province to the battle NCO and captain."

This pair, who are part of a multi-service team trained at Fort Bragg, N.C., works opposite shifts in the Tactical Operations Center to operate the radios and monitors the movement of friendly forces within the 7,700 square-kilometer province.

"The training that we received at Bragg was good and did teach us a little about the equipment, but mainly it taught us about the Army culture and mentally prepared us," Clowers said.

The skillsets they learned in training are vital because it helps them better understand what the team is experiencing outside the wire. It also makes communication more coherent, because they were introduced to the Army jargon and procedures in a safe environment. The PRT-owned RTOs trained with just their team, but are responsible for many lives.

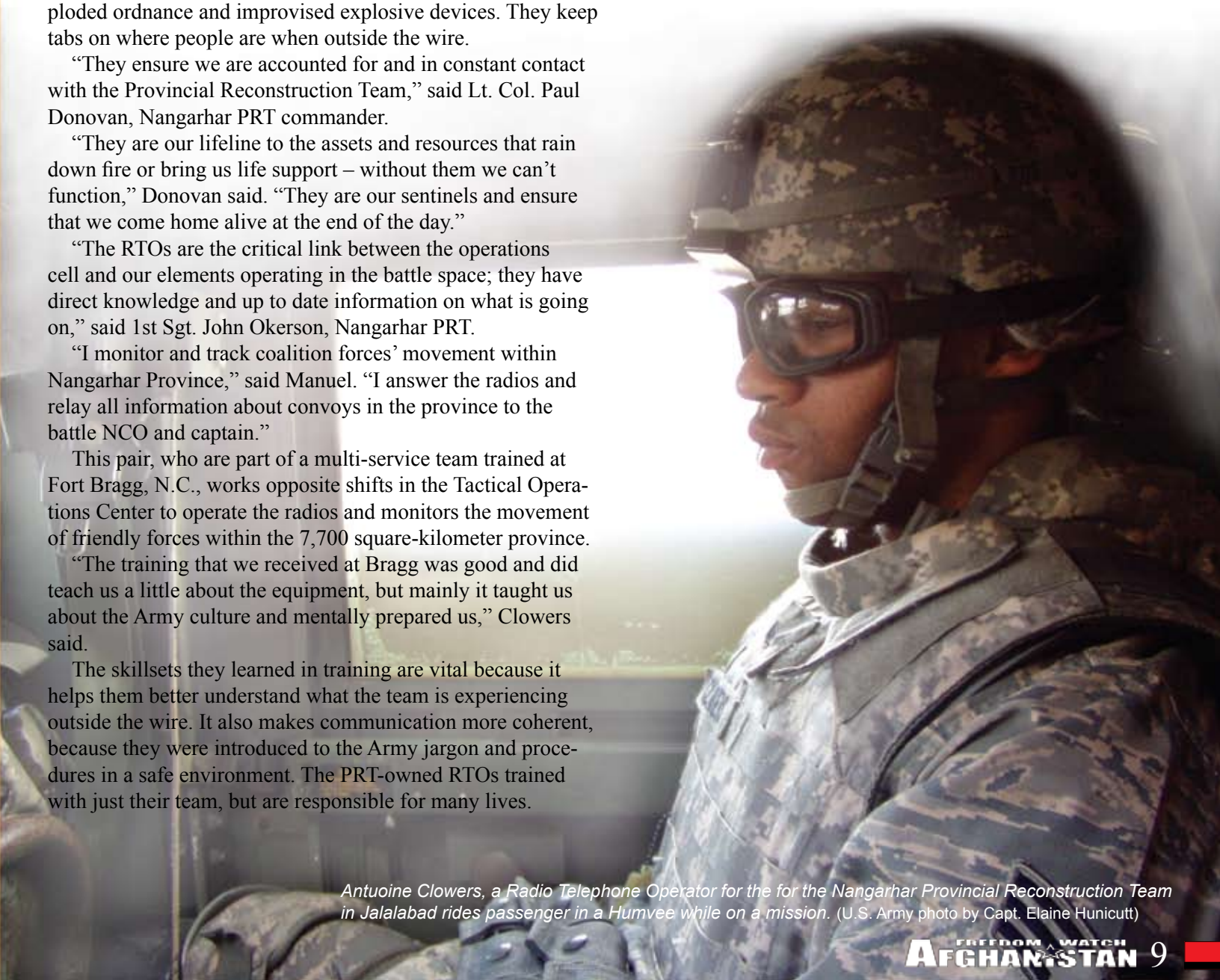
"I work both sides of it; I drive when I can to help out the PRT, but I am part of all of it, because I track all of the convoys within our battlespace," Clowers said.

A typical day for an RTO can mean sitting in a windowless vault monitoring routine movement, but unfortunately, a typical day is also calling in "med evacs" for wounded troops on the battlefield.

Both RTOs agree that the greatest benefit of the job is having a comprehensive look at the mission within the area of operation.

"I like the job because I get to know everything that is going on in the province. I am the battle NCO's eyes and ears" Manuel said.

"It seems like we are fighting two different wars, when I compare my last deployment in Manas with the Air Force to this," Clowers said. "Here, I feel like I'm on the frontlines. I get to see it up close and know what's going on."



Antuoine Clowers, a Radio Telephone Operator for the for the Nangarhar Provincial Reconstruction Team in Jalalabad rides passenger in a Humvee while on a mission. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Elaine Hunicutt)

Hitting the Ground Running

By Air Force Staff Sgt. Rachel Martinez
455th Air Expeditionary Wing

As a surgical technician at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, Senior Airman Ricky Hopper had very little experience with trauma cases, but that changed his first day deployed to the hospital at Forward Operating Base Salerno in Afghanistan.

"My first day here we got a mass casualty. We had patients come in that got hit by an improvised explosive device," said the 25-year-old Shawnee, Okla., native. "Very fast-paced. I wasn't really ready at first."

With the help of experienced techs from the prior deployment rotation, the work quickly became natural for Hopper.

"I teamed up with one of them and they showed me exactly what I needed to do," he said. "It worked out great."

Despite having to amputate legs, the surgery was a success, according to Hopper, because the patients lived.

With Air Force and Army medical professionals deployed from all over, the team learned quickly how to work together at the joint hospital.

"When we get into the OR, we all have different styles, different ways of doing things," he explained. "But when the first mass-cal came in the first day we were here, we realized it's time to rock and roll. We realize who is strong in one thing and weak in another, and we team up with someone who is opposite."

According to Hopper, there is no typical day in the OR. He comes in every morning and prepares for any scheduled surgeries, but he never knows when a "Shamrock" will come in. Shamrock is the term used by the hospital staff for incoming traumas. Following the colors of the American flag, a Shamrock Red indicates one patient, White indicates two patients, and Blue indicates three patients. A Shamrock Black means there are four or more patients and is considered a mass casualty.

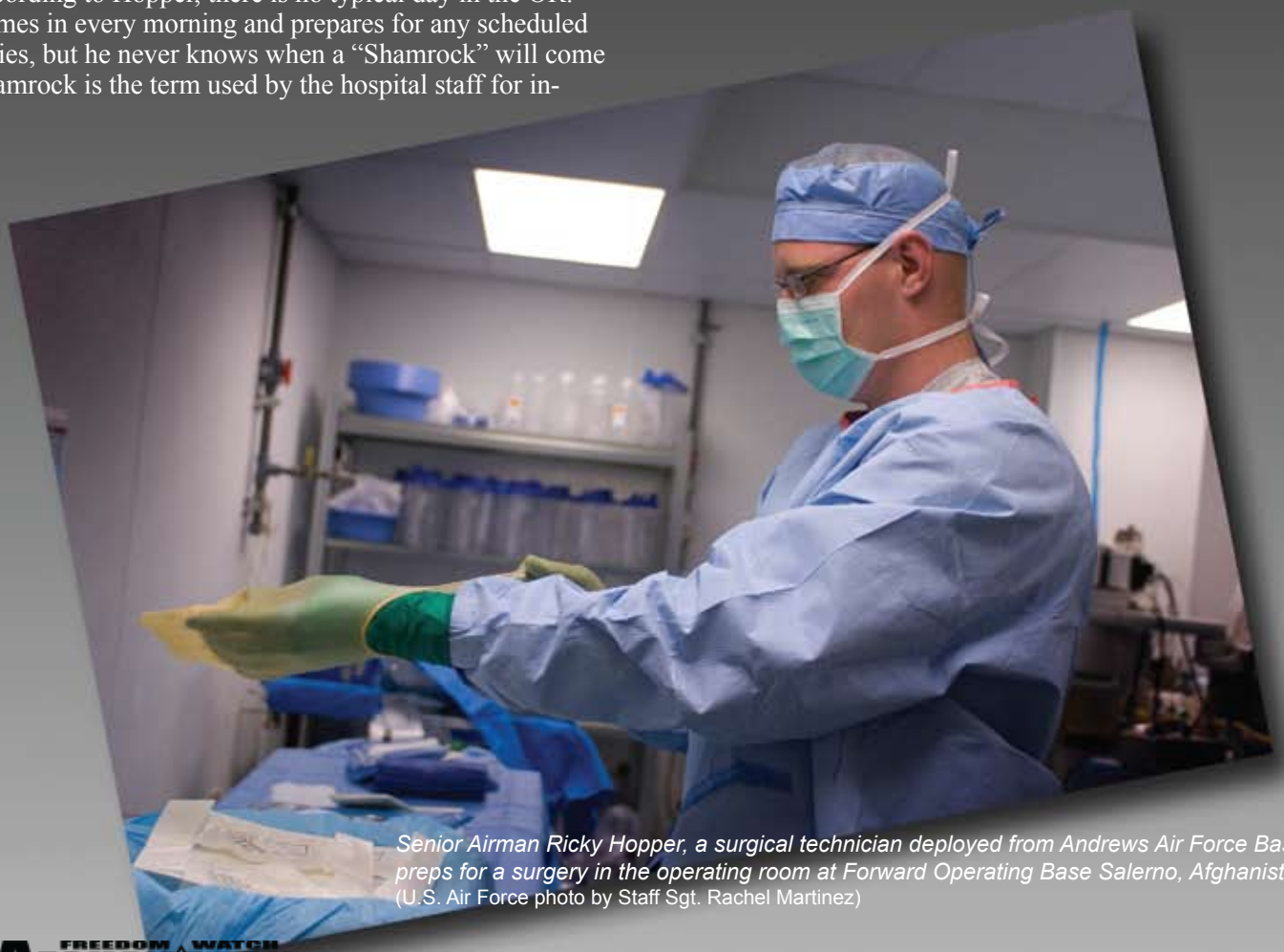
Hopper helped save more than a dozen lives Aug. 18, Afghanistan Independence Day, after a suicide car bomber rammed the gate of the base. It wasn't his first mass casualty, but it still wasn't easy.

All the patients that day were Afghans, but for Hopper it wasn't any easier than when the patient is a U.S. servicemember. As an additional job, Hopper would spend time monitoring the local Afghan workers on base. He knew many of the patient's names and faces that day.

"I don't think about it. That's the easiest way to do it at the time – just do your job," he said. "Later on, you realize, yeah I knew that person, and it does make you feel bad. But you try to put it in the back of your mind and get the job done. As long as you get the job done, that's all that matters. We don't dwell – as medics we can't dwell."

Despite the loss of 10 Afghan lives from that suicide attack, Hopper, who has already volunteered to deploy again next year, focuses on the 16 patients who lived.

"I've helped a lot of people," he said. "Other people may look at it as doing extreme things, but for O.R. techs, it's our job."



Senior Airman Ricky Hopper, a surgical technician deployed from Andrews Air Force Base, Md., preps for a surgery in the operating room at Forward Operating Base Salerno, Afghanistan.
(U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Rachel Martinez)

Manning the Gun Line

By Army Staff Sgt. Adora Medina
3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division

From a distance the barrels of the howitzers can be seen above the barriers surrounding Forward Operating Base Kala Gush. The weapons are ready to fire at a second's notice, providing fire support to the immediate area.

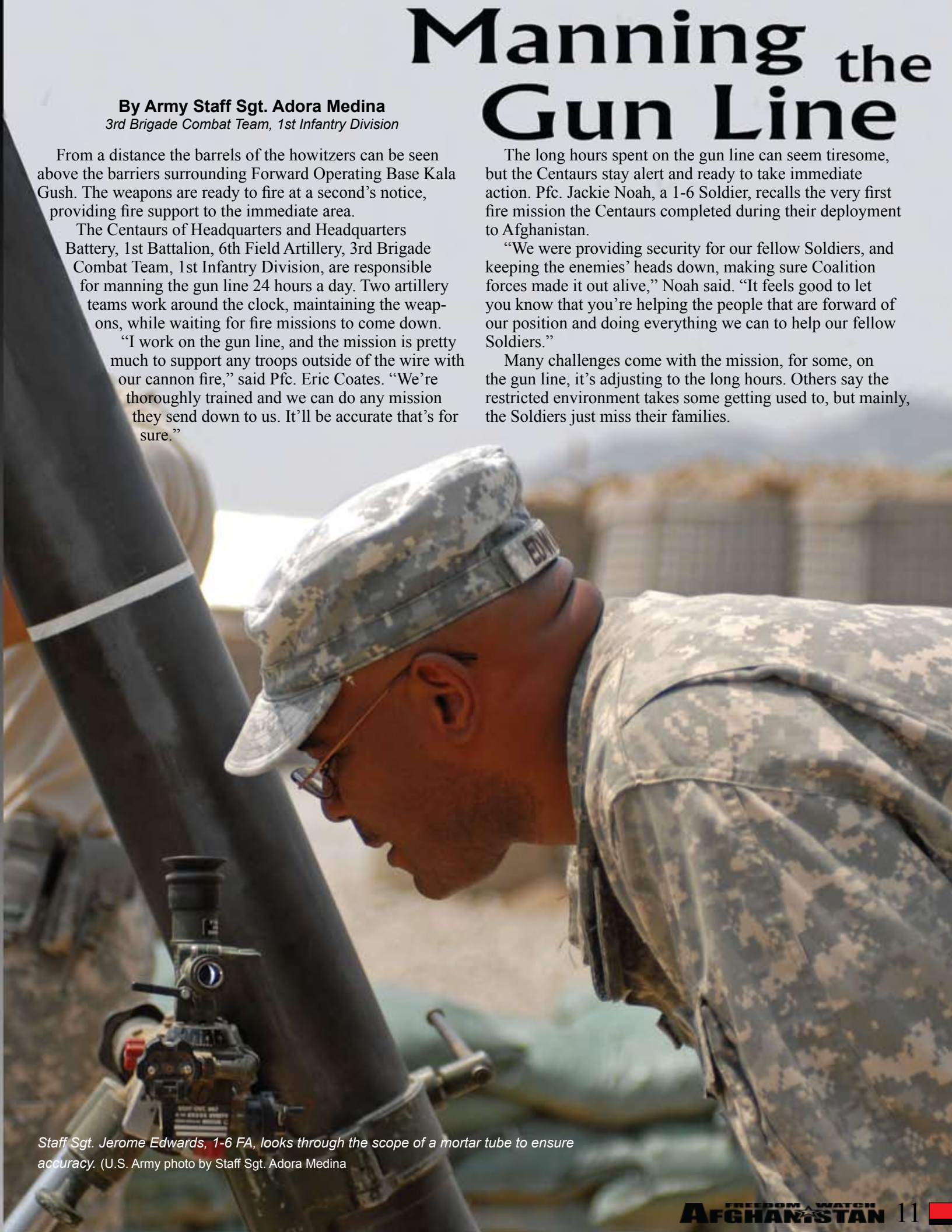
The Centaurs of Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, are responsible for manning the gun line 24 hours a day. Two artillery teams work around the clock, maintaining the weapons, while waiting for fire missions to come down.

"I work on the gun line, and the mission is pretty much to support any troops outside of the wire with our cannon fire," said Pfc. Eric Coates. "We're thoroughly trained and we can do any mission they send down to us. It'll be accurate that's for sure."

The long hours spent on the gun line can seem tiresome, but the Centaurs stay alert and ready to take immediate action. Pfc. Jackie Noah, a 1-6 Soldier, recalls the very first fire mission the Centaurs completed during their deployment to Afghanistan.

"We were providing security for our fellow Soldiers, and keeping the enemies' heads down, making sure Coalition forces made it out alive," Noah said. "It feels good to let you know that you're helping the people that are forward of our position and doing everything we can to help our fellow Soldiers."

Many challenges come with the mission, for some, on the gun line, it's adjusting to the long hours. Others say the restricted environment takes some getting used to, but mainly, the Soldiers just miss their families.



Staff Sgt. Jerome Edwards, 1-6 FA, looks through the scope of a mortar tube to ensure accuracy. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Adora Medina

photos from the field

U.S. Navy Cmdr. John Craybill assists British Army medics assigned to 2nd Battalion, Parachute Regiment, after a wounded Afghan was brought to the British Battalion Aid Station at Forward Operating Base Sangin. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Steve Cushman)

Petty Officer 2nd Class Edgar Crosshabeyeh inspects a patient's scalp during sick call in Kala Gush. (Courtesy photo)

Afghan National Police Capt. Amandullah accepts his graduation certificate from Col. Stephen Yackley, deputy to the commanding general, Police Development Combined Security, Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan. Amandullah and 200 other members of the ANP graduated from the Konduz Regional Training Center on Sept. 16. (U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Douglas Mappin)

German Army Cpl. Christoph Zitkovic, International Security Assistance Force vehicle operator, mounts a 40mm gun to the top of a Desert Fox 24 combat vehicle. ISAF is assisting the Afghan government in extending and exercising authority and influence across the country, creating the conditions for stabilization and reconstruction. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech Sgt. Laura Smith)

French Navy Pilot Capt. Hans Piart, International Security Assistance Force, meets with Afghan children at a boys' school during a volunteer community relations visit. The visits help the community by providing school supplies, clothing and food to local agencies in need. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Laura Smith)