



RED WARRIORS

1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment



Soldiers from Alpha Company check a map of the area during a patrol of a vast network of tunnels.

True Warriors

By Staff Sgt. Justin Weaver
1-12 IN PAO

Over the past six months, I've served as the PAO for the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment. Did I mention I'm in the Air Force?

Flashback eight months – I'm sitting in my office at Aviano Air Base, Italy, staring at the Dolomite mountains as I try and process the news I'd just received that I'd be filling an Army tasking and deploying in six weeks with an infantry unit.

Are you serious? My idea of combat was arriving late for lunch and having to fight through the line at

Subway. God forbid they run out of mayo.

Don't get me wrong, I don't mind the idea of "Boots on the ground combat." In fact, if I wasn't married with two kids, I'd be leading the charge in that direction. Honestly though, I was excited to be going out with an Army unit.

And so, my saga with the Army began. I was shipped off to Fort Dix, New Jersey for a month of "Combat Skills Training." Before I knew it, we were wheels down at Kandahar Air Field and I was in limbo

as I waited to catch a helo to Forward Operating Base Ramrod.

Despite hearing the combat stories, being warned of IEDs and the lack of supplies, it didn't hit home until I was actually here. Week after week, Soldiers in the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs) were hitting IEDs. While some of us would think this would deter us from going outside the wire, it had the opposite effect. I'll never forget talking to a Soldier who had gotten some shrapnel in the face from an IED. He just laughed it off like it was no big deal as he got ready for the next day's patrol – a true Warrior!

In June and July, when the sweltering heat caused a record amount of heat casualties, it didn't deter the rest of the battalion from focusing on the mission. Throwing on an average of 60-80 pounds of body armor and gear in 115 degree heat day-in and day-out requires the utmost dedication and it's a challenge I saw your Soldiers openly face each day. That dedication led to a huge disruption of enemy activity, the destruction of multiple IED factories and the capture of several key Taliban insurgents.

When we tragically lost five of our Soldiers to IEDs

and saw others wounded, your Soldiers didn't give up – they learned to lean on each other and overcome the heartache together.

As a photographer, I accompanied the Soldiers on numerous patrols, missions and operations. Waking up at 2 a.m. to go out on a patrol isn't my idea of fun, but it's something they do on a daily basis.

With the help of night vision goggles, we maneuver through fields, wade through waist deep rivers and climb over any mud walls or other obstacles in our way. It was on one of these missions that I ripped a hole in my ACUs from the waist down. Comical to anyone who saw it, I could only laugh it off. Thankfully I was wearing underwear. Other Soldiers haven't been so lucky. It's almost like an initiation. You'd be hard pressed to find a Soldier out here that hasn't ripped their pants at least once.

Out in the villages, we grew to either enjoy the Afghan Chai (tea) or pretend to like it as it was served regularly on our visits. The children, hesitant at first, would end up becoming fast friends with the Soldiers.

Kalam, Kalam, which means pen, was the children's first request. If a Soldier had a tattoo on their arm, the



A Soldier takes what little downtime he has during an operation to catch up on some sleep.



One of several river crossings Soldiers had to cross during a patrol of a local village.

Kalam would then be used to draw an identical one on their arms.

Candy and toys that many of you have sent end up in the hands of these children. Gum is a big hit with them and sometimes I think they are competing to see who can get the most pieces in their mouths.

Being a father of two small children, I and many other Soldiers found ourselves drawn to the Afgahn children. I think, in a way, playing and laughing with them helped us cope with being away from our loved ones back home.

As many of you know, I kept a blog about the daily activities of the battalion. Little did I know when I started it the impact it would have for most of you stateside. I've received so many encouraging comments and input throughout the past six months and I drew just as much encouragement from that as you did from my postings. If you haven't seen it, please go to www.jetgwot.wordpress.com to read through the archives.

As I look back at this joint journey I've been on, I have to say it's been a life changing experience for me. While I am only deployed for six months, these Soldiers give up at least a year at a time to serve here.

I hear them talk of their loved ones back home, the babies they can't see being born and the anniversary they've now missed for the fifth year in a row. While they all wish they could be home right now, they recognize the importance of the fight they are in.

As someone once said, "Honor those who served, because freedom isn't free." For the five Soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice, and the many others wounded, the flag of freedom continues to fly because of the sacrifices they've made.

To all the Red Warriors and their families, thank you for letting me be a part of this battalion.

Although I'm in the Air Force, I leave here feeling like a part of this battalion's family.



Staff Sgt. Justin Weaver



TFK commander discusses way ahead in Zhari District

FORWARD OPERATING BASE WILSON, Afghanistan – A lone AK-47 hung on the wall as the setting sun tried to push its way through the red-draped curtains as Sarahadi, the Zhari District Leader, and Canadian Brig. Gen. Jonathan Vance, Task Force Kandahar commander, met Nov. 2 to discuss the security and development of the Zhari District.

As they sat on handmade burgundy patterned rugs, hot tea and candy were served while General Vance and the district leader began discussing the issues in the Zhari District and the difference the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment had made since moving to Forward Operating Base Wilson in September.

“Since the arrival of new Soldiers, the strength of the enemy has been reduced,” said Sarahadi, with the help of a Pashtu interpreter. “The work with our Afghan National Army and the highway being secured has helped put the people at ease right now.”

Over the past two weeks, the 1-12 IN has conducted an operation on Highway 1, the main road running from Kandahar to Kabul, known to some Soldiers as “Death’s Highway.” Since it began, the operation has seen the number of Improvised Explosive Devices on the route drop more than 95 percent.

Earlier in October, four U.S. Soldiers were killed when a 1,500 pound roadside bomb hit their vehicle on Highway 1. Insurgents had dug a tunnel beneath the road in order to plant the IED. Because of the constant IED threat, the focus on community projects has been temporarily sidelined.

“The greatest threat to these projects is when Soldiers die from IEDs,” said General Vance, who stressed to the district leader the importance of the Afghan civilians working with Soldiers to help stop these IEDs. “We need the help of your people to keep the community safe. The next step for us is to help you create sufficient security so good development projects can occur.”

A partnership with the Afghan National Security

Forces and the Canadian and U.S. forces in the area is what General Vance sees as key to the success in the district.

“Reporting Taliban activity, rejecting the insurgents, reporting IEDs and scaring them away is critical to the success here,” he said. “The people can overpower the Taliban. There are thousands of villagers and only 50-75 Taliban in this area. If they tell us where there are, we can react to that information.”

For Sarahadi, he sees the decades of war as a major cause of the problems his country currently faces.

“Thirty years of war have devastated our country and its tribal leaders,” he said, referring to the loyalty tribe members have for each other – even if they are Taliban. “Because of that, the evil of society have become our leaders.”

Operations like the highway mission have encouraged the district leader, who believes there has been an exodus of insurgents in the area.

“The way the operations are going, the enemy will abandon the area,” he said confidently. “They are scared and their leaders have left.”

General Vance hopes that is true and looks forward to working with Sarahadi to keep the estimated 76,000 Afghans in the district safe.

“We appreciate the work you are doing and this year will be productive,” he said as he shook the district leader’s hand. “As long as we can hold the people accountable and stop the corruption, we will see success in this area.”

The 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment will continue to work with the district leader for the duration of their tour. The 1-12 IN is based out of Fort Carson, Colorado.

“We have been working with you day and night because you have come thousands of miles to help us,” said Sarahadi, while sipping some Afghan tea. “We hope to work shoulder to shoulder with you to make this country a better place.”

