

## **New U.S. troops arriving in Afghanistan quickly learn about challenges**

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE WILSON, AFGHANISTAN -- The soldiers who will lead the buildup of U.S. forces in Kandahar this summer began arriving this week and immediately dove into a crash course on the problems they will face in [Afghanistan's](#) most critical battleground.

Battalion and company commanders from the 101st Airborne Division, which makes up the bulk of the new forces in Kandahar, have teamed with their counterparts in outgoing units to learn the ropes while they await the arrival of the rest of their soldiers.

A transition process that normally takes a month has been compressed in some cases to a few days as flight delays, caused in part by the [Iceland volcano](#), have slowed the arrival of reinforcements. About 10,000 of [the 30,000 new troops President Obama ordered last year](#) are coming to Kandahar.

"It's not going as fast and as smooth as we'd like it to go," said Brig. Gen. Frederick B. Hodges, the director of operations in southern Afghanistan. "They're flying the wings off everything" to get the new soldiers to Kandahar.

The treacherous farmlands of the Zhari and Argandab districts on the western outskirts of the city are among the most important terrain for the new troops. The two U.S. battalions there will soon grow to five, each with approximately 1,000 troops. The commander of one battalion, Lt. Col. Johnny Davis, said about 10 percent of his soldiers had arrived at this forward operating base, just 10 days before the scheduled transfer-of-authority ceremony.

An outgoing battalion, led by Lt. Col. Reik Andersen, delayed its departure by 10 days to accommodate the slow arrival of the new troops, Hodges said.

In the coming days, the new battlefield commanders will shadow their counterparts through intelligence briefings and meetings with local officials, while learning about the difficulties that lie ahead in bringing security to Kandahar.

On Monday night, Capt. Nicholas Stout, a company commander, arrived in the Senjaray area of Zhari to take the reins from Capt. Jeremiah Ellis. By Tuesday morning, Ellis was walking Stout through the Pir Mohammad School.

The school was built in 2005, then shut down by the Taliban two years later, and reopening it has become Ellis's obsession. For six months, he and his men have fought military bureaucracy, endured gunfire and grenades, filled sandbags for the windows and shoveled human excrement from the classrooms. They are now, he told Stout, days away from opening. Even a single functioning school would be a small victory against the Taliban, Ellis said, and for his soldiers ending their difficult tour.

"They can come here and take a photo of this and say: 'You know what? We did this thing,' " Ellis said. "I don't know if it's the Taliban or [Pakistan](#) that's going to

be in charge of this country in five years. It's not going to be us. I hope it's the Afghans. But you don't have to know the outcome to know that this is worth trying."

The new commanders in Zhari face many challenges: a determined Taliban insurgency; trigger-happy Afghan security guards who escort NATO supply convoys and spray bullets as they pass through town; a district government without a governor.

The former governor, Niaz Mohammad Sarhadi, recently left his post to run for parliament, leaving his lone staff member, a secretary, in charge.

"The district governor taking off is going to be a big challenge for us," said Andersen, commander of the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division. "It's going to be difficult to find somebody of his caliber to go back."