

## High ground gives Soldiers advantage over Taliban



Minutes before a gunfight, Afghan National Army soldiers from 4th Combat Service Support Kandak and Soldiers assigned to Company B, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, push toward a ridge during a 12-hour patrol in Chowkay District's Dewegal Valley March 13. Taliban fighters set up an ambush on the farthest left hilltop.

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They knew where the enemy was March 13, and they had a plan. The Taliban had been attacking them from what was considered a safe haven because of the terrain.

The Soldiers from Company B, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, needed to break the Taliban of their habit.

"The insurgents use the same fighting positions their grandfathers used with the Mujahadeen against the Soviets, so they're creatures of habit," said U.S. Army Capt. Ryan A. McLaughlin, Co. B, commander, TF No Slack. "And they stick with what works."

The plan, he explained, wasn't going to be easy, and enemy contact was imminent.

In Chowkay District's Dewegal Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province, insurgents use the rugged terrain for cover while mortaring Combat Outpost Fortress and orchestrating their attacks on International Security Assistance Force and civilians alike.

U.S. forces developed a strategy to counter the attacks.

The plan included sending one element as far into the valley as possible with armored vehicles while another element climbed

more than six rugged kilometers from the other side of the valley — doing all this while under suspicious eyes in the unforgiving terrain of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

"Unfortunately, we're bound by roads and elevation based on what equipment we have to carry," said McLaughlin, a native of Tuscaloosa, Ala. "Whether we mean to or not, we've become creatures of habit, too."

As the sun crested the mountains from Pakistan, McLaughlin's troops crested a treacherous 1,200-foot ascent.

"Hurry up! Come on!" yelled U.S. Army Sgt. Benjamin G. Olivarez, a squad leader from Kingsville, Texas.

The heavy burden of body armor, ammo, weapons, and food and water had the Soldiers breathing hard. Some had already vomited whatever breakfast they had eaten in the pre-dawn hours. That was just the first climb of the day.

"It's lots of ups and downs, the terrain isn't a simple walk," said Olivarez during a short break to drink water and choke down an energy bar. "Sometimes you're down on all fours trying to make it up."

As Olivarez and his team lurched forward against oppressive mountains and the weight of their gear, the other maneuver element was facing their own struggles.

After dismounting his vehicle, U.S. Army Sgt. George S. Rueda, a weapons squad leader from Co. B, TF No Slack, and a native of Norwalk, Calif., started a climb of his own.

"It was very steep," explained Rueda. "A lot of rocks were slipping underneath you and there's really no cover. It kind of gave us a sense of motivation to get up the mountain."

Once there, his team found an abandoned Taliban fighting position. Rueda said he thought the three-walled position was a perfect spot to provide support for the rest of his unit.

That's when PKM machine gun fire started.

"First, the initial burst came in and separated me and an assistant gunner," said Rueda. "We low-crawled to each other and, as soon as we poked our heads up to return fire, they shot a rocket-propelled grenade at us that went over our heads at three or four meters. It landed about 10 meters behind us. That's when we opened up on them."

Later, Rueda realized, the Taliban had them zeroed in because they used the fighting position before, but it was still the best choice for cover. If his troops had been anywhere else, they could have sustained heavy casualties.

On Rueda's arms are inked names of fallen brethren from previous deployments. This wasn't his first mountain in Afghanistan, and this wasn't his first firefight.

"I felt kind of vulnerable because rounds were actually landing inside our position, which was a pretty well-built fighting position," he said. "I was pretty surprised none of us got hit because rounds were landing inches from us. After we returned fire, I felt confident, I felt good. It was an even fight after that initial burst."

On the other side of the mountain, the Soldiers heard the echoes of gunfire, picked up their heads and quickened the pace.

"We're just trying to keep a heavy pace to try to stay ahead of the enemy," said Olivarez.

So far, the plan was working.

After another kilometer or two, Olivarez was about to reach the highest ascent of the day, but it was difficult to tell.

"Every time you look up, you think it's the top, but there's always something higher," said Olivarez. "I'd say it's the 13th or 14th mountain we've climbed this tour, but this one is rough."

Except for a few rock piles and sparse trees, there was very little cover as they reached an opening just below the peak.

Now it was Olivarez's turn to direct his team into action just as AK-47 machine gun fire ripped up the ground around them.

"I just came out into the open, but then ran straight to cover," Olivarez said. "I ran as fast as I could and started laying down rounds so the rest of the guys could get there. The enemy was 100 to 150 meters in front of us. (Rounds were) whizzing and cracking all around us."

An orchestra of various types of machine guns played a symphony on the walls of the Dewegal Valley.

"The engagement we had was unique because we were fighting them at eye-level and they don't like doing that," said McLaughlin.

The pace and persistence of the troops had paid off. The insurgents were surprised at how high McLaughlin's troops were.

"That's one of the only engagements we've had that has been within 500 meters," said McLaughlin.

He explained that the Taliban are at a disadvantage when they get too close to the heavily armed and well-supported ISAF troops.

This is the closest McLaughlin and his troops have been to the enemy in 10 months of fighting. They took advantage of it.

Artillery shells and machine gun rounds saturated the area. The insurgents quickly disappeared.

Olivarez continued urging his team forward. They had been on the move for more than six hours. Everyone was tired but moved with more purpose.



After about six hours into a 12-hour joint combat patrol in the Hindu Kush Mountains, intravenous fluids flow into U.S. Army Pfc. Garrett J. Hartman, an infantryman from Needmore, Penn., assigned to Company B, 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, Task Force No Slack, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, in Chowkay District's Dewegal Valley March 13. The weather was uncharacteristically warm for March.

The Soldiers pressed on to their objective, a little town called Barbar. Afghan National Army soldiers from Artillery Company, 4th Combat Service Support Kandak, took the lead and set to work searching the village.

"We spoke to the people whose houses we searched, and it's very important to be nice to those people," said ANA 1st Lt. Ahmadullah Safi, a platoon leader from Jalalabad. "I spoke to the elder and told them that they have been giving food and shelter to insurgents. He said, 'No, we are shepherds and farmers.'"

Safi was suspicious and thoroughly searched his house.

"I don't believe him because he puts on a mask when we visit and says he's fine. But, behind the scenes, he's working with the bad guys," said Safi.

After completing the searches, the soldiers continued down and up another valley before reaching the final descent.

Intelligence reports were filtering in about insurgents in position to attack the troops as they exited the area after more than 12 hours on the move.

"Right now, I don't think they can see us, but they know generally where we are," said McLaughlin. "They're probably a little pissed. This is definitely their place, because we've never been here. This is an easily influenced insurgent area."

The sun was setting as the line of troops left the valley accompanied by hellfire missiles and then artillery rounds. Exhausted, they returned to their base under the cover of darkness.

The next day, insurgents sent volleys of mortars at COP Fortress.

"This is indicative that we struck a nerve about yesterday," explained McLaughlin. "This is their version of a counteroffensive."

Yet, the point of the mission was clear.

"The message we're sending to them is that we're not scared to go into those areas. We're changing it up a little bit. It's showing these people we can climb and get to the same fighting positions that the Taliban has made for themselves," said Rueda. "It was good to get out there and take the fight to the enemy, which I'm always happy about doing." ☺