

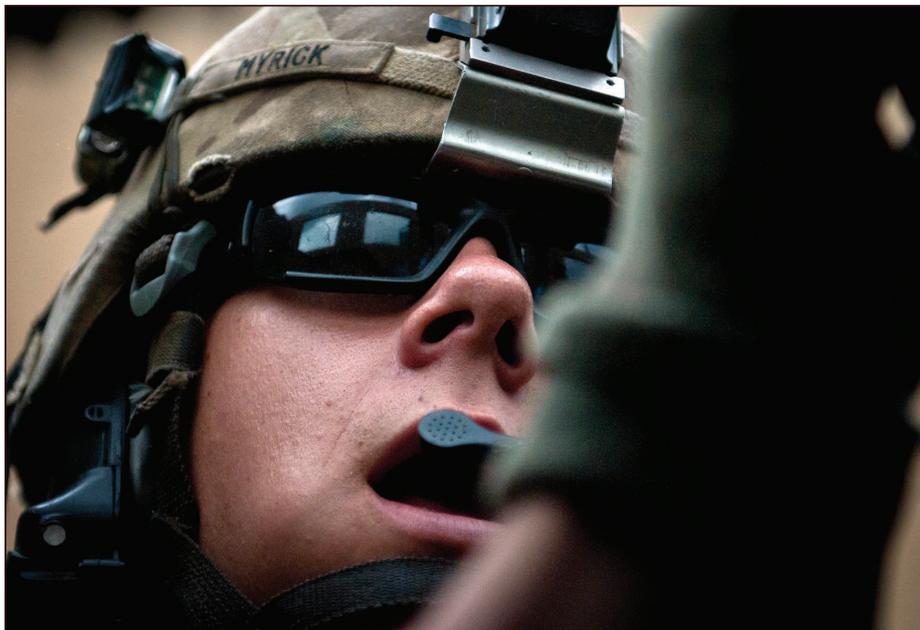
ISAF, ANSF CONTINUE OPERATIONS IN PECH VALLEY

*Story and photos by U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Mark Burrell,
Task Force Bronco Public Affairs*

During the dead of night in the Pech River Valley, they moved into position. High up on the rocky ridgelines that loom over Route Rhode Island, Taliban fighters silently crept into crumbling fighting positions. There, they hid waiting for the return of International Security Assistance Forces to the valley July 28.

- Continued on page 8.

An F-15 Eagle fighter jet screams low across the floor of the Pech River Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province for a show of force right after a firefight with insurgents and troops from Company D, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, Task Force Cacti, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, Task Force Bronco. The troops worked closely to secure the area with their Afghan National Police partners under intense fighting conditions.



U.S. Army Pfc. Joshua B. Myrick, an infantryman from Elwood, Ind., assigned to Company D, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, Task Force Cacti, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, Task Force Bronco returns fire from a .50-caliber machine gun from his mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle at a checkpoint in the Pech River Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province.

On the winding road below, Afghan National Security Forces and their U.S. counterparts took up fortified security positions at various checkpoints throughout the valley.

The sun rose showering the valley with light, as bullets rained down from above.

But Soldiers from Company D, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, Task Force Cacti, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, Task Force Bronco and their ANSF counterparts were ready for a fight.

"It shows that the enemy is not in charge here," said U.S. Army Capt. Brian P. Kalaher, commander of D Co. "The enemy thinks they are, and they say it's the world's worst valley with all the media covering the Pech, but obviously not. I mean, if they controlled the valley, my ass wouldn't be sitting here, you know. If they controlled the valley, I wouldn't live here."

Kalaher, based out of Combat Outpost Honaker-Miracle on the edge of the Pech River Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province, isn't shy when talking about his company's dangerous mission of controlling Route Rhode Island.

"There are a couple of (improvised explosive device) hotspots in there, and we're there to really make sure that the enemy cannot hinder a humanitarian aid convoy," said Kalaher, a Plymouth, Mass., native on his third combat tour.

To regain a foothold in the Pech River Valley and Nuristan Province, Kalaher and his Soldiers were tasked to help ANSF set up checkpoints along the route and allow safe passage of more than 200 tons of humanitarian supplies to isolated Afghans.

"The only real clear and direct way up into Nuristan is through the Pech River Valley. It's the lifeline from Asadabad all the way up north," continued Kalaher. "This convoy is further proof of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's ability to assist and provide a service to the people of Afghanistan. A large part of that is securing the area."

With the sun now directly overhead, the first of many firefights during this weeklong joint-operation died down. U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Ramses Martinez, an infantry squad leader from Bronx, N.Y., assigned to D Co., wiped the dirt and

sweat off his brow in the blistering heat. His platoon had been swapping 24-hour shifts at an exposed checkpoint deep within the valley for a few days now.

The smell of gunpowder wafted heavily through the small interior of a mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle as Martinez evaluated the situation. Were there any dead Taliban after that initial exchange of fire?

"Maybe. I've seen three guys," he said. "One over to the right and two over to the left. We hit them pretty hard and they haven't shot back. So maybe, maybe not."

Cars passed by seemingly oblivious to the earlier fighting as Afghan National Police stopped and searched each vehicle at the checkpoint.

The sun moved across the sky and the hours droned on and on.

Whiz. Snap. Crack. Afghan National Police troops returned fire almost immediately with AK-47 and PKM machine guns.

Martinez quickly swung the .50-caliber machine gun around and gritted his teeth as the heavy gun barked back at the insurgent fire.



U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Trey VanWyke, an infantry platoon leader from Hills, Minn., assigned to Company D, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, Task Force Cacti, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, Task Force Bronco does the "Jersey Shore" fist pump with an Afghan National Police counterpart during a lull in the fire in the Pech River Valley in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province.

Then, it was quiet again. "He doesn't want to poke his little head up and play anymore," Martinez radioed to the other trucks pulling security.

"The other day, they attacked us in this same spot," said ANP Sgt. Ubiad Rahman, the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the checkpoint. "We used teamwork to fight the insurgents and cooperation to help secure this place. The Taliban come down from the mountains and try to attack us. They plan to capture us and take us alive. But once we started firing our PKM machine guns and the American's started firing their .50-caliber machine guns, then the Taliban got the message."

The message was clear: this isn't Taliban country anymore, and the locals don't need to be afraid.

"We must take care of the villagers here first," Rahman said. "The Taliban will attack us, but as much as possible we will fight them and make them run away. The Taliban attack here frequently, but they are not brave. We make them run and hide in the mountains."

As the days passed, more and more locals approached the checkpoint to talk to

the U.S. and Afghan soldiers. Many of the kids asked for brass from depleted ammo to sell or candy. Some of the locals offered rice and bread to the troops.

"Indirectly, they see that the enemy does not control this valley. And when we leave, the enemy will not control this valley," said Kalaher. "I don't think we need to directly say that to the villagers because they know it."

But control of the Pech has its costs.

"Yeah, we've taken casualties, but the number is small compared to how many people are in that valley," explained Kalaher, who recognized the sacrifices made by U.S. and Afghan counterparts for the humanitarian aid convoy.

"These people up there haven't had supplies in such a long time, they need it," said Martinez.

Whiz. Snap. Crack. Their combat concerto began again.

"Where the [expletive] you going?" yelled Martinez in between controlled bursts of the .50-caliber. "Shoot at me again!"

Artillery rounds pounded the ridgelines and an F-15 Eagle fighter jet screamed

through the valley 200 feet off the ground. Amid the chaos of the firefight, the coordination was impressive.

Kalaher said the coordination between his troops and the ANP also exceeded his expectations.

"A lot of the patrols that we ran, we'd be stationary and over watching the ANP in a mutually supporting position to make sure the route was secure," explained Kalaher. "They've been phenomenal during this operation. They've made pretty large gains since we've gotten here. I think they see the timeline and know that the ball's in their court, so they're starting to step up."

And step up they did.

The humanitarian aid convoy passed through successfully delivering grain, rice, school supplies and other aid to locals.

Though deemed the most dangerous valley in the world, the joint operation proved once again that GIROA's reach, with coordination between ANSF and ISAF, could extend out to even the most isolated villagers in Afghanistan, Kalaher said. ☺