

# Blackhawk Soldiers conduct presence patrol in remote village in Paktika Province

Story and photos by U.S. Army Spc. Ken Scar  
7th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

To the U.S. Soldier, northeastern Afghanistan is unforgiving on many levels - extreme weather, isolation and tribes afraid of outsiders but the true suffering begins and ends with the rugged terrain. It is a country of severe alpine landscapes that seem to go on forever in merciless, jagged waves of cliff faces, boulder fields and stony hillsides - and yet, somehow, life took root here eons ago and never gave up its hold.

A tiny village is carved into the spring-fed nooks and crannies of this harshest of environments. The small village of Derka, near Combat Outpost Zerok, in Paktika province, is a rustic community of earthen homes seemingly fastened to the hillsides on either side of a valley that is green with crops, fields of grass and tall, shady trees.

Like the vast majority of Afghanistan's tiny communities, Derka is extremely difficult to get to, but a company of Soldiers from Task Force 2-28, 172nd Infantry Brigade, along with their partners in the local Afghan Uniformed Police and Afghan National Army, performed a combat patrol through the village Sept. 19.

The mission was to clear the village and disrupt possible insurgent activity in the area, but also to make contact and convince the small, secluded populace that the government of Afghanistan exists to help them just as much as the large population centers.

"We have reports that the most active Haqqani element in Paktika could be using Derka as a safe haven," said Capt. Craig Halstead of Sioux Falls, S.D., commander of Company B, TF 2-28. "So going in there could be like taking a baseball bat to a beehive."

The dangerous and well-funded Haqqani network, which has close ties to the Taliban, has been invading small villages like Derka for years to use as staging grounds for attacks on coalition forces.

Unfortunately for the soldiers stationed at COP Zerok, the vast majority of roads in their area of operation are impassable even to the U.S. military's high-tech armored vehicles.

"We don't drive here," said Halstead. "If we need to get somewhere outside the wire, we walk."

So in the cool darkness of night, they walked, and walked, and walked some



A member of Company B, Task Force 2-28, 172nd Infantry Brigade, braces against the prop wash from a UH-60 Black Hawk while securing the landing zone in a stream bed by the small village of Derka near Combat Outpost Zerok Sept. 20.

more, avoiding roads altogether to maximize stealth and security. For seven hours the element trudged methodically through jumbled, backbreaking stream beds, crossing the running water dozens of times until every boot was soaked through and every foot was freezing.

Finally, they slipped into the mouth of the small valley that cradles Derka and waited.

At dawn the villagers woke to find their little pool of life full of strangers.

The ANA and AUP worked fast, sweeping through the buildings and rounding up suspicious individuals before they could rub the sleep from their eyes.

Despite the unavoidable irritation of the intrusion, care was taken to treat each villager as respectfully as possible.

"Whether or not this first mission to Derka is going to have hugs and kisses all around, we can still have a positive impact on them so that they want us to come back," said Halstead.

The home of a wealthy merchant that overlooked the valley was chosen to be the center of operations for the day. The U.S. and Afghan forces set up shop in a courtyard, sharing the space with chickens, goats, a camel and several unfriendly dogs.

Throughout the morning, the intelligence teams collected information as

other soldiers pulled security. The hillside gave them good vantage of the village and its shy inhabitants.

Children often hide from strangers in these places, but occasionally a few of the braver boys would come out of the woodwork to peer at the goings on of the day or even approach and speak to the ANA or AUP soldiers. The boys did not approach the U.S. soldiers, as these strangers to them were apparently too intimidating to reach out to. According to what the village elders were saying in the courtyard, Derka had never been visited by U.S. ground forces.

Little girls are even rarer to spot, but a few did show themselves - running around in their pretty dresses to feed the camels, fetch water or do other chores. The bravest ventured out just to look at all the action, but would dart back into their hiding places when the Soldiers would smile or a wave at them from afar.

Around mid-day, Brig. Gen. Gary Volesky, 1st Cavalry Division Deputy Commanding General for Maneuver, who had been monitoring the operation, decided to visit and put his own boots on the ground.

Volesky emerged from the settling billows and was greeted warmly by Armanshah, Naka District AUP chief of police. The two strolled up the hillside together

and Volesky asked about the enemy activity in the area.

"They are sneaky," said Armanshah. "They come back and forth across the border and use villages like this one to hide in - but we are good at finding them."

"Do you need anything?" Volesky asked the police chief.

"Only that you and I be blessed with long, happy lives," smiled Armanshah.

When asked how the Afghan government can help them, the village elders' requests were equally simple.

"They asked for things like rice, flour and cooking oil for their poor," said Sgt. David Vasquez from Killeen, Texas, 504th Military Intelligence Company, 172nd Inf. Bde., who sat and talked with many of the village elders for several hours through an interpreter Mir Hadelli. "After the initial shock, I think they were happy we came."

"They claim they've never seen any insurgents around here but many of them have relatives who are involved with either Haqqani or the Taliban," said Hadelli. "Only time will tell if they told us the

truth."

"God willing, we can keep [the insurgents] out of this district," said Armanshah. "I don't know if we'll find any of them [in Derka] next time. If we do, my guys will get rid of them, but the villagers need to help us. They need to stand up and tell [the insurgents] that they are not welcome here."

Insurgent organizations like Haqqani and the Taliban are the ones who bring the war to the small villages, said Armanshah. The people of Derka and their unexpected visitors were all working toward the same goal, he added, which is, ultimately, peace across Afghanistan for all of its citizens.

By the end of the day, a good portion of the villagers had gone from being openly hostile to having a better understanding of that common purpose.

When the mission ended, the people of Derka were left with prayer rugs, winter jackets for their children and the hope that Afghanistan can finally be peaceful with Derka resting tranquilly, another jewel in the crown. ☺



Members of Company B, Task Force 2-28, 172nd Infantry Brigade, ruck down a stream bed below the town of Derka near Combat Outpost Zerok Sept. 20. They navigated seven miles of rough terrain at night to reach the town.



Members of the Afghan Uniformed Police, including Armanshah, the Naka District Police Chief (standing with cap, upper right), point out an enemy combatant they have spotted on a ridge line about 500 meters away to Brig. Gen. Gary Volesky (center, taking a knee), 1st Cavalry Division Deputy Commanding General for Maneuver, and members of Company B, Task Force 2-28, 172nd Infantry Brigade Sept. 20. Company B was in the middle of a joint mission with the AUP and the Afghan National Army to clear the village and disrupt insurgent activity in the area. The insurgent was neutralized by a U.S. Army sniper.



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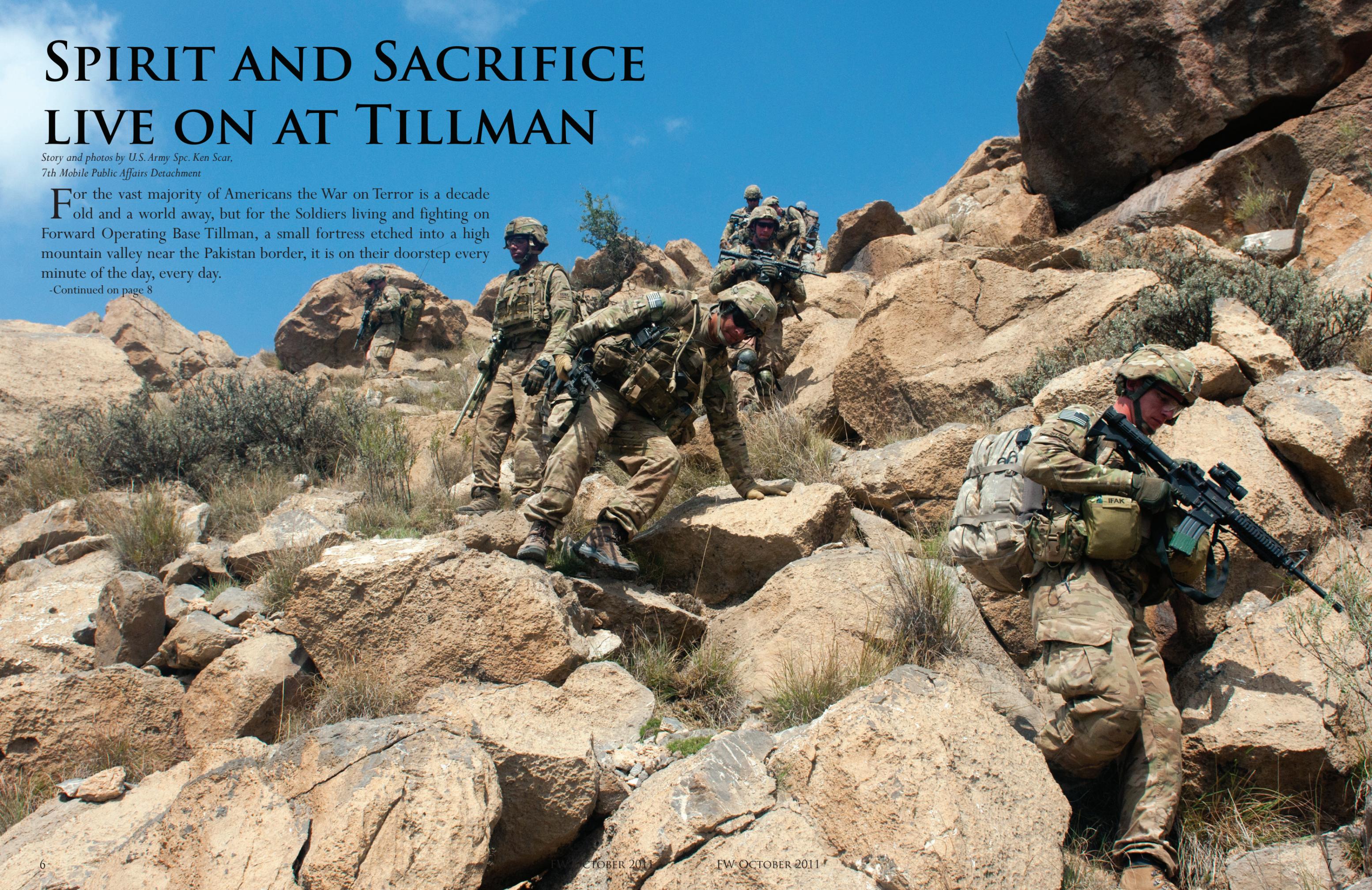
OCTOBER 2011

# SPIRIT AND SACRIFICE LIVE ON AT TILLMAN

*Story and photos by U.S. Army Spc. Ken Scar,  
7th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment*

For the vast majority of Americans the War on Terror is a decade old and a world away, but for the Soldiers living and fighting on Forward Operating Base Tillman, a small fortress etched into a high mountain valley near the Pakistan border, it is on their doorstep every minute of the day, every day.

*-Continued on page 8*





U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Seth Penad of Medford, Ore., a joint terminal attack controller, and U.S. Army Sgt. James Luckenbach of Loneta, Texas, return fire against insurgents who attacked them Sept. 7. Dust from a mortar round can be seen on the hillside across the stream bed from them. Both were on a mission with C Company, 3rd Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, Task Force 228, 172nd Infantry Brigade, in a high mountain stream bed outside Forward Operating Base Tillman. Task Force 228 was on a joint mission with the Afghan National Army and the Afghan Border Patrol in the mountains near the Pakistan border.

At FOB Tillman the enemy is never far away – hidden among the rifts and crumbling peaks of the broken terrain that surround it on all sides. Once, twice, sometimes five or more times a day they make their presence known by firing rocket propelled grenades toward the base. Then they disappear back into the wilderness. Then the Soldiers of FOB Tillman go looking for them.

On Sept. 7, three platoons of Soldiers from C Company, 3rd Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, Task Force 2-28, 172nd Infantry Brigade, along with dozens of their brothers in arms in the Afghan National Army and the Afghan Border Police stepped outside the wire to find bad guys once again.

The destination was a small observation post six miles out. Established by coalition forces on the Eastern shoulder of a mountain nicknamed Big Nasty that rises 1500 steep, scree-infested feet off the valley floor, the OP had been manned only sporadically for some time, allowing insurgents to use it as a point of origin for several RPG attacks. The American/Afghan war fighters were to put a stop to that nonsense.

The area around Big Nasty is known to be some of the most inhospitable terrain on Earth to navigate by foot– and that’s taking what few established roads and foot trails that can be found, which U.S. infantrymen do not. They take the rough ground, shouldering over 100 pounds of body armour, weapons, ammunition, water and other supplies.

“All the weight makes you feel like Robocop when you walk,” said Spc. Ryan Debellis, a radio telephone operator for TF 2-28 from Tamaqua, Pa.

“There’s nothing light about the light infantry,” quipped Staff Sgt. Gregorio Florez of Abilene, Texas, a platoon leader for TF 2-28.

The main body stepped out the gate before dawn, hiking quietly past small camps of nomadic tribesmen dotted with wagons, tractors and colorful tents. Herds of camels and sheep stamped and grunted as they filed by.

As the sun rose, the contingent passed a small picturesque village carved like green and red steps into a mountainside, connected by irrigation canals from which the pleasant sound of cascading water could be heard. Children laughed and played in the terraced fields of corn, unaware of the forces moving across the hillsides above them.

Eight hours of arduous trekking later the column paused in a dry riverbed to take water and rest before beginning their ascent up the rocky backside of Big Nasty. They don’t get to rest long.

A group of insurgents, perhaps hoping to ambush the contingent as it continued upstream and then being thwarted when the entire element halted, attack with small arms fire and RPG’s from behind several boulders 250 meters away.

The U.S. and Afghan teams immediately respond with a wall of bullets and mortar rounds. The entire fire fight lasts maybe five minutes. When the dust and smoke settled the attackers had fled, perhaps realizing that they had bit off a lot more than they could chew.

Afghan National Army, ABP and U.S. Soldiers smile, slap backs and high five each other. They have been fighting this war together for years.



(Above) Members of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan Border Patrol perform a water drop for C Company, 3rd Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, Task Force 228, 172nd Infantry Brigade outside Forward Operating Base Tillman Sept. 8. The units were on a joint mission in the mountains near the Pakistan border.

(Below) Members of the Afghan Border Patrol rest near the summit of a mountain called “Big Nasty” near Forward Operating Base Tillman. The ABP was on a joint mission with C Company, 3rd Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, Task Force 228, 172nd Infantry Brigade and the Afghan National Army in the mountains near the Pakistan border.

This mission, however, had only just begun. It would go on for another twenty-six brutal hours. By the time it was over the element had climbed and descended thousands of feet of elevation, endured blazing hot afternoons and spent a long frigid night on top of Big Nasty, subdued yet another small arms attack by insurgents, and put nearly twenty hard miles under their feet.

The Soldiers of TF 2-28 and their Afghan partners took it all in stride. To them it was just another day on the job, another day outside the FOB.

“The Soldiers out here are doing an outstanding job, not only for their country but for each other,” said 1st Sgt. John Orbe, from Brooklyn, N.Y., Company C, TF 2-28. “Americans may be getting complacent about the War on Terror after ten years, he said, because they don’t see it on the news every day – but at FOB Tillman it’s as real as ever.”

“There are [still] thousands of Soldiers putting their lives on the line out here every day – from my boys on patrol doing their missions to all the Soldiers at the satellite FOBs, to the Soldiers that are back on [larger bases] kicking boxes onto aircraft to make sure we’ve got food, ammunition and fuel,” he said.

In June of 2012 there will be another ten-year anniversary, one that won’t be marked like 9/11 but that will have particular significance to all the troops, past and present, engaged in the War on Terror. June 2002 was the month Pat Tillman – the FOB’s namesake - gave up a career in the NFL and joined the Army – instantly becoming an American icon.

One can’t help but believe he would be proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with his fellow American heroes who continue to sacrifice and sweat it out across the foreign landscapes of Afghanistan to keep his principles alive and finish the fight. ☺



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## News: ABP Keep the Peace at Isolated Check Point

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Story by [Spc. Ken Scar](#) Follow This Journalist

PAKTIKA PROVINCE, Afghanistan — In the canyon below Forward Operating Base Tillman two streams converge. One leads across the border into Pakistan and one comes down the mountain, from the small villages to the north. The rocky beds of the two streams serve as roads and have probably served as roads for centuries. It's rough going, but an amazing variety of vehicles ferry passengers and goods past this point every day.



Photo by Spc. Ken Scar  
A local boy watches U.S. soldiers and members of the Afghan National Army operate a traffic check point near Forward Operating Base Tillman Sept. 13.

A sturdy mud shop that sells tobacco and corn from local crops juts from the tip of the peninsula that was carved from the merging of the two rivers. Perched in between the fortified bunkers on the banks to each side, the Afghan Border Police operate what must be one of the most unique traffic control points in the country.

If you didn't know you were in Afghanistan, you'd take one look at this place and think you were on an Indian reservation in Arizona or Utah, on your way to a weekend of mountain biking in Moab. But this is not a vacation destination – not yet.

It's a place of ebbs and flows – one moment the only sound is the chuckling streams, the next a small convoy of diesel cargo trucks that come slowly rumbling through, leaving behind a cloud of dust and fumes. After a while, the gurgling streams take over again.

The U.S. military has had a presence here for many years, but these days the U.S. soldiers come down from the FOB more to observe and do biometric checks than to conduct the flow of traffic. The hardy ABP stationed here control the pulse of this place now.

A beat-up Toyota Camry grinds up the stream bed from Pakistan. U.S. soldiers observe as the ABP stop it for a routine inspection making the six men inside step out for questioning. After everything checks out, the car disappears upstream in a clatter of steel and gravel.

The local kids like to come down here, where the soldiers are. Dressed in their colorful "kali", they are bright shadows that follow the soldiers around, making minor pests of themselves.

Sometimes the soldiers will give them candy or other small gifts like radios and bottles of water.

"If it comes out of your pack they love it, they want it," said one ANA soldier.

Most of the time the U.S. and Afghan warfighters tolerate the small flock of hangers-on with good humor, but when a call comes down that an improvised explosive device has been detonated not far away, accompanied by small arms fire, it's time for the children leave. The soldiers bark orders and the children, used to this kind of thing, disappear in a blink, scampering off through the neat rows of trees and cornfields on either side of the stream bed. The checkpoint is suddenly quiet, serious.

Some time later the call comes on the radio – all clear. The children reappear, splashing and chattering along the stream beds. The grinding of gears echoes from up the canyon, and a jingle truck bounces into view.

The ebb and flow continues.

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## News: Task Force Maverick soldier's journey to Red Hill

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PARWAN PROVINCE, Afghanistan — Ernest Hemingway said, "Courage is grace under pressure." If that is true, then there is no deeper pool of courage than that at Combat Outpost Red Hill, and no more stalwart a soul than Spc. Brett Waller, a soldier with Task Force Maverick, 1st Cavalry Division.



Photo by Spc. Ken Scar  
Spc. Brett Waller (second from left), from Ponca City, Okla., hangs out in his B-Hut with other members of his squad while waiting for information about a mission on Combat Outpost Red Hill Oct. 13. His squad is a part of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Cavalry Division, Task Force Maverick.

Burly and soft-spoken with a finger-crushing handshake, Waller is not the typical American 23-year old. Even though feature films could be made about the feats he and his battle buddies accomplish on an almost daily basis, you get the sense from him that there's nothing he'd like less than being on some reality TV show. Waller's journey from his hometown of Ponca City, Okla., to this desolate but beautiful alpine valley reflects that of many in the new generation of U.S. war fighters: It is not glory or revenge he seeks but peace, as in a peaceful life for his wife and two sons. It's as simple as that.

Soldiers at COP Red Hill enjoy a seemingly mundane life while they're home inside the wire - working out, doing laundry, playing video games - but looks are deceiving. Waller and his platoon live under the constant pressure of being deep in Afghanistan. They execute frequent missions into the backcountry surrounding their outpost. They must maintain a posture of constant readiness.

Minds and bodies have to stay primed for action at all times. There is no real down time in a war zone.

Sitting on the old leather couch in his B-Hut, waiting for darkness to clear a village with his platoon, Waller spoke calmly about recent missions, recounting ambushes and rocket attacks as if they were flat tires or parking tickets.

At one point he noted the empty bunk next to his where his roommate would be if he hadn't taken four bullets in the leg on their last mission.

"We got on the road and we saw him running up towards us and he just looked like he was just tired of running. He said 'man my leg really hurts!' and we looked down and he had a chunk of meat hanging there. We got him up to see the medic and they found three bullet holes in him, and when he got to Bagram they found another one," he explained, shaking his head slightly and taking a puff of a cigarette. "He's doing fine now. Should be back here next week."

Tales like this are a dime a dozen at COP Red Hill. To Waller and his buddies, it's all in a day's work.

"I needed a job," he said when asked why he joined the Army, "I needed security [and stability] for my kids." The Army offered him a chance to provide for his two sons - Brandon, 3, and Ryan, 4, - and get out of Ponca City where he was "just running around being stupid".

"It worked great," he says with a smile. "It changed my entire life."

It was an easy choice for him, said his wife Whitney, who anxiously waits for his calls home when he's safely behind the Hesco walls of the COP. "I worry about him all the time," she said. "He's the best husband and father a person could ask for."

"You can't get a sentence out of Waller without the words 'my boys' coming out of his mouth," said Waller's platoon sergeant, Staff Sgt. Ashley Waruch from Accord, N.Y. "He is the most family-oriented person I've ever known."

"He's also very funny and outgoing," said Mrs. Waller, who met her husband by putting a note on his car in a Walmart parking lot. "We were just teenagers then. My friends said he was a nice guy so I wanted to see if he'd call - and he did."

They married two days before Waller shipped off to basic training.

Waller's original job with the Army is as an air conditioning mechanic, but when he was placed in what is for all intents and purposes is an infantry position, he took to it in his typically steadfast way.

"When they turned us into more or less our own little infantry platoon every one was down to do it," he explains in his easy southern drawl. "We were ready for it."

His platoon has been conducting dismounted infantry missions for six months now, taking fire from insurgents more often than not, including one clash with the enemy that lasted over seven hours.

"That was the worst one," he said. "It wasn't really hard [physically] but that was the worst contact we've taken so far."

During another grueling firefight Waller fought through a complex attack with several other members of his squad. When they were finally able to get clear and report back to Waruch, he informed them that there was another squad still pinned down. Despite having just survived an exhausting exchange with the enemy, Waller immediately volunteered to go back into the fight.

"When I need something done he's the first guy in the mix - he's right there standing up. When we had guys pinned down and I said, 'Hey we still got guys in trouble', he said 'Roger', gets all his gear and is ready to go back in."

To Waller those kinds of actions are not exceptional. Like good soldiers do, he has become almost desensitized to the extraordinary circumstances of his day-to-day life.

"I love being over here with my buddies," he said. "We all got the same amount to lose."

Waller is typically pragmatic about the big picture as it applies to the war on terror. Doing an extraordinary job in the relentless pressure cooker of war, he quietly and consistently exhibiting grace under pressure..

"They say we gotta be out here so I'm just along for the ride," he said matter-of-factly. "Just doing my job."

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## News: San Mateo native mans the big guns in war on terror

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PAKTIKA PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Ten years ago, U.S. Army Pfc. Erik Park was 12 years old growing up in San Mateo, Calif. When his father told him one September morning that the World Trade Center had gone down, he only had one response: "What's the World Trade Center?"



Photo by Spc. Ken Scar  
Pfc. Erik Park from San Mateo, Calif., fires his M777 155 mm howitzer at Forward Operating Base Orgun-E Sept. 3. Park, who is in 3rd Platoon, Alpha Battery, 1st Battalion, 77th Field Artillery Regiment, 172nd Infantry Brigade, is the "number one" man on the five-man numbered team that operates the massive weapon system.

Today, a decade after 9/11, Park – a 2007 graduate of Alma Heights Christian Academy – fights in the war on terror from Forward Operating Base Orgun-E, a small walled-in fortress dug into an isolated high-mountain valley in eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border.

The only way in or out is by helicopter, or a 35-mile dirt road to the next-nearest base that takes 18 to 24 hours to navigate. One would be hard pressed to find a place further away from San Mateo in distance or atmosphere.

Even the atmosphere hanging overhead is different, the elevation is a mile and a half above sea level so the air is thin – and that suits Park just fine. Thin air means less resistance against projectiles that fly through the atmosphere to their target.

Park – a member of 3rd Platoon, Alpha Battery, 1st Battalion, 77th Field Artillery Regiment, 172nd Infantry Brigade – is the "number one" man on a team that operates a massive M-777A2 155mm howitzer. All members of the team are numbered according to their specific job and have synchronized tasks that have to be executed with precision, echoing cannon teams throughout history, particularly British naval teams from the Napoleonic Wars.

Park's job is to help load, elevate, and aim the "triple seven" then pull the lanyard that ignites the charge – in short, he's the triggerman.

"The feeling of being on the gun line with my friends and with my chief is exciting," said Park, explaining that one of the main functions of the howitzer teams is to react quickly to indirect fire – rocket propelled grenades or other explosives that are indiscriminately lobbed at the base by insurgents in the hopes of hitting something.

This means they are on call 24/7 for the entire year they will spend on Orgun-E. 3rd Platoon can return fire immediately after the attack begins, often returning fire before the attack is over.

"When everyone else is in the bunkers, my guys are at the guns," said 3rd Platoon leader Capt. Anthony Pearson of Findley, Ohio.

The triple seven is a 9,000-pound solid steel goliath that is so well balanced when the barrel is down that its crew can easily rotate it on its two wheels like an I-beam on a Segway scooter. Once it has been set, however, it is a monster that can launch its engine block-sized rounds over mountains with deadly accuracy.

"We take everything into account [when aiming]," said Pearson. "From the wind speeds and directions at different altitudes and the spinning of the round, to the rotation of the Earth."

Just as the naval cannons of the Napoleonic wars would blow the wooden walls of enemy ships into millions of pieces of shrapnel, a round from a triple seven will shred everything within 50 meters of its strike – rocks, dirt, trees, vehicles – into a shock wave of deadly projectiles.

After only one month at Orgun-E, Park and his team have already sent plenty of rounds over the mountains to wreak havoc on enemy positions.

"These guys are hungry," said Staff Sgt. Nicholas Powell, the howitzer section chief. "They always want to fire. It's a good thing."

One month in to his one-year deployment Park is introspective about his mission here, in a war that was started when he wasn't even old enough to know or care what the World Trade Center was.

"I'm glad I've been to Afghanistan, so I know how it feels," he said. "I'm glad I can be here to protect people."

"He's a good soldier. He's squared away and dependable. I can see him being a gun chief some day," said the section's gunner, Sgt. Carl Ellebb.

With the 10-year anniversary of 9/11 only a few days away, Park has simpler goals.

"I just want the people back home to know we're still out here fighting for our country."

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