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McClatchy Newspapers

U.S. troops call Afghan region 'Vietnam without napalm'

Hal Bernton

October 01, 2009

JELAWUR, Afghanistan — The men of Bravo Company have a bitter description for the irrigated swath of land along the Arghandab River where 10 members of their battalion have been killed and 30 have been wounded since the beginning of August.

"Like Vietnam without the napalm," said Spc. Nicholas Gojekian, 21, of Katy, Texas.

A prime agricultural area of vineyards and pomegranate orchards, the 18-miles of valley that the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment patrols includes Taliban insurgents, booby traps and buried explosives. The troops call the area the "green zone," but unlike Iraq, where it's a fortified area in the heart of Baghdad, this green zone can be a hellish place.

The soldiers have one of the toughest tasks in Afghanistan: improving security and winning the support of villagers in an area where the Taliban have been gaining power.

The battalion arrived in southern Afghanistan this summer as part of a brigade of more than 3,800 soldiers from Fort Lewis, Wash. The unit took its heaviest losses in August, when it had the highest casualties in what was the deadliest month so far in America's eight-year war here.

So far, the Army mission here has been an uneasy mix of trying to woo elders with offers of generators, roads and other improvements while fighting a nasty war with an often-unseen enemy.

Bravo Company arrived in Afghanistan with 24 Strykers, the first of the eight-wheeled combat vehicles outfitted with high-tech communications and surveillance gear to arrive in Afghanistan. A third of the vehicles are now out of service due to bomb attacks or maintenance.

The bomb threats are so pervasive that Stryker drivers have abandoned some stretches of road in favor of driving through the deserts on different routes. The road to one smaller outpost has so many homemade bombs that the soldiers usually arrive on foot, a treacherous hike due to buried land mines.

"We have had enemy contact almost every day," said Lt. Col. Jon Neumann, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment. "Until we do clearing, we can't hold or build here right now," a reference to the U.S. counter-insurgency tactic of "clear, hold and build."

Neumann said that a "perfect storm" of factors has bolstered the Taliban in the Arghandab. They include a successful spring insurgency campaign, the death of a strong tribal leader who supported the U.S.-backed Afghan government and the wounding of a charismatic police chief.

The Americans are up against a foe who's adept at creating unforeseen hazards. Often the Taliban fill large yellow water jugs with explosives — packing some underneath road culverts and burying others in the sandy desert soil.

Some battalion soldiers perished when their Strykers hit roadside bombs — known as IED's or improvised explosive devices — and others were killed by bombs that exploded while they patrolled on foot. On a single deadly day in August, a Bravo Company 1st lieutenant on a patrol had both his legs blown off by a mine, and explosions killed two soldiers temporarily attached to the unit as they walked through the green zone.

Civilian casualties also have climbed. IED's set by insurgents have blown up many. Villagers claim that other civilians have died or been injured in crossfires when U.S. forces and their Afghan allies fight insurgents.

Bravo Company is responsible for an area that's considered a key staging point for Taliban as they organize forays into Kandahar, a major southern city where the insurgents rule by night and set off bombs by day.

The Arghandab valley is starkly divided between a flat, barren desert and the fertile stretch of irrigated orchards, vineyards and cornfields along the river. In the 1980s, Soviet troops spent more than a month in an unsuccessful attempt to defeat U.S.-backed mujahedeen forces that took refuge in the orchards.

From the green zone, the Taliban fan out to villages, which consist largely of mud brick homes inside mud-walled compounds that sprout out of the ground in the same dun colors of the surrounding desert.

The Taliban presence is strong enough in some areas that children are afraid to go to school, even abandoning a large school built in 2004 with the aid of Japanese funds. "If we send our children to school during the day, then the Taliban will come kill the parents at night," said one elder in a meeting with Bravo Company soldiers in the village of Adirah. McClatchy isn't using the elder's name to protect his security.

In the nearby village of Jelawur, the U.N. was able to complete a rebuilding project a few years after the fall of Taliban, an effort marked with a plaque on a wall. Seven years later, however, several dozen Bravo Company soldiers found a walk down the main street to be a tense one this week.

The soldiers were in full battle gear, scanning culverts for IED's and checked their gun sights to search the surrounding fields for signs of a Taliban attack. Some soldiers stripped off their shoulder patches to make themselves less of a target.

Villagers warily monitored their passage. A soldier threw out a piece of candy, and a shopkeeper quickly admonished a young boy to leave it alone.

The company had 152 soldiers when it arrived, which was more than a dozen short of its authorized strength. Since then, some platoons have been depleted by injuries, including concussions from bomb blasts.

"I don't have enough troops for everything they want me to do here," said Capt. Jamie Pope, the company commander, a West Point graduate from Sherrills Ford, N.C.

One platoon authorized to have more than 40 soldiers is now trying to get by with fewer than 32 soldiers. After guard duty is assigned, a platoon may be at less than full strength for patrols.

"We may go with 10 to 11 guys, when we like to have 14 to 21," said Sgt. 1st Class Anthony Dimico, a 1st platoon soldier from Yakima, Wash. Another platoon that arrived with 39 soldiers was operating this week with 22, according to Sgt. 1st Class Zalman Dass from Renton, Wash..

The tempo was set on one of the first patrols back on Aug. 10 as Bravo Company soldiers trekked through a cornfield and were attacked at close range by nearly a dozen fighters who fired from the edge of some orchards.

Spc. Richard Thiebault was one of the lead soldiers. He heard the slam of a rifle bolt, and then went down with a bullet in his chest from an RPK machinegun about 60 feet away. His ballistic vest probably saved his life: The bullet left a half-dollar sized dent in the armor, but it didn't penetrate.

"I'm still shook up to this day," said Thiebault. "I don't like going near the orchards."