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# NEXT STOP: Afghanistan

Text and Photographs  
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Right, 2nd Lt. James Marione keeps radio contact with his company commander as his platoon mans a tactical check point during a security cordon mission around the town of Bermel for National Women's Day celebrations. Below, PFC John Giasullo, platoon medic, quickly assesses wounded Spc. Bradburn during the ambush in the village of Gairo.

**JRTC, FORT POLK, LA.—**It was not yet 10 A.M.

Another cold, damp January day, and we were on our way to the second of the day's missions.

The small sign alongside the road in the thin pine forest pointed to "Gairo," and the nine up-armored Humvees of the platoon and its company command element turned off the asphalt onto the mud path leading to that tiny village soon visible in the clearing just ahead.

Platoon leader 1st Lt. Mike McBride wasn't overly concerned about this mission, which was

Right, maneuvering toward sniper fire from a building during operations in Ghazni, Sgt. Matthew Vera dashes for a safe position.



Pvt. 2 Brian Rokita maneuvers to contact to kill the last of the insurgents from the ambush in Gairo.



Using the Humvee as cover, 1st Lt. Mike McBride, trailing, and platoon members move toward the wood line to attempt to neutralize the sporadic gunfire still peppering the platoon at the tail end of the ambush in Gairo.



a simple escort operation—bringing a district leader to a regional meeting and setting up a secure perimeter to search people as they arrived. It was the first operation earlier, at dawn, for which Lt. McBride had done his heaviest planning. That operation had required his platoon to enter the city of Ghazni to establish security for the World Health Organization's (WHO) scheduled medical civic action program (medcap) and then pick up the district leader for escort to Gairo.

The sky was still graying with dawn as Lt. McBride led a

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dismounted squad into the city while the remainder of the platoon pulled cordon security just outside in their Humvees. "I expected a major attack, from all the possible buildings around," Lt. McBride admitted later. "And maybe a suicide bomber." What he got was simply two snipers located on the second story of just one building; while he and his dismounts took cover, he brought in his Humvees for their firepower and then maneuvered foot elements to enter the building and kill the snipers. His platoon sustained no casualties; made a successful link up with the local Afghan National Police (ANP), securing the area for the medcap; and then brought in the WHO medical team. Mission complete, they then headed for Gairo where, as soon as Lt. McBride brought his vehicles into the village, all hell broke loose.

Sitting ducks—within minutes of taking Dishka machine-gun and RPG fire from a variety of positions in the wood line across the clearing—Lt. McBride's platoon quickly lost two vehicles and one-third of its men. The dim, whiny beeeeeeeeeeep of multiple integrated laser engagement system (MILES) going off and calls of "Medic!" could be heard between the incoming and return fire, and Lt. McBride found himself with a rifle squad, on foot behind the cover of a functioning gun truck, heading for the wood line to assault the enemy. When the end of the exercise was called before noon, the major question raised by the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) observer controllers (O/Cs) wound up being: Should the platoon leader be running around with the radio?

Age and civilian work experience under his belt, a de-

1st Lt. Mike McBride overwatches his squads maneuvering toward a sniper during the platoon's security operation in the city of Ghazni, keeping radio contact with company commander Capt. Thomas Kilbride.

gree in history from Brown University (concurrently ROTC at nearby Providence College) and with four years Ready Reserve and four now on active duty, Lt. McBride already knew the answer. But having lost so many men, including squad leaders, he reasoned, "Someone's got to do the shooting," he told me later.

This is a lesson—*lessons*—learned under simulated battle situations, with blanks and MILES instead of real bullets and real blood, coordinated and overseen by O/Cs. That's the purpose of JRTC—preparation for the real thing. Lt. McBride's platoon will deploy this spring to Afghanistan, part of 101st Airborne Division's (Air Assault) 4th Brigade Combat Team, 506th Infantry Regiment, which takes over Regional Command East.

The brigade had participated in a full JRTC exercise just a few months earlier, and each battalion's return rotation in January was a shortened, intense four-day series of exercises—a refresher, a final honing. It was also an opportunity for the junior commanders and NCOs who had missed the fall training to catch up.

**B**ecause I will embed with the brigade during its Afghanistan deployment, I was given the privilege of joining 3rd Battalion for its JRTC week. The battalion is the 1st Battalion, 61st Cavalry (1-61 Cav), the RSTA (recon surveillance target acquisition), whose heritage is World War II's 601st Tank Destroyers and its most famous hero, Audie Murphy. Being a cavalry squadron, the 1-61's companies are troops, and at random I was placed with Troop C, the light dismounted recon element.

Troop C Cav commander Capt. Thomas Kilbride already knows Afghanistan from firsthand experience. The upcoming deployment will be his third combat tour there; the first two

Troop C commander Capt. Kilbride keeps radio contact with both higher headquarters and his platoon leaders. "They are my eyes and ears on the battlefield for that sector," he says about his lieutenants, "And I am the squadron's eyes and ears."



were as a platoon leader in the 1st Ranger Battalion. Add to that two combat tours in Iraq—the first with the 82nd Airborne Division, as he modestly says, "toward the end of the initial assault," and later with the Rangers. A 2002 West Point graduate, Capt. Kilbride has spent three-and-a-half of his six years in the Army deployed overseas. Airborne, Air Assault, Ranger and even Scuba, the only badge Capt. Kilbride seems to lack is the Special Forces Tab, and that was by choice; when he had to make that career decision, it was either going the Special Forces route or taking a Ranger platoon to combat. He chose the immediate leadership role, as anyone wearing the crossed rifles would understand. One might say it's in Capt. Kilbride's DNA; his father spent 27 years as a marine, both enlisted

and officer, and his three older siblings all graduated from West Point.

By January, Capt. Kilbride already knew he would be setting down his troop command along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. "I'm going to hold my battlespace with my company," he told me—meaning he will be the commander of a remote, small forward operating base (FOB).

With a brand-new platoon leader, First Platoon's 2nd Lt. James Marione, and some team leaders who had missed the fall's JRTC rotation, Capt. Kilbride was glad to have the opportunity to get them through the lanes in the shortened train-up, mainly, he said, "To develop the combat team that we are actually going to go overseas and fight with."

As for fighting, Capt. Kilbride's company is bound to see its share. The Army has been moving aggressively out





Observer/controller SFC R.L. Montgomery watches the leaders engagement conducted by 2nd Lt. James Marione with the four role-playing Afghan "village elders." As part of the realism of Engagement University, the four role-playing elders are actual Afghan nationals, and they speak no English during the meetings.



of the bigger FOBs and into smaller ones at the center of the tribal areas along the avenues of Taliban infiltration—and in the heart of the rural population, the villagers. For Capt. Kilbride and his fellow commanders, from platoon leaders on up, the day-to-day aspect of personal engagement with Afghans is even more important than actual combat.

Capt. Kilbride will most likely have attached more than a company of the Afghan National Army (ANA) at his FOB, and that will mean constant interaction with a culture, language and military process different from our own. In the counterinsurgency (COIN) nature of the war, Capt. Kilbride's battlefield success might very well rest on his relations, and those of his subordinates, with their counterpart ANA and with the local populace, beginning with the elders and leaders.

**W**ith that in mind, 1-61 Cav's train-up began with instruction at JRTC's Engagement University, the essence of which can be summed up with a quotation from the new counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24: "The cornerstone of any COIN effort is establishing security for the civilian populace. Without a secure environment, no permanent reforms can be implemented and disorder spreads."

The instruction was for leaders and NCOs, learning the basics in leader engagement, that week specifically for 1-61 Cav, American to Afghan. The classroom portion emphasized leader preparation—going into any meeting with as much knowledge as possible, fully in control; knowing the issues, war-gaming the avenues in and around them; and solidifying the exact outcome one expects from the engagement. There is no place for trying to wing it. A number of dos and don'ts were stressed, including:

- Don't agree to the first offer.
- Don't lie, bluff or make threats.
- Don't assume your counterpart does not speak English.

*Lt. Marione listens to a litany of grievances from "village elders" during leaders engagement training.*



- Do avoid talk of politics, religion or policy.
- Don't look at your interpreter; do make eye-to-eye contact with your counterpart.
- Don't promise beyond your control and ability to deliver.
- Do know if your counterpart is the decision maker.

Classroom instruction is one thing, but the university provides an actual engagement for the leaders, with native-born Afghans role-playing village leaders and interpreters. I was able to observe new platoon leader 2nd Lt. Marione's session, as four very stern, very serious Afghans, speaking nothing but Pashto, gave Marione their litany of grievances against the previous U.S. commander in their area and made their demands of him. The university had provided Marione the scenario beforehand—history, personalities, options, restrictions—to give him the opportunity to prepare and not rely on improvisation. A Pennsylvania native and political science graduate from Colgate University, with Officer Candidate School and Ranger School en route to this first assignment as First Platoon leader of Troop C, Lt. Marione conducted the engagement with far more poise and confidence than I had expected of a second lieutenant. In fact, afterward,



with Lt. Marione out of the room, the immediate, universal opinion of the O/C and Afghans was that Lt. Marione was far better than most of the students coming through; Lt. Marione had more than held his own.

The central part of JRTC being the self-critique and learning following any training, what followed for Lt. Marione was a sit-down with the O/C and the Afghans to review his engagement. Lt. Marione had made one significant error, but that's what the training is for—to make errors now, and not in the real thing. He had mixed up his number figures and had promised the village leaders \$10,000 in reparations, when it should have been 10,000 Afghanis (at 50 Afghanis per dollar, a considerable amount less), the most he was authorized to offer. The mistake, in real life, would surely cause some friction at the next meeting, when the Afghans would look at it as a promise broken. The lesson learned: Lt. Marione might have caught the error had he not failed to finish the meeting with an es-



*Maneuvering to neutralize sniper fire from a building during a security operation in the city of Ghazni are Sgt. Matthew Vera trailed by 1st Sgt. Marlin Heater.*

Left, 1st Lt. Mike McBride gives his platoon a detailed op order for the next day's missions. Below, with an interpreter at his side, Capt. Kilbride discusses the day's activities with the district governor during National Women's Day celebrations in Bermel. The interpreters and the major role players are all Afghan nationals, and all leader engagements, like this one, are conducted in Pashto.



sential point of the course's instruction, reviewing with your counterpart all agreements just made.

There is no way around the fact that the flat, pine forest landscape of Fort Polk cannot replicate that of Afghanistan, nor do the mock towns and villages resemble Afghanistan's 16th-century mud-dirt settlements, though the names, such as Ghazni, Gairo and Bermel, are actual places in Afghanistan. On the other hand, JRTC creates scenarios and provides participants straight from Afghanistan. Afghan nationals are used throughout the training events as the major role-players, pretending to neither speak nor understand English. Even when the roles of the Afghan security forces or villagers are filled with American soldiers or local Louisiana civilians, no English is spoken, and an interpreter must be used for all communication.

**O**n Day Two, Troop C's mission was working with the local ANP to cordon off and secure the town of Bermel, to ensure peace for the town's National Women's Day celebrations. Capt. Kilbride took his headquarters element to Bermel to meet with the ANP, while his two platoons established tactical road checkpoints. Lt. Marione's First Platoon's checkpoint was hit by a suicide bomber, resulting in casualties and the need for evacuation. In the midst of that, a suicide bomber struck the town's celebration, resulting in mass civilian casualties that required Capt. Kilbride to coordinate his troop's immediate first aid and evacuation.

On Day Three, the Ghazni and Gairo missions wound up with Lt. McBride's platoon in the world of hurt. Meanwhile, Lt. Marione would take his platoon for a full 24 hours on the live-fire lanes.

On Day Four, Capt. Kilbride and his headquarters element and Lt. McBride's Second Platoon would return to Bermel for another National Women's Day celebration. They would secure the town, one platoon shy this time, having been hit with an insurgent attack on one road





*Top Left, Troop C's 1st Sgt. Marlin Heater directs the evacuation of wounded civilians, the victims of a suicide bomber striking National Women's Day celebrations in the town of Bermel. Above, squad leader Sgt. Preston Jackson (R) and medic PFC John Giasullo (L) carry to safety for medical evacuation an "Afghan National Army soldier" (role-played by a fellow American soldier) wounded by a suicide bomber at 2nd Platoon's tactical check point. Left, platoon medic PFC John Giasullo assesses one of the many civilians wounded from the suicide bomber attack during the village of Bermel's National Women's Day celebration. Below, Following the Gairo mission, squad leader Sgt. Preston Jackson passionately offers critiques to his squad of its performance; that critique is the heart of the intent of all JRTC training.*

checkpoint and a suicide bombing in the town. Events came fast and violent, with Capt. Kilbride coordinating between his own subordinates, the ANP and the district governor there for the town's events.

**D**ay Five, with the training finished and his soldiers packing up for the 13-hour bus ride back home to Fort Campbell, Ky., Capt. Kilbride shared some of his thoughts about the previous days' train-up. "JRTC tries to replicate, as much as they can, the operations currently going on in Afghanistan and in Iraq," he told me. "They put you in scenarios and situations that might not be exactly replicated, but it gives you an idea, or a baseline to think about—'How would I actually engage them? What would I change?' JRTC isn't supposed to make you ready for combat. It's supposed to get you prepared. They don't critique you, they just say, 'Hey, this is what you need to work on. What do you think your sustainments and improves are?' Normally, if you messed up, they'll get you in the right direction, what you need to fix."

With four previous combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq, Capt. Kilbride is a man whose words are weighted with serious experience. With that in mind, a final caveat



sums up well the deploying brigade's prior fall JRTC rotation as well as Capt. Kilbride's troops' shortened refresher: "Overall," he told me, "I think you're constantly looking for self-improvement, and if not, you're going to become complacent, and that's going to kill soldiers." ★