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Settling Into Afghanistan



First Platoon leaders walk through a village on a get-acquainted visit. Below, the terrain of Charlie Company's area of operation is as starkly beautiful as it is challenging for mounted patrols.

Above, view from the surrounding ridgeline of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Wilderness. Right, 1st Sgt. Marlin Heater stands forefront of Charlie Company, 1st Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment (1-61 Cav), 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, at FOB Wilderness.



Text and Photographs by Paul Avallone

Forward Operating Base Wilderness, April 2008—

We were returning from the day's outing, a familiarization patrol, designed for the platoon to get to know the area and locals, when the fast radio chatter started. There was a suspected Taliban road checkpoint—four men in a blue flatbed jingle truck, blocking the road and demanding money for passage. Rolling and armed, and

Sgt. Joseph Poling serves breakfast steaks hot off the grill. After a previous tour as a guard on a large base in Iraq, where the dining facilities are civilian-contracted, he appreciates his responsibility for actually providing the meals at FOB Wilderness.



just minutes from the reported location, we were the immediate responders, now racing for the site. The excitement was discernible in the radio voices of the platoon leader (PL) and his platoon sergeant and team leaders, all spread among the five up-armored Humvees in the patrol that included two Ford Ranger pickup trucks with a handful of Afghan National Army (ANA) each.

Charlie Company, 1st Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment (1-61 Cav), 4th Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), had been in country at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Wilderness for just two weeks, and most of the guys were not one bit hesitant to admit being anxious to get into combat action. For the seasoned vets with one or more tours (for the most part in Iraq) it was for the challenge and thrill that never grows old; for the still uninitiated, a big motivator was the combat badge, whether Combat Infantryman Badge, Combat Action Badge or Combat Medical Badge.



Platoon leader Lt. 2nd James Marione briefs the platoon members on the day's upcoming patrol.

For First Platoon's PL, 2nd Lt. James Marione, this was his first assignment, having joined the Army after earning a degree in political science from Colgate University, and graduating from Officer Candidate School (OCS), Airborne and Ranger schools. He had had a taste of combat just a week earlier when, on patrol in ride-along right-side training with the unit that his company was replacing—Troop C, 4th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment (4-73 Cav), 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division—an improvised explosive device (IED) exploded just outside the vehicle. The only injury was to the gunner, who suffered a punctured eardrum. The others in the vehicle "had our bells rung," according to Lt. Marione,

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but the IED was an antitank mine, exploding relatively harmlessly straight up. The mine had been command detonated—pull-cord type—and the fishing line led up a hill where the 4-73rd quick reaction force found an Afghan hiding in the bushes.

That IED occurred the day before I arrived at FOB Wilderness, rejoining Charlie Company after having spent a week with the troops at their January Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) predeployment train-up. (See April issue, "Next Stop: Afghanistan.") Embedding with the 101st Airborne for its assumption of command of the U.S. Army's role in the Afghan theater, Regional Command East, I made FOB Wilderness my first stop, wanting to see how the troops I already knew were settling into their 15-month deployment.

Though the First Platoon guys were hoping for more, it was not a surprise that the rush to the supposed Taliban checkpoint proved to be a wild-goose chase. There was a

Lt. Marione meets with village elders during a routine presence patrol.



blue jingle truck with four men, but they were loading riverbed rocks, not accosting travelers. Earlier that morning, not 10 minutes into the patrol, the road was blocked by a jingle truck broken down with electrical problems. First Platoon snapped in half a thick tow chain, trying to move the truck, then the Afghan drivers themselves managed to jerry-rig the battery and get the truck running.

Later, at the first settlement the platoon visited, the elders, to whom Lt. Marione and platoon sergeant SFC Anthony Barnes introduced themselves as the new Americans in the area, quickly made it clear that the man arrested the week before for the IED incident was from the village and just happened to be a brother.

They claimed, naturally, that he was completely innocent, and they asked Lt. Marione and SFC Barnes to have him returned to them. Rather than argue that the suspect had been caught near the scene and had tested positive for explosive residue, the platoon leaders assured the elders that they would relay the concerns to their command and invited them to visit the FOB and discuss that and any other issue in person.

Such interaction with the local population happens in nearly every familiarization or presence patrol heading out from Wilderness. During Charlie Company's January JRTC exercise, these leader engagements were a major emphasis of the training.

Whether it was Lt. Marione's First Platoon or Lt. Kevin Bell's Third Platoon that I joined for daily patrols at Wilderness, the theme for these first weeks was acquiring a knowledge of the area and population.

I learned that Lt. Bell—a graduate of Davidson College, with the same OCS-Ranger-Airborne route as Lt. Marione, and with extensive experience living in foreign countries—takes a particular pleasure in meeting and socializing with

Platoon leader Lt. Kevin Bell meets with elders of a remote hillside village.



During a formal lunch, company commander Capt. Thomas Kilbride, standing, with his interpreter at his side, introduces himself and his subordinate leaders to the leadership of the Afghan security forces colocated and working with Capt. Kilbride's company at FOB Wilderness.



the locals. I witnessed one such meeting in which a farmer offered Lt. Bell saplings to take back and plant at the FOB after Lt. Bell expressed admiration for the man's beautiful budding fruit trees.

Charlie Company's formal introduction to the local leaders, less than two weeks after arriving, went beyond the platoon level. The outgoing Troop C, 4-73 Cav commander arranged for an area *shura* at which to introduce his replacement, Company C's Capt. Thomas Kilbride, as well as Capt. Kilbride's squadron commander, Lt. Col. Thomas O'Steen, to all the district leaders.

A major issue at the *shura* was demands from the local leaders that the Americans, through Col. O'Steen and, closer to home, Capt. Kilbride, ensure that locals be hired for the major road construction job to begin within weeks. The road joins the provincial capitals Khowst and Gardez through the mountain pass, with FOB Wilderness in between.

It is a nongovernmental organization (NGO)-funded project, with a Turkish company already signed as the contractor, and the American military commanders are not in the position of determining employment.

But in Afghanistan's warlord culture, it is difficult—if not impossible—to accept that the American “warlords”—in this instance, Col. O'Steen and Capt. Kilbride—cannot dictate that the road contractor hire locals.

Lieutenants Bell and Marione heard some of the same during their own village visits, the elders firmly expressing their concerns that the road be built with labor from their villages. Following the lead of both Col. O'Steen and Capt. Kilbride, the PLs would attempt to swing the discussion to the theme that the NGO would readily quit the project once begun if security were to become an issue. The anti-Coalition militants (ACM) throughout the country are known for attacking road-building projects for that very reason, to shut them down.

The ACM can freely operate only in areas with the support, willing or coerced, of the local population, so it will be interesting to watch in the next eight good-weather months whether



1-61 Cav squadron commander Lt. Col. Thomas O'Steen meets with the provincial elders in a *shura* to introduce himself and his Charlie Company leaders and to discuss the concerns of the local population.

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the road gets built with or without local labor or cooperation.

Quite simply, Capt. Kilbride does not have the manning strength to guarantee the security of the road project in his sector. When we were together at JRTC, I got the sense of a man who, after four previous combat tours in a lesser role, was excited and serious about having, as he told me then, "my own battlespace." He has it; FOB Wilderness is his command. He has presently lost one platoon, his Second, to the squadron at its HQ base up the road in Gardez, a three-hour drive.

Complementing his two remaining platoons and mortar and sniper sec-

Right, a Charlie Company Humvee returns from patrol to FOB Wilderness. Below, SSgt. Jeffrey Gorski, company mortar section sergeant, hangs a 60 mm mortar round during initial in country mortar training.



Above, team designated marksman PFC "Chainsaw" Slawson has his Sage stock conversion M14 rifle at his side during a patrol stop. Left, Lt. Marione's radio operator, PFC Dale Binkley, adjusts the satellite antenna for the platoon leader to communicate with command back at the base during a patrol.



is more than just running combat patrols and leader engagements.

FOB Wilderness is only one year old, and it is most assuredly a work in progress. Whether by intention or mistake, it was established in a ravine, which has meant carving terraces out of the hillsides to erect work and residential structures. Water is a problem, both getting clean stuff in and the

dirty sewage out, never mind the ravine's drainage issues when it rains hard.

Charlie Troop, 4-73 Cav, made the place livable, with wooden B-huts that, heated, will make next winter's snowy environment at the 7,000-foot altitude viable. A number of construction projects remain for Capt. Kilbride's company, however. They include a dining facility; a new tactical operations center and morale, welfare and recreation center; a mechanics' shop; a permanent latrine and showers; as well as a safe, functioning power grid.

tions at Wilderness is a platoon from the 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Battalion, and their two 105 mm howitzers, as well as a military police platoon from the 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized). Colocated at Wilderness is a company of ANA to work hand in hand with Capt. Kilbride's troops and mentored by an embedded training team of U.S. Army active duty and National Guard advisers.

Less than two weeks after Charlie Company's arrival at Wilderness, the last of the 82nd's 4-73 Cav departed, leaving Capt. Kilbride with his battlespace. And the command

PFC Shane Webb (left) and PFC Girault Valcourt (right) stand as security during their platoon leader's social call with the residents of a remote hillside settlement.



The electrical grid of the FOB Wilderness that Capt. Kilbride has inherited is a scattering of smaller generators and snakes of orange power cords on the ground, under and over the dirt and gravel. The running joke is, "Don't let OSHA come around—they'd shut the place down." KBR is contracted to install the permanent grid, but the team has yet to arrive, and, as FOB "mayor" PFC Jack Keck says with a shrug, he's not getting his hopes up of seeing them anytime soon.

Strange as it may sound—a private first class as an FOB mayor—that is the case at Wilderness. I had gotten to know PFC Keck at JRTC, seeing him given and solving a number of problems well outside the realm of a private. Curious, I had asked Capt. Kilbride then what his plans were for PFC Keck in the deployed company. His response: "You mean Task Force Keck?"—just that, and a smile. I understood what he meant then, so I wasn't surprised to find PFC Keck as FOB mayor.

PFC Keck is not a typical private by any means. The difference begins with his age and follows with the life and work experience that comes with it. Jack Keck joined the Army the day before his 42nd birthday, the cutoff age for enlistment then. Along with his age, Keck brought years of experience in construction and contracting. PFC Keck is so old, he jokes, his son was serving in the Stryker brigade in Iraq when he himself enlisted.

A major part of PFC Keck's responsibility as mayor is to coordinate and supervise the Afghan laborers working and living on the FOB for the various construction projects and daily maintenance. Even at the level of a PFC to Afghans, this key leader engagement is the most prominent aspect



On a get-acquainted visit, with interpreter "Sonny" in the middle, Lt. Marione tours a village with an elder.

First Sgt. Marlin Heater briefs the soldiers on the day's events.



of this war in which America is a partner with the Afghan government, not in conflict with it.

On a higher level at FOB Wilderness is 1st Sgt. Marlin Heater. First Sgt. Heater's primary concern is base security. He has targeted the one or two best enemy avenues of approach, with supply orders submitted for additional static protective measures. Speaking with me, he admitted the single weakest part of base protection might very well be the dependence upon the ANA for perimeter observation post security. That feeling was not from a distrust of the Afghans' loyalty, but rather from comfort at having a disciplined American soldier accountable at each site. With the manpower limitations of the FOB, that is simply not possible, as it would stretch Capt. Kilbride's forces too thin to properly conduct off-base operations.

Just when I thought that the first sergeant was leaving all the leader engagement to others, he joined First Platoon on their third patrol, in as many weeks in country, to the remote village Suri Kheyl, which the 82nd's Troop C, 4-73 Cav, had considered extremely unfriendly. The first visit had been with the 4-73 Cav, on a dawn snatch of a mid-level ACM leader. The area had been the location of the troop's single KIA during its deployment. The 82nd guys had their reasons for not liking Suri Kheyl.

That first mission came up empty; the target of the snatch wasn't there. Later intelligence would indicate that he was in Pakistan, with the intent to safely stay there. Within days, First Platoon returned to the village, in broad daylight this time, to show a

peaceful presence and meet the elders. As a get-acquainted mission, it was successful, with Lt. Marione and SFC Barnes invited to sit down for chai with the elders.

First Sgt. Heater joined the platoon on the third trip to Suri Kheyl just a few days later, and this trip was to detain an individual thought to be selling RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] rounds in the village.

The man was nowhere to be found, but the leadership sat down for chai with the elders, and 1st Sgt. Heater's humility, sincerity and kindness quickly registered with the locals, who invited him and the platoon to return again soon for the sacrifice and feast of a goat.

It is easy to appreciate why the Afghans immediately took to 1st Sgt. Heater. He is a man of his word, and he remembers and keeps his promises.

Unlike so many first sergeants, he's not a yeller. He's disciplined, firm and stern, but he does not wield his power by instilling fear through screaming.

The village elders of Suri Kheyl must have gotten that



Lt. Marione watches his sergeant take a retinal scan in a process of registering village leaders. The portable camera also takes fingerprints and records biographical information.



A Chinook prepares for liftoff from FOB Wilderness, which Capt. Kilbride calls "my own battlespace."

sense of honest dealing and trust in the first sergeant, because soon after the chai sit-down, the RPG seller showed himself and allowed serious questioning and a complete rendering of identification—from retinal scan to fingerprints to biographical data.

While higher command, up the radio channels, debated actually detaining the man, 1st Sgt. Heater understood that the man was far more an innocent dupe than a dangerous militant. First Sgt. Heater's counsel was respected from above, the man was not detained and 1st Sgt. Heater was the recipient of hugs, genuine hugs, from the local leaders.

Now, if only the first sergeant could work that magic on Army logistics. Regardless of the term *light infantry*, Army units do not travel light, and Charlie Company is no exception, bringing with them en route the absolute warfighting essentials and shipping a handful of connex containers of equipment—both military and personal—months before deployment by land and sea. Four of those connex containers have yet to arrive, having been broken into, stolen or both. By Capt. Kilbride's reckoning, "Half of my property book is in those pilfered connexes."

This isn't the first instance I have heard of such thievery. A photojournalist friend told me earlier that the 173rd Brigade company, with whom he was embedded last December, had their shipped connexes emptied in transit, losing, among other gear, their sleeping bags. As the bags had not been replaced, that made for some very cold winter nights.

From what I have heard, the shipped connexes arrive in port in Pakistan, and the banditry occurs somewhere between there and their FOB destinations in Afghanistan. It seems fair to assume that the Army cannot find shipping contractors who will actually guarantee safe delivery of goods from the Pakistan ports to Afghanistan FOBs, what

with the lawless environment of the route being beyond anyone's control.

As such, it seems obvious that the Army is willing to accept a certain amount of losses when weighed against the cost of military air shipment of the equipment. Not that that will help Charlie Company with their missing items, like their extra uniforms (down to socks), optics for their sniper weapons or even their Xboxes and games (entertainment to fill their downtime).

The soldiers admit that they had been advised ahead of time of the pilfering risk, but with the amount of equipment and personal gear necessary for such a long deployment and the extreme limits on air shipment, there was no other option.

Soldiers are used to changes, foul-ups and doing without; and the official word is that the Army will reimburse the individuals for their personal property losses. The soldiers at FOB Wilderness seem to have accepted the missing/pilfered connexes as something beyond their control and thus don't allow it to occupy their time or energy.

In these first weeks, they have been too busy settling in, making the FOB their home for the next 15 months, and learning about the area and the local population, constantly aware that their primary concern is the enemy that can be anywhere out there—or soon will be.

Conventional wisdom says that things will start heating up countrywide soon and will get really hot by summer—when, exactly, and where, no one knows.

Soon enough the guys will all have earned their combat badges, though the unvoiced concern is that those badges may very well have been earned in blood.

That reality does not have to be voiced; not a soul would be here at FOB Wilderness or in Afghanistan, not in these days of the all-volunteer Army, if he did not accept that reality underneath all his actions. ★