

**Article written under pseudonym  
Jim Keller, because Paul Avallone  
was working as a civilian  
contractor in country then.**



## AFGHAN JOURNAL

Exhaustion shows on the faces, and dirt on the uniforms, of 3/71 Cav soldiers returning from a three-week stint at a remote outpost/OP. Brought out by CH-47 helicopter when their replacements were flown in, they'll now have hot showers, hot chow, actual tents and internet in the comfort of home that is the FOB.

# A Day In The Life Of An FOB

Forward Operating Base Naray, Kunar Province

Text & Photos by Jim Keller

I wake to a voice shouting outside, "Get under cover, idiot!" And then a thump...thump! Is that incoming or outgoing? It's pitch black in here, with the windows of this concrete barrack covered in plywood, but I jump into my pants, shirt and shoes, grab my cameras and head outside into the dawn light as the deafening bomb-bomb-bomb-bombs of the Dashaika being fired from the roof of the nearby SF compound echo between the two rows of six concrete barracks where soldiers are gathering – in everything from shorts and shower shoes to full uniform and kit – out of the open where an enemy rocket might really ruin one's day.

That's what it is, guys are saying, a rocket attack, from the distant mountain ridges, not a ground attack. Distant ridges mean our reaction will be mortar fire, so I make my way to one of the mortar pits, where the crew is just dropping its first round. Kabloom! round out, and I immediately wish I'd remembered my ear plugs. The mortar is the new 120mm – the old four-deuce is ancient history – the distant ridge is child's play for it, and a dozen rounds later, the ridgeline is obscured by the explosions. It's the same thing at the 105 howitzer ring when I jog on over – the crew pumping out rounds for the ridgeline.

When the attack is over and totaled up, it proves to be seven Chinese 107mm rockets fired, with none hitting the Forward Operating Base (FOB). The closest were two landing in the river the FOB has as its southern border and a third about 25 meters off the western perimeter Hesco wall. A couple were duds, and a patrol will later take EOD out to find and destroy them. The assessment is, it was a typical Taliban or al-Qaeda attack. Meaning, a half-dozen guys humped the mountain at night, waited for first light, set up their rockets by leaning them on rocks, aimed by guess, then fired them and booked on out. Lucky their aim is by sight, and lousy.

The U.S. has optics, (shhhh, their nomenclature and technical stats I am advised not to write about), that locate the launches, and the mortars and howitzers fire up the area and close-by egress routes. Everyone hopes our quick response actually gets some or all of the shooters, but no one's really betting on it, and all are grateful that the enemy's method and aim of shooting the rockets is, by anybody's standards, lousy.



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*Gasses explode from the tube and dust kicks up as the baseplate settles, as a mortar round blasts toward the enemy position in the saddle to the right of the two teats on the distant ridgeline.*

## Rockets and MRE's

The action is over, and having been roused early from a decent sleep, the important question now is, is breakfast hot As or MREs? Damn, MREs, again, as it is here three out of four days. The fact is, the only guaranteed hot meal a day is dinner at this FOB. And it's cooked, served and eaten outside, as the roof of the mess building collapsed last month, and with the efficiency of Afghan construction it is yet to be rebuilt. But the cooked food is the same brand and quality as one gets on the large American base at Bagram, just not as great a variety each day. There is steak, lobster, hot wings, fish filets, veggies, salads, cold sodas and Gatorade, dessert pies, cookies and even ice cream. All part of the massive ground and air resupply chain engineered to keep the troops well fed, in condition and in positive spirits.

After all, this FOB is physically a long way from home and a long way even from Bagram. The nearest FOB is at Asadabad, and it's half again bigger than this, but Abad is a seven-hour, dirt-road drive away – not to mention the past and possibly future IEDs on that road. This is near the end of the universe here, in the northeast part of the country, bordering Pakistan, in a valley cut down the middle by a fast river – the FOB on one side, the rural town of Naray on the other. Thus, FOB Naray.

Three-plus years ago when I was stationed in eastern Afghanistan, there was nothing up in this neck of the woods. Just FOB Abad down the road, and the only Americans visiting these areas were Special Forces patrols out of Abad. A while after that, SF set up its base here, building a compound to house themselves (comfortably, including air-conditioning, individual rooms, satellite TV and fully-stocked bar, one must assume, if you know SF) and their Afghan militia (or Afghan Special Forces, which are hired guns getting triple or more than the \$70/month official Afghan National Army; which is about to change, as ASF is to be brought down to the ANA pay scale...unless the Green Berets get around that by paying their ASF the extra out of their comfortable, easily manipulated op funds.)

I don't know how the Naray SF team feels about any of this, nor how they feel about their little freedom growing from a private base to a 500-man FOB, because the U.S. Army Special Forces Command isn't allowing much, if any, team-level contact with the media, (for secrecy reasons), as if every insurgent from here to Peshawar, Pakistan, doesn't know that the Green Berets in Afghanistan are mainly doing intel gathering. Big secret. As if every illiterate farmer and goat herder from here up into the mountains to the border can't from a mile away tell the difference between a bearded Green Beret guy from a bearded Af-

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ghan soldier. Duh.

This mountainous area was big in the news a little over a year ago, when a SEAL recon team got hit, three out of four dying, with the rescue Chinook sent in getting shot down – all aboard dead. The fourth SEAL managed to escape and evade, protected by some local villagers and brought out safely.

### Establishing A Presence

Big Army decided to push its influence into here up from Abad starting the beginning of 2006, by sending in the 3rd Squadron, 71st Cavalry of the 10th Mountain Division to establish Naray as a full-fledged FOB to gain a

All in all, FOB Naray is now home to about 500 American and Afghan soldiers, about one-third of whom are out at any one time manning the OPs and outposts for weeks-long spells.

And there are no hot As at those sites; none. I've spent some time at one. Just MREs, three times a day. And no flush toilets, no hot showers, or bathing at all, unless one is near a stream or water source. And no real electricity, except a small generator, no air-conditioning, no tents, and, heaven forbid, no internet. All of which can be found at FOB Naray. Sure, the flush toilets are all the way on the other side of the camp, unless you're counting the couple of out-

cate back home to loved ones.

### 10th Mountain – Right At Home

The 10th Mountain's 3/71st Cav has, in only a few months, established a functional, active FOB here, but it's come at a price. Not by the occasional, poorly executed enemy rocket attacks, but by the Cav's own aggressive hunt for the enemy. The unit was stood up only two years ago, in August 2004, in the army's realignment to Units of Action (UAs), and the man who stood it up, LTC Joseph Fenty, was its first casualty here in Afghanistan. He along with two of his soldiers.

It was May 5th, a nighttime extraction of a team from a ledge in

chopper faltered, one soldier managed to jump back onto the ledge, and the helicopter went down, a fireball crash in the ravine. Fenty, his two soldiers and the six crew members of the Chinook all killed, just like that, in an instant's bad luck.

Just over six weeks later was another bad day for the 3/71 Cav at FOB Naray, with three more men lost, again in the mountains. It was a plussed-up sniper squad in an overwatch position to which it had taken the team two days after chopper infil to quietly reach. Third day was supposed to be the raid below for which the team would be overwatch. It was temporarily postponed. The team was low on water, the temperature in the 100-degree range; a resupply was essential. The chopper that brought the resupply incorrectly dropped it too close to the team's position – in a sense, marking it. A short while later, the team was taking rifle and RPG fire. From close, very close. In the ensuing firefight, the team drove the enemy back, but took four casualties: two KIA, two seriously wounded. A medevac chopper was called in. One of the wounded was hoisted up into the chopper, the chopper medic rode the extractor back down, picked up the second, and on the way up the cable broke. The medic and the wounded man died in the

fall.

### For Fallen Comrades

A number of guys here have relayed me that story of the sniper team during my time among them. All personally knew the three from the sniper squad. All had a sadness in their telling. And then a pride, an affirmation, as each always ended the story making sure that I understand that they got them back – they got those guys who took their friends. The Cav dropped a team up higher on the mountain, and that team spied armed, black-clad men on the roof of a house. They called in an air strike and had A-10's drop four 500-lb bombs smack down on the enemy. Fourteen killed. Retribution. For their friends.

I remember last year about this time when I learned that a brigade of 10th Mountain was coming to Afghanistan, I thought, because they're warriors, they would be jealous of their sister brigade going to Iraq, because Afghanistan's quiet and Iraq's where the action is. Around the end of the year, I knew things were heating up here in this once-quiet conflict, and I made my way here. If there had been jealousy before, my bet is that there sure isn't now; the guys of the 3/71 Cav know first-hand that Afghanistan, too, is hot.

*Continued on page 58*



3/71 Cav squads board the CH-47 that will take them high into the mountains along the Paki border for a weeks-long stay at one of several remote observation posts that overlook Taliban and al Qaeda infiltration routes.

firm foothold on this once-neglected part of the country. The 3/71st doubled the physical size of the camp, brought its mortars and howitzers and cav platoons and Combat Support Hospital, and the vehicles and equipment and support personnel to make it all function. Plus, its own contingent of ANA soldiers. The Cav established permanent observation posts (OPs) on surrounding hilltops, then moved further into the mountains of Nuristan province to the north (where few Americans had ever been) to begin establishing a PRT (Provisional Reconstruction Team; basically, civil affairs, to bring better living conditions to the locals).

house burn-shitters on the north side. And the showers too aren't next door; they are in a connex that is a long, ankle-straining river-rock walk away across camp. There is air conditioning and heat in the winter, but the long tents are packed, 30- to 40-cots or more each, with personal space less than an arm's reach. As for the internet, except for the staff working the TOC (with internet at their fingertips, that's the benefit of being staff), there are exactly three computers hooked up in a small connex, there's a 30-minute limit, and there's always a line of guys waiting. Still, it's better than the guys up in the outposts have it, with only their dreams to communi-

the mountains. The team had been inserted the same way as the extraction was planned: a CH-47 Chinook hovering backwards toward the ledge, its tail ramp down. The insertion had been dangerous, and so would be the extraction, in particular, with the unpredictable winds gusting from up and down the mountainside. Fenty did not have to go along on the chopper for the extraction, but he chose to be there, like a father wanting to shepherd his children through a danger. Three of the team jumped onto the ramp, something happened – the chopper blade hit a tree or rocks, or something, the accident investigation report has not been released – and the



Evening off-time is usually spent in the tiny rectangle of private space in the tents which most of the soldiers of the FOB call home. Specialists Doug Sletten (R) and Shane Koch (L), of the North Dakota National Guard MP platoon attached to the 3/71 Cav at FOB Naray, are on their laptops -- for games, music or DVD movies -- a typical way of spending evenings and off-times for many of the guys. The 50 cal. machine gun receiver at the end of Sletten's cot is testament to the crowded living conditions, where everything you own or are responsible for is within two feet of you -- not to mention your next-bunk neighbor as well.

## RKB's pick for NRA Board of Directors

"Vote for Silver Star Recipient  
**Steve Schreiner**  
for NRA Board of Directors. I am encouraging NRA Board of Directors voters to utilize the 'bullet ballot' procedure. If you vote just for Schreiner, you increase his chances of being elected.\*"

*LT. Col. Robert K. Brown,  
USAR (Ret.) Editor/Publisher,  
Soldier of Fortune Magazine*

### Why vote for Steve Schreiner?

Schreiner is a Vietnam Vet, Airborne Ranger; awarded CIB, Bronze Star with V Device and Silver Star.

He is a noted supporter of the Second Amendment as exemplified by the following:

1. President, Firearms Coalition of Colorado;
2. Awarded NRA's Best Volunteer Organization of the Year;
3. Successfully Fought for Colorado's CCW;
4. Highly Successful Registered Lobbyist at Colorado Legislature;
5. Fought against semi-auto ban, magazine bans and "safe storage bills";
6. Member of NRA's Grassroots Committee.

### What I stand for:

1. We need to reach out to everyone, especially the younger generation, using their means of accessing information, about the positive aspects of the National Rifle Association and the Second Amendment;
2. We need more emphasis on range development and protection of existing ranges;
3. We need to protect our shooting rights in National Forests and on other Federal lands.

*Steve Schreiner, President, Firearms Coalition of Colorado*

\*Bullet balloting does not increase the number of votes cast for Schreiner but it does reduce the number of votes the other candidates receive which, therefore, increases the likelihood of Schreiner's election.



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But I don't want to think about that this morning, not the bad stuff. These guys here have told me the stories, because I'm sort of "the media" and they want the world to know about their commander and their friends who lived and died with an American flag patch on their right shoulder; but they don't dwell out loud for long on the bad. The rocket attack this morning at dawn was a complete failure, and today is looking to be a beautiful day, and, sure, breakfast may be MREs, which I'll skip, but I'll take the refrigerated juices, the donuts, the bagels and the cereal. Who can complain?

And I've got my cameras, and I think I'll just walk around the FOB, saying hello here and there, seeing what's going on with these guys serving America in the middle of nowhere, at the edge of the universe, in an FOB they call home a long long way from their real homes. ☒

Jim Keller is the nom-de-plum of a freelance writer who was a Special Forces captain in 5th Group. He is a frequent contributor to SOF.



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