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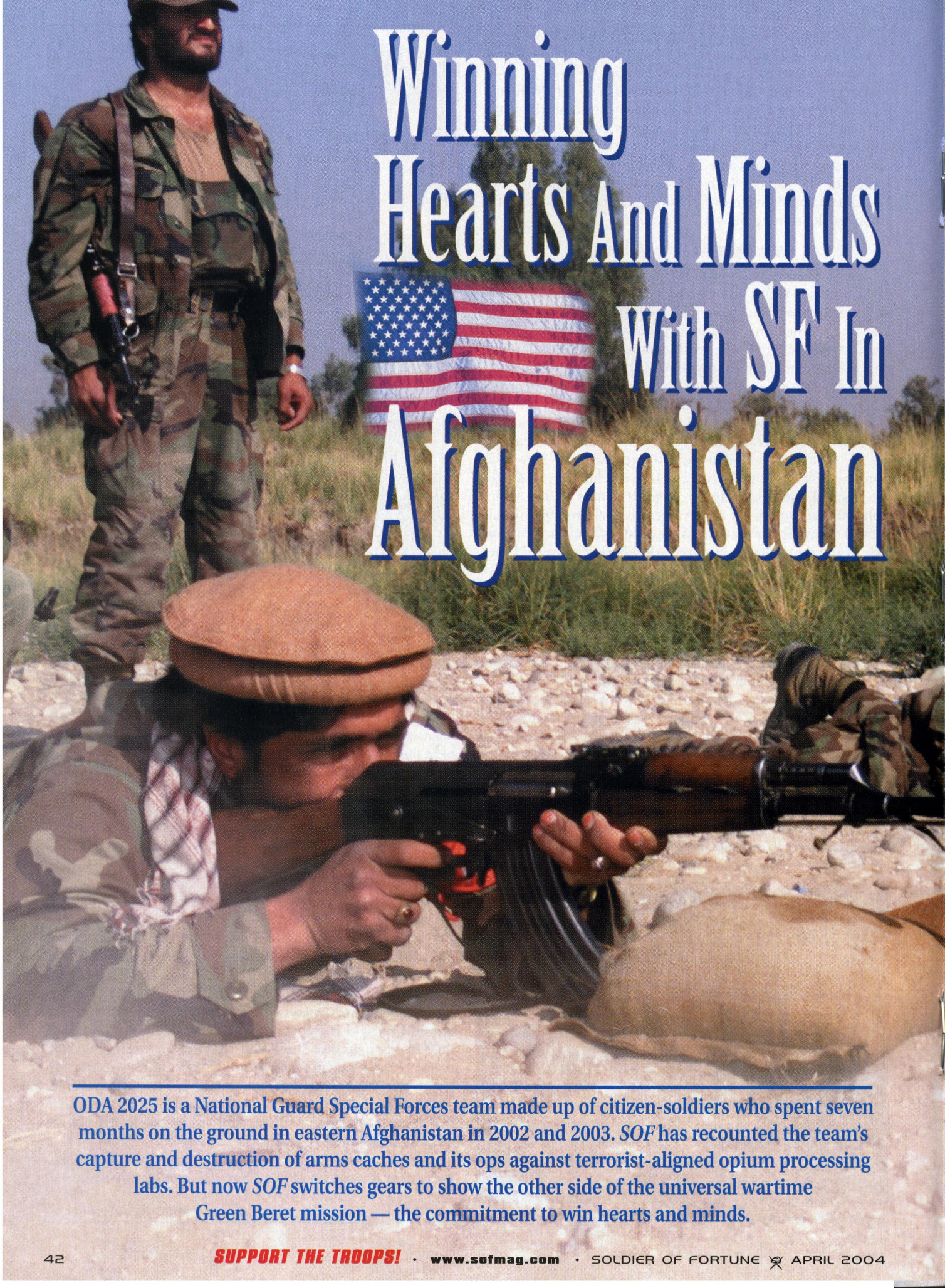
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Winning Hearts And Minds With SF In Afghanistan

ODA 2025 is a National Guard Special Forces team made up of citizen-soldiers who spent seven months on the ground in eastern Afghanistan in 2002 and 2003. *SOF* has recounted the team's capture and destruction of arms caches and its ops against terrorist-aligned opium processing labs. But now *SOF* switches gears to show the other side of the universal wartime Green Beret mission — the commitment to win hearts and minds.

Staff Sergeant Dean, of ODA 2025, instructs soldiers of the team's MRF (Mobile Reaction Force) on the range, overwatching as the soldiers fire their AK-47s. The MRF is the ODA's hundred-man militia — trained, equipped and lead in battle by the ODA.

TEXT & PHOTOS BY PAUL AVALLONE

To see Special Forces depicted in a Hollywood movie, one would think it's all about brute physical superhuman studs firing a machine gun under one arm while launching a Stinger missile over the other shoulder, then taking on a platoon of zombie-like Ninja warriors with nothing more than bare fists and a sharp Kaybar, before climbing into the pilot's seat of an Apache or Harrier and flying the thing into the sunset.

The truth is, SF involves far less creaming the enemy a la Rambo than subtly outsmarting him, though it is that physical warfare that's most glamorous and plays best on movie screens and even in magazines such as this. Everyone wants to hear bang-bang, shoot-'em-up tales. "There I was, knee-deep in hand grenade pins" Those high-octane stories may very well be true for the opening stages of the Afghan war, but today the war is being fought and won by small

teams of SF quietly gaining the confidence, trust and allegiance of a 16th-century people who have for too long been preached to that we are the Great Satan.

Even though everyone knows that Rambo is a fiction, my guess would be that 97 of 100 guys showing up at Ft. Bragg for the SF Qualification Course, hoping to come out a year-and-a-half later a tabbed Green Beret, are imagining themselves as one day being one of those 5th Group guys we've all seen in the photographs riding into combat on horseback. One of the other two is there just because he heard of the great TDY per diem SF guys get for long deployments to the shitholes of the world. The last guy, he just got in the wrong line on the way to the PX.

Basically Teachers

Reality is, after the physical challenge of the SF



Assessment & Selection phase, 90 percent of the Q Course is mental. Classroom learning. Designed to make "force-multipliers." Who are, basically, teachers. As dull as that sounds, that is the special mission of Special Forces: forming, training and leading foreign armies. In particular, in an unconventional warfare (UW) environment.

UW was the heart of SF at its inception and still is today. Along with its corollary, foreign internal defense (FID) — the training of foreign militaries. The Q Course is geared in the UW/FID direction, culminating in the famed Robin Sage guerrilla exercise, which is really a chess match between the students and guerrilla role players, not a clash of warriors on the battlefield.

But it is in the two other missions of SF — direct-action (DA) and special-reconnaissance (SR) — where the quick-draw, techno-thriller glamour lies. Army Rangers, Marine Recon, Navy Seals and Delta can all perform DA and SR missions, and I am willing to grant that most times, if not all, they can do them as good or better than SF. But UW and FID — the training and leading of foreign indigenous soldiers — that's the province of SF alone.

Ironically enough, even as FID missions worldwide crowded SF's plate from the Reagan mid-1980s right through the present, with the quick in-and-out wars of Grenada, Panama, Desert Storm and Somalia and in a stiff competition for military dollars and viability, SF tried to remake itself as a primarily DA, SR and Close-Quarters Battle (CQB) fighting force. SFAUC (SF Advanced Urban Combat) became the must-have course. Building-scaling, door-kicking, fast-roping and flash-banging. Delta stuff. Heck, stuff that any Ranger platoon can do and that any disciplined Marine infantry company can be taught.

UW? Post-Cold War, who needs it? FID? There's no hooah in teaching. Just blackboards, flip-charts, cardboard and balsa wood training aids, range firing and pretend patrolling. The fun's in riding the skids of a Little Bird, leaping off onto a rooftop, rappelling down the building side and swinging into a window, blasting away a life-size terrorist target with a customized carbine!

And Then Came Afghanistan

Those 5th Group guys on horseback didn't get that way by parachuting in with them or galloping off Chinook ramps on them. The 12 men of ODA 595 inserted in the middle of the



(left) Staff Sergeant Dean of ODA 2025 watches soldiers of the team's MRF (Mobile Reaction Force) perform basic rifle maintenance while practicing range-fire drills. The MRF are the hundred-man militia that the ODA trains, equips and leads in battle. (above) Sergeant First Class Laval leads conducts the Special Forces detachment's MRF in daily physical training exercises.

night via an MH-47E helicopter (a 160th Special Ops Chinook) to link-up with the largest of the Northern Alliance's armed factions, General Abdul Dostum's force, to assist that 2,000-man army in breaking the years-long stalemate and defeat the Taliban. That Dostum's army was a cavalry unit — literally, horse-mounted — had not been known before, but ODA 595 did what only SF is geared to do — they adapted, improvised and fit in. UW. They guided Dostum's faction of the Northern Alliance to a victory that had eluded it for years.

My team made it to Afghanistan about 10 months after 595's famous ride. By then, the Taliban had been defeated and the U.S. had control of the entire country. It was a tenuous control at best. The remaining Taliban and their al Qaeda comrades had melted into the rural countryside or across the mountains into Pakistan. Were the U.S. to pack up and leave Afghanistan, the Taliban would be back, regrouped, to try and recapture control of the government.

Our job on the ground in Afghanistan was to find and root out whatever remained of the Taliban and al Qaeda and to



Master Sergeant Terry of ODA 2025 overwatches soldiers of the team's Mobile Reaction Force as they zero their AK-47s on the range in mission prep.

keep those who'd found safe haven in Pakistan from coming back. A corollary was to uncover and take control of as much of the untold thousands of tons of arms and munitions cached and stockpiled by warlords, rival warlords, Taliban sympathizers, provincial governors, security chiefs, village mayors and everyone else, it seemed, along with his brother.

No small task for one little 10-man ODA in an area that covered more than 10,000 square kilometers, with the rugged mountains of the Paki border flanking the east and south. One ODA, remember, that did not have attached companies of Rangers, 82nd or 10th Mountain for combat support. Those infantry companies were in the country somewhere, we knew, but we never even thought it an option that we could call them, even in an emergency, and have them deploy rapidly to pull our asses out of a jam. We had an Air Force Tac-P attached for 24-hr on-call Close-Air Support (CAS). And we had a three-man Tactical Psyops Team (TPT) permanently attached, and they proved their worth as much as extra guns backing us as for their propaganda peddling. Also, sharing our fortress compounds was a dozen-man Civil Affairs team (a CAT) that — not for these Reservists' limited combat prowess but rather for their ability to assess the needs of the populace and subsequently get wells dug and schools built — helped create an atmosphere of hope, stability and progress for a people who had barely survived two decades of war.

An ODA, TPT and a CAT, that's it, working UW. In this case, the guerrillas could be said to be the Taliban and al Qaeda remnants and supporters just waiting for the opportunity strike at us, run us out of the area and reclaim it. This is Nangarhar Province we're talking about: an early Taliban stronghold and Osama bin Laden's home. Also to be viewed as potential guerrilla threats were the various local rival warlords who would love to optimize any chink in our armor to take the province over as their own.

Our Team Sergeant, Terry, used to love to say, with a smile and a shake of his head, "It's the Wild West meets the Mafia."



Guests of rural District Security Chief General Zariat Gul (far left), ODA 2025's Terry, Brian and Laval partake in a typical lunch of goat, chicken, rice and flat bread. Being the lone American military contingent in a great expanse of rural eastern Afghanistan, the ODA found it essential to build rapport, friendship and trust with the local Afghans upon which rested the ODA's success curtailing any Taliban or al Qaeda activities and build-up.

Meaning, the lawlessness of the Wild West and the ruthless, violent stranglehold of power the Mafia wields, all played out in a literal landscape of barren rocky deserts and mountains straight from a Hollywood western. And in this mix, Terry would add, with a wink, "And we're the sheriff."

As the sheriff, in true textbook UW fashion, our deputies and posse was our 100-man militia. Our MRF ("murf," for Mobile Reaction Force). They were the best soldiers culled from the local warlords' troops. Our own little army that we formed, fed, clothed, equipped, trained and led. It's not the stuff of glamour, but a videotape documentary could go a long way in the UW teaching phase of

the Q Course. The logistics alone of maintaining a hundred-man militia can be daunting. Lucky for us, the accounting and financial machinations fell upon our Senior Engineer, Chuck, who in his civilian life is an accountant. Even by Afghan standards, it takes many thousands of dollars a month to maintain such a militia, and since that money came from our command in Bagram, it had to be accounted for down to the penny. Again, not glamorous war stuff that makes for an action-packed thriller.

Neither is it all that interesting doing the mundane of instructing the MRF and helping establish a better, more secure compound. Constructing fortifications. Teaching and clearing fields of fire. Having latrines and showers built where before the soldiers shat in the open and bathed in the ditch. Spending hour after boring hour in the broiling sun on

(below, left) Sergeant First Class Laval, an 18D medical sergeant on the ODA, treats a bedridden Afghan man during the team's medical assessment at a refugee camp in eastern Afghanistan. In a land with so few doctors and fewer rural medical facilities — not even clinics — Afghans would come by the droves seeking medical care whenever we would set up a MedCap, impromptu or planned. (below) A little girl is a little tentative as Sgt. 1st Class Randy, a Special Forces medic with ODA 2025, checks her for what her father asserts is a congested chest during the team's medical evaluation in a rural village.





Getting into the spirit of Special Forces' winning hearts and minds, Air Force Chief John Harris, for a while attached to ODA 2025 as its Tac-P, gives Polaris rides to boys of a rural village in the heart of the Shin War Valley — a location famous for its poppy cultivation from which comes 60% of the European demand for heroin.



(above) Village children clamor around Sergeant First Class Randy for the candy he is giving out during the ODA's visit to this rural village in a strongly pro-Taliban area of eastern Afghanistan. 2025's Senior Weapons Sergeant Jason passes out toys and clothes collected by Mobile, Alabama friends and church members of Jason's wife, who mailed boxes and boxes of them to the team in Afghanistan to give to the needy children.



the range teaching basic rifle maintenance and marksmanship. As for Physical Training, no matter how many days you do it, it's always an hilarious sight watching a formation of Afghans doing jumping jacks. Flutter kicks? Synchronized? You're asking for a miracle. It might make for a good comedy bit in a movie, that's about it.

In a UW environment, it's not a company or a battalion or brigade of your fellow Americans with whom you live and fight; it's the locals, the "indig," (for indigenous populace). As such, you become a part of their lives. They are your fighters, and they're your friends. They respect you. They trust you. They feel responsible for your own safety. I witnessed it more than once that our own MRF soldiers would step in front of us when the rounds were coming our way, in their sense of obligation to protect us. Maybe because we drank chry with them, we ate with them, we laughed with them, and when they would gather to party we danced as they do, alone (women do not exist in any social setting), no matter how foolish we looked. Boil it down, and no matter that our culture, our education and our standards of living may be centuries more advanced than theirs, we treated them as equals as humans.

It's part of the flexibility built into the SF way. You're 10 or 12 men in the middle of nowhere — the Wild West. We may have been the sheriffs there, but without our deputies and posse, we would not have survived. In a like sense, without the allegiance and respect of the biggest, baddest warlord in the area, we would have been totally ineffective. In our case, that man was General Hazarat Ali. He had led his army for years as a faction of the Northern Alliance and had been the main ground unit utilized by SF during the Tora Bora hunt-for-Osama campaign in December 2001. Supported financially by the U.S., Ali was an ally in name, but it was our personal relationship with him — sitting down to numerous lunches with him, NCOs with the General — that helped bind us together that he allowed us to roam and operate at will in what everyone knows is "Ali country." Otherwise, it would have taken at minimum a heavy brigade of the 82nd to displace Ali. And worse, it would have taken that same brigade or more as an occupying force to provide the same area security Ali provided with his semi-rag-tag army. There is little that is more unfriendly to a people than a foreign occupying force. That's the quickest way to lose hearts and minds. Instead, in a UW situation, the single ODA working hand-in-hand with the indig commander (or guerrilla chief) could do the same without that dominating, intimidating conventional brigade. In a sense, General Ali was the guerrilla chief, and we were the single ODA.

Conventional warfare is fought and won with sheer physical power. In UW a single ODA cannot possibly wield that amount of power (except for its ability to call in CAS to do the killing) and succeeds by winning hearts and minds, however trite and worn-out that saying may be. To a certain extent, the proverb "When in Rome, do as the Romans" applies. If the operational culture deems a man without facial hair as "not a man," then you grow your mustaches and beards as much to respect the culture as to blend in. When the governor or a general or a rural mayor or just some humble village elder or your own MRF invite you to sit down and eat with them, you don't beg off to the safety of your own sanitized, pasteurized, bacteria-free American-supplied rations (from MREs to T-Rats to huge stockpiles of frozen lobster, steak and chicken, we were very well supplied by our command). You sit down on the floor (or ground) and eat with them, and your utensils are theirs — your hands into the same communal platters.



(above) Staff Sergeant Dean is a general contractor in the States, and it wasn't a surprise when he led the way getting the basic work to get this rural school made usable. (above, right) A school teacher in his civilian occupation, Captain Brian gives a quick lesson to school boys during one of the ODA's many presence patrols through rural eastern Afghanistan. (right) The school supplies sent from the U.S. from friends and relatives of the team.



And you get sick. Liquids-streaming-freely-from-all-orifices sick. What we called "pissing- outta-your-ass" sick, which is what literally you'd be doing for weeks on end. It happened to all of us. The cure: Cipro. We learned soon enough to cut it off at the pass before the liquid shits hit by making it ritual to pop a Cipro or two immediately after an Afghan meal and for the next couple of days following — and just put out of mind the possible long-term liver damage from such drug overuse.

With General Ali a U.S. ally and our team's working partner, we had physical control over the area, but that did not mean that we would automatically be liked and respected in the rural districts. This part of eastern Afghanistan had been fiercely pro-Taliban and had hosted al-Qaeda. In fact, Osama and his AQ had fled to and been protected by the villagers in the Tora Bora Mountains which border Pakistan to the south. With the people in the rural villages along the Tora Bora and the poppy-growing Shin War Valley distrustful, unfriendly and sometimes hostile to Americans, we knew that to gain their trust and allegiance meant first winning their hearts and minds.

To begin, we met with rural commanders, security chiefs and district governors to gain their understanding and support. They in turn would help arrange for us to conduct visits and meetings with the elders of the faraway, hostile villages, where we would go — armed, yes, and with a few squads of our MRF, but in peace and without threat. Most times, we brought along a couple of the Civil Affairs NCOs, who would do detailed assessments of the villages: population, agriculture, water sources, medical facilities, and the like. We would listen to the elders, who would often complain that "America never cared about us before, why should you now?" And, "What will America do for us?" In turn, we

stressed that we could listen and determine that they needed wells dug, they needed schools, they needed clinics, and that America could help make those resources available through our own military and through other worldwide relief agencies, from the UN on down, but the civilians of the agencies would not risk their lives coming to a hostile area, which is as the villages, being pro-Taliban, were viewed. The message was clear: Friendship and trust is a two-way street. The relief agencies would come with their aid if they believed the areas were secure and free of Taliban.

Numerous times we proved our own good intentions as representatives of America by providing very basic, immediate relief. In various villages we ran MedCaps, which is setting up a clinic for a day, having our own 18D medics see patients who, for the most part, had never been treated by a doctor. The Army provided lots of medicines for these missions, and we supplemented those with medicines we bought with our own money on the open market—a great deal purchased across the border in Pakistan for us by our terps. We helped some villagers reopen schools by performing repairs, building blackboards, providing school supplies like pencils, notebooks, readers, etc., and even covering the

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Winning Hearts & Minds

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salaries of teachers who hadn't been paid for months.

Before going out, we always made sure we brought along goodies to give out to the kids along the rutted dirt roads or in the villages as we drove through. Always we had candy to hand out and throw out the windows of our Toyota Tacomas — most from the “Care Packages” sent to “Any Soldier” from ordinary citizens back home. Our supply chain provided us with cases upon cases of Kellogg little single-breakfast boxes, long-shelf-life single serving milk and Juicy Juice by the pallet, and there was no way in a decade we could have eaten or drunk all of it, so they became staples we tossed to the kids from our Toyotas or handed out at makeshift refugee camps and nomad stopovers.

“There I was, knee-deep in Frosted Flakes and Juicy Juice ...” Who knows — 10 or 15 years in the future when young men are being preached hatred for America by some Taliban organizer, they will remember fondly the Americans and our boxes of Sugar Smacks, Corn Pops and Apple Jacks or the sweet fruit punch Juicy Juice and chocolate milk.

That's what it's all about, ultimately, winning hearts and minds ... for the future. Sure, except for scattered cells of resistance, presently the Taliban and al Qaeda have been defeated and driven from Afghanistan. Still today, conventional units and Special Forces are securing the peace.

In the rural outback where my team operated for seven months, the peace was a delicate ballet in an unconventional warfare Wild West environment in which we, as the sheriffs, used diplomacy, kindness and people skills more often than guns to pave the way in the future for when the Afghans themselves can do the same without us.

It might not make for an exciting scene in an action movie — a guns-up ODA bouncing down a rutted path in the middle of nowhere Afghanistan in their Tacomas, tossing hard candy, Frosted Mini Wheats and Juicy Juice out to the kids — but it's a symbol of the other side of the SF coin. One that would make anyone proud to be an American.

A Green Beret since 1978, Paul Avallone has served in the 7th, 12th and 20th Special Forces Groups. ✕