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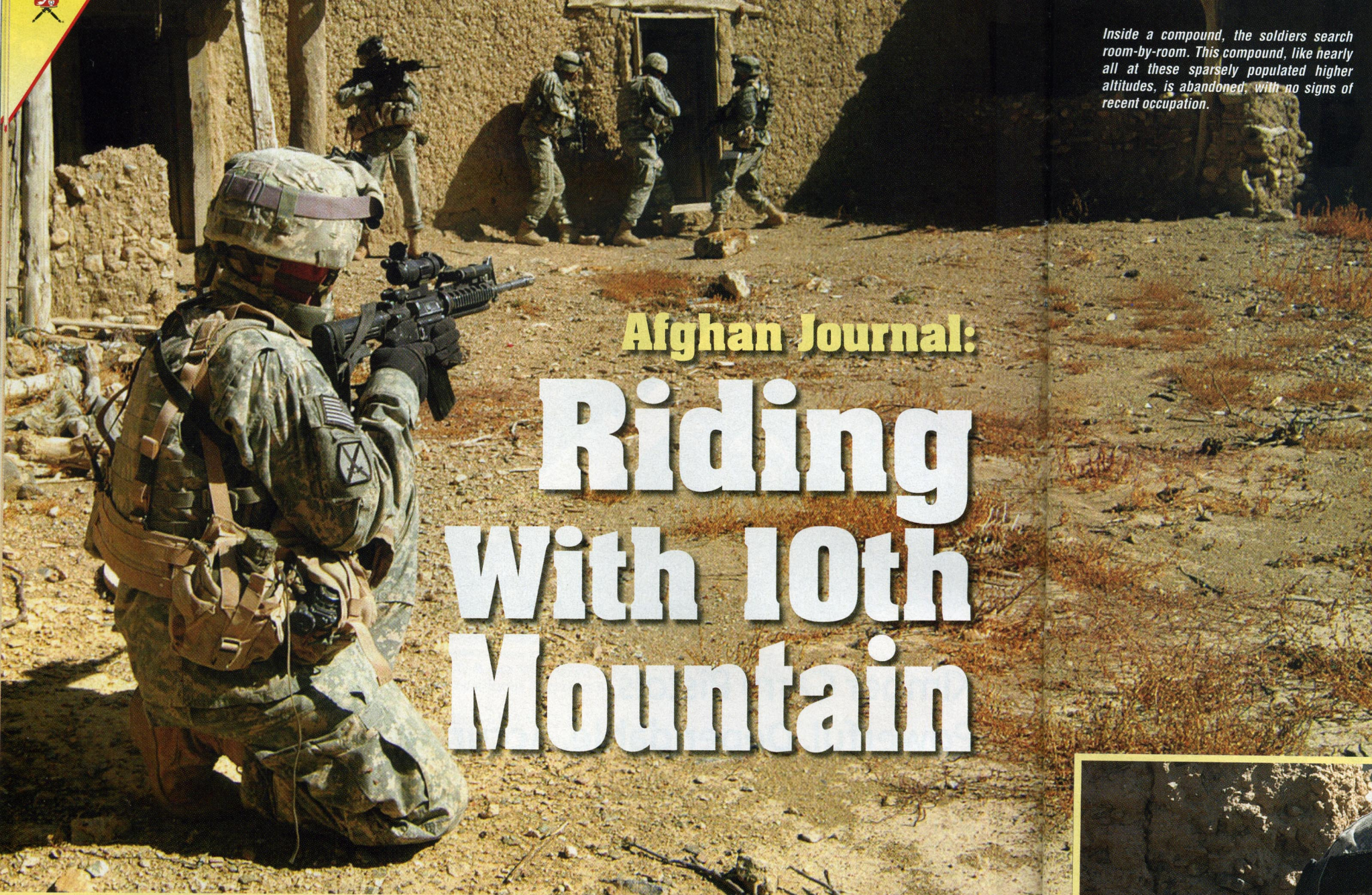
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Inside a compound, the soldiers search room-by-room. This compound, like nearly all at these sparsely populated higher altitudes, is abandoned, with no signs of recent occupation.

## Afghan Journal: Riding With 10th Mountain

Text & Photos by Paul Avallone

### It's very early morning, autumn in the mountains

— cold and overcast, with a wet mist left over from yesterday afternoon's drizzle and hail. We are standing over the body we've just found on this trail. It's been passed over by the metal detector to check for booby traps, but the only buzzing from the detector is over the gold watch on the body's bare wrist. Sgt. First Class Lassally uses the end of his M4 rifle barrel to pull the scarf off, fully revealing the body's face — the lines, the color, the scraggy beard of a Talib poster boy. "You got your story now I'll bet, don't you?" Lassally says. I hesitate, then give him a slight smile, to mumble,

"Yeah, now I do."

I've lost track of the number of times in the past few days Lassally or one of his guys has said something similar. "You don't have a story, do you?" They know that I'm ex-Army Special Forces and here freelancing; that makes me to them an "action guy" looking for action stories. We've spent four days and four nights up here in the deep draws and passes of the mountains on the Pakistan border, patrolling mounted in uparmored humvees and dismounted when the terrain is impassable, and until yesterday afternoon, we'd gotten nothing. Zilch. No combat. No action. No caches. No story.

We're Charlie Company, 2-87 In-

fantry, of the 10th Mountain Division. We're in Paktika province, in eastern Afghanistan. Alpha Company and Bravo Company are on similar recon patrols, flanking us, in valleys, draws and passes close by, but we don't hear them, we don't see them, and they could be a million miles away as far as we're concerned. It's an operation the command has labeled "Frozen Turkey," and no one I've asked can really tell me why, except perhaps because it's winter-around-the-bend cold up here and Thanksgiving's just a couple of weeks away. Up until yesterday afternoon, for us, Charlie Company, in terms of mission success, it's been a turkey: zilch, nothing. We have two platoons of ANA (Afghan National



Sgt. First Class Dave Bowman stands guard with the ANA soldiers of his company outside a compound of a suspected Taliban. Bowman, of the Oregon National Guard, is one of the six embedded trainers assigned to the Afghan National Army company attached to C Co, 2-87 Inf during Operation Frozen Turkey.

Army) with us, and we've hit all the spots that the MI (military intelligence) guys in the rear had said were likely Taliban sites — hilltops, hidden draws, ridges, abandoned compounds — and, again, nothing.

### A Small Op

In terms of big-picture Afghanistan, Frozen Turkey is miniscule. The Taliban haven't massed in this corner of the country as they have in Helmand and Kandahar provinces to

take on the British and Canadians, respectively. The reasoning is, the Taliban know they aren't going to be able to run President Bush out and instead have put all their marbles in getting NATO to pack it in and leave. The British and Canadians stood and fought, though, and the guys I'm with, Charlie Company, joined them, helping out first in Helmand for Operation Mountain Thrust, then in Kandahar for Operation Medusa. Big ops. Lots of fighting. Loads of war stories. An-



Sgt. First Class Gonzalo Lassally in a temporary covering position as his platoon searches compounds suspected as Taliban bases. A native-born El Salvadoran, Lassally went to military schools in the States and joined the army after 12th grade. Airborne and a Ranger, Lassally loves leading men and is contemplating going to OCS.





An ANA soldier scans the ridges ahead from the back of a pickup truck in a joint U.S./Afghan weeklong patrol in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan.

other refrain from the guys these past turkey days has been, "You shoulda been with us in Panjawai," which was the major battle of Medusa.

Unlike Medusa, Frozen Turkey isn't meant to take on and kill hordes of Taliban; it's cells we're after. Guys who have been shooting rockets at the forward operating bases here. FOBs for short. For the most part, the guys' aim is lousy, with their rockets

landing close but outside the bases. A week ago, a rocket landed within feet of the front gate of the nearest FOB, Bermel, and that's too close. If one were to land, no matter the luck in the aim, in the mess hut at dinner-time, suddenly this semi-quiet corner would be big-picture Afghanistan. At least, big-headline Afghanistan. Headlines that generals, sec defs and presidents don't like the public to be

opening their morning papers to.

The U.S. Army has the technology to track the direction of these rocket launches and calculate the approximate area of the launches, and that's what Frozen Turkey is all about. "We hope to find the actual launch sites," Charlie Company Commander Captain Steven Helm told me before our pre-dawn movement to here five days ago. "Or at least chase the Taliban back over into Pakistan for the winter." A boots-on-the-ground practical man, he shrugged and added, "Then, after the snow melts, in the spring, we'll have to do it again."

For nearly four days, we'd found nothing and chased nobody. Then, yesterday afternoon, by sheer chance, patrolling mounted, we were heading to another suspected launch site, when midway, one of the turret gunners spotted something suspicious sticking out of some trees off the trail. It turned out to be a 122-millimeter rocket launch tube. And five rockets hidden under nearby shrubs. A compass and map reading showed the launch tube to be aimed on an exact azimuth at FOB Bermel just a dozen kilometers straight-line distance away. It was a 122 that landed just outside the gate a week ago. We would soon learn that this 122 launcher we found has been the first captured intact in the entire conflict. Not a bad little discovery for Charlie Company.

### Attaboy... Later

But there was no time to gloat and enjoy the kudos cascading quickly down from commands. Over the radio the battalion commander ordered the company to continue with the previous site recons. The first proved to be a bust, nothing. Evening was settling in quickly in the steady, near freezing drizzle. Second Platoon, the mortar section, the ANA and the company command staff established a temporary firebase, and First Platoon headed mounted for the second, and last, site to recon. This is SFC Gonzalo Lassally's platoon, the guys who I — the "fifth wheel" in his crowded humvee — have been with then entire patrol.

Lassally is El Salvadoran by birth, spending most of his early childhood there, before attending military school in the States. At 32, he's made rank really quickly. Then again, he's Airborne, he's a Ranger, and he loves soldiering. He's an American citizen now, and the army is his career. He's

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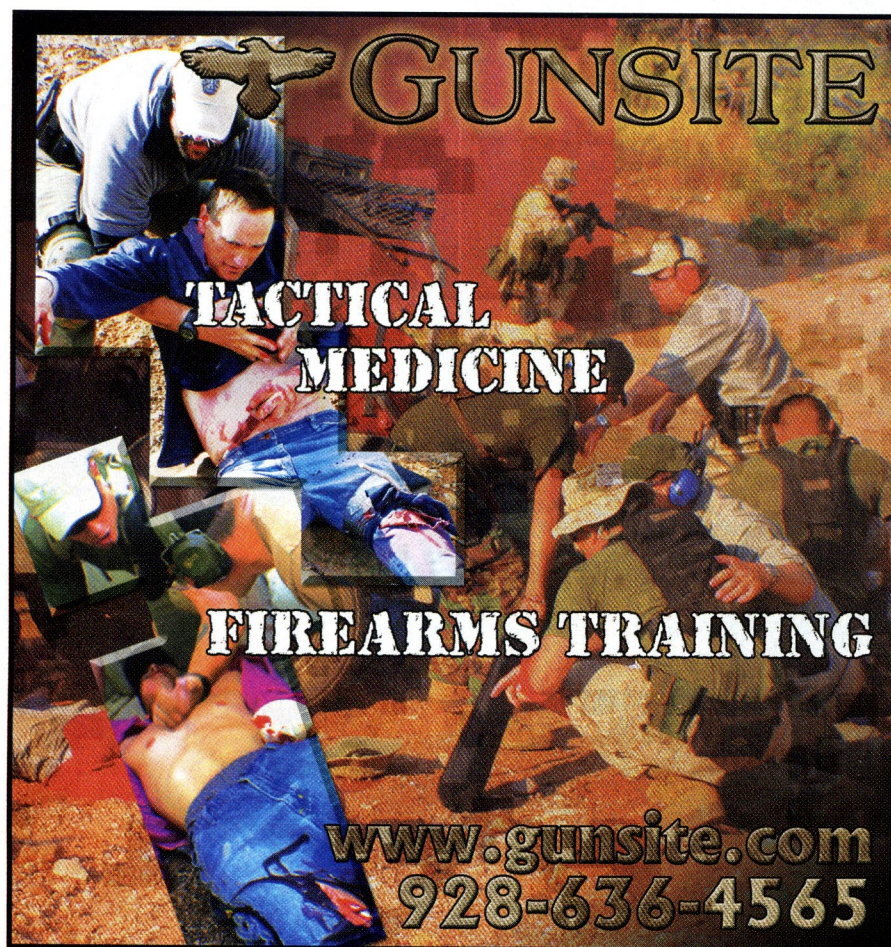
extremely competent, he's confident and fair, and his guys follow him without argument or hesitation, which is what we were doing last night, driving at a crawl up that narrow, boulder-strewn draw as dark was falling fast, until none of us could see our hand in front of our face without nods (night observation devices). I was blind; I don't have nods.

When the draw narrowed so that we could go no further, Lassally checked his GPS and determined our destination was a hundred, hundred-fifty meters ahead. Walking distance. "You coming?" he asked me. I declined, "It's too dark for photos." Besides, without nods I could see myself tripping and slipping on the wet boulders, all for nothing, just another bust, not to mention, probably busting my cameras in the fall. Better to stay in the warm dry vehicle. Lassally and a handful of guys from the vehicles behind headed up on foot. This particular recon was not for a rocket launch site but for BDA — battle damage assessment. The night before, aerial spy imagery had shown armed men moving around the area, and an AC-130 gunship had raked the hillsides with its 20-millimeter gun. Lassally would be looking for evidence, any evidence, of the success of the hit. Sure, that might be a questionable mission in the pitch dark, but orders are orders.

### **Contact!**

It wasn't long before Lassally came over the radio. They'd found something: some documents, some photos, some money. "We need white lights up here," he said, meaning flashlights with clear, rather than red, lenses. "And some illum rounds." Meaning, fired from our mortars, to light up the entire area. Before he could get either, we heard the firing — the distinctive clack of AKs, followed by our own M4s. Then Lassally's shout over the radio, "We're in contact, we're in contact! Pulling back, pulling back!" That was followed in moments by his own orders back to the firebase to "Fire the grid!" Meaning, have our own mortars here in the mountains and the long-range artillery back at FOB Bermel fire the exact location, the exact grid coordinates, that had been plotted earlier as the BDA re-

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con site. Lassally and the others made it back to the vehicles before the barrage began, and we were driving back down the gully with the flashes and explosions of the mortar and artillery rounds behind us.

None of our guys had been hit or was hurt from the contact. Three AKs had opened up on them from the blackness, they'd returned fire — all emptying at least one magazine, and Lassally even managing to throw a grenade — and they beaten a hasty retreat, wisely leaving the battle to the big guns. That's what the artillery is for.

Now it's morning. Cold and damp, and we've come back. It's light enough to photograph, you bet I haven't begged off and stayed in the vehicle this time. Who knows what we'd meet up there, and there's not a reporter in a war zone who would turn down the possibility of getting first-hand photos and the live drama of a tic (troops in contact, the new phrase for "firefight").

We head up. The ANA are walking the ridgelines on both sides of this



*Barely visible is a 122mm rocket launch tube, camouflaged with tree limbs. About twenty meters off the trail, the tube was spotted by one of 1st Platoon's turret gunners during the platoon's movement to a suspected Taliban base. Hidden under nearby bushes were five 122 rockets, and the tube was pointed in an exact azimuth toward FOB Bermel, twelve kilometers straight-line-distance away.*

draw; they're flank security. It's still and deathly quiet down here. Not even a slight breeze. Just the wet mist.

It's further up the trail from where Lassally met contact last night, a couple hundred meters maybe, where we find the first body. It's half wrapped in a white blanket — a makeshift

stretcher — and the small amount of blood stained on the blanket indicates the body had bled out earlier and was being carried off dead.

The second body we find a couple hundred meters still further up the trail is also wrapped in a white blan-

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ket for carrying. Again, there is very little blood on the blanket, though the man's head is half-missing and so is one complete hand. The big 20-millimeter bullets from the AC-130 will do that. Like the first, this man was being carried off dead, back toward Pakistan just up the draw, when something — our mortars and artillery last night or our arrival this morning — frightened off his bearers.

A third body we find back in the wood line down at the site of last night's contact. Our own gunfire or mortars got him. And no one's made it back to carry him out. That's it, though, there are no weapons found. That much has been cleaned up, so at least one guy here last night made it out. Or some returned since and got what they could out. Out meaning back, of course, the only safe way from here, the one direction that does not lead to us, the American and Afghan forces: east, up into Pakistan.

### A Story — But What Story?

The guys of Charlie Company, and 1st Platoon in particular, are proud

and happy that, sure enough, I've got my story. We've spent five days up here in the mountains together and nearly as many earlier back in the FOBs, and soldiers seem to want their embed reporters to come out with a story. If only, perhaps, because it shows that they, the soldiers, have accomplished something.

The story. I think about it as we're driving down out of the mountains. What is it, really? Is it a combat action piece spiced with details of the personalities of these grunts, America's fighting men? Lassally and the guys of his platoon itching for something for four days then getting it when they least expected it? That tic in the dark.

But it slowly dawns on me that this isn't the actual story here. What I've stumbled upon is far more subtle. After all, this has been a near-inconsequential five-day recon patrol that will hardly register a blip on any big or little picture. Except for the handful on the receiving end of those AK bursts from the blackness, the tic was nothing. The story is something else.

The story is in the white blankets beneath the bodies. The story is in

Pakistan just up the draw.

There are those who argue that the Coalition Forces here are making up body counts and deceiving us when they say the Taliban carry their dead away. For them there are the white blankets. They can ignore them in their ignorant bliss.

And for our own leaders who send our Charlie Companies off to war to secure this place called Afghanistan, there is Pakistan just up the draw. Pakistan, from which the Taliban come. They can ignore it at our peril, to our eventual regret. ✕

*Paul Avallone was a Green Beret with 7th, 12th and 20th SFG who served a tour in Afghanistan.*

*As we went to press, agency news wires said 2-87 Infantry troops in Barmel were part of an air-ground op that whacked seven enemy personnel who were observed setting up rockets: They engaged the bad guys with indirect fire, Coalition aircraft dropped two munitions, then the grunts moved in to mop up and do BDA. ✕*

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