A front-row seat in the plodding war on the Taliban

By Scott Baldauf | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

BADO KALAY, AFGHANISTAN - The squad jumps from the back end of a Chinook helicopter into a swirl of sand kicked up by the rotors. We take positions on the bank of a mountain stream and pause in silence, scanning the hillside for movement.

The eight-member team is young - the oldest is 28 - and all are fighters of the elite 82nd Airborne, nicknamed the "Ghost Busters." Their mission: To work with about 40 US and 10 Afghan soldiers from a nearby base to sweep villages never before visited by US forces. They're looking for Taliban or their weapons.

For the next five days, I will have a front-row seat in what some call "The Other War," where 18,000 US troops continue fighting four years after ousting the Taliban government and sending Osama bin Laden into hiding. I will accompany a US Army squad carrying a mere 40 lbs. of body armor, notebooks, water, and MREs, while they carry up to 115 lbs. of "battle rattle" - guns, ammo, food, body armor, radios, and night-vision equipment.

Together, we will tell a lot of unprintable jokes, see a lot of sheep, find a few Taliban weapons caches, and try to reassure scared villagers.

My team's role this morning is to climb a steep, 1,650-foot hill to secure the high ground. They will keep watch over the roads while other US squads, including troops from the fledgling Afghan Army, search a village that Taliban fighters have often used as a rest stop.

The squad leader, Sgt. Jeremy Brannan of Panama City, Fla., almost inaudibly gives the order to move: "Let's go."

These remote mountains, stretching from western Ghazni through Zabul, Kandahar, and Uruzgan provinces, have been the scene of some of the fiercest fighting - and highest casualty rates - since the Taliban government fell in 2001. This is partly because of the insertion of small squads like Sergeant Brannan's into ever-more-remote corners of Afghanistan in an effort to disturb Taliban hideouts and entice their elusive foe into engagements. When the Taliban stand to fight US soldiers, who are aided by American air power, the insurgents usually lose.

Soldiers like Brannan and his men accept the dangers of their work.

"For so long, it was quiet here, then it got kicked up," says Brannan, sitting at a watch post high above the village, where the house-to-house search for weapons has begun. "I think they hide up in the mountains and see how big an element we're sending in. Mostly they don't fight. But when they do, it's mostly spray, pray, and run."
Iraq war vets

The squad is led by a few veterans from the Iraq war, such as Brannan and Pvt. Mike Patraw of Platteville, Wis. The men say they are shocked at the poor Afghan living conditions, and Brannan says it's hard to know which conflict is more dangerous. "I'd be tempted to say Iraq, but we've had a lot of dudes die here recently," he says. "But the Taliban aren't very good. Mostly it seems like lucky shots."

Brannan's men meet the danger, and the physical challenge of climbing up mountains loaded with equipment, with a sense of humor. As an outsider, it occurs to me that the standard GI gear must include a rifle, camouflage, and an unabridged Dictionary of Scatological Terms and Crude Jokes.

Trained in the woodland terrain of Ft. Bragg, N.C., these men are used to rugged conditions. But on this day, they struggle up Afghan hillsides of loose slate and sedimentary rock with difficulty. Some, like Private Patraw, carry M-240 Bravos, a medium-caliber machine gun that weighs about 50 lbs. Others carry the lighter M-4 carbines, but help out carrying the heavy ammunition for the M-240, along with several galsions of water and pounds of food.

"Now imagine you had to carry this," says Patraw, as I pause, huffing like the big bad wolf, just four miles into our march. I try to put that thought out of my head.

Big picture, small picture

As is true in most wars, it's often hard for the troops on the ground to see the big picture.

American commanders remind the 18,000 US troops here that their presence in Afghanistan will give some breathing room for the Afghan government to establish its credibility, for the Afghan army to become strong enough to defend the country, for the Afghan people to accept the rule of their new government.

But as they patrol the villages, the squad also knows that democracy often has little to do with local loyalties. Unarmed Afghan villagers will always cooperate with whatever gunman is in town at a given time. Brannan's men know that a village of "friendlies," as cooperative Afghans are called, can turn into a Taliban haven overnight.

"I don't know who the villagers are closer to, the Taliban or us," says Senior Airman Brian Mellon, alias Gunslinger 37. He's an Air Force forward air controller temporarily assigned to Brannan's unit to call in and coordinate airstrikes if needed. "If we go there, we talk to them, give them food. But if the Taliban go there, they beat the local people. So if your life's in danger, it's more conducive to work with the Taliban."

Down below the unit, shepherds guide a hundred or so sheep across the rocky hillside, staring at the US soldiers. The soldiers stare back. "OK, now what are these guys up to?" asks Pvt. John Hernandez, of Long Island, N.Y.

"Just keeping an eye on us to tell their Taliban buddies," smirks Patraw.

"Sometimes it gets frustrating," says Brannan. "You get back to the base and you say, 'So what did you do today?' I didn't see any friendlies, I didn't see any enemies."

Private Hernandez jokes. "Saw some sheep."

As the afternoon drags on, I join the men as they start to dig into their MREs (meals ready to eat). I save the beef and mushrooms medley for later and pull out a package of vegetable crackers and cheese spread. There is so much dust in my mouth, I can hardly
taste a thing, which may be a blessing.

Later on, I join in on an impromptu game of "hoops," tossing stones into an upturned Kevlar helmet, and occasionally hitting Pvt. Brian Martin of Trenton, Mich., the sniper, by mistake. Some of the soldiers scrape out hollows in the steep hill with their hands, in case they have to sleep on the mountain for the night.

Then at 4 p.m., Senior Airman Mellon, a native of Kailoa, Hawaii, receives a radio message from the village below. The village has been cleared. Afghan soldiers have confiscated stacks of Kalashnikov ammo magazines and, oddly, a pair of brass knuckles. None of the villagers have weapons themselves, so commanders believe the ammunition belongs to the Taliban.

Once again, in his quiet voice, Brannan gives the order: "Let's go."

A few hours later, the men reach the night's resting place, a hilltop above another village cleared by other platoons. Kicking away stones, they fall in for the night.

• First of three articles. Wednesday: Out of the hills and into the villages.

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