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Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Battalion's Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment board a CH-47 Chinook helicopter at Forward Operating Base Lagman, Afghanistan, for the first leg of their trip home to Vicenza, Italy.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

## Going home



### Combined Joint Task Force-76 reflects on year in Afghanistan

Left: Victor Martinez, 6, looks for his dad, Sgt. 1st Class Victor Martinez, as Victor's god daughter Gabriela Nazario, 8, holds welcome home signs. Right: Staff Sgt. Jeremy Scribner gets a look at son Reagan, 1, after returning to Vicenza, Italy.



# Where they were



### Bagram Air Base

Combined Joint Task Force-76  
 Task Force Sword  
 Task Force Griffin  
 Task Force Sabre  
 Joint Logistics Command  
 Task Force Strength  
 Task Force Eagle  
 Task Force 165 MI

### Jalalabad

Task Force Koa (Marines)

### Kabul

Combined Forces Command-Alpha

### Salerno

Task Force Devil (Regional Command East)

### Orgun-E

Task Force Fury

### Qalat

Task Force Rock

### Kandahar Airfield

Task Force Bayonet (Regional Command South)  
 Task Force Storm  
 Task Force Gun Devil

### Herat

Task Force Longhorn (Regional Command West)



Photo courtesy of 508th Infantry Regiment

Soldiers from Company C, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment prepare for a patrol in Afghanistan.

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# Kamiya: Battles' context is key

Commander says success can't be measured in number of fights

BY KENT HARRIS  
*Stars and Stripes*

**M**aj. Gen. Jason Kamiya says he may never be sure how to accurately measure a successful mission in Afghanistan.

But the commander of the Southern European Task Force (Airborne) and former head of Combined Joint Task Force-76 is certain of how he'll not want it remembered.

"I didn't want our mission to devolve into a body count, where we measure our success on the number of people we killed," he said in an interview in early April in his office at Caserma Ederle.

Kamiya acknowledges that might seem strange coming from a career military man. Especially when most of the news coming out of Afghanistan during the task force's stint involved a greater number of firefights and American casualties than had been seen at any time since the American invasion in late 2001.

"It is one of the great ironies," he said, acknowledging an impression in Europe and the States of a somewhat deteriorating situation in Afghanistan because of an increase in fighting.

"From a purely military perspective, we celebrate the number of contacts we have," he said. U.S. forces, their NATO allies and the fledgling Afghan National Army win such encounters overwhelmingly, Kamiya said. In fact, commanders in the field report they have trouble getting enemy forces to stay and fight.

But, "all the international community sees is the numbers," he said. "It left the external audience with the thought that it was getting more violent."

Such battles need to be put in context, though, he said. He points back to an interview he gave shortly after arriving in Afghanistan in which he discounted a potential spring offensive by Taliban forces. He promised the coalition would actively seek out and engage anti-government forces in places the coalition had rarely or never been before, and then follow up with projects to make the local quality of life better.

Afghanistan, as many soldiers like to say, is a place that time forgot. It has isolated mountain villages where communication with the outside world is virtually nonexistent.

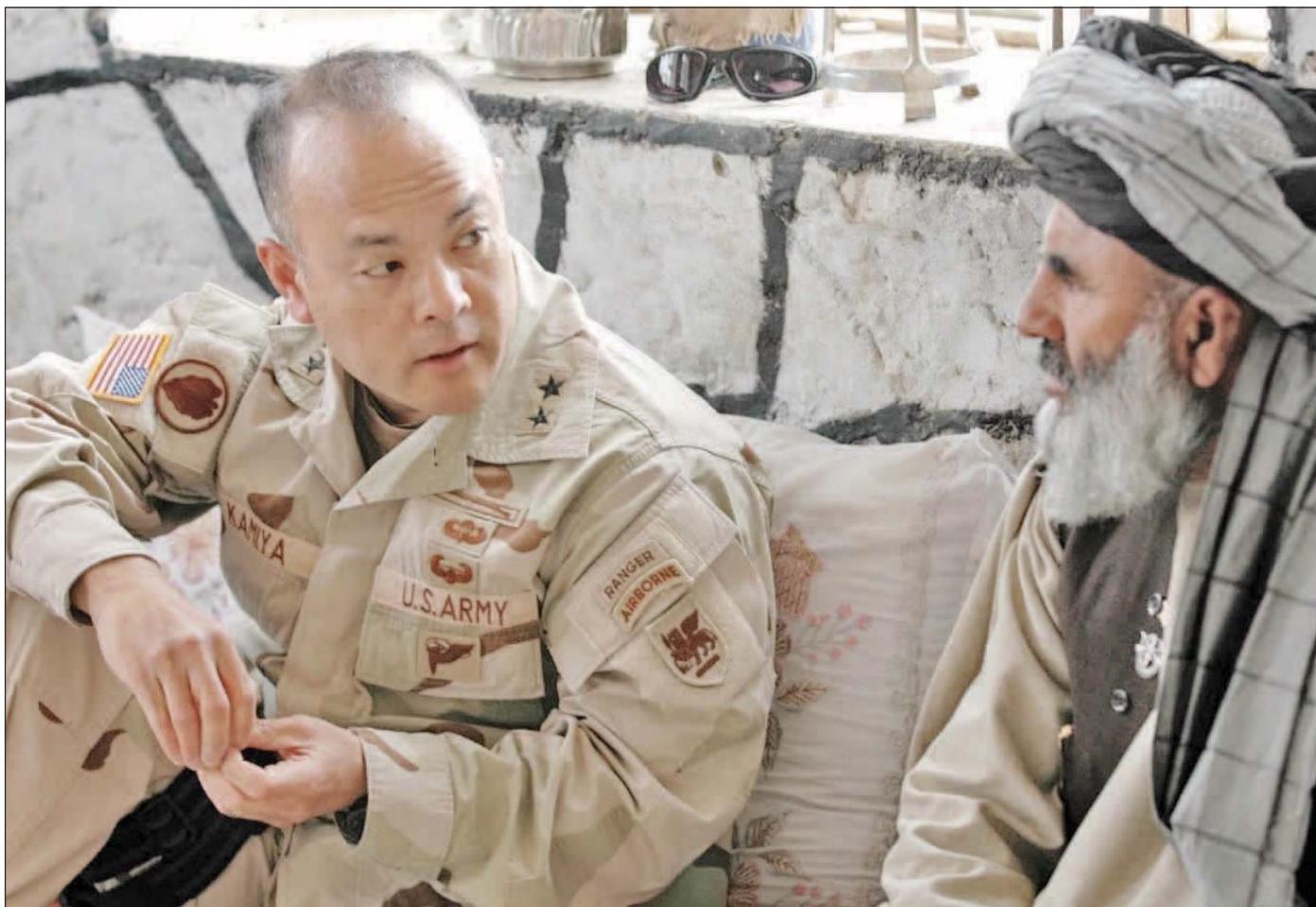
Bringing education — in the form of dozens of new schools — and accessibility — with hundreds of kilometers of new roads — brought coalition forces into contact with pockets of those opposed to change.

The Taliban, Kamiya said, views "education and communication as the real threats" because as the Afghan government grows stronger the more interaction villagers have with other communities and the outside world.

"There are so many more important ways to measure an insurgency than by the number of people killed," he said.

He pointed to the town of Shinkay in Zabul province, where the price of a sack of wheat dropped dramatically after elements from the 173rd Airborne Brigade built a road connecting the community to Qalat. Businessmen said improved transportation and a lack of bandits on the road allowed them to lower costs.

The Afghan National Army doubled in size during the task force's stint and in-



TARA TEEL/Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Maj. Gen. Jason Kamiya, commander of Combined Joint Task Force-76, talks to a local Afghan leader.



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Bryan Hotz of 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade patrols in Akhtar on March 6.

creasingly took responsibility in operations. The federal government's control spread to places where it had not been acknowledged before. Officials who didn't do their jobs were replaced. U.S. forces spent more than \$88 million on various projects during the fiscal year. The country held landmark parliamentary elections in September.

"That can't be discounted," Kamiya said. "Those are the things that are really important. I said at the beginning that I hoped we would leave Afghanistan and those we came into contact with ... much better off. Looking back, I think we accomplished that."

E-mail Kent Harris at: harrisk@mail.estripes.osd.mil



KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes

Lt. Col. Tim McGuire, commander of the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment, speaks to a group of kids during a visit to one of a series of villages in Paktika province in Afghanistan on Sept. 17, a day before the country held its first parliamentary elections.



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

**Maj. Gen. Jason Kamiya, Southern European Task Force commander, is scheduled to head to another position in the Army.**



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

**Lt. Col. Cynthia Fox, commander of the 173rd Support Battalion (Airborne), said her unit will be moving from Vicenza to Bamberg, Germany, temporarily. But she won't see it because she is moving on this summer.**



KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes

**Lt. Col. Tim McGuire, commander of the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment, is set to give up his post this month. The unit will then officially become a part of the 82nd Airborne Division.**



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

**Lt. Col. Mark Stammer, commander of 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, is set to give up "The Rock" in June when he moves over to a job in the SETAF staff.**



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

**The insignias of the Southern European Task Force, 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 503rd Airborne Regiment on the wall of Forward Operating Base Lagman in Afghanistan. All of these units will be seeing major changes in the next few months, including name changes, address changes and new commanding officers.**

## Changing times for Vicenza

To become a unit of action, SETAF will see new faces, places

BY KENT HARRIS

Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy

**A**fter a yearlong deployment to Afghanistan, soldiers assigned to the Southern European Task Force (Airborne) set aside time in March and April to recuperate. This month, the pace starts to pick up again.

SETAF's major subordinate unit, the 173rd Airborne Brigade, will use the next year (and more) to transform into one of the Army's units of action.

And while "transformation" is a key word for the Army, a better word for Vicenza might just be "change." Just about every major command will change hands over the next few months. Two of the 173rd's battalions will change their names. Some troops will stay in SETAF, but change their addresses.

And even more troops will no longer wear the Lion of Saint Mark or flying-sword patches of the "Sky Soldiers" on their shoulders.

Just when all of this will take place is just like an airborne sol-

dier — a little up in the air. Lt. Col. Jerry O'Hara, the public affairs officer for SETAF, said several factors will determine when certain events take place.

Chief among them is the status of Dal Molin airfield, which the U.S. hopes to use as an additional base in Vicenza. Caserma Ederle is too small to move in the additional troops that the 173rd will eventually call its own.

The U.S. has been negotiating with the Italian government regarding the little-used base for more than two years and some progress reportedly has been made. But negotiations continue, and no one involved will talk about the process.

O'Hara said regardless of the times and dates, the process will proceed in some manner.

"The 173rd will continue on with its transformation," he said, brushing aside questions about Dal Molin and any timetables.

It's unlikely that more than a few of those currently a part of SETAF will be around to see the finished product. Because a massive amount of construction would be necessary at Dal Molin, it's likely that the entire brigade

combat team won't be all together in Vicenza until at least 2010 and probably a bit beyond that.

In the meantime, "Sky Soldiers" will be based at places such as Bamberg, Germany. At least one battalion might form there. And a second likely will be based there.

Lt. Col. Cynthia Fox, commander of the 173rd Support Battalion (Airborne), said in an interview in late February that her battalion was set to temporarily move from Vicenza to Bamberg. And it will likely get a small name change at some point. Not that Fox will still be around. She'll be one of a host of commanders moving on this summer.

Lt. Col. Tim McGuire is set to give up command of the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment this month. He'll be the last commander of the "Red Devils" in Vicenza, because the unit designation will officially become a part of the 82nd Airborne Division. The new battalion in Vicenza will be called the 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, joining the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment that's already a part of the 173rd.

"The Rock" is due to change

commanders as well, with Lt. Col. Mark Stammer moving over to a job on the SETAF staff in June. His current boss, Col. Kevin Owens, is giving up command of the 173rd in June as well, with Col. Charles Preysler taking over. Owens heads to a job at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Stammer will be joining a veteran crew on the SETAF staff, where many of the positions won't change hands for a while. Two big exceptions are Maj. Gen. Jason Kamiya, the SETAF commander, and Brig. Gen. Bill Mayville, the chief of staff.

They will be heading to other positions in the Army. But they will be far from alone. Owens estimates that as much as half of the brigade will have left in the months following its return to Italy. And Stammer said about two-thirds of his battalion will either be out of the military or serving somewhere else.

Those remaining will be integrating an array of new equipment as well as personnel. Many of the Humvees and other materiel was left behind in Afghanistan, so replacements will eventually make their way to Caserma Ederle. Or wherever else the 173rd will be calling home.

# Going above and beyond the call

## Silver Star recipients

Staff Sgt. Matthew Blaskowski  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Patrick Brannan  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Christopher Choay  
2/503rd

Staff Sgt. John Doles  
1-508th

1st Lt. Timothy O'Neal  
2-503rd

Capt. Dirk Riggenberg  
2-503rd



## Bronze Star with Valor recipients

Sgt. Erik Aass  
2-503rd

Spc. Ronaldo Alvarado  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. David Barberet  
2-503rd

1st Sgt. Scott Brzak  
2-503rd

Sgt. Benjamin Burlew  
1-508th

1st Lt. Mark Bush  
2-503rd

Sgt. 1st Class David Cannon  
173rd HHC

Staff Sgt. Michael Christian  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Albert Galvan  
2-503rd

Spc. Ernesto Godoy  
2-503rd

Spc. Carlos Gonzalez  
2-503rd



Maj. Gregory Harkins  
2-503rd

Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Hartless  
2-503rd

1st Lt. Derek Hines  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Edward Hinojosa  
2-503rd

Sgt. Justin Hormann  
2-503rd

1st Sgt. Richard Howell  
173rd HHC

Sgt. Derek Huss  
2-503rd

Spc. Kurt Kaahui  
2-503rd

Sgt. Jason Ketchum  
1-508th

Capt. Michael Kloepper  
2-503rd

Spc. Joseph Leatham  
2-503rd

Spc. Steven Lewis  
2-503rd

Pfc. Joseph Lorman  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Jose Magana  
2-503rd

Command Sgt. Maj. Bradley Meyers  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Andrew Moore  
1-508th

Sgt. 1st Class Tony Nathan  
1-508th

1st Lt. Timothy O'Neal  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Patrick Perkinson  
2-503rd

Capt. Dirk Ringgenberg  
2-503rd

Spc. David Rivera  
2-503rd

Lt. Col. Orlando Salinas  
D Battalion

Capt. Joshua Segraves  
1-508th



JON ARGUELLO/Courtesy of the U.S. Army

**Gen. John Abizaid, commander of U.S. Central Command, congratulates Staff Sgt. Matthew Blaskowski, of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), on receiving the Silver Star for gallantry in combat during a firefight May 3 in Zabul province.**

Sgt. Maj. Kevin Sharkey  
2-503rd

Spc. Michael Simmons  
2-504th

Staff Sgt. Michael Smith  
173rd HHC

Sgt. Austin Srotms  
2-503rd

Lt. Col. Mark Stammer  
2-503rd

Capt. William Swaims  
173rd Support Battalion

Staff Sgt. Michael Welch  
2-503rd

Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth White  
D Battalion

## Purple Heart recipients

Sgt. Erik Aass  
2-503rd

Spc. David Alexander  
2-503rd

Pfc. Grant Anderson  
2-503rd

Pfc. Robert Baker  
3-319th

Spc. Gino Belarmino  
3-319th

Staff Sgt. Matthew Blaskowski  
2-503rd

Spc. Daniel Boyle  
3-319th

Sgt. Timothy Brumley  
2-503rd

Sgt. Charles Burton  
2-503rd

Pfc. Darren Byrd  
2-503rd

Pfc. Edward Caldwell  
2-503rd

Spc. Jereme Carter  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Michael Christian  
2-503rd

Spc. Samuel Cleek  
3-319th

Pfc. Daniel Dedman  
2-503rd

Spc. Carida Demeo  
173d HHC

Staff Sgt. John Doles  
1-508th

Staff Sgt. Rich Emmendorfer  
3-319th

Spc. Michael Evans  
2-503rd

Pvt. Benny Franklin  
74TH LRS

Staff Sgt. Albert Galvan  
2-503rd

Pfc. Tyler Gangwer  
2-503rd

Pfc. Salvatore Giunta  
2-503rd

Spc. Ernesto Godoy  
2-503rd

Spc. Carlos Gonzalez  
2-503rd



Pfc. Blake Hall  
2-503rd

Spc. Adrian Heilbronner  
2-503rd

1st Lt. Derek Hines  
2-503rd (awarded twice)

Sgt. Christopher Holbrook  
2-503rd

1st Lt. Joshua Hyland  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Matthew Kahler  
2-503rd

Pfc. Matthew King  
2-503rd

Capt. Michael Kloepper  
2-503rd

Spc. Joseph Leatham  
2-503rd

Spc. Michael Lehmillier  
2-503rd

Spc. Robert Lliteras  
2-503rd

Spc. Ernesto Lopez  
Civil Affairs

Pfc. Joseph Lorman  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Jose Magana  
2-503rd

2nd Lt. Ari Martyn  
2-503rd

Command Sgt. Maj. Arthur McCann  
HHC

Spc. Thomas McCool  
2-503rd

Sgt. James Miller  
2-503rd

Spc. Jose Mondragon  
74TH LRS

Pfc. Aaron Pace  
2-503rd

Pfc. Christopher Palmer  
2-503rd (awarded twice)

Pfc. Mark Passage  
3-319th

1st Lt. Heath Phillips  
3-319th

Pfc. Adam Richter  
3-319th

Sgt. Anthony Rico  
1-508th

Staff Sgt. Michael Schafer  
2-503rd

Spc. Kirk Schmitz  
74TH LRS

Sgt. Dustin Shackelford  
3-319th

Spc. Ryan Shafchuck  
3-319th

Sgt. Timothy Smith  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Ryan Spoores  
2-503rd

Pfc. Saul Stafford  
3-319th

Sgt. Travis Stoddard  
2/503rd

Capt. Casey Thoreen  
74TH LRS

Spc. Christopher Tobias  
2-503rd

Pfc. Javier Torres  
2-503rd

Spc. Matthew Towns  
3-319th

Pfc. Steven Tucker  
2-503rd

Spc. Christopher Velez  
2-503rd

1st Lt. Kenneth Wainwright  
2-503rd

Spc. Shannon Ward  
3-319th

Staff Sgt. Michael Welch  
2-503rd

Staff Sgt. Robert White  
3-319th

1st Sgt. Oscar Wilson  
3-319th

Pfc. Tyler Wilson  
2-503rd

Capt. Benjamin Wright  
2-503rd

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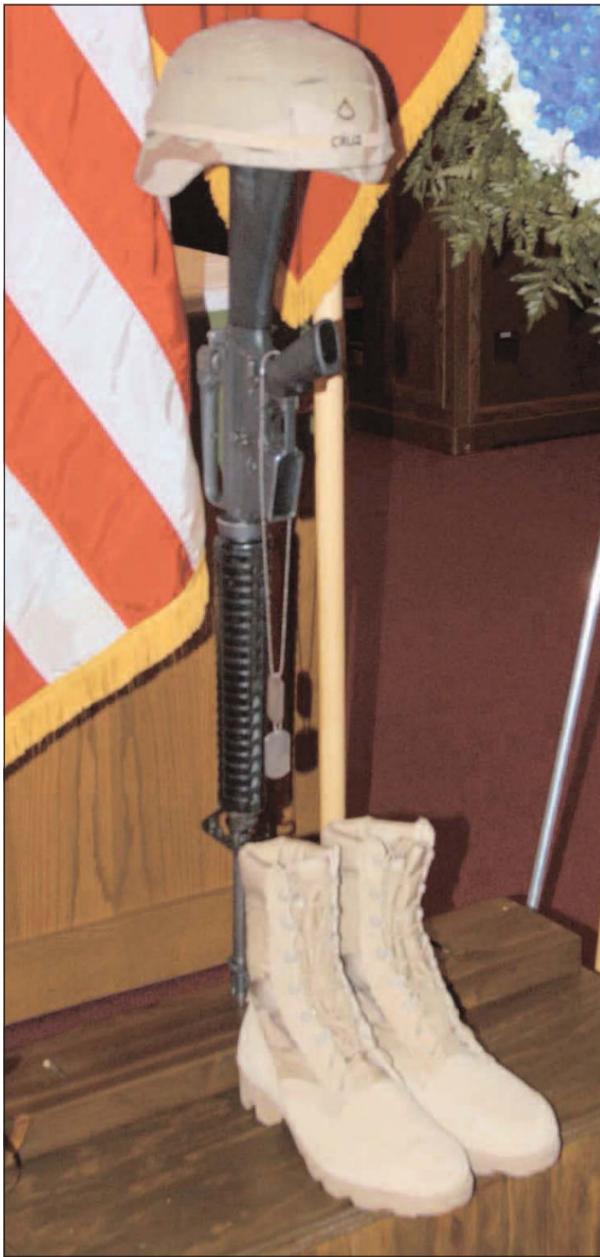


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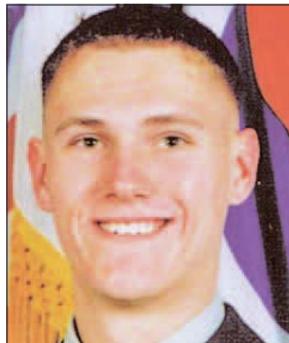
# Remembering fallen warriors

*18 servicemembers who died while serving in Afghanistan*



KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes

Memorial services at Caserma Ederle, Vicenza, Italy, for servicemembers killed in Afghanistan have been all too common. Eighteen members of the Southern European Task Force (Airborne) have died since the unit took command of Combined Joint Task Force-76 in March.



**Cpl. Sascha Struble**  
HHC, 1-508th  
Ghazni province  
April 6, 2005  
Helicopter crash



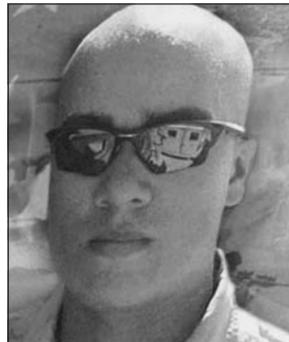
**Cpl. Daniel J. Freeman**  
HHC, 1-508th  
Ghazni province  
April 6, 2005  
Helicopter crash



**Staff Sgt. Romanes L. Woodard**  
HHC, 1-508th  
Ghazni province  
April 6, 2005  
Helicopter crash



**Maj. Edward Murphy**  
HSC, SETAF  
Ghazni province  
April 6, 2005  
Helicopter crash



**Cpl. Steven Tucker**  
Company A, 2-503rd  
Shinkay province  
May 21, 2005  
IED attack



**Cpl. Emmanuel Hernandez**  
D Battalion, 319th AFAR  
Shkin province  
June 8, 2005  
Rocket attack



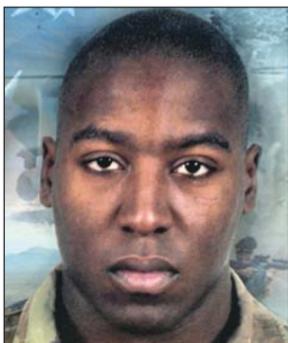
**Staff Sgt. Michael W. Schafer**  
Company C, 2-503rd  
Uruzgan province  
July 25, 2005  
Small arms



**1st Lt. Joshua M. Hyland**  
Company B, 2-503rd  
Deh Chopan province  
August 21, 2005  
IED attack



**Sgt. Michael R. Lehmilller**  
Company B, 2-503rd  
Deh Chopan province  
August 21, 2005  
IED attack



**Pvt. Christopher L. Palmer**  
Company B, 2-503rd  
Deh Chopan province  
August 21, 2005  
IED attack



**Spc. Blake W. Hall**  
Company B, 2-503rd  
Deh Chopan province  
August 21, 2005  
IED attack



**Staff Sgt. Damion G. Campbell**  
HHC, 1-508th  
Khayr Kot province  
August 26, 2005  
IED attack



**1st Lt. Derek S. Hines**  
D Battalion, 319th AFAR  
Deh Chopan province  
Sept. 1, 2005  
Small arms



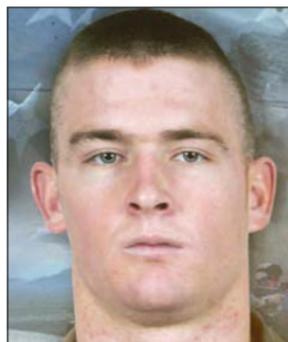
**Staff Sgt. John G. Doles**  
Company B, 1-508th  
Sha Wali Kot province  
Sept. 30, 2005  
Small arms



**Staff Sgt. Troy S. Ezernack**  
Company A, 2-503rd  
Pending location  
Oct. 9, 2005  
IED attack



**Pfc. Joseph Cruz**  
Company A, 1-508th  
Orgun-E  
Oct. 15, 2005  
Nonhostile incident



**Cpl. Matthew Paul Steyart**  
Company B, 1-508th  
Shah Wali Kot province  
Nov. 11, 2005  
IED attack

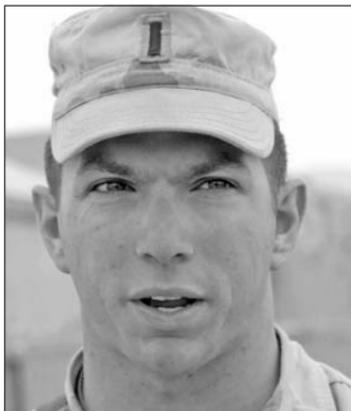


**Sgt. 1st Class John David Morton**  
74th Long Range  
Surveillance Detachment  
Shah Wali Kot province  
Dec. 15, 2005  
Small arms

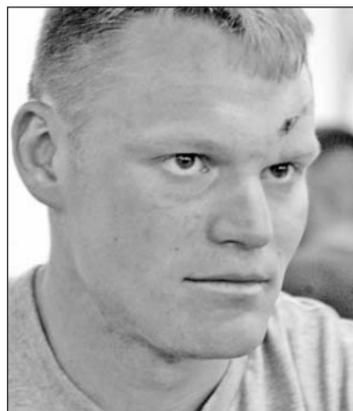
# A different life near the border



Staff Sgt. Steven Sokolowski



1st Lt. Ari Martyn



Capt. Dave Rowland



Spc. Donald Gross

BY KENT HARRIS  
Stars and Stripes

**W**HALAT, Afghanistan hile their counterparts in the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment were often using other modes of transportation such as foot patrols and aircraft to get around, those in Company A relied on their Humvees. "A lot more than the other two companies," said Capt. Dave Rowland, the company commander.

That's because the areas that Company A patrolled were sparse in terms of population and just about everything else. The population centers were spread out. With a largely flat, desertlike terrain, there generally weren't a lot of places for enemy forces to stage ambushes. And there never seemed to be very many of them grouped together anyway.

"The enemy for us was one that was not willing to stand and fight," Rowland said, so they resorted to other methods to harm U.S. troops.

"Our biggest threat was the [roadside bomb]," he said.

The company encountered dozens of the devices during the course of its year in southern Zabul province. Many were disarmed and didn't do any damage.



JASON CHUDY/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers, from Company A, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, prepare to drop a 60 mm illumination mortar into the tube under a bright moon in July.

## 503rd Infantry Regiment

But that wasn't always the case. A soldier died in one explosion. Another was killed in one of the relatively rare firefights that did occur.

Because it didn't spend a lot of time fighting, the company was able to devote its resources to working with the fledgling Afghan security forces and sponsoring projects.

First Lt. Ari Martyn, leader of 3rd Platoon, said he'll remember helping to train the country's border police.

"Standing near the international border, knowing what we were doing was making a difference," he said. "I was talking to some of the guys and told them, 'Thirty years from now, you'll be looking at something about Afghanistan and you'll know that if it has solid borders, that'll be partially because of us.'"

The border in Zabul province is flat. And largely wide open. Martyn and his platoon didn't get close enough to meet anyone from the Pakistan side. But they could see them in the distance.

The troops got a lot closer to the Afghans who lived in southern Zabul, though.

"I've treated a ridiculous amount of Afghans," said Spc. Donald Gross, a medic with 2nd Platoon. He said some had illnesses beyond anything he could treat. But stab wounds, broken bones and minor illnesses that he could treat, he did.

"It was much more poor than I expected," he said of the living conditions in the province. "Iraq is leaps and bounds ahead of Afghanistan."

The company soon found that it could deliver something that just about every Afghan wanted.

"Everyone wanted a well," said Staff Sgt. Stephen Sokolowski. "Whether they really needed one or not, they wanted it right by their homes."

Sokolowski said the people who lived near the bases the company set up were friendly. Those who were farther away said they feared reprisals. They were willing to accept help, but not as willing to offer it.

Rowland said that gradually changed, though. Locals started to offer tips on suspected roadside bombs or on enemy activity. A few leaders of bomb-building cells even turned themselves in, seeking new starts with amnesty from the government.

"If you look at the stuff of nation-building, that's what we did in southern Zabul," Rowland said.

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“Our company’s motto is ‘Battle Hard’ and from a selfish perspective, there’s no company in this theater that has spent as much time on its feet in the mountains practicing bread-and-butter infantry skills as we have.”

**Capt. Josh McGary**  
Company B commander

# Huffing it through Afghanistan

Soldiers of Company B walked rough terrain patrols

BY KENT HARRIS  
*Stars and Stripes*

ARGHANDAB VALLEY,  
Afghanistan

A few years ago, the soldiers who reformed the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment decided to resurrect “The Rock’s” former company name as well.

So Company B is referred to as Battle Company, instead of the now-common Bravo Company.

In the mountainous north of Zabul province, the name fit well. There were probably more Taliban in the sector than anywhere else in the province. But “Boot Company” would have been just as appropriate.

“Our plan all along was to walk,” said Capt. Josh McGary, the company commander. “Our battle space just didn’t support wheeled movement.”

If Humvees were largely out, that meant that patrols needed to be carried out by foot — across some of the roughest terrain in the country.

“I’ve climbed pretty much all of these,” said Spc. Ben Roberson, a member of 3rd Platoon’s weapon squad, gesturing toward the mountains surrounding Forward Operating Base Arghandab. “Up and down. Up and down.”

Staff Sgt. Dave Barberet, a squad leader in 1st Platoon — which spent much of its time at Forward Operating Base Baylough — said the longest patrol he went on took 17 days. As in two weeks and three days. Walking.

Spc. Jeremy Swoyer, assigned



JASON CHUDY/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers from 3rd Platoon, Company B, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment walk through the Afghan desert to a blocking position during an afternoon mission to capture a Taliban financier in July. An AH-64 Apache from 2nd Squadron, 6th Cavalry Regiment covers their move.

to 2nd Squad, said the unit did know something of what it was getting into.

“Prior to coming here, we spent time climbing mountains in Italy,” he said. “But that was nothing compared to the elevations here.”

He said most of the platoon’s soldiers thought they were in good

shape before the deployment. But after months of climbing, many shed any extra pounds they had.

“I’m probably in the best shape of my life,” he said.

The company took over an area

“I’ve climbed pretty much all of these. Up and down. Up and down.”

**Spc. Ben Roberson**  
3rd Platoon’s weapon squad

with one basic base and left with four. The bases provided relative safety and some of the comforts of home: Internet, hot meals and a dry place to sleep.

“B” did not stand for “Bath,” though.

“You get used to not taking showers,” Roberson said in an interview in late March. “The last one I took, I think was in January.”

There were a few times the unit had to drive. It lost four soldiers during one of those rare occasions on Aug. 21 when a Humvee hit a roadside bomb. A fifth soldier survived, but lost his legs.

“I didn’t think they were going to be able to pull through that,” said Staff Sgt. Shayne Charlesworth of his squad, which had several soldiers close to those killed. “Because it hit me pretty hard.”

Another soldier was killed Sept. 1 in a firefight.

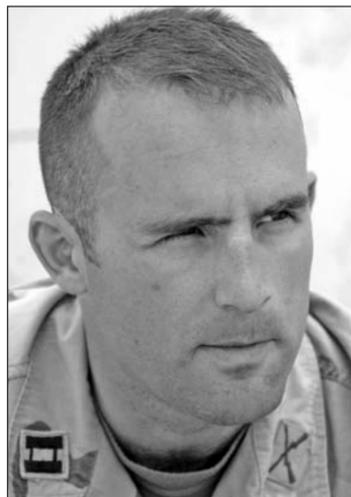
Barberet said his first tour in the country with 82nd Airborne Division was nothing like his latest one.

“It would be one or two [enemies] and nothing lasted longer than a minute or two,” he said.

Many of Company B’s firefights lasted for hours.

“Our company’s motto is ‘Battle Hard’ and from a selfish perspective, there’s no company in this theater that has spent as much time on its feet in the mountains practicing bread-and-butter infantry skills as we have,” McGary said.

## 503rd Infantry Regiment



Capt. Josh McGary



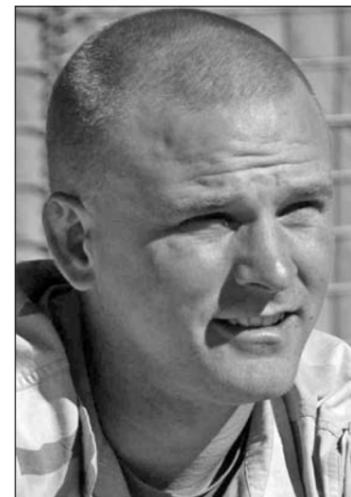
Spc. Ben Roberson



Staff Sgt. Dave Barberet



Spc. Jeremy Swoyer



Staff Sgt. Shayne Charlesworth

# Company C was always on the move

BY KENT HARRIS  
*Stars and Stripes*



JASON CHUDY/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers from Company C, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment turn away from a CH-47D Chinook helicopter as it comes in for a landing in a riverbed northwest of Qalat, Afghanistan, in July.

From left: Spc. Eric Jensen, Sgt. Timothy Smith, Staff Sgt. David Dzwik and Capt. Eric Gardner.

Whether it was conducting patrols on one of the country's best roads or flying into a fire-fight, the soldiers of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment didn't stay in one place for long.

"We've been in Kandahar and all over Zabul province," said Spc. Eric Jensen, a member of 3rd Platoon's 2nd Squad.

"Chosen" Company's sector was the middle of Zabul province. It centered on the provincial capital of Qalat and Highway 1 — one of the country's best roads, which runs between two mountain ranges, starting in Kandahar to the southwest and running into Kabul to the northeast.

Capt. Eric Gardner, the company commander, said that simply patrolling the relatively quiet central sector of Zabul and supervising a variety of ongoing projects could

have kept his unit busy. And that's what most members of the company thought they'd be doing. After all, that's what had been going on previously in the province.

"We found out very early on that wasn't going to be the case and we had to play both roles," Gardner said.

The other role was effectively as the battalion's quick reaction force. Because Company C's soldiers were often the most readily available to climb onto Chinooks and fly into a fight, that's what they did.

"I'll definitely remember all the fire-fights we got into," said Sgt. Timothy Smith of 1st Platoon's 2nd Squad. "And our squad always seemed to get into the middle of everything."

His squad was fortunate. Its team leader got a tooth shot out, but there were no other injuries. That wasn't the case with the company in general. One soldier was

## 503rd Infantry Regiment

killed. Others were severely wounded.

Jensen said one friend lost a leg in the first fire-fight. Another was shot and paralyzed.

"Guys came together," said Staff Sgt. David Dzwik, the 3rd Squad leader from 1st Platoon.

The battalion arrived at the end of one of the harshest winters the country had experienced in years. But the second winter was much milder.

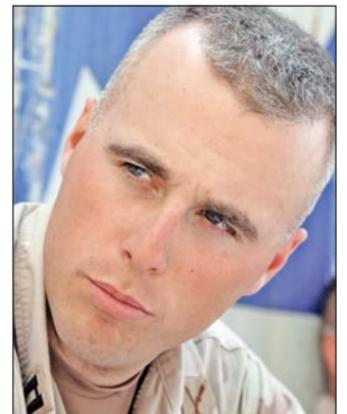
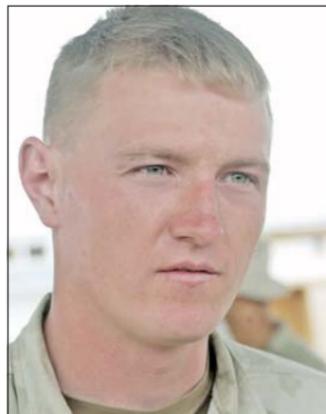
"I was expecting a little more down time in the winter," Jensen said. "But it didn't snow much, so we had missions."

Just because it wasn't snowing didn't mean conditions were perfect.

"Sometimes, it [stinks] being out there," Jensen said. "But after you've done it, you're proud of it."

Gardner said he was proud of his company's effort throughout its tour.

"I've never seen a more capable unit as these guys here," he said.



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# Moving out

## 503rd heads home after lively yearlong deployment

Spc. Archie Moore, with the M-14 rifle, and his spotter, Spc. Mick Steik, watch a handful of Afghan men near a building as other members of Company B, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment clear a village and compound of Taliban fighters.

JASON CHUDY  
Stars and Stripes



Maj. Gen. Jason Kamiya, from front to back, Lt. Gen. David Barno and Maj. Gen. Eric Olson salute the colors at the transfer of authority ceremony at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, in March 2005. Kamiya took over command of Combined Joint Task Force-76 from Olson at the ceremony.



Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Battalion's 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment relax on the helicopter landing pad at Forward Operating Base Lagman, Afghanistan, as they wait for a Chinook helicopter ride to Kandahar Airfield on the first leg of their trip home to Vicenza, Italy.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes



Spc. Michael Mason, from left, Sgt. Juan Salinas, Spc. Anthony Grazziani and Spc. Jeremy Swoyer, all of the 173rd Airborne Brigade's 3rd Platoon, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, clean the unit's M-2 .50-caliber weapon as they prepare for their return to Vicenza, Italy.



JASON CHUDY/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers from Company A, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment walk through a river valley during Operation Surri Sweep in Afghanistan.



Capt. Joel Dean, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, hugs his wife, Jen, after he returned to Caserma Ederle, Vicenza, Italy, with other members of the 173rd in March 2006.

# 'Bandits' missions covered it all

Headquarters and Headquarters Company became jack of all trades during tour

BY KENT HARRIS  
Stars and Stripes

The "Bandits" of Headquarters and Headquarters Company had to do a little bit of everything in Afghanistan, as opposed to soldiers in the rest of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, who had specific territories for which they were responsible.

For the "Bandits," that sometimes involved doing a lot of the same thing. Over and over again.

Just ask the cooks who prepared one meal after another. Or the transportation platoon, whose long resupply missions were often punctuated by a jingle truck rolling over.

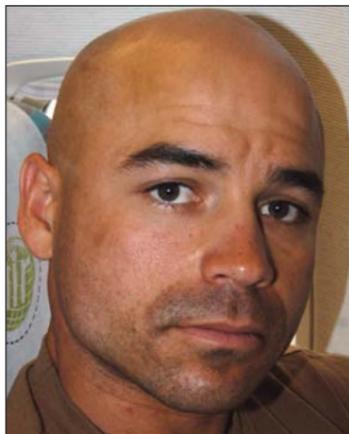
The disparate missions all had one theme, though, according to Capt. Paul Larson, the company commander — offering the rest of the battalion "world-class support."

"[Battalion soldiers] never had to worry about ammunition coming in, being fed or getting good medical care," Larson said. "They could just focus on the operational missions."

Not that the "Bandits" didn't



Staff Sgt. Paul Cerabone



Sgt. 1st Class Juan Pena



Staff Sgt. Jarrad Bloom



Capt. Paul Larson

have some of those on their own.

The scout platoon operated all over Zabul province looking for — and finding — signs of the enemy.

"I think we were the most diverse platoon in the battalion because we had to operate in every company's sector," said Sgt.

1st Class Juan Pena.

Sometimes that was by Humvee. Sometimes by foot. Sometimes by air via helicopters at-

tached to Task Force Storm. And sometimes it was by dirt bike. Yes, "Bandits" on dirt bikes.

"I think we learned more out of Afghanistan on different ways of fighting — and our tactics had to change a lot — than we did in a year in Iraq," Pena said.

The scouts' missions sometimes ended with their engaging a superior number of enemy forces and staying in the fight until more of the battalion's assets could arrive to help.

"If you allow the enemy to flee, you allow the enemy to fight another day," Pena said.

The support and transportation platoon supplied soldiers at far-flung locations. Many forward operating bases in the north took more than a day to reach from the battalion's headquarters in Qalat.

"The roads were not designed to travel in large trucks," said Staff Sgt. Paul Cerabone.

But that's what the transportation soldiers did, guiding a series of jingle trucks driven by locals to resupply American soldiers.

Cerabone remembers one mission that took 33 hours and included a trip through Paktika province

to get to its mountainous destination. Four jingle trucks rolled over and off the road on that trip alone.

Some of those waiting for supplies at the end of those missions were the battalion's cooks. Staff Sgt. Jarrad Bloom said his platoon was shocked — in a good way — when it arrived at the battalion's headquarters in Qalat.

"We weren't expecting to have the amount of food and equipment that we had," he said. "We were only limited by our imaginations. And there was no shortage of imagination."

## 503rd Infantry Regiment

# HHC duties included on and off base tasks

Whether on patrol or manning gates, 508th kept busy

BY KENT HARRIS  
Stars and Stripes

Soldiers assigned to a battalion's Headquarters and Headquarters Company often perform vital roles that don't have them straying too far beyond the base perimeter.

But that wasn't the case with many of those assigned to the HHC, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment in Afghanistan.

Due to the transfer of Company B to Regional Command South, more troops were needed to patrol sectors in Paktika province.

"Basically, HHC had to fall down on all of Bravo Company's [area of operations]," said 1st Lt. Chané Jackson, who spent most of his time in Afghanistan with Company A.

Both Company A and Company C had extra territory because of the move, as well. But engineers and mortar men from HHC joined the scout platoon in taking on specific geographic areas of responsibilities instead of performing their more traditional roles. HHC's area of responsibility was generally the northwest part of Paktika.

And there were times — the September elections, for example — when those in other specialties,



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

**Capt. Jack Kilbride, left, of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment, uses a translator to talk to Naka, Afghanistan, police chief Jon Baz, center.**

such as cooks, were assigned to patrol duties, as well.

Not that there still weren't soldiers who spent most of their time in or around the bases.

Spc. Larry Elkins spent almost all his time around the front gates of Bagram Air Base, shepherding jingle trucks that were carrying supplies for the battalion. Despite serving on the biggest — and arguably the safest — U.S. compound in the country, Elkins had a close call on

Nov. 30.

"I survived an anti-tank mine," he said.

Bagram still has mines originally placed by the Soviets and later rearranged by warring Afghan factions.

Elkins had driven over the

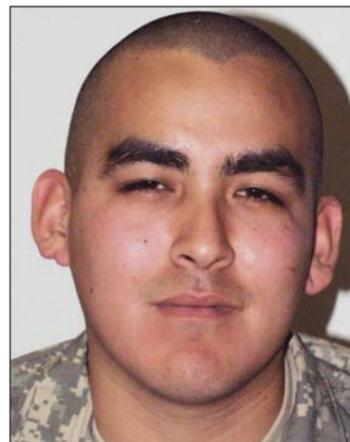
same ground before — it was believed to be cleared — but this time his Humvee's rear struck a mine when he was returning to the base.

"It was blown seven feet in the air and off to the right," he said. He was the only one in the vehicle and suffered a minor back injury.

Sgt. Aaron Correa mostly heard about such incidents on the radio. He was the one responsible for keeping Company A's radios in working order before moving over to HHC and then adding computers onto his responsibilities.

His main accomplishment? "Surviving a year in Afghanistan," he said with a smile.

Spc. Jason Alipio also spent a lot more time on base once he joined HHC from Company A. He was one of those charged with loading and unloading the helicopters that landed on base.



Sgt. Aaron Correa



1st Lt. Chané Jackson



Spc. Jason Alipio



Spc. Larry Elkins

"The main job at Orgun-E was the birds," he said. "Before that, it was basically patrolling every day."

Elkins said no matter where

they were stationed, there was plenty to keep HHC soldiers busy.

"The year went by pretty fast," he said.

## 508th Infantry Regiment

# Company A saw history made

BY KENT HARRIS

Stars and Stripes

On more than one occasion while riding in their Humvees along a primitive road in the rugged mountains of Afghanistan's eastern Paktika province, some of the soldiers from 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment's Company A had one question on their minds: What are we doing here?

"A bad day here is still better than a good day in Afghanistan," Spc. Russ Ferguson said in an interview in the battalion's headquarters in Vicenza, Italy.

But Ferguson and Staff Sgt. James Christy, members of 1st Platoon, said they could usually answer that question when they thought about it objectively. There were the many projects the company sponsored. There were villages that seemed to be doing a little better than they had been when the company arrived. And there were historic events such as the country's first parliamentary elections in September.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers of 1st Platoon, Company A, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment patrol through Naka, Afghanistan, in March 2005.

"It was cool being there for that. I mean, that's history," Christy said.

Ferguson agreed with that assessment, citing a bit of history himself, such as the many foreign occupiers that have come into Afghanistan.

"We were the first to stay there and try to help them build a good government," he said.

Whether it was in the tiny mountain villages of Naka and Zeruk, where 1st Platoon operat-

## 508th Infantry Regiment

ed, or the more volatile town of Bermel, where 2nd Platoon ventured, soldiers in the company had enough to do.

"We didn't have a chance to get complacent," said Sgt. William Keene, a member of 2nd Platoon. "We were so busy."

"We were spread thin, but competent the whole time," Ferguson added.

Ferguson is one of many soldiers in the battalion who expected to be using skills they trained for — fighting the enemy — more than skills they had to develop, such as training Afghan National Army troops.

"They put us in a place they expected the most fighting to happen," he said.

But that generally didn't happen. Some soldiers in the company were wounded, but none killed. Keene said it did get hairy at times around Bermel, where the small U.S. base came under attack.

Instead of fighting, soldiers spent more time interacting with the locals, trying to help build the country's security forces and government.

Christy said soldiers sometimes went to extremes just to try to make a small difference. He remembers a four-hour drive (each way) to a small village just to spend a few minutes checking in with local leaders.

There were some tangible improvements, though. Ferguson cites the first school built in Zeruk.

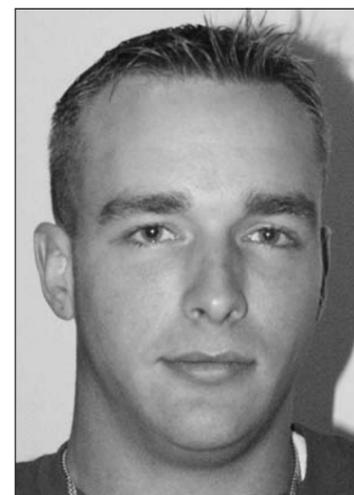
"There was a notable difference there from the first we arrived to the last week we were there," he said.

They'll also have more than a few stories to remember of their time in Afghanistan. Like climbing onto mountain ridges again and again. Or getting vehicles stuck in the mud.

"It's funny now, but at the time it was really awful," Christy said.



Spc. Russ Ferguson



Staff Sgt. James Christy



Sgt. William Keene



A 1st Platoon soldier patrols through Naka in March 2005. The platoon spent most of its time in Afghanistan operating out of the tiny mountain villages of Naka and Zeruk. The 2nd Platoon worked in Bermel.



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# Company B's move meant more action

## After transfer from Paktika to Kandahar, GIs hit resistance

BY KENT HARRIS  
Stars and Stripes

Most of 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment called Afghanistan's Paktika province home during its stint in Afghanistan, but soldiers assigned to Company B soon landed in other territory.

Members of Company B were transferred a few months into the deployment to take on duties in the restive north of Kandahar province.

"We liked it," said Staff Sgt. Lucas Donahue of the unit's stint down south. "For the most part, we got to operate how we wanted to operate."

The company did more than switch provinces in Afghanistan. Its new area of responsibility was a lot more dangerous than it had been in Paktika.

"Definitely a lot more action," said Sgt. Anthony Rico, who has the battle scars to prove it.

Rico was shot in the hip during a firefight on Sept. 30. The battle claimed the life of another soldier in the company. Rico said it felt like getting hit with a sledgehammer.

"It was like some big dude wound up and hit you," he said.

He would be flown back to Kandahar Airfield, then to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany and Walter Reed Medical

**“We got our bells rung, but we were still able to pile out of the truck and head up the hill looking for who did it.”**

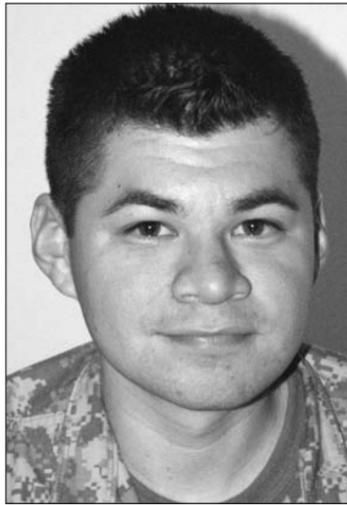
**Pfc. Clinton Streagle**  
Company B, 1st Battalion,  
508th Infantry Regiment

Center in Washington, D.C. While Rico was recuperating, the rest of the company got to know its new territory.

Donahue, on his third tour in Afghanistan, said the company started to know the valleys it was patrolling very well. "The Legion" eventually learned where the ambush points were and where enemy forces liked to plant roadside bombs.

Pfc. Clinton Streagle and four others in his Humvee survived with only minor injuries when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb placed in a location that had previously been safe.

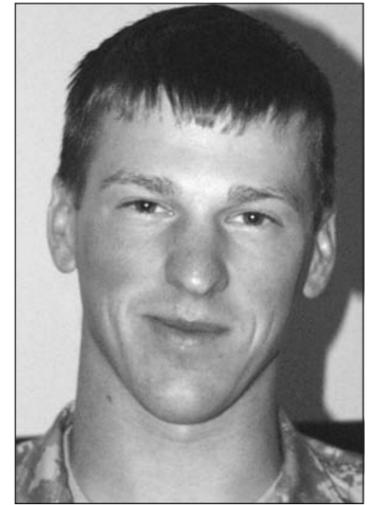
"We got our bells rung, but we were still able to pile out of the truck and head up the hill looking



Sgt. Anthony Rico



Staff Sgt. Lucas Donahue



Pfc. Clinton Streagle



Photo courtesy of 508th Infantry Regiment

**Left: Soldiers from Company B, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment drive through standing water on a patrol in Afghanistan. Right: Company B patrols parts of Afghan territory on foot.**

for who did it," Streagle said.

Another of the company's soldiers was killed in a similar attack.

Donahue said soldiers had to be alert while on patrol.

"I would definitely say we turned it on a little more," he said. "You knew there were enemies down there."

But Kandahar Airfield, the second-largest base in the country, provided a haven when the patrols were completed.

"You came into KAF and you could just relax and not worry about anything," Donahue said.

Streagle said it seemed like there was always a vehicle in need of attention for the next patrol, though. And it wasn't long before that patrol rolled along.



**While on patrol, a soldier from Company B encounters a local with some camels. Locals use camels to transport goods.**

### 508th Infantry Regiment

# Enemy's absence puzzled Company C

BY KENT HARRIS  
Stars and Stripes

Many of the soldiers in Company C, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment went into their assigned territory in Afghanistan looking for a fight.

But in an area reputed to be a stronghold of the Taliban, they didn't see much of the enemy during their stint in southern Paktika province. Some of them still aren't sure why.

Staff Sgt. Sebastian Dus said that when his platoon set up operations at Tarwe, about four kilometers from the Pakistan border, they were told they would be seeing plenty of the enemy. After all, Special Forces troops had reported regular contact with the enemy.

That didn't happen, though. Dus thinks it



Staff Sgt. Sebastian Dus



Photo courtesy of 508th Infantry Regiment

**Soldiers from Company C, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment prepare to start a patrol in southern Paktika province in Afghanistan.**

might be because the company sent out patrols large enough to scare away any enemy in the area — and sent them out all the time.

So Charlie Company quickly turned to trying to win over the local population and curb whatever support enemy forces might have in the area.

And that's what Dus will remember the most.

"Being able to be there and see the difference we made

going back from the first day we got there to the last day we were there," he said.

Among the differences soldiers cite: village bazaars that grew exponentially, a local tribal council that announced it would support the Afghan government and turn over those causing trouble, and the emergence of the Afghan national flag in places where it hadn't flown before.

### 508th Infantry Regiment

**SEE PUZZLE ON PAGE 15**

# Puzzle: Sticky patrols slow company down



Photos courtesy of 508th Infantry Regiment

Left: For Company C, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment, Afghanistan patrols weren't always smooth. This Humvee got stuck in the mud after a heavy rain. Right: Soldiers from Company C try to push the mired Humvee onto solid ground.

## 508th Infantry Regiment

### PUZZLE, FROM PAGE 14

The unit's bases improved gradually, as well. Spc. Michael Cody cited Whaza Kwah in particular.

"By the time we left, it was almost nicer than Orgun-E," he said. The Orgun-E base, headquarters of the battalion, was north of Company C's sector. It really wasn't far away via helicopter, but by Humvee, it seemed like forever.

"Traveling 30 to 40 kilometers in the terrain over there takes an entire day," Dus said.

And that brings up a few more memories.

"Being stuck in the mud for hours and hours," he said.

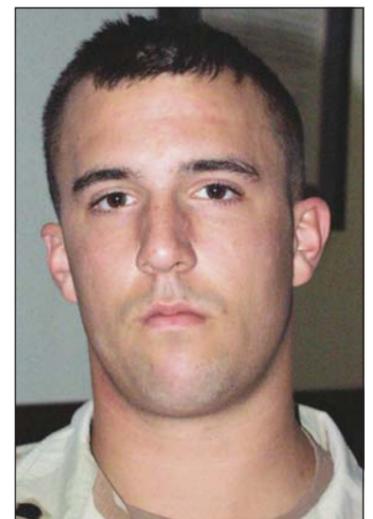
"We became experts in vehicle recovery," Cody said.

They didn't become experts in the local language, though.

"The frustrating and most annoying thing was the language barrier," Cody said. "We didn't have very good [interpreters]."

Sgt. Cheyenne Smithey said he'd remember some of the patrols that took several days to complete. And spending a lot of time with other soldiers in the unit. Enough time that it might have been too much for some.

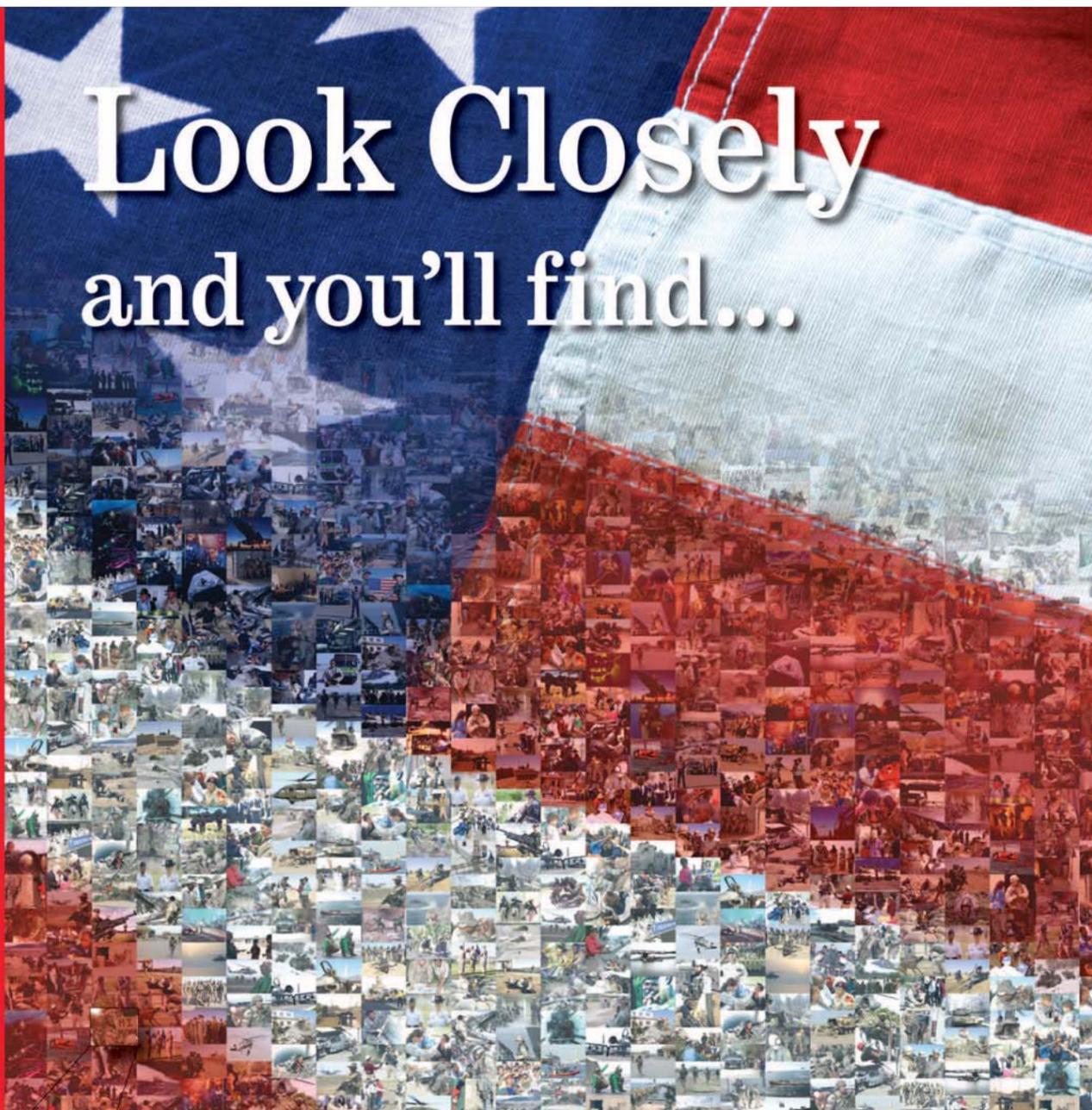
"You would think that it would be," he said. "But not really. I think it's because the conditions we shared. The patrols we went on. It brought us closer together."



Spc. Michael Cody



Sgt. Cheyenne Smithey



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A UH-60 Black Hawk rolls past a line of CH-47 Chinooks at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, following a mission in April 2005. MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

# Helos took fight to the sky

BY KENT HARRIS

Stars and Stripes

**T**KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan here are some similarities between southern Afghanistan and the Nevada deserts — but they sure aren't identical.

"I think we were probably ready for it more than most units," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Dan Manciu, a member of the Oregon National Guard CH-47 Chinook pilot and part of a task force that included Nevada Guardsmen during a yearlong deployment.

But Manciu, who flew Huey helicopters in Vietnam, said "there's no comparison" between Afghanistan and Nevada. "It's much more dangerous here environmentally."

And the pilots and crews on the Chinooks, UH-60 Black Hawks and AH-64 Apaches who made up Task Force Storm had more to worry about than the terrain and weather.

"We weren't ready for the [rocket-propelled grenades] and bullets," said Staff Sgt. Dean Penrod, a member of the Nevada National Guard and a Chinook flight engineer.

Task Force Storm consisted of Black Hawk helicopters from the 3rd Battalion, 158th Aviation Regiment from Giebelstadt, Germany; Apaches from the 2nd Squadron, 6th U.S. Cavalry Regiment from Illesheim, Germany; and Chinooks from the Oregon, Nevada and Washington guards. Six Black Hawk helicopters

from the 68th Medical Company, made up of guardsmen from Hawaii and Alaska, rounded out the task force.

Storm was half of Task Force Griffin, the Army aviation task force in the country. But like the units on the ground in southern Afghanistan, those in the air saw more combat in the last year than their counterparts to the north.

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Thomas Higgins, an Apache pilot, said there were several times that firefights ended only because his helicopter ran out of missiles and bullets to fire.

"I've been in four really bad ones," he said. All of them were in support of coalition forces on the ground.

"They have the most difficult job out here," Higgins said, referring to members of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment from Vicenza, Italy, and Special Forces units in the area. "I can't tell you how much we respect them and what they do."

Manciu, Penrod and other members of the Chinook crews worked with ground-based troops more than they expected. Both said they had some training on landing troops in the middle of a fight. But Chinooks carried out more than 150 such deliberate assaults during their stint in the country.

"In some cases, landing right on the enemy," Penrod said.

One of those cases proved to be fatal for the crew. On Sept. 25, Mustang 2-2 had just finished dropping off 30 soldiers. It was shot down while trying to leave the battlefield. All five crewmembers died.

"The [only] good thing about it was that 35 weren't killed," said Maj. Roger Capps, commander of the Chinook unit — Company D, 113th Aviation Regiment.

"Unfortunately, five were. And they were our five."

Another Chinook was lost when it caught fire after landing under enemy fire. The crew escaped. An Apache went down while training up north. Very few helicopters of any make made it through the year without taking at least one hit. But most were soon out flying again after getting patched up. Mechanics had enough to do without the bullet damage.

"They've done an amazing job keeping the aircraft in the air," said 1st Lt. Kevin Kane, an Apache pilot and platoon leader with 2-6. "Really, they're the backbone for us."

Spcs. Timothy Brown and Thomas Haun, crew chiefs for the Apaches, said the work was accomplished by all of those on the ground pitching in to help.

"We're assigned to an aircraft, but we work on all of them," Haun said.

Capt. Michael Stone said the medical unit flew 357 missions over the last year, bringing 544 patients to medical care. Many of those were local nationals needing urgent medical care. Stone said none of the medical evacuation helicopters had been hit.

"We've been extremely lucky," he said.

## Deployment made 'a long year' for Task Force Sabre

BY KENT HARRIS

Stars and Stripes

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan

**A** year away from family and loved ones. Living conditions and a lifestyle not exactly on par with the home base back in Germany. And a mission pace about three times that at Army bases in Illesheim or Giebelstadt, Germany.

Soldiers assigned to Task Force Sabre spent a year getting their helicopters in the air and into one of the toughest environments in the world.

"It's made the year go by very quickly," said Chief Warrant Officer 3 George Kessler, an Apache pilot and instructor, on the frenetic pace that crews, mechanics and support personnel have maintained.

"But it's been a long year."

"Time feels like it flew," said Capt. Rob Beale, a Black Hawk pilot. "You were never really in one place for very long."

That hasn't been true for all the 900 or so members of the task force. Some of those maintaining or fueling the AH-64 Apaches, UH-60 Black Hawks and CH-47 Chinooks that make up the task force did largely stay in the same place during their tour. But that doesn't mean they were taking it easy.

"We stay busy," said Staff Sgt. William Hernandez, a platoon sergeant for 2nd Squadron, 6th Cavalry Regiment. "It's like [the movie] 'Groundhog Day.' Every day is the same."

Pilots and other crewmembers who take to the air say that was sometimes true for them as well. But they often found something to set each mission apart.

Sometimes that was tragedy or near tragedy. One of the Chinooks from Big Windy plummeted to the ground in April 2005, killing five crewmembers and all the passengers on board.



KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes

Above: Sp. Sean Lewis looks out at the Afghan countryside over the turret of his machine gun as the Black Hawk he's aboard makes the short run between Bagram Air Base and Kabul in February. Right: Soldiers say goodbye to the five soldiers of Company F, 159th Aviation Regiment killed in the crash of a CH-47 Chinook in Afghanistan on April 6, 2005.



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

SEE WINDY ON PAGE 17

# Windy: 'Healthy rivalry' kept crews on their toes

WINDY, FROM PAGE 16

A Black Hawk returned to base a few days later after an intense firefight, carrying 57 bullet holes with it. All of the crew survived. An Apache went down while on a training mission in July. Both crewmembers onboard survived but suffered severe injuries.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Clay Rekow, who had a close call of his own when an engine failed on his Chinook, said watching a fellow aviator go down isn't easy.

"I think we dealt with that by paying our respects, talking with each other and getting back up and flying as soon as possible," he said.

And the task force has done a lot of flying. Task Force Sabre was responsible for the eastern sector of Afghanistan. It operated out of Bagram, Salerno and Jalalabad. Task Force Storm was headquartered in Kandahar and was responsible for the south sector of the country. Both fell under Task



Spcs. Shane Hubbard, left, and Corey Mullins inspect a Chinook helicopter that had just completed a mission and returned to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan on Feb. 5.

Force Griffin, the Army aviation component of Combined Joint Task Force-76.

Lt. Col. Mike Swanson, the

Sabre commander, said it took a while for the task force's components to get accustomed to working with one another. Crews from the various helicopter models tend to have their own lingo and ways of doing things.

Whose lingo won out? That depends on whom you talk to.

"We brought all the other airframes around," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 Paul Heitzenroder, a Chinook pilot, smiling.

"We all come out of basic training thinking our aircraft is the best," said Capt. Kelsey Smith, an Apache pilot and troop commander. He estimates he worked with 18 types of fixed-wing or rotator aircraft from at least eight countries during his tour.

But most of the missions involved a mix of the three helicopters.

"At this point, it is a healthy rivalry," Kessler said. "But as soon as the mission starts, all that is put aside."

Swanson said such mixed task forces now will be the norm for Army aviators.

"There was a learning curve at first," he said. "But I think we got through it really quickly. I think now as a task force, we're at the top of our game."

All of the dozen or so soldiers in his command interviewed seemed to agree with that sentiment.

"We were a good unit showing up here, but we are much better now," Kessler said, "both collectively and individually."

"With the experience we've gained here, we bring a lot more proficiency to the job," said Sgt. Michael Signorio, a crew chief for those maintaining the Apaches.

Most of those in the task force are taking something besides experience with them back to Germany: memories.

Spc. Jayra Douglass was a member of the five- or six-member crews that spent weeks at a forward operating base, waiting for helicopters to land. Some days there weren't any landing to fuel up. Other days there were too many.



PHOTOS BY KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes

An Apache helicopter flies over patches of snow outside of Kabul, Afghanistan, while escorting a Black Hawk helicopter that was transporting an officer between the two locations on Feb. 4.

Others will remember the harsh mountain terrain, the quickly changing weather and the high altitudes at which they flew.

"The single most demanding environment to fly in in the world," Kessler said.

And those sent to help earthquake victims in Pakistan put that at the top of their lists.

"That's the most rewarding," Heitzenroder said, because crews made an instant impact on the lives of those in need.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Michael Thompson said he had seen nothing like it during tours in Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Take all those, combine them and multiply by 10," he said. "It was overwhelming. The most death and destruction I've ever witnessed."

Soldiers participated in a variety of missions during the year-

long tour: ferrying cargo and personnel, supporting troops or convoys on the ground, whisking away those in need of medical care and launching aerial assaults.

Although all those interviewed say they've improved their skills, they're not exactly eager to put them to use in a similar deployment any time soon.

"Definitely not," was Rekow's quick response.

Those with families in Germany or the States say they've been away from their loved ones too long. Others just need a break. Or a return to "civilization."

That's not to say they aren't proud of their accomplishments. Spc. Rafael Villodas summed up his tour by recalling a common feeling:

"At the end of the day, I went back to my cot, thinking I made a difference."

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Pfc. Kiel Muston patrols near a road on the way to Naka, Afghanistan, in March 2005.



Spc. Drew Wilkerson, top, and Sgt. Matthew Fillinger scan the countryside after someone suspicious was seen on a hillside on the way to Naka in March 2005.



Above: Following a tree-planting ceremony at Zama Dam Park in March 2005, soldiers of 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment enjoyed a meal with the locals to celebrate the event. Right: Sgt. Oscar Torres gives himself a haircut outside his barracks at Forward Operating Base Orgun-E, Afghanistan.

# A busy year for the 508th Infantry Regiment



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

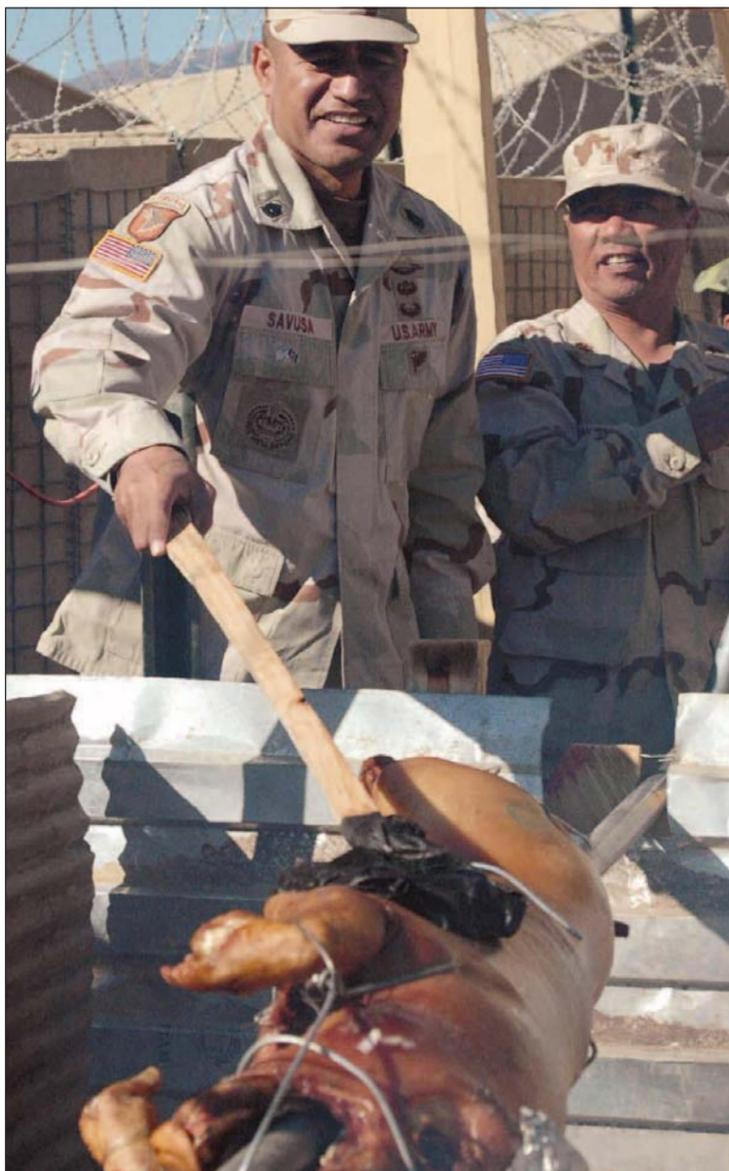
Humvees from the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment use a riverbed as a road as they travel through eastern Afghanistan on a two-day mission in March 2005.

# Not quite home for the holidays



KENT HARRIS/Stars and Stripes

Southern European Task Force (Airborne) soldiers who were stationed at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan watch the Christmas celebration at Caserma Ederle, Vicenza, Italy, on Dec. 2 via a video teleconference center hookup. It gave them a glimpse of the holiday season back in Italy.



TARA TEEL/Courtesy of the U.S. Army



Courtesy of the U.S. Army

A Thanksgiving banner hangs in the dining hall at Forward Operating Base Shkin in Afghanistan.



LARRY LANE/Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Far left: Command Sgt. Maj. Iuniasolua Savusa, Combined Joint Task Force-76, takes a turn basting the holiday pig at Fire Base Lwara in Afghanistan on Thanksgiving Day. Left: SETAF soldiers use a video teleconferencing system to wave at friends and family attending the annual Christmas tree-lighting ceremony at Caserma Ederle, Vicenza, Italy, on Dec. 2.

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