



Photos by Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael Pintagro

Army Pfc. Jake Niedzwiecki, an infantryman with 1st Platoon, B Company, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, Task Force Spartan, from Grand Rapids, Mich., mans his weapon Aug. 4 at Bella Firebase, located in Nuristan Province.

Chosin troopers patrol northeastern frontier

By Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael Pintagro

Task Force Spartan public affairs

JALALABAD AIRFIELD, Afghanistan -- The remote outpost American Soldiers share with Afghan National Army brethren overlooks the town of Aranas, built in a roughly columnar pattern directly into the side of the mountain. A steep grade that sometimes taxes the ingenuity of ascending and descending dogs and donkeys let alone men separates the troops from the town.

Army 1st Lt. Matt Gottschling and his men live near the crest of a mountain in the Waygal Valley of northeastern Afghanistan's Nuristan Province.

Gottschling leads the 1st Platoon of B Company, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, Task Force Spartan, a hardy group of Soldiers who rotate among mountain fasts, vehicle control points along rural Afghan roads and remote northeastern outposts.

The B Company Soldiers and members of Chosin Battalion man a string of small, but strategically significant, outposts along Afghanistan's eastern frontier. The forward posts allow allied Soldiers to operate from advantageous geographical

positions. They simultaneously deny anti-Afghan extremists use of the ground they occupy.

The rural outposts embody the philosophy of the battalion commander, who believes his Soldiers maximize their impact by living close to the people. Army Lt. Col. Chris Cavoli's subordinate leaders implement that vision on the ground.

"Our mission is to disrupt the enemy, to disrupt their movement through the Waygal and Pech valleys," said Gottschling, from Hilltown, Penn. Army Maj. Douglas E. Sloan, the B Co., 1-32 Inf. commander, added that the outposts "prevent the enemy from entering the Korengal and reaching the Pech Valley," pushing extremists away from major approaches into the northeastern heartland.

Sloan also pointed out that the outposts serve as bases for future endeavors in rural northeastern areas.

"Base camps in Aranas and nearby Bella serve as a jump-off point to establishing a greater presence in the north," said Bella, from Charlevoix, Mich. "They'll be winter outposts to protect the people of the region."

Soldiers manning the outposts, Sloan noted, will prevent the enemy from wintering in the area. "If we stay there, the enemy won't be able to. If they want to operate there, they'll have to leave and re-infiltrate in the spring."

High stakes loom in the effort to interdict extremist leaders attracted by the region's isolation, strategically daunting landscape and proximity to the Pakistani border. Since the inception of Operation Enduring Freedom terrorists have operated in the region.

"Geography is an enormous challenge," Gottschling said, noting peaks reach as high as 13,000 feet. "It looks a lot easier on a map. A short distance might be very difficult to cover on this terrain."

Gottschling said this is where terrorist leaders make their plans and hold meetings before they move into the Pech. Then they'll pick up caches on the way and attack the Soldiers.

The Bella facility serves as a key regional logistical hub and provides important fire support to battalion Soldiers throughout the Waygal Valley.

According to Army 1st Lt. Jesston Wagner, the leader of the platoon

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assigned to Bella Firebase, the outpost “acts as a re-supply hub for supplies and equipment passing from Blessing to Aranas.”

The 24-year-old from Fort Rock, Ore. added that he and his men regularly contract donkey teams to push supplies deep into the Waygal.

Chosin mortar-men, infantrymen and fire supporters protect allied Soldiers and positions throughout the region from the firebase. Soldiers based at Bella occasionally conduct foot patrols. Together with embedded trainers and ANA colleagues, the Chosin infantrymen also conduct traffic check points.

Intensive construction projects, organized by leaders, managed by Coalition soldiers and aided by a company-sized force of Afghan employees, reshape and enhance the outposts by the day. Ambitious projects underway in Bella as well as Aranas promise to establish stronger, more secure facilities featuring better living conditions and more amenities.

“We’re doing our best to set up our position and set up our camp so we have a place to stage and conduct missions out of,” Gottschling said.

Soldiers and local workers in Bella work diligently to construct guard towers as well as billeting, storage and command and control facilities.

Chosin infantrymen spend periods ranging from weeks to months at their various camps, pausing briefly for “refit” between missions. The Soldiers enjoy their highest standard of living at such modest forward operating bases as FOB Asadabad and Camp Blessing; they live more often amid virtually unmitigated mountain wilderness.

Some Chosin troopers spend so much time in remote camps that isolation develops into a normal condition.

Army Spec. Min Kim, a communication specialist with Headquarters Company, 1-32 Inf., spent more than two months in the Pech Valley and another month manning an observation post on high ground near Camp Blessing prior to his arrival above Aranas.

“When I go back to the FOBs I feel kind of funny with all the people

around,” the 24-year-old from New York City said with a smile.

The Soldiers hunkered down above Aranas live in makeshift hovels constructed near their fighting positions. These “hooches” range in sophistication from bare ground covered by ponchos to elaborate structures comprised of pallets, plywood, tarps and sandbags as well as Army field gear. One enterprising Chosin Soldier constructed a fairly plush tree house; a handful of resourceful ANA warriors moved into cave-hooches.

Like their counterparts in Aranas, B Company Soldiers serving in Bella live where they work and fight.

“We sleep in our fighting positions,” said Army Pfc. Jake Niedzwiecki, a 27-year-old B Company infantryman from Grand Rapids, Mich.

Some Chosin troopers construct more or less permanent living spaces, noted Army Spec. Jeffrey LeVesque, a 24-year-old B Company infantryman from Buffalo, N.Y. “Other guys tear them down every day and rebuild them every night.”

“It’s better than the Pech,” Wagner said with a laugh. “We build makeshift hooches with pallets, plywood and a couple of tarps left over from air drops. It’s not ‘Home Improvement with Bob Villa,’ but it’s better than getting rained on every night.”

Chosin Soldiers serving in the Waygal Valley enjoy, at least, the consolation of a relatively mild climate. Rivers and creeks course through the valleys, while rain falls regularly on the mountains and passes.

“It’s wetter and cooler,” Wagner said of his Bella base, adding that nearby mountains also obstruct the withering glare of the Afghan sun during part of the day.

The relatively temperate Nuristani climate creates challenges as well as opportunities. Frequent rains force Soldiers to devote more time and energy to constructing and maintaining shelters. They also create quantities of mud greater than those found in arid regions of the country. The mud bogs down transportation efforts and renders the already challenging task of maintaining some modicum of cleanliness without running water or artificial bathing facilities even more daunting for Soldiers.

Allied Soldiers confront the hygiene challenges posed by their primitive living conditions in resourceful ways. At Bella, Chosin troopers bathe in calm stretches of the Waygal. Allied Soldiers stationed above Aranas, meanwhile, rely on water piped in from a mountain spring for washing.

Soldiers’ diets consist mainly of meals, ready to eat supplemented by Afghan fare provided by their ANA colleagues, interpreters and the numerous Afghan laborers who work on outpost construction projects. The American Soldiers enjoy regular rations of rice, bread and beans; more rarely, they devour goat or chicken meat, fresh fruits or diced potatoes. At Bella, locals provide fried bread and “chai” every morning. Counterparts above Aranas blend rice prepared by ANA Soldiers and interpreters with MREs.

“We buy food from the village, mainly rice and beans,” explained Army Sgt. Allen Lewis, a 22-year-old B Company infantryman from Barre, Vt. “We get the ‘terps’ and the ANA to cook it for us. It makes a pretty good meal mixed with an MRE.”

Serving together in remote, isolated outposts far from home – ANA Soldiers too represent a national body drawn from regions throughout their country – allied Soldiers form close and complex bonds. Soldiers share cultural as well as culinary tidbits.

Pashtun and Dari as well as Nuristani radio broadcasts resonate throughout ANA areas of the camps. English-language publications, meanwhile, circulate around the outposts. Allied Soldiers learn each others’ card games, habits and manners. The Soldiers converse through interpreters and incorporate counterparts’ expressions – some of them clean – into their lexicon. Heavily accented attempts at contemporary American slang and Pashtun greetings resound daily throughout the camps.

“They come visit with us every day,” Niedzwiecki said of his ANA colleagues. “Sometimes we’ll talk through the ‘terps.’ Sometimes we’ll try to talk with gestures and signals.”

“We travel in their culture and they travel in ours,” Lewis said.