

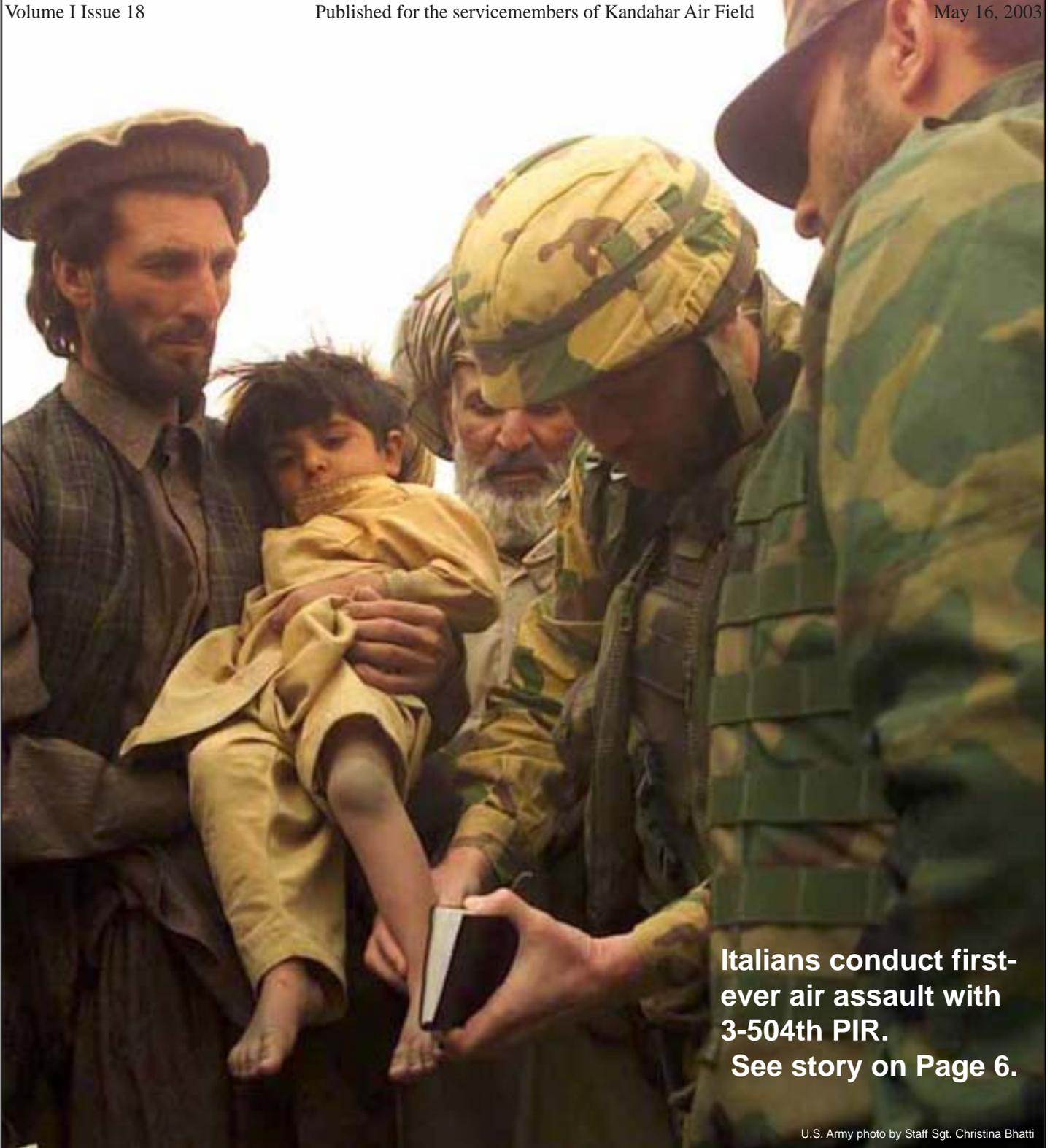


DESERT DEVIL DISPATCH

Volume I Issue 18

Published for the servicemembers of Kandahar Air Field

May 16, 2003



**Italians conduct first-
ever air assault with
3-504th PIR.**

See story on Page 6.

U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Christina Bhatti



Devil 6 Sees August Return For TF Devil

Story and photo by Spc. Jim Wagner
109th Mobile Public Affairs Det.

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Speaking after a ceremony honoring five Purple Heart Medal recipients from the “Blue Devils” of the 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 82nd Airborne Division, Wednesday (see related story), two of Kandahar’s top coalition task force officials talked about plans for the return of all coalition Task Force Devil to the United States.

Task Force Devil deployed from Fort Bragg, N.C., and has been at Kandahar Airfield, plus various fire bases throughout southern Afghanistan since late December.

For the past couple months, speculation has given many different dates for a replacement-in-place (RIP) by the Army’s 10th Mountain Division of Fort Drum, N.Y., who will replace Task Force Devil.

Col. John Campbell, 504th PIR and Task Force Devil commander, said he wanted to clear the air surrounding the RIP back to Fort Bragg.

“We’re working to get back on the six-months timeline,” he said. “Best case we’ll start flying the Blue Devils in early August; the White Devils we’ll start moving out in July.”

Since January, Task Force Devil has

see **RETURN**, page 5

Five Awarded Purple Heart

Story and photo by Spc. Jim Wagner
109th Mobile Public Affairs Det.

Task Force Devil’s commander presented five soldiers with Purple Hearts Wednesday, earned for injuries sustained during two recent firefights along the Pakistan border.

Sgt. Konrad Reed, Sgt. David Smith, Pfc. Otis Johnson and Pfc. James Torbet of 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, were part of a quick reaction force (QRF) responding to a call when they were wounded Apr. 25 outside Fire Base Shkin. Capt. Gregory Trahan, the QRF’s squad leader, is in the United States recovering from multiple gunshot wounds. The team’s sixth member, Pfc. Jerod Dennis, died from injuries suffered during the confrontation.

The fifth soldier honored in the ceremony, Sgt. Augusto Alarcon-Gonzales, received his injuries after taking shrapnel from a rocket-propelled grenade during a Mar. 18 attack at Fire Base Solerno.

All credit the training they’ve received back in the United States for their ability to survive during the attacks.

“When the shooting started, I shot back,” Alarcon-Gonzales said. “It’s like muscle memory; after two JRTCs (Joint Readiness Training

see **MEDALS**, page 5

Desert Devil Dispatch falls under the supervision of Task Force Devil.



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VTC Brings Little Bit of Home to Afghanistan

Story and photo by Cpl. Keith Kluwe
109th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

More than 200 soldiers deployed to Kandahar Air Field from Ft. Bragg, N.C. had a face-to-face conversation with their spouses and families back home May 10 during private video teleconferences here.

The VTC was the first time since 1st Brigade of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in December of last year that most of the soldiers and paratroopers here were able to see their families in anything other than pictures.

Many newly married soldiers like Pfc. Daniel Sandoval, a military police officer with the 118th Military Police Company and Spc. Harold Pitts, a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter mechanic with Echo Troop, 1st of the 17th Cavalry, Task Force Sabre, have spent more time deployed for training or operations than they have spent at home with their spouse.

"I've been married about a year," said Sandoval, a Roswell, New Mexico native. "My wife Anthena was finishing her degree when we got married, so we've never been able to live together."

Sandoval was worried that he would end up wasting the two-and-a-half minute video-phone call because he wouldn't know what to say.

"She's sent me a lot of pictures, but (the VTC) was great," Sandoval said. "She looked great and I got to see her and tell her that I miss her. I can't wait to go home."

Pitts was lucky enough to spend 8 months of his year-and-a-half long marriage with his wife Ashley. He married while he was in his Advanced Individual Training.

"I was very excited to see what she looked like, and she looked beautiful" said Pitts, a native of Independence, Kansas. "I know she has been busy. She works harder than I do, going to school full time and working part time."

Pitts was hesitant to get into a deep conversation during his two-and-a-half minute call.



Pfc. Daniel Sandoval waves to his wife Anthena during a video teleconference May 10. More than 200 soldiers assigned to Kandahar Air Field were able to use the video phone to talk to their spouses and families.

"I concentrated on telling her how much I loved her and missed her, how good she looked," said Pitts. "She just encouraged me and told me she loved and missed me too, to hang in there for her."

A great deal of planning and coordination went into bringing the video teleconferences to completion, according to Chap. (Maj.) Jeffrey Watters, the Task Force Devil chaplain.

"The planning started at that week in the deployment that soldiers start 'hitting the wall.' Families were starting to disintegrate. We have (had) four or five divorces," said Watters. "We wanted to teach a class on marriage relationships. Whatever we taught here to the soldiers, we wanted their spouses to have the same class. It would give them skills they could fall back on."

During three separate hour-long seminars, Dr. Gary Chapman, a well know author and relationship counselor, spoke to soldiers and their spouses via the video teleconference.

He spoke about communication skills, and all the problems related to miscommunications.

"I think the seminar and the VTC were good for the marriage itself. The semi-

nar by Dr. Gary Chapman was something a lot of married people in the military need to hear," Pitts said. "I think it is very important that husband and wife get to see and talk to each other. I know it raised my morale. It gave me a second wind for the rest of the deployment."

"When a soldier went in, he looked kind of tired," Watters said. "When he came out it was a whole different story. He had a huge smile on his face. I was like 'wow, that's worth a million bucks; you can't pay for that.'"

At least one soldier here got to see their new baby for the first time, according to Watters. Other soldiers will just draw strength from the video phone calls.

"The VTC gave me some motivation. It showed me what I was working for, serving for," Sandoval said. "I could have used another 30 minutes with her."

Watters has started planning for a reunion brief and video teleconference, but doesn't know it will be able to be put together in time.

He said this VTC wouldn't have been possible without support from Tamsco who set up all the equipment at Ft Bragg and here in Kandahar. Tamsco also donated all the satellite time to the soldiers here.

Challenges Remain for Re-Enlistment

by Spc. Jim Wagner
109th Mobile Public Affairs Det.

While the non-stop operations tempo of training and recall alerts at the 82nd Airborne Division in Fort Bragg, N.C., would have some soldiers looking for a way out after their enlistment term, deployment to Afghanistan is having the opposite effect.

The challenge remains, however, for career counselors to get first-term and mid-careerists to sign up for another hitch in the Army.

Since arriving roughly four months ago Master Sgt. Joseph Wolfe, the senior brigade career counselor at Kandahar, said his staff has re-enlisted 130 soldiers. Last quarter, he added, they were 12 percent over the mission goal for the brigade.

That might not seem like much at face value, but the pressure to get first-term soldiers who only joined for the GI Bill, or to get mid-careerists to stay onboard despite very little incentive to do so, can be a challenge.

Part of the answer to the re-enlistment challenge, Wolfe said, can be found in the deployments the 82nd has endured the past several years.



U.S. Army photo by Spc. Jim Wagner

Sgt. Timothy LaPraire, a practical nurse in the 307th Logistics Task Force, gives his re-enlistment oath Wednesday.

“I’ve found that you get (soldiers) doing what they’ve been trained to do, they’re more apt to re-enlist,” Wolfe said. “First-termers are the hardest to get; they come in for the GI Bill and the bonuses, and after their four years they want to go on to bigger and better things.”

There’s still a lot of work involved getting soldiers to reenlist, according to Staff Sgt. Shawn Joyce, a career counselor for the 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

He finds the mid-careerist to be the most challenging of the three categories (first term, mid-careerist and careerist) of soldiers up for re-enlistment. What makes it so difficult, he said, to re-enlist mid-careerists is that under current policy they are not offered the option they desire.

“Being assigned to a rapid deployment division can really wear down your family,” he said. “It’s a hard decision when you’ve got a family to think about also.”

Sgt. Tim LaPraire, a practical nurse with the 307th Logistics Task Force, signed up for five more years through Kandahar career counselor Staff Sgt. Joel Lucero for the chance to attend the licensed practical nurse (LPN) course offered at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

Although he successfully challenged the board at the State of Texas for an LPN license in the state, he is not eligible to practice at civilian hospitals without completing an approved LPN course.

He could have, LaPraire said, got out at the end of his enlistment term and practiced at a government hospital, but thought the Army schooling would pay off bigger dividends in the long term.

“(The Army’s) got its ups and downs,” he said. “You just have to keep pushing at it.”

Making sure the soldier’s leadership, said Joyce. Good leadership, the career counselor said, is critical in getting someone to reenlist.

“Re-enlistment is a direct reflection of command climate,” Joyce said. “The fact that (our) was the top producing brigade for three out of four quarters for Fiscal Year 2003 adds proof to that statement.”

Is your unit getting ready to return to the States? Make sure you call the Deployment Support Team at least 60 days prior to the departure date to ensure your equipment and personnel get out in time. Contact Stan Miller at DSN 580-3090 for more information, or email him at millers@kaf.cjtf180.army.mil. DST hours of operation are 0200 - 1700 Zulu.

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participated in several high-profile combat operations based out of Kandahar, including Operations Mongoose, Viper and Valiant Strike. Companies from the task force have also bolstered security at fire bases throughout Afghanistan – places like Solerno, Orgun-E and Shkin, the site of several attacks in recent times.

Because of recent attacks the Blue Devils, who are currently pulling security at the fire bases, were cautioned not to let the imminent return to the States detract them from the mission at hand.

“Don’t focus on (the RIP, though) it’s hard not to,” said Lt. Col. Richard Clarke, 3-504th PIR commander. “I’m

thinking we’ll be back the first week of August – give or take a week or two – (but) we can’t get complacent now, we can’t let our guard down. We have to stay vigilant; even though we’re two-thirds of the way done, we have to treat each day as a new day.”

Clarke also briefed his soldiers with a timeline once they returned to Fort Bragg. Two or three weeks would be spent moving into the new barracks at the post, followed by 10-15 days of leave, then expert infantry badge training. In September or October, he expects the battalion to be back on the normal division readiness brigade alert rotation.

Regardless of the timeframe, both commanders praised the Blue Devils for the

missions they’ve done while in Afghanistan.

“You’ve missed Boy Scouts meetings, teachers’ conferences, anniversaries – this nation owes a great debt to you and your families, families whose sacrifice has been as great as yours,” Campbell said. Remember the friendships you’ve made here, the camaraderie – it’ll last a lifetime.”

Clarke echoed those remarks, saying also: “You don’t know how good you are, let me repeat that: you don’t know how good you are.

“Afghanistan is a squad leader training camp,” he continued, “and what you learn here you will bring back with you.”

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Center) training rotations and numerous live-fire exercises, it just takes over.”

Col. John Campbell, Task Force Devil commander, lauded the medal winners for their actions, saying ceremony isn’t the type he necessarily enjoys.

“I don’t like pinning Purple Hearts, no one wants to get one,” he said. “I’d ask you to remember those that didn’t make it and remember their sacrifice.”

Torbet and Johnson, both who were shot in the head (hitting their Kevlar in both cases) during the Shkin firefight, gave their heartfelt agreement to their commander’s comments.

“It’s not really the award I was look-

ing for when I came over here,” Torbet said.

Despite the dangers, Command Sgt. Maj. Steven England, 18th Airborne Corps command sergeant major, reiterated the U.S. Army’s commitment to remain in the country until the job is done.

“We’re not going to have an ‘Afghanistan II’ in the future,” he said. “We’re going to stay here as long as we have to. I would remind you to always be prepared...thank you from me and (Lt. Gen. Dan McNeill, U.S. Army commander in Afghanistan) for what you do every day.”



Five soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, stand at attention during an awards ceremony Wednesday where they were presented with a Purple Heart by Col. John Campbell, Task Force Devil commander.



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Around the AOR

3-504th PIR Jumps on First Italian Combat Air Assault

by Staff Sgt. Christina Bhatti
11th Public Affairs Det.

BERMEL VALLEY, Afghanistan — May 2 marked a historical day for the Italian Military. The Alpini battalion L'Aquila and the 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment "Blue Devils," Fort Bragg, N.C., executed the first combat air assault in Italian Military history.

The mission was in the Bermel Valley. The helicopters landed and released a flood of Italian and Afghan National Army soldiers.

The day before the assault began differently for the rest of the Italian troops. Against the backdrop of the rising Afghanistan sun, approximately 20 Italian vehicles and one American vehicle headed for the Bermel Valley. Fifteen hours later, after driving on every imaginable terrain, the convoy arrived at Forward Operating Base Shkin. The next day started with the move into the valley.

Their mission was to secure the valley and establish a sense of security and trust in the ANA in the villages of Bermel and Margah, said Maj. Dan Fields, Task Force Nibbio liaison officer, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Brigade, 3-504 PIR.

Once in the valley, all of the soldiers merged to accomplish the mission. They set up blocking positions within the valley to prevent unfriendly forces from entering or exiting the valley, said Fields. The positions are not permanent due to the lack of manpower and for strategic and security reasons, he added.

The next step was to win the hearts of the people through the distribution of aid by the peoples' own new national army. The villagers, who wanted any little thing they could receive, immediately crowded the ANA soldiers.

"This is very important," said Italian Maj. Gianpaolo Romolli, L'Aquila commander. "We want to show the people that their army is here to help them and



U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Christina Bhatti

Two American soldiers wait for the HH60 Black Hawk to touch down and unload Italian soldiers.

that we will be here also — as a coalition — to rebuild Afghanistan."

Along with humanitarian aid, medical aid was also given. Limited medicines were given out to those who most needed it. The ANA and Italians donated all of the aid that was handed out.

"We are hoping to promote a more stable country — politically and within the population," said Fields.

Both Fields and Romolli said that the mission was a success.

"This was a big effort and brought together many elements that normally don't work together," Romaolli said. "I think we have made a great impact on the people in the valley.

This mission was a first for the Italian Army and is being touted as their first combat mission since WWII.

But the people of Italy are being told a different story.

"They don't say war for political reasons," said Romolli. "The people are told that this is for peace, and for the people it is difficult to see otherwise when they don't see any injuries."

Across the valley, the soldiers of 3-504 had a different mission. They, along with Special Operations Forces and the

ANA went into the Bermel bazaar to give back documents that were taken out of the village a year ago.

The people of the village gathered in the middle of the bazaar to the sound of a beating drum, where ANA and American SOF soldiers greeted them. Aid was handed out and a presentation was made to village leaders returning the seized documents.

The documents were taken because they were thought to be suspicious and belonging to al-Qaida and Taliban, said ANA Maj. Wahab, 2nd Brigade, 1st Kandac (battalion).

When it was discovered that they were personal affects of the people, the U.S. and ANA soldiers returned them.

"We are the new national army," Wahab said. "It is important that we are the ones who give them aid. It shows them that we are here for them and that they are safe. Once they know this, then they will work with us to stay safe."

Wahab is proud of his new army and boasts that for the first time in the history of Afghanistan, people of different tribes have come together for a common goal — and the goal is the rebuilding of the country and the safety of its people.