DESERT DEVIL DISPATCH

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2/504th PIR paratroopers sweep Baghran Valley during Operation Viper. See story on Page 3.

Brothers-in-Arms Against PX Fire

Command Sgt. Maj. Abdo Zacheus

ASTF CSM

On Feb. 21, at or about 6:20 a.m. Zulu, the Kandahar Post Exchange was quickly engulfed in what appeared to be a towering inferno. Upon my arrival it was apparent that a lot of property was destroy by the fire.

This commentary is not about the fire or the damage that it caused, this story is about the soldiers, airmen, Marines, and civilian workers who, in the mist of the confusion, stepped forward and helped with the fire hoses, fork lifts and engineering equipment needed to battle the fire.

A Marine lance corporal was coming out of the gym and came face to face with the fire. He made an attempt to put out the fire to no avail. He then proceeded to assist the Army and Air Force Exchange Service personnel with the evacuation of the tent and stayed with the firefighters fighting the fire.

An Army sergeant first class working at the Air Field Arrival and Departure Group witnessed the fire, jumped on a forklift, and proceeded to the fire at the PX location. The SFC saved some critical equipment from the fire and proceeded to assist the firefighters with the water hoses.

Finally, I witnessed civilian workers and soldiers getting equipment out of tents that were in the path of the fire with no hesitation whatsoever.

This is teamwork at its best. It is unfortunate that the hard work of many people was gone in a matter of minutes, but the work put on by airmen, soldiers, Marines and civilian personnel prevented further loss of property and human life. I am proud to be in this task force and serve with men and women who work to make this place a better one.

U.S. Army photo by Capt. Thomas Enright

Firefighters, soldiers, airmen and a Marine pose for a photo after the PX fire.

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Warm Weather Heralds Scorpion Activity in Afghanistan

By Lt. Col. (Dr.) Tom Martinko
Acting Brigade Surgeon

As the temperatures start to rise, scorpions and other arachnids are coming out of their dormant state.

There have been reports of scorpions in boots already. There are two primary species of scorpions in Afghanistan: the sun scorpion and the yellow scorpion. Both are nocturnal and live mostly in wood piles and under rocks, but often will come into tents.

The sun scorpion is small, thin and looks a lot like a spider. It is non-venomous.

The yellow scorpion is venomous. Its sting is similar to a bee sting, causing localized pain, redness or blanching, and swelling unless someone is allergic to bee and wasp stings. If you are allergic to bee or wasp stings, symptoms can be severe.

Above: Sun scorpion, which favors the dark. Right: Yellow scorpion.

Treatment of a scorpion sting is similar to treatment of a bee sting. Wash the skin in the area of the sting. Ice or cold compresses will limit the swelling. An antihistamine will also help to diminish the reaction.

If itching in the throat, difficulty breathing, or severe swelling develop, report to an aid station immediately for an injection of epinephrine, benadryl, steroid, and cimetadine.

People with a history of allergy to bees or wasps should carry an epi-pen with them. There are also bees and wasps in Afghanistan.

The best way to deal with scorpions is by prevention. Do not torment them. If picking up wood or rocks, use gloves. In the morning, shake out clothes and boots before putting them on.

Operation Viper Sweeps Through Baghran Valley

By Cpl. Keith Kluwe
109th Mobile Public Affairs Det.

It was a cool, clear morning Feb. 19 when paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division and other supporting elements air-assaulted into the southern end of the Baghran Valley, starting "Operation Viper."

The goal of Operation Viper, conducted in the Hemand Province, was to search villages in the valley and recover weapons caches and other war material left by hostile Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. Coalition forces were searching for hostile forces as well.

Soldiers on the operation met with much less resistance than they were expecting, said paratroopers on the ground. There were no Coalition forces soldiers wounded or killed during Operation Viper, but that doesn't mean things were safe for soldiers in the field.

"When I search a home, I open the door and hope nobody inside is armed," said Spc. Jonathon Kohnen, a paratrooper with Alpha Co., 2nd Batallion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. "I do my job and look for weapons and ammunition, stuff they shouldn't have. I try to be pretty decent and not tear up the place."

Civil affairs soldiers contacted village leaders — with the help of local interpreters — and asked for permission to search homes in the village and cooperate during the house-to-house search.

"We try to be as un-intrusive as possible," said 1st Lt. Jeffrey Pickler, a platoon leader in Bravo Co., 2/504th PIR. "We have to search everything, false walls and things like that. We want to be respectful but we have to do our job. We have to be thorough to find anything."

More than 20 rifles of various types, a machine gun and more than 2,000 rounds of ammunition and other war materials were confiscated during the searches on the first day.

"This operation is happening one step at a time," said Capt. Andrew Zieseniss, commander of Bravo Co., 2/504th PIR. "It's not a war where we're fighting a conventional army like World War II. There are bad guys in civilian clothes. It's old-fashioned detective work, digging through hay stacks, literally."

Soldiers, interpreters and civilian media reporters were camped throughout the valley where temperatures during night fell below freezing. Daytime temperatures were comfortable and the skies were clear.

Operation Viper will continue until completion, but day-to-day activities of the hostile elements in the valley was interrupted, said the ground commander.

"The leadership of the Taliban is on the run and are not functioning as well as they were yesterday," said Lt. Col. Charles A. Flynn, 2/504th PIR commander. "We're disrupting their activity and denying them their ability to operate."

Photos by Dave Swanson/Philadelphia Enquirer

Top: A weapons cache is found in one of the villages searched during Operation Viper.

Left: 2/504th PIR paratroopers search a house.

Above: A 2/504th PIR paratrooper keeps a perimeter watch.

527th Engineer Medics Assist With 1st MEDCAP

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

AHMERJAN, Afghanistan -- Despite an intensive knowledge of medical care through their civilian jobs back home, medics from the 527th Engineer Company learned first-hand the problems facing Afghanistan after a civil affairs - medical mission here Tuesday.

"Back home I work in a charity hospital, so I've seen this type of sickness (before), but this is on a whole new level," said Spc. Dennis Gee, a combat medic with the 527th Engineer Co., who is a third-year nursing school student.

The Louisiana Army National Guard medics got off relatively easy. At most civil affairs missions, hundreds of people throng the impromptu aid station, all clamoring to get their children, or themselves, treated. Most of the 350 villagers, however, were in the city of Kandahar, an hour drive northwest.

Though the village is relatively close to Kandahar, medical care is dear to the people residing there. Last year six people died because they were unable to get treated in time or could not afford to drive north for repeated visits.

Muhammad Shah, one of the village elders, said he hopes someone, whether it's the U.S. Army or a non-governmental organization, can build a clinic in his area. His uncle was one of the six who died last year, due to a chronic sickness.

A civil affairs officer participating in a meeting with the village elder said it could be some time before aid will come to the village.

"The biggest problem in getting schools and clinics built is that their's still fighting in the area," he said.

1st Lt. Bill DeWitt, battalion medical officer, right, gives a boy a vitamin boost for malnutrition symptoms.

Left: A toddler looks at shoes and socks donated by Americans, perhaps wondering how he is going to get them on.

Above: A soldier provides security to the civil affairs event, using binoculars to scan the perimeter.

Around the World

U.N. Chief Censures Iraq

The United Nations chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, has censured Iraq for its lack of cooperation, in a report due to reach the 15 security council members either later today or at the weekend.

A draft of the report is critical of the Iraqis for dragging their feet, and admits that the results of the weapons inspections have been "very limited so far".

The document claims that Baghdad has not done enough to either deliver proscribed weapons to the inspectors or show evidence that they have been destroyed.

But the report, delivered to the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, on Wednesday, seems unlikely to provide a solution to the deadlock on the security council. *(Story courtesy of David Teather, The Guardian)*

Threat Warning Lowered

WASHINGTON — The Bush administration lowered the nation's terrorist threat level on Thursday from "high risk" orange to "elevated risk" yellow, signaling a waning of immediate danger.

But officials urged Americans to remain vigilant.

Reducing the level is "not a signal ... that the danger of a terrorist attack is past," Attorney General John Ashcroft said in a joint statement with Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge.

It is "only an indication that some of the extra protective measures enacted by government and the private sector may be reduced at this time," they said.

One change was the scaling back of random vehicle checks near airports.

President Bush approved the decision Thursday morning, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said. *(Story courtesy of Eunice Moscoso, Atlanta Journal-Constitution)*

Mr. Rogers Dead at 74

Fred Rogers' death Thursday saddened the millions of families who have watched his long-running public TV show, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

Quietly, calmly, he taught children to respect one another and to understand themselves, their friends and their families. With the mild-mannered Rogers as their guide, kids learned to conquer fears and channel anger.

Younger viewers instantly grasped Rogers' authenticity. It took adults a little longer to know that Fred Rogers — TV star, ordained minister, family man — was genuine. *(Story courtesy of Seattle Post-Intelligencer)*

Cowboys Drop Smith

Emmitt Smith, the NFL's all-time leading rusher who was released by the Dallas Cowboys on Thursday, plans to continue his 13-year career, but don't expect his next stop to be Houston.

Texans sources said it was doubtful the team would have any interest in Smith, who was scheduled to count almost $10 million against Dallas' salary cap.

It's not out of the question the Texans might consider Smith if there is no market for his services and he becomes willing to play for the veteran's minimum.

"Emmitt has been a great back in the NFL, but right now, we're addressing other positions in free agency," Texans general manager Charley Casserly said. *(Story courtesy of Carlton Thompson, Houson Chronicle)*

Woods, Mickelson Advance

CARLSBAD, Calif. — Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson advanced to the third round of the World Matchplay Championship amid pouring rain on Thursday.

Woods, the world number one, easily dispatched South Korea's K.J. Choi five and three, while Mickelson, the world number three, beat Brad Faxon, three and two.

Britain's Darren Clarke reached the final 16 by defeating Davis Love III seven and six while Peter Lonard of Australia also advanced with an impressive five and four win over New Zealand's Phil Tataurangi.

(Story courtesy of Alex Miceli, Reuters)

Pvt. Murpy's Law
by Mark Baker

You might be Airborne if ...

if you go to a dinner party with your slacks tucked in your shoes.

— Mike Wilson (from partrooper.net)

Kandahar Weather Forecast

Today
Partly Cloudy
Hi/Low: 60/30 F
Precip: 0%

Saturday
Partly Cloudy
Hi/Low: 58/26 F
Precip: 0 %

Sunday
Partly Cloudy
Hi/Low: 54/21 F
Precip: 0 %

Monday
Partly Cloudy/Windy
Hi/Low: 51/21 F
Precip: 0 %

Tuesday
Partly Cloudy/Windy
Hi/Low: 60/22 F
Precip: 0 %

Wednesday
Partly Cloudy/Windy
Hi/Low: 62/30 F
Precip: 0 %

Thursday
Partly Cloudy
Hi/Low: 64/37 F
Precip: 0 %

Information courtesy of Weather.com

Airborne History

American parachutists — Devils in Baggy Pants — are less than 100 meters from my outpost line. I can't sleep at night; they pop up from nowhere and we never know when or how they will strike next. Seems like the black-hearted devils are everywhere.....

(Translated from the diary of a dead German officer at Anzio - February 1944)

At 3:30 a.m. on Sept. 9, 1943, the amphibious landings at Salerno began. The Allied hold on the beachhead became tenuous when, on Sept. 12, the Germans launched a successful counterattack. The situation became so critical that Gen. Mark Clark, 5th Army commander, ordered the 82nd Airborne to prepare to parachute directly on the beachhead.

In order to guide the C-47 pilots to the shrinking drop zone, oil drums filled with gasoline-soaked sand were ignited every 50 yards when signaled. On the night of Sept. 13, 1,300 men of the 504th took off and parachuted on to a drop zone that was a mere 1,200 yards long and 800 yards wide south of the Sele River near Salerno.

The sight of the paratroopers floating down gave the defending troops a morale boost as well as badly needed reinforcements.

The actions of the days that followed were, in the words of Clark, "responsible for saving the Salerno beachhead."

As the 504th Regiment (minus 3rd Battalion) took the high ground at Altavilla, the enemy counterattacked and the 6th Corps commander suggested the unit withdraw to safer ground.

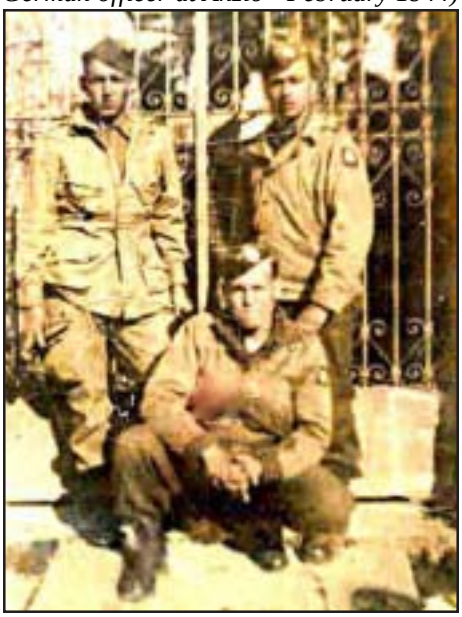

Photo courtesy of Bob Swanson

Photograph of some troopers from F Co., 2nd Battalion, 504th PIR.

Epitomizing the determined spirit of the 504th Regiment, Colonel Reuben Tucker vehemently replied, "Retreat, hell! — Send me my other battalion!"

The 3rd Battalion then rejoined the 504th, the enemy was repulsed, and the Salerno beachhead was saved. By Sept. 18 the Germans withdrew, conceding the success of the landings.

U.S. Army photo.

82nd Airborne soldiers before dropping into Salerno.

(Information and photos courtesy of Dominic Biello and his 82nd Airborne history Web site at: http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/5340/division/82_overview.html)