



## ‘CHOSIN’ PLATOON CLIMBS TO VICTORY IN KORENGAL

SERGEANT FIRST CLASS MICHAEL PINTAGRO

**CAMP BLESSING, Afghanistan** – In spring of 2006, Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, “Combat” Company, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, Task Force Spartan, patrolled the Shuriak Valley during Operation Mountain Lion, moving into strategic position atop the peak of Abas Ghar as the highly successful mission wound toward its conclusion.

Like other infantrymen from the 10th Mountain Division’s “Chosin” Battalion, the 2nd Platoon, Combat Company Soldiers conducted operations in the Shuriak and Pech Valleys of northeastern Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of Mountain Lion.

Were their experiences typical, the war story might have ended there — combat duty done, insurgent operations disrupted, bragging rights and a place in Spartan Brigade as well as Chosin Battalion history safely secured.

But for the men of the 2nd Platoon, the story was in its early chapters.

Selected to “stand up” the Korengal Outpost, the infantrymen shifted to the site of a dilapidated lumber yard rather than the relatively comfortable confines of a forward operating base.

In all, the Chosin Soldiers spent 115 days in remote outposts, camps and unmitigated mountain wilderness along the river valleys of northeastern Afghanistan. Only a brief pause at Asadabad to resupply interrupted their stay “in the field.”

Many American Soldiers, and many Spartans in particular, spend substantial chunks of time in the field. Yet the Chosin troopers’ experience differs not only in the quantity of their field time but in the types

of missions they typically perform. For 2nd Platoon troopers, “Mountain Infantry” and “Light Infantry” described present realities, not historic legacies.

“When I got off the plane in Bagram, I noticed all the mountains around the base,” recalled Private First Class Jonathan Demler, a 22-year-old 2nd Platoon infantryman from Niagara Falls, N.Y. “Now we (are) up in those mountains, climbing them every day.”

Indeed, Demler and colleagues performed the vast bulk of their missions on foot. While fellow Soldiers in other parts of Afghanistan — not to mention Iraq and Kuwait — typically travel in vehicular

Photos by Sergeant First Class Michael Pintagro

*An assistant gunner with 2nd Platoon, “Combat” Company, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, Task Force Spartan, monitors his sector at a check post along the Pech River Road in northeastern Afghanistan.*



convoys, the 2nd Platoon infantrymen traveled by foot over, around, and through the most rugged terrain imaginable.

The length of the operation and size of the participating element varied according to mission and circumstance. Missions ranged from engagements and village assessments to combat operations against known anti-Coalition militants (ACM).

Operating in an isolated, rural, mountainous region located close to the Pakistani border and home to known ACMs, the Chosin troopers predictably made frequent contact with the enemy. The Soldiers said they averaged an indirect fire attack, typically a rocket or mortar assault, around every other day. They also met the enemy frequently during their daily foot patrols through the mountain passes and river beds of the Korengal and Pech Valleys.

“Sometimes, we’d get contact every day for a week, then go a few days with none at all. On patrols, it was around a ‘50-50’ chance of receiving contact,” McQuade said, adding that the enemy frequently “set up ambushes on cliffs and riverbeds. They always seemed to attack from the high ground.”

The native of York, Maine, who only recently celebrated his 26th birthday, recalled one memorable patrol during which a Chosin team “came around a bend of a trail and came face-to-face with three ACM. Our guys opened up first, killing two of the three. But we immediately received fire from another direction and withdrew.”

Many of the platoon’s young troopers took the gunfights in stride.

“By the time you could start thinking ‘I hope I don’t get shot,’ you’d already be firing back,” Demler said. “And then, before you knew it, it would be all over.”

The grueling physical challenges posed by the terrain and the mission impressed many in the platoon more than any perils presented by the enemy. Soldiers and leaders alike described the pace as relentless. In theory, Soldiers alternated duties, patrolling some days and providing security or serving on the quick reaction



*An infantryman with C Company, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, mans a check post in northeastern Afghanistan.*

force on others. But given the velocity of the operation tempo, the frequency of enemy attacks and the precarious condition of the camp, the weary infantrymen enjoyed little rest.

“There would be days when we’d get back, drink some water and turn around and go out two hours later,” McQuade said. “If you were lucky, maybe you had a chance to wash your clothes or sew your uniform before you went back out.”

“It’s the toughest physical thing I’ve ever had to do in my life,” added Sergeant Bradley Brinkman, a 23-year-old 2nd Platoon team leader from Sacramento, Calif. “It pushes you to your limit — and then you look up and you still have two more clicks to go.”

The endurance of the Chosin infantrymen reached proportions almost comical in their extremity.

“We had one guy who fell like 30 feet off the side of a mountain,” recounted

Specialist Issac Jackson, a young infantryman from Plattsburg, Mo. “He’s a .240 gunner and he broke his butt stock. He landed in a riverbed. He got up and began pulling security by himself with a ‘9-mil.’ We asked him if he was OK. He said, ‘yeah,’ and we just continued the mission.”

The versatile infantrymen not only “humped,” climbed, fought and shot, but built. The establishment of the Korengal Outpost, envisioned by Colonel John Nicholson, the Task Force Spartan commander, as an institutional manifestation of the Coalition’s commitment to the security and welfare of the region, represents an accomplishment of strategic magnitude.

They started from scratch.

When the Chosin infantrymen arrived at the Korengal in the spring, Americans — mainly Marines who occupied the ground during Operation Mountain Lion — serving in the “outpost” enjoyed the use of a single hardstand building. A large, circular concertina-wire boundary encompassed ruins, fighting positions, decayed lumber stocks,

human and animal waste, and a patch of reasonably level ground pressed into service as a landing zone. Aircraft landed and departed within a dozen or so yards of the single building, shaking loose makeshift doors and shutters and filling the hapless edifice with dust and debris.

Aided by combat engineers from the 27th Engineer Group from Fort Bragg, N.C., as well as engineer assets organic to the Spartan Brigade, the Chosin infantrymen slowly and painfully transformed the disaster site into a functional outpost. Soldiers serving at the “KOP” currently live in tents and enjoy access to functional if modest dining, wash and sanitary facilities as well as limited telephone and recreational services. Perversely, electrical service arrived as the 2nd Platoon Soldiers finally rotated out.

The men described living conditions at the KOP during their tenure as, well, Spartan.

“It was cool at night, (very) hot during the day,” said Staff Sergeant Chris Bryant, currently the senior enlisted 2nd Platoon Soldier. Perpetually donning “battle rattle” under the withering northeastern Afghan sun — daytime temperatures rarely fell below 100 degrees in the summer and occasionally reached as high as 130 — Soldiers struggled to keep hydrated. For three iceless weeks, the warriors consumed hot water. Some went entire days without urinating. Chosin troopers expertly assessed times and distances in terms of water requirements.

“You could give any of our guys a grid and he’d tell you exactly how much water you had to bring,” Private First Class Lucas Amyx, a 19-year-old 2nd Platoon infantryman from Cincinnati, said with a smile. “The packing list would be three-fourths water. Just three camel backs, some meals and your ammo — you didn’t even think about putting anything else in your assault pack.”

Soldiers serving on major theater operating bases typically find shelter from the sweltering Afghan summer heat in their living quarters, if not in comfortable work spaces, dining facilities, gyms or Morale, Welfare and Recreation establishments. Upon arrival at the KOP, 2nd Platoon Soldiers, by contrast, lived in a draw, forming makeshift shelters with timber beams, pieces of tarp, ponchos or clothing.

Food consisted principally of meals, ready-to-eat, supplemented occasionally by “pogie bait” garnered from care packages or regional bases and Afghan fare prepared by ANA colleagues or purchased from locals.

Not surprisingly under such circumstances, the 2nd Platoon Soldiers lost weight — sometimes significant amounts. Bryant, by no means fat to begin with, dropped 37 pounds. His “PL,” a lean, compact young man who could ill afford it, lost 23. Leaders estimated the men lost around 20 pounds on average during the “115 days.”

“Korengal,” Bryant observed one morning as he stretched his hand across his belly. “Asadabad,” the Columbia, S.C., resident added with a gesture toward the meatier midsection of a colleague enjoying the “plush” conditions of Asadabad — in truth only a small regional base featuring modest amenities.

When in charitable moods, 2nd Platoon Soldiers characterize sanitation at the KOP as “primitive.” The Chosin infantrymen typically relied on stream water or small amounts of bottled water for whatever washing they attempted. Uniforms, generally soiled and not infrequently torn into rags, went weeks without cleaning.

Service at the KOP did provide a few unique opportunities, mainly cultural in nature. The allies, for instance, shared living and working space at the outpost, officially an Afghan facility.

The platoon’s Soldiers forged tight bonds with the ANA troops they served alongside. Nearly every mission launched from the KOP, McQuade pointed out, involved Afghans as well as Americans. As they labored together against a ruthless, determined foe amid austere conditions, the Soldiers developed mutual respect and even affection.

“They were excellent,” McQuade said of his Afghan brothers in arms. “They’d pick up on things we wouldn’t. One time an ANA soldier reached down into the road and picked up an (improvised explosive device). We didn’t even notice it.”

ANA soldiers, he added, picked up on “The cultural things, especially the language. Sometimes, they’d just know an attack was coming.”

The American warriors also grew to admire their ANA counterparts’ ferocity in battle.

“You shoot at them, and they’ll chase you down until they get you,” Amyx said. “They’ll scale walls to get at the enemy.”

The Americans noted the many essential similarities of the allies and their services. Similar in age to their American allies, ANA soldiers represent a national institution drawn from a broad cross-section of ethnic and cultural groups. Just as the U.S. military blends Soldiers of a variety of European, Asian, African and Latin American ancestry representing numerous strands of Christianity as well as other faiths, the ANA unites Sunni and Shiite Muslims of Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek as well as Pashtun extraction.

The Americans learned about enemies as well as friends.

Amyx said events that occurred during one patrol demonstrated the insurgents’ complete indifference to the lives of innocent Afghan civilians, including children.

“One time we were walking through a riverbed past a kid,” the infantryman recalled. “He was shaking hands with us and everything.”

Anti-Coalition assailants, he continued, “just started firing into the area with no regard for the kid or any of the other locals in the area. The kid’s family was waiting for him on the other side. They kept screaming for (the insurgents) to stop, but they just kept shooting with no regard for human life.”

While the young men typically describe their accomplishments in earthy or ironic terms, they clearly appreciate the gravity of their mission and the stakes riding on its successful accomplishment.

“Being part of two monumental things in Afghanistan — Mountain Lion and standing up the KOP — is real exciting,” Amyx said.

“There’s a permanent base on the Korengal now, and we’re the ones who started it,” McQuade said. He added that his platoon’s insertion into an ACM stronghold also made a significant contribution to the allied effort.

If training rotations in the humid Louisiana woods and deserts of southern California, field problems in the frozen northern New York forests, deployment and shared grief hadn’t done so already, the “115 days” molded the platoon into a family.

“You’re going to scream and yell and get upset every once in a while, but I have a lot of confidence in these guys,” Demler said of his 2nd Platoon brothers. “I’m glad they’re on my side.”

“You just learn to trust people,” Brinkman added. “People you might not get along with in the rear might be your best friends when you’re out.”

“We were a pretty well-rounded, tight-knit platoon to begin with, but being in that kind of environment for that length of time just brings a platoon closer together,” McQuade observed. “They know the only people out there with them are the dudes on their right and left. It helps them perform better. They know they always have to give 110 percent.”

---

**Sergeant First Class Michael Pintagro** is currently serving as the Public Affairs NCOIC for Task Force Spartan in Afghanistan.

---