

Afghans Reach Out to U.S. Route-Clearance Patrol

Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs  
Courtesy Story

By Army Sgt. Jon E. Dougherty

FORWARD OPERATING BASE SHARANA, Afghanistan - As Army 1st Lt. Phil Kirk pulled the walkie-talkie from his hip, disappointment was obvious on his face and in his voice.

"Did you hear that?" Kirk asked, shaking his head. "Sounds like medevac is 'red.' We're not going anywhere."

The lieutenant was referencing radio traffic from the tactical operations center informing him that his newly formed route clearance patrol's first mission would be delayed for several hours because helicopters were unable to fly, presumably due to poor weather.

The unit, nicknamed the "Black Jacks," was pieced together last month with members of the 203rd Engineer Battalion, Missouri Army National Guard, and 5th Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery [the 5-3], 17th Fires Brigade, an active-duty unit based at Fort Lewis, Wash.

As Kirk's troops huddled to try to ward off the bite of the morning chill on Jan. 30, a helicopter could be heard in the distance. As it grew closer to the landing zone, some of Kirk's soldiers turned to look at its approach.

"We'll get out of here later today," Kirk said confidently as he walked away.

Later that day, Kirk and his troops formed up in their vehicles and moved out onto the paved highway which snaked through nearby Sharana and into the distant, snow-covered mountains.

"All elements, let's go," came Kirk's order over the radio. The Black Jacks' first mission was underway.

The convoy spread out along the highway in tactical formation. Each vehicle's gunner was mindful of his sector of responsibility as the mine-resistant, ambushed-protected vehicles made their way through towns and villages. Crowds of Afghans watched the convoy as it passed through each village. Many of the children waved at the lumbering vehicles.

For the most part, the convoy was able to remain on the main road, but it was when the U.S. troops had to maneuver their MRAPs off the main route – because the primary road was washed out or otherwise damaged – that the journey became nerve-wracking. Planting improvised explosive devices in road bypasses is a favorite tactic of the enemy.

Late in the afternoon, the convoy rolled into a village which would serve as the endpoint of the day's patrol. Two-thirds of the way through the village the convoy's lead vehicle, commanded by Staff Sgt. Gary Rhodes of Wyandot, Okla., Forward Support Co., 203rd Engineers, stopped short of a ditch that had been dug across the road by Afghan road crews. A narrow bypass had been built around the ditch. Rhodes decided to use the bypass to go around the obstacle. It was the only way through.

"Leader, this is One. We've got a ditch across the road, so we're taking a bypass, over," Rhodes announced over the radio, informing Kirk and the rest of the convoy of the situation ahead.

Rhodes' vehicle plodded along, its engine emitting a throaty roar as the driver maneuvered the sharp left turn in the middle of the bypass, aiming the vehicle back toward the main road. Then, the vehicle's right rear tire sank three feet into the muck within a few feet of the main road, bringing it to an immediate stop.

Several Afghans; among them a local operator of a road grader; arrived and quickly understood the dilemma facing the American patrol. Without hesitating, and despite a language barrier, the Afghans made it clear to the Black Jacks who had dismounted to survey the situation that they wanted to use a nearby road grader; which already was positioned on the side of the bypass in front of Rhodes' vehicle; to pull the MRAP free.

It took several minutes to attach a steel cable to the grader and the stuck vehicle. However, three-quarters-of-an-inch thick cable snapped almost immediately after the grader began tugging on the MRAP.

Another attempt to free the vehicle also came to naught when a towing rope snapped. At that point Kirk, his men and the Afghans determined that two vehicles pulling simultaneously would be needed to free the MRAP from the mud. The grader operator used his machine to cut deeply into the bypass and mix fresh, dryer dirt with the surface mud to create a more stable driving platform.

Finally, everything and everyone was in place. A second tow line was attached to the front of Rhodes' vehicle and to the back of another U.S. vehicle; with the wave of an arm from one of Kirk's men, both tow vehicles lurched forward and partially pulled the entrapped vehicle from the mud. They still would have to pull it from the ditch.

In the fading light, the Americans and the Afghans rigged another vehicle to pull out the trapped MRAP. Kirk's crews decided to use the convoy's massive wrecker with its powerful winch and attach it to the mud-trapped vehicle's rear bumper. The crews knew they were running short of time. This final effort, they decided, would simply have to work.

First, the signal was given to the wrecker's winch operator who slowly, deliberately tightened the steel cable attached to the MRAP's bumper. Inch by inch, the MRAP's rear wheel was pulled from the mud. At the right moment, another signal was given to the two vehicles in front to begin moving the MRAP forward. Engines roared, and Rhodes' trapped vehicle was finally freed, to the delight of the U.S. troops and Afghans.

A few hours later Rhode's group arrived back at FOB Sharana, no worse for wear.

Rhodes was philosophical about the mishap.

"You know, when you're lead truck, you can't just push things out of the way, you have to move forward as best you can," he said. "We had one way to go and we had to go in. But we're alright. We handled it as best we could."

Rhodes was grateful for the show of support provided by local Afghans.

"They see us out there looking out for them and trying to take care of them, and I think they really appreciate it," he said.

Kirk said he was impressed with the assistance provided by Afghan National Police.

"It was great how [they] were able to go into the village and get the construction operators to assist," said Kirk, who hails from Waterloo, III.