THE dROP

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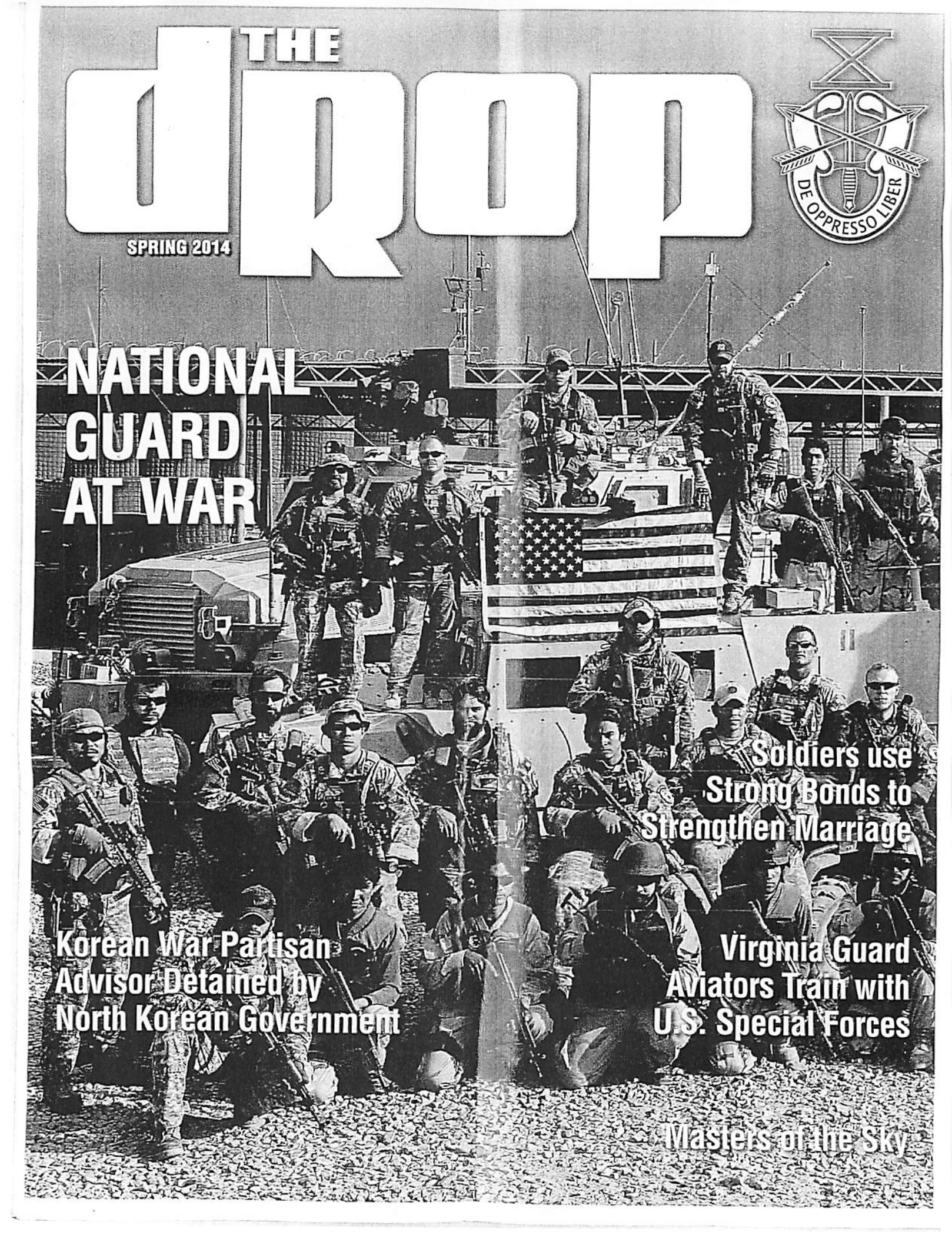

NATIONAL GUARD AT WAR

Soldiers use Strong Bonds to Strengthen Marriage

Korean War Partisan Advisor Detained by North Korean Government

Virginia Guard Aviators Train with U.S. Special Forces

Masters of the Sky

19TH GROUP 2ND BATTALION

2 Battalion, 19 Special Forces Group (Airborne) experiences in Afghanistan during the 2008-09 rotation are life lasting. Some were very positive while others were not. To our battalion, Afghanistan was just another mission to add to a long list of deployments. I have a specific story about a firefight that Operational Detachment "A" (ODA) 9224 was engaged in during this rotation. The significance of this firefight is that we nearly lost one of our own. In this story, you will hear about heroism and courage under fire of Special Forces soldiers and the brave Aviators who knowingly flew their MEDEVAC aircraft into harm's way to recover one of our own. Thanks to these brave men and two surgical teams, our brother survived.

From the beginning of the deployment, we had outstanding leaders who cared about the men; leaders such as our Commander LTC HB Gilliam, CSM Kevin Harry, and our XO MAJ Jones. The leadership was focused on preparing the battalion for war. We had soldiers like MSG Dave Miles, who was awarded the Silver Star for his heroic action during an intense firefight in Iraq in which several Special Forces soldiers were killed. If you can find time, please "Google" SFC Miles to read about his courage under fire. We had great leaders helping to set us up for a successful deployment. During our 6 months rotation in combat, our battalion had few injuries and no loss of life. During this period, this was truly a phenomenon.

Our ODAs went through our Pre-Mobilization Training (PMT) during Oct-Dec 2008 at Hawthorn, Nevada. The surrounding terrain is similar to Afghanistan and is more supportive to realistic training than any other location CONUS. After a rigorous 90 day PMT, we returned home for a short leave to spend our last days with our family before departing. On Jan 3rd, 2/19th SFG deployed to Afghanistan as a Battalion whole. As we left our homes, we kissed our wives, hugged our children, and said final goodbyes. The stunning realization set in, this may be the last time we would see our families.

The ODAs were given their assignments prior to arriving in Afghanistan which allowed them time to conduct appropriate Military Decision Making Process. ODA 9224 was assigned the Ghazni Province which has 19 districts, almost 1 million people and 9k square miles. The environment was unlike anything we could have prepared for in the U.S. Hawthorn may have looked like Afghanistan but it was the elevation that was dramatically different. The average sea level for home is about 1,200 ft. FOB Ghazni, Afghanistan was 4,500 ft. The moment we landed, we could feel difference. The air was thinner and it was harder to breath.

We met the ODA we were replacing and soon afterwards we met our Partner Nation Force which was Afghanistan National Police (ANP). The ANP had been trained by more than 30 rotations of SF soldiers and were combat hardened. In total, our ODA had 30 ANP. They were the great men, committed, loyal, and truly wanted to make a difference in their country. They had our backs and we had theirs.

I will never forget our first mission to the Ajiristan District which is in the western portion of Ghanni. The only way to travel there was by Chinook as our vehicles could not traverse the mountain passes due to the heavy snowfall. Our battle space owner was conducting an aerial resupply mission and asked if we wanted to participate, of course we said yes. 9224 's Alpha, Zulu, and Delta flew that day. During the flight, we remember the difficulty of breathing under the weight of our body armor while flying at 12K altitude. When we landed, we exited the bird and found ourselves walking in 2 feet of snow. As we moved closer to the outpost, we were getting very winded and stopped to rest. The lesson learned that day was to acclimate before conducting combat patrols. Each of us had 70+ lbs of equipment. We completed the mission, we returned to FOB Ghazni.

During the winter, there's a significant amount of snow. The temperatures at night were in the single digits and miserable at times. As spring



approached, the ground thawed. The fighting season began. On one of our first patrols, we got our MRAP stuck 7 times in less than 200 yards. It took all day to self recover. As the rotation went along, we became more familiar and the people in the villages. Later in the deployment, there would be a mission that would test the mettle of each man on our ODA.

This mission was significant for several reasons. During this firefight we had more than 26 EKIAs, including the future Taliban Commander of 3 of the most dangerous districts in the Ghazni Province. One of our own was gravely wounded but survived. SFC Mark Warner was awarded the Silver Star for his actions and three were awarded the Bronze Stars with valor. This was the only Silver Star awarded during the entire rotation. There were a total of 42 SFODAs in three Battalions operating in Afghanistan.

This mission began as any other we had conducted. At our daily ODA meeting, our intelligence sergeant provided us with an update on a village named KhalaKel, in the Qarabaugh District, 45 minutes south of Ghazni City. The Taliban were attacking the legitimate forces of Afghanistan on the main supply route almost every day. The last report we received was that 3 ANPs were ambushed and killed. We knew the Taliban Commander was responsible as we had been tracking him for several months. We became very familiar with

the phrase, patience becomes a virtue. It took a long time, but we were finally able to get information from local nationals on the village where the Commander lived. One thing that made this mission challenging was the Taliban controlled the cell phone towers and after nightfall, they would shut them down. We were determined not to hit a dry hole, which means we didn't get our target. This had occurred several times during previous operations and it forced the Taliban to go underground. For this mission, we stood up 7 straight nights consecutively with our vehicles prepared to roll out but due to lack of confirmation, we stood down each time. Tensions were high on the ODA as we wanted to get this guy. On the 8th night, we received word there was another ambush. This time there were considerably more Taliban Fighters on the ambush than in past. Based on this information, we launched the mission at 1600 hours.

Our plan was to separate our convoys into several elements, leaving the gate at different times, and taking different routes to reduce our SOF convey signature. The first element left the gate and made a right, then drove through the city. The second element left 20 minutes later, exited the gate, made a left and headed south along the MSR. The third element left 5 minutes later. They were the key to this mission. 14 of our ANP travelling in an unmarked vehicle proceeded to the target location. The Taliban were watching all entrances and exits of the village. The first element traveled down the MSR towards the village and established a northern blocking position. The second element traveled toward the village from the south, again establishing a southern blocking position. The third element entered the village in a regular vehicle and would hold ground preventing the escape of the Taliban until we arrived. In order for us to make contact with the Taliban, we had to be less conventional in our way of thinking.

With all elements closing in on the target, our convoy remained on the highway heading south. The plan was to parallel to the village and pull over on the side of the roadway as if we had maintenance issues. We exited our vehicle, opened the hood, and poured water on the engine block to create steam. If anyone was watching, it looked as if one of our vehicles had overheated. We were to give our other elements 15 minutes to make contact or get into position before we would close in from the east. Our only way of communicating between elements was signal flares. We waited 10 minutes then decided to move. We closed the hood, made the left, and began moving at a normal rate of speed towards the village. We were about a mile out when red star clusters lit up the sky which meant contact.

We increased our speed over the rough terrain in an effort to reach the target. We could see RPG's and tracers flying as we approached. We called Troops in Contact to higher informing them of our situation and requested air support. When a TIC gets called, everyone stays off the NET and all support goes to that element in contact. As we arrived, we surrounded and cordoned off any escape route. I directed my vehicle to the north side of the village where I could best control the firefight. While moving into position, I noticed that I already had 2 ANP down with gunshot wounds although neither was life threatening. The remainder of my men moved in to support their ANP brethren. Upon arriving, the gunfire slowed, but then the Taliban realized they were surrounded. At this point, the firefight reached a new level. We began receiving large volumes of direct fire from the village. It seemed as if every hole or window of the target building was a source of contact. As the firefight continued, we formulated a plan for dynamic entry into the building. ANP and SF members stacked on the primary door with SFC Sean Clifton, who was my intelligence sergeant being the primary breacher. As they stacked, Sean placed himself in front of the door and gave it a good kick. The door opened and before he could enter, he was met with a barrage of 7.62 caliber rounds from the Taliban Fighters inside. As is the norm, the information we received was incorrect as it was reported there would only be 6 or so total fighters. We would later find out that there were between 26 to 32 fighters inside the target building we were attempting to enter. The Taliban were having a Shura to nominate their next Regional Commander. Sean was shot in the lower abdomen where his SAPI did not protect him. He was also shot multiple times in the chest and his hands. The last round hit his NVGs on his helmet barely missing his facial area. Sean collapsed backwards from the force of the rounds hitting him. From my position, I was unable to observe everything occurring during the attack. I saw Sean run around the building and collapse when he reached SFC Mark Warner, my medical sergeant. The call came over the NET that we had a man down. In my mind, I thought, "no big deal, a superficial wound, continues the fight". My other medical Sergeant, SFC Matt Sheaffer moved to assist Mark in providing aid to Sean. As Sean was lying on the ground with both Mark and Matt working on him, a Taliban fighter began shooting through a small opening from within the building. Rounds were impacting the ground around the three of them. Mark covered Sean with his body to shield him from further injury. Rounds passed through Mark's legs and all around but none found a home. At this point, Matt and one of my weapons sergeants, SFC Matt Maxwell, removed a grenade from the back of Mark's kit. They maneuvered under fire to the entrance of the door and prepared to toss the grenade inside. Max jumped in front of the door and kicked it once which alerted anyone in the building we were attempting to enter. He kicked it a second time and it opened. He timed his movements perfectly before bullets passed through the doorway. Matt moved around and tossed in the grenade killing 6 Taliban fighters. Mark continued to stabilize Sean as best he could. I had already dropped a 9-line and the MEDEVAC bird was on



their way. We knew the MEDEVAC pilots and their medics from past missions. We had invited them to our cookouts at the FOB and they were always with the team during mission planning and back-briefs. As a result of our relationship, I had 2 fixed wing aircraft overhead within 5 minutes of the firefight. One was a predator drone with hell fire missiles; the other an A10 complete with ordinance. At this time, we had 2 ANPs with gunshot wounds and Sean with a significant wound. We were not about to lose any men by attempting to gain entry. We pulled our main elements back while keeping our north and south security in place. We were still receiving a significant amount of gunfire from the structure. Our 18B weapons sergeant fired 2 x 80MM recoilless rifle rounds into the structure. One round fell short; the other round however was a direct hit. This still did not stem the enemy gunfire. We moved our elements back 600 meters and utilized the A10 and the ordnance it carried. Before we were able to interdict the enemy, the MEDEVAC bird came up on my NET to let me know they were inbound. They approached from the north flying over the building which we were taking fire. We attempted to correct his course via radio transmission but were unsuccessful. As the bird flew over, it took fire. At this point, we engaged the target building with every weapon system available to us. This reduced the Taliban's barrage of gunfire directed as the AC. A few seconds later, the AC landed within 40 feet of our vehicles. Within 1 minute of landing, the AC was once again airborne taking Sean and our ANP brethren to a field hospital in Wardak Province. I dropped 1 X 500 lb GBU bomb on the structure with a delayed fuse. I used the camera system on the predator to sanitize the area 300 meters in all directions to ensure there were no unknowns. We marked the building for the pilot and he dropped the requested ordinance. It impacted the NE side of the building resulting in very little damage to the structure so we dropped another bomb. This one impacted the center of the building reducing the structure to rubble. The ODA moved forward to conduct battle damage assessment and called in the results what we found to higher. After several hours of clearing secondary devices, IEDs and searching the area, we moved back to our FOB. Upon arrival, we contacted our battalion commander to find out Sean's medical status. The BC told us that Sean was in the Wardak Province with 2 medical surgical teams working on him. Typically, there is only one surgical team at this location but conventional forces were preparing for a large mission in the area of operations so the medical support had been increased. Both medical teams worked on Sean through-out the night using over 31 units of blood to keep him alive. In fact, so much blood was used treating Sean, donors were requested to fill the shortage. After the initial surgery and several days of recovery, we were finally informed Sean would live. Once he was stabilized, he was relocated to Baghram, Germany for follow-on medical care. Later, we were able to meet with several of the doctors who gave Sean initial medical care at the field hospital. They told us that in 90% of the situations concerning injuries similar to Sean's, the patient does not survive. Sean's survival was a miracle.

In summary, there would be 26 enemies KIA, 3 High Value Personnel KIA, and 2 High Value Targets KIA, Sean severely wounded and 2 ANP's wounded. I am very happy to say Sean is doing well and recovering with the support of his family and friends. He has been promoted after a long road of recovery. Since his return he and his wife have had a second child. It seems the day Sean was injured; all his lucky stars were aligned. The MEDEVAC bird was on the ground in less than 17 minutes after Sean was injured and he was at the hospital in less than 30 minutes with 2 surgical teams working available. Sean was awarded the Purple Heart with a BSM with Valor pending approval. He did not leave his son fatherless or his wife without a husband on the battlefield that day. Every member of that ODA was a hero on this day. SFC Mark Warner was awarded a Silver Star and SFC Matthew Sheaffer, SFC Sean Clifton and SFC Maxwell were awarded Bronze Stars with Valor.