

Military.com editor Ward Carroll and managing editor Christian Lowe are currently embedded with American troops in eastern Afghanistan. This despatch was published in military.com (who retain copyright) on 21st May 2010

**FORWARD OPERATING BASE RUSHMORE** -- It took elements of First Platoon, Angel Company, 3-187, an hour to navigate a convoy of MRAPs across 10 miles of bumpy dirt road between the Combat Outpost at Yosef Khel to the village of Mest. And that slow ride was considered a good commute by infantry standards -- no IEDs hit; no RPGs fired at them, and no small-arms contact with the enemy.

The day's mission was an "election site survey." The platoon was tasked with taking historical data -- grid information from the previous election that indicated where polling stations had been located, etc. -- and verifying that it might still be viable for the upcoming elections in the fall. It seemed simple and straightforward enough.

But in this rural portion of Afghanistan's Paktika province, nothing is simple and straightforward in terms of moving the population toward self governance -- including establishing security against the Taliban.

The convoy arrived in Mest and was greeted by a small, curious band of local children at the village edge. On an adjacent small hill sat an Afghan National Army outpost. The Afghan soldiers stood by their modest barracks and lookout posts until Capt. Joshua Powers, Angel Company's commander, directed his interpreter -- a handsome young Afghan who favors a Philadelphia Phillies baseball cap along with his camouflage uniform and goes simply by "Matty" -- to call them down.

"We need four ANA to join us for a patrol of the village," Powers said once the handful of Afghans reached the line of parked MRAPs.

The Afghan leader replied that he could spare two. Powers insisted he needed four, and the Afghan relented. Soon, the patrol was underway.

Mest is situated along the main Taliban supply line from Pakistan toward the west and has been a hotly contested area since the start of the war. It is also infamous in U.S. Army circles as the place where Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl walked off an American combat outpost and into Taliban hands, where he reportedly remains.

"I'm not going to lie to you, this is currently a Taliban controlled village," Powers said. "But they know that we know that, so they most likely won't mess with us today."

Once inside the walls of the city, part of the platoon spread out to sweep the area and establish a perimeter while the officers split the balance of the force present into two groups. As 1st Lt.

Marcus Smith, the leader of First Platoon, set about verifying the polling station data, Capt. Powers walked through the small bazaar, waving and nodding to the merchants.

About halfway down the line of shops, Powers removed his helmet and stopped to chat with two young men astride Honda motorcycles -- a common form of local transportation but also one favored by Taliban insurgents. After exchanging pleasantries and inquiring about their crops, water supply and schools, the American officer got down to business.

"Have you guys heard anything about the crazy stuff the Taliban is doing these days?" Powers asked as Matty translated in Pashto. The locals looked back at him with mostly blank stares. Powers continued, telling them about how just the day before a young Afghan boy had stepped on an anti-personnel landmine near the village of Yosef Khel to the north. "He would have died had the police and coalition forces not been able to get him, treat him, and move him up to the Sharana hospital," he said.

"We know," a bearded villager replied in Pashto. "That's why you guys are here -- to solve those kinds of problems."

"And then two days ago in the Yahya Khel district, the Taliban fired four mortar rounds where children were in school," Powers continued. "What kind of crazy person fires mortar rounds at a school when there are children there?"

The crowd didn't seem particularly upset by the Taliban's recklessness. "We just pray for them," the same bearded villager replied.

Meanwhile across the village, 1st Lt. Smith was having little success figuring out where polling stations might have been in the past, not to mention where they might safely be established in the future. A member of the Afghan Uniformed Police on a motorcycle said he knew where the polling station had been, but when Smith asked the policeman to take him there, he just drove off. Near the mosque, an elder said there had never been elections in Mest and that those wanting to vote had to travel to other villages to do so.

Smith, who graduated from West Point in 2008, worked to contain his frustration. "I have resources I can give you," he offered the elder. "But you have to work with me." The elder smiled and said he wanted to work with the lieutenant and that he would take him up on the invitation to visit the outpost at Yosef Khel for follow-on assistance coordination.

After another 45 minutes or so of the locals offering contradictory facts and faulty logic, the patrol was over. "Tonight the Taliban will come back and nail 'night letters' to the doors of the elders," Powers said on the way out of the village. "They'll threaten them with death if they work with the coalition."

A few days later, Capt. Powers led an air assault into the village of Ateh Khanek located east of Mest in the shadow of the first mountain range toward Pakistan. The village was thought to be a way station for the Taliban, and after weathering several attacks on the combat outpost at Yahya Khel, the Americans were ready to seize the initiative and, hopefully, engage the enemy

on more offensive terms.

But as the two lumbering Chinooks landed in a field of high grass adjacent to the village, they were met by no opposition. The Apache attack helicopters flying cover overhead spotted a couple of men fleeing to the west into another group of buildings, but by the time the members of Second Platoon got there, they found nothing unusual. The men had either fled without being seen somehow or re-assimilated into the population.

As the assault continued, a single shot rang out. The Americans ducked for cover and got ready to engage, but their posture relaxed as word circulated over the radios that a member of the Afghan Uniformed Police had shot himself in the foot.

Meanwhile, coalition forces found a small cache of enemy weapons stashed in the mosque: Four rocket-propelled grenades, one launcher, two motorcycles, and one long-haired wig.

Behind the cover of an unoccupied farm house about 100 yard from the center of the village, Powers met with a group of four elders. Again, pleasantries were exchanged before the captain turned to more immediate concerns.

"We have indications Taliban are using your village as a staging ground to attack Yahya Khel," Powers said.

"I am Muslim; I won't lie to you," one of the elders replied. "The Taliban were here this morning."

"Are they here now?" Powers asked.

The elders didn't answer immediately, but eventually they said that the Taliban were gone. "Let me get this straight," Powers said. "Today Taliban came to the village and they put RPGs in the mosque."

"We didn't know about the RPGs in the mosque," the elder offered.

Powers grimaced as he wrestled with the moving body of facts. "So if I search your village, will I find any more weapons?"

"You can have whatever weapons you find," the elder said in return.

"That's not what I asked," Powers said. "Will I find any weapons?"

The elders conferred among themselves. "This village has been searched three times and they never found any weapons," another elder said.

"Well, now it's been searched four times and we did find some weapons," Powers retorted.

An hour later, Powers sat in front of a gathering of the village men -- an impromptu shura. "Thank you for welcoming us as visitors," he said. "Our search here was definitely warranted

based on what we found." He gestured toward the confiscated weapons cache gathered next to the mosque as he continued. "There is no use arguing about whether or not the Taliban come here because the evidence is here." The locals nodded and murmured among themselves.

"There is nothing I would enjoy more than to build you a school," Powers said after discovering the children had nowhere to learn. "But I can't until there is security."

The captain went on to describe the Obama Plan for a surge to establish security as well as the timeline for withdrawal. "Ultimately, your security is up to you."

The villagers argued, mostly among themselves, about whether they would ever have the means to defend themselves. "Give me a rifle and I will shoot them now," one of the elders shouted.

"If we try to fight they will kill us all and all that will be left are the women," another said. "They will abandon the village and move to Kabul."

Another man stood up and said he was upset that his cousin had been detained during the assault. He pointed toward his two nephews and said they were crying because their father was now a prisoner. "He is a simple farmer," the man declared. "Let him go."

Captain Powers was unmoved. "If you're saying this man is not the one responsible for the weapons, then bring me the right man and I will gladly trade." The villagers had nothing to offer in return.

At sunset, the coalition forces gathered their meager haul and marched onto a nearby hill and waited for dark. Some time later, a single Blackhawk landed nearby and then quickly took off -- a "false extraction" designed to make the enemy think the coalition forces had left. But if there were any Taliban hiding near the village, they didn't take the bait.

Once the last Chinook had dropped the Joes back at FOB Rushmore, the company commander reflected on the events of the past few days and considered how things were going overall. In spite of the apparent lack of progress and the frustrations he faced, Powers -- who's been constantly deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since he graduated from the Virginia Military Institute in 2004 and plans on returning early next year after only five months at home -- remained upbeat and resilient.

"I get paid to kill bad guys," he said. "What could be better than that?"