



GATOR COMPANY FRG NEWSLETTER



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 5

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JANUARY 2010

FORWARD OPERATING BASE BLESSING KUNAR PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN





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A NOTE FROM GATOR 6

I know it has been a while since our last company newsletter; I hope you enjoyed the battalion's newsletter in December. The last 2 months have been anything but normal here. One thing is for certain, the platoons are still getting out there every day working with the local village elders, promoting governance, projects, and peace and reconciliation with those who have picked up arms against the government since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Though it may not seem like it from news reports, life here has drastically improved for the people of the Pech Valley since our arrival here. We are putting systems into place that do not require an outside military presence to carry out. We are promoting responsible and transparent governance that encourages the participation of the people; and finally, we are denying this country's enemies the capability to cause instability from within. For the past 8 months we have been consistent and the local people have been very responsive to what we are trying to do here.

There were many things that we were told from previous tours that would happen that have not really happened here so far. The major thing would have to be the weather. I'd previously heard that by now (January), it would be biting cold outside and there would be some snow on the ground, so much so that we would need snow shoes for movement in the mountains...that has not happened. The temperature has taken a dip on many days, and though it has not been hot, winter has not completely shown itself to us yet. In fact, if the weather stayed like this all year, it would probably make our lives a whole lot easier come summer time as we would not have as many issues with dehydration and other fatigue and heat-related injuries. The locals keep telling me that the cold will come, and with it more rain and snow, but they do acknowledge that this year has been relatively light so far.

Our men continue to have success with the Afghan National Army (ANA) as well. We have focused our efforts on training and mentoring them. It seems obvious that if they would just do things the way we do then they would be a fully functioning Army with not many worries. Think of it in this way, the United States Army took a long time to get as proficient as it is today, so the fledgling Afghan Army is inevitably going to hit some speed bumps along the way too. There are many barriers we must overcome, mainly their culture. The Pashtun culture is very rich in its traditions so it tends to not promote deviations from the norm. In spite of this, the past few months have seen 100% ANA fielding of NATO M16 rifles, M249, M240B, and M2 .50 caliber machine guns (they have to be trained on them in the classroom and on the range), additional training on vehicle maintenance and first aid, and a noncommissioned officer course that effectively trained 15 NCO's. They will soon be rotated out (much the same way we do), and we will bring in a new crop of ANA to train and mentor.

I know what is on everyone's minds...when are we coming home? Trust me, it is on our minds as well; we think about our loved ones daily and would like nothing more than to say goodbye to this place so we can get back to a "normal" life. As far as I know, we are on schedule to be home late Spring / early Summer and from the looks of things, there will be plenty of time off to spend with family and friends. Information on homecoming activities will be forthcoming in the months ahead, but right now we are still focused on our mission to help the Afghan people take control of their country.

Finally, I would like to welcome Tina Eckstrom as Gator Company's new FRG Leader. She has a wealth of experience working with FRG as her husband (our very own Company First Sergeant) has been in the Army for 16 years. She is familiar with deployments and served as A Co 1-9 Infantry's FRG leader during the last deployment. Please feel free to contact her should you have any questions concerning the Gator Company FRG.

Sincerely,
CPT Kevin W. Hutcheson
REFUSE TO LOSE!



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1SG Corner,

Dear families and friends of Gator Company, I sit here and write this letter amazed at what you Soldiers are doing on a daily basis. We have made huge accomplishments over the last eight months and have seen many changes in our area of operation. We continue to have challenges and difficult moments on a daily basis, but our Soldiers continue to come together as a team and succeed creating a stronger unit.

We have come to the point in the deployment in which we are submitting awards for what the Soldiers have accomplished through Operation Enduring Freedom X. I get the pleasure of seeing all of the awards before they get signed by the Commander and forwarded to Senior Commanders. We have some true heroes here in this Company. I have forwarded awards for Service, Achievement, Valor and Merit. *(Moms you might not want to read this)* These men have moved forward against gun fire and exposed themselves to the enemy in order to better suppress an insurgent position. Some of them have continued to fight and accomplish a mission after they have been injured themselves. The fighting is only a small part of what these men have achieved and are awarded for. Each one of these Soldiers has played a huge part in the development of the Kunar Province. They have pulled security for workers doing projects and yes they have delivered Goats to people as tokens of friendship. Every day that the Soldiers of Gator walk off of FOB Blessing they drive the insurgency a little bit farther away and bring the security a little closer to the people.

I would like to thank all of the families and friends of Gator Company who have supported us thus far in the deployment. We received so many packages during the Christmas period that when I walked thru the Barracks, the hallways were lined with boxes of snacks and sundry items. You are all awesome.

1SG Mark A. Eckstrom
Gator 7



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Dear Family and Friends of 1st Platoon,

HAPPY NEW YEARS! While all of us, soldiers and family, can say that 2009 was a good year, and one filled with many memories, 2010 marks the 75% completion of our tour here in Afghanistan. I'm sure this news is something to smile about for all our friends and family back home; I know the men over here are pleased. The guys, as always, have been doing an excellent job, carrying out mission after mission with zero complaints. While the days are sometimes long, and the nights can feel even longer, I think 2010 will be an exceptional year for both us and the villages we interact with along the Pesh.

SFC Findish and I would like to use this letter to welcome some new soldiers to the Platoon, and to wish their families a very Happy New Years. This past month we added 3 new soldiers and their families to the ranks, SPC Matthew Hooks, wife Lisa, and 2 children, SPC Jeremy Pittman and his parents from Alabama, and SGT Larry Lemieux and wife Allyssa. With new soldiers come new stories, and after 7 months of listening to the same ones, it's nice to let the new guys share their past experiences and war tales with the rest of the group.

While the calendar says winter, the weather here had proved otherwise. Now don't get me wrong, nights and early mornings are a struggle for even the most hardened winter vets, but the days here have consistently been in the mid to upper 60's. So, I'm sorry to say, we have yet to construct a snow fort, build Frosty, or engage the locals in an all out snowball battle; we have, however, been continuing our mission here by aiding the locals in governance and conducting missions as planned. One major project we are starting this year is trying to introduce new crops to the area. The major food sources are corn and wheat, 1st Platoon with the help of the Afghan's and US NGO's have started a school on how to grow different fruits and vegetables in order to maximize use of the farm land. While this project is in the infancy stages we will be sure to keep you updated on its progress and send pictures our fruit bowls at the end.

As always you should be very proud of the jobs all your fathers, husbands, and sons are doing here. SFC Findish and I have been very lucky and blessed by the group of men we have been given to lead, our Squad Leaders are some of the best in the Battalion; despite being here for 7 months the men go out on mission everyday as if it's their first time. With little difference in the day to day operations, things can start to seem mundane and it is human nature to become complacent; however, I can say with the utmost confidence that the junior leadership in this Platoon has prevented that from happening.

In closing I would like to thank everyone back home for all the care packages, letters, thoughts and prayers. While being home is the ideal holiday wish, the season was made much easier through all the packages and letters we received from all of you. Thanks again and Happy New Year from all of us in 1st Platoon.

Very Respectably Yours,
1LT Chris Capasso
SFC Jason Findish



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1st Platoon





2nd Platoon

Greetings family & friends of 2nd Platoon, Gator Company 2-12 IN from Kunar Province, Afghanistan!

I am proud and excited to be the new Platoon Leader for 2nd Platoon, which I have taken over in October of 2009. 1LT Fio Rito is now the Executive Officer for Chosen Company located @ COP Honaker – Miracle. He spoke extremely highly of the Platoon and the men have exceeded my expectations. Your sons, husbands, and friends have performed very well in all of their jobs consistently throughout this deployment. Through their hard work and determination, they have supported the Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers here on FOB Blessing by training them in various areas to include weapons instruction, communication equipment, and medical treatment. This is a vital part of our job here as it will allow the ANA to take over security in many areas in the future, therefore decreasing the US footprint here in Afghanistan.

The valley in which 2nd PLT operates has made huge steps towards connecting themselves with the Afghan government. The local development projects include bridges linking villages across the river, a school that will provide education to over 200 children, and a road that has the possibility to traverse into another province which will further promote economic prosperity throughout the region. Without 2nd PLT's constant presence among the population and engagement of key village elders, these projects would not be able to occur. These projects have shown the local population that their future can be bright if they choose to support their local government and this sentiment is spreading throughout all of Kunar Province. These projects are a huge part of our job here in Kunar Province and all soldiers in 2nd PLT have contributed to the development by providing cement to local villages, bringing work utensils to contractors, or simply pulling security on construction sites.

Also a big part of our job is to maintain constant communication with local elder leaders, referred to as Heads of Shura. A Shura is a group of key elders within a village that make decisions in all types of matters within the village. Some of the Shura leaders were commanders of Mujahedeen during the Soviet War and some are the wealthiest individuals among the locals. Although Muslim traditions are unfamiliar to the great majority of Americans, the soldiers of 2nd PLT have impressed local leaders with their respect for the local customs. For example during the holiday period of Eid which is the equivalent to our Christmas, 2nd PLT purchased several goats for local leaders and this spoke highly of our reverence towards the Muslim culture. These actions have created a strong bond between us and Shura leaders, and in turn has created an anti-Taliban culture.

It has been an honor to serve with your sons, husbands, relatives, and friends. They are doing amazing things in this country and their service will not be in vain as Afghanistan has a great amount of hope in its future. If you have any questions about 2nd PLT's activities, please do not hesitate to contact me via email (hugh.charles.miller@us.army.mil). Thank you all for your sacrifice and hard work enduring this deployment.

Sincerely,
1LT Hugh Miller



2nd Platoon



Serious business does not take up all of 2nd PLT's time, especially with the local personalities that we encounter everyday. A local, camera-shy boy has become the source of many comical moments during the deployment. He is extremely friendly during our patrols, however whenever a soldier attempts to obtain photographic evidence of said child, he is gone within seconds. Finally, after more than a few candy bars and Snapples, the boy agreed to an impromptu photo shoot...we call him Harry Potter.





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Family and friends of 3rd Platoon, Gator Company,

As January comes to a close we find ourselves nearly two-thirds done with this deployment. In such a relatively short period of time, the impact that your men have put into securing and building the Pech is beginning to become very visible, both to us and the residents along the valley. We are starting to see villagers from the more permissive areas building strong relationships to the government, and instead of using us as a means to connect to the government, they are going directly to the district centers to solve their problems. In our less permissive areas, the projects we are doing there are giving the villagers a taste of development, something that we hope will present them with a compelling ultimatum; do we want to continue living at odds with the government, and caught in the cross fire of the coalition and the Taliban, or are we willing to keep the Taliban out of our areas and bring peace and development to our families. While that sounds like a easy decision to make, it is not always that simple. The villagers need to commit to the government, to band together and repel the influence of fighters in their village. We need to make that a possibility, and make the villagers feel confident in our abilities to keep them safe. There has been much accomplished, and still much to be done. I have full confidence that our Soldiers have what it takes to make our impact on these villages last.

On a much lighter note, we welcome two new soldiers to the Platoon, Privates Wheeler and Sells. Both of whom have done incredible job in the short amount of time that they have been here. Within their first few days on the ground, they were challenged by a number of difficult missions, including an Air Assault from a CH-47. Despite the hard times and trying situations, they have proven themselves integral parts of this Platoon, and it is a privilege to be their Platoon Leader.

Another soldier who has truly stepped up and performed exceptionally is SPC Mark Brady. SPC Brady came to this Platoon about a month ago, after spending over a year working in Gator company headquarters platoon due to an injury. Because SPC Brady's team leader is on leave, SGT(P) Nix put him in charge of the team. Watching him lead soldiers has been very impressive, and I have seen him take care of his men both under fire and back on the COP. He has demonstrated himself to be a true leader, and for his efforts, I have named him Soldier of the Month for January.

I thank you all again for your endless support. Leading your men is a distinct pleasure and privilege. Please keep us in your thoughts and prayers,

Mark Zambarda,
1LT, PLATOON LEADER



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3rd Platoon





A Message from the FRG

Hello Friends and Family,

I hope everyone had a nice Holiday and Happy New Year. I know we are all relieved we are more than halfway through the deployment.

*If you have not signed up for the vFRG, please do so. Shoot me an email if you need help signing up. The vFRG will always have upcoming FRG information as well as Battalion and Brigade news.

*Remember to update your contact info if you move or are going to be out of town.

*The next Battalion FRG meeting is scheduled for 3 March at 6:30 p.m., located at the Family Readiness Center, Room 104. This meeting will be a potluck. There is a slide show and raffle planned. I encourage all to come if you are available. If you can not make this meeting and have question you can send it to myself or Kim Mendenhall ahead of time. Minutes from this meeting will be sent out.

Note from Kim Mendenhall:

FREE on-site Childcare is available for this meeting! For those of you who attended our December meeting, you may have noticed the small play area for kids to entertain themselves as the Rear Detachment was briefing. This will NOT be the case for the March meeting as we will be meeting in the same building only a different room.

For the individuals taking advantage of the FREE on-site child care offered, CYS provides fun and appropriate activities for all children ages 6 weeks to 12 years. A FREE dinner is also provided to the children.

All children using childcare must be registered with CYS at least one week prior to the meeting.

Please submit the names and ages of children using child care to

kimberly.mendenhall@conus.army.mil

<<http://us.mc345.mail.yahoo.com/mc/compose?to=kimberly.mendenhall@conus.army.mil>> no later than 24 February at 12:00 noon. Sorry, no late childcare reservations can be accepted.

If you have any concerns or questions please ask!

Take Care,

Tina Eckstrom

719-559-5354 home

719-964-7326 cell

mtand3@yahoo.com



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A Co Contact Information

FRG:

FRG Leader: Tina Eckstrom

mtand3@yahoo.com 719.559.5354

Rear Detachment:

CDR: CPT Ryan Main: 719.503.4200

1SG: 1SG Michael Pak: 719.503.4210

Aco NCOIC: SSG Talkington: 719.338.6163

FRSA: Kimberly Mendenhall: 719.503.4201

UNIT MAILING ADDRESS

Headquarters, 1st and 2nd Platoons

SOLDIER'S NAME (NO RANK)

A 2-12 IN, 4BCT 4ID

FOB BLESSING, APO AE 09354

3rd Platoon

SOLDIER'S NAME (NO RANK)

A 2-12 IN, 4BCT 4ID

COP MICHIGAN, APO AE 09354