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Operation BACKPACK



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****Cover Photo:** Chief Petty Officer Michael Ploeger, Camp Alamo

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operation BACKPACK

at Camp Alamo Afghanistan

By Karen Schmitt

Photos by: Captain Scott Delius and
Chief Petty Officer Michael Ploeger – Camp Alamo, and
Andy Burriss – Herald News, Rock Hill, SC

The press describes the area around Camp Alamo, which is located inside the walls of the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC), as “home to blood thirsty drug gangs, al-Qaeda suicide bombers, floods, and flesh-eating scorpions,” yet this does not deter our troops from venturing beyond the confines to distribute school supplies to needy children. Sometimes, the people coordinating the effort do not have specialized training in distribution or logistics—but they do have heart. And that’s what it takes when the destination involves “one of the most dangerous places on earth.”

What follows are two separate accounts from Captain Scott Delius, US Army National Guard, and Chief Petty Officer Mike Ploeger, US Navy Reserve. They both were moved by the children; they both found solutions to deliver help in resourceful ways. Their mission is informally known as “Operation Backpack” and is sustained today through a resilient network of friends and comrades.



Frustrated, and in response to the extreme poverty he encountered in surrounding villages outside Camp Alamo, Captain Scott Delius set about collecting clothes, shoes, notebooks, and backpacks in his spare time for the youngsters. He appealed to family and friends back home in Atlanta, Georgia, and soon donations came pouring in. “I was overwhelmed by the response of my family, friends, and complete strangers. I received 200 large boxes of pre-sorted clothes, and almost \$4000 in donations. Much of that money was used to ship

things over to me.”

Captain Delius arrived in Kabul in late November 2006 after a month’s training in Mississippi and was assigned as the Judge Advocate General (JAG) officer attached to the Kabul Military Training Center (KMTC). It is the country’s largest base, with about 8000 new recruits in training at any one time. He worked with the base’s top Afghan legal officer to establish a military justice system, and he helped US soldiers with legal problems



that came up back home. His role didn’t require expertise in transportation or logistics, but when facing mountains of donated supplies—enough to fill two seven-ton trucks after all was said and done—he was forced to assume a new mind set and develop additional problem-solving skills.

Other opportunities for hands-on learning surfaced from time to time, like the time a devastating flood swamped Kabul. Shovels, tarps, saws, and hammers were delivered along with food and clothing. “More than 6000 people [in Kabul] lost their homes. A police chief contacted our intelligence officer and asked for assistance,” Captain Delius remembers. The supplies were critical in rebuilding homes and lives.

In May of this year, he returned home to rekindle his law practice, but the legacy of good will lives on at Camp Alamo—and in surprising ways.

One day, out of the clear blue, NDTA member Mike Meyer received a call. It was from his longtime friend Mike Ploeger, now a Chief Petty Officer with the Naval Reserves and stationed at Camp Alamo as Public Affairs Officer. Way back

when, they were raised in the same neighborhood and grew up to own and operate their own trucks for the same companies, spending many long stretches on the road together. That was 30 years ago, and now Chief Ploeger was calling for help. Coordination was needed to collect a barrage of donations earmarked for Afghanistan; goods were coming from around South Carolina in response to communications from the 218th National Guard out of Columbia and the 178th Combat En-

gineers out of Rock Hill and Fort Mill armories, both units deployed to Camp Alamo. Chief Ploeger had to get the word out. After all, winter was approaching and the kids needed coats and shoes!

Meyer stepped up to coordinate the necessary stateside logistics. “I contacted trucking companies and others in the industry to assist with transport. Ana Bundy, with Blackwater, a private security firm, agreed to offload and warehouse items, as well as provide airlift to Afghanistan.” He continues, “Some aspects [of this effort] are easier than others, and having a private company on board to handle shipment over to Afghanistan can speed up the process. It hasn’t been hard to get others involved—there are many people with connections to someone over there [at Camp Alamo], and they want to contribute.”

Volunteers in South Carolina sorted and boxed the goods, which even included old military uniforms for the Afghan trainees at KMTC; the American soldiers’ names were taken off garments that were no longer standard issue. The domestic trucking was arranged through Andy

EXCERPTS FROM CAPTAIN DELIUS ONLINE JOURNAL

- >> “My Afghan colonel told me about a village that was in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, you can’t just jot down an address and run out and start distributing aid. You must always recon the area first. We mounted up in uparmored humvees with gunners in the turrets. I put my Afghan colonel and an interpreter in the back seat. Everyone was in full body armor with weapons locked and loaded.”
- >> “The village itself was everything the colonel said and more. Trash everywhere . . . mud huts with plastic sheeting for roofs and windows.”
- >> “It was obvious that the area was completely unsafe. Tall buildings. Tight and narrow streets with no room for maneuverability. Crowds. Cars, trucks, bicycles, and motorcycles all over the place. Way too many variables. In short, this area was a complete ‘no go.’”
- >> “The lesson learned is that we simply cannot pull off a humanitarian mission in a heavily populated urban area. I will look for something closer to home, with better ground to defend. The reality is that we can’t help others if we can’t be assured of our own safety.”

*Captain Scott Delius
Thursday, April 5, 2007*



**COMMENTS FROM
CHIEF PETTY OFFICER
MICHAEL PLOEGER**

- >> The Arzon Kimont School is located about six miles from Camp Alamo and set up in what was a private home. The building is three stories tall, the rooms are about 15ft x 20ft and each has 30 to 50 children in it. There are no desks or chairs. They sit on a carpet, shoulder to shoulder, row after row. The rooms have no air-conditioning or circulation, so it's very stuffy.
- >> The excitement on the children's faces is priceless. The school has two sessions; the younger children attend three hours in the morning and the older children attend the next three hours.
- >> We finish the distribution. It has taken us about three hours total. We even had enough to leave extras for those students that were absent. We prepare for the convoy back; we now have to become soldiers, weapons loaded, very alert. We return to Camp Alamo. The whole mission goes without incident. Everyone involved has a tremendous feeling of fulfillment.

*Chief Petty Officer Michael Ploeger
CJTF Phoenix TAB VI PAO
Sunday, May 27, 2007*



1/2 Page Ad

Clarke and provided by his firm, Panther Expedited Services. Chris Koehring of Panther coordinated the multiple pickups and the delivery without delay. *The Herald News* in Rock Hill, SC, reported that the truck drivers from Panther were so impressed with the humanitarian effort that they donated mileage from part of the trip—which translates as money that they would normally earn.

Friendships, whether casual or work-related, help build the bridges that move things along . . . in this case, to Camp Alamo, and thanks to two old friends. By October, enough shoes, coats, hats, gloves, and clothing were collected to warm the kids (who play barefoot in the snow), their mothers (whose husbands and fathers were killed in war), and the aged village farmers (who till the fields by hand).

LESSONS IN LOGISTICS

Captain Delius kept an online journal; portions have been adapted to provide some "Lessons Learned."

- 1 IDENTIFY NEEDS FIRST HAND** Recon missions give a chance to size up the situation and learn what items are needed most. A visit to a village school, for example, gave a glimpse at what was lacking in the classroom and it also helped establish trust with the children.
- 2 SORT UP FRONT** Donations that arrived at Camp Alamo from the US were labeled and sorted by size and gender, which facilitated distribution—a definite plus when under the risk of enemy attack.
- 3 EMPLOY A SUITABLE STAGING AREA AND CREATIVE SCHEDULING** Filling 2000 backpacks and duffel bags was one of the biggest logistical challenges since the task was accomplished during "down time," and there wasn't much of that. Each pack or duffel had to be unwrapped from its packaging, unzipped, and then passed assembly line style among "stuffers" who inserted pens, crayons, and notebooks. Finally, someone had to zip it all up and box it for surface transport. Internal packaging resulted in lots of useless cardboard and plastic that required disposal.
- 4 DELIVER WITH AN EYE TO CONSTANT THREATS** It took about two weeks to pre-plan the delivery trip. Sometimes as many as three trips were made to the village to check things out and calculate possible rough spots. Sorties provided information about the best route and the appropriate personnel, weaponry, and vehicles to accomplish the mission.
- 5 CONTROL THE CROWDS** This was a big task since villagers jockeyed for better spots in line to grab clothing and shoes. Things were distributed inside the village courtyard with a controlled entry point, which was key. A soldier escorted each person through every station to make sure they got a fair amount of clothes that fit them.
- 6 GROOM THE NEXT GENERATION OF TRANSPORTERS/LOGISTICIANS** "We should give the Afghans the goods and let them distribute them. Although they don't have the resources such as abundant food and clothing, they do want to help their fellow citizens. We should therefore strive to let them organize the mission and conduct the delivery more often in the future."



"Like all kids, they were a bit shy. I guess I would be too if a couple of fully armed soldiers walked into my classroom. That can't be helped because we were required to stay in our body armor. Despite our appearance, the kids opened up to us."



"Crowd control became the biggest task as the villagers began lining up. We helped to placate the villagers and assure them that there was plenty for everyone. You will notice that there are no women in line. Young girls showed up, but they had to fend for themselves. Unfortunately, they couldn't do much. The men and boys kept pushing them aside."

EPILOGUE

Chief Ploeger joined Camp Alamo just as Captain Delius was preparing to leave in May. They became quick friends. They didn't spend much time together in transition, and they were not related by either their uniform or by their profession. But they shared a strong commitment, a resourceful spirit, and an "army" of friends back home that keeps "Operation Backpack" alive. So far, six Humanitarian Aid (HA) missions have taken place with almost 2000 man hours of off duty time

contributed by the coalition soldiers. The missions include three schools in an area that sustained several IED strikes, two village clothing distributions, and a distribution of food and clothing to the families of Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers that were killed this past July in a mortar training accident. *DTJ*

Scott Delius hopes to continue helping from afar. He can be reached in Atlanta at sddarmy@yahoo.com. If you would like to contribute from the industry standpoint, Mike Meyer may be

contacted at OperationBackpack@ndtahq.com, and Chief Ploeger is at michael.ploeger@us.army.mil. He can bring you up to speed with goings on at Camp Alamo. He has six months to go in Kabul and will be working hard on humanitarian aid mission operations.

WIRED – BATTLEFIELD BLOGS

>> in the November NDTA Gram >>