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One Battalion's Wrenching Deployment to Afghanistan

By JAMES DAO

Pvt. Johnnie Stevenson spent his final hours at Fort Drum alone, trying to put his game face on. He played some Ludacris on his iPod, then turned it off. He unpacked his 72-hour bag, then repacked it. Did he have enough toothpaste and spare socks? Had he paid his bills? Was he ready for war? For a year?

Capt. Adrian Bonenberger took a drive through the farmland of northern New York to absorb one last view of the St. Lawrence River. To drink one last cup of coffee at the Lyric Bistro in Clayton. To savor one last moment of real peace and quiet before heading to Afghanistan. For a year.

Sgt. Tamara Sullivan pulled out her cellphone charger and braced for a night of tears. She called her children in North Carolina, ages 3 and 1, and told them she would soon be going to work in a place called Afghanistan. For a year. She reminded her husband to send her their artwork. She cried, hung up, called him back and cried some more.

"I asked for him to mail me those pictures, those little sloppy ones," she said. "I want to see what my children's hands touched, because I won't be able to touch them."

These are the faces of the new American surge in Afghanistan. For the next year, the First Battalion, 87th Infantry of the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, N.Y., will be living, working and fighting in the fertile northern plains of Afghanistan, part of the additional 30,000 troops who will make up the backbone of President Obama's plan for ending the nine-year war.

The president said last week that the strategy — which calls for securing population centers, reducing civilian casualties and strengthening the Afghan police and army — would continue despite his firing the top Afghanistan war commander, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal.

In the increasingly restive provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan, the 1-87 will be opening a new

front and waging a different kind of war. Its job will be to train the local police, secure a vital highway to Central Asia and expand the shaky writ of President Hamid Karzai's government in the north.

The soldiers will be living with the police in mud-walled outposts and conducting daily foot patrols alongside them into contested areas. The goal is to build public support for the police — no simple task, given its reputation for corruption and ineffectiveness.

Over the course of the next year, The New York Times will be visiting the battalion to chronicle its part in the surge and explore the strains of deployment on soldiers, many fresh out of basic training, others on their fifth combat tour in nine years.

If their mission cannot succeed in the relatively stable north, the policy seems unlikely to work anywhere in Afghanistan.

The battalion is the first large American military unit to be based in these provinces since the war began, and the troops expect to be challenged by emboldened insurgent forces that have been ambushing police checkpoints, vandalizing schools, mining roads and extorting merchants with growing regularity.

Lt. Col. Russell Lewis, the battalion commander, said that for most of the war, troops with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization had not seriously contested Taliban-controlled areas in the north. That, he said, is about to change.

The battalion, which began moving to Afghanistan in March, will be joined by late summer by an aviation brigade with transport and assault helicopters that will allow them to conduct missions deep into insurgent strongholds, which fuels talk of a possible offensive by fall.

"It will get hotter before it gets better," Colonel Lewis said.

The deployment will also test the emotional mettle of soldiers and their families. Across eight time zones and 6,500 miles, linked by the fragile threads of the Internet and cellular technology, those soldiers will counsel children, comfort parents, manage marriages and mourn deaths back home, even as they struggle with loneliness, boredom and fear in Afghanistan.

They are almost all men, with a small attachment of women in noninfantry jobs. Many are begging to see combat. Others dread the prospect.

Specialist Samuel Michalik, a 24-year-old, single infantryman from Tennessee on his first deployment, offered one perspective.

"I think it's safe to say that most people would want to see some action — they don't want to be there and just be sitting around," he said before the deployment. "If it's my time to die or get injured, whatnot, I think then, God's going to allow that. I'm at peace with that."

Sgt. First Class Brian Eisch, a 35-year-old single parent of two boys from Wisconsin, also on his first deployment, voiced a different view.

"If we are here for a year and don't fire one round, I'm happy," the sergeant said. "I've got two boys waiting for me that I want to go back home and be a dad to."

Conflicting Emotions

The days before deployment are a time for rearranging the furniture of lives. Wills must be drafted. Single parents send children to grandparents, uncles and aunts. Cars are stored, apartment keys returned, phone service canceled.

For Sergeant Sullivan, it was also a time to say goodbye, again and again, slowly.

The youngest of three sisters, Sergeant Sullivan, 31, was raised by a grandmother in Casey, S.C., after her father killed her mother and then himself. She graduated from a local college and worked for a year as a substitute teacher. But school loans weighed heavily on her, and in 2002 she enlisted.

A night-vision goggles technician, she spent five months in Kandahar in 2004, calling it "a big field trip." She resolved to make the Army her career.

That was before she had children.

In the hours before deployment, she was feeling the conflicting emotions of a parent in the Army. She is one of only about 20 women attached to the battalion, but there are dozens of other soldiers with children back home.

She wants to serve 20 years and make retirement, with its good pension and health care benefits. But leaving her children for 12 months seems the hardest thing she has ever done.

"I know what I'm doing is important, but my children are a priority for me," she said. "Something's got to change."

The farewells were very different for Captain Bonenberger, 32, single and without children. He visited old girlfriends in New York City. He saw his parents in Connecticut. He drank too much with buddies in California. He stored up memories.

"I made spending time with friends and family a huge priority in my life, because I knew that when I was over there I couldn't be thinking about that," he said. "I can only concentrate on the present, on what's in front of me, or it gets me really depressed."

Raised in Branford, Conn., the son of a poet-turned-librarian and a classical-guitarist-turned-lawyer, Captain Bonenberger developed a childhood fascination with the military from reading Homer. He considered applying to West Point, but his father, who protested the Vietnam War in college, and his grandfather, a World War II veteran, were adamantly opposed.

So he went to Yale, studied English literature and considered following his father into law. After graduation he worked for a consulting firm, tried his hand at writing and taught English in Japan. None of it spoke to him. Then came Abu Ghraib.

The reports of prisoner abuses there outraged him, but also rekindled an ambition to be an officer. He joined the Army in 2005, and a year later he was in Paktika Province along the Pakistan border.

The guy who could quote Alexander Pope learned about spitting tobacco and dodging mortar rounds, the strange allure of a hard life. "Everything is vivid, even the crappy food," he said.

Before his flight from Fort Drum, he itched to get going, to be *there*. He was part of the battalion's planning team, but he hoped to finish the tour as a front-line company commander.

"For all of us, that's the dream," he said. "To lead soldiers."

Private Stevenson, 19, had his own waking dreams in the hours before he left Fort Drum. He grew up in Port Arthur, Tex., never knowing his father. His mother, a corrections officer, died of complications related to AIDS when he was 15. He became homeless, quitting school and selling crack cocaine to survive, barely avoiding arrest.

One day a woman, the mother of a girl he knew, saw him sitting by the road, his life's belongings in a plastic bin. She offered him dinner, and he stayed for two years, agreeing to her demand that he stop selling drugs. Today he calls her his godmother because, he believes, heaven must have sent her to save him.

Joining the Army seemed the next best step in setting his life straight. His slow drawl and easygoing style mask ambitions: college, perhaps law school, a family. More immediately, he longed to become a turret gunner, the first line of defense for a truck team.

As he sat on his bunk that final night, butterflies fluttered in his stomach. Would he see combat? Would he do the right thing if he did? He needed to know.

"Once the first bullet comes at me, and I know that I've fired back and I wasn't hesitant, then I won't be worried about it anymore," he said. "Because I'll know I can do my job without freezing up or any of that."

Weapons Status Red

When their bags were packed, the soldiers received the M-4 rifles that would be their constant companions in Afghanistan, then bade final goodbyes to family and friends. Inside a spare concrete building at Fort Drum, every corner seemed filled with quiet exchanges of love and grief.

Specialist Kiel Haberland, 26, hugged his wife, kissed their infant daughter and shouldered his pack. His wife, Sarah, put an arm around her mother-in-law, wiped away tears and strode away.

Then through the early morning darkness, he called: "I love you, Sarah."

Another soldier helped: "He loves you, Sarah."

"I love you, Kiel!" she shouted back. But he had rounded the corner.

From late March until mid-April, the battalion moved in waves through Germany, Kyrgyzstan and Kuwait to a small airstrip in Kunduz, about 150 miles north of Kabul across the rugged Hindu Kush mountain range. As their planes arrived, the soldiers received a bracing reminder that they had entered a war zone.

"The weapons status once we go outside that door will be red!" a sergeant major shouted inside the bare blue walls of the Kunduz air terminal. Then he led soldiers wearing heavy rucksacks and body armor on a brisk jog across a partly cleared minefield to their new home, Forward Operating Base Kunduz.

Just months before, the base, on a plateau overlooking the city, housed fewer than 200 National Guard soldiers. Now it was a microcosm of the surge itself, growing rapidly to accommodate nearly 800 soldiers from the 1-87. As bulldozers rumbled and Navy Seabees filled wire-mesh barriers, dozens of yellow tents rose on a gravel-paved field.

The enemy seemed to have taken notice. The day after Colonel Lewis arrived, insurgents fired a rocket at the base, the first such attack in nearly a year. The rocket missed by a long shot but sent a message.

"Let's just be aware," Colonel Lewis cautioned soldiers before a patrol two days later. "They're reacting to us."

The first weeks of a deployment are often the most dangerous, as new soldiers in unfamiliar terrain make mistakes that can turn deadly. So as the battalion prepared for its first major convoy in mid-April, Sergeant Eisch and other platoon sergeants bore down on the newest soldiers, looking for signs of slackness or inattention — and barking orders when they found it.

A former wrestler and drill sergeant with a shaved head and fire-hydrant frame, Sergeant Eisch had missed previous deployments after winning sole custody of his sons, ages 12 and 7, in a bitter divorce. But this time, his brother volunteered to care for the boys.

Finally in Afghanistan, Sergeant Eisch faced a new problem: kidney stones. He had conveniently failed to mention them to his doctor before deploying, fearing he would be held back. Now he had to make do with ibuprofen and fortitude.

"I made it this far," he said. "I'm not going home."

A Growing Insurgency

Below the base spreads a verdant plain of rice, wheat and cotton fields, grape arbors and almond groves. This is Afghanistan's breadbasket, an ethnically diverse region of Tajik, Uzbek and Pashtun villages that seemed relatively stable after 2001, when Taliban fighters were ousted from Kunduz city after a 12-day siege. It was the last major city to fall to the American-led anti-Taliban forces.

But Uzbek, Pashtun and Pakistani insurgents, some of them fleeing the American offensive in Helmand Province, have filtered into havens in Kunduz, NATO officers say. In April alone, seven Germans were killed in ambushes in Kunduz and Baghlan Provinces. Intelligence officers with the alliance say that five of Kunduz's seven districts are contested or controlled by the Taliban.

In their first weeks on the ground, the commanders from the 1-87 learned about the growing insurgent activity from the local police over tea, skewers of roasted lamb and small talk. Hundreds of fighters were massing in the Archi District about 25 miles northeast of Kunduz city, the police reported. The village of Gor Teppa, less than 10 miles to the northwest, had become the seat of a Taliban shadow government, protected by hundreds of homemade bombs buried in the area's lone road.

And at 7 o'clock every evening, the Taliban shut down cellular telephone service across the province, punctuating their control of the night.

In early April, the commander of the battalion's Alpha Company, Capt. Jeffrey Kornbluth, visited police headquarters in Emam Saheb, a district near the Tajikistan border. The police

chief, Col. Kajum Ibrahimi, told him that Taliban forces — many of them involved in opium and weapons smuggling — had begun massing a few miles outside town.

Captain Kornbluth explained that it would be weeks before all his soldiers and trucks had arrived. Colonel Ibrahimi's face darkened and he sighed dramatically. "We need an operation as soon as possible," he said.

Two weeks later, a platoon from Alpha Company returned to Emam Saheb. This time, though, the Americans agreed to help Afghan police officers who were trying to clear a Taliban stronghold near town.

The platoon's armored vehicles turned down a narrow dirt road that snaked through farm land, accompanied by Afghan police officers on motorcycles and in Ford pickup trucks. Suddenly there was a boom and a puff of smoke: the truck carrying the platoon leader, Lt. Nathaniel Bleier, had set off a mine. The truck's front left tire landed in a rice paddy a football field away.

No soldiers were seriously hurt, beyond a separated shoulder. But a few hours later, a road-clearing team found antipersonnel mines connected to a much larger bomb buried just up the road. The injuries could have been far worse.

As April flowed into May, Private Stevenson was promoted to private first class. Sergeant Eisch readied his platoon for its first foot patrols. Captain Bonenberger prepared plans for the summer fighting season and for his own two-week leave in June. Sergeant Sullivan began work on a backlog of broken night-vision goggles.

And on a single afternoon in early May, three separate patrols were ambushed by insurgents firing rocket-propelled grenades.

There were no serious injuries, but it had become clear: the battalion could not travel more than a few miles — in some cases just a few yards — beyond police outposts in contested areas without drawing fire.

"We've gone to where the guns are," an intelligence officer said.

The 1-87 had found the war. One month had passed. There were 11 to go.