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Cacti Battalion leads humanitarian effort
By Capt. Todd A. Schmidt Combined Task Force Bronco



Photo(s) by Spc. Claudia K. Bullard

Members of a rifle squad from 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment keep watch over humanitarian supplies delivered by helicopter to a village in Zabol Province. The Afghan government is leading the effort to deliver the aid to villages cut off from food and medical assistance by heavy snows. International and Coalition forces are delivering the life-saving aid as Afghan government representatives provide information and coordination.

QALAT, Afghanistan -- In the heart of Southern Afghanistan, in the last remaining bastions of Taliban insurgents, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry (Cacti) is making an ever increasing impact in winning the trust and confidence of the Afghan people.

Winter conditions are extreme in the higher altitudes of Zabul Province. Snowfall is at record highs, with accumulation in some areas as high as twenty feet. The result is a growing humanitarian crisis.

"We have seen more snow and rain in the past three weeks than we have seen in seven years," stated the Provincial Governor, Muhammad Hussein, "The water is good, but it threatens the safety of the people."

Stranded travelers, nomadic tribal groups, and displaced civilians are facing harsh winter conditions that they did not anticipate. Villages are stranded, roads are closed, and communication is a challenge. With the help of the Cacti Battalion however, the Afghan people see rays of hope.

In a combined effort with the Afghan National Army, Capt. James Moyes, Bravo Company Commander, ensured that several hundred stranded civilian received food, fuel, blankets, medical supplies and shelter tents along Highway 1, commonly referred to as “Ring Road.”

Charlie Company, led by Capt. Michael Berdy, helped facilitate the delivery of over 53 tons of humanitarian assistance supplies to more remote districts and villages cut-off from the Provincial capital.

“Through direct support from agencies such as the central government, United States Agency for International Development, the World Food Program, and many others, our Soldiers are able to provide the necessary food and medical supplies needed,” said Maj. Joseph Walsh, executive officer for the battalion.

On Feb. 13, the governor toured several districts by helicopter with battalion commander, Lt. Col. Scott McBride. In two severely affected districts, Mizan and Shajoy, more than 80 tons of humanitarian supplies were delivered to district leadership officials for distribution to villages throughout each district.

“Hundreds of tons of supplies are coming in daily and will be delivered regardless of how long it takes,” McBride said.

Winning Afghan trust and confidence is crucial Walsh said, “Fighting this war takes on many forms. We defeat the enemy with more than just guns and bullets. Today, we are defeating insurgents with our humanitarian assistance efforts.”