

'TF Cacti' helps Afghan police establish footprint in Pech Valley.

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An F-15 Eagle fighter jet screams above the Pech River Valley, in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar province, for a show of force, right after a firefight between insurgents and troops from Co. D, 2nd Bn., 35th Inf. Regt., "TF Cacti," 3rd BCT, 25th ID, recently.

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KUNAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan — During the dead of night, in the Pech River Valley, here, they moved into position.

High up on the rocky ridgelines that loom over "Route Rhode Island," Taliban fighters silently crept into fighting positions. There, they hid, waiting for the return of International Security Assistance Forces to the valley.

On the winding road below, Afghan National Security Forces and their U.S. counterparts took up fortified security positions at various checkpoints throughout the valley.

The sun rose, showering the valley with light, as bullets rained down from above.

But Soldiers from Company D, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, "Task Force Cacti," 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, and their ANSF counterparts, were ready for a fight.

"It shows that the enemy is not in charge here," said Capt. Brian Kalaher, commander, Co. D. "The enemy thinks they are, and they say it's the world's worst valley ... but obviously not. I mean, if they controlled the valley, (I) wouldn't be sitting here, you know. If they controlled the valley, I wouldn't live here."



2nd Lt. Trey VanWyhe, infantry platoon leader, Co. D, 2nd Bn., 35th Inf. Regt., "TF Cacti," 3rd BCT, 25th ID, does the "Jersey Shore" fist pump with an ANP counterpart, recently.

Kalaher, based out of Combat Outpost Honaker-Miracle, on the edge of the Pech River Valley, in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar province, isn't shy when talking about his company's dangerous mission of controlling Route Rhode Island.

"There are a couple of (improvised explosive device) hotspots in there, and we're there to really make sure that the enemy cannot hinder a humanitarian aid convoy," said Kalaher.

To regain a foothold in the Pech River Valley and Nuristan province, Co. D Soldiers were tasked to help ANSF set up checkpoints along the route and allow safe passage of more than 200 tons of humanitarian supplies to isolated Afghans.

"This convoy is further proof of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's ability to assist and provide a service to the people of Afghanistan," said Kalaher. "A large part of that is securing the area."

With the sun directly overhead, the first of many firefights during this weeklong, joint-operation died down. The smell of gunpowder wafted heavily through the small interior of a mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicle, as Staff Sgt. Ramses Martinez, infantry squad leader, Co. D, wiped the dirt and sweat off his brow in the blistering heat.

His platoon had been swapping 24-hour shifts at an exposed checkpoint deep within the valley for a few days.

Martinez evaluated the situation as cars passed by, seemingly oblivious to the earlier fighting, and Afghan police stopped and searched each vehicle at the checkpoint.

The sun moved across the sky, and the hours droned on and on.

Whiz. Snap. Crack.

ANP troops returned fire almost immediately. Martinez quickly swung the .50-caliber machine gun around and gritted his teeth as the heavy gun barked back at the insurgents.

Then, it was quiet again.



Staff Sgt. Ramses Martinez, infantry squad leader, Co. D, 2nd Bn., 35th Inf. Regt., “TF Cacti,” 3rd BCT, 25th ID, takes a closer look at a possible insurgent fighting position at a checkpoint in the Pech River Valley, recently.

“He doesn’t want to poke his little head up and play anymore,” Martinez radioed to the other trucks pulling security.

“We used teamwork to fight the insurgents and cooperation to help secure this place,” said Sgt. Ubiad Rahman, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the checkpoint, Afghan police. “The Taliban come down from the mountains and try to attack us. But once we started firing, and the American’s started firing, then the Taliban got the message.”

The message was clear.

This isn’t Taliban country anymore, and the locals don’t need to be afraid.

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