

'Cacti' take Afghan boy under company's wing



Spc. German de la Roche (left), an infantryman and COP Honaker-Miracle mayor assigned to Co. D, 2nd Bn., 35th Inf. Regt., "TF Cacti," 3rd BCT, 25th ID, explains a job to Shahidulla (center) and another Afghan worker in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar province, July 31.

Story and Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Mark Burrell, Combined Joint Task Force 1-Afghanistan August 11, 2011

Smallest victories and youngest Afghans can help change a country

KUNAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan — Soldiers assigned to Company D, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, "Task Force Cacti," 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, are trying to make a positive change in the lives of Afghans around Combat Outpost Honaker-Miracle, here.

The lives of thousands of Afghans have been unequivocally altered because of war, but Soldiers are looking for ways to help foster good relations in the community.

A few years ago, an Afghan National army soldier worked as a cook on a base in Korengal Valley, here. One day, he went to a nearby village to get a lamb for dinner. He was ambushed and killed by the Taliban, leaving Shahidulla, 9, to care for his mother and younger sister.

Today, Shahidulla, now 14, stands on top of a shipping container at COP Honaker-Miracle and directs other Afghan workers on where to put a pallet of bottled water.

"When Shahidulla first came to us, I immediately saw an opportunity to bring someone in to work with us as a day laborer," said Spc. German De la Roche, COP mayor, 2nd Bn., 35th Inf. Regt. "Rather than him having a bad experience with us and possibly making other choices in life, I wanted us to take that opportunity and seize it."

Shahidulla was offered a job with a contractor that helps run the busy COP.

De la Roche saw an opportunity to help this Afghan teenager, because too many young Afghans fall in league with Taliban, said De la Roche, and he didn't want to see that happen to him.

“When I see a boy like (Shahidulla),” said De la Roche, “I say, what can we do to help him, so he can tell his friends, and one day say, ‘I worked with the Americans. I saw them every day. I saw how they lived, how they ate (and) how they treated us. They wanted to do the best for this country and for our people.’”

“If he uses those words one day, that's all we can ask for,” continued De la Roche. “If he spreads that message, at the end of the day, that's much more effective than whatever information campaign that we have.”

“We can be the factor that gets him headed in the right direction and gets him to understand that America isn't that bad, and we're here to help,” said 1st Sgt. Matthew Bartel, 2nd Bn., 35th Inf. Regt. “We'll take a small victory like that.”

Here, it's the small victories that can have lasting impressions, added De la Roche.

“What we're facing here, it's only through generational change that the overall picture can stabilize,” explained De la Roche. “These kids are the ones that can change a country when they grow up. That's why we're here at the end of the day.”

Recently, rockets blasted the small combat outpost. Shahidulla was hit with some shrapnel while getting into a bunker. The medics began evaluating him, and the company commander came to check on him. Shahidulla woke up and gave the thumbs-up sign.

It was a scare for the Soldiers, because the company has adopted Shahidulla as a little brother, Bartel said.

“Of course, it was a big relief when he woke up, and we found out he was all right,” said Bartel. “An hour later, he was back out there, doing work and ordering some guys around. All day, he was giving us the big thumbs-up, letting us know he was doing all right.”

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