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Locals fight information war

SARAH ELIZABETH BROWN
07/02/2008

On his first operation in Afghanistan outside the relatively safe confines of the multi-national base at Kandahar Air Field, Sgt. Donald Clark was at the rear of the group doing security.

Working at night with other Canadian soldiers and their counterparts with the Afghan National Army, the group was to seize a known weapons cache.

"We were crossing some difficult terrain and at one point I couldn't see the guy in front of me," wrote Clark from Afghanistan. "For that brief moment, I started thinking about my 'conduct after capture' training and what could potentially happen if I got separated from my team.

"It only took a moment to get my bearings and locate the rest of the team, but it was a serious reality check that this wasn't an exercise anymore and I was in a combat zone."

Though he's called Vancouver Island home for the last 14 years, Clark grew up in and around Thunder Bay. His wife of nearly 10 years is from Thunder Bay as well. Their six-year-old son was born in B.C.

In Afghanistan, he's second in command of a tactical information operations team, also called a psyops or psychological operations team.

Clark and colleague Cpl. David Carr, also from Thunder Bay, spend most of their time outside the air field base as their job involves talking to "the uncommitted target audience" – Afghans – in an effort to gain their support.

"We do this primarily by ensuring that people are informed of the facts, understand the consequences of actions and are aware of our intent," Clark wrote. "We also monitor Taliban information operations and dispel Taliban rumours that attempt to instill fear in the local populace – a method the Taliban likes to use to control the largely uneducated villagers."

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In fighting the information war, Clark's team uses leaflets, newspapers, radio and loudspeakers, but relies mainly on old-fashioned face-to-face talking.

A former army photojournalist, Clark has formal education in applied communication, experience and training that led him to being picked for the tactical information unit.

An Afghan interpreter works with the unit, and the Canadians were trained in the local culture and customs along with skills in persuasion, argument and negotiation.

That's taken them on 40 foot patrols in 10 operations, largely in one district of Kandahar province.

"I have generally found the Afghans to be a hospitable and resilient people," wrote Clark. "However, most of them have grown tired of the fighting and feel trapped between us and the insurgents."

The day Carr, a tactical operator, sat down to answer questions about his job in Afghanistan, he couldn't say what the temperature was – the thermometer doesn't go that high.

The day before, he could tell. It read 58 C, though he didn't say where the thermometer was mounted.

A photo of Carr after a foot patrol shows nearly every inch of his uniform soaked through with sweat.

"I've covered a lot of ground in Kandahar Province on my feet," he wrote from Afghanistan, where the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment reservist is on his first tour of duty. "The tours are always changing, but the weather is always predictable: hot."

An Afghan tour is a long way from a nine-to-five gig.

Patrols occur at all hours, requiring the soldiers to be ready. Not only does the tactical information unit talk to Afghans, every interaction has to be documented and reported.

"Additionally, we are soldiers first, so we always have to be available for security or quick reaction tasks to support other Canadian Forces," wrote Clark.

Fighting boredom in Afghanistan is the same as back home – almost, Carr said. He showers, reads, plays video games or settles in to watch a movie with his buddies – or cleans his weapon or works on the unit's vehicle.

Clark hasn't been bored yet, but catches some shut-eye if he has down time.

"Because you never know; the next night you might not get any."

Unless he's answering e-mail or making one of his twice-weekly calls home, Clark tries not to think of home too much.

"It's really important to keep a clear head and stay focused on the task at hand," he wrote.

Carr thought his calls home were sporadic, but his mom pointed out to him he usually calls on Sundays.

"I don't really get homesick," he said. "I think it's best that way because I can focus entirely on my mission. That's not to say I don't miss them, because I do, but I don't want to be caught with my pants down by the enemy, so to speak."

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"I'll think about (family) when I'm done my work here," wrote Carr. "I'm an adventurer and this is one big adventure."

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