

MIRED IN AFGHANISTAN

On the front lines of the battle for hearts and minds.

Big Task, Tiny Victories



MATT KATZ / Staff

In their aid station at Kala Gush, Navy Lts. Douglas Gugger (left) and Kyle Burditt treat Sewella, who thinks she's about 7, after a boulder mangled her fingers and caused infection. The Americans took care of her for months.

Lt. Douglas Gugger of Philadelphia is in a U.S. force whose elusive mission is to rebuild a province and win over Afghans before the Taliban reaches them.

FORWARD OPERATING BASE KALA GUSH, Afghanistan — A calm breeze carries the smoke from the Americans' cigars into the craggy mountains of their enemies, just as it does every night at the place known as the end of the earth.

Hosting the smoke session for the troops is the medical staff of this remote base in the eastern Afghan province of Nuristan. Dr. Douglas Gugger of Philadelphia — senior medical officer, unlikely Navy man, new father of two — leans back in his red-and-blue camping chair. He smiles.

Talk turns, once again, to the aid station's new mascot, a two-inch-long gnarly creature called a camel spider, now residing in an empty biohazard syringe container. It is, as Gugger says, "freakin' awesome."

Just then ... BOOM!

The Taliban is trying to ruin cigar night.

A radio crackles with numbers and acronyms.

See **AFGHANISTAN** on A16

By Matt Katz / Inquirer Staff Writer



Gugger and Navy Cmdr. Joseph Carnell, a Cherry Hill native, relax at the Provincial Reconstruction Team's nightly smoke session.

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Seeking goodwill, finding fear, frustration

AFGHANISTAN from A1
“We just took a rocket,” someone says. The sirens, seconds later, and the loudspeaker pronouncement, “This is not a drill,” confirm the hit somewhere on the outskirts of the base.

Like leaves blowing in the wind, the troops disappear to their huts, grab body armor, and rush to battle positions at the base perimeter. The crunching of stones under scrambling boots fills the quiet before the fight.

Gugger drops his lit cigar on the ground, runs into his hut, and puts on the body armor he never thought he would need. Then he returns, picks up the stogie, and puts it back in his mouth.

His right-hand man, Kyle Burditt, a physician's assistant and Navy hospital corpsman from South Carolina with far more battlefield experience, joins him.

Cigar night is back on.

Leaning on the sandbagged wall of the bunker outside the aid station, the two friends watch artillery guys a few yards away tear into the surrounding hills with retaliatory blasts of flame. In the distance, from a nearby village, the faint sounds of the Islamic call to prayer welcome the night.

The men, both known as “Doc,” wait for injuries or an order to stand down, whichever comes first. They smoke. They throw rocks at nothing.

Gugger's cell phone vibrates in his pocket. It's 7:35 p.m.; 11:05 a.m. in Philadelphia.

“It's my wife,” he says, staring into the phone.

Back home, Amy Gugger, 33, is juggling the couple's two new babies: Abraham, 10 months old and adopted from Ethiopia in December while Gugger was at training; and Micah, born while Gugger was home on a two-week leave the month before, a surprise gift after the couple tried to become pregnant for three years.

“Is everything OK?” the new stressed-out mother asks, wondering why her husband is late making his nightly phone call.

He speaks to her inside the aid station, and minutes later he's back outside.

“I lied,” he says, heavily.

The cigar has turned to ash. When the order comes to stand down, Gugger heads into his hut, one night closer to going home, one step closer to being a true father to his children.

U.S. troops gather for their nightly smoke — which can be interrupted by Taliban attacks — at Kala Gush.

MATT KATZ / Staff



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Dr. Douglas Gugger treats mostly Afghans at the remote Kala Gush base, America's last stand in Nuristan province on Pakistan's border.



MATT KATZ / Staff

Gugger keeps cigars, top, in his night-vision goggle case. Above, Navy Cmdr. Raymond Benedict.

Can this work?

Gugger isn't telling Amy about this attack, or the dozen attacks that the base — the last American presence in Nuristan — has so far faced. He isn't talking about how he's dealt with fear and frustration by healing Afghan children. He isn't saying much of anything about his strange life here.



AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer

At home in Manayunk, Gugger's wife, Amy, cares for the couple's babies, Abraham, 10 months old and adopted in December from Ethiopia; and Micah, born while Gugger was home on leave the month before.

The Navy lieutenant is part of a joint U.S. force called a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), with members from the Navy, Air Force, Army and federal government. Their mission is to rebuild a province in one of the poorest, most battle-scarred nations on earth in order to win Afghan hearts and minds before the Tali-

ban (and al-Qaeda) reach them first. This kind of work is supposed to win the war.

But to succeed, the Nuristan PRT must try to build police stations, wells, and roads — while giving a crash course on things like project bidding and legal contracts to mostly illiterate tribesmen unexposed to centralized gov-

ernment. The 100 PRT members, culled from military posts throughout the world, must empower the local provincial government that will lead once the United States withdraws. Trouble is, the Americans aren't speaking with the governor of the province — he's widely considered corrupt.

“Nothing in my last 20 years in the Navy taught me anything about this,” says the Nuristan PRT's commanding officer, Navy Cmdr. Raymond J. Benedict, a Toms River kid who has spent most of his working life on amphibious vehicles.

If Benedict and his team have even a little success, then maybe the United States can succeed in all of Afghanistan. But if not — if giving billions of dollars to a country and rooting out the worst of its society doesn't stop its people from hating America — then what will?

This question looms as the longest war in American history enters its 10th year.

Tens of thousands of troops have arrived, along with a new commander, Gen. David H. Petraeus, perhaps the most compelling military leader since Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Petraeus wrote the Army's Counterinsurgency Field Manual and then employed its strategy in Iraq in 2007.

But Afghanistan presents a different challenge. American popular support for the conflict is dropping like a 500-pound bomb. Large swaths of the country that were once relatively safe, like Nuristan, the most linguistically and ethnically diverse province in the country, are now hotbeds of insurgency. And the Afghan government, which the United States is supposed to be working with, is broken and despised.

The clock is ticking. Benedict, Gugger, and the other PRT airmen, soldiers, and sailors have nine months in country to figure it all out. Petraeus, and the United States, might not have much longer than that.

An exceptional journey

A lean 6-foot-1, with dark hair and classic good looks, Gugger, 33, is the guy you want doing this Herculean job. The eldest of a dentist's three sons, he played lacrosse at La Salle College High School, the Catholic prep school just north of Philadelphia, before graduating in 1999 from Boston. See **AFGHANISTAN** on A17



Associated Press

October 7, 2001: U.S. launches a bombing campaign in Afghanistan after the Taliban-led government refuses to hand over Osama bin-Laden.

Troop Deployments

The United States has had troops stationed in Afghanistan for nine years. Troop levels compared with Iraq:

