

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL PAUL SOMERSALL, REGIONAL CORPS ADVISORY COMMAND COMMANDER IN SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN SUBJECT: THE ROLE OF EMBEDDED MENTORS IN SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN TIME: 8:30 A.M. EST DATE: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2008

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SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday (sic/means Tuesday), December 2nd, 2008. And my name is Seaman William Selby at the Office of Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

Note to the bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly state your name and blogger organization in advance of your question. Please respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct.

Today our guest is Colonel Paul Somersall, commander, Regional Corps Advisory Command in southern Afghanistan. And sir, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead with that.

COL. SOMERSALL: Well, thank you.

Good morning. My name is Colonel Paul Somersall. Thank you for allowing me to discuss the progress of the Afghan National Army's development in southern Afghanistan. I am the senior mentor for the 205th Hero Corps and commander of the 205th Regional Corps Advisory Command, which reports through the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command South, Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix, Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan through the commander, U.S. Forces Afghanistan, General McKiernan.

In the south, I'm responsible for command and control of all U.S. embedded transition teams, otherwise called the ETTs, and for the development of the 205th Corps.

It's a pleasure for me to be able to share with you the incredible advances of the 205th Corps, which is the Afghan National Army's unit responsible for partnering with the Afghan National Police and coalition forces to provide security in the southern region of Afghanistan, which consists of the following six provinces: Kandahar, Zabul, Helmand, Oruzgan, Daikundi and Nimroz.

As most of you know, the southern region is the most volatile in the entire country. I'd like to focus our conversation today on the 205th Corps'

development, which is based on my personal observations and experiences over the last several months, as well as those of the other mentors in this region.

First, I'd like to explain who the mentors are, what they do, and how they do it. Then I'll provide an overview of the 205th Corps and the status of their development.

The mentors in southern Afghanistan represent every branch of service - - Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines -- from several countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, Romania, Australia and France. I'm very proud to serve with these brave men and women, and their collective performance has been outstanding. I appreciate the support from each nation, and especially want to say thank you to their families and the citizens of each country.

Our mission as embedded mentors, also referred to as combat advisers, is to lead the development of the 205th Corps so that they have the capability to conduct independent, sustainable counterinsurgency combat operations. We coach, teach, train, advise and mentor our ANA counterparts with how to plan, execute and sustain offensive, defensive and stability operations in order to provide security to the citizens of Afghanistan. The mentors also control the coalition combat enablers of close air support, medevac and other assets. How we do this mission is by establishing strong, trusted relationships with our ANA counterparts, and that is done by living, eating and fighting side by side in combat with our Afghan brethren. Depending on the location and the circumstances, mentors are expected to spend between two to 12 hours a day with their counterpart.

We must be tactically proficient in our respective specialties, and we must demonstrate patience as well as resolve. To be effective, we must learn how to communicate and see the challenges and opportunities through their eyes, from the Afghan perspective, based on their culture, constitution, police system and way of fighting.

We help the ANA learn how to develop systems, policies and procedures in order to sustain themselves, as well as ways to effectively employ intelligence systems and fire support, such as artillery mortars and close air.

In giving you an overview of the 205th Corps, first I will characterize them in terms of organization and capability. The 205th Corps is the largest corps in the ANA. It consists of four infantry brigades, three garrison commands, and responsibility for tactical employment of an ANA airport detachment and a commander battalion.

The Corps has artillery, mortars, recon, engineers and logistical support units. In addition to the combat units located at the Corps, there is a regional military hospital to provide medical support to the ANA, Afghan National Police, and the people of Afghanistan during times of crisis.

Today the 205th Corps has the capability to plan and execute operations, and they also are resupplying their troops using ground and air ANA air assets such as helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. These are Afghan pilots flying Afghan missions in support of the Afghan people. This capability is growing and becoming more and more integrated into daily operations.

An example of the Corps' growing capability was their response to the Sarpoza prison break in June and the follow-up combined operation with Task

Force Kandahar, which together they planned and executed an operation in the Ardenga (sp) Valley. That operation restored the confidence to the Afghan citizen in the Ardenga (sp) district, who have fled when enemy forces moved into their villages after the prison break.

During recent combat operations, three of the four infantry brigade headquarters were observed and assessed as capable of conducting independent operations with minimum support from their combat advisers, who controlled air support and other enablers.

Throughout this year, several battalions throughout the region have also been recognized as reaching the same level. One of the brigades recently planned, executed and sustained themselves during a seven-day operation where they drove deep into what is called an enemy sanctuary or enemy safe haven to destroy identified enemy forces.

They were successful leading the operation, with less than 30 mentors and 20 other coalition soldiers, in addition to their 300 ANA ground force. They were supported by coalition mortars, close air support and intelligence assets. This was a great example of the ANA's capability to lead and conduct their own operations.

Not only is this ANA brigade capable of planning and executing combined arms operations -- (inaudible) -- coalition enablers of close air support, medevac and intelligence, they learned how to use non-kinetic effects in order to assist in the -- (inaudible) -- consent of the population for the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

The mentors, with their ANA counterparts, delivered over 300 tons of wheat seed to provincial districts, promoting food production, helping to reduce illegal poppy production in one of the poorest provinces in Afghanistan. That brigade commander has now taken the lead in determining humanitarian assistance projects and priorities.

Across the region, the 205th Corps, with their mentors, have been conducting -- (inaudible) -- meetings with village elders to understand the needs of Afghans, and they have responded by providing food, water wells, power generation, schools, as well as medical and dental outreaches. These efforts have been well-received by the local villagers (that have ?) support for the government.

In closing, I'd like to give an overall assessment. The ANA in the southern region of Afghanistan are tough, experienced fighters. They're focused on fighting for their country and support the Afghan constitution. They are patriotic and ferocious warriors against foreign fighters that seek to take over their country. When attacked, they become more committed, and aggressively they've taken the fight to their enemy. They are good students at putting in systems, policies and procedures in order to sustain an army.

The 205th Corps is committed to winning in southern Afghanistan and doing what needs to be done to grow larger and stronger every day. I'm convinced that with increased numbers of well-trained mentors and advisers, as well as additional combat enablers of aviation and intelligence assets, we move closer every day to being able to transfer and lead security responsibility to the government of Afghanistan.

A young captain who is a Corps maintenance mentor recently told me that he believes that when we begin to treat the ANA as true allies, we will be close to winning. I believe we are getting closer and closer every day.

With that, I welcome your questions. SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

And Andrew, you were on the line first, so you can go ahead with your question.

Q Thank you.

Colonel, Andrew Lubin from Naval Institute's magazine Proceedings. Good afternoon, sir.

COL. SOMERSALL: Hi, Andrew.

Q Colonel, I just came back from a month in Afghanistan. I was out east at Blackhorse with the 201st Corps. It seems that the -- and I'm generalizing a bit -- that the ANA have respect for the Marines, have respect for the Army, but they don't have respect for our coalition allies, who don't seem to go out beyond the wire, thinking more about the Portuguese, the Romanians and the Turks.

Do you run into that down in your AO, or is that a common problem across the country?

COL. SOMERSALL: Andrew, I'll tell you, the 201st Corps I've had a little bit of experience with, because during the Sarpoza prison break, they moved 1,000 troops down here as well as -- (inaudible) -- Alaska Guard operation, well over 1,200 moved down to support us out in Helmand. So I've got a lot of respect, and I appreciate the 201st Corps; Colonel Jeff Haynes, who just recently was my counterpart, and also General Wardak, who's the Corps commander.

I haven't personally seen that kind of situation, because down here, quite literally, over the last several months we've had a number of Brits, Canadians, Aussies, Dutch, all going out and fighting alongside with the Afghans. I obviously -- I've got one brigade that's full of U.S. ETTs, and they're constantly in fights. But so are the other guys. So our guys across the board, the OMLTs, Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams, as well as the U.S. ETTs, are all fighting together with the ANA.

Q Okay, great.

Let me have a follow-up, guys -- (inaudible).

Are the French allowed to fight now? When I was out with Colonel Haynes -- (inaudible) -- they seemed to be doing pretty good. Are they allowed to fight down your way, or do they got to get permission every time?

COL. SOMERSALL: Well, again, in June I had a French brigade that was chopped from 201st Corps. They came in -- a mentor team came in with them. And they had legionnaires, and they were out in the middle -- (inaudible) -- actually in Kandahar, and then went into the Ardenga (sp), and they were mixing it up. So my experience has been that they were there and they were

fighting, and they were right there in the villages going alongside with the ANA.

Q Okay, excellent. Thank you.

COL. SOMERSALL: I can't comment on their caveats, but I can only comment on what I see.

Q Okay, great.

See, I was with Colonel Haynes when they pulled out. That was an interesting couple days up there.

COL. SOMERSAL: Yeah. He's a good guy.

Q Thanks.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay.

And Chuck, you're next.

Q Good evening, Colonel. Chuck Simmons from America's North Shore Journal from Upstate New York.

COL. SOMERSAL: Oh, great!

Q Talk to me a little bit more about the organization of 205 Corps. When you talk about a brigade, how many -- are you talking about an American-sized brigade? When you talk about a battalion, an American-sized battalion? Are we talking different numbers?

COL. SOMERSAL: An Afghan battalion is roughly about 600 soldiers -- that range is based on the configuration. And each brigade has three -- average three infantry battalions and then they have a combat support and combat service support. So they have five total battalions, besides the three infantry battalions.

And Chuck, I appreciate you calling from Upstate New York, because that's where I'm from. And here it's, I don't think, as cold as it is up where you're at.

Q Oh, I don't know about that. You know, there is the dreaded Afghan winter.

COL. SOMERSAL: It's 60 degrees here!

Q Oh, okay. Yeah. So it is much colder here.

Can you talk about medical services? You talked about the regional medical hospital. Can you talk about the provisional medical services both for the troops and for the civilians through there? COL. SOMERSAL: Sure, absolutely. The regional medical hospital is an asset of the Ministry of Defense. It's to provide medical treatment to the Afghan National Army as well as the Afghan National Police. It has an emergency room. It has a pharmacy. It has an anesthesiologist. It has -- it's a full-op hospital.

It's mentored by U.S. medical mentors, in conjunction with support from our coalition partners. We have Regional Command South, which we are co-located with, and we have Canadians and Marines and Brits come over and help support and teach the Afghans.

It's only been in operation for one year and it's had a number of mass causality events that they've had to deal with and have done a fantastic job. And it's a growing -- by no means would I say it's like an Albany Medical Center or a Saint Peter's, because it's far from that. It's a small hospital that's an asset that's growing.

We offer support through ANA that are the doctors there and the hospital administrators to provide medical services to women and children once a week. And that's done by female providers from the coalition that help the -- there will be one female provider that's assigned to the hospital and they treat and provide preventative health care to women and children that are the officers, NCOs and soldiers families.

Q Thank you.

COL. SOMERSAL: In terms of the medical treatment downrange, there's full medics. There's Afghan medics that are located in the battalions and they are teamed up with our medics, which are corpsmen, which are from every service. And they go out and they treat not only the Afghan soldiers, but they do what's called medical outreaches in the local community where they take care of the citizens when they have time and they're not fighting.

Q All right. Thank you.

COL. SOMERSAL: Okay. You're welcome.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Troy.

Q All right. Good evening, sir. This is Troy Stewart (sp). It's been a long time.

COL. SOMERSAL: How are you doing, Troy?

Q Good, good. Glad we got you on here.

Sir, I'm going to kind of ask a question that I hope -- I know a lot has happened over the last year; I hope you can remember a few of the things we -- I guess I talked about the last time I saw you when I gave a class at the Fort Drum.

If you think back over the last year, and if you can kind of remember -- if you can't, I have another question -- but if you can kind of remember some of the things I talked about, I was wondering what the one thing is that stands out as the most dead-on, exact topic or fact, which I talked about. And what has been the one thing that is the most changed or that was off base or was nothing like what I talked about?

COL. SOMERSAL: Wow! That's interesting.

Q And if that's too tough, I've got some more -- I've got another question.

COL. SOMERSAL: Well, I think Troy, the one thing that you mentioned that was spot on was at, you know, where you were at, which obviously over in the east and -- (inaudible) -- Company FOB, how austere and how tough the fight is out there. Yeah.

Q Okay. The other --

COL. SOMERSAL: Hey, Troy, the other thing I will tell you that I don't know, I wouldn't say that you were off on -- we'll talk about it maybe when I get back -- is you know, we had some pretty good -- and I can't tell yet, because I haven't been -- (inaudible) -- every single location. But we had some pretty good experiences with most of the guys out there, albeit a lot of fire fights, a lot of rocket attacks, a lot of IEDs, a lot of situations where we had, you know, five or six guys in firefights for quite awhile.

But the Afghans really embrace our guys and we have some very, very close relationships. I remember you had some good ones and you had some bad ones, I think, if I remember correctly.

Q Yes, sir. That's correct. And I could tell you, we always respected the soldiers in the 206 because they had to fight. The ANA soldiers

had to fight every single day, they seemed to be a cut above just about all the rest of the ANA, because they were fighting for their own survival, which is quite different than a lot of other places.

Thank you, sir.

COL. SOMERSAL: You're welcome, Troy. Good to hear from you.

Q Yeah. I've got a follow-up if you have time.

SEAMAN SELBY: Absolutely.

Q Yeah, Colonel, Andrew Lubin again.

Again, I've just come back from months with Colonel Haynes. Are you able to start promoting soft power and the use of economics and micro loans and small-scale projects? Or are you still more in the hunting down and the kinetic operations? COL. SOMERSAL: (Laughs.) I'm only laughing because it's -- it's a great question, Andrew. And we have, as you've heard and as you know, quite a bit of -- we have a target-rich environment. We have a lot of bad guys that don't want to see Afghanistan survive. So by definition, yeah, there's a lot of kinetic activity.

We have, since I've been there -- or even before I got here -- there are a number of projects, CERP projects -- Commanders Emergency Relief Projects -- where we build walls, build schools. We provide a lot of wheat seed. I believe it's been over 500 -- I think we did over 500 -- 300 tons.

In terms of micro loans, we haven't handled that directly, but we've employed a lot of Afghan -- local Afghans through the several millions of dollars of projects that drew the ETT -- now I'm talking strictly with the EPT side. The mentors in the various countries have their projects also. And we synch those when we bring our projects forward.

So yeah, I can say there's a lot of soft projects that have been going on -- not quite enough. We need a lot more. That's one of the objectives for 2009 is to really increase the amount of big projects that are done through the ANA with their direction, where they know where we can get the best return for the taxpayer's dollars.

Q All right. Thank you very much.

SEAMAN SELBY: Hey -- oh, do you have another one? Okay, go ahead.

Q Yeah. I have a couple. Part two -- the most important first, in case I get cut off.

Sir, Troy again. How is the ANA progressing in the area of logistics support? Have they been supporting themselves from what you saw when you first got there until now, and can you give an example?

COL. SOMERSAL: Sure.

The logistics support is -- as you know -- has always been problematic. And that's one of the things that we knew we wanted to tackle. And what's happened from this time -- from the time we've gotten here till today is that the Afghan's are now realizing that they have a system in place that they can rely on.

And what our mentors have done is they have a parallel, vertical system from the company mentor to the battalion mentor to the brigade mentor to the corps mentor. And my guys at the corps level are forced or tasked by me to make sure they've reached down and help out whoever needs help, but not to do it for the Afghans, but to help the Afghans understand why they need to do certain things in the system. And we've been able to get the system working. You know -- I'll give you an example. Yesterday, we have a forward support depot co-located with the corps filled with supplies. And we have two battalions that -- (came back ?) battalions that came down to pick up supplies -- the truck battalions, CSS battalions -- to actually take winter supplies, oil, food, clothing back for their brigades. And we're doing that by ground or we're doing that by air.

So the second brigade, the fourth brigade -- both did combat controls, pick up their supplies, and move them back. They'll distribute them and they're doing that on their own. And also, we use the Mi-17s that we have to create our own ANA-link flight.

And now they were -- we've moved 90,000 tons of supplies since August using the MI-17's and these are all by the Afghans. We only help

coordinate and keep them either focused or answer questions when they need help. Does that answer your question?

Q Oh yes, that's great sir. That's some really good news of progress, I can say for sure. Can I ask one more question?

COL. SOMERSALL: Sure.

(Cross talk.)

Q Nimruz was usually -- had been typically ignored by previous ECT rotations, prior to 47th coming in. Were you able to successfully penetrate that province and was that because of the extra support from the 27 Marines?

COL. SOMERSALL: Troy, could you repeat -- could you say that again please?

Q Yeah. Nimruz Province was usually ignored by -- has been -- pretty much hasn't been tackled by previous ECT rotations. And I was wondering if you were successfully able to penetrate that province and was that because of the extra support from the 27 Marine's you had in-country?

COL. SOMERSALL: Okay, so you're asking about Maywand Province -- Maywand District?

Q Nimruz District -- or Nimruz Province, actually.

COL. SOMERSALL: Oh, Nimruz. Oh, okay, I got you. Nimruz Province is currently a province that does not have a dedicated ANA presence in it. And I won't -- Well I guess that's the best way for me to characterize it. The police are a presence there. Today the Afghan National Army does not have a presence in Nimruz, on a dedicated basis.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay. And Andrew did you have one more question?

Q Yes, one more Colonel, if you don't mind. Sir, how's it going with the chain of command of reconstruction over there? General McKearin was trying to take over all the fighting and realign all the lines of command. How's that actually working out? How's it progressing? COL. SOMERSALL: Well the both times that I saw him I knew that he was my Commander. And it's interesting, we, as you know, have probably the most challenging numbers of chains of command that I've ever seen in 27 years. But what I've told the guys over there is that its unity of effort. The coalition staff of Canadians -- my personal staff is combined of British -- I have five British, I have three Canadians, I have Dutch and I'm about to get, I believe, an Australian officer. And what I tell them all time is that its unity of effort and we have to make sure we pull it together for the sake of the country here in Afghanistan and our country back home and our respective countries. Because of the change, which has been a real positive change, General McKearin and his U.S. forces, Afghanistan, and General Cohen who is the (inaudible) Alpha Command who reports to him. And it really provides a focal point while we, as we work through and work with the Afghans. So it's helped and I believe that we'll see that continue to be a positive effect over the next, as we continue moving forward.

Q Okay, great. Thank you. William?

SEAMAN SELBY: Yes, this is William.

Q Yeah, it's Chuck. I've got a quick question if I could.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay, yeah, we have a few minutes -- about one more minute left. So go ahead Chuck.

Q Colonel, is 205 Corps manned up to spec? And if so, do you anticipate the need for any more ANA forces in your region?

COL. SOMERSALL: Well one of the things that I'll tell you that I've seen down here is that the ANA is not much different than a U.S. unit in terms of we never have enough people. So the manning level has been -- actually the Afghans have been able to man it, man the units very -- obviously with our assistance with the (KNPC ?) and the whole force generation process we've been able to keep a very good pipeline. And we've built some MCO programs to keep MCOs flowing. And we're working on building combat leaders courses for the officers down here. So the strength has been good. What I will tell you is that a country, such as Afghanistan which is, I believe, larger than Iraq, and to look at the number of troops that we have, we could always use more troops. The Afghan army, I believe, as it gets bigger will be able to take the fight to the enemy and be able to run operations in their own AORs so they'll have battle spaces and they can today even conduct operations with task and purpose so that they can work alongside with the coalition partners. So yes, is there a need for more Afghan troops? Yes, I believe so and I say that because that's what my Afghan generals say, General Zazai and the previous corps commander, (General Naiibi ?) who I've worked with closely. So I believe that the army will continue to grow and there's a need for a bigger army to fight the insurgency down here. SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

COL. SOMERSALL: We have -- I don't know if the constraint is on your time but if you want to go a few more minutes. I have -- we're on a different line than Amy usually uses. It's actually -- I've got the ability to go a little longer if you'd like to.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay, well, we actually, yeah, we could go about 15 minutes longer if -- do you have more questions? Do any of our bloggers have more questions?

Q Yeah, I do. Can I go first guys? Then I have to jump off and I'll tell you why. Colonel, Andrew Lubin again, I'm briefing my Congressman, Representative Pat Murphy about my trip to Afghanistan, mostly about being out with Colonel Haines in the east last month. I don't know whether you know, Murphy is, we're Bucks County, Pennsylvania, he's former Army, got a bronze star in Iraq. What can I tell him about your AO? And I apologize -- and if it feels like it's -- (inaudible) -- question then have Amy give you my email number and we can, I can follow up with him later on. But no he's a pretty serious guy.

COL. SOMERSALL: Well, I can tell you that, you tell your Congressman that we are doing a heck of a lot with the resources that we have. The soldiers here have been -- have been incredible.

SEAMAN SELBY: Sir?

COL. SOMERSALL: Yeah. And I would just say that, just let him know that we appreciate the support that Congress gives us and that the more we have in terms of mentor support to grow the Army the faster the Army can provide the

security and the country can reach a better level of responsibility for its own security.

Q Great thanks. And again, Colonel, I'm sorry I have to jump off. I'm meeting -- I've got to be at his office in another 25 minutes. If you would like to communicate later through Lieutenant Panano (sp).

COL. SOMERSALL: Okay.

Q Great guys, hey guys it's good to talk to you all.

COL. SOMERSALL: Thanks, Andrew.

Q See you, Andrew.

SEAMAN SELBY: And -- anymore follow-up questions?

Q (Audio break) -- from point zero, versus in -- in Iraq, we put up units and then we kind of then trained them. I'm trying to account for the difference in the size of the two armies, given the timeframe involved. Can you speak to that at all?

COL. SOMERSALL: Chuck, first of all, I've never been to Iraq. The closest I got to Iraq was flying through Kuwait when I came back home in R&R, so I can't really speak to Iraq because I just -- I don't have any experience, specifically, with Iraq.

We -- what I can talk to you about, though, is about the 205th Corps -- the officers, the NCOs and the soldiers.

Q Well --

COL. SOMERSALL: And what I'll tell you -- excuse me?

Q Well, I guess what I'm -- what I'm wondering is why is the Afghan army comparatively small?

COL. SOMERSALL: Oh, okay.

Well, the reason the army is the size that it is, is vis-a-vis agreements that have been -- they have come to with -- at levels much higher than mine, as a result of the Charter. And the international community actually sets the size of the army.

And I think if you look back in some of the recent press interviews by General Cohen and others, you know, there are plans to grow the army -- and, again, that's outside of my lane, but I will tell you that I've read the same things that you guys have access to and we've been briefed on. I know I've been briefed on the growth of the army, so the army's going to grow, but the international community agreed to the size of the army. And that is also -- (audio break). So, does that help you?

Q Yeah. Just -- do Afghans want to join the army? Is there a demand for -- COL. SOMERSALL: Oh, absolutely.

Q Okay.

COL. SOMERSALL: Oh, absolutely. Let me just give you an example. I mean, the Afghan senior officers -- some of these senior officers have a tremendous amount of experience -- going through staff colleges and other training, through the United Kingdom; they've gone to some of our war colleges, staff colleges; Airborne Ranger school, Special Forces. I mean, there are guys -- and the Afghan army, and there are Afghans and they've lived here that have gone to our schools over the last 30 years and they're -- (audio break) -- professional officers.

The most respected force in this country is the Afghan National Army. Soldiers are proud to belong to the ANA, and the people love and appreciate the ANA and they trust them. So recruiting -- the numbers are high, and the soldiers are coming in. And it's a matter of, again, you know, what we're allowed to grow. And, again, that's not something that I deal with. I deal with, you know, the decisions that have already been made to actually train them collectively and take them into war -- combat.

Q Okay, thank you.

COL. SOMERSALL: But, yeah, they want to belong to the army, absolutely, Chuck.

Q Great. Thank you.

COL. SOMERSALL: You're welcome.

SEAMAN SELBY: Troy, did you have any follow-ups?

Q Oh, of course I do -- yes.

Sir, have your ANA started receiving M-16s and up-armored Humvees yet?

COL. SOMERSALL: Yeah, absolutely. We've received M-16s and fielded them, and actually gone out and engaged and killed the enemy with them -- to the point where in one particular battalion the enemy was saying that, "Stay away from the ANA now, they have the black weapons which kill us faster."

That's probably not a very politically-correct statement, but it was a good thing because they became the poster children for other ANA -- other battalions because they were a little skeptical on this thing called the M-16, versus their AK-47. Much more -- obviously much more accurate, albeit -- (inaudible) -- you know because you're a pro. But, yeah, they're fielding them and they're having some good effects. Q Right, right. I mean, I know the ANA -- you know, they love to imitate American soldiers, and want to look and act like American soldiers as much as possible. However, I'm wondering how it is -- how it's been to maintain them, especially since the M-16s are much more sensitive? I'm getting reports from other parts of the country of some major issues. How are they doing on that? Are they able to keep, you know, the extractor pins and things like that together?

COL. SOMERSALL: Well, that's -- it's tough. I mean, it's tough. You know the M-16, I keep that baby clean -- cleaning kits, moving that through the supply system, as well as just training them to maintain it, versus the AK-47 -- as you know, you can do anything to that thing and it'll still, you know, fire.

And that's the challenge that we have at the company level where we need to make sure we have the right number -- (audio break) -- NCOs and pay the right amount of attention to sustainment training. And we've actually -- the quote I gave you at the end of the speech was from a corps maintenance officer. That was a captain we put in place about a month ago that focused on maintenance, and we just added an armor and we're adding a lot more capacity, on a contractual basis, to support, you know, down through the battalion level, which, again, is not far enough but it's the best that we can do right now, in terms of weapons maintenance.

Q Okay, --

COL. SOMERSALL: But, it is a problem that -- (audio break) -- to work on.

Q Roger, sir. How about up-armored Humvees? Have they started getting those yet, and how's that going with maintaining those -- and safety with those?

COL. SOMERSALL: We are just -- we're just in the beginning of our fielding. 205th -- one of the other corps has gone -- a couple of the other corps has gone before us, and because of the summer fighting the fielding was intentionally not done. I don't want to give you too much more information, Troy, because obviously, you know, that's a sensitive area in terms of timings. But, we haven't gotten into it yet, but it's an area that I'm very concerned that we make sure that we have all the support and the infrastructure and the sustainment in place, and we're actually training mechanics and doing everything as we speak right now.

So we haven't experienced it yet, they haven't rolled out. But that's going to be an ongoing effort that -- going forward.

Q Okay. I have one -- just one more question, if I can -- and I promise that's it.

COL. SOMERSALL: Okay. Q They said -- reports just came out that November had the lowest number of U.S. casualties -- maybe Coalition, I'm not -- I don't remember -- in November in Afghanistan this year I think. And I'm wondering, in your opinion, and what you've seen, your intel you've gathered, is that because of either, 1) it's November and a lot of the bad guys are heading back across the border, or heading wherever, or sitting low?; or is it because the change-out of your -- of the very kinetic 24th MEU, and the Marines, and stuff and just the replacements that have come in haven't had a chance to really take the fight and stay on them yet? What would you attribute to the low casualty count?

COL. SOMERSALL: Troy, I haven't seen that report. And actually, I'm very interested to get the specifics -- obviously, it's drilled down by unit, which I'll be able to. What I'll tell you is that we've had, in November -- and I was actually involved, or I went out -- I went down-range on one of the operations for 13 days -- we have an increased number of ANA-led operations that are offensive in nature.

And the good news is that the other guy can't claim, I don't think -- he can't claim what you just stated, because I know that there are -- there's quite a few casualties on their side. And the ANA didn't have one casualty in

that multi-day operation, and neither did the Coalition that we were with, albeit there were only a handful of guys with them.

The other thing that's happening is we are very -- some of the -- some of the things that we're doing is we're -- we have our force protection out there. Let me just -- I don't want to get too far into it, but we're doing some things to make sure that we can do the best possible job we can to keep our guys safe.

And then the other piece that I'll say, that -- and you hit the nail on the head -- you got guys -- the bad guys starting to determine if they go underground ground what they're going to do, but I will tell you that there's quite a few folks left out there to fight and they haven't decided what they're going to do yet.

So a combination of offensive operations by a ANA, more ANA-led operations -- and I'm talking about brigade and battalion at the ANA level -- more offensive operations, and then we've taken some force pro measures which I won't go into too much -- any detail about.

Q Roger, sir. Thank you very much. That's all the questions I've got.

Q Can I get one more in?

COL. SOMERSALL: Okay.

SEAMAN SELBY: actually -- actually we are -- we're out of time, Chuck, unfortunately. Q All right. Okay.

SEAMAN SELBY: And, sir, if you have any closing remarks you can go ahead with that.

COL. SOMERSALL: Yeah, my closing remark is thank you. Thank you for giving me and the men that I represent, and the women, an opportunity to share with you what's going on here in southern Afghanistan.

I want to thank all of the great citizens of their respective countries, and particularly the United States. We're getting all kinds of great care packages and support. It's been fantastic. And I would be remiss to say, thank you to New Yorkers, and my family for their support.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir.

COL. SOMERSALL: Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And today's program will be available on-line at Bloggers link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call, along with the source documents such as the audio file and print transcripts.

Again, thank you, Colonel, and our blogger participants. This concludes today's event.

END.

