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by 1st Lt. Lauren Johnson
PRT Paktya

7/20/2009 - **PAKTYA PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN** -- The two Air Commandos last saw each other in 1999, when they served together in the 20th Special Operations Squadron as crewmembers on the MH-53 PAVE LOW out of Hurlburt Field, Fla.

So Lt. Col. Carlos Halcomb, a former MH-53 pilot, and Capt. Michael McCarter, previously a flight engineer, were surprised to run into each other in an Army dining facility in the Midwest 10 years later.

Over the past three months at Camp Atterbury, Ind., both officers have enjoyed reconnecting while preparing for a new kind of warfare -building infrastructure and governance capacity in rural Afghanistan as members of provincial reconstruction teams.

"I was always on the side where my job was to hurt the enemy," said Captain McCarter, who commissioned as a physician's assistant and is now serving in that capacity on the PRT for Zabul province. "This is a totally different mindset."

PRTs have been an active component in the Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaign since 2002, aimed at developing infrastructure and strengthening governance in 26 provinces throughout the country.

Whereas special operations firepower is typically aimed at eliminating the opposition, "a counterinsurgency fight is about undermining the support base for the opposition," said Colonel Halcomb, the incoming commander for PRT Paktya.

As Captain McCarter learned when he served on the Laghman PRT in 2006, this shift in focus requires a new set of tools.

"Traditionally in special operations we've done things like leaflet drops," he said. "But you can't do that in Afghanistan [where the population is largely illiterate]."

In Zabul province, literacy rates are estimated to be between one and 15 percent.

Instead, Captain McCarter "spent a lot of time with a hammer and a drill, doing construction work."

A key component of degrading local support of the enemy is to provide a better alternative than the insurgents offer, Colonel Halcomb said.

PRTs work with the provincial government, village elders and religious leaders and industry officials to help provide basic services and build development capacity among the Afghan people.

"We're in the business of putting Afghans in business," Colonel Halcomb said. "And the eventual result of that is it will put us out of business, and we will leave."

In Laghman, Captain McCarter and his team worked directly with the local population in the public health arena, helping Afghans improve water purification procedures, provide veterinary care for livestock, and develop accessible food sources for malnourished children.

Going from the tip of the kinetic spear to the heart of a non-kinetic battle can be difficult, the former Air Commandos said, but it's not an entirely new concept.

Colonel Halcomb followed up his 20th SOS tour with five years as a foreign aviation advisor in the 6th Special Operations Squadron.

"This deployment has a lot of the same aspects that you develop in the 6th SOS, as far as mentoring and working across cultural boundaries," he said.

Maj. J.D. Loftis, who will be joining Captain McCarter on the Zabul PRT, has been learning about Afghanistan's cultural boundaries for a long time as a regional affairs strategist and director of the South and Central Asia Orientation Course at the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School.

Photos

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Capt. Mike McCarter, physician's assistant for the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Zabul Province, Afghanistan, examines Staff Sgt. Paul Herrera July 16. Provincial Reconstruction Teams have been operating in Afghanistan since 2002, and work with provincial government and the local populace to improve security, development and governance. (DoD Photo by U.S. Air Force Maj. J.D. Loftis)

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Major Loftis studied Pashtu, one of Afghanistan's primary languages, at the Defense Language Institute, and he jumped at the chance to get involved in reconstruction work and put his language skills to use.

"To my knowledge, I'm the first U.S. military Pashtu speaker to be part of a PRT," he said. "During training I've been the mission lead, representing the commander, and I've been able to speak directly to the villagers."

Major Loftis is the PRT's public information officer, where he is tasked with fighting the increasingly important war of public relations; countering insurgent propaganda and encouraging public support for the Afghanistan government and coalition forces.

Major Loftis said that while his language skills make him an asset to his team, his counterinsurgency experience is also valuable.

"At USAFSOS, we teach counterinsurgency principles, and now we're living them," he said. "I've applied a lot of the things I've taught there."

Additionally, two other Air Commandos, Staff Sgt. Kristopher Thomas, and Senior Airman Billy Wells, both from the 1st Special Operations Logistic Readiness Squadron, are with the Zabul PRT.

Sergeant Thomas is working as a master driver, but even driving Humvees, he said, requires a counterinsurgency mindset.

"You have to constantly be on the lookout, watch your speed and keep your distances," he said, adding that one mistake behind the wheel could lead to civilian casualties or other consequences that undermine public support for the PRT.

In one training scenario, Sergeant Thomas took control of the vehicle and called in rescue information over the radio when the truck commander was a simulated casualty.

"I didn't think there would be as much to it," Sergeant Thomas said. "I'm dealing with stuff I've never been exposed to before."

Senior Airman Christina Bower, 1st Special Operations Medical Group, who is deployed as a combat medic for PRT Paktya, is also finding herself in an unfamiliar, but exciting environment.

"I'm going from a clinic setting to being in the field," she said. "I'm excited to use skills that I've never been able to use. I'm nervous that something could happen, but I know that if it does, I'll know what to do."

Sergeant Thomas said his time as an Air Commando helped prepare him for the job.

"AFSOC's different. We don't have the normal mindset, we're more gung-ho," he said. "[PRTs are] part of changing history, and that's what AFSOC is all about."

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