



Paratrooper veterans pay friendly visit to Afghanistan

By Chris Walz

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FORT MYER, Va. (Army News Service, Sept. 11, 2003) -- An Army civilian employee helped villagers in Afghanistan get a better sense of American goodwill last month.

Afghanistan native Waheda Nadi, who works at Fort Myer, Va., accompanied the International Airborne Society to help bridge the language barriers between jumpers delivering humanitarian aid and the villagers.

"The Afghans loved it. It doesn't matter what country you come from. If you are friendly toward them and show respect to them and help them, they will be willing to die for you," said Nadi, who became a U.S. citizen in 2000. "We can't cure 23 years of trouble and heartache overnight, but we gave them happiness for a couple of days."

Nadi joined the group thanks to the invite from her friend Kevin Gilday. The two became friends in 2001 during a Middle Eastern symposium in Pennsylvania. A Middle East expert himself, Gilday found he and the well-traveled Nadi had a lot in common. Gilday, who spends most of his time in Afghanistan as a national security consultant, coordinated the jump and asked Nadi to come along.

"You really get to parachute into some unique places," said Gilday, who joined the society six years ago. "Once we're there, we open the door of diplomacy and help teach foreign armies some of the things we've learned in the Special Forces."

The International Airborne Society, founded in 1992 at Fort Bragg, N.C., allows paratroopers of all ranks — including active duty, reserve or retired — an opportunity to jump into foreign countries to spread goodwill. The jumpers even jump with foreign armies, including some former and current enemies to the U.S. They say, however, foreign paratroopers have always welcomed the society's participation in the spirit of international airborne camaraderie.

Since 1992, the group has jumped with 28 foreign armies. Besides last month's trip to Afghanistan, the group has already touched down in Argentina and Uruguay this year and Russia is scheduled for next month.

"Russia is not a third-world country, but working with them gives us great contacts and potential allies in our efforts," Gilday said. "They were our enemy. We're all former Special Forces and are as anti-communist as one can be, but life goes on. We're the same breed of cat ... they just have a different political ideology."

"Make no mistake," Gilday said, "The Afghanistan people could've killed us if they wanted to. Some people there hate Americans. But, everyone we saw loved us."

The society chose Aug. 19 as its Afghanistan jump date to mark the country's independence from British rule in 1919.

"It is like the Fourth of July," said Nadi. "But, nobody was allowed to celebrate Independence Day under the Taliban regime. It was good for them to celebrate their independence once again."

The trip, jumpers say, was a sign of appreciation to show the Afghan people Americans are supporting their efforts toward establishing a democratic government.

Through a quarter-century of war, Afghanistan lost its airborne capability — no serviceable parachutes and no trained personnel. In fact, the Afghan airborne wings had not been issued since 1976, but that ended last month when Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai and Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Mohd Asif Delawar awarded the 15 jumpers airborne wings. In return, the International Airborne Society donated six parachutes and reserve chutes to the country's military.

"The Afghans had one Russian parachute," Nadi said, "but it was broken."

"It was really poor conditions," said Nadi, who remained grounded for the jump to translate between paratroopers in the back of the helicopter and the Afghan pilots in the front via a handheld radio.

Many of the jumpers veered off course. One landed on top of a four-story building, one drifted to the other side of the city, one slammed into a goal post as his parachute wrapped over the top of it, but none were injured except Sgt. Monte Marshall. The California-native struck a concrete obstacle and broke his leg.

Many are wary of Americans, Nadi said.

"They were promised big things, but they haven't seen much done," said Nadi, who was educated in the Soviet Union and speaks five languages. "They would like to see more. The educated Afghans know why America is here, how they are trying to free us from the Taliban. The uneducated Afghans don't know why they're here and are reluctant to believe such grand promises. They only know fighting and it's hard to convince them to change mentalities and believe in the future. It's important for America to show it still cares for the people of Afghanistan."

Gilday agreed.

"The Taliban is reforming and getting stronger with al Qaeda help," he said. "The warlords who were on our side versus the Taliban are defecting. Believe it or not, they love [President George W.] Bush here. But, they want to know he still cares about them."

For more information on society contact Lt. Bernie Hasenbein at (901) 365-3508, or visit their Web site at www.airbornesociety.com.

(Editor's note: Chris Walz is a staff writer for the Fort Myer Pentagram.)