

101st Soldiers use 'Clarksville flood experience' to save Afghan lives

Written by U.S. Army Spc. Richard Daniels Jr. Task Force Bastogne Public Affairs
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NANGARHAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Drawing on experience gained during the flood relief operations in Clarksville, Tenn., in early May, Soldiers from Fort Campbell's 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, assisted local Afghan civilians when flash flooding hit Adah Village in eastern Afghanistan's Beshood District, Nangarhar province July 28.

While returning from a routine patrol, Soldiers with 1st Special Troops Battalion, Task Force Spartan, stopped for a traffic jam where locals watched as the rising waters stranded their loved ones in their homes. "We came upon a road where there was a large amount of traffic stopped," said U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Patrick E. Stoner, of Latrobe, Penn., Headquarters and Headquarters Company.

"There was a father that ran up to us; he was a little hysterical. He was just yelling at first, but then I got my interpreter to calm him down, and he told us that his kids were stuck in the building," said U.S. Army 1st Lt. Ricardo Delbrey Jr., of Sanford, Fla., military police platoon leader.

"We dismounted as a security team to see what was going on so that he could talk to the village elders," said U.S. Army Sgt. Kenneth R. Huff, 1st squad leader, of Erlanger, Ky. "As [Delbrey] was getting out, he walked over to the edge of the road, and the road disappeared from under him, about to his chest in the water.

"Then we realized that the water was coming up, and we didn't know what the terrain was," Huff said. "At that time, we had different villagers coming up asking for help in different situations."

Several Soldiers went to assist the initial man they met whose three children were stranded inside a building. Floodwaters quickly reached to almost 8 feet.

"He was fearful that the house was going to flood out, that they were alone," Stoner said. "We had him show us the house... It was about 100 to about 125 meters away, and it was an all-flooded out area."

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The group descended into the water and proceeded to the house, sticking close to each other because of the strong currents between the buildings.

"It was definitely hard," said U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Gil Lopez Jr., of Apex, N.C. "The current was very strong. All the mud was settled at the bottom of the street, so not only were we fighting to stay afloat and not be swept by the current, but also not to lose our footing and disappear in the mud."

When the Soldiers reached the house, they discovered more than just children stranded at the house.

"As we got to the house, there were maybe four or five other people in the house because it was kind of an oasis; it was the only place above water where we were," said Huff. "The people ... caught in the current were grabbing hold and climbing up into the house."

They moved into the building where U.S. Army Cpl. Patrick T. O'Rourke, of Front Royal, Va., and Huff walked to the edge. They were informed that an elderly woman had just been swept downstream.

"We later found out that she had drowned," Huff said. "As we came back, Sgt. Stoner and I saw a guy being pushed by the current along the edge of the house, so we reached down, grabbed his arm, pulled him up out of the water onto the porch."

Huff proceeded into the water and received a baby from O'Rourke. O'Rourke then jumped into the water to help stabilize Huff as they headed toward higher ground.

"Some of the other people that had grabbed hold of the people we were helping started getting into the water with us and making a line all the way over to where we came up out of the water," Huff said. "As we got over there, I handed the baby up to his father, and they handed [him] one of his other children, a small boy, up to a friend his that was next to him."

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Huff continued, "Then Sgt. Stoner was back with one of the other children as [villagers] came up with a couple of other people ... The other group that was walking with us; they walked in groups of twos and threes just to keep the current from pushing their feet out from under them."

Shortly, the Afghan National Army arrived with large trucks. They began evacuating civilians from other buildings and rooftops. Spartan Soldiers assisted in various ways, ranging from supplying straps for tow trucks to rendering medical aid and providing security. Despite the road deteriorating from under their vehicles, both ANA and the Soldiers kept their resolve to save the villagers.

"They came up to where there was an elderly man trapped in one of the buildings," he said. "[The ANA] loaded up about 10 people on one of their trucks and drove back to one of the alleys, which was probably about 6 foot deep in water," Huff said. "We gave them one of our back boards and a couple tie-down straps so they could strap the gentleman down, and they brought him out, and our medic checked him out."

Soon enough, ANA and Afghan National Police were at the scene to handle the situation on their own. The platoon began to pack up and head out, but not without the appreciation of the Afghan people.

"They came up and thanked us. [They] told us that they really appreciate it, that they couldn't have gotten it done without us being there," Huff said. "We called in and told them we were going to return to base."

While this is one platoon's story, Combined Joint Task Force-101st Soldiers from around the province provided similar stories of rising floodwaters and rapid currents that took the Afghan civilians by surprise. Working together with Afghan National Security Forces, Soldiers from the 1st Brigade Combat Team, Task Force Bastogne helped rescue more than 200 Afghan civilians from areas and villages throughout the Beshud district of the province that day and in the days that followed.