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TF Dolch patrol combines route clearance, school supplies distribution

By U.S. Army Spc. Rosalind Arroyo
Task Force Dolch

LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – To help prevent violent extremism and turn potential enemies into friends, 54th Engineer Battalion route-clearance Soldiers donated supplies to Afghan school children in Baraki Barak of Logar Province, Afghanistan, Jan. 30.

Task Force Dolch Soldiers of 54th Engr. Bn.'s Route-Clearance Patrol 43 (RCP 43) believe in practicing the "golden rule" of treating others the way they would like to be treated when attempting to "win the hearts and minds" of local Afghans. Donating a large quantity of supplies to a school in the Baraki Barak valley of western Logar is a perfect example.

U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Otto Valdez, TF Dolch's RCP 43 platoon sergeant from Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, asked friends and Family to donate the school supplies for Afghan children. Valdez collected nearly \$1,500 worth of school aid, saying his mother and brother sent about 80 percent of the supplies and the other 20 percent came from his friends.

Donated items RCP 43 Soldiers distributed to the school children included 500 pencils, 100 pens, 100 notebooks, 20 erasers and 10 coloring books and crayons, said Valdez. Also, the children received 10 pairs of shoes, 30-to-40 small toys for boys and girls, 15 Barbie dolls, 20 hand balls, five soccer balls, 10 small toy trucks and two boxes full of winter clothes for boys and girls between the ages of 4 to 8.

One of RCP 43's objectives is to help poor Afghan children enjoy a better quality of life. Valdez conducted similar missions during past deployments.

"It was something that I did before on other deployments - twice in Kosovo, twice in Iraq and now in Afghanistan," said Valdez. "I am willing to do it again as long as God provides me with the strength."

Valdez's RCP 43 discovered the school while conducting frequent route-clearance patrols in their area of operations. RCP 43 Soldiers received help from local national interpreters to choose the most appropriate gifts for the children and establish rapport with the school officials.

One of the numerous benefits for the Soldiers taking part in this mission was seeing the smiles and happiness in the children of the west Logar Province school.

"I have two kids of my own, and I know the greatest thing to me is to see them happy," said Valdez. "These Afghan children are not as lucky as Americans. If we can help them, that's our biggest benefit from the missions."

The principal of the boy's school appreciates the assistance from American Soldiers. In fact, this help has changed his views of their presence in his area.

"I am feeling thankful that these Soldiers are supporting our people. I also feel that we can improve our relationship with the military," said Mr. Ahmadi, the school's principal. "I never really thought much of the American military. Now it's different, I like them very much."

Valdez plans to broaden awareness of the school-support missions in the near future. He wants to make more use of word of mouth and signs around Forward Operation Base Shank to inform his comrades about the support he hopes to bring to local Afghan people.

"I think the simple way is to put the word out to people in the dining facility. There are a lot of people who stay on the FOB who don't know what we're doing," said Valdez. "We can put a point of contact on signs to inform people they can help the children by donating school supplies and clothes."

RCP 43 will include Afghan National Army (ANA) forces in future school sponsorship missions. Valdez plans to have ANA soldiers help distribute shipments to the schools and interact with the local populace.

"I think working with ANA is a great idea. This is their country, and they should be the ones dealing with their locals," said Valdez. "It promotes community cohesion and helps the locals improve their relationship with the ANA."

RCP 43's Soldiers enjoy the school sponsorship. It gives them a healthy approach to making a difference in the local community.

"It felt great, because these kids have less than we do," said U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Ryan Newsome, TF Dolch RCP 43 squad leader from Tampa, Fla. "Anytime we can help the kids, by giving them stuff, it's good. Anytime we can help these people, it will help stop future attacks and help win the hearts and minds of Afghan communities."

"If the circumstances are right, I definitely would sponsor a school to help them out," continued Newsome, who said he plans to conduct similar mission

during possible future deployments. "When soldiers sponsor schools, they take on a different mindset that helps them build character."



LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Otto Valdez, a Route Clearance Patrol (RCP) 43, 54th Engineer Battalion, Task Force Dolch, platoon sergeant from Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, establishes rapport with local villagers during a mission to distribute school supplies and toys to Afghan children in the Baraki Barak valley of Logar Province, Afghanistan, Jan. 30. Valdez' friends and family continue to donate aid packages to Afghan schools, many of which are just marginally functioning. (Photo by U.S. Army 2nd Lt. Michael Chigbrow, Task Force Dolch)



LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan– U.S. Army Spc. David McDowell, a combat medic from Fayetteville, W.Va. assigned to Route Clearance Patrol 43, 54th Engineer Battalion, Task Force Dolch, delivers aid to a school during a mission to distribute school supplies and toys to Afghan children in the Baraki Barak valley of Logar Province, Afghanistan, Jan. 30. This was RCP 43's first school sponsorship mission on Jan 30 in province, and these school missions are already showing signs of improving relationships with local Afghans. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Rosalind Arroyo, Task Force Dolch)



LOGAR PROVINCE, Afghanistan – Children of Logar Province eagerly accept toys from U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Otto Valdez, a platoon sergeant from Rio Grande, Puerto Rico assigned to Route Clearance Patrol (RCP) 43, 54th Engineer Battalion, Task Force Dolch, during a mission to distribute humanitarian aid to Afghan children in the Baraki Barak valley of Logar Province, Afghanistan, Jan. 30. TF Dolch leaders hope villagers will start to turn away from Taliban influence because of establishing better relationships with RCP 43 Soldiers. (Photo by U.S. Army Spc. Rosalind Arroyo, Task Force Dolch)

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