



## International Media Press Review

29-05-2006

### French peacekeepers on rare foot patrols in volatile Afghanistan

AFP 28 May 2006

The barking of a stray dog tears through the deathly night silence as French Sergeant Julien Canals leads his unit on a foot patrol through a ramshackle village in the Shomali Plain outside Kabul.

"Move!" Canals orders in a whisper. "Two on the right of the road, two on the left," he says. The four others have to remain near the vehicles to cover their comrades.

"We'll engage if we come under attack," he tells AFP. "Otherwise, we're not allowed to touch people."

Tonight it is all quiet. The only thing the men encounter is two cars that speed past them with barely a glance.

But for this unit the task is about more than finding the baddies: it is about building relations with the community people by instilling a sense of security and sometimes just having a good old chat.

This is a different approach to that adopted by some of the other foreign troops, especially the Americans who have adverts in the media telling locals to stay away from them.

And it is rare in a country where most patrols are conducted by convoys of anonymous men staring down the barrel of a gun in an armoured vehicle.

The unit begins their evening 20 kilometres (12 miles) away, at a base in Kabul for the 600-strong French battalion and others troops in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force.

In two military vehicles they weave through the darkened streets of the war-scarred capital almost empty at this hour of its four million inhabitants.

They head north into the Shomali Plain -- a heavily mined, 80-kilometre-long plateau that was a key battleground during Afghanistan's 25 years of war -- stopping at a rise at the entrance to the plain to survey the area through night vision gear.

Satisfied all is clear, they roar down the hill towards a checkpoint outside the village. There they descend to get the latest news.

"Is the situation all right?" Canals asks his Afghan counterpart, police Major Hashmatullah Timuri, through a yawning interpreter. "It's quiet so far," Timuri replies.

The Frenchmen sit down for some sugared green tea to discuss security, the conversation later turning to the police chief's children and their schooling.

"Their presence is vital," Timuri tells an AFP correspondent. "Without their support it's hard to keep the security smooth... I think we still need them."

A while later, the men drain their mugs and stand up to leave, shaking hands with all around. The next stop is the village.

A 10-minute drive, this time with no headlights, and they are ready to begin the patrol. "Move!" orders Canals.

The tea break is an important part of gaining the trust of the local security forces and building relations, French Lieutenant Jeremy Naegel says.

"Fear creates aggression," the lieutenant says, paraphrasing his top commander's advice that the troops should try to gain the trust of the population and local security forces.

Since they have been conducting these patrols in and around the capital, this unit has had little trouble.

"There are two possibilities: one it's quiet because it's a quiet place. Second it's quiet because we're patrolling a lot," Canals says. "So people who want to do something, might think they'll be caught by these patrols."

The biggest worry is homemade bombs that can't be detected: two French soldiers were wounded by such a device while on patrol on the outskirts of the capital in October.

But the situation in the capital is far different to that in the south, where about 200 French special forces soldiers operate, two of whom were killed last weekend in a battle in lawless Sangin province in Helmand province.

"I'm so sad," says Private Gil Dimitri about the latest deaths, which bring to seven the number of French soldiers to have been killed in Afghanistan since 2001.

"We're not on the same mission but we both are from France," he says.

And France is where the men's thoughts return as the patrol winds down and the pressure eases. "Oh, I miss her a lot," Canals says of his baby daughter back home. "She's only four months old," he says, smiling.

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