

A soldier in silhouette is walking away from the camera on a snowy road at night. The road is illuminated by streetlights, and the snow is piled up on the sides. The soldier is wearing a helmet and a heavy jacket. The overall mood is somber and dangerous.

# W FREEDOM WATCH

AFGHANISTAN

Most dangerous road

page 6

page 10

Red Bulls help protect  
Afghanistan border

page 38

Soldier's Medal  
awarded

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# Red Bulls help protect Afghanistan border

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The scene at Torkham Gate in eastern Afghanistan the morning of March 7 was comparable to that of a city at rush hour in the United States.

Dozens of small cars were intermixed in a long line of heavily decorated, colorful Jinga trucks that stretched about a mile from the zero line - the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the middle of the traffic, a handful of Soldiers from the Iowa National Guard's 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Task Force Red Bulls. The Soldiers, from Company B, 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry Regiment, were helping the Afghan Border Police, Afghan Customs Police and the National Directorate of Safety, keep order at the gate.

Though the infantry Soldiers may not be participating in the ground-pounding, door-kicking missions they envisioned for the deployment, they appreciate the undertaking.

"I enjoy working with the Afghan forces," said U.S. Army Sgt. Casey Ketelson, an infantry team leader from Osage, Iowa, with Co. B, 1st Bn., 133rd Inf.

He said Soldiers can use the information they collect to catch insurgent traffickers and other wanted persons should they try to sneak through by working closely with NDS, the Afghan intelligence force. The Afghan agencies help the Soldiers identify certain types of vehicles and people that could be harboring illegal or dangerous items.

About 10,000 people and 1,000 to 2,000 vehicles cross the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan daily at Torkham Gate. Everything from trucks loaded with hundreds of chickens, to people carrying dead relatives who wanted to be buried on the other side of the border, travel through the gate.

Co. B's Soldiers help manage the traffic by assisting in various capacities at the gate from security over watch to biometrics collection to vehicle security.

Soldiers help their Afghan counterparts direct vehicles through the checkpoint and randomly select vehicles to be searched to ensure they are not carrying contraband or other dangerous materials into the country.

In addition to watching the vehicles, the Soldiers watch the pedestrians and ensure they don't walk into vehicle traffic.



An Afghan Border Patrol police officer searches a bag in a boy's wheelbarrow on the pedestrian walkway March 7 at Torkham Gate on the Afghanistan border.

"We try to get pedestrians out of the vehicle routes or else they plug up traffic and we can't get much accomplished," said U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Thomas Boge, an infantry squad leader and the day's sergeant of the guard for Co. B, 1st Bn., 133rd Inf., and an Allison, Iowa, native.

Soldiers working with ABP, also monitor the pedestrian walkway, from both overhead observation posts afoot.

U.S. Army Spc. Chris Linssen, an infantryman from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, said Soldiers provided extra security by having an overhead vantage point.

"We'll watch the (pedestrians) coming in for anything that stands out or doesn't look right," Linssen said.

In addition to physical security, biometric information is collected on people transiting the border.

"This is the only job I've ever done here," said U.S. Army Spc. Nathan Valentine. "Other platoons may enter a higher number of people into the system, but we're more selective about the types of people we enter."

He said the Soldiers work closely with their Afghan counterparts when choosing individuals to enter into the system. To aid in security, the Afghan government is implementing a national identification card and fingerprinting system, which is also enforced at the gate.

The Soldiers said their biggest obstacle is dealing with the monotony of the job.

After a week at the gate they switch to another duty, such as forward operating base defense, for a week.

"We try to rotate the Soldiers out between stations to keep them fresh," Ketelson said.

Linssen said people from many countries, not just Afghanistan and Pakistan, cross the gate with a variety of items. He said the line begins forming before the gate is open.

"At 6 a.m. there will be people crowding on the Pakistan side of the border like they're waiting in line at Walmart on Black Friday," Linssen said.

The Soldiers said they have found items on people entering the gate such as hashish, improperly packaged food goods or items on which people haven't paid taxes. When items like those are found, the ACP seizes them.

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The Soldiers said they are not fooling themselves to think they are catching all the contraband coming through the gate. After all, the gate is not the only way to enter the country, simply the most convenient. But they said they do know that every piece of contraband or person they do get could potentially mean a life saved somewhere in the country.

Besides the reward of helping to secure the gate, the Soldiers said there are other perks to working at Torkham Gate. For U.S. Army Spc. Michael Stuart, an infantryman from Anamosa, Iowa, it is getting to sample some of the Afghan food sold by the many vendors in the area.

"This is definitely a perk. The food is great here," Stuart said with a smile as he loaded some lamb, rice and a piece of pan bread onto a plate for lunch. 🍴

(Top) A Soldier with the 34th Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team speaks with an Afghanistan truck driver at Torkham Gate.

(Right) U.S. Army Spc. John Meyer, left, from Iowa City, Iowa, and Spc. Chris Linssen, center, from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, both infantrymen with Company B, 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, Task Force Red Bulls, watch the pedestrian walkway with an Afghan Border Police dog handler, right, at Torkham Gate.

