

Six months after pullback, U.S. goes back in to contest Pech Valley



No casualties resulted from a mortar strike in late July on a building where U.S. soldiers were staying at Nangalam Base, known as Forward Operating Base Blessing until the U.S. Army turned it over to Afghan forces in February. U.S. soldiers are moving back into the base in the Pech Valley of Kunar province.
MARTIN KUZ/STARS AND STRIPES

By MARTIN KUZ | STARS AND STRIPES Published: August 4, 2011

NANGALAM, Afghanistan — The Chinook had descended within 200 feet of the ground when a rocket-propelled grenade rose from the night-cloaked mountains and stabbed its belly fast and deep.

The 15 U.S. soldiers and crew members on board heard only a faint thump above the helicopter's pounding. Yet nothing muffled the attack's underlying message.

Welcome back to the Pech, America — the insurgents have been waiting.

Less than six months after mostly abandoning the deadly Pech Valley in what U.S. military officials dubbed a "realignment" of forces in eastern Afghanistan, the Army has begun rebuilding its presence in the heart of Kunar province. Since the start of the Afghan war, more than 100 American troops have been killed in mountainous terrain so treacherous that previous U.S. commanders openly questioned the need to secure such a remote region.

But in late July, the first wave of troops from the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 25th Infantry Division arrived at Nangalam Base, formerly known as Forward Operating Base Blessing and once the hub of U.S. military operations in the valley.

By September, a company of soldiers from the division's 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment will occupy the post, which was renamed after the U.S. turned it over to Afghan control in February. They will join an Afghanistan National Army battalion stationed at the base in the village of Nangalam, about 25 miles west of Asadabad, Kunar's capital.

Lt. Col. Colin Tuley, commander of the 2-35th, offered a reason for re-entering the Pech that echoed the rationale given by Army leaders since the U.S. first pushed into the valley in 2003.

"We're coming here to set the conditions for a transition that will support the Afghan army and Afghan police in providing security," he said.

The latest attempt to shore up Afghan forces in the Pech, a vital east-west trade route in Kunar and a haven for the Taliban-led insurgency, will involve fewer U.S. troops than past efforts.

The 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment last occupied Blessing before the Army withdrew from the base earlier this year. Military officials said at the time that the resources devoted to the fight in the valley exceeded the remote region's strategic and political importance.

So far, insurgents appear undeterred by the return of U.S. forces, as the downing of the Chinook on July 25 revealed with a fiery flourish.

The rocket strike in the pre-dawn hours caused the helicopter to crash outside Nangalam Base in a graveyard of nameless headstones. Two soldiers suffered minor shrapnel wounds as flames consumed the aircraft and ignited thousands of rounds of ammunition loaded in its fuselage.

"In a way, (the attack) wasn't surprising," said Capt. Derek Price, 23, of Medina, Ohio, who walked away from the wreck. "We're in the Pech."

The mountains that squeeze the Pech Valley jut above 8,000 feet with ridge lines contoured like the edge of a broken beer bottle. Some of the war's fiercest fighting has erupted in this winding seam and its so-called capillary valleys, including the Korengal, Shuryak and Waygal.

The U.S. has absorbed heavy losses in the area since showing up eight years ago; 19 soldiers died in a single operation in 2005. The estimated number of enemy combatants killed runs into the low thousands.

The chronic unrest in central Kunar influenced the decision of U.S. military officials to hand off Blessing to the Afghan army, along with a nearby combat outpost and a loose necklace of observation points strung above the Pech River.

The Army demolished another combat outpost at the mouth of the Korengal, COP Michigan, leaving COP Honaker Miracle, 10 miles west of Asadabad and now manned by the 2-35th's D Company, as its lone base in the Pech.

U.S. forces have continued to carry out missions in the region despite the Army's diminished presence. More than 100 insurgents and three U.S. soldiers were killed during an operation in June to expel militants from the Watahpur Valley near the Pech's eastern edge.

Yet last week's helicopter attack sharpened doubts among soldiers in the 2-35th about the wisdom of the Army reoccupying the valley's interior. The move coincides with an apparent shift of U.S. military emphasis to eastern Afghanistan.

"We're getting out of this country in a couple of years, but now we're going back into the Pech?" asked Sgt. Altaf Swati, 27, of Houston, a team leader with the Headquarters and Headquarters Company. "I don't see where that makes sense."

Two days after downing the Chinook, insurgents launched a mortar round into Nangalam Base, punching a hole in the roof of a building full of U.S. soldiers. The crude skylight, about the size of a bike tire, let in the afternoon sun without brightening the mood, even as the men had escaped injury.

"I don't think the people want us here," said Cpl. Daniel Schwab, 24, of Fort Myers, Fla., a D Company team leader. Chunks of brick and wood from the ceiling had pelted him when the shell hit 10 minutes earlier.

"If we wanted to be in this valley," he added, "we probably should have stayed. Coming back in, it's going to be tough."

The soldiers had traveled to the base as part of a 10-day mission to shepherd a convoy delivering 100 tons of food from Asadabad to the villages of Wama and Parun in neighboring Nuristan province.

Hundreds of U.S. and Afghan troops took part in the operation to safeguard the convoy's passage on Route Rhode Island, the primary road across Kunar's midsection. The route parallels the Pech River, cutting west of Nangalam before curling upward into Nuristan, where the U.S. last stationed troops in 2009.

The Taliban has exploited the shrunken U.S. profile in the Pech Valley to seize control of trade along the route. Tuley, the 2-35th commander, sought to support Afghan forces in re-establishing more than a dozen traffic checkpoints they deserted soon after the U.S. pulled back in February.

"We're not going to allow the enemy to say that no one can travel Route Rhode Island," said Tuley, 40, of Atchison, Kan.

Behind him stood a row of M113 armored personnel carriers of the sort the U.S. used in Vietnam and later sold off to other nations. Soldiers from an Afghan battalion based in Kabul had driven the box-shaped, green-camouflaged vehicles to Nangalam for the operation.

"If we can help the Afghans keep the route secure after this mission," he said, "it becomes a turning point for the entire region."

One checkpoint stood a short distance from the northern end of the Korengal, perhaps the most violent pocket of eastern Afghanistan during this war, and during the Soviet invasion

that ended in 1989. U.S. and Afghan soldiers guarding the position took fire throughout the operation, as insurgents targeted them with automatic rifles and RPGs.

U.S. fighter jets responded by dropping 500- and 1,000-pound bombs day after day on the enemy's position along a ridge line. Each bomb gave rise to a brilliant orange bloom that wilted moments later inside a miasma of dun-colored smoke.

Silence followed. A few hours later, the guns on the ridge again began to chatter. The pattern repeated as if unbreakable.

Maj. Rahmdel Haivarzay, commander of the Afghan battalion at Nangalam Base, tried to explain the stubborn reaction of Korengalis to coalition forces and, by extension, the country's fledgling democratic government.

"There are people in the Korengal Valley who don't know what a paved road looks like," he said. "They don't want to be part of the government. They think, 'We're better off being here and being left alone.'"

The troops amassed for the operation far surpassed the number that the 2-35th and the Afghan military will station at Nangalam Base. Still, the insurgents fought, dropping numerous mortar rounds on the post and firing at troops on Route Rhode Island.

The intensity of their resistance provoked questions among U.S. soldiers about whether the 2-35th will have the resources to prevail in the Pech. One high-ranking officer, talking on condition of anonymity to avoid reprisals from superiors, wondered aloud whether returning to the valley would succeed only in inflaming enemy forces.

"Is there an insurgency if we're not here? It's a valid question," he said. "There's a reason we left before."

Defiance of authority is a birthright in the Pech, with fathers bequeathing blood feuds to their sons. Tuley nonetheless talked with upbeat resolve about the coming months.

"It's tough terrain, it's a tough enemy," he said, staring at the distant peaks shielding the Korengal. "But I believe we can create the time and space for the Afghan government to build up their presence in the area."

Much of the burden will fall on Tuley's soldiers moving to Nangalam Base. They will work with Afghan troops in what he calls a "permanent embedded partnership" to nurture the self-reliance of Afghan forces.

The U.S. military has struggled to fulfill that ambition across Afghanistan. In the Pech, where fear of the insurgency runs deep among Afghan military and police, progress will come slowly, if at all.

The departure of U.S. troops from Blessing earlier this year unnerved top officers of the Afghan battalion stationed here. Convinced that enemy fighters would overrun the post, the unit commander and more than a dozen members of his staff fled within a month. (They were replaced in April.)

The base's physical decline happened almost as fast and remained evident last week amid an ongoing cleanup. Several buildings that had served as U.S. living quarters and offices appeared uninhabitable.

Detritus littered the floors: food wrappers and water bottles, wiring strips and foam insulation, shards of glass and scraps of wood, brick and metal. Flies swarmed piles of human feces. A scrawny gray cat scurried between buildings.

Other interiors were conspicuous by what they lacked. A trauma station that U.S. medics had stocked with supplies for their Afghan counterparts sat barren. In a vehicle maintenance garage, most of the tools and equipment donated by the Army had vanished.

The conditions startled U.S. soldiers who had arrived for the convoy operation.

"It's trashed," said Spc. Kasey DeRaad, 23, of Menominee, Wis. "It's hard to believe our guys were here only a few months ago."

For some soldiers, the conditions on base fanned skepticism about the ability of Afghan security forces to one day assume the larger task of patrolling the Pech.

"We've been here for 10 years and they still rely on us a lot," said Spc. Anthony Malanga, 22, of Newburn, N.C. "You'd like to see them step up."

U.S. officers counseled Afghan commanders on matters small and large as the mission unfolded, providing a glimpse of how much hand-holding lies ahead.

Maj. Guillermo Guillen, 38, of Moreno Valley, Calif., heads Team Nangalam, the group that will run the base's U.S. operations. One morning last week, he stood with a pair of Afghan officers in their corner of the tactical operations center beside a whiteboard.

He asked why they kept a faded diagram on the board instead of filling the space with updated mission details. One officer, dressed in a green T-shirt bearing the words "Afghan Commandoes" that traced the soft bulge of his paunch, replied that the diagram was "important."

Guillen sighed.

"It's a whiteboard," he said. "It's designed to be used continuously." He suggested they copy the diagram onto a piece of paper.

In the evening, Tuley huddled with Haivarzay, the Afghan commander, and another officer to discuss the traffic checkpoints on Route Rhode Island. Afghan soldiers had strayed from two of the positions, reportedly after receiving gunfire.

"We have to make sure they stay at the positions," Tuley said. "That's a big part of what we need to do out here."

Haivarzay nodded and reassured Tuley that the soldiers would return.

Later, the Afghan commander spoke of his gratitude that the U.S. had come back to the Pech.

**“It is very important to us that we have support until we build our own capabilities,” he said. “We want to do this as quickly as we can, but it is something that requires time.”
The insurgents will be waiting.**



**An AH-64 Apache circles over Nangalam, Afghanistan, on July 29, 2011.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES**



Lt. Col. Colin Tuley, commander of 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, waits on a helicopter at Nangalam Base, the former Forward Operating Base Blessing in late July.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



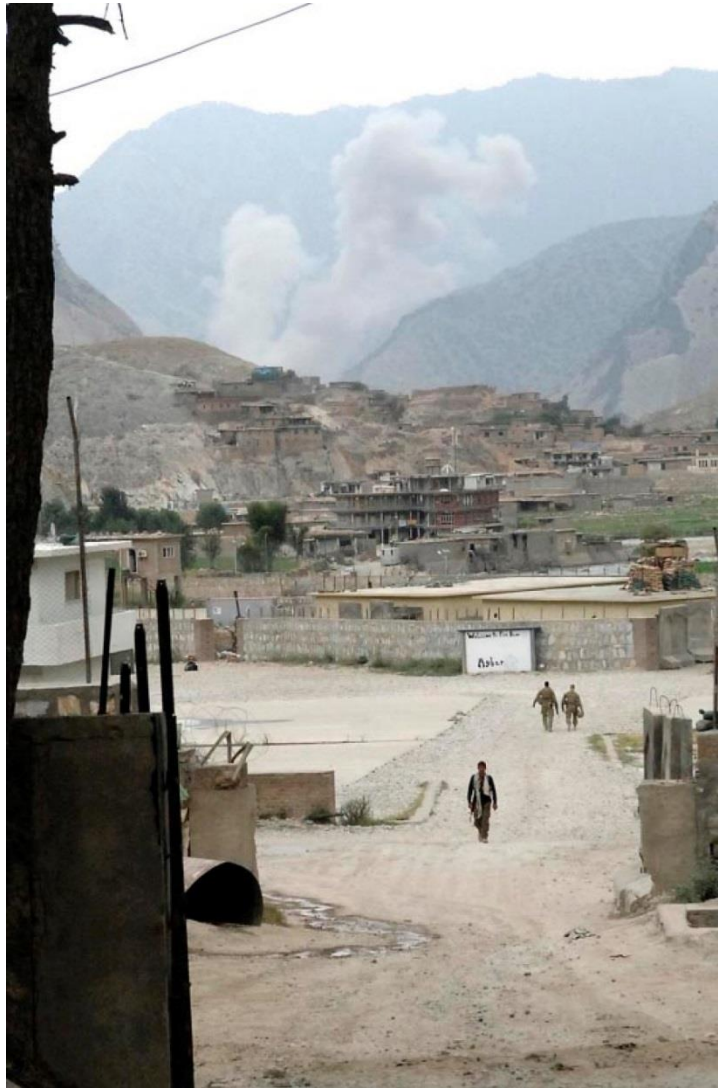
Col. Richard Kim, commander of 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, listens to Afghan commanders during a briefing in tactical operations center at Nangalam Base, the former Forward Operating Base Blessing on July 29. At right is Afghan army Maj. Rahmdel Haivarzay, whose troops are based at Nangalam.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



Lt. Col. Colin Tuley, right, commander of 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, asks a question during a morning meeting in tactical operations center at Nangalam Base, the former Forward Operating Base Blessing on July 29. To his left is Afghan army Maj. Rahmdel Haivarzay, whose troops are based at Nangalam.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



As seen from Nangalam Base, the former Forward Operating Base Blessing, smoke from an American bomb rises up over the Pech River valley, as U.S. jets provide air cover for troops that came under attack in the area.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



An Afghan National Army armor unit in their M113 armored personnel carriers get ready to roll out of Nangalam Base, the former Camp Blessing, for a mission on the western part of Route Rhode Island.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



Vehicles pass through a checkpoint on the road that runs along Afghanistan's Pech River Valley, between Nangalam and Asadabad.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



Spc. Brian Derewenko of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, scans a mountain ridge over a checkpoint set up by U.S. and Afghan soldiers outside Nangalam.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



Several buildings at Nangalam Base, known as Forward Operating Base Blessing until the U.S. Army turned it over to Afghan forces in February, show signs of neglect. U.S. soldiers began moving back into the base in the Pech Valley of Kunar province in late July.
MARTIN KUZ/STARS AND STRIPES



Nangalam children watch U.S. and Afghan soldiers run a checkpoint on the outskirts of the city on July 28.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



First Lt. Luis Sanchez, left, and Staff Sgt. Altaf Swati discuss tactics as the soldiers of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, along with Afghan National Army troops run a checkpoint on the outskirts of Nangalam.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



Afghan National Army soldiers run a checkpoint on the outskirts of Nangalam in late July.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



Pfc. Leo Corbin of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, keeps a watch as Afghan National Army soldiers set up a checkpoint in Nangalam in eastern Afghanistan. MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



As a local leads his cow to pasture, Pfc. Leo Corbin of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, scans the vicinity as Afghan National Army soldiers set up a checkpoint in Nangalam in eastern Afghanistan. MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



Just months after leaving Forward Operating Base Blessing, American troops are returning to re-occupy the base on the Pech River. The lush valley, surrounded by steep mountains has not always been friendly to coalition forces.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



An American MRAP vehicle travels through Afghanistan's Pech River valley on Tuesday.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES



**Capt. Adam McCombs, commander of Troop A, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, far right, listens to villagers as they discuss how a teenage boy died. The Americans said he died in a crossfire between coalition forces and insurgents in the Pech River valley. The locals said he died from shrapnel wounds when the insurgent position was bombed by American aircraft.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES**



**Capt. Adam McCombs, commander of Troop A, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, listens to a local as they discuss how a teenage boy died. The Americans said he died in a crossfire between coalition forces and insurgents in the Pech River valley. The locals said he died from shrapnel wounds when the insurgent position was bombed by American aircraft.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES**



**Pfc. Michael Marquez of Troop A, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, searches for targets during a firefight with insurgents in Afghanistan's Pech River valley. It was the first of three firefights of the day as Americans rolled into the valley on July 26.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES**



**Pfc. Craig Middleton of Troop A, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment scans the hills above the Pech River valley from his MRAP, after his unit arrived at the river in the early morning on July 26.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES**



Shortly after an early morning arrival in Afghanistan's Pech River valley on July 26, Staff Sgt. Buakai Tamu has a friendly talk with a local through an interpreter. The rest of the day didn't run as smooth, as Tamu's unit, Troop A, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, was involved in three fire-fights with insurgents.
MICHAEL ABRAMS/STARS AND STRIPES

Credit To: <https://www.stripes.com/news/six-months-after-pullback-u-s-goes-back-in-to-contest-pech-valley-1.151170>