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173rd Airborne Brigade Leaves Afghanistan

Return of the Tien Bien

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The 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team has deployed three times to Afghanistan since 2005. But it wasn't until the last six months of the recently completed deployment that the Sky Soldiers were all serving together in the same part of the country.

At least one battalion had been detached to serve under a different command during the brigade's first two tours in Afghanistan.

But when the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment moved into Wardak province from Kunar in May, Col. Jim Johnson had all of his soldiers in the same region: Wardak and Logar provinces.

And he liked what he saw.

"I'm extremely proud of the performance of our Sky Soldiers," Johnson, the brigade commander, said.

Nine members of the brigade died during the deployment that ended in mid-November, compared to 43 during the unit's deployment in 2007-08. Leaders said soldiers were just as tenacious in fights with the enemy during this rotation, but that factors, such as different terrain and changes in stationing and basic operations, resulted in fewer large-scale engagements and fewer fatalities. Troops largely have stopped manning small, isolated outposts across Afghanistan, concentrating instead on trying to protect large civilian populations and keep insurgents isolated in the mountains.

The brigade put greater emphasis on information operations, Johnson said. One prominent program, Voices of Modern Islam, was created in cooperation with a Jordanian ranger unit that was in the brigade's area of operations. It received funding from the Jordanian and U.S. governments and a Jordanian nonprofit organization. The U.S. invested about \$50,000 in the program.

As a result, 35 Afghans from Logar and Wardak provinces got the opportunity to visit Mecca, Islam's most holy site, in Saudi Arabia.

"But it wasn't just a 'Hey, how would you like to visit Mecca?' program," said Maj. Matthew Yandura, the brigade's information operations officer.

Units selected leaders in the towns and villages in their areas, who then visited Forward Operating Base Shank, where they saw two active mosques. Then they were taken to Amman, Jordan, where they were able to talk about Islam with scholars from several Middle Eastern countries who flew in for the event. After that, the Afghans flew on to Mecca and took part in the religious celebrations there.

Yandura said most Afghans cannot afford to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and those who do are greatly respected by their peers. So most of those making the trip were greeted by hundreds of residents welcoming them home. Many shared pictures and offered thoughts not only about Mecca, but the gathering in Amman.

"Part of the insurgents' narrative is based on a belief that the U.S. is in Afghanistan to destroy Islam," Yandura said. "That obviously isn't true and we demonstrated that with this program."

Cooperation increased in several communities around the region as a result of the program, Yandura said.

Most of the 173rd returned home from Afghanistan by Thanksgiving, and the soldiers are scheduled for block leave starting Dec. 15.

After that, troops will be spending more time near Aviano Air Base in Italy and the Grafenwöhr training area in Germany refining their airborne skills. Such jumps could include small- and large-scale movements, leaders said.

About 50 percent of the 173rd is expected to leave the military or transfer to other units in the next few months. But much of the brigade's senior leadership — including the six battalion commanders — are staying around until late spring. That's a change from past rotations when commanders have left their positions within weeks after returning from deployment.

The move should help units with re-integration, Johnson said, because senior leaders know their troops better than new commanders would.

"We know where our strengths and weaknesses are," he said.

New leadership will be in place by the time the brigade travels to Germany for its annual exercises.

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