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Sniper Shares Experiences In Afghanistan

Home on Guam for a few weeks, Sgt. Enrique Elizalde tells a story about America's efforts to help defend Afghanistan's new democracy.

By Katie Worth, Pacific Daily News

For two months, as they trudged through broiling hot days and slept in dusty holes in the barren Afghani mountains, Sgt. Enrique Elizalde and his fellow platoon members did not take showers.

Often sustained on just one meal a day, they performed mission after mission -- Elizalde completed 150 over the summer -- chasing anti-coalition militia leaders through remote villages and desolate landscapes, trying to capture them alive, often meeting gunfire in return.

Elizalde is a sniper and team leader of a scout sniper section in a U.S. Army reconnaissance platoon deployed to the Uruzgan province in the heart of Afghanistan. He has been deployed to the country since April.

Much attention has been paid to the ongoing conflict in Iraq, but many don't realize that American and coalition forces are continuing to battle the bloody remnants of a war to rid Afghanistan of its Taliban and warlord rulers. Operation Enduring Freedom is in its fourth year.

Elizalde, home for a few weeks of leave, is one of hundreds of Guam's sons and daughters who have served in Afghanistan since the attacks on America on Sept. 11, 2001, and among 18,000 American troops engaged in a winter offensive aimed at eliminating insurgents who threaten the country's precarious new democracy. The Guam Army National Guard is expected to deploy 59 troops to Afghanistan in the coming months.

After months of taking part in the operation, the 24-year-old sniper can't even describe how strange it is to be back on Guam, even if only for a few weeks.

"In some ways, being back here is worse than being over there," he said. "You're not over there any more, you're here now, but you still have that mindset. You'll see a guy looking at you funny, and you're looking at this guy looking at you and you have to adjust for a few seconds and say, 'OK, I'm in Guam now, I'm not in Uruzgan anymore. This guy's not going to kill me.'"

He recalled his last mission in Afghanistan before he was given leave: he and his sniper section members were told to capture, dead or alive, an anti-coalition militia commander in a high mountain village.

The military learned of the commander's location in the same way they learn much of their information, he said.

"Some of these Afghans want to make money so they can go to Pakistan. It's like people who want to migrate from Mexico into the U.S.; to Afghans, Pakistan is their U.S., they all want to go to Pakistan. And if you have enough money to pay your way into Pakistan, you can go through the border, no problem," he said.

"So what people do is they tell the U.S., I know where an (anti-coalition militia) commander stays, but I want money for it. And another section of the military will do research and confirm or deny the Taliban commander's presence there, and if it is there, they put up a mission and send us," he said.

In this particular mission, his sniper section worked as an aerial reaction force, or an ARF, he said.

"We basically sat around in a helicopter with a scope rifle waiting for what we call 'squirters' running out of the village. If we see a squirter has a weapon, we can probably take him out from the helicopter, but if the squirter doesn't have a weapon, we have to land and chase the guys and try to catch them. We try to not kill them," he said.

"On the third day we were on our ARF, the Taliban commander tried to flee across the river using a raft, and he had his 8-year-old kid with him. The helicopter shot some warning rounds down and he stopped in the middle of the river. ... Well, he finally gave up and surrendered and left his kid in the raft. But the kid fell off into the water where it was about 40 degrees, and this kid is freezing," he said.

"I don't even know how to swim that good, but I was just trying to do a good thing for the day so I took off all my gear, swam across the river and helped this kid," he said.

The boy didn't speak English, Elizalde said, so he signaled the boy to come closer once he reached the raft. However, what Elizalde didn't realize at the time was in that in that part of Afghanistan, one must signal someone to come closer with fingers pointed down, he said. Signaling to come closer with your fingers pointed up is threatening, he said.

"He thought I was saying, 'come here, I'm going to hurt you,'" Elizalde said. "I didn't know that, and the kid was really scared and crying and holding onto the raft. And I'm like, 'Don't jump off the raft because if you do, I don't know how to swim, man.' I mean, I know how to swim, but you can't be in the 40-degree water that long, you could get hypothermia. But the kid didn't understand what I was saying, he was just crying. So I just grabbed the back of his shirt and picked him up and slammed him on the raft and took him back to shore," he said.

When asked why he did it, he shrugged.

"I guess it's just good to do one good thing when you do 50 bad things every day," he said.

Fallen colleagues

Not every mission ends so successfully, he said.

"The day before Thanksgiving, we sent out a patrol and a couple of our guys didn't make it. Everyone was waiting for them to come back so we could all have our dinner together. And next thing you know we get a call on the radio saying one of the patrols got hit and we got two (killed in action). And when KIA hits on the radio, it's just total silence.

"We radioed back, 'Say again, over?' They said, 'We have two KIA, and we're sending a Medevac to the main base.' And we're like, 'Do you have anything else?' and they said, 'We have two KIA and three wounded in action.' Wounded in action means urgent. When it's urgent, it means surgery. It means they lost a leg, an arm, part of their head got blown off," he said.

"Out on patrol, it's like, this is the last time you're probably going to tie your boots on. ... All you can think about is how you're going to survive and how you're going to make it home alive," he said.

Elizalde said after experiencing several months of battles there, it's difficult to conceive of a truly peaceful Afghanistan.

"The majority of the reasons the ACM fights against us is they don't want us there, they just want to do their own thing. I mean, this country has been ruled by warlords for so long," he said.

The first two months his platoon was in the Uruzgan province was hellish, he said. The temperatures in the summer at their camp, some 8,000 feet above sea level, reached well over 100 degrees, and there were no tents or infrastructure for months after they arrived. He and his platoon members had to dig holes in the ground to sleep in and cover themselves with a temporary tent. The temperature was so hot and the air was so thin at the altitude that many people had days-long nosebleeds. There were no showers so they would rinse themselves off from water from the water truck, he said.

In September, an engineer battalion came to the region and built a firebase. He said he and his squad members now have the luxury of a wooden floor.

But now the desolate mountains have daytime temperatures of around 30 degrees. At night, it's below zero, he said.

"So you're cold and wet all the time. It's worse than the summer," he said.

When asked why he chose to re-enlist -- he's in for another four years -- after experiencing such harsh conditions, he said it's hard to explain.

"It's like my squad members are my family, you know? I know they've got my back. Whoever's next to me, I know they'll defend me," he said. "We're not there to kill people, but we're there to help these people, but we have no choice. It's like they say, nobody likes to fight, but somebody needs to know how."

"And it's an adrenaline rush, you know. Some people crave for it. It's just like skydiving. You jump off and you never know if the chute's going to open or not. But you take that risk because if it does open that feeling when you hit the ground it's like, 'Yeah, I just jumped off 30,000 feet and I'm still alive.' When you're out there, it's like, 'I just went out on patrol and I got ambushed, and we got all the bad guys killed and no one on our side got hurt.' It feels alright," he said.