



Afghan National Army Soldiers assigned to the 203rd Thunder Corps, Afghan National Army, along with U.S. and Coalition advisors assigned to the 1st Armored Division supporting Operation Resolution Support and Freedom's Sentinel prepare to conduct an extraction (EXFIL) from a forward outpost during an Afghan-led and executed clearance operation **U.S. Army Photo by Master Sgt. Alex Licea**

By Alex Licea

It had been nearly a decade since my last combat/operational deployment as a young 27-year-old staff sergeant and newly promoted sergeant first class working in Southeastern Baghdad as the Public Affairs Noncommissioned Officer in Charge (NCOIC) of the storied

3rd Brigade Combat Team (Panther Brigade), 82nd Airborne Division.

However, in the summer of 2019 I found myself loading up a Quadcon with duffel bags and equipment and carrying my assault pack as I set my eyes toward Afghanistan to begin my deployment in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel and Resolute Support.

Naturally, I was full of emotions with various levels of anticipation and excitement along with nervousness and sadness to be leaving my loved ones for such a long duration of time.

It was a hot July day in El Paso when I boarded a plane bound for Central Asia. The months ahead would provide me several important lessons that will stay with me for years to come.

1. Check your equipment

The fit of your equipment is easy to overlook but make sure to inspect your equipment and make the proper adjustments so your kit is worn correctly and your helmet fits properly. The last thing you need as a leader is a crooked helmet, jacked up chin strap, and incorrectly sized kit.

Have someone inspect you and check your fellow Soldiers to make sure their equipment is worn to function correctly as well. You might think this practice is a given but there is always one "crooked helmet" person out there. Don't let it be you or your soldiers.

2. Back to the basics

Being a senior NCO does not excuse me from being proficient on the basics of being a Soldier. The basic skills of marksmanship and first aid as well as physical fitness should be taken seriously at all times no matter what the rank or MOS. Take every opportunity to go to the range and fire your weapon. Pay attention during those pre-deployment first aid classes and stay in the best physical shape possible. Weapons proficiency, life-sustaining

skills, and conditioning are important in a dynamic and unpredictable environment so it's best to always stay focused and prepared.

3. Communication

The art of effective communication was a major takeaway for me during this deployment. Our task force commander set his priorities right from the get-go through clear and direct communication with those of us on the staff. His clear guidance enabled us to accomplish our mission and meet his intent in support of our Afghan partners. He also emphasized that we, as section leaders, pass down everything to our respective section members so there would be full transparency and no vacuums of information across the staff. The importance of consistent communication was a continued pattern throughout our deployment during our daily morning briefings and various working groups. I really felt it provided the focus we needed as a general-level staff. This experience was also the first time I felt a true sense of collaboration, allowing each of us to express our ideas and contribute using the power of words.



Our Team

4. Power of Teamwork

The second line of the Soldier's Creed states: "I am a warrior and a member of a team." The Army emphasizes this foundation at every opportunity because it is a core tenet.

I can honestly say I had the pleasure to work with some of the best military professionals in my 18-year military career. I was also honored to be the leader of my section with incredible and talented NCOs.

I don't want to paint a rosy picture of perfect synergy because there were times of disagreements, miscommunication, and arguments - especially in the beginning of the deployment. However, we were a strong team with personality traits that complemented each other to overcome those initial growing pains and accomplish our mission. Delegating

projects and trusting my teammates to get the job done provided increased productivity to meet the commander's intent without being overburdened as the section lead.

I am proud to say that everyone on my team earned battlefield promotions, impact awards and one my most junior NCO earned a DA-level award. We all cared and respected each other, and our collective success led to individual accolades.

5. Relationships

Relationships are everything, especially when working with our Afghan partners. Building positive relationships based on mutual respect and trust were vital in an ever-changing and unpredictable environment. Our Afghan partners from the 203rd Thunder Corps were amazing and hardworking people and Soldiers. My teammates and I made it a point to establish a true partnership where we learned from each other. This proved to be an invaluable and fulfilling aspect of our deployment.

My relationship with my fellow servicemembers is something I will always cherish, especially my "gym bros" trying to get large.



British Army Brig. Gen. Leigh R. Tingey and the primary staff comprised of U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, 1st Armored Division, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division and 1-178th, Illinois National Guard served as members assigned to Task Force-Southeast based in Southeastern Afghanistan from August 2019 through March 2020.

6. Earning Trust

I wanted my commander and the staff to believe in me and my team. This was especially important for me because there was not an officer in my staff section. I took great pride in

being the only section who was made up completely of non-commissioned officers, and I served as the leader of the team. If you are confident, knowledgeable, and understand the commander's vision you will earn the commander's trust and that of the senior members of the staff. This was the case for me and my team, and thanks to our work ethic, we earned trust and a direct line to our commander. Trust is everything!

7. Dealing with Stress

Being deployed and away from home is stressful enough. Throw in a hectic and non-stop work environment, and it can really increase an individual's stress level. Many times throughout the deployment I found myself stressed out, so I took a step back. For me, it was taking a walk around our small base, working out at the gym, or occasionally eating some cereal or Buffalo pretzels. Now I don't advocate for stress eating by any means, however, in my opinion, there is nothing better than a nice bowl of carbs and sugar like Cinnamon Toast Crunch (with no milk) to help me relieve some stress during moments where some comfort food can help during the most hectic days.

8. Leadership

All of us in the military profession have an opinion of what makes great leadership. There are thousands of articles, commentaries, and books about the topic. This deployment exposed me to various leadership styles and traits, but being a servant leader and "leading by example" seemed to be the most prominent style among our core staff; styles that continue to be adapted by military leaders.

This deployment was challenging, unpredictable, stressful, rewarding, and a great learning experience. I met and worked with so many great people who came together to accomplish the mission in a complex and ever-changing environment. Despite the long hours and missing birthdays and the holiday season, this deployment has made me a better Soldier and leader. I wouldn't change a thing, and I am grateful for the experience!

Alex Licea is an active duty U.S. Army Master Sergeant, Public Affairs professional, father, writer, and lifelong learner. Alex enlisted in the U.S. Army in July 2002. He earned his Master's Degree in Public Relations and Corporate Communications from Georgetown University in 2016. He was the 2019 recipient of the MSG Marcia Triggs Award for excellence by the Army Public Affairs Association and the 2019 recipient of the AUSA SGM Dawn Kilpatrick Scholarship Award. He will be a student for Class 71 of the U.S. Army Sergeant Major Course at Fort Bliss, TX.

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