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AFGHANISTAN:

Retired Green Beret battles on humanitarian front

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DAILY NEWS-SUN

National Geographic producer Gary Scurka lay bleeding. He had taken rounds to his hip, right knee and right side of his chest at the front lines in a battle on November 11 between Taliban and Northern Alliance forces in northern Afghanistan.

Greg Long, from Partners International Foundation, who was nearby, was thrown backward 25 feet by a burst of Taliban fire and suffered a concussion. Fortunately, a dvcam video case that had been stuffed in his field jacket minutes before deflected the shrapnel from his chest.

Moments later, Long came to and managed to drive Scurka to Northern Alliance headquarters in Koja-Badeen more than four hours (45 miles) away for medical assistance. From there they were medevacted to Tajikistan.

It wasn't the first time Long had been wounded in a war zone. A retired U.S. special operations officer, he was recipient of three purple hearts while serving in Vietnam. This time, he wasn't part of a military operation, but was in Afghanistan as part of a two-man team conducting feasibility studies, evaluating mine fields and



PHOTO COURTESY OF GREG LONG

Greg Long from Partners International Foundation, left, stands by displaced Afghans in tent encampment 20 miles from Northern Alliance headquarters in Koja BaDeen, Afghanistan prior to snowfall in November. Long was in northern Afghanistan performing feasibility studies for humanitarian aid drops before being injured in a battle between the Northern Alliance and Taliban forces in November.

securing drop zones for humanitarian aid. They were also assisting Knights Bridge International (www.knightsbridge.org) in the distribution of relief supplies to Afghan civilians.

It was not his intention to be in the middle of a battle. Scurka and a film crew had been assigned to cover the humanitarian mission for a television documentary and were with Long and his team near the village of Kalkata, a short distance from the fighting. Scurka and a photographer set off on foot with intentions of capturing film footage of the battle. Long spotted them moving along a trench burn on the front, and knowing they were in imminent danger, started after them.

Long is now recovering at his home in Flagstaff where he continues to direct activities in Afghanistan.

Long's military experience makes him uniquely qualified for undertaking risky humanitarian projects. He also directs the Me Boun Foundation (MeBoun@aol.com), a group he founded after retiring from the military in fulfillment of a promise he made to the people of Cambodia that he would return someday to remove landmines and help restore villages.

COORDINATING HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS

Founded in 1997, Partners International Foundation (www.partners-international.org) is a Connecticut-based non-profit organization made up of a small group of volunteers from the military and private sectors that formed to fill what it considers a critical function lacking in humanitarian relief efforts: an objective source of oversight and coordination between humanitarian groups and charities in emergency situations.

"There is virtually no effort on behalf of the hundreds of international and national domestic groups, each with its separate focus — such as food, transportation, water or medical — involved in complex emergencies," Long said.

This is particularly true, as Long and PIF contend, for federal and non-federal agencies and emergency response organizations supporting emergencies in the United States like those experienced on Sept. 11. There is even less focus on conducting detailed objective assessments of the actual impact of these efforts, according to PIF's analysts.

Based on what PIF sees as a

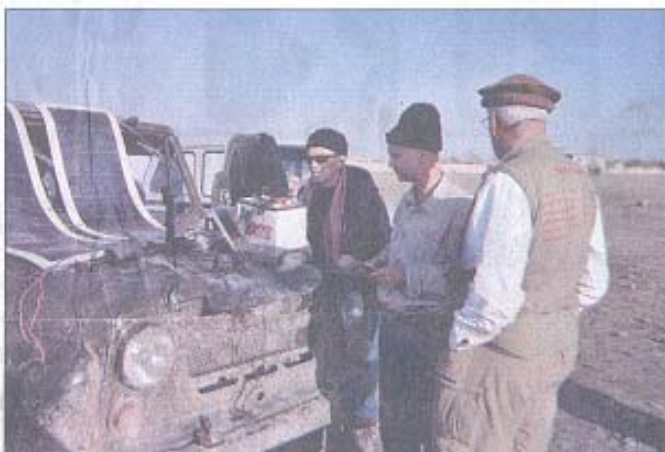


PHOTO COURTESY OF GREG LONG

Waiting for Satellite to pass overhead to receive a message from Partner's International Foundation are, from left, Greg Long and Bob Morris and Knightsbridge International founder, Sir Edward Artis. The two organizations were one of the few humanitarian aid groups who have been able to gain entry into the interior of northern Afghanistan since September 11. A ruptured food packet is shown, above right. Ninety-percent of the humanitarian daily rations dropped by the U.S. military were not usable according to Partner's International Foundation.

steady increase in the number of world crises, the complexity of required responses and the greater involvement of military forces, coordination between international humanitarian, non-governmental, private and governmental organizations and agencies is imperative.

Synchronizing this effort is impeded, Long says, because there is a lack of communication at the levels of the military where humanitarian organizations most often interact with the supporting military units.

In addition, decisions on humanitarian aid are made at the military and government levels without reliable information on the needs of victims or effectiveness of the relief response.

"The first time military operators and humanitarian operators meet is when they are on the ground," said David Kildee, president of PIF.

Their efforts would be more effective if they exchanged pertinent information before initiating the humanitarian response, he said.

PIF is attempting to bridge these gaps by providing an interface between groups. Its approach involves sending a team to assess the nature of the emergency and the needs of those affected.

"The team's ability to locate, mark, and operate drop zones helps prevent the tremendous and costly waste of resources, time and effort," Long said.

Military forces supporting humanitarian operations and humanitarian organizations are then able to enter the country with a greater shared awareness of the situation useful in synchronizing their response, instead of being in conflict or disjointed.

Following the Sept. 11 attacks, Partners International Foundation dispatched the first prototype humanitarian assistance and assessment team to Northern Afghanistan. The team, working with the Knights Bridge humanitarian organization, entered prior to the Northern Alliance offensive and remained despite other relief and UN organizations withdrawing and remaining outside the country with their aid waiting for the situation to stabilize.

Long became the lead force behind the team's success in the region. In addition to assisting in distributing aid, the team conducted a detailed needs assessment. PIF determined that one the team's most significant findings came from the United States' program to air-drop relief supplies.

Based on its first-hand observations, the team concluded that the U.S. air drop of humanitarian daily rations were ineffective.

"U.S. HDR airdrops was a good concept that was poorly executed," Long said. "The Dept. of Defense didn't do its homework."



PHOTO BY PARTNERS INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

Facts about Afghanistan

- A million and a half people have been killed in a land ravaged by more than two decades of war following the Soviet Union invasion in 1979.

- The United Nations estimates that some 10 million land mines are preventing use of thousands of acres of farmland. International forces are removing mines around Kabul, but land mines continue to kill and cripple in other parts of the country. Four percent of the population is disabled because of injuries from mines and unexploded bombs.

- An estimated 4 million people are living in refugee camps. In Pakistan, about 1.2 million Afghans survive in tents and mud huts in sprawling camps, some of which were set up 20 years ago. Another 800,000 live in Pakistani cities. About 1.5 Afghans live in Iran.

- Relief agencies estimate that a million Afghans still living in the country have been displaced by famine or fighting and that six million desperately need food and other aid.

- Afghanistan is facing its worst drought in 30 years, resulting in the migration of thousands of farmers into cities and aid settlements.

- Earthquakes in 1998 killed 7,000 and destroyed 53,000 homes.

Sources: United Nations and National Geographic Society

Long-term commitment essential to peace in war-weary country, says former green beret

From AA1

More than 90 percent of the HDRs inspected by the team had ruptures to one or more of the internal food components. The high altitude drops had caused the sealed food packets to expand and rupture, exposing their contents to air.

Another problem that the military hadn't anticipated involved packages of desiccant (to help preserve food), a chemical that is similar in appearance to salt contained in the food packets.

"Some Afghans became ill after eating the desiccant, having mistaken it for medicine or spice," Long said, adding, "The presence of spoiled food and desiccant corroborated previous reports by the Taliban that civilians were being 'poisoned' from the air drops."

Further complicating the effort was the fact that many HDRs landed in or near mine fields, and accessing them posed a risk.

"The HDRs are similar in appearance to the munitions previously left by the Soviets and the United States," Long said. The Afghans are reluctant to retrieve them.

As a result of the needs assessment, the government was able to send necessary resources to redirect methods of humanitarian aid. The military stopped dropping food rations, but brought in blankets, tarps and other supplies by air.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GREG LONG

Shown are sub commanders of the northern alliance carrying bags of money for their troops on payday in Northern Afghanistan. They are the local tribal elders — also known as warlords. Each has control of his own region in Northern Afghanistan. Greg Long from Partners International Foundation, third from the left, was permitted to stay in a northern alliance compound while he and Knightsbridge International members delivered shipments of humanitarian aid to local villagers.

The findings appeared to validate the foundation's position that greater oversight and coordination of humanitarian efforts are needed.

The Team's report on the airdrop of HDRs drew the attention of the chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, commander-in-chief, United States Special Operations Command, congressional leaders and other officials.

LONG- AND SHORT-TERM SOLUTIONS

Media coverage about the foundation has been limited, says Long — MSNBC, FOX NEWS, NPR, USAToday and a few local news outlets had stories in December.

"Despite these reports," Long says, "the most important information isn't getting out."

He said conditions in the Afghan interior since October have been appalling.

"Aid is severely hampered because of winter conditions, rugged mountainous terrain, lack of adequate roads, security concerns, lack of a police force and communications infrastructure," he said. "All of this makes movement of supplies very, very slow."

A report issued in February by the group Doctors Without Borders (www.doctorswithoutborders.org) states that only a fraction of the needed food has been supplied or promised to several "high food insecurity" districts, and a concerted effort is urgently needed from the international community to avert a disaster. Ed Artis from Knights Bridge Foundation has observed that many groups are unable to get into the country. Food and supply vehicles are stopped at the border.

"Security is a huge, huge issue," Long said.

In addition, Long emphasized that for a relief campaign to be a success in the region, it is going to require a long-term commitment — particularly by the U.S. government — to understand the Afghan people and build trust by spending time with them.

"The Afghan people are suspicious of U.S. intentions and are fearful of being abandoned again after U.S. interests are met," he said.

Long's on-site observations of conditions in Afghanistan suggest to him that how the U.S. addresses the humanitarian crisis could have serious consequences for the war on terrorism.

He said humanitarian assistance has to eventually move into phase of country building.

"Handing out a bag of rice isn't going to do it," he said.

"If you don't stay for the long-term, conditions will lapse into a worse state than before. Terrorists find ready candidates because of our short sightedness."

Long is planning to lead another Partners International Foundation team in

Afghanistan in the spring. The group is attempting to build public awareness, donor support and partnerships with other organizations.

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How to help

● "Do your homework," says Greg Long. Research the humanitarian organizations and Afghanistan and its people before donating. Select organizations that are working to get aid directly to the people in need. A large portion of aid doesn't get to its intended destination because of bureaucratic waste within organizations or because corrupt governments don't distribute it to their people.

● Find an organization that does not focus on a short-term resolution or an end product.

● Send money, not supplies. There is a practical reason for not sending food or clothing: They can be purchased locally for far less. It costs around \$6 thousand USD for a 40-foot container to be sent to Asia or Central Asia. There are added costs for transportation and security. By the time it reaches those in need, a considerable amount of money has been needlessly spent. For example, a 40 bag of rice costing \$25 USD in the states, after shipping and handling will be \$60 by the time it reaches Afghanistan — and the rice might be spoiled.