

He Was Just Standing There!

January 14th, 2010

An article by Brian B Donaldson



Earlier in the day, I was asked if I wanted to go to the Observation Post with the rest of the soldiers and Marines. Not doing anything terribly important at the time, I said sure. I had been at Combat Outpost Rocco, or COP Rocco, for over a week now. My job was to repair a satellite communications terminal and then head back to my base camp. Unfortunately, or fortunately, there was no transportation available. I was in the Uzman Valley of Kapisa Province, a hot bed of activity for the Taliban.

So off to the OP we go. Three High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee) trucks departed with me and the other soldiers and Marines and several Afghan National Army (ANA) personnel. The ride took all of 10 minutes across dusty and deep-rutted roads. There was no sign of eminent danger but none the less, the turret gunners kept a sharp eye out for trouble.

Reaching the OP was anticlimactic, but the weapons firing had already begun. I watched and photographed one American soldier teaching a few ANA officers in the proper use of an M-60 machine gun. Several others were firing their weapons at the rocks. But just off to my left there was an ANA soldier watching me. The scenery to my left was breath taking. This is beautiful country, Afghanistan,

but so torn apart from centuries or conflict. I still wasn't sure why I was being watched so closely. It could be that I was the only non-military person, or maybe I had a camera.

I would look every once in the while to see if I was still being watched. When next I looked, I noticed the soldier start to turn around. His movement was so sudden and so quick that I have very little time to snap the photo. Only one photo and I prayed it was the right exposure. Just as the shutter clicked, I noticed that he was turning towards me again. I continued to watch the training and shot a few more pictures. But I was nagging at myself if the exposure was correct.

Several months earlier I was fortunate enough to meet Nikki Khan, a Washington Post staff photographer. We sat one day and chatted about cameras and photography. The two of us exchanged PCs so we could look at each other's work. I was so impressed with her work I had to ask her how she set her camera. Nikki advised me to shoot about -2/3 stops. So I took this to heart and practiced this new technique. I found that it did not work all the time, but most of the results were better. Did I have that setting today?

So the image I captured this day, of a lone soldier looking over the land of his fore fathers, was a quick and lucky shot. I am reminded of the great Joe Rosenthal when he captured the second flag raising on Iwo Jima, and how it was a chance shot. I can't even compare my image to Mr. Rosenthal's, but I can say this image of a lonely soldier was a once in a life time moment. After all, he was just standing there.



Brian Donaldson is a freelance photojournalist and writer. He has lived in many countries and travels to find interesting stories and pictures. Brian writes for the International Press Association.