

Rock Hill native awarded Bronze Star

Langston improved communication with Afghans, media

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One path to peace is in the message and who delivers it.

That idea sank in for 1st Lt. Carter Langston, a Rock Hill native stationed in Afghanistan, when he learned that an American pastor and about 30 spectators had burned a Quran in Florida.

In a country where anti-American sentiment already runs high, a few angry leaders in Afghanistan urged people to avenge the insult. The result was the deaths of at least a dozen people including several United Nations workers, according to American media reports.

Langston was stationed at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, deployed with the 210th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment of the U.S. Army Reserves. He was a public affairs officer for the Regional Command – East Communications Center. His objective was to work with Afghan reporters, informing them of news and giving them access to local leaders and military sources.

Misinformation was a pervasive enemy.

The base was located in the eastern region of the country, where millions of people, many illiterate, get their news word-of-mouth or from Afghan radio, the only form of media that can penetrate the rocky mountains.

Langston immediately seized the opportunity to get another message out there.

“I recognized the significance of that moment and invited reporters to come to Bagram.”

Langston wanted them to see for themselves the four mosques on the base where uniformed U.S. troops of the Islamic faith worshipped next to about 3,000 Afghan civilians who worked there.

“We were able to show a portion of Americans who have deep respect for the Muslim religion,” Langston said of the April visit.

The reporters took what they saw back to their communities, reporting it in their own voice and language. That went a long way toward creating peace in the region, he said.

That idea and several others earned the 43-year-old Rock Hill native a Bronze Star for meritorious service and a joint service achievement medal.

Langston received the honors for programs he created to communicate with Afghan reporters in the eastern provinces during Operation Enduring Freedom from October of last year to August.

The Bronze Star is a highly sought after award often given for valor, said Capt. Jason Beck, Langston’s commanding officer. Langston deserves it for the “character of his service” in what was really an experimental role. He served with diligence, commitment to his mission, and a keen ability to see the ongoing impacts of ideas and make the right choices, he said.

His efforts improved relations between coalition forces and the Afghan media, government and national army.

The key to peace in Afghanistan is in the message, a point Langston understood.

"He realized that true success was better informing the Afghan populace by better equipping the Afghan media," Beck said.

His efforts included meeting with Afghan reporters regularly, starting a text-to-cell program to alert reporters of news events, and creating and maintaining a website where he posted news about the region, insurgent attacks and efforts of the Afghan National Security Forces and the U.S. military.

The ultimate goal was to encourage Afghans "to take responsibility for their own security," Langston said this month at his father's home in Rock Hill. Langston, who lives in Pinehurst, N.C., recently returned to the United States from deployment.

"Getting the Afghans to take control of their country will lead to a quick and effective withdrawal," he said.

Doing that through the news means fighting misinformation.

250 characters or fewer

But getting the news to the highly mountainous region of 14 provinces and 18 million people and in two languages would be difficult.

At meetings with Afghan reporters, Langston asked them how best to get news to them.

A reporter stood up and "in his perfect Dari" said the Taliban sends text messages to their cell phones.

Langston took the suggestion and developed a text-to-cell program that allowed for the immediate dissemination of urgent news to Afghan reporters in about 250 characters or fewer.

Wanting a place to archive news blasts and post stories for Afghan media, Langston developed a website in three languages: the region's languages of Dari and Pashto, and English.

His efforts helped establish better relationships with Afghan media. He also became the first public affairs officer to be quoted regularly in the Afghan media.

Getting the message out quickly was crucial, something the insurgents were already doing, Beck said.

"It's one of their best tools. They don't have to be right--they just have to be first," he said.

'The credible spokesmen'

One of Langston's challenges was to "show Afghani people that insurgents were harming them and destroying their way of life," Langston said. Reaching out to local leaders helped him do that.

He had the governors of 14 provinces "on speed dial," urging them to be the news bearers in their communities.

The reward came when he saw the impact.

Citizen tips helped the military locate weapons caches and alerted them to insurgent activity. In at least three instances, Afghans took up arms to protect their villages from insurgents.

Governors eventually stood up and said things like, "No Taliban allowed here!" Langston said. One governor announced that the insurgents had reduced a hospital to rubble and killed scores of people, including health care workers.

"It was heartwarming to hear government leaders representing" their communities, Langston said. "These were the credible spokesmen."

To serve and give back

Langston returned to the military last year as a U.S. Army veteran.

He was first commissioned as a sophomore in college in 1989. He served in the Kentucky Army National Guard for two years as an armor officer overseeing four tanks and 16 men.

In 1991, he went to work as a public affairs officer in the National Guard.

But the father of two children, a son, 10, and daughter, 7, never felt comfortable standing to be recognized as a veteran, despite his son's prodding.

"I didn't feel I had served the way these (troops) serving now are," he said. He thought: if his son wanted him to be a veteran, then "I need to be one."

On August 27, 2010, after a 16-year civilian career in public relations and corporate communications, Langston, then 42, returned to military service on a special commission with the U.S. Army Reserves.

Nine months later and another birthday, Langston came home safe and sound.

He only came under indirect fire a few times. His father, Robert Langston, who grew up in Rock Hill also, worried about his son, who followed in the footsteps of both his grandfathers.

Now that Carter is safe at home, Robert can laugh about it.

When Robert was a boy, his father, a World War II veteran, used to threaten him with military school when he misbehaved. That set him straight, he said.

Robert tried that on Carter.

"I thought that was a pretty good ploy," he said. But it had the opposite effect.

Reflecting on his deployment, Carter said his was safe compared to many troops' experiences. It was even enjoyable. Now he wants to give back to the groups that supported him while he was deployed.

Sometime this fall, Carter will walk or run the entire Carolina Thread Trail system in honor of the many who support the military. But proceeds will go to one organization that helped Langston's family while he was deployed: Our Military Kids, which provides support for the children of National Guard and Reserve personnel.

The Carolina Thread Trail is a network of regional greenways and trails that includes parts of 15 counties in South Carolina and North Carolina. About 80 miles of the trail is open.

"There were so many affiliated organizations that serve our military men and women. It was tough deciding on one," he said. "Our Military Kids really did a great job for my children...to keep them engaged in activities throughout my deployment."

Details of the fundraiser will follow.

Check out the website Langston developed and read news dispatches from Afghanistan at <http://akhbaar.af/>

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<http://www.thestate.com/2011/09/16/1973709/rock-hill-native-awarded-bronze.html>