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Plain Text Attachment

So, what's it like in Afghanistan?

I will do my best to answer that question and put my answer in terms that I hope are graphic enough descriptions that you can get a real feel for life in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a mix of two worlds. I call them the Inner World and the Outer World. That same description applies to my life here, which I will describe as well.

Afghanistan is a place that never got much further than the Stone Age. That's their Inner World. But they did discover the things that made America free: guns and automobiles. That's their Outer World. Most homes here are walled compounds of adobe. Yup, that's right, the houses are mostly made of mud. Some of the nicer places are built with brick and mortar, but not many. We drive back and forth between our Firebase and the 10th Mountain Division's Forward Operating Base (FOB). The road is a combination of dirt, rock, and for a few kilometers, blacktop. Along the drive we watch the Afghans building new adobe walls, homes, and compounds every day. That's the Inner World again. We also watch them roll hand-made carts in the road. Carts laden with bricks, dirt, produce, etc. It is common to see herds of goats and sheep and cows walking down the road.

There is always dust in the air here. If you have ever visited El Paso in the winter and early spring, you may have seen a dust storm that is very similar. Whenever we come back from a patrol we look like sugar cookies, dusted with a fine powder coating. Blowing your nose is a constant past time.

When we drive the roughly 10 kilometers to the FOB, the streets are always active, especially with children. They are no different than other children. They like to play in the water, although I question the cleanliness of the ditches in which they play. They like candy. I know this because they mobbed me one day when we stopped to talk to them and hand out candy.

Automobiles are a source of transportation as well as a vehicle for murder. They don't much care what their cars look like so long as the move from point A to point B. Hmmm, maybe we could learn from them in some ways. And like I said, they are also vehicles for murder. By the time you read this you will have likely seen in the news where the Governor of Gardez was killed by a suicide bomber who ran in front of the governor's vehicle. After the vehicle ran the bomber over, he lived just long enough to detonate his bomb while under the vehicle, killing the Governor and a body guard. That was yesterday. Today there was a funeral procession to bury the Governor near our Firebase. The enemy rammed a Vehicle-Borne IED (VBIED) into the procession and killed the governor a second time. They also killed four Afghani police and soldiers and wounded several more in the second attack. Little value on human life and no respect for the dead. That is another aspect of their Inner World, not far removed from the Stone Age.

My life here at the Firebase is pretty nice. I described it in a previous note. It's my Inner World. Sometimes, my Inner World and Outer World overlap. We have TV here, internet, air conditioning and pretty good chow. We have a nice gym and a 4.5-mile route to run around an airfield. I have a comfortable bed to sleep in, inside a nice, strong concrete building. We have little blast bunkers outside our buildings. The intent is during a rocket attack we run out of the strong concrete building and into the little blast bunkers. We usually opt to stay inside the building. I was sick as a dog and nearly comatose during the last rocket attack. I slept right through it and woke up after 13 hours safe and sound and none the wiser until one of the guys mentioned it to me.

Imagine a drive of 10 kilometers. That's 6.2 miles. In the prime of my life I could run that distance in 40 minutes. 10 kilometers is the distance from our Firebase to the FOB. Now imagine driving that route every day to conduct coordination with other friendly forces. Imagine memorizing every speed bump, every rock, every pothole, and every imperfection in the road. You have to memorize them because when the day comes that there is a new one, you have to stop and check it out because those who are not very far out of the Stone Age probably buried something there meant to hurt you. You also have to look closely at every parked car and every passing car.

Imagine looking with scrutiny at every passing vehicle. You're looking for the one that has indicators, one that matches the latest

color scheme reporting. One that is riding really low on its springs because of the weight of its deadly payload. Imagine looking into the eyes of every passing motorist, looking for that look, some kind of hint that he is the guy that is going to ruin your day. The cars with families and loads of family belongings are the first indicator that that vehicle is safe. The cars with a lone driver, that's another story.

But the children I mentioned earlier help a lot. Children playing in the street are a good indicator that the coast is clear. And if we are doing our job at winning the hearts and minds, the locals call us or visit us to tell us that bad men planted bombs. We pay them a small reward, go out and collect the bomb, bring it back to our range and detonate it.

There is hope for Afghanistan. One of our Afghan Security Guards (ASG) has been fighting for his country since he was old enough to fire a weapon. He was Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion. After the Taliban came to town, he fled north and became a member of the Northern Alliance. When the Americans came after September 11, he fought beside us. When the Taliban fell, he was legitimized as a soldier in the Afghan Militia Forces (AMF). They continued to fight alongside Americans and coalition fighters and over time they became the Afghan Security Force (ASF). Just a couple days ago they were re-flagged as the ASG. This one guy in particular fights from a wheel chair. He lost his left hand and both legs in an ambush two years ago. So long as he has one hand remaining and can pull a trigger he will fight for a better Afghanistan. If only there were more like him. Attached is a picture in which my commander pinned the Heart of a Lion Medal on this brave man. We can win here, but we have to get into their Inner World to do so. There aren't enough of us to blanket the countryside and extend our reach unless we do it with surrogates. Those surrogates are the Afghan people, most of who are tired of the fighting and tired of living in fear. When we win them over in one area and they tell us where the bad men put the bombs and just as importantly where the bad men are hiding, then we can stretch out even further. But it will take time, a very long time. Unfortunately, the American public has already run out of patience. I expect the next president will pull troops home from both Afghanistan and Iraq soon after taking office in Jan 09. Both countries will fall into worse turmoil than ever before because we don't have the guts to go the distance.

In closing, you hear about Iraq every day in the news. Rarely do you hear about Afghanistan. I expect this will become our generation's Korea; the Forgotten War.

Love to all,
Rob