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Afghanistan SITREP 03 Saturday, September 30, 2006

A couple weeks passed by since my last report. Funny how time passes so quickly. Not a day goes by that I don't think of all of you. Remember the 10 kilometer stretch of road I mentioned in previous notes? We rarely have to travel that route any more. We spent so much time at the other firebase, we decided to move there instead of driving every day.

By moving I went from the luxury of my own room and satellite TV, etc., to living in a tent with six other guys. I don't feel inconvenienced by the move. In fact I feel fortunate. I no longer drive a dangerous stretch of road every day and when I do get out and about the countryside, while still dangerous, I cannot help but compare how I live to the families in the local area. My tent, shared by seven of us, is still luxury compared to the standard on living experienced by the Afghani people. The average annual (yup, that's yearly) income here for a family is \$800. I have a building where I can take a hot shower. They have an irrigation ditch in their backyard where they draw water. If they want hot water they have to heat it on a fire. I walk a few hundred meters to an air conditioned dining facility with more food choices than I could wish for. There are probably more leftovers dumped in the trash on the way out the door than most locals in Khowst eat at any given meal. If they are fortunate, what they eat grazes and grows in the surrounding fields.

I mentioned the children here, how they are not unlike children any where in the world. Children are immune to the conflicts between nations. Childhood is about play and learning. When you think about play, many of you think about video games and riding bicycles, going to the pool in the summer time, and skateboarding. There's no such thing here. Bicycles are an adult mode of transportation, not a toy for children. Most don't own TVs, let alone a Nintendo or Sony Play Station. Many don't have electricity. No pools, just mud puddles and irrigation ditches. A neighborhood is fortunate if one kid has a soccer ball, then it is game on and entertainment for hours. We had a half-dozen brand new soccer balls at my old firebase. I pumped them all up and gave them all away. We had a box full of Ty Beanie Babies. I gave all those away too.

When we patrol, I cannot help but notice the way the kids dress. Most wear dirty "man-dresses" as we call them. Some wear flip flops or sandals, a few have shoes, but most are barefoot, maybe by choice, but maybe not. I wonder what they will wear when winter comes in a month or so. I doubt that many of them have warm socks, decent shoes, mittens, or coats. \$800 per year only goes so far.

I have visited many countries in Europe, the Caribbean, Central America, Africa, and the Middle East. One thing I have not seen here is

beggars. Despite the poor conditions, begging is below them. The locals that work on the various firebases enjoy a standard of living well above the average. We have an interpreter named Amin (pronounced Ah-meen). Five years ago he spoke no English and was employed as an unskilled laborer on a firebase near Khowst making about \$100 per month / \$1200 per year, 50% above the average. Within a year of hanging around the Special Forces detachment he learned enough English to get hired as a Category I interpreter at \$400 per month. Now, four years later, he speaks almost fluent English and he is now a CAT II Terp making \$1600 per month. He takes very good care of his family. He's married with two children and he rides a Honda 250 motorcycle. He is a super nice guy.

I hope that by sharing these small glimpses of life in Afghanistan and my experiences here you get a better perspective of what life is really like here. I want you to know things about the land and the people that you won't see on Fox News or CNN or read in USA Today. They will tell you about the fighting and the IEDs and the bombings. I could tell you about the rocket attack on our firebase five days ago, but I think you see enough of that on TV.

Once again I hope this finds all of you well.

Warmest Regards,  
Rob