

Kabul Journal
by
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Chapter 12 – Routine Mission

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When I was on home leave and back at my office at Texas A&M University for two weeks, it was difficult for me to describe to co-workers how surreal the working and living environment is over here. From my office at A&M, the embassy seemed so bizarre and dysfunctional. Now that I have been back for a few weeks, things here seem routine and expected; I guess it's just human nature to adjust to your surroundings. Perhaps that's why things continue to be dysfunctional here. After a while, it all seems normal, and people stop questioning why things continue to go on like they do.

My trips to the PRTs don't really seem routine, but everything has pretty much fallen into a pattern. The few weeks and numerous emails it takes to set up a PRT visit and missions out, arriving at the PRT and hopefully finding a place to crash that isn't too uncomfortable, chatting with the soldiers, and filling up the large amount of time spent setting around just waiting. Every PRT is different and has its own personality but I guess it's the similarities that we tend to see the most.

Wednesday, March 29 - Parwan Province

This ended up being a day-trip. Much to my surprise the Embassy security office approved a security detail to take me up and back from Bagram Air Base in the same day. This is the same Bagram PRT that I've visited twice before (See Chapter 3 - *First Trip Outside the Wire* and Chapter 11 – *Governor Murad's Vision*). However, this time I'm going out with the team that covers Parwan Province to look at a "pie in the sky" pipeline project proposed by the Governor.

We're suppose to leave at 7 am, but I find myself standing alone in front of the Embassy Building. It's a pleasant, cool morning but I'm anxious to go, the PRT is waiting for me to show up. It turns out that the security detail assembled on the Café-side compound and it take a good 15 minutes until they show up on this side to pick me up. The mission leader goes by the call sign of Jello for no obvious reason.

Then, we take the long road to Bagram. There are two roads that run north from Kabul, and the Embassy mixes up the route for security reasons. This route is called the "Old Bagram Road" which passes through the heart of Kabul and the section of town where the Intercontinental Hotel is located on a hill with a great view of the city. There's a lot of traffic and many small villages along the way that slow our progress; we don't arrive at the PRT at 8:45 am, a good 45 minutes later than planned. I find the PRT soldiers sitting in the shade or milling around the humvees, patiently waiting. They tell me that they were taking bets on whether I would show.



I ride in the lead humvee with the mission leader, Hooper who is the Civil Affairs officer for Parwan Province. Once again three humvees, nine soldiers and this time, two translators take me out. The drive to the provincial capital is uneventful. *“This is probably the best road in Afghanistan,”* Hooper tells me. It’s the major highway north to Konduz and to the Tajik border; a nice paved road with no pot holes. We make good time and arrive at the Governors Compound about 25 minutes later.

Our only reason to stop here is to pick up the provincial engineer who is to show us the pipeline project. Hooper is hoping we can just get the engineer and be off. He has no interest in meeting with the Governor. But such is not the case. We find ourselves with the Governor in his formal reception hall drinking tea.





The governor rudely answers several cell phone calls while Hooper and I drink tea and chat. This governor is different, and the PRT soldiers have a low regard for him as well. No lofty speeches about the importance of Water, no visions for his province; he seems to have other priorities. He rambles on and now says perhaps this pipeline project isn't his first priority, perhaps the PRT should pay for the drilling of water wells instead.

Hooper becomes even more irritated when the engineer arrives and says that he has a previous appointment and can not go out with us today. But the mission is scheduled and I'm here, so we drive out to inspect the site anyway. The first stop is to inspect work on a bridge. This is one of many projects underway by the PRT. They hired the contractor and come by every couple of weeks to check on the progress and to ensure quality control.

The project is located in a pretty mountain valley with small villages perched on the hillsides, with the many irrigated fields crowding the narrow flood plain between the walls of the canyon.



A large crowd of children rapidly appear, hoping that the soldiers will give out writing pens. The soldiers have fun making jokes with the kids, and only pass out the pens just before we load up to move on.

On the way back down the gorge, we stop at the purported beginning of the pipeline. This project is a weird and bad idea. A better approach is to construct a catchment basin further down stream and with a short pipeline to the city's reservoir.

It's lunch time and our convoy stops at a roadside restaurant. I'm surprised and pleased at my first opportunity to eat in an Afghan restaurant. This PRT routinely stops for lunch and has eaten at several of the other restaurants along this stretch of the highway. Hooper tells me, *"The real reason we bring along translators is not to be able to talk to the contractors at the project sites, but so that they can order lunch for us."*



We sit outside at tables under a large shade tree; it all seems so natural and routine, stopping for lunch while out doing field work. It so natural, even though I'm surrounded by nine soldiers carrying rifles and side arms.

The food is excellent, afghan rice and lamb skewers. We linger at the site, talk to the vendors, and enjoy the warm and pleasant noon day sun.



A soldier spots a can of Russian beer in one of the road-side stands and shows it to me and Hooper. US soldiers in Afghanistan are under General Order No. 1; no alcohol is allowed. Through the translator, Hooper asks the vendor if he could sell beer during the Taliban. The vendor laughs and just shakes his head.



On the road back to Bagram Air Base, we pass a grave yard of Russian military vehicles and tanks, abandoned when the Soviets fled Afghanistan. Now all of this military hardware is just a natural, rusting museum on the side of the road.



Hooper drops me off at the PX on the way through the base. The base stretches along the runway, a narrow strip several miles long; great for hiking, but perhaps not today with all my gear.

I have an hour before my scheduled departure time. The PX area is famous for having a Burger King serving whoppers, cheese fries, and cokes. I pass on the hamburger and pick up a fruit smoothie in the real coffee shop.

The Embassy security detail has been here since they dropped me off this morning and are impatient to leave, but we have one additional passenger to wait for. Jello comments that you can spend a lot of money around here. I look in my shopping bag at a new shirt, two pairs of pants and a new cell phone, "*mmm, maybe so,*" I think, "*\$600 in 20 minutes!*"

Everything seems normal and routine as we head back to Kabul. We take the “new Bagram road” on the way back, which passes through the east side of the Kabul Basin with nice vistas of mountains on the left, with some with snow still clinging to the higher peaks and in the shaded gullies.

To our right are the broad plains looking much like the lowlands in the Big Bend area of Texas. The plains are now green with the emerging grass of early spring. We pass numerous camps. Appearing in just the last week or two are the nomads with their tents, camels and herds of sheep and goats. We see widely spaced tents scattered out in the plains and pass families and their camels packed tall with possessions moving further north.



Jello and I talk about the nomads wondering where they spent the winter, where they will go from here when the grass dies from the summer heat and lack of rain. He wonders if anyone has done a study; do they live longer since they have a natural and stress free life? I express my doubts. The nomads use to freely roam the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The border is now closed and many of their traditional grazing lands are now infested with landmines.



As we approach the edge of Kabul, everything seems normal and routine, just 20 more minutes and we'll be back at the Embassy. This section of town is the industrial zone. We first pass large factory compounds lying in ruins, then the newer industrial section crowded with warehouses, trucks, people and activity, hopefully a sign of an improving economy.

Traffic quickly thickens. Suddenly, there are five lanes of traffic on this road designed for only two; cars and trucks spilling over the shoulders and almost scrapping the walls of the industrial compounds that line the road. Vehicles and trucks jockey for position, then we slow and soon come to a complete stop, jammed in with stalled cars, trucks, and busses on all sides.



The traffic jam has apparently been going on for quite a while. Passengers have abandoned their taxis and taxi-busses; they tread their way through the stalled cars seeking an escape route. Drivers stand by their vehicles with their doors open if there happens to be enough room at the spot where they are stuck. A few men carry firearms which is not uncommon here and make their way through the cars. People seem calm, but for how much longer I wonder.



Jello gets out of the vehicle to scope out the situation. He walks through the maze of vehicles and passes out of sight for a few minutes. When he returns, he directs half the security team to exit our three vehicles. Perhaps it's their armaments and flak jackets, but drivers actually respond as they begin directing traffic, this car to move a few feet forward, these cars to back up, this truck to squeeze to the left. They slowly clear a torturous path through the traffic.



We eventually come to the intersection of total gridlock. As traffic slowed, the Afghans crowded their vehicles into every conceivable open space. Traffic attempting to turn left and right and to go straight ahead are now were trapped by each other's vehicles. I see a few policemen taking into their cell phones.

The security detail works wonders, and slowly but surely clears a path just wide enough for our convoy to pass through. I noticed irritated Afghans wedged in between cars, trucks and busses, angry that we are getting through while everyone else is stuck.

As we leave the gridlock intersection and out onto the open road, I feel sorry for everyone trapped, it will be hours before the mess is cleared and people can be on their way again.