

Kabul Journal
by
Guy Fipps

Chapter 13 – The Logar Forward Operating Base

April 12, 2006

The Gardez PRT headquarters is in the town of Gardez, the capital of Paktya Province. This PRT is responsible for two provinces, Paktya and Logar. In February, the PRT sent one humvee and four PRT soldiers to Logar to serve that province after repeated requests from the governor. The PRT soldiers are located at a small forward operating base in the town of Kulanger, the capital of Logar Province. The operating base is manned by Military Police (MP) representing all four branches of our arm forces, whose job is to gather intelligence and help train local police.

The Gardez PRT asked me to come down to the forward operating base in Logar to help their Civil Affairs Officer, Bryan, sort out the many requests he has been getting for funding of water and agricultural projects. The Embassy security detachment takes me over to Logar in a convoy of three armored land cruisers vehicles and nine armed guards. The operating base is a 2 hour's drive from Kabul.

As we drive through the country side, Logar Province appears poor and sad. This was once called the breadbasket of Afghanistan, but many battles were fought here during the wars of the last 20 years; first it was battles against the Soviet occupiers and then, during the civil war, against the Taliban. Life now is hard in Logar, with much of their agricultural infrastructure is destroyed.



I arrive at the base around 9:30 am. The base is clearly visible from the road; a single rectangular building surrounded by with blast proof barriers (“sand bags”) and a 10 foot metal fence.

The security detachment pits then quickly heads back to Kabul. There's a visiting congressional delegation in town and all security personnel are needed to escort them around. In fact, at first the Embassy requested that I reschedule my trip due to the visiting delegation. But this visit had taken three weeks to set up and rescheduling would be a major undertaking.

The atmosphere is noticeably much different here than at the other PRTs I have visited. I suppose this is because it's only a military forward operating base. Conditions are relatively primitive. I'm given the bed of a PRT soldier on leave, a cot with a thin mattress on top. This is what all the soldiers sleep on. I share a room with three others; no private rooms or even partitions at this base.

No, not much on creature comforts, except the bathrooms which have individual shower rooms with doors that close and latch with a nail. The rec room has only three arm chairs and two internet computers for 60 soldiers, and the exercise room has only the bare minimum amount of equipment. Outside, there's very little space between the building and compound walls, just enough to provide parking space for the vehicles.

Our first mission of the day is in town, just a few blocks away, so we take only the one PRT humvee and two armed soldiers. We're meeting with the directors of the provincial irrigation and agriculture departments.



The directors are not happy. They talk about all the needs in the province and how, in spite of being peaceful, safe and loyal to the central government, they have received very little assistance from aid organizations. They talk about the difficulties of the people, the harshness of life, and the difficulty in growing crops: no seed, no fertilizer, no money, and not enough irrigation water to go around.



Both directors agree that the first priority is more water. They will show us some projects this afternoon, but first we head back to the base for lunch and to arrange escort. The PRT soldiers have only one vehicle, so they must persuade the Military Police to provide force protection anytime they leave the city.

At lunch, I'm surprised at how poorly equipped the mess hall is. No chairs, just homemade plywood benches and tables, and only enough seating for about 1/3 of the soldiers at a time. The food is remarkably bad, unless you are an active 19 year old and like hot dogs and onion rings. The lack of variety in the food surprises me as do the milk cartons with expiration dates that have already expired! I was hoping to watch the Final Four on the big screen TV in the mess hall, but there is no reception no matter how much the satellite system is adjusted.

After lunch, we load up and head out. The MP sends along three humvees as force protection. With the PRT vehicle, this makes a total of four humvees and 12 soldiers taking me out this afternoon.

We follow a compact SUV that carries the directors of irrigation and agriculture. First, we head west on the main road towards Kabul about 20 clicks, then turn off on a dirt road to the north. The dirt road winds itself through several villages before emerging into a

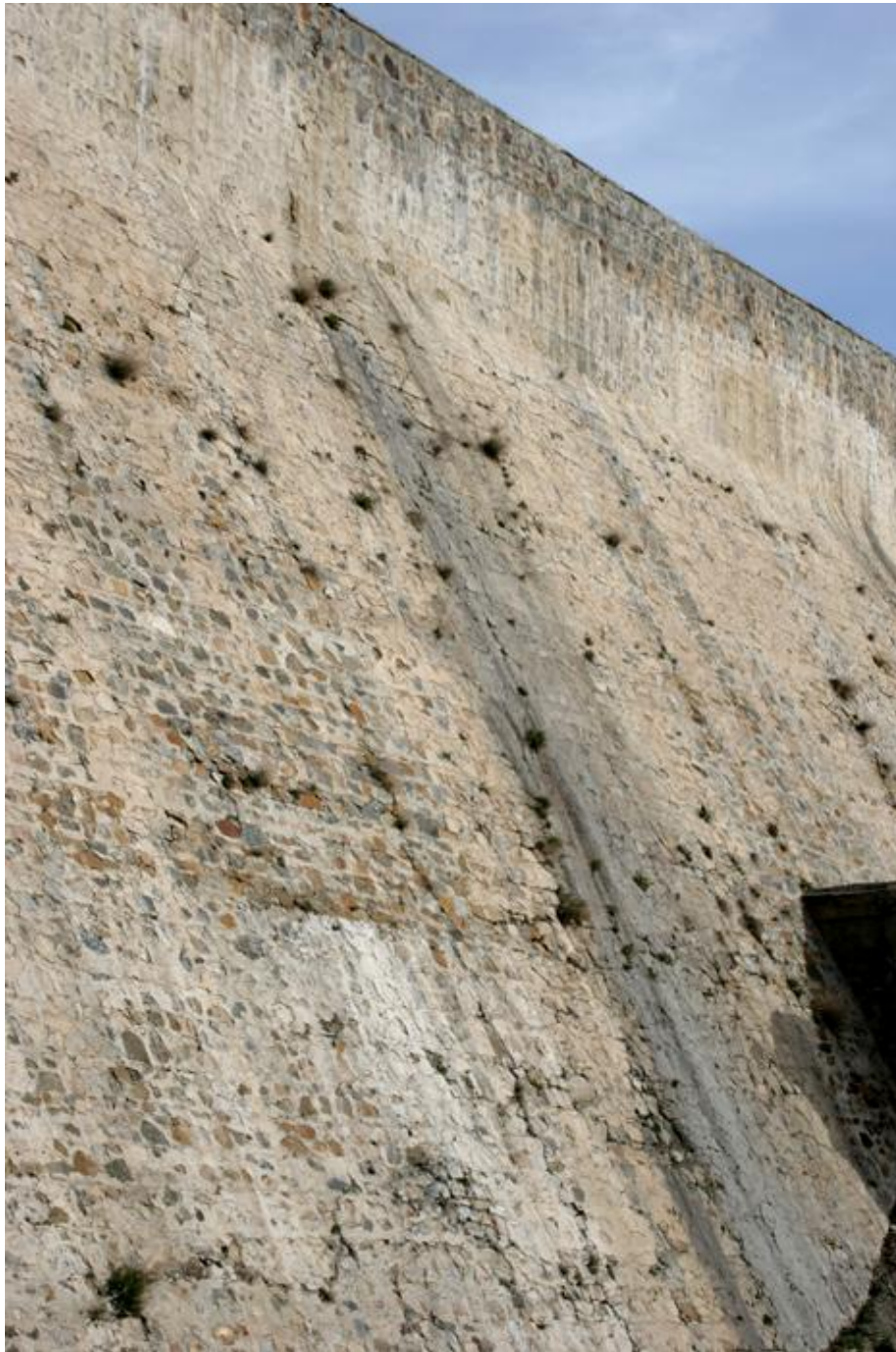
spectacular mountain basin. Dramatic vistas are further enhanced by the amazing sky of fair weather clouds which look like they are finger painted onto the deep blue sky. We pass an occasional nomad camp and many camels gazing on the spring grass.



They are taking us to see an old, famous dam that needs help. We continue driving towards the mountains and travel about 40 kilometers before arriving at the site. The dam is old, they say it was built over 80 years ago by the Germans. A large group of village elders wait for us, sitting on the dam drinking tea.



The dam has many serious problems: cracks, an eroding face with numerous holes, with one that penetrates through the dam and leaks. Nor does the dam have an emergency spillway. All which spell doom for the dam; I estimate that without repairs, the dam will collapse in two to three years.





In Dari, an Afghan language, the village elders plead their case. This dam provides drinking water to 30,000 people and irrigates 75,000 acres. If they lose this dam, they lose everything. It will cost only \$60,000 to fix these problems, but the villages have no cash, and the irrigation department has no funds.



The dam has other problems. Two gates that release water into the canal system are broken.

I explain the dam's problems to Bryan and the other PRT soldiers. They do not understand, so I tell them how water is diverted from the dam into the canals, then flows through water control structures (which are also in very poor state of repair) to the crops.

I tell Bryan that this would be a great project for the PRT to take on since the cost is within the range of projects they like to fund. Bryan says, *"Well, I'm leaving in two months; I'll leave this to my successor."*



While the soldiers talk with the kids and villagers, I admire the dramatic scenery.





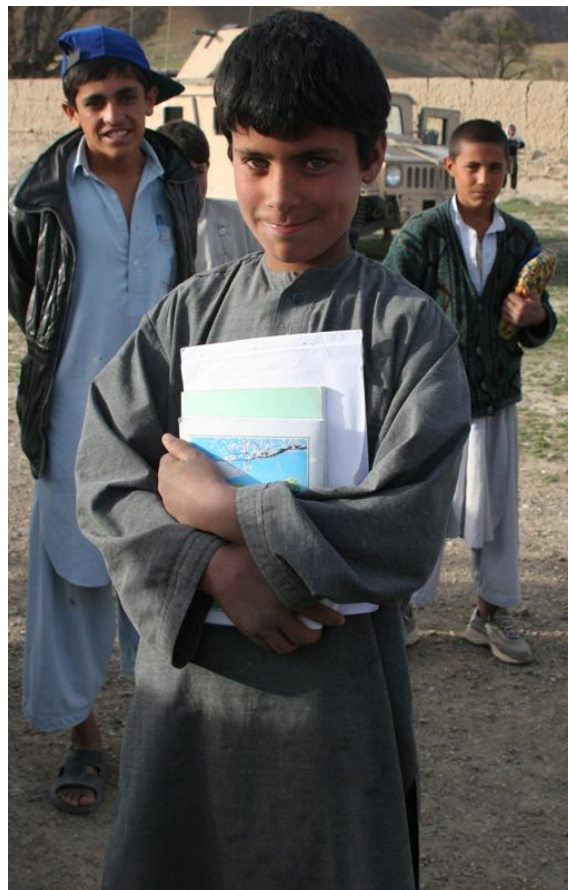
On the way back to town, we stop at what was once a research farm. The director of agriculture shows me a small plot of recently planted mulberry seedlings which will be given out for transplants in a year. But the research farm is in shambles, destroyed during the civil war. The building is full of bullet holes and portions of the walls have collapsed.



The water well in the court yard is in just as bad shape, partially collapsed as well. They have dug a deep ramp to the remaining well casing in an attempt to prevent further collapse and to provide water access.



A large crowd quickly gathers around the humvees. Bryan says that it is difficult to go anywhere in town because of the large crowds. As we load up to leave, the soldiers toss out writing pens and the kids scramble to catch them.







It's dark by the time we return to the base. I head first for the showers. In spite of the nice shower room with a latch on the door, there is almost no water pressure and just a little hot water. I end up taking a wash rag shower.

Once again at dinner, the food is amazingly bad, but there is an ample supply of energy and candy bars that help get me through. The satellite system still doesn't work, so there's not much to do, except sit on my bunk,. I pass the time reading and working on my laptop.

I'm actually shocked at the poor living conditions at this base, and wonder why we treat out soldiers this bad. For me, I'm here only one night, but these soldiers are based here, many for an entire year. The next morning, I step outside for some air and find a high spot where I can gaze over the 10 foot fence at the spectacular vista looking east towards the mountains.



I catch a ride back to Kabul with a two-car UN convoy. As we drive through the county side, I now know that conditions are worst then they look. I'm still disturbed by the conditions that our soldiers must live in at the Logar Forward Operating Base. Back in Kabul I can not help but notice, that for once, the Embassy compound doesn't seem so bad after all.

