

**Kabul Journal**  
by  
**Guy Fipps**

**Chapter 16 – Technical Report**

**Friday, July 14, 2006**

Friday is our day off, but I'm working in my apartment today, trying to finish a technical report I began last month. The first draft is complete; now it's time to incorporate the review comments and get it done!



I have the TV on while I work. My routine on Fridays is to sleep late (relatively speaking) and catch up on the news. Mornings, AFN (American Forces Network) rebroadcasts the Evening News of the major networks at various times beginning at 7:30 AM.

The news today from Lebanon is not good, and for the first time in weeks, it replaces the increasingly bad news coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan. Here, the number of incidents and organized insurgency attacks have been steadily increasing. The Embassy has received a few threats and we are occasionally “locked down” but the normal business goes on almost without interruption.

I try to focus on the report and pull out my notes and photos to check my facts. But I'm distracted by the memories of the experience. This assignment wasn't mission impossible, but it had its share of challenges, for sure, and my first trip out to Herat and the PRT run by the Italians.

## The Assignment

I'm the only water specialist at the Embassy, both in the Department of State and USAID, and I'm the only irrigation expert in the entire US Mission, including the military. Many people, including me find this surprising for a nation like Afghanistan where water is so vital to everything, from the day-to-day survival of the people, to the effort to bring stability and long term economic development to Afghanistan.

So I wasn't surprised when USAID asked me to evaluate some of the water infrastructure projects implemented under RAMP. RAMP (Rapid Agricultural Marketing Program) was a 3-year, \$133 million agricultural development program that ended in June.

Randy and Tracy, USAID contract officers, working with the prime RAMP contractor, Chemomics, Inc., came up with a list of about 20 projects in two provinces for me to inspect. These specific projects were selected as they represent the type of projects that are planned as a part of the next big agricultural program, code name ASAP (Accelerated Sustainable Agriculture Program) scheduled to begin this fall.

## Monday, May 15, 2006

Today, I'm heading up to Parwan Province to evaluate the first round of projects. This is my second trip to Parwan (see Chapter 12: *Routine Mission*), which is just an hour's drive north from Kabul. Randy is coming along, and the Embassy's security detail is taking us up today. We assemble at 7:15 AM by the flagpole on the Café-side of the Embassy. We both wear body armor as required whenever going out-of-Kabul. The shift leader directs us to sit in the second vehicle of our three car convoy of armored plated land cruisers.

## Blackwater

The current force protection contract for the Embassy is held by Blackwater Security Consulting, a company founded by former US Navy SEALs. Most of the personnel are former military and came here following a year or longer working for the company in Iraq. Things are obvious much, much worse in Iraq, and the company lost personnel there. The Blackwater guards are, not surprisingly, paranoid.

As the day goes by, I cannot help but notice the contrast between Blackwater's paranoia and the casual attitude of the seasoned PRT soldiers during my last trip up to Parwan. One example is that the PRT soldiers routinely stop for lunch at Afghan roadside restaurants. Blackwater, on the other hand refuses to stop.

Thus, lunch has to wait until after we work our way down the list of projects starting from the north, and we make way to Bagram Air Base arriving just before 3 pm.



The “reward” for waiting however, is a Burger King hamburger, fries and a coke, markedly different from the rice and kabobs that is the typical Afghan fare.



Another contrast is that the PRT soldiers regularly interact with the locals, handout pens to the kids, and engage the adults in conversation and jokes. Blackwater attempts to keep the crowds way from us as we inspect the projects; no winning hearts and minds here, all the crowds represent to them is danger.

I'm both irritated by the Blackwater's guards and a bit guilty for not making their day a little easier. Looking at irrigation projects involves water and mud, wading through fields, and traversing canals. I try to be patient, to wait for the guards.

At the third stop, we must walk down a steep embankment and leap across a 3 foot canal. Our Afghan guides lead the way, effortlessly leap across the canal and head towards the project site, and I quickly follow. However, the guards' body armor is packed with attachments, ammunition, radios, and a lot of mystery packets. They are further weighed down by their rifles and handguns, a heavy load indeed.



They stop at the canal and appear perplexed. “*Mr. Fipps, please wait,*” I hear while they try to decide what to do.



But the Afghans come to the rescue. They find large rocks and quickly make a rock bridge to allow the guards to step over the canal.

### Project Evaluations

The day is uneventful, but fascinating for me. The projects range from very large to small. Unfortunately, most of the projects have major problems with engineering design, selection of materials and workmanship which I will detail in my technical report.





The locals, however, do not see these problems and are extremely thankful. Increased water flow into the canals now means higher yields, more food on the table, and a little cash in their pockets.



So the good news is that these projects have had an impact; the bad news is that the projects are destined to have short life spans. I'm afraid that in just a few years, only the plaques will remain, monuments to US ingenuity and the incompetence of USAID and their contractors.



### Bagram Air Base

I actually enjoy the stop at Bagram Air Base. It was with the Bagram PRT that I had my first trip outside of the wire (Chapter 3), my amazing day out with Governor Murad (Chapter 11), and my first meal at a road-side Afghan restaurant (Chapter 12).

I think about the PRT Commander, COL George McDonald, his professionalism and dedication, and our conversations and friendship. Then there were those few days I spent hanging out at the base, working on my laptop at the PRT and taking breaks for walks around the base.

One evening while staying at the base, I went to see a comedy show, a USO sponsored show featuring two comedians from Comedy Central, who in spite of the pathetic turnout (about 15 people in a room that can seat 200) went on with their show and jokes about masturbation, military johns, the mess hall, dating woos and the good life.

COL McDonald and his soldiers have completed their 1-year tour in Afghanistan, and new soldiers now man the PRT. George tried hard to make a difference here and I'm sure he succeeded. I know that Governor Murad and the people in Kapisa Province miss



him. But time does goes by; one year isn't very long considering the momentous problems of Afghanistan.

### **Monday, June 19, 2006**

I'm standing outside the terminal at the Herat Airport, wondering where my ride is. Once again, I call Dr. Claudio Belli, my host at the Herat PRT, but there is no answer. I regret not catching a ride with the two US soldiers who flew in on the same PRT Air flight, but they're long gone. I smile and wonder, "*What would I do if no one came to get me?*" I can image the reaction of the Embassy's security officer if I caught a taxi for the drive into town.

But my friend Waleed who runs the EIRP (Emergency Irrigation Rehabilitation Program) gave me the phone number of his office director here in Herat. So I call Ismail and he quickly sends a driver and an UN vehicle.

The EIRP office is at the Herat Province Department of Agriculture. I arrive just in time for lunch which turns out to be a vegetarian Afghan meal: rice pilaf (with raisins, nuts) salad, a yogurt-type drink, and the excellent Afghan flat bread.

After lunch, I finally get a hold of Claudio on his cell. He tells me he'll be back at the PRT in a couple of hours. So Ismail calls in one of the engineers who takes me out to look at two EIRP projects near the city and a quick tourist drive through the city. The irrigation projects aren't very interesting, but the city is.

Herat has existed here for at least 2500 years and there are many monuments to the past, a spectacular 800 year old bridge still in use, minarets, the old city built centuries ago, and the fort perched on a mesa built by Alexander the Great. It was in the 7<sup>th</sup> century though that Herat had its heyday as an economic and intellectual power.

Today, Herat is probably the most prosperous city in Afghanistan, located near the border with Iran. Power lines from Iran electrify the city. Roads are paved, and some wealth can be seen. But for me, the little bit of wealth magnifies the deep poverty of the vast majority of the population.

As we drive by the Iranian Embassy, there are long lines of Afghan men waiting patiently, hoping to get a work visa. The engineer tells me that the Afghans don't like Iran or want to go there, but there are no jobs here. Later Afghans who work at the PRT tell me that, during the first two years after the fall of the Taliban, there was great optimism here, much economic activity, and jobs as the city was reconstructed. But the economic surge has ended, things are getting worst here, people are growing impatient.

The security situation has gotten worst here as well. A car bomb went off in front of the PRT a couple of months ago, the UN no longer lets its staff go out into the city, and all UN travel outside of Herat must be with force protection.

## The Italians

This PRT is manned by the Italians. It doesn't look like a military base as it encompasses an entire neighborhood. Within the PRT walls are rows of apartments, houses and a couple of office buildings.



Claudio lets me have the spare bedroom room in his flat. The flat is on the third floor of a four story apartment and has a regular bathroom with a shower (indoor plumbing!) and Italian satellite TV.



The PRT has a PX and a large bar serving mixed drinks, beer and wine. Not only is there a bar, but the PX sells wine and beer by the case. Meals are interesting as well: wine on the table and three kinds of pasta for lunch and dinner every day.

At first I think that the Italian soldiers are unfriendly. But it turns out that most soldiers speak no English, and many officers only can say a few words. I find that if you make an effort to be friendly or to make conversation, you're suddenly their buddy; it just takes breaking the ice. The soldiers readily share their bottles of wine with me at meal times. I soon feel at home.

### The Missions Out

I have two days of RAMP projects to inspect. The PRT proves me force protection. The Italians take a low profile approach. Seven soldiers take me out in two Toyota Land Cruisers, not military vehicles. The Italians seem relaxed, but I notice that they do their job, scope out each site and post soldiers at key observation spots.





Claudio accompanies me on the first day. He's very impressed by the projects and seems little envious that the Italian aid program, by contrast is very modest. Claudio is on contract with the Italian Corporation, a branch of the Italian embassy that does development work. He's setting up four rural water supply utilities: small village systems equipped with a well, diesel pumps, pipeline networks, and billing and collection systems.

Claudio has concluded that in order for these systems to generate enough money to cover expenses, they each need 1000 connections or customers. Right now they have only about 400 in each system, but are expanding. But I'm impressed by his program. The Italians are not just constructing something and then leaving. They're setting up systems that have a chance at sustainability after they're gone.



On the second day, our first stop is a large aqueduct project, and surprisingly there are four security guards there hired by RAMP. They stand guard, dressed in camouflage uniforms and carrying rifles. They then follow us to the second project site. The mission leader asks me if I know what's going on.

It turns out that there is a dispute between the upstream and downstream villages on this canal over water allocations. There has been some violence in the past, and the contractor and his crews have been threatened. This is a serious oversight by the RAMP project managers - not letting us know that there are specific security concerns at these two project sites and that another vehicle will join our convoy.

I put my flak jacket when we get to the second site, but everything is calm and there are no incidents. Here, RAMP is replacing an 800 year old aqueduct!



We have time to linger at the site. The contractor has laid out a blanket, cushions, soft drinks and fruit under a tree where we sit and discuss details of the work. The soldiers not on stake-out also partake of the refreshments, but pass on the cushions, and stand around in the shade enjoying the spot.



Later, in the mess hall, I pass the table where the mission leader sits with his buddies eating dinner. He calls out to me and insists that I set with them and share their wine. His friends don't speak English, but I enjoy the comradeship and the wine.









### Wednesday, June 20, 2006

Claudio walks with me to the staging area where the soldiers wait to take me to the airport to catch my flight back to Kabul. I give him a ball point pen with the Texas A&M logo, “*a small gift in appreciation for your help and hospitality.*” He thanks me and seems to really appreciate the gift, but he dismisses my thanks, “*nothing I wouldn’t do for any colleague,*” he says with a smile.

This time, the Italians are taking me in two military transport vehicles. Large, high profile, cool looking vehicles that end up being surprisingly unpleasant to ride in. The soldiers are friendly and help me with my bags, but speak no English. The drive to the airport is uneventful and they pull up almost to the same spot where the UN vehicle picked me up 3 days ago.

The mission leader exits the vehicle and helps me out while the other soldiers hand down my bags. He shakes my hand and says something in Italian which I don’t understand. I respond, “*Thanks and be careful out there, stay safe*”, not sure if he and the other soldiers understand me. But it’s not our words which are important.

I take the UN flight back to Kabul, as the PRT Air flight was cancelled due to mechanical problems.





We fly up the Harirud River which flows out of the Hindu Kush Mountains to the East and brings water and life to the people of Herat Province. Out the window are spectacular vistas of the irrigated land and the desert beyond.

**Friday, June 14, 2006**

It's 10:30AM and ABC Evening News just ended. I don't seem to be making much progress on my technical report, and am growing weary of the continuing bad news on

Time for a break, I think. I'll try finishing the report later perhaps....