

Kabul Journal
by
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Chapter V – The Gardez PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team)

January 22, 2006

I guess I made the mistake. I stood in front of the New Embassy Building in the early morning cold (22 degrees) waiting for the EPD (Embassy Protection Detail) to pick me up. *The EPD is late? No way!!* Turns out that they were on the Café-side of the compound wondering where I was. But a couple of quick cell phone calls, and they were cheerfully on their way out through the gate, across the street and into the Embassy-side compound.

The vehicle entrance station is across from the Embassy building where I stand. Vehicles must pass into a garage-like inspection bay, a structure with thick concrete walls and huge, tractable steel grates on each end, creating a secure area for guards to check for bombs and IED (improvised explosive devices) underneath the vehicles.

I watch as three armored Land Cruisers emerge from the vehicle entrance station. In both the first and third vehicles are 4 security guards wearing desert camouflage and flak jackets, and holding rifles.

The second vehicle pulls up to where I'm standing. There's only two security guards in this vehicle; they open the tailgate and the bullet-proof inner door and help throw my pack and sleeping bag into the back. They're polite and keep calling me *sir*. I get into the back seat with instructions: *"In case of trouble, sir stay in the vehicle and do not open the door yourself, but wait for one of the security guards."*

I buckle up and then off we go, three vehicles and ten (10) security guards to drive me to Gardez. The EPD security services are provided by Dynacor; American soldiers of fortune who are very professional and take their job of protecting Embassy personnel seriously.





Traffic in Kabul isn't too bad this morning. We quickly reach the east side of the Kabul River, passing the lumber yards, autopart stores and other shops on the edge of town.



We leave the city heading southeast, through spectacular mountain valleys blanketed by snow. This is Logar Province, once known as the breadbasket of Afghanistan. But that was before the wars. Numerous battles against the Soviet occupation took place here. I suppose that the snow masks the damage that has been done to the irrigation and agricultural infrastructure, and the erosion of the topsoil and nutrients.

We quickly transverse the Province and come to a mountain range, then slowly climb over the Camel Hump Pass and down into Gardez.



The paved road deteriorates as we climb up the mountain. Large transport trucks and the slippery surface slow our progress. Afghans stand in the road with shovels, filling up pot holes and hoping passing cars will throw them some coins for all their trouble.





Dotted around the landscape are the Afghan compounds. In rural areas Afghans construct compounds surrounded by 15 foot walls, some higher. Many look like forts, sporting guard-like towers on the corners. The dark brown mud walls stand out in shape contrast to the crystal white snow. These are private residences, most likely a product of decades of war, during which Afghan extended families had to fend for themselves and provide their own security. Parts of the country are still dangerous with warlords and petty thefts; I'm sure that the fortified compounds are a necessity, as they are expertly maintained.



Gardez sprawls out on either side of the main road as we come down the mountain and into town. A town of a few hundred thousand situated in a broad mountain valley at an elevation of 7000 ft, everything blanketed in pure white snow. The entire trip from Kabul to Gardez took us about 3 hours.

Gardez is the capital of Paktya Province and is on an ancient invasion route that runs northeast from Pakistan to Kabul. The city is also on a major north-south road that links all the Provinces along the Pakistan border. Gardez was the site of many battles during the Soviet Occupation and Taliban war.





Overlooking the center of town is a large fort built during British colonial days. It was used as a base of operations and control by the Soviets and then the Taliban. Now the fort is manned by a small detachment of Afghan military.



On the west-side of town next to the airport is a graveyard of Soviet military vehicles and weapons abandoned as they fled the region. The airport's runway hasn't been cleared, preventing flights to Gardez, including PRT Air which I would have normally used to travel here.



The Gardez PRT is a few miles outside of town. The focus is a former residential compound that looks like fort out of Beau Gess, with tall castle-like guard towers at each corner. The fort is actually the headquarters of the PRT. A small military base surrounds the fort. Soldiers are positioned in each of the four towers. The walls around the base are blast-proof composites about 10 feet tall.



Sunday is a day off for the soldiers of the PRT, so things seem very quiet and empty. Scott, PRT Civil Affairs Officer greets me, and shows me to the mess hall where we eat a late lunch. A big screen TV is turned to the AFN (Arm Forces Network) Sports Channel and the UT basketball game. My EPD also shows up in the mess hall, quickly eating lunch before heading back to Kabul.

Snow is everywhere, and ice covers the foot trails throughout the fort, treacherous footing for sure. Col McGill, a medical doctor and member of the Texas National Guard was the person who first contacted me about coming to visit; he slipped on the ice last week and broke his leg in four places. *“Now he sets back at home in Austin drinking beer,”* Scott says. I wonder if the pain was worth the early trip home?



After lunch, Scott shows me around. There's the gym, the PRT offices and, well the mess hall. We walk through the barracks compound of the 82nd Airborne who are based here and spend their time in counter-insurgency.

Not much else to see, so Scott then pulls out a laptop and goes through the PowerPoint presentation on the Gardez PRT. This PRT, because of its relatively close proximity to Kabul gets a lot of visitors: congressmen, senators, and generals who fly in for the day in order to see a PRT first hand. I'm sure that the PowerPoint comes in real handy. Nice slides that show the military, civilian, NGO and Provisional governments, all working in partnership and harmony.

The PRT seeks to bring legitimacy to the local government by having the Governor set the priorities on projects that are funded, or at least sign-off on them. The PRT currently has about \$2 million worth of projects underway in two Provinces: Paktya and Logar. Projects that include government buildings, schools, clinics, training programs, and even a little irrigation.

The PRT has two civilians, Jill with the State Department who acts as a liaison with the local government, and Bill with USAID who manages \$20 million worth of projects. Yes, it's USAID that has the money! *"But USAID has very poor QAQC"* Scott says, *"The American public would be appalled at some of the projects and the amazing waste of money, buildings that begin falling down just a year after construction. The farther the projects are from Gardez, the less they are inspected and the worst the quality."*

One slide shows the security threat, large areas of the two Provinces covered in red, with the central area (and Gardez) in green. Scott says things are getting better here; there hasn't been an incident in the last few months. He believes security is better and all but one of the red-coded areas are safe to work in.

Tomorrow, we'll go out on a mission, but not much else to do for the rest of the afternoon but hang out. The soldiers surf the web, do laundry, clean their rooms or barracks, watch DVD's and generally pass the time as well as they can. I check email, and then take a walk around the compound, admiring the dramatic scenery – what a location for the PRT, snow covered mountains close by on two sides, then the broad plain sloping down to Gardez city and white mountains all around as a back drop.

Scott is in the reserves, a high school history teacher from Arizona. I ask if the kids back in his high school think he is cool, serving in Afghanistan. He doesn't know. He was only back from his 1-year tour in Iraq for 2 months before being recalled and sent to Afghanistan.

He calls me *Dr. Fipps* and sometimes just *"Doc"*. He keeps telling me how glad they are that I'm here. Like most of Afghanistan, people here are farmers; etching out a living after the snow melts. And they want and need agricultural projects, but there is no agricultural advisor here, just Scott, a high school teacher and other PRT soldiers. So, they don't know which Ag projects they should fund, or what construction standards should be used for approving payment to the contractor. They don't know if they should fund the requested projects or just buy seeds for the farmers.

“You’re lucky,” Scott tells me, “Sunday’s are steak and seafood night!” And seafood it is, fresh lobster and shrimp! And there’s ice cream, pies and assorted snack foods and soft drinks. After dinner, I go back to my room to write. The NFL playoff games are being broadcasted live tonight on AFN, beginning at midnight local time. Scott expects a party in the mess hall for the Pittsburg game and plans on going if he can stay up. I am content to wait and just watch the rebroadcast tomorrow evening.

I’m given the room of a soldier who is on home leave. My own room! Soldiers get one home leave of 15 days during their 1-year tour. The ceiling of the room has been insulated with green and red plaid blankets. Thus, the room is warm, heat doesn’t radiate out like my hooch at Bagram (see Chapter 3). There’s, of course the pin up wall calendar of Hooters women in swim suits, and guns, ammo, CDs, DVD’s, junk food and even a few books scattered around.

The Mission – January 23



We assemble at 8:15 am by the main gate. Three humvees and 10 soldiers to take me out for the day. One humvee is manned by Texas National Guard out of Weslaco. It felt oddly familiar and comforting to hear Spanish spoken again. We talk about places and people we know in the Valley.

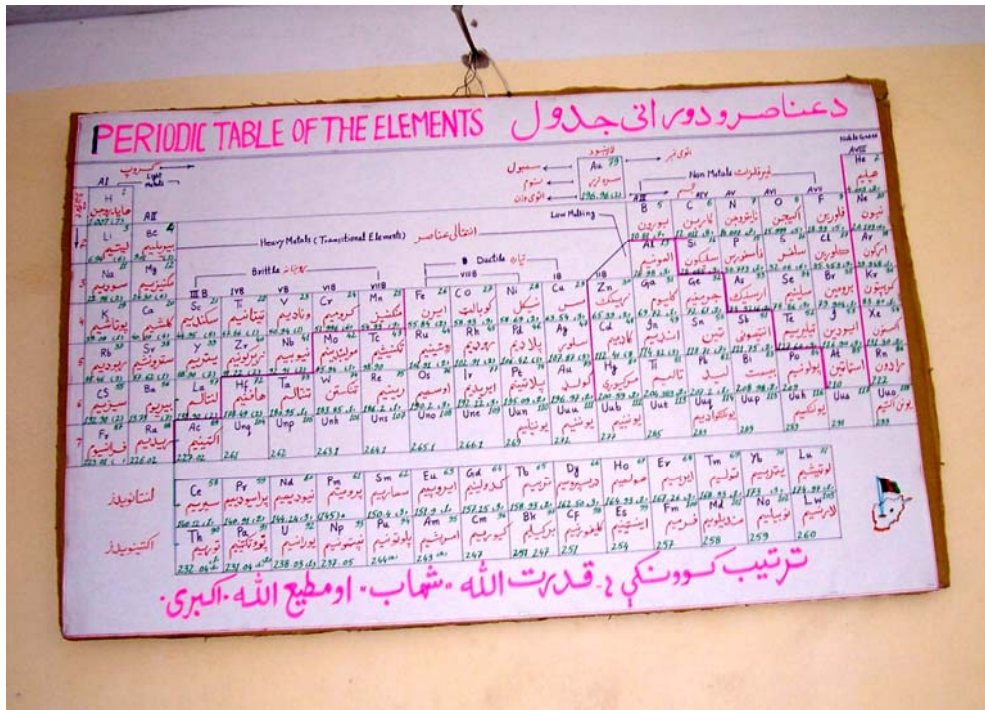


The University



The first stop is a new university, just established last year. This is the second year, 176 students are now sophomores, and 176 are new freshmen, and so the student body will expand each year until the first gradating class in two years.

Classes are suspended until March because of the cold and lack of heat. Three professors and some assistants teach all the classes in the fields of General Education and Agriculture. Facilities and budgets are very tight, but the professors are optimistic and dedicated. They believe strongly in their vision for the university and future development of an agricultural research farm and extension service.



Now however, they must make do, including making their own teaching aids like the Periodic Chart of Elements that hangs in a classroom. They talk about the difficulty of recruiting faculty. Yes, there are qualified people in the area, but pay is so low that people would rather sell rugs, haul merchandise, or do other things for money.

In Afghanistan, education is free and so is room and board, further eroding the already dinky budget provided by the National Government. The PRT is considering providing some support for the struggling university. Their requests are modest: teaching aids, microscopes and other lab equipment, and beds and chairs for the dorm. Then, they discuss their need for vehicles, both personal and a van or bus for field trips. Scott and I take notes; later Scott will ask my opinion on what the PRT should provide.

Ministries of Irrigation and Agriculture

Next is the meeting with the deputy directors of Irrigation and Agriculture. Even at the provincial level, they're called ministries. A long list of needs, but their requests seem modest: shovels and wheel barrels to help dredging of canals, a survey instrument to help in construction of water works, a back-hoe and dump truck for larger dredging jobs, three (3) weirs for measuring and allocating water in the canal systems, and of course vehicles.



Except for the vehicles, these requests are vital and would have a large impact on a lot of people. Scott, a high school history teacher hasn't a clue and looks to me to decide which items to fund and at what levels. We reallocated \$300,000 from a proposed snow fence project to meeting the more direct and pressing needs for simple tools, water storage and flood protection

The Governor



The last stop is to meet the Governor. We set in the reception hall at his residence drinking tea. I introduce myself as the Senior Advisor for Water and a Professor on leave from Texas A&M. He says that I am “*close to his heart*,” as he was once a college professor, teaching sociology at the University of Kabul. But that was 25 years ago, before all the wars.

He fled Afghanistan with his family and eventually settled in Australia. He’s back now, doing what he can to help his struggling homeland. His family waits for him in Australia.



We go back to the Governor’s the next day for lunch before heading back to Kabul. Three consultants have come up for the day. They are studying governance issues. I lose interest in the conversation and think about what will happen here when the snow melts in the Spring. Will there be floods like last year, or severe drought and water shortages like the previous 4 years? I sit next to the PRT Commander (seen left) talking about development issues. I enjoy the meal, the traditional Afghan food is a real treat!

Follow-up

The Gardez PRT wants me to come back, so we plan a longer visit for March when the weather is better and I can get out to look at projects. At dinner on my second night there, the PRT commander introduces me to the Commander of the 82nd Airborne. We make small talk. I tell him about being born at Ft. Bragg, NC, their home base. He tells me that the 82nd also runs several PRTs. One in an adjoining province, and all but one are in the volatile Pakistan border region. He invites me back as well, desperate for my technical expertise and advice. Agriculture and Water are clearly the key to stability in these provinces, subject areas in which the military here has no expertise.

I welcome the 82nd Airborne's invitation. Planes, helicopters and humvees, many options for getting out and about, and being able to see first hand what the local conditions are like and the real needs. Plus, it's fun to hang out with the young soldiers and the career military. They all seem so mission-focused and practical minded, much different from the bureaucratic State Department and USAID missions in Afghanistan

The follow-up emails verify all that was said and the plans for future trips in March. The 82nd also wants me to help them in Bamyan on micro-hydro assessments. Bamyan! That's where the giant Buda stood for a thousand years before the Taliban destroyed it in 2000. There's also ancient irrigation canals and mud brick dams that have stood for centuries in a magical and mystical valley. Bamyan, a place I thought I would not be able to see now waits for me.

But I'm deeply concerned. I'm just one person, who will be here only for a short time. Where is the technical support for the PRT's? Like so much I've seen here, nice ideas poorly executed, partial solutions – it's like the US is not really serious about succeeding here in Afghanistan



