

Kabul Journal
by
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Chapter 7 – Mission to Zia’s

February 2, 2006

Once again, I stand in front of the new Embassy Office building in the early morning chill. The EPD (Embassy Protective Detail) is 10 minutes late! When they arrive, there are only two vehicles both of which are full of security guards. One guard who goes by his call sign, *Dice* gets out of the first vehicle and asks me “*Where is your limo?*”

After a phone call, *Dice* suggests I go have a cup of coffee while we wait for the vehicle to be brought over. The motorpool either didn’t get the vehicle request form or there wasn’t time to act on it due to the short notice of my trip.

This is my third attempt to make it down to the Ghazni PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team). The first trip was cancelled the day before I was to leave because of ice and fog. My trip scheduled for tomorrow was approved two weeks ago and an EPD assigned. But two days ago, the RSO (Regional Security Office) sent out the following email:

Due to a VIP visit, all Embassy Protective Detail (EPD) support of “Out of Kabul” trips will be suspended from February 3, 2006 until February 13, 2006. EPD support for in town moves will still continue.

The GSO motorpool will have reduced resources available to the Embassy community for this period 2/4-12. Motorpool will make every attempt to meet customer requests during this period, but there is a significant likelihood that this will not always be possible.

Any questions regarding this notice should be directed to D/RSO....

This is an on-going problem here. Military and State Department VIP’s and congressional delegations frequently fly in on short notice and everything comes to a stand still. It happens so frequently that I’m surprised the Embassy hasn’t instituted measures to deal with it.

When I talk to Ed about it, he comments jokingly that I’m spoiled. “*No,*” I respond, “*I’m just use to working for an organization that believes in getting the job done.*” But I’m sure if I complain to the Ambassador, he would look at me strangely, and say “*of course your trip was cancelled.*” This is a part of the State Department culture, where the work that needs to be done is second to formality and almost a class system where rank or importance dictate.



1 Entrance gate for the Province of Ghazni

But the RSO did approve my request for a day-trip to Ghazni for today, the last day EPD service is available. With four hours driving time (round trip) and the requirement to be back before dusk, I will have only about six hours there instead of three days originally planned. But something is better than nothing, particularly here in Afghanistan.

The "limo" shows up 30 minutes later; actually it's one of the armored land cruisers. I think that that Dice just enjoys saying "Your Limo, Sir!" Dice is my driver today.

Ghazni PRT

We have an uneventful trip and arrive at the Ghazni PRT at 10 am, an hour late due to the mix up on my limo. As we drive into the headquarters area, a sign catches my attention, "Remember the Alamo." National Guard and Reservists from San Antonio and McAllen man this base.

Four humvees are idling in front of the PRT headquarters building waiting for me to show up. Soldiers in full battle gear hang out the doors, lean against the armored vehicles, or sit on the steps waiting patiently (I hope).

After a quick pit stop, we're off on our "mission." Each time the PRT goes outside the wire (see Chapter 3), it's referred to as a mission. This is my fourth mission in Afghanistan, the Mission to Zia's.



The first stop is the firing range. Here, the soldiers must check their weapons by test firing them each day before going out. I sit in the humvee and listen to the muffled sounds of the rifles and handguns. Then the gunners that set on top of the humvees shoot off the big guns, impressive firepower which cause my ears to ring, even though the noise is muffled by the armored plated vehicles and my fingers stuck in my ears.

Ghazni

Reminiscence of Gardez, the skyline is dominated by a mesa. The mesa masks most of the town from the main road. The barren landscape between the mesa and the road and the industrial zone along the highway give the impression of a very unattractive city. On top of the mesa is a military base and the ruins of ancient forts. Ghazni was once the regional capital of the Persian Empire back a thousand years ago. Various rulers and armies have occupied the area and built their command centers on the mesa for millennium.



Our convoy turns off the main road, and we drive through the center of town. Ghazni turns out to be unexpectedly pleasant and attractive, full of people and activity with a nice city center. It must be a regional shopping center judging from all the stores and vendor stands that we pass. Ghazni has a population of a couple hundred thousand.





From the city center, we head south and out of town, following the river upstream into the mountains. There're spectacular views of snow covered mountains and stark lowlands that remind me of the River Road drive in the Big Bend area of Texas. Afghan villages and compounds are situated on dramatic ledges and overlooks.



The trip to Zia's takes just over an hour. As we climb up the valley and about 2000 feet, the snow cover thickens.

Zia's

Zia lives in a large compound overlooking the village in which he was born. Equipment and vehicles from his various enterprises are scattered around. Zia left Afghanistan when he was young to seek his fortune, first living in California for 4 years, then immigrating to New Zealand where he made his living importing rugs and other Middle Eastern artifacts.



Zia returned to Afghanistan eight years ago to be with his extended family and to try to help his village. He's married and has five kids, ranging from 2 to 14 years old. He's a farmer, runs a local contracting company and still exports rugs to New Zealand, where he travels to several times a year. Unlike many Afghans, he insists that his girls go to school; the closest school district is in Ghazni, a hour's commute each way.



2 Major Fry and Zia

Zia takes the commander of our mission, Major Maureen Fry and our translator up to his house to visit his wife and kids. I hang out with the troops.



The soldiers begin snow ball fights, first with each other and then with the kids which quickly appear and gather around the troops and the humvees.



I stole towards the village to look at the water well and pump. At first the soldiers don't see me leave, but two soldiers quickly appear by my side to provide escort and protection. We stand around looking at the dry well and talking to the villagers.



One soldier tells me that they no longer put in wells. *"We use to build a lot of schools, clinics and wells,"* he says, *"but there are no doctors for the clinics, no teachers for the schools, and the wells all seem to go dry within a year."*

Zia returns, and we inspect his orchard of young apricot and almond trees. Zia has constructed basins around each tree which he floods with water. Water is delivered to each basin through long dirt ditches. Water losses are high in the sandy soil and steep slopes.

Zia is hopeful that the micro-spray system I suggest will reduce losses so that more water will be supplied to the trees resulting in improved yields. The PRT is cost-sharing the irrigation system with Zia. I agree to help with the design and to locate suppliers for the equipment. There are no irrigation dealers in Afghanistan, with the closest suppliers in Pakistan, Iran or Dubai.



The commander returns from the house and joins us in the orchard. She talks about how important this project is, to introduce improved irrigation to the region. I think that this is just a small, 10-acre orchard. While small orchards are common in this region, the vast majority of the land is planted in field crops: potatoes, wheat, corn, crops for which drip irrigation isn't practical or affordable.

Where are the projects to improve irrigation of these crops, I wonder? Who will provide the technical support to make this project a success? There are no extension agents and no one trained in agriculture at the PRT.

I think about USDA and their advisor, Jeff who arranged the funding for this project. Jeff was here for just 6 months. He did request an extension, but USDA did not approve it. New USDA advisors are being recruited, but it will be months before they arrive. By that time, a new contingency of soldiers will be manning the PRT. What a system, the lapse in advisors means no continuity, and much of the progress that this PRT and Jeff accomplished will be lost.

Lunch



Major Fry tells me that Zia was distressed when he found out I was to be here today instead of Saturday. No time to prepare a proper meal, no time to find the fruit and sweets that are required! Zia had wanted to prepare a feast with barbecue lamb. But instead all he had time to pull together is a traditional Afghan meal. And what a meal it is!

We eat in the village meeting hall. And the food is impressive. Dishes I haven't seen before: a turnip that tastes like a tart potato, a sweet corn dish that can serve as an entrée or a desert, wild Afghan greens, traditional cheese sauce, lamb prepared two different ways, and of course the delicious flat bread. What a treat, much better than the fancy barbecue that Zia had planned for Saturday



After lunch we head down river and two more stops. We're running late, no way we will be back by 3 pm, the time Dice designated for our departure to Kabul.

Watch out for Mulberry Trees

It was the mulberry tree's fault. A mulberry tree was allowed to grow at the base of the dam, the well-built and modern dam constructed by the Germans 25 years ago. No one knows if the tree was planted or not, but it was allowed to grow. During the drought of recent years, the groundwater levels fell, and the mulberry tree sent out deeper roots, further undermining the base of the dam. When the flood came last May, the dam failed right at the spot where the mulberry tree stood.



Dams have existed at this location for centuries. Still standing are the ruins of the ancient dam that the Persians built here a thousand years ago, and a section of the mud brick dam still stands! Extraordinary!

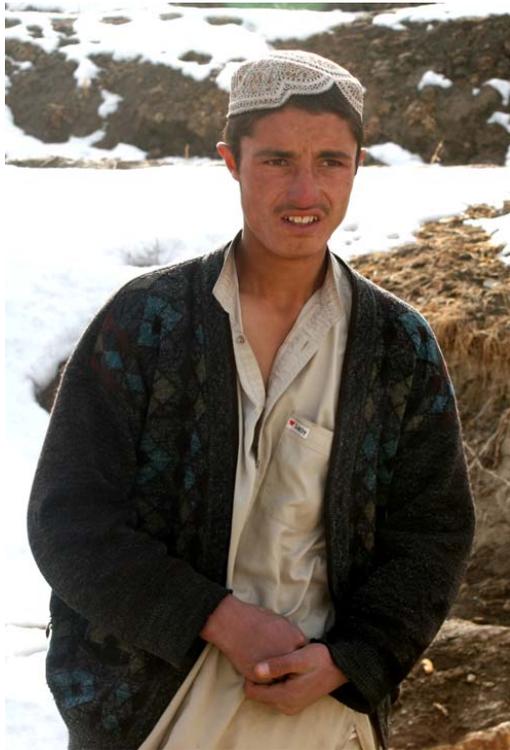


The FAO (United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization) is repairing the dam using funding from the World Bank. This is one of Walleed's projects (see Chapter 2). The dam site is impressive, a natural location for a dam, creating a huge reservoir for irrigation and village water supply.

A few miles downstream, we come to the washed out bridge. The concrete bridge was moved a 100 yards down river when the dam broke because of the mulberry tree during the flood last May. Now a village is cut off and the bus cannot pick up the children for school. The PRT is considering funding a replacement bridge which will cost \$150,000. We inspect the bridge site and take photos.



Once again, kids appear from nowhere, rapidly forming a comradeship with the soldiers. Then another surprise, an Afghan come trotting up, the first Afghan dog I've seen here. For centuries, Afghans would not allow these dogs to be exported.







Late

We pull into the PRT at 4 pm, 30 minutes after the “absolute latest” departure time set by my EPD. We stop at the firing range once again, so that the soldiers can discharge their firearms.

My cell phone rings. It’s the Embassy Security Officer, Scott; the man himself, in charge of all security for the Embassy and all the people who work and live there. Scott sounds worried and tells me that the EPD is waiting, and we need to head back to Kabul right away.

When we get back to the PRT headquarters, Dice and the other guards don’t seem concerned even though they’re standing around wearing their flak jackets and guns. Dice tells me that they like taking people like me out, and don’t even mind the extra delay, because I’m trying to help the Afghan people and make a difference, not like the endless succession of VIPs who come and go with no noticeable impact.

Wild Ride through Kabul

We make good time going back. At sunset we transverse the final mountain pass leading down into the Kabul basin. When we reach the edge of Kabul, it’s dark: dark from the lack of lights and dark from the haze, dust and smoke.

Dice comments that he hates this part of town, called the “*market area*.” It’s always hectic and full of cars and people. Stores and stalls crowd both sides of the road, and people are everywhere, selling food and merchandize out of carts and wagons that spill out into the traffic. Busses and taxis stop anywhere and everywhere, including in the middle of the road, creating an obstacle course that slows my convoy.

The thick, dark smoke from the wood fires and burning tires (for heat) make it difficult to see. The area is crowded with pedestrians who seem unconcerned as they dart through traffic seeking their bargains of merchandise, meat and produce.

Most sidewalk vendors use kerosene lamps; there's only a few solitary light bulbs here and there. The light from the occasional street lamp is devoured by the haze. A few neon lights meekly shine through the haze casting a red-light district type glow. The smoke and darkness adds a sinister feel to the area.

We come to a intersection of five roads converging at a large traffic circle; and traffic comes to a standstill. The street becomes a parking lot of cars, tucks and buses jammed together as the roadway constricts around the circle. Dice is visibly nervous. After a couple of minutes he radios back to the driver of the rear car "*Turn on the siren and let it run all the way back.*" At the same time, the driver of the lead car begins flashing his lights and honking the horn.

The traffic reluctantly clears a torturous path for us, and we slowly move around the traffic circle and finally out of the dreaded market area. A few miles down the road, the smoke and haze seem thicker as we come to a car wreck blocking traffic in both directions. But the siren, horns and Embassy plates do the trick, and the police quickly begin blowing their whistles and directing the traffic to clear a path to let us through. The rest of the drive is uneventful.

Back at the Embassy

The air is still thick, almost like fog, when we arrive back at the Embassy. We pass through the barricades and checkpoints that mark the beginning of the US Embassy and into the street by runs between the two sides of the embassy.

It all seems so eerie, as the street is strangely devoid of cars and people usually there at this time of the evening. I slowly pull my self out of the back seat, already sore from wearing the flak jacket all day My legs ach from hiking up and down the hills at Zia's, and at the dam and bridge sites. I thank the EPD, something it seems that they're surprised to hear.

I just make it to the Café-side cafeteria before they stop serving at 7:30 pm. I sit there looking at my food; with the day's events running through my mind and distracting me from eating.

I don't know what to think, about the trip, the mission to Zia's, the good intentions of the PRT and their unrealistic expectations, the EPD and their professionalism and paranoia, and the wild ride coming back into Kabul.

No, I don't know what to think, so I have a couple of beers instead.