

**Kabul Journal**  
by  
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**Chapter 10 – Helmand**

**Tuesday, March 7, 2006**

For Americans, the Helmand Valley is one of the better known regions in Afghanistan either because of poppies, drug trade and insurgency, or because it was the location of one of the most ambitious irrigation development efforts in US history. Cold War politics and President Truman's vision of halting the spread of communism through modern technology led the US here in an attempt to reproduce the TVA in Afghanistan.

Two dams, including the famous Kajaki Dam and a large network of irrigation canals were constructed beginning in the late 1940's. US involvement continued into the 1970's, but the original vision was never fully realized. The project was controversial then and continues to be controversial to this day. Was the Helmand development a success or failure? The answer depends on who you talk to and what criteria you use.

This is my first trip to the Helmand Valley. But I'm not here to evaluate the US's experiment of transplanting a 20<sup>th</sup> century model into a nation essentially still in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but to visit the Lashkar Gah PRT and help engineer a drainage project.



My mission here will be limited to seeing just a small portion of the Helmand irrigation system located near Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province. At the moment, the poppy eradication program is going full steam. Angry farmers and local warlords are

taking up guns. The battle is underway for poppy production. Profits from opium production are widely believed to fund the Taliban. With 3/4<sup>ths</sup> of the total poppy production in this province, Helmand may become the front line of the continuing war.

## **Arrival**

Besides being 400 miles from Kabul, the road to Lashkar Gah passes through Kandahar and is considered unsecured, as is the entire border region with Pakistan. The US Embassy does not permit overland travel. Instead I take PRT Air, a flight service funded by USAID to PRT's on a regular but unpredictable schedule.

I have a morning flight from Kabul to Lashkar Gah. The propeller plane is the larger of the two planes flown by PRT Air and is half full with US Army Corps of Engineers personnel off to Kandahar, our first stop, a 1 ½ hour flight from Kabul. We quickly drop off the passengers and head to Lashkar Gah, just 30 minutes flying time away.



The plane does not descend normally as we approach Lashkar Gah. We stay at high altitude until we're directly over the town, then the plane banks sharply to the left and begins a tight spiral down to the airport. Like a cork screw we descend to the landing strip. No slow, constant decent and cruising at low altitudes like planes normally take when landing.



The view out the window is dramatic but difficult to photograph due to the 60 degree angle of the plane as we spiral down. Out the window is dessert as far as the eye can see, and then the green strip along the Helmand River, the width varying depending on the configuration of the irrigation canals.

Three armored humvees from the PRT wait for the plane to land as well as two armored vehicles from Chemonics, a USAID contractor working on the *Alternative Livelihood* project, a make-work program to entice farmers from growing poppies. People are paid \$3 a day to dig out drainage ditches and for other “conservation corps” type projects in an attempt to provide an alternative income to poppies.

Two other passengers get off the plane with me, Jeff the new USAID field agent here and Paul, an engineer from the US Army Corps of Engineers here to inspect buildings being constructed by USAID. Paul and I ride in one humvee, Jeff in another, while the third humvee provides escort as we drive through the provincial capitol. The PRT is located on the edge of the far end of town.

We arrive at the PRT just a few minutes before they stop serving lunch. The food is strange, some sort of fried ham and cheese sandwich, served with pink and orange drinks. Later I find out that the British are now in charge of the mess hall. This has been an American PRT, but that will change on April 20. The Brits are taking over and arrived three weeks ago to begin the transition.

My host for this trip is Tom, the USDA Advisor. Tom is a large, jolly country boy from Nevada where he works for the US Crop Service. He tells bad jokes and frequently puzzles the Afghans with his references. Our only appointment for the afternoon is with the Governor.

### **The Governor**

We take an armored SUV into town without escort. Two Afghan soldiers ride in the vehicle as our security. The Governor's heavily fortified residence and office is next to the Helmand River. A few angry farmers linger in front of the entrance gate watched closely by local police and armed guards. I'm told that earlier there was a crowd.



We are shown into a very large and formal meeting hall with 20 foot ceilings. The wall facing the Helmand River is all windows covered today with ceiling to floor drapes; couches and coffee tables line three walls. There are strange murals on the walls. Two commemorate the war against Russian occupation with almost childlike images of Russian tanks and planes in scenic mountain river valley landscapes.

Governor Mohammed Daoud is busy today with angry land owners and meetings with government officials from Kabul. The poppy eradication is underway, being conducted by combined US, British and Afghan forces and drug eradication units. The President of Afghanistan, Karzai refuses to allow airborne spraying, so they physically destroy the poppies by dragging chains over the field with 6-wheelers. The British press questions whether Karzai is serious about poppy eradication since he doesn't allow airborne spraying, the most effective method for destroying the crop.

Tom says that when the farmers complain about their destroyed crop, the Governor tells them "*I understand but you knew that this was going to happen.*" On March 2, the Governor announced that in two months there would be no more poppies growing in Helmand Province.

Governor Daoud has been in office only a few months. Word is that the British demanded that President Karzai replace the previous governor, a warlord with ties to the drug trade. According to British press, his only interest was in destroying the poppies of his opponents.

After about 30 minutes, we are directed to the Governor's private reception room in the residential part of the compound, a medium sized room, well furnished with modern chairs and couches, and exquisite Afghan carpets on the floor. I look down at my dusty boots as we walk into the room.

The Governor has a lot to say. First, he apologizes for our wait, but he was called to the airport for a meeting with high government officials who flew in from Kabul.

He's concerned about the shortage of engineers in Afghanistan and lack of educational opportunities and places to send young people for training.

He is not impressed by the type of projects being funded by the US and other donors. "*These \$300,000 short-term projects aren't what we need,*" he says, "*We need projects that will lay the foundation for the future.*"

He believes that the cause of the insurgency is the millions of displaced Afghans living in Pakistan refugee camps. They sit around with nothing to do, no hope for the future. If new agricultural land is opened for them, they would return to Afghanistan, and the insurgency problem would be solved. New agricultural land requires the expansion of irrigation. He would like assistance in developing detailed engineering plans for irrigation expansion. If he had these plans and cost estimates, he is confident he can find the funding.

He asks me for a favor. *“Will you use your contacts at the Ministry of Energy and Water, to find the plans for the unfinished Kajaki canal?”* This canal was originally planned by the US as part of the Helmand project to open a large area to the west in Zamin Dowar District for irrigation and agriculture. The canal was never built due to budget cutbacks.

The Governor says that in the 1970’s, work had started on this canal and an inlet structure completed, but everything came to a halt when the Russians invaded. He’s sure that the engineering plans exist, as he saw them when he was a young engineer working at the Ministry of Water. With updated cost estimates, he will find the funding, construct the canal, expand irrigation area, and resettle the many displaced persons in his province.

He directs his 16 year old son to see us out. We pause to take some photos of the Helmand River as we leave his compound.



### **Passing the Time**

We arrive back at the PRT at sunset. Within minutes and without warning, a dust storm comes up. The blowing winds and dust quickly drive everyone behind cover or inside. This is the first dust storm of the year, a little earlier than normal. Dust storms occur here during the spring when cold air descending from the mountains interacts with the air heated by the desert sun. Soldiers take photos and videos even though there’s not much to see as visibility falls. I head indoors. When I was in Chad, the Africans called dust storms the bringers of illness and death.

I bunk in Tom's room, as his roommate is away. After dinner, I head over to the latrine for a shower. The long, rectangular room has sinks and mirrors crowding one wall, benches down the center, and a row of deluxe, individual shower rooms along the far wall. Each has an outer curtain to close off a small dressing area from the common room and another inner curtain for the shower stall. Large volumes of hot water refresh my spirits as much as my body.



Back in Tom's room, he loads *Crash* on his laptop and lies in his bunk to watch the movie. Movie DVD's can be bought here for \$2, usually within days of their US theatrical release. I pass on the movie and lie on my bed reading while the dust storm continues to howl outside.

*View of Tom's bunk from my bed*

## **The Brits**

The PRT is packed with soldiers. A US soldier laments that this was a quiet, calm place just a few weeks ago. But then the counter narcotic units came, quickly followed by the British troops, some for the PRT and others for counter insurgency and poppy eradication. Helicopters land and take off, and patrols come and go all day. For the first time in Afghanistan, I feel like I'm in an active war zone.



It has been 126 years since the British have had a significant presence in Helmand. Just east of here, on the Kandahar road, the British experience the infamous bloody defeat at Maiwand which was immortalized by Kipling. This summer, 3300 additional elite troops will arrive as the British seek to control the Province

For now, the British PRT soldiers spend the time building their camp. They assemble large, dome tent structures which are insulated and have metal floors and central AC and heat. Unlike American PRT's which are manned by the National Guard and reservist, the British PRT detachment is regular army. A friendly lot speaking with a heavy accent that almost sounds like a foreign language.







When I asked them what will they do here, will they operate like the American PRT in supporting reconstruction projects; they shrug and say “*We’re building our camp.*” Apparently do not know exactly what they will do here; just soldiers who follow orders and go where they are sent.

The food is obviously not American! Here I do not find food that an active 19 year old would like, instead bland stews and vegetables with rice. There’s *hash* which looks like potato stew with the consistency of refried beans. For lunch on Wednesday, there is fried eggs, sunny side up and French fries! I ask the guy sitting next to me if eggs and fries for lunch is common in England. He says, “*Sure, eggs and chips, it brings me a nice warm homey feeling.*” I tell him that most Americans only eat eggs for breakfast. He asks, “*What if you miss breakfast, you go without eggs all day?*”



Later at dinner, two Royal Marine Commandos set across the table from me. Jason and I strike up a conversation. He's a professional soldier in his mid thirties, but with boyish good looks, gentle eyes and a nice smile in sharp contrast to the work he does, search and destroy, counter insurgency, active conflict. He and his friend have been here for three weeks, coming in with the rest of the British contingency.



I ask how long will they be here. *"We're just passing through,"* he says. At first I think he means just for a few days at this PRT, but he's referring to their indefinite deployment in Afghanistan. *"You know, it's all about getting to where you want to be."* *"Home?!"* I respond.

They ask me what's Kabul like. I tell the truth, it's an unattractive, sprawling, dusty, crowded city, and the security restrictions are tight, limiting where you can go and what you can do. *"It's better being here where you can get out..."* I add quickly, *"...at least for me. I just go out and look at projects."*

Jason responds *"You need be careful too, better keep your head down."*

I ask if they've seen action in other places, a silly question I decide on reflection. Jason just nods. His friend responds, *"Yea, we just follow you Americans. We piggy back on your campaigns."* Jason adds, *"When will we get our reward, I wonder?"*

Jason finishes eating, disposes his paper tray and comes back with a cup of tea. He grew up in London. *"A city boy!"* I respond. *"Yea nothing wrong with that,"* he says. Not sure if he's offended, I respond, *"No, nothing wrong with that."*

*"I've never been to London"* I continue, *"but hear it's nice."* Jason pauses, looks directly at me and says seriously, *"Yea, a real shit hole."*

I'm momentarily startled, then I laugh. We both laugh. As we laugh I wonder if we're laughing because we're in Afghanistan and calling London a shit hole, or if we're laughing about all the shit holes we've found ourselves in over the years...

## The Mission

We assemble at 0900 on Wednesday. Three humvees and nine PRT soldiers from the Texas National Guard in Weslaco will take Tom and me out today. It takes us about 30 minutes to drive to the site, where the contractor and the land owner are waiting when we arrive.



The USDA advisor asked me to come down to provide engineering assistance on the project that includes what may be the first drain tile system in the country. The purpose of the project is to leach out the salts that have accumulated in the soil so the land can be farmed.

Tom received \$100,000 of funding through the PRT for this project. The US Military provides moneys to PRT for projects, a total of around \$170 million for this year. When the contractor and Tom begin making sketches in the dirt, I ask where is the site map for planning the system. The contractor argues and makes excuses.



One of the soldiers takes me aside. He is not pleased. He is irritated by this contractor and others he has seen during his 11 months in Afghanistan. *“They over charge and do shoddy work, they steal and lie, then when a problem occurs they blame us.”* He warns me that I’m being used, that when there’s a problem with this project, they’ll blame me.

The soldiers are not eager to return from our mission early, so we take the time to walk out to the excavation site, take pictures and chat with the locals. I have them shoot the field using their portable GPS unit so that a proper site map can be made. Later, with the site map, Tom realizes that the contractor does not have enough materials to complete the project.











**Thursday, March 9, 2006**

Thursday morning, I'm just hanging out, waiting for my flight back to Kabul. Today, the sky is clear, no dust and just a little haze. I sit outside enjoying the early morning chill and bright sunshine, watching all the activities as the convoys assemble preparing to go out on their patrols or missions. The soldiers check their equipment, all wearing full battle gear and body armor. The Brits, like the Americans are mainly quite as they prepared to depart and wait patiently to leave. Radio communications and GPS tracking systems seem to take a lot of time to check and to debug.





This morning, I watch as five convoys assemble, two British and three American. The first set of convoys depart, then others quickly take their staging areas. I see Jason organizing one convoy, he is apparently the mission leader.

The British convoys are in sharp contrast to the Americans and our armored platted humvees. They have thinly plated panel trucks and soldiers riding in open jeeps! I'm surprised to learn that the Brits are also doing foot patrols in town. I'm told that the British learned in Northern Ireland that you have to get out and interact with the people to win their hearts and minds.



The same PRT unit of the Texas National Guard takes me out to the airport. PRT Air is late which doesn't surprise them. While waiting, we watch all the activities on the landing strip, a cargo plane and helicopter surrounded by soldiers and coalition troops. During raids last night, the anti-narcotic units captured five druglords who are being flown out. We watch as they are escorted onto the plane.



Just 10 minutes before the PRT Air's revised arrival time (changed for the third time today), my escort unit gets a *return-to-base* command. They quickly load up and hurry back to the PRT. At the entrance, they don't bother stopping to clear their weapons. They drop me off, switch mission leader, then speed out of the compound.

I'm lucky to find an alternative ride to the airport, two US contract security guards with an armored plated Ford extended cab, the only one I've seen in-country. Reached by cell, PRT Air is on the ground but agrees to wait for me. When we drive into the airport, I'm relieved to see that the airplane is still sitting on the landing strip. We quickly load up and then we're off, spiraling up into the sky like a corkscrew while the war continues below us.