

**Kabul Journal**  
by  
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**CHAPTER III – FIRST TRIP ‘OUTSIDE THE WIRE’**

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‘Outside the wire’ is the military term for leaving the protected area of a base, usually in regards to going on a “mission”. In Afghanistan, there are strict rules about the type of vehicles and troops that must be used.



**1: My driver (left) and security detail at the Kapisa Province government headquarters**

For me to accompany the Bagram PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team), we take three vehicles, me riding with the PRT Commander in one vehicle, and two other humvees carrying the support troupes, a total of 9 soldiers with specific arms skills. Two of the vehicles have gunner positions whose great views are tempered by the dust, sun and wind. Everyone wears body armor when outside the wire.

The first stop is the weekly PCC (Provincial Cooperation Committee) meeting between the military and the Provincial governor and key ministers. Afghans smile, wave and give the ‘thumb up’ as we passed through the many small villages along the road.



After the meeting, we travel to two field sites. The first is a major water diversion point on the Panjshir River. Here, rocks and dirt from last years floods are blocking the gates that divert water from the river into a canal that supplies 200,000 people with drinking water and that irrigates 15,000 hectares of land.

To get to the gates and canal, we hike about 300 yards, across a foot bridge and down the east bank of the Panjsher River. We're surrounded by kids while taking to the government and village officials. It all seems so natural, like I've done countless times outside of Afghanistan, except of course the flak jackets and armed soldiers.

The last stop was a pump plant, a large pump station with 8 electric motors and huge centrifugal pumps located in a village a few miles further downstream. The pumps have been idle for 15 years due to the lack of electricity, but expertly maintained by the locals, totally operational if only there was power.



Once again, we are surrounded by villagers and the kids. After being cooped up the last three weeks, it felt liberating to be out walking around, interacting with the local Afghans.

## Getting out of Kabul - Wednesday (1/7/06)

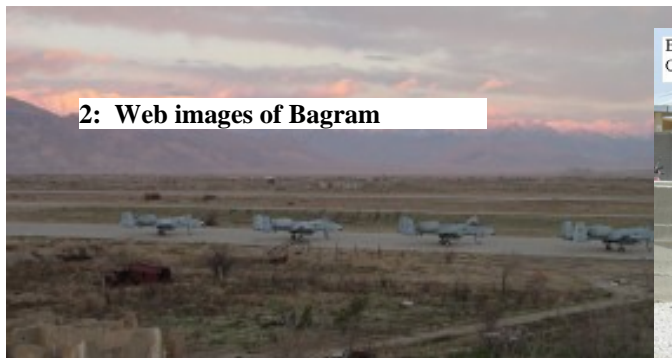
Travel outside of Kabul is only allowed with approved security. When traveling by vehicle, we must be accompanied by the EPD (Embassy Protective Detail) or in a military convoy. Normally, for traveling short distances, such as my trip to Bagram, I'm told it's not a problem getting a vehicle and EPD. However, this week, there are several visiting congressional delegations, tying up all available EPD's. So, they send me up with the diplomatic pouch run.

For this run, we assemble first thing in the morning. The "pouch" vehicle is full, so the motor pool sends over a landcruiser and driver for me. One member of the EPD, Dave, rides in the front seat. He tells me that this is a fairly safe run, but if we run into hostel action, to immediately lie down on the seat, and he will likely lay on top of me, to provide protection. Dave is from Houston where his wife and 8 year old daughter wait for him. His daughter wants to be a CIA agent when she grows up and is taking karate classes.

We end up being the lead vehicle, with Dave radioing back info about any parked cars along the road, slowing traffic or other warning signs. The trip is uneventful. We quickly leave Kabul and drive north through the Kabul Basin. The ground is still covered with the New Years Day snow, and the snow covered mountains that surround the basin are spectacular in the early morning light.

## Bagram

We arrive at Bagram Airbase about an hours drive. Once inside the base, our vehicle leaves the pouch convoy to drop me off at the Bagram PRT. Originally constructed in 1979, Bagram was the base of operations for the Soviet Union during their occupation. It is located about 30 miles north of Kabul, near the village of Charikar. From 1999-2001, the base was also the battle line between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, with control going back and forth until finally secured by the Alliance. It's the largest base in Afghanistan with well over 10,000 people.



**2: Web images of Bagram**



## Bagram PRT

I'm a half a day early, so LTC McDonnell, the PRT Commander gives me a desk, sets me up on a computer with internet access, and I work quietly for most of the day. It's much quieter and less hectic than the ARG office wing at the Embassy. In the afternoon, I walk



over to the PX area where there's a Burger King and several other restaurant that provides a break for the soldiers from the mess halls.

There's a Korean contingency of about 200 at the base, and a unit of about 6 Korean military attached to the PRT. They invite me over to their mess hall for lunch, Korean food served on stainless steel trays; and there are stainless chop sticks!

Housing assignments for visitors are based on military rank or GS level for civilians. I rate VIP housing, but they're all full with generals and their aids. So I'm assigned a hooch, the same accommodations as the soldiers.



Hooches are plywood buildings packed together in "subdivisions". Each building is split in half, with each half having a separate entrance. Each half accommodates 4 soldiers, each with a 8 by 10 foot room, joined by a hallway. The rooms have an open door, and a cot with a thin mattress. Communal bathrooms and showers are a short distance away, except the distance seems a lot further in the chill of the single digit temperature nights.

The hooch heater works well during the day, but cannot keep up with the heat loss from the uninsulated building during the very cold nights. But I have my sleeping bag, and warned by a soldier, I purchase an extra blanket at the PX.



The Mission – Thursday (1/8/06)

We assemble at 9:15 am in front of the Bagram PRT headquarters, load up and head out. The commander and I are second in the convoy of three humvees. The first stop is the weekly meeting with the Governor.



The Kapisa government building is on a hill with a spectacular view of the Panjsher River. We wait for two other contingencies to show up, the Civil Affairs unit, and the Military Police. We remove our flak jackets for the meeting, since according to the Commander, this is a secured area. We drink tea and eat cookies, and they discuss progress on various projects funded

by the military: roads, buildings, a well; and updates on related activities undertaken by the provincial government, including a TV station that will be provided if they can come up with a building.



The Commander introduces me as Dr. Fipps, Irrigation Professor from Texas A&M. I then describe my duties as Senior Advisor for Water. Enthusiastically, the Governor expresses his appreciation to me for coming to his province first, the importance of water, the need for expanded irrigation for economic development, water supply and sanitation.

The Governor asks the Commander and me to meet him in his office before we go out for the site visits. The Agriculture and Irrigation Ministers also attend. The Governor describes the types of projects they need. There's the dredging and rehab work at the diversion point which we will see that afternoon. But with passion, the Governor describes his desire to expand irrigation into three eastern districts where pine nuts and seedless pomegranates are economically viable, and expanded production could bring economic development. Rehab of existing systems is important, but it is clear that this Governor understands that economic progress must come from looking towards the future.



The Governor describes the need for water supply and sanitation for a planned city of 20,000 homes. New housing construction is now prohibited in the river bottom, land with too much value for agriculture. However, anyone can have a building site in the new city. The Commander tells me that last year there were about 500,000 refugees that returned to Afghanistan, but these were easily absorbed back into the country. But this year, another 500,000 refugees are being forced back by Pakistan with no families to take them in, so new houses and agricultural land will be needed. The Governor is serious, obvious dedicated, very impressive. The Commander tells me he's the best in this part of Afghanistan.

### Irrigation Works

It's about a 45 minute ride along side the Panjsher River to our second stop. For lunch, I'm given a *Meal Ready to Eat*, a prepackage meal of chicken, bread, cheese, pumpkin bread which I eat, and stew and hot chocolate mix which I don't bother with, although I'm curious to see how the self-heating package works. The Commander and soldiers don't eat - I guess they would rather be hungry than eat another one of these.



Inside the humvee, view from the back seat. On the right is the edge of the GPS navigation system being monitored by the Commander that accurately tracks our location and relays it back to control.



**3: The footbridge we crossed can be seen up river.**

The hike over the bridge, down to the water works seem so natural, like what I do back in Texas for work – visiting another site to help out or to learn. The flak jacket is heavy – I'm sure I will be sore in the morning.



### Site Inspection

There're repairs underway on the turnout structures. These are funded through the EIRP (Emergency Irrigation Rehabilitation Program), a \$50 million 3-year effort funded by the World Bank and UNFAO. About 300 such projects are currently underway through the county. UNFAO and MEW (Ministry of Energy and Water) staff complete the designs, and then hire local contractors to do the work.



**4: One of the Korean soldiers attached to the PRT enjoying the outing as well. The fresh concrete is visible to the left of the Afghan standing on the diversion structure**

At this site, the EIRP is only doing repairs, not paying for the needed dredging. One set of gates are completely submerged by 6 feet of rocks and dirt, and serious damage will soon occur in the downstream canal if it is not also dredged.



The Commander is asked if he will provide this funding. The Commander responds diplomatically that it depends on the Governor and where this project is in his priorities, since funding is jointly decided.



The Bagram PRT will spend about \$20 million this year on projects in two provinces, with the emphasis on roads. These are funds through the military. I'm told that the total military budget for reconstruction efforts is \$250 million for this year.

The Commander tells the locals that Dr. Fipps, through my contacts and work with NGOs may become aware of other funding sources.

The last stop is at the pump station. Eight large electric motors and centrifugal pumps set idle, but well maintained. The pumps were put in to support a massive development built by the Germans and the Afghan government 40 years ago that includes a textile factory that once employed 15,000 people in a planned community of houses, shops and schools. The factory and the water pumps have been idle for the passed 15 years due to the wars and lack of electricity. The Commander tells me that he was amazed to see the care the Afghans are taking of the factory. Everything is in perfect working order, and the factory and pumps could be restarted on a moments notice, as soon as there is power, materials and markets.

As we go back to our vehicles, the soldiers are once again surrounded by kids. The children of Afghanistan want pens and pencils, not candy or other treats. I'm fascinated by the sight of the soldiers showing the kids their uniforms and attachments for guns, ammo, and survival gear while handing out pens. It reminds me of the photos I've seen from other wars; soldiers and kids, forging a trust and friendship, hopefully that the future can be built upon.

