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Snowflake

September 13, 2002 2:26 PM

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Afghanistan

TO: Larry Di Rita
FROM: Donald Rumsfeld
SUBJECT: E-mail

Larry Di Rita
9/13

(couldn't make out)

Let me read PARD'S e-mail.

Thanks.

DHR:db
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Please respond by _____

13 Sep 02

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11-L-0559/OSD/8677

Copy to: Terie Clarke
Original STM

Roger Perro-Mamer
DASD (ISA) on leave

**COMBINED JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS TASK FORCE
COALITION COORDINATION CELL
KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN**

August 11-15, 2002

Hey kids.

Greetings from scenic Kandahar.
Formerly known as "Home of the Taliban".
Now known as "Miserable Rat-Fuck Shithole".
Sister city of Fayetteville, NC.

I proffer humble apologies for not writing sooner but I've been moving too much, working too hard, or just plain harried worn out and catching Z's. This is just a monstrous catch-up broadside to let you know I'm still alive, and hope all is well back in the land of the free and the brave. Please forgive my using the one-size-fits-all format, but this is the first chance I've had to get back in touch, and the only way I can reach all my friends at one time. I should be able to check this email address sporadically for the next month or so, and promise to catch up with the whole gang of you one-at-a-time.

For those who didn't get the word, I got activated in June and am taking a leave of absence (without pay) from the Pentagon to join my unit ---"B Company, 3rd Battalion, 20th Special Forces" also known as "The Forgotten Company" of Virginia, which after being mustered from Qatar to Kabul has finally circled the wagons in Southeast Afghanistan, in the original Taliban stronghold of Kandahar.

Heat, Wind, Sun, Rock and Dust

What can I tell you about Kandahar.

The best description of the joys of Kandahar comes from our redoubtable training NCO, Sergeant First Class Mark Maine, who says that Kandahar is like sitting in a sauna and having a bag of cement shaken over your head.

There is the heat. 120 degrees. I know you self-pitying Potomac sweatdogs will scoff that "it's DRYYYYYY heat" to which I respond that 120 degrees in the shade will occupy one's full attention any day of the week, and you don't stay dry for long when you are the Lobster Thermidor inside a carapace of about 50 lbs. of Kevlar and ceramic plate armor, with a sweltering chamber pot on your head, especially if there is no hope of shade for the next 20 miles. This week it finally cooled to a balmy 110 degrees, so the brain switch is ON again---the only reason I am able to babble with some degree of coherence and without short-circuiting this laptop.

11-L-0559/OSD/8678

Then there is the dust. No account of Kandahar is complete without mention of the dust. It's what geologists refer to as "Old Dirt" from the smug comfort of their impenetrable academic cubbyholes. "Old Dirt" means grit so finely dablashed by the aeons that it takes on the attack properties of virulent subatomic particles with scary names, like "Terminal Hyperionic Cesium" and "Bone-Seeking Strontium". I peered out of the Hercules C-130 the other day as we in from the central highlands, and even at 22,000 feet the dust was thick as Indiana Pea Soup. Heaven help you if you are on the ground. To watch a Hum-vee come at you through the stuff is sickening---it plows up a bow wave you could surf on up and trails a pillar that would flatten Moses and scatter the 12 Tribes of Israel. Even on the calmest, clearest day, the dustdevils will suddenly howl out of the blue and chase you like flesh-eating harpies.

And then there is the wind. We're just at the height of the "120 Days of the Afghan Wind," a freak of nature which scours the appalling Dasht-e-Margow desert to our south, slurps up the last molecule of moisture from the Kandahari dustpans, and then hurls it all back with a vengeance on the flanks of the Hindu Kush, in flash floods such as just washed away a convoy of our Hum-vees at Jalalabad.

Put it all together, and you have a quasi-Venusian sub-Martian environment of heat, dust, and parched air that stuns you, rasps your corneas, produces constant sinus-clogging migraines and nosebleeds, and crackles your skin in weird tender places. If there is a landscape less welcoming to humans anywhere on earth, apart from the Sahara, the Poles, and the cauldrons of Kilauea, I cannot imagine it, and I certainly don't intend to go there.

Kandahar: a Little History goes a Long Way

The Arabic for Alexander is Iskander, whence Kandahar in Pashtun, the local palaver. Kandahar was Alexander the Great's last big urban development scam before he sat on the bank of the Indus to sob because he had run out of real estate to conquer. Now that I've actually been here, I'll take issue with Plutarch. I've no doubt that what *really* happened with Alexander, cultured alumnus of Aristotle that he was, is that he took one look at the place and invoked that oft-overlooked verse from the Odyssey,

κακα ποποο μεγα βοοβοο, τον οενος! οενος! και εξοδσ!

(Rendered in Pope's chaste hexameters as "*strengthen my flight, O wine, from foul fathomless pit*", or, for a loose translation more evocative to the modern ear, "*this place is a shithole. Get me a drink and get me outta here*".) If Alexander were to rise from the dead he'd bellowing for his goblet, flabbergasted to learn the dump was still a going concern, and appalled to find they'd named it after him.

Apart from the Kandaharis, a crusty lot of downtrodden moochers who are as plentiful and indestructible as rocks, there is left little to ruin in Kandahar after a quarter century of war.

The city's chief item of interest these days is "The Cloak of The Prophet". Now every one knows that prophets are about as common as dustdevils in these parts, and none has been sighted preaching in the buff since John the Baptist. You can be sure the mangiest of them had cloaks to out-Karzai Karzai. Yet give them credit: somehow the hometown mullahs got their clutches on the genuine 100% Natural-Fiber Accept-no-Substitutes Limit-One-Per-Prophet wonder-working article, and they haven't let go. In an epic moment of high Mahometan camp, Mullah Omar ----he with the \$10 million tag on his FBI "Most Wanted" poster ---wrapped himself in The Cloak, clambered the walls of the fort, and proclaimed the Age of Taliban to the gaping Pathan horde.

And why not? If you simply want to hang out in the madrassa, wish a little death on the USA, and trample your backsliding brethren, I say why not slip into something a little more comfortable. But all that is history. The venerable heathen dishtowel is now safely stuffed back in the hamper. And if the good mullahs know what's good for them, they'd better keep it there for about the next 1,000 years, or at least as long as there are New Yorkers. Speaking as a disgruntled Pentagon employee in the area, I'd just as soon set it on fire myself, and with the selfsame torches that great-to-the-nth-power-grandpappy Aznar Pardo used back in Anno Domini 1212, when he burned down the *palenque* of the *Al-Muhaddi* at the battle of Navas de Tolosa. Let none say we haven't picked up a tip or two over the last millennium on how to handle the Hajjis.

B Company

So here we are, at the very fountainhead of the mayhem, the epicenter of the madness smack dab in the Taliban bullseye. "B" Co's bailiwick is the City of Kandahar itself, but we also have the vast expanse to the south and east---the provinces of Kandahar, Zabul, Oruzgan, Ghazni, and Paktika--- right up to the baffling mountain passes on the Pakistani borderland.

Our job is the usual SF bag of tricks and black art----slaying dragons, storming castles, sparing damsels, scourging warlords, and consulting wizards, not to mention wholesale liberation of the oppressed. Throw in a little long-range reconnaissance, mounted/dismounted patrols, cordon, search, and interdiction, snatch-&-grab ops, and interminable indescribable ineluctable drudgery ---and you've got just about all I'm allowed to tell you before the censor (of whom more, anon) wields his fasces.

While recovering from the field "B" Company guys also run the "Coalition Coordination Cell" at Kandahar Air Field. Now that nomenclature sure has a grand ring to it. You'd think that nothing less than the fate of the Civilized World depended on it. Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't, but you'd think that the Civilized World could at least spare a few more bucks for the effort than will just barely get you a roof and a floor on a teetering plywood shack with a lot of junk piled outside, and that wouldn't look a whit out of place along Rural Route 40 of West Virginia. I grant Sergeant Major Balz's point that the captured Chinese ZSU-23 14.7 mm Anti-Aircraft Artillery piece and the Russian howitzer do add a little special something to the décor.

This shack is the nerve center (in the same sense that the walnut-sized brain in the tail of a Stegosaurus is also a "nerve center") for the "Coalition", i.e. the combined Special Forces units of the US and its allies, currently Germany, Canada, and New Zealand. Its job is to plan special operations, coordinate close air support, and in Pentagon-parlance "deconflict" missions so our gunships don't light up friendlies. It is stacked to the rafters with heaps of grenades and shoulder-launching rockets (try that instead of a NO SMOKING sign), spindly ankle-grabbing tangles of space-age antennas, and crate upon crate of *always* the wrong damn maps. And dust. It is staffed by 5 or 6 very sleepy guys snarling at the million-dollar high-speed laptop which of course just croaked from dust in the A: drive, and always just as some snotty F-18 pilot is second-guessing your 10-digit grid coordinates. "*Oh BAGRAM! No wonder there's Triple-A, are you sure you didn't say BAGHDAD?*"

It Takes a Village...

The "SF Village" as it is called, is home to all these folks, including your Humble Obt. Svt.: a multitude of tents arrayed round the airy, pleasant, and bullet-riddled courtyards of the Airfield's old quarters. The previous tenants, the Taliban, left some murals that are remarkable chiefly for their fervor and execrable artistic merit, but overall, the last good lick of paint here was applied by the tenant before them, the Soviet Air Force.

It's far better than our first setup, at Bagram Air Base. I was only too happy to leave that place behind! With a main road running right through it, I simply don't see how Bagram is defensible. I hope it never happens but that place is simply begging to be a front page headline in the Washington Post. Nor would it be the first time. While digging a drain through the kitchenyard, our guys unearthed longbones believed to be from a company of Soviet engineers who got massacred there. Talk about *baaaaaad* Feng Shui.

We have a formidable pack here. The US has one battalion of Army Green Berets, a squadron of Navy SEALs, and a couple wings of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, the "Night Stalkers" celebrated in Blackhawk Down ---my heroes, having seen them in action! Down the road from SF Village are some Rangers and a brigade of the 82nd Airborne. There might possibly also be a unit whose existence we can neither confirm nor deny. And let me put in a disparaging word for those crude vainglorious chumps from Langley---they have done absolutely nothing for us but drive up the price of local handicrafts.

Across the board, the quality, dedication, and professionalism is just what you would expect: impressive beyond words. I know that years hence I shall marvel at what a privilege it was to mix it up with them. It is humbling to work with these fellows ----by definition the finest soldiers in the world.

It is a relaxed, low-key, and soft-spoken bunch. Nothing could be more remote from crass Hollywood stereotypes of the ultimate warrior. OK---we'll make an exception for the SEALs, the youngest of the lot, and whose rowdy conceits are generally indulged if for no other reason than their high entertainment value.

Informality rules. All is on a first-name basis, and there is no saluting, except in jest ("Sniper check, Sir!"). To the consternation of the 82nd Airborne's spit-&-polish officialdom, bushy beards are the norm and rank is rarely worn---much of the time we don't even wear uniforms. About once a week the 82nd marches a little embassy of lieutenants up the road to complain about our latest outrage against Army Regulation 670-Dash-Whatever and proper dress, grooming, and military courtesy. We just stare. Eventually they go away. And the SF guys stroll around in Texas and Aloha shirts looking as grubby and copacetic as if they had just driven back from a long fishing holiday on the Outer Banks.

But with wicked firepower. My personal outfit consists of a 9mm Beretta and an M-4 carbine fitted with a 40mm grenade launcher, flash suppressor, and silencer---the whole shebang looks so scary I'm almost afraid to touch it. By edict, everyone is armed, all the time. And I mean *all the time*. That makes sense out in the field---you'd want nothing less. But it strikes me as laying it on a little thick back at Kandahar Air Field. I shudder to imagine the crossfire if so much as the shadow of a Taliban flits across this place, what with every lock-'n'-load cook, clerk, meteorologist and grease monkey of the 82nd armed and a-quiver. If it comes to a shootout, I'll be the one diving like a prairie dog for the nearest ditch.

As for our partners, for my money the New Zealand SAS deliver the best bang-for-buck in the business. They vanish into Al-Qaeda-land for weeks on end, groaning with ammo but unburdened by fripperies such as food supplies and water. Yet they always return looking fatter than when they left, and....shall we put it delicately.... "satisfied". The Bad Guys always go very quiet after they've dropped in for a chat. It's probably just as well that no one asks too many questions about what the Kiwis do ---least of all their Prime Minister. The Kiwis have nothing if not style. They have transformed their courtyard into something reminiscent of the garden of a small Cambridge college, albeit one that the porters have neglected to water since the days of Henry the VIIIth. The tea and digestive biscuits are wonderful, and there is usually plenty of beer. Alas, this civility is all off-limits to the young SEALs, those louts. They were banished by the Kiwi commander, Steve, after an excess of festiveness in which they tried to uproot his rose bushes, break things, eat the goldfish in his fountain, and set his pet snakes loose.

Canada's Joint Task Force - 2, a unit that officially does not exist (and which is the equivalent of a US unit that officially does not exist and may or may not be here) may or may not be here. This is an especially happy association, since the Special Forces actually began as a US-Canada joint venture ---the legendary "Devil's Brigade" of WWII. The Canucks are quite likely the deadliest bunch in town, but also the friendliest. They'll ring up Pizza Hut in Dubai and have their resupply flight haul in 100 deep-dish pies to share with their pizza-starved allies. Their Colonel himself takes to the griddle to cook up gigantic buttery flapjack breakfasts drowned in maple syrup, come-one-come-all.

The Germans deserve an honorable mention. Their KsK, or "Kommando Spezialkräfte," is their first unit to go into combat since WWII. (B Company, by the way, is the first Virginia unit to go into combat since WWII. My old Virginia National Guard unit, A Co.

of the 3/116th Infantry, last ran into Fritz at Omaha Beach on D-Day). And here we are, together under the palms and bawling "Lili Marlene" and "Ze Ballad of ze Grün Beret" to the crescent moon. "Ja", confided one of their officers in a beery moment "ve don't schart any vors any more, but are hoping you inwite us to all of yours". What a difference a day makes.

Lest there is any doubt that there is such a thing as Western Civilization, I'm pleased to report to all Thanes and Toledo Lounge Lizards back home that the centerpiece to the décor of the Canadian compound is a shrine to Elvis, while that of the Germans--- the "Talibar"--- is a Jim Beam escutcheon, which the chaplain himself lovingly carved off a long-gone case of that sweet elixir. Indeed, inspired by such auspicious emblems, even as I write plans are being laid for the Kandahar SF Beam Dinner, to close out the upcoming "Southeast Afghanistan Elvis Commemorative Croquet Tournament." Grisly details to follow.

The ones who have gotten the short end of the stick are the poor 82nd Airborne. Those poor guys (and gals---yes there are a few, and I take back everything I ever said about women in the field, if not in combat--- they are doing a great job) are bored out of their minds. The basic problem is that the Taliban and Al Qaeda have learned they can't fight us in formations, and have thus reverted to the local specialties of small-scale ambush and harassment. The 82nd Airborne is a bludgeon, a mattock, a pounding block---a jillion-ton anvil that drops from the sky. To employ them for manhunts is like using a steamroller to kill fleas. The maneuver phase is past, yet here is the Airborne, all dressed up and nowhere to go except on delicate blocking and escort operations. At least they are taking it in stride, with discipline and good humor, even though they are the ones who lately seem to be taking most of the casualties.

A Tirade

Now, gentle reader, I beg of you to indulge me as I rant against the sinister encroaching Puritanism of our times.

Consider the kids from the 82nd. I say kids, because that is exactly what they look like. (You know you are getting too old for this when not only do the soldiers, but even their officers look like babies). Whatever they do back at Ft. Bragg, out here they behave with a commendable maturity. Yet we somehow feel that even though we can trust them with awesome life-or-death decisions and responsibilities, and dreadful weapons, but in their off-duty hours we cannot trust them with 12 ounces of Bud Lite.

By official fiat the US and Canada("blame it on NAFTA!") are dry. In SF Village they are lucky even to have their tiny cafés, the "BushHog" and "Cougar" respectively, to quench their thirst. The allies, by contrast, operate generous honest-to-god no-kidding grog bars, with footrests, stools, coasters, and Old World charm and where anything weaker than 5% is used to soak feet or wash the dishes. Nay, far from frowning, they actually *bless* these establishments---the German chaplain himself lent a hand in building the KsK's splendid "Talibar".

So as you see, the coalition really is essential to the maintenance of morale. (Rule #3 of the 3 Rules of War: "*Maintenance of Morale*"). There is some concern now that the Norwegians and the Danes have left, taking with them our main pipeline to the sterner stuff. It is now up to the Germans to keep the tap open and support the allies. It's always a close call though--- the Europeans' chronic airlift woes are an open scandal in NATO, and sure enough last week Jerry's resupply plane went kaput so all SF Village is temporarily dry.

The only good thing I can say about this situation is that it forces our troops to leave their tents and forage for refreshment, bye-the-bye developing real camaraderie (and good intel-sharing) with the allies. Even if we were to have beer, you can bet it would be pisspoor standard-issue US Quartermaster-Lite, probably laced with saltpeter on advice of the Surgeon General in order to diminish the libido. Our soldiers would have to guzzle by the gallon just for a buzz, and would be so bloated they'd never roll outside the wire. None but outcasts and the desperate would visit us---certainly no self-respecting German from the land of Reinheitsgebot. Our teetotal policy may well be a good one in the end, but as with anything in the Army that make sense I am sure it is unintentional.

Let me not forget to inveigh against the censor, referred to above, whose chief business is not to preserve operational secrecy, but rather to pull the plug on the avalanche of naughty JPGs streaming in over the Internet. I take no great interest in pornography, since my approach to life is generally that of the sportsman, rather than the spectator. And as far as I am concerned, what transpires between the purveyors and consumers of smut is a matter purely of their own concern. I do wish to point out that the proper care and feeding of this killjoy costs you, dear taxpayer, about \$50,000 a year---and wait till you see the bill you'll get from the Veterans Administration once he's eligible for the VFW lodge!

Here endeth the tirade.

It Ain't over Till it's Over

One of the reigning platitudes concerns how the media now beams war straight into US living rooms, with much airy speculation of the effect on public opinion, etc. etc. etc. But that news is so stale---- real-time reporting has been going on at least since Viet Nam. What you may not realize is that the *soldiers*, too, now get to see what the media and the folks at home are saying about them---as it happens. That is a distinctive new dynamic in this war, and we haven't learned how to manage it.

US network news (yes Jamie, Fox is the #1 favorite) now beams in over satellite. The soldiers get pummeled with it non-stop. What they hear is a lot of horseshit about how the war is all but over, apologies for accidental bombings of civilians, the need to hand out flip-flops and bags of flour, and similar drivel.

Let's consider our attack on Deh Rawod back in June, probably the most controversial incident in the war thus far. We may have hit a wedding party, but we did not hit it by accident. Bad Guys (and Girls) get married just like anyone else. They're still Bad Guys (and Girls). And when they try to kill us, they are fair game. That particular village is an infamous Taliban sanctuary, a vicious opium and heroin pit, a known terrorist hideout and scourge to half of Oruzgan province. The locals spent the previous weeks and days festively shooting up our planes with bullets the size of bananas. The team who called in the strike with eyes-on-target were my tent neighbors last week, and I got that much of the story directly from them. It is all on camera.

The Central Americans are no slouches when it comes to world-class intrigue and Great Power manipulation, and I have seen some of that in my time. But I have to hand the Afghans the palm. They were simply waiting to pounce on something like the Deh Rawod incident, and when it came, they exploited it masterfully, a win-win for all, for it gave the local warlords leverage over President Karzai, and Karzai leverage over us.

None was swifter than our good friend the Governor of Kandahar, who organized the 5 neighboring governors faster than you can say "Jimmy Hoffa" to declare that they wanted all future US operations to be cleared through them first. How convenient...and how much do you think terrorists and smugglers and drugdealers would pay for that information. Of course we told them to get stuffed, and Karzai then poised himself as the honest broker. The wedge was in. The result of this incident, with its attendant media reverberations and procession of investigators and lawyers and United Nations high muckety-mucks was to petrify every US field grade officer and disgust every US soldier in Afghanistan. Operations virtually froze for a month while the Al Qaeda and Taliban patiently reconsolidated out of Pakistan. Now you begin to understand Afghanistan.

Time is of essence here. The situation we're in now is that Al Qaeda have licked their wounds and are regrouping in the Southeast, with the connivance of a few disgruntled junior warlords and the double-dealing Pakistanis. The shooting match is still very much on. Along the border provinces you can't kick a stone over without Bad Guys swarming out like ants and snakes and scorpions. It's amazing how many are foreigners. The locals are only too happy to see us come by and squash them, and will trudge for days through heat and hellish terrain in order to drop a dime on them.

If anything, it's heating up a little, now that the Loya Jirga is behind us, and the Afghans have had time to sort out who the winners and the losers are. A good rule of thumb is that are no good Afghani winners, and all Afghani losers are sore. You will never hear about most of the goings on, since the news coverage ---of both good AND bad guys--- has been a joke. But after about six months of holding back, they're getting up close and personal again.

Our trusty C-130 Hercules resupply pilots were complaining about the AAA fire in Khowst, a particularly rough neighborhood near the border, to which the SF team leader just shrugged saying, "not to worry, there's always rounds floating around in Khowst". Not two hours before I tapped out these lines someone left a bomb in our flight terminal,

about 100 yards away from where I write. Out in the field our so-called "safehouses" get shot up all the time, and rocket strikes and command-detonated mines are almost too common to be worthy of mention. My Master Sergeant had 2 hand grenades chucked at him over a wall last weekend. And one of our guys got shot in the face while shopping in Kandahar bazaar---the round went right through both cheeks, without even a dint to his tooth enamel. Talk about a lucky shot! Even though everybody hates the body armor, it has saved a lot of lives, and so far we've been lucky with limbs. It also helps that for the most part, the Bad Guys are spectacularly bad shots.

So Johnny goes marching on...hurrah. One always is hot, filthy, thirsty, hungry and tired, tired, tired, tired, tired. There is no rhythm to the day, certainly no routine, and one's elemental sense of the clock is turned upside down and inside out. I'm never quite sure if I've slept 4 hours or 8 1/2. At least out in the field one can live by the sun, but here one sometimes sits down to dinner as sun rises and rises from breakfast as it sets, and one catches the US evening news in the morning and the morning news at night. One of these days I expect I'll wake up before I've gone to bed. It is circadian bewilderment of the type inflicted on mice and pigeons in medical experiments targeted by PETA. We work on both Zulu (GMT) and local time. Like many soldiers I now sport TWO wristwatches, one for each time zone. (So far it has only made me twice as unpunctual.) Zulu is 4 hours ahead of the East Coast, and to confound the matter Afghanistan is 4 1/2 hours ahead of Zulu. Nobody can figure out how that aggravating 30 minutes slipped into the equation, but it is consistent with the general time-warp and cosmic wormhole that is Afghanistan.

The Bottom Line

So are we winning? You should definitely sleep better at night. We're way ahead of the game, and making strides every day. It's slow slogging, but with the help of the locals we're uprooting caches of weapons and bombs every day, and rounding up Taliban troublemakers, along with plenty of Saudi, Yemeni, Chechen, and Pakistani Al Qaeda ---- yes, that selfsame irksome riffraff you've seen a million times swinging from the monkey bars in the overplayed video from Al Jazeera.

We should still be getting more for our money's worth. One look at Bagram, that grotesque burgeoning carbuncle, that self-licking ice cream cone that is our main HQ and staff chateau-bunker, will convince you that the spirit of McLellan is alive and well in Afghanistan. It is the same old story of every war we've fought since the dawn of the Republic: too many peacetime paper commandos focused on process rather than results, by-the-book belligerents who complain there is never enough to support their perfect plans, and who, when at length indulged with men and materiel, insist on yet providing for contingencies to the contingencies before ever they ever make a move. This is the mentality that says if 6,000 troops are good, then 10,000 must be better.

The number one *military* mistake we could make here is to "go conventional" in this war. So long as we keep to the shadows, in an unconventional war fought by tiny Special Forces units with local Afghan forces, we shall be welcome here--- fighting along the

Afghans, rather than against them. As the Afghans harvest their melons and bake their bread, as they play checkers and music and paint their toenails and fly their kites (all forbidden under the Taliban) they are savoring the first sweet fruits of peace in nearly a quarter century, indeed, since most of the population is under 21, the first surcease from atrocities that most of them have ever known. (The life expectancy, by the way, is 45 years for males---just about the world's lowest). My guess is that 90% of the common Afghan folk are overjoyed to have us here. That figure would probably rise to 99% if we explicitly adopted a policy of taking all confirmed Taliban leaders out back and shooting them like rabid dogs.

The number one *political* mistake we can make here is to actually believe that this place is a country, and that there is such a thing as an Afghan. It is not and there is not. Not the Taliban, nor Al Qaeda, nor any Pakistani, Iranian, Uzbek, Turkoman, Hazara, Afridi, Pushtun, Tajik or what-have-you succumbs to that delusion. It seems only certain folks at the State Department do. Afghanistan is the place where the world saw fit to stash all the tribes it could not handle elsewhere. We must not waste effort on "nation-building" here. It will never work. Just give the common Afghan yeoman a chance to mind his own business unmolested for a change and he will soon enough figure out how to get flip-flops and bags of flour on his own.

Maybe it's just the Central American side of me, but it really is not that complicated. What can work here is for a benign empire (Iran, Russia, India, and Pakistan need not apply) to get a loose grip on the tribal balance-of-power here, without qualms, hesitation, or apologies, and keep an eagle eye on the place with an olive branch in one talon and arrows in the other. The key to understanding the maze of Afghanistan's Byzantino-Machiavelli-Hobbesian politics is the ongoing power play between President Karzai and his Defense Minister, Fahim Khan. And remember that Fahim *personally* has more and better troops at his disposal, than does his Ministry. So watch that space. It encapsulates the struggle among the hopelessly-divided Pashtun warlords, and between them and all the other ethnicities and would-be warlords, who must band together since their numbers are inadequate to allow for pillage and oppression on a proper national scale.

For now, none of the Chico Banditos has the puissance to overthrow his neighbor...not without a whack from Uncle Sam. As long as we are in the neighborhood they must make nice with each other.

This is progress. It means we have accomplished one of our chief objectives, which is to make politics matter here, as opposed to the dumb brute clash of guns. Of course, the Afghan view of what constitutes political activity is rather more expansive than ours, running as it does the gamut from debate and dialectics to ambush and assassination. It will be quite some time before we get much further than a bullet away from a change of policy. But so far so good--- and as long as we don't put our trust in any one man here we'll be able to dodge that bullet.

None put it better than Pacha Khan, the prickliest of the Chico Banditos, that ever-quotable scourge of reason who holds sway over the Smuggler's Paradise that is Paktia,

along the remote eastern border with Pakistan. Pacha's nemesis is the Honorable Hakim Tanewal, a scholarly gent with progressive notions about taxation and irrigation and who knows how to tie a necktie. Hon. Tanewal would be the 5th supplicant duly-appointed by President Karzai in as many months, but unfortunately the job is on hold, at least till ol' Pacha deigns to disband his militias and hand over the keys to the Governor's palace.

Egged on by Kabul, the Hon. Tanewal has been issuing increasingly shrill statements. This week's manifesto declared that "the time for warlords is over". To which Pacha snarled, in an interview to the Christian Science Monitor: "You must not call us warlords. *If you call us warlords we will kill you*".

Pacha must have a direct line to the State Dept., for as I left D.C. the wisdom from Foggy Bottom was that now that Afghanistan is on the yellow brick road to democracy, the former "warlords" are to be officially referred to as "regional leaders". Meanwhile, Hon. Tanewal cools his heels on the curb outside the Governor's palace, his hat on his knees, waiting for Pacha to give the nod.

Speaking of Warlords...

There are about 100 of these warlords, and they shakily hold Afghanistan together, like rivets in the boiler of some awful contraption from the age of steam. Our intel guy, Weatherford, and I recently enjoyed the hospitality of one of them, the local Chico Bandito, Major General Razik Shirzai. Along with some 500 of his close friends, and their relatives, and their flies, we supped off a long squalid roll of cheesecloth unfurled on the dirt patio of the General's little fort. The repast was truly tasty ---a hearty chicken and potato stew with flat bread--- and was laid on with no less form than if it had been the Annual Members' Dinner of the Metropolitan Club.

This particular general is the Big Fish in this particular Little Pond. Lest his appearance lead you to doubt this fact, as it might, he wields his satrapy with scant regard for nuance or subtlety. Your first taste of this comes as you walk into his office and your sensibilities get mugged by two dazzling golden massively overframed photographs of himself, one backslapping General Tommy Franks, our very own Gringo Warlord Supremo, and the other, a tad grainy but still convincing, in an appropriately groveling stance before the ex-King, Zadir Shah.

General Shirzai is to be counted among the most enterprising of our new friends. When not (as one can only suspect) kidnapping the locals or shaking down smugglers, he is diligently enforcing his end of his contract with the USA, which involves providing the security for the environs of Kandahar Airfield---surely the biggest legitimate money-spinner between Kabul and the Indian Ocean.

And by the luckiest of coincidences the General's elder brother just happens to be our old friend, the Governor of Kandahar Province!

Lunch done, the jolly swagman surveyed his turbaned clientele from the vantage of a camp stool. They squatted and sprawled in a semicircle at his feet, prostrate from the meal and the heat, languorously swatting at flies. Time passed with a subdued chatter. Little winged carcasses began to accumulate in drifts. I began to get drowsy, and Weatherford began to wonder if we shouldn't excuse ourselves. But presently the assembly was called to order and the General complacently announced the most recent plunder.

Today's contraband was boxes upon boxes of cologne --- Eternity, in case you wonder. As for the provenance of this cargo, one must speculate. The most obvious candidates for extortion would be the Pakistani smugglers who negotiate their jingle trucks across the border at Spin Boldak, weary diesel caravans crawling to the emporiums of Central Asia.

The chico banditos spritzed and sniffed one another approvingly, like debutantes at a ball. The General basked in the esteem, but presently it began to wear a little thin. The buzz of flies again obtruded. And so, with a flourish, he commanded a cupboard be flung open to reveal a cache of... Roloids. An admiring gasp erupted from throng. As if on cue, two grizzly henchmen stepped forth to dispense the pills, one per chico bandito, as somberly and reverently as if they were windowdressers laying out the choicest Mikimoto pearls at the 5th Avenue Tiffany's. One pill rolled to the floor and two of the younger badmashes lunged for it like park pigeons after a smitch of popcorn, but a sharp kick from the General's flip-flop put an end to *that* unseemly kerfuffle.

With an apologetic cough the General then summoned for a metallic briefcase and proceeded to the main business of the day. He fumbled with the combination, and brought forth the goods: dog-eared wads of greasy Pakistani rupees for the superior lackeys, and thick blue bricks of crisp and worthless Afghanis, which were flung to the common sort. (The greenback stash presumably wends its way UP the chain-of-command). Nor were Weatherford and I disregarded. As commanded by *Pashtunwali*, the native code, each of us was sent on his merry way with a slab amounting to some hundreds of thousands of Afghanis, or about \$3. This served me later in the Kandahar bazaar for the purchase of an embroidered skullcap, two clay water jug, and three watermelons.

All our foreign aid to Afghanistan will be distributed in this manner.

The General turned out to be a canary-fancier and on that basis we got along famously. He showed off his prize bird: a good songster in a clean cage, which he rattled tenderly with his fingernail while blowing kisses through his whiskers, like a walrus in heat. His birds, claimed the General, were imported from Germany, though once we had developed a certain intimacy he confessed to serious doubts about the trustworthiness of the supplier. Through the interpreter, we held a lengthy but inconclusive discussion on the relative merit of Gloucesters versus Harz Rollers. We agreed to disagree on the tradeoff between hardiness and melodiousness, but heartily concurred that plumage and form were merely superficial considerations, and song was all.

By no means does the General strike one as a bad man, rather, as simply a man who is in no hurry to rise above his circumstances. And as much can be said for the rest of the Afghans. Rough as they are, they set great store by delicate and ephemeral things: roses, songbirds, scent, a sigh. Gesture is real, and substance fleeting. There is ample material there for us to work with.

Keeping in Touch

But I digress... the main point is finally to say hello and let you know that all is well. Please send news!!! If you want to send a "Care Package" it will get shared with the guys of SF Village. We have a fine Bolshevik kibbutz going here and everything gets passed around. Big winners: homemade cookies and brownies, good coffee (instant or ground), powerbars, beef jerky, trailmix, magazines, Copenhagen. From the cheap seats, our Master Sergeant La Morte growls "tell 'em some hollow point 9mm ammo would be nice". (No I could never make that up, that really is his name) Other than that, as Sergeant Maine sums it up, "anything that doesn't melt" will be cause for celebration.

The APO address, which goes for the rate of regular US mail, is as follows:

Roger Pardo-Maurer
Coalition Coordination Cell
CJSOTF-A (2/3)
APO AE 09355

That stands for Combined (i.e. multinational) Joint (i.e. Army/Navy/Air Force) Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan.

Also, if you (or your office) want to take up a good cause and send goodies for the kids out in the villages, I will be only too happy to hand them out for you. (My camera gave up the ghost during a sandstorm, but I'm trying to get new one, and if possible will take pictures for you.) The kids mob you at every turn, and it seems that a horde of orphans is just waiting for you wherever you go. The villagers usually send them out first to greet the Americans, in order to break the ice and no doubt also to test our intentions. Just about anything from the dollar store will be a huge hit----these folks have nothing and expect nothing. Big winners: pens, crayons, little notepads. I brought a couple dozen Matchbox cars with me, and only wish I had brought a crateload.

I will be checking into Kandahar sporadically, and will have access to email when I am here. The mail service is fast and reliable. 10 days from stateside seems to be the norm, but mail has been arriving in as little as 5 days. I am starved for chit-chat from home. Please send news----I have made many new friends here, but think all the time of those back home.

How I wish you could see your troops in action, especially those kids from the 82nd! Don't believe a single word from the chattering classes that suggests the Nintendo

generation somehow isn't up to the snuff. From what I have seen of their good nature, their dedication, their courage, and their high spirits, they are worthy inheritors of the Republic, and it is safely in their trust. You should be reassured by their good work here, and very proud of how they represent you.

Yours aye,
RPM
B/3/20th Special Forces Group (Airborne)
"De Oppresso Liber"