

USIP - ADST
Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #40

Executive Summary

The subject of this interview returned recently from PRT Jalalabad, where he served as commander. He noted that he had had no training for this position and had only a brief (two-day) overlap, with his predecessor. In this context, he recommended that the “management teams” of PRT’s be trained and deployed together, with plenty of overlap with their predecessors, in order to build team efficiency and continuity.

Near the end of the subject’s tour, a helicopter team (Task Force Saber) was deployed to the PRT. The resulting increase in mobility was a major plus for the PRT.

The subject noted significant and frequent gaps in civilian staffing to his PRT. When he left post in June, there was not State representative at the PRT.

“Stovepipe” reporting is a problem at PRTs, according the subject. Different and separate reporting chains up to Kabul and to Washington are duplicative information that should be exchanged often is not. As a result, PRT personnel and their colleagues must rely on their informal relationships and informal communications to guarantee that information is exchanged.

Development assistance funding is a problem. The subject praised the effectiveness of CERP funds, especially their flexibility and speed – if programs are well coordinated. At the same time, USAID funding is slow and cumbersome. As a commander, the subject sometimes had to use CERP funds – just to get the job done – when USAID funding would have been more appropriate if quickly available.

The subject counseled that any “lessons learned” project should take into account the fact that all PRTs are different, because the provinces in which they are based, and their resulting challenges and needs, are very different.

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Afghanistan Experience Project

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Interviewed by: Jack Zetkovic
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Q: Could you please tell us when you served in Afghanistan and in what capacity?

A: Yes, I arrived in Afghanistan in September and left in June and I was the PRT commander in Jalalabad.

Q: That would be September '04 to June '05?

A: 05.

Q: Okay. Could you tell us something about how you ended up going there? What training you had, what preparation you had for the service on the ground in Afghanistan?

A: Basically zero training as a PRT commander. My understanding was there was a nominative process through my peacetime chain of command, which was fast. U.S. Civil Affairs Psychological Command where I was nominated to be one of seven individuals whose resume were forwarded up into country of which there were three of us chosen. That's how I got over there. Initially I was slated to go to Parwan. Even that wasn't determined until about a week or so when I was actually at Fort Bragg. I started doing my research. Of course on Parwan the layout is, what's the ethnic makeup, who the governor, just trying to get some informational nuggets. The day I was told to unpack my stuff I received a call to repack my stuff because I was going to go to Jalalabad, so that said, there was no time to and because I was changed of locations, I had no time to research. When I asked about a sort of pre-command course which I thought would be appropriate because we were considered as a battalion commander, I was told that there wouldn't be one, that there wasn't one. I think that was a problem because you have many things to do as a commander and again, coming from various backgrounds some individuals may need refresher training and property accountability. UCMJ administrative actions, so forth and so on. When I arrived in country and I still thought I was going to Parwan, I asked, okay, what about a country orientation, what about anything in country and there was again nothing. So, got down to Jalalabad two days after I was in country and just started to go from there. Unfortunately, I didn't have much of a handoff because the guy I was replacing was under pressure to get back so we just kind of went from there.

Q: How much of an overlap did you have?

A: About two days and a day and a half of that he spent looking for equipment that he couldn't find initially.

Q: That he was responsible for?

A: Right as part of the property accountability I was only going to sign for the things I could get my hands on and there were a couple of discrepancies that he spent some time looking at.

Q: Gotcha. Okay. Did you have any time in Kabul at the embassy or anywhere else before heading out to the PRT?

A: No.

Q: Wow. Did you go straight to the PRT or did you go through Kabul?

A: Yes.

Q: You went straight to the PRT.

A: Right. I was I think it was on a Sunday. I think I got in country on a Friday. The decision was made on Sunday and it just so happened that there was a squad from my PRT, from the Jalalabad PRT up there and it was either try and catch a ride with them or wait for a ring flight which may or may not happen with all my stuff. So I sort of introduced myself as the PRT commander to the new guys that would be working for me and they kind of got the hint that it would be a good idea to drive me back down to Jalalabad. There was no stopping. There was no introductions, no nothing, it was just go down there and try and do some good things.

Q: Wow. Okay. Now, you said you had expressed an interest in going to a PRT. What was the period of time between expressing an interest and then getting assigned? My question relates to someone in that position, how could you constructively use that with any kind of language training, on line training, anything?

A: Well, I'm an AGR officer, so I had a daytime job and that was as the deputy G-3 to the 352nd Civil Affairs Command. I was told when they did the slating process in the civil affairs they slate you meaning they tried to look who is scheduled to move, what positions are available, taking into account promotions so forth and so on. I was told on or about February of '04 that I was nominated for a position. Then between February and July it was you're going, you're not going, you're going, you're not going. I remember very vividly that I was told on the 10th that I was not going. On the 11th I had a TDY down at Fort Bragg where I ran into the G-3 in the hallway, he said, "Congratulations." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "Oh, you're going." So, realistically from 11 July through 07, 09 September is when I showed up at the mobile site. Roughly five and a

half weeks of which I took two weeks of leave time to spend with my family before I departed, so figure somewhere around three weeks to get ready.

Q: Your tour of duty from September to June, was that a set tour of duty?

A: The time period was for a year. It was not to exceed a year, so I got there in September, fully expected to stay there for a year. Two months into the tour they started asking us if we wanted to stay our whole year or what, which I was kind of surprised at. What happened was when the new CJTF commander came in with his staff it was my understanding that he was also going to be bringing in new PRT commanders which made sense because the regional commander was switching out, the marines was switching out, civil affairs was going to be switching out and since most of the PRT commanders belong to the civil affairs community it was thought that they would be leaving on or around that same time frame. Once it was identified, or once it was made clear that my PRT command replacement was actually in country in Kabul, I said, it makes no sense for you to be there. You've been there for three months. You need to come down here. We've had some events planned and it would greatly benefit you to come down here. She came down on or around the 30th, 29th or 30th of May. I had put together a two week continuity plan where we would go over everything to include property accountability, meetings, engagements, my battle rhythm and then the second week I would be there to sort of be her safety net. In other words, you watch how I run it for a week. We'll do all those things. We'll catch things up on the second week. You can start to run things and I'll just kind of be sitting in the backside waiting and if you need my help. I told her I was prepared to stay as long as she felt I needed to be there.

Q: That's a nice handoff. That's how it should be.

A: We did two weeks and I think it went over pretty well.

Q: That's actually exceptional because a lot of the people we've talked to have had the same experience you had going in, which was not much preparation at all.

A: Yes and you're there, I mean really it goes by so quickly. The first three months you're trying to figure out what you don't know. The next three months you figure, I'm starting to get it and you're starting to hit your stride. You know who the players are, you know what the meetings are, you're feeling comfortable in the setting and surroundings. You're more comfortable with your environment. All the players and actors in it. Then the next couple of months you're probably executing maybe at a peak, but then when its getting time to go you start smelling the barn door and you want that person to get there. I mean it makes no sense that each PRT commander has to come in and start at the bottom of the learning curve. It was my goal that she wouldn't have to do that and would be spared the difficulties when that occurs.

Q: Could you describe the other, well, first off the other military personnel in the PRT who was providing security?

A: We had an Iowa National Guard. What were they? 161st or something, I can't remember. Infantry. They were an infantry company.

Q: They were there the whole time you were there or they were rotated out?

A: No. They were rotated there. They got there a few months before me and left about a month or so before I did. Excellent group of guys. They provided force protection. I had two civil affairs teams out of the 450th civil affairs battalion. I had an explosive ordinance detachment. I had a provincial training and assessment team. I had a tactical team. I had a reinforced company of Marines. I had a PSYOP detachment. I had embedded trainers or LNOs that worked with ETT. I had a first sergeant out of an engineer company from Kabul. Then right towards the end of my tour we received a task force of helicopters for a medical evacuation capability to the south.

Q: Yes, I've heard about that.

A: Task Force Saber. So, they showed up with four or five helicopters and about 35 people.

Q: That was a very important addition to your team.

A: It gave us incredible capability that really took us a while to get into our planning process because for nine months, eight months we didn't have one and now all of a sudden we had this capability and it greatly aided and increased our capabilities.

Q: What were they flying?

A: UH60s basically and occasionally there was an Apache that came by, but not very often. Mainly they were UH60s.

Q: Okay, and then the U.S. civilian personnel, State, AID, Agriculture?

A: Yes.

Q: One of each?

A: Initially yes and then I had at various times I had gaps and then I had another USAID person that got added so actually it was a total of two USAID people, one USDA person and then I did not have a State Department person when I left.

Q: Can you describe the general security situation in the area during the time you were there?

A: Well, security was first it was major focus area for many reasons, but what we tried to do, we tried to tie the security using the standards that the UN has in its reporting of freedom of movement zones if you will. They use the green amberet so we tried to tie

our standards to that. When I got there there were four permissive districts. When I left there were 16 permissive districts. We had a pretty good relationship with the security elements, a very good relationship with the border patrol in general with the governor, with the A&P, with the A&A, with the NDS, very good relationships with all of them. We attended a few meetings. We took an initiative to have a security commission. Actually it was an idea that was brought up by the Afghans where we'd bring LNOs from all the security elements in a weekly meeting at the working group level. We would attend the governors' biweekly security provincial security meeting. He would put out directives, tasks, projects, concerns, and issues. We would meet every week at the working group level again, which the PRT facilitated to hash out possible recommendations for his implementation. We did it so we could bring all perspectives into it so that everybody knew what everybody else was doing and then again we weren't showing favoritism to one side or another so we could involve everybody in there. So, we think it worked pretty well. Some of the things that we talked about were counter narcotics, the roles and responsibilities of the individual security elements within the province and again this was just Nangarhar. We were implementing something else for Laghman, but eventually Laghman got taken over by another PRT up north. We also had a very good relationship with the security elements up there as well, minus one district.

We took on roles and responsibilities. We took on heavy weapons turn in. We took on.

Q: DDR?

A: We did some DDR. We supported DDR. Out of DDR my main focus was clearing out all the caches that we knew about.

Q: You mentioned counter narcotics. Was there a focus on it or not?

A: There couldn't help but be one because we were by some accounts the largest growing province of narcotics. The governor and the police chief got very strong feelings about it and said, hey, we will not grow it this year. They basically had a zero tolerance for what they knew. We were at a couple of meetings where the police chief, the deputy police chief and the governor spoke out very strongly about it. As a result we think we did very well in terms of poppy not even going into the ground. Other than that if we found something, if we found some fields, we plugged them and then we turned them over to the A&P and when we could then we would go out there with them just to kind of monitoring in a monitoring sense. We didn't look for it. We didn't go into anybody's home searching for it. If we found it we turned it in.

Q: Well, you did more than some of the PRTS because some of them are so busy doing other stuff they don't have time to focus on the drugs at all.

A: Well, it was not a mission. Counter narcotics was not a mission for us, but we had to be involved because as a big province there were many actors that were coming in from time to time to do things and so we tried to keep abreast of everything that was going on. Like I said, there were two the CPEF organization, something police eradication force,

maybe central police eradication force. Anyway, they came in two separate occasions to go look in what was determined last year to be the hot zones or the major poppy growing areas and they came back with one plant. So, we told them we also told those guys at the time, hey, here's a couple of grids where you will find some poppies. I guess it was too hard for them to do to read the zones that they were just supposed to go in, so maybe the next time around, but again it wasn't a major mission, but because of the area we were in we had to at least maintain the situation.

Q: Gotcha. Okay. Could you describe the interagency relationships that you had? You had State, AID, and some Agriculture people at various times in the PRT and in the reporting to Embassy Kabul, do you think that those were adequate or could have been better, you tell me.

A: The relationships or the reporting?

Q: Both. Take your pick.

A: Well, I didn't report anything to Kabul. They weren't my chain of command. I mean I reported up through my military chain of command down at Task Force Thunder and whatever they wanted to do with the information that I provided to them that was fine and dandy. Reporting to the embassy was not anywhere remote; something that I would even put any resources against. Okay, so that said, the relationships. What I did when I got there was after observing just for a couple of days how things were and where I thought we might be able to improve some of these inefficiencies was I brought my civilians and my civil affairs in and we came up with one mission statement for the PRT and so took away from everyone's individual missions and rice bowls. We had one mission statement, so that was my first interaction with them, trying to get the wording just right. It was funny because my USAID rep really had a problem with one of the words.

Q: Because words mean different things to people in different bureaucracies.

A: Exactly, correct. The State Department individual that I had was a former naval officer so he was a little bit empathetic to what I was trying to do. The bottom line was he was able to sway her into the wording that we wanted to use. Again, it's not to say that once it's there it's there forever or written in stone. My philosophy was to bring them in, take their concerns, their critical tasks into our planning, into our resourcing and see where we could use them to benefit the overall objectives for what we were trying to achieve. I think we were pretty successful. That's my perception. You can probably get other perceptions if you talk to them and see how we did or didn't do. They were part of the briefings. They had to compete for resources. They sat on the project nomination board so when somebody brought a project for funding.

Q: These were the CERP funds?

A: CERP funds or it could have been with AID funds. It just wasn't military funding. If somebody wanted to bring a project to the PRT for its consideration for funding, then

there was a board that consisted of the civilians, civil affairs and then later on when the marines came more involved, we put a Marine rep in there so we could give them some situation awareness and likewise when they wanted to bring a project that they were considering then we could also gain awareness of it. I stayed out of that because I didn't want to influence and so they only brought me recommendations. Everybody had an opportunity from different angles to look at a project and see what was going to be the effect of it and had we thought of everything so that we just weren't building a school, but USAID would say okay, we'll check to make sure there are textbooks that will be there and then we'll say, we've got the teachers' training program so we'll contact the Department of Education to make sure there are teachers that are slated to go to that school to support it. What are we going to do to power it? Well, we're going to put a generator in it and it's going to have a year's worth of fuel, blah, blah. It just gave different perspectives so that we made sure we weren't throwing somebody's pet project through. It wasn't being done haphazardly. Some of the civilians also could bring maybe what they knew from the IO or the NGO community such as don't do that, somebody else is doing that. Okay, good idea. We'd take our resources and put them elsewhere.

Q: Did you find the structure of the development resources to be adequate or was it unwieldy? It was a mix, there was AID money, there was CERP money, but was it the right mix for you or do you think it could have been arranged better?

A: It was a lot easier with my CERP money because I never really saw the AID money. They talked about these quick funds and these quick funds and they never came to fruition the time I was there. They had already spent it or obligated it because I got there towards the end of the fiscal year and then starting October we kept waiting and they just never arrived. I'm not sure if they were there. So, really we used the CERP funding and we used ODACA funding for projects. Probably, I can't really speak too much on the quick side of the house. Additionally our province had the benefit of being in alternative livelihoods, which meant that we had millions of dollars being thrown at us. In fact that was the impetus I believe for bringing the second person from the USAID so that my USAID rep could focus on alternative livelihoods, 1) which was a multimillion dollar project or program and then the other individual then could focus on the normal if you will USAID responsibilities or responsibilities that she had. We got some funding out of USAID for some longer term projects, bigger projects, bigger dollar items, but really not a whole lot.

Q: You mentioned the NGO community. Could you characterize the relationship with the NGOs in your area?

A: There were a couple of things we did. I think we had somewhere between 20 and 30 major IOs or NGOs. There were a couple of different forms where we engaged them. There were technical working groups that were already set up for health, for education, for sanitation, for you name it. We sent representatives to those working groups. Usually I would send a civil affairs rep, but when the agricultural group got stood up and my USDA individual come in then he took lead on, on that working group. When I had my

corps of engineer guy that was there under contract to USAID he went to a couple of the more technical working group if you will that dealt with his expertise. We engaged them there. I told my guys to extend your hand first. Again, if there are some things that we can do to help them, partner with them, we need to talk to them to make sure that we're not doing the same thing that they are because if they are then we can use our resources elsewhere and I had heard that that was the case in some places. We didn't want to do that.

The other thing we did was we had a very good relationship with UNAMA and the regional director and the last PRT group had had him set up meetings at UNAMA to bring in the IO's and the NGOs and the PRT could send a rep or two and we could dialogue at that level. I sent my CA team leader because she was more intuned to doing those kinds of things. Again, we tried to be very upfront with what we were doing, why we intended to do it. Told them what we were doing and I guess it could be, I guess it went okay. I never heard any rumblings except the typical, every time they go somewhere they bring weapons. Every time they go somewhere they're dressed in a uniform. So, they would complain if we were in uniform or if we were out of uniform or if we're driving or not driving, or whatever the case was.

Q: We've had some of the NGO people say that they never knew what was best. If the military people were in uniform, then they were in uniform, if they were not in uniform, then they were seen somehow as covering up their identity.

A: There was no way. Again he facilitated the meetings. The feedback I got was something that we wanted to continue to do at least on an informational sharing basis. We even partnered with a couple of IOs and NGOs on some projects that we were doing. Again, we tried to offer our hand in friendship first.

Q: Do you think it was grasped?

A: I think sometimes it was. We had a very good relationship with individuals in the health field. We did a couple of medcaps where we coordinated with them, told them what we were going to do and see if they had any ideas where it should be done, where they weren't going. Here's what our plan was, they were more than welcome to participate so I think we had a very good relationship with the medical IOs and NGOs. We did some with I.F. Hope and then we did a couple later on with not really an IO or an NGO, but we did some with DAI, which was the implementer for the alternative livelihood program. If we could add a couple of dollars and it made a difference or improved a project or we could do some cost sharing, then we were able to extend the use of our resources.

Q: Okay. Stepping back from the day to day work, the basic goal of this interview project is to come up with lessons learned. You mentioned upfront a very abbreviated training program. Are there other areas in your personal preparation, in your day to day work, but then in a broader from a broader perspective things that you would recommend first to individuals who are going out there and then from an organizational perspective

to improve the structure of the PRTs and how they work? That's a big question.

A: Yes, you may have to repeat some of it. I think first and I've kind of brought this up because there's not a one size fits all in Afghanistan. So, when it comes to civil affairs because I'm also a civil affairs officer, I think we need to be a little bit smarter in how we set our line up cards because the requirements in one PRT for civil affairs capabilities don't equal the civil affairs capabilities required in another. For example, I needed a city planner. I needed a waste management. I needed a city administrator. I needed a power generation power distribution. In some PRTs those thoughts won't come to the front for another year or so and that's okay. That doesn't make it right or wrong. It just means as we look at manning, we need to match the manning with the requirements and I don't think we do a very good job there.

Secondly, training and I understand that this has already been addressed. There was a precommand course that took place in Kabul with a group of PRT commanders that are now in place. I understand that went very well. I never got a look at what the agenda was or what the items were, but I know that USAID was on it. I know that they talked about various programs, fundings, things like that. I think that's definitely a good step in the right direction.

Organizationally, again one PRT structure doesn't equal another's so you kind of have to take a look at what you have to work with and because of the rotations you don't always know who you're going to get with. For example, I had three different marine companies. I had three different force protection teams. One was outstanding, one was average and one was not very, not as good as they could have been.

Q: Should the rotations be longer?

A: No, they don't need to necessarily be longer, but there is some thought as to whether or not the management team or the PRT management team should come over as one group, i.e., they're identified, they're assembled, they're trained and then they're deployed and then the next group comes over as such. I've seen that idea kicked around. It's got some pluses and minuses to it like most anything else. I think again, just researching it, becoming familiar with it, it is a puzzle that has not been solved for hundreds if not thousands of years and certainly we're not going to be able to change it in the brief nine months to a year that we're there. There's so many different things going on that again, just trying to maintain situational awareness, so research, read books, become familiar with the area that you're going to be working in before you go. Definitely, it would be good if they could figure out how to provide some training in the mobilization training or the predeployment training, whether its civil affairs or even the infantry guys because we were able to overcome a lot of issues by just improving our communication and improving our education. That went for both the civilians that have never ever worked at a battalion level, didn't understand it and to the military who at a battalion level never worked with civilians. It's that kind of an organization. There's no doctrine. I think it is evolving and the way PRTs were designed at what they were expected to do two years ago has evolved in some cases and in some cases maybe its not.

I think that's kind of the hard part. You can't pick one up and put it down somewhere else and expect the same things from it. Likewise, the manning is always going to be the same, but we'll just have to learn to deal with it.

Q: Any recommendations of more people that we should talk to and interview, individuals that you bumped up against who would have a good perspective, not just Americans, but other internationals as well?

A: Well, I think. Did you talk to (name)?

Q: We've interviewed him. It was a very long interview and it was probably the most in-depth interview we've had.

A: Wow. And my regional commander is now here.

Q: Oh, who's that?

A: He's at the Pentagon. (Name).

Q: Yes, he was on our list and we were trying to find him.

A: He's in the J5 at the Pentagon.

Q: Okay. We'll try to get through to him again. We've had his contact information in Afghanistan and I think he was just too darn busy. (note: said interview took place the following week)

(end of interview)

Q: Good, okay.

A: I would try, the number there is (number). The individual you'll talk to is a Captain (Name). He might be able to give you some good contact numbers, tell you when they're drilling.

Q: Yes, we want to get more of a perspective. We've talked to maybe a handful of people who have done the civil affairs side and probably too many of the diplomats.

A: Well, these guys should pretty much be able to tell you what they thought. Again, they were all over. I could give you the brigade was a 360th civil affairs brigade and they're located in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I have some numbers for them, too.

Q: Can I drop you an e-mail?

A: Sure can. What I'll do is I can forward it to the brigade commander and then maybe touch base between you and he and see if there is some sort of accommodation he might be able to.

Q: Great. That's great. Thank you. We've talked to a good number of the AID contractors, some of the State people, some internationals, and a good number of military folks, but we would like to get more of the military perspective. Any concluding thoughts as our tape is heading toward the end?

A: No.

Q: Okay, well, thanks a lot for doing this. I really appreciate it.

A: Sure.

[END SIDE] [END TAPE] [END INTERVIEW]