

USIP – ADST

Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #49

Executive Summary

The interviewee was one of two USDA representatives at the Parvan PRT from January-July, 2005. In describing the recruitment process he experienced, he notes that there was high attrition among potential USDA candidates, either because of the protracted security clearance process, or the difficulty passing the stringent medical exams. He also highlights the fact that the Foreign Agricultural Service, which provides support for these individuals in Afghanistan, does not fund their salaries. As a result, they must be paid by their home offices. This is a significant negative incentive for those services to release their employees for service in Afghanistan.

The interviewee evaluated the four agricultural projects that he worked on as “modest successes” so far. These included two crop demonstration trials, one of which involves the very promising introduction of soybeans into the Afghan diet as a good protein source. The other projects were fruit tree replanting projects, financed by the Commander’s Discretionary Funds. This funding mechanism for relatively low cost projects was praised as very efficient. The interviewee also found the CERP funding mechanism, used for the higher cost agricultural trials, a sufficiently efficient mechanism at the time he was there.

The interviewee described the PRT concept as a “brilliant” one for the purpose of extending the reach of the central government, providing a security presence, and undertaking significant and sorely needed reconstruction and development. He would like to see the PRT model continue. His primary criticism, however, was the military’s decision, which he characterized as a “terrible misjudgment,” to remove the dedicated force protection from the PRT. He explained that once the dedicated force protection was lost, the PRT was obliged to “scrounge around and get resources from Bagram airfield,” thereby reducing its missions from four to five a day to one or two daily, and “stifling the progress of the PRT.” He suggests remedying the shortage of security personnel, if the military can no longer provide them, by relying on civilian contractors or the Afghan National Army.

On the issue of relations with NGOs, the interviewee found no hostility from the various NGOs operating in his area. It appeared that the NGOs preferred to operate independently and did not see a need for collaboration with the PRT. Finally, the interviewee expressed his keen disappointment that the public affairs aspect of his work was not more actively promoted. He was especially chagrined that his own initiatives to publicize his work were rebuffed by his home agency.

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

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Q: When were you in Afghanistan and if you could also describe how you got there?

A: Yes, I will tell you how I found out about it which I think is as important as some of the other things I'll tell you about. I left my (previous) job in early January of 2005. January 14th we left Washington to go to Afghanistan and I say we, there were four of us who went together, four USDA individuals who went together and both left and returned at the same time. We returned to Washington together for a debriefing and I believe that was July 11th of this year. The way I found out about it was through the USDA website. My agency is NRCS, the National Resource Conservation Service. We have a website mynrcs and it's for employees. It has newsletters and announcements and things and technical pages and many resources on the page, but one of the things I always check in on is what some of the vacancy announcements are and what some of the temporary assignments are and so forth. There was back in early June of 2004, there was a posting of a USDA assignment for six months in Afghanistan and when I pulled it up and looked at the job description, the knowledge, skills and abilities for the position, they looked like I could respond to them. There were some KSAs that talked about extensive international experience and I had only once gone over to Africa in 1988 for USDA doing soil survey work for about two months, but outside of that I hadn't much international experience. So, I wasn't terribly optimistic, but I put together my best application and sent it in to FAS. About a month later they responded to me and asked me to come down for an interview and I did that sometime in late summer of 2004 and met with five individuals from FAS. Actually one was from NRCS, in charge of the international conservation division of our agency, and then four FAS people. One was the team leader who was in charge of the Afghanistan USDA cadre.

We had a fairly extensive interview and about three weeks later I was called back and told that I was accepted and that I would need to get a security clearance and a medical clearance through the State Department. Fortunately, I had already had a security clearance because of some of the work I had done for USDA. I'm a photomap interpretations specialist, an aerial photo interpretation specialist, so I had access to classified imagery and had to get some security clearance for that back in 1998 and that clearance is good I believe for 10 years. That was a big hurdle.

Q: That was helpful to have had that.

A: That was very much, because that's been a big stumbling block for many people, not so much that they can't get clearance, but it takes so long and they're on a fairly short timeline here to get people processed and out. They want to make sure that people get these things done right away. That was fortunate for me I had it done. For the medical, I was asked to come down to Washington again and go to the State Department and get a two-day medical examination. The first day you get a lot of blood and samples drawn and so forth and then you wait a day and on the third day you go back and you have some more tests done, but in addition they have the results from your lab samples. They're able to give you clearance or not during that third day. From what I've heard in hindsight, the medical exam is very rigorous and if there's any question concerning your health, mental or physical I assume, too, they will stop you from getting clearance. I have heard from more than one person that's either gone through the process and was eventually able to make it over to Afghanistan but after several follow up appointments to determine blood work or determine maybe a heart condition or whatever the concern was to see if they were healthy enough to overcome that question mark. I've also heard from two people through e-mails and phone conversations that were not able to do that, who subsequently could not make it over there. That's just personally my experience. I'm sure there are many more there that FAS or others could tell you have not been able to pass one or both of the exams. I think that the attrition rate there is fairly high. I don't know if that is something that they can work on or not or whether they want to keep that standard as high as it is right now, but apparently it has blocked many potential USDA candidates from going over.

Q: I would think the medical hurdle is going to be significant and there wouldn't be much that someone could do to change that. For the security clearance hurdle I would think the State Department would have it within its power to speed up the process, still being thorough, but just making sure that the papers are being handled in an expeditious manner. Having undergone both of these procedures, I make that observation. Fortunately, then you were processed.

A: I was processed and that was in sometime in November and at that time we started to talk about specifics. I had a meeting with the FAS people, and we started to discuss places that I could potentially be assigned. As you probably know there were many PRTs that USDA people were assigned to already and we had a six months rotation, so the thought was to fill in behind some of the people that had already been there and also to place people in new PRTs where no one had been before because there had been new ones popping up in Afghanistan over the last couple of years, a fair number of them as a matter of fact. Also, there were other PRTs that were being taken over by the coalition forces such as England and Canada and Italy and so on where we did have USDA people and there were question marks as to whether we would continue to have a USDA presence in some of these because we were so dependent on outside funding, for example, USAID or military source funding such as CERP funding, to get projects on the ground. Without U.S. military there that would be one main source that was going to be lost and whether or not it would be worth sending a USDA person to some of these coalition PRTs was a big question mark. As it turned out for me, I ended up in the Parvan PRT, which is at the Bagram airfield in the Parvan Province; that's where the

name came from. It was I believe different than most PRTs in that it was a very small component of the Bagram airfield, which was a quite large facility and probably the main U.S. presence in terms of numbers in Afghanistan. There are, I'm going to guess, 5,000 to 6,000 U.S. military people there along with a number of coalition partners, Canadians and Poles and UAE, United Arab Emirates and maybe three or four other countries that had smaller units there. We were co-located in the PRT with a small Korean army contingent and they were actually part of our PRT.

Q: Oh, they were?

A: Yes. We actually shared office space with them. I became very fond and good friends with many of them. They were a big part of my detail at the Parvan PRT.

Q: So, your PRT was a little larger than most because you had the Koreans?

A: Larger, yes, but the PRT itself, the numbers were probably about the same if not smaller actually than some of the other outlying PRTs because we did not have to have a security force in our PRT. I think in some of the outlying PRTs they actually had security force members that sort of bolstered the number of soldiers assigned to that PRT. Because we were in the confines of Bagram airfield the security was already provided for us and all we had were force protection people and civil affairs people that were assigned. The Koreans worked with the civil affairs team and they had civil engineers that were assigned to the PRT as well as doctors and sometimes dentists or nurses. They were outreach type of military personnel, people that had civilian skills that could work with Afghans and units of government and so forth.

Q: But you were the only one doing agriculture in the PRT?

A: No, and this was the one other unique thing about Parvan PRT, we were the only PRT that had two USDA people assigned to it and that was in hindsight I think an excellent idea because crops and soils were my strength and my counterpart was a veterinarian and of course had a strong background in animals and animal care. So, we complemented each other very well. We got along personally very well and there was a synergy there that I think was created because we had each other to work with and to build programs and I think that was quite successful that we were able to do things together.

Q: How did you define your mission and what specific kinds of projects did you decide to undertake?

A: Right. Well, I wished I had my power point presentation because there were very specific points that we had in our USDA mission statement. If I could just sort of guess I would say that it was to provide technical and financial assistance to agricultural units in the Afghan community to help them advance their needs in the agricultural sector and I emphasize that we worked primarily with units of government. We did not work with private individuals. There were just too many needy Afghan farmers to service, so what we tried to do was to be much more broad based and to provide support systems for the

Afghan farmers through the Afghan agricultural ministry.

Q: When you arrived in January of this year, was there already a program underway and were you able to continue that or did you have to have meetings with the ministry of agriculture to determine what projects you'd be doing?

A: Another good point that I should make was that my counterpart was at Bagram six months prior to when I arrived there. He had worked from I believe May to the end of November, I think that's six months, at the Parvan PRT and then took a few months off and came back in February about a month after I had arrived. He had worked on many projects or many project proposals. By the time I got there, there was a big project that was already formulated and the project had been submitted to DOD for approval and I was able to sort of hit the ground running, which I think was excellent. My colleague had at least two, maybe three projects that he already had been working on and which were in the process of being implemented and when he came back he continued on those. The advantage of the later USDA people that are coming in is that most of them should have projects that are ongoing and if not, then they may have project nominations that have been written. I tried to leave a project nomination fully written for my successor and I don't know the outcome of that nomination, whether it has been approved or not, but that's the kind of thing that is beneficial when you have someone following in your footsteps.

Q: The USDA I guess has committed to a succession; that is, they have an ongoing recruitment so that there are people in the pipeline whom they will presumably fund or make available?

A: Yes. FAS (Foreign Agricultural Service) is spearheading that, not without some problems. USDA is unique in that the people that are selected to go over to Afghanistan to do this work are being paid not by any particular State Department or USAID or FAS; they're actually being paid by the agency they work for, which as you can imagine could be a rub. When I went to Afghanistan I was being paid by the Vermont State NRCS budget. My salary was being paid by the Vermont NRCS; not only that, I accrued some danger pay and some hazardous duty pay and that was paid for by Vermont NRCS. That came out of their budget. FAS provided transportation and the equipment and the training, which is no small feat, but it doesn't match a six-month salary. That was a concern. The other thing that did not work smoothly is that we were very anxious to have some in-country time with our replacements and because of the security and medical clearances, neither of the two people assigned to come to Parvan PRT after my colleague and I left reached Bagram by the time we left in July. We were very disappointed in that because there was no transition time, no in-country time to really guide this person on to the next step. It would have been very important, but it never happened.

Q: I can imagine how that works. The overlap would have been real helpful, certainly.

A: Very helpful, yes.

Q: Those individuals did arrive, but I guess they just arrived later.

A: Well, one individual arrived, the replacement for my colleague, a veterinarian did eventually arrive. She is there right now. My replacement, who was a gentleman from my agency from Utah, unfortunately got tripped up at the last moment and didn't get his medical clearance and was unable to make the trip.

Q: Right, so for your projects who knows what's happening?

A: Well, I just coincidentally wrote an e-mail to the commander of the PRT yesterday and got a nice reply back from him this morning. I was asking about the projects. We had, and this is I think an important point to note about PRTs because we are working mostly with Afghans and most of us do not have fluent language skills, we were provided with interpreters. In our case at the Parvan PRT we had a wonderful gentleman who was about my age, a little bit older; he was 56 years old, and an Afghan American. He grew up in Kabul, but in 1974 he left the country, came to the United States, got his masters degree in California at Fresno State in agriculture, has a bachelor's degree from Kabul University in agriculture and came back to Afghanistan as an interpreter about three years ago and has been there on and off ever since. He's a contractor, as many of the interpreters are. He was assigned to us as our agricultural advisor interpreter. So, all the agricultural projects we worked very closely with him on and he was not only a good interpreter, but he also guided us in many of the nuances of dealing with the Afghans themselves and knew many of them personally. It was amazing how we would go to meetings and they'd get to talking because they were agricultural people and they were former classmates or they knew of people and so it immediately created a good working relationship for us in many situations.

Q: Now, he sounds like an exceptionally well-qualified interpreter. Some interpreters have been described as maybe "so-so" shall we say, but this gentleman clearly had language and subject knowledge.

A: Yes, subject knowledge and the social skills, too. He was clearly a real find and one of the things I was trying to write to find out last night was his phone number because I've lost contact with him. I passed the message on that I wanted to find out and the point I haven't made is that he is sort of the curator of our projects. He knows them all. He will be there until the end of November and he will be the thread that carries these projects on. In our case that's going to be vital because my successor was not there to carry out my projects, but I have full confidence that he would know how to proceed with these projects that we started in the spring and summer.

Q: What were some of the projects; what kinds of concrete things were you trying to do?

A: Yes. Well, let me talk a little bit just about my colleague, a veterinarian. He was very involved in setting up veterinary clinics for each province that we worked in and so that would be one in Parvan, one in Kapisa, one in Panjshir and one in Kabul, but that would have been associated with the University of Kabul. These were clinics where Afghan

veterinarians could come and get diagnoses of things. They would have lab facilities, able to diagnose problems with animals. It would have a necropsy facility, meaning that they could do autopsies, necropsies as they're called I guess. I was corrected not to call them autopsies.

Q: Oh, in animals you do necropsies I guess. Okay.

A: Right. They would be able to do those kinds of procedures and determine what kinds of diseases or problem the animal had that had recently died. As you can imagine, in a country like Afghanistan they have many exotic diseases that we do not have here and some of them, like hoof and mouth or black leg, I guess are a big problem. These are things that need to be diagnosed quickly to stop the spread of epidemics and so forth. My colleague was very big on getting these labs built, not only built, but equipped and the equipment went quite far. I mean they would actually provide vehicles for the facility. They might even provide fuel for a year for the vehicles. They would provide generators because most rural areas are not up on the grid. I mean, really the only place that you could have somewhat reliable electricity was in Kabul itself. Outside of that you had none, so everyone that had any electricity ran on generator so the generators were provided and equipment was provided and medicine was provided, those kinds of things.

For me, I worked with him on a joint project. There was a university in Kapisa Province started by the famous northern alliance leader, Ahmed Shah Massoud, who ended up being assassinated on September 9th, 2001 two days before 9/11.

Q: I remember that. I didn't realize he had founded a university?

A: Yes. Al Baruni. That was in his home area. He was from the Panjshir, but this was right at the mouth of the Panjshir in an area called Golbahar, where he had the university. It was actually an old textile factory and they converted some of the buildings into classroom space, but they were putting in a new campus and the first building that they were going to build was an agricultural building that would have lab facilities for students and also for farmers to have soils or crops tested to determine things that were wrong or needed to be analyzed. It was a teaching lab as well as a functional lab; that was our thought. We were going to build the building and equip it and have it as a regional agricultural facility. We had the ground breaking in March. There was an existing building there that we were going to convert. To make a long story short, the building did not pass muster by the Korean engineers that were on our PRT. They said that it wasn't a safe and sound building and that we would be throwing our money away to convert it. At the time I left, we were rewriting the PNF - the project nomination form- so that they could get it resubmitted. I think it was an excellent project and I hope it gets funded, but that was one of those that we left on the table when we left the PRT.

Q: Yes, was it likely that they would use that building or would they just start again?

A: Oh, we would definitely start again. The consensus was that this was not a building that was worth converting. What will happen to that building I have no idea. It was an

existing shell of a building, new, but poorly constructed. That's a very big problem in Afghanistan as I'm sure in many Third World countries where the materials and the design is subpar and when the Korean engineers looked at it, they said there was no foundation built for this. The bricks, they were kind of blocks, like cinder blocks, full of sand and they just went on and on about all the structural problems that were there. To put \$80,000, which was budgeted for this newly designed building would have just been a waste of money.

Q: It's a good thing they did that proper analysis and made sure.

A: Yes, it was. It was a lesson learned, but we had a big setback because we actually had a big ceremony there with all the Al Baruni faculty and the potential contractor and so forth and it was kind of a little bit of egg on our face because we learned about this after the fact. I think it should have been before the fact, but I certainly think we made the right choice.

Q: Sure. What other things were you working on during your time there?

A: I personally had four projects. Two were what I call crop demonstration trials and one of those was already written up partly when I got to Bagram in January. It was for the Kapisa Province in a village called Mahmood-Raqi, which was only about half an hour away from Bagram, so it was convenient. It was a province that had a large agricultural base, but not much agricultural work had been done there and we were working with the provincial agricultural director, Mohammed Raki, and he was very cooperative. He assigned a piece of provincial land about 100 acres in size that we could use to grow certain varieties of crops to see how well they did in the Afghan environment. We contracted with some seed dealers in Pakistan, a Pioneer seed dealer, and we purchased seed for corn, soybeans and sorghum, and also different grasses. They were hybrid seeds, which are not typically used in Afghanistan. We were interested to see how hybrid seeds would do in that kind of environment. Plus, we purchased equipment for planting, a tractor, some attachment equipment and funds for labor, funds for creating a fence around our crop demonstration trial, and various other things. We had about an \$80,000 budget for that as well and realized that there were many things that we could have, should have done, prior to getting it on the ground. It was a modest success.

We got the crops planted, although somewhat smaller than we had originally planned. I would say quite a bit smaller than we had originally planned because of water problems and by that I mean that nothing in Afghanistan grows unless you have irrigation. In this case there was irrigation that was provided, but the field hadn't been used for years, so they had to really do a lot of land grading to get the water to where they wanted it to go and most of the plots in Afghanistan are very small, maybe half an acre to an acre in size. We were looking at a 60-acre field and this was much larger than they were able to manage. So, we scaled it back to about 15 acres. When I left we had a good stand of soybeans. We had a modest stand of corn and the sorghum was not doing so well because of lack of water and the grasses hadn't been planted yet because we were going

to do them on some of the marginal pieces. I didn't mention that we also had sunflowers that were coming up and they were modestly successful.

Q: Would the sunflowers be for oil?

A: Yes, they would be or for animal feed or both. You could squeeze them and then use the refuse for animal feed. The big excitement for them in particular were soybeans. The Afghan diet both for humans and animals is very low in protein. Soybeans provide about 38% protein in the source of the bean, so that's much higher than corn or some of your other grains like wheat or oats or what have you.

Q: But would soybeans be new to the Afghan diet?

A: Relatively new.

Q: Would they would have to be processed in the right way so that people would eat them?

A: You're exactly right. Soybeans cannot be eaten raw because there are some issues, especially human concerns, that you can get sick. There's toxicity there, so they have to be roasted or processed. The people that we were working with on the soybean trial, actually Nestle Corporation, were providing the seed for free. They were asking us to keep records on the growth and vigor of the soybeans, but the program also allowed that they would buy the beans back from the farmer and they would process the beans. They were as interested in human nutrition as they were in animal nutrition; they were going to create a soy flour, which would be supplementing the wheat flour used in the staple bread there, "nan," which is a flatbread. It's very good.

Q: Right, I've had it.

A: Yes? So, what they wanted to do was put in about 25% soy flour in the nan and that would create a higher protein food source. I thought it made wonderful sense and that was the plan: to purchase back the harvested beans, process them and use them for this experiment. Then the rest of it could have been used for animal feed, which the animals sorely needed, too. There was great hope and high expectations for soybeans. I've read some e-mails since I've gotten back and I think it's been a modest success, not quite as vigorous as they had hoped. Any crops, especially ones that require a fair amount of water like corn and soybeans, if you're not watering at a fairly consistent level, they're going to suffer and we experienced that. Plus, the soils tend to be very high PH, sometimes too high. The second plot where we had a crop demonstration trial was in Bagrami. It was a town in Kabul Province that was south of Kabul City, historically a very large vegetable growing area. I worked with the provincial AG director down there and they opened up a seven-acre piece of land for us to plant. The PH there was quite high. Neutral was seven; the PHs running in that field were about nine, which is getting close to being toxic. The plants came up quite nicely. They were doing well but it looked like the last time I was out there in July they had acrostic symptoms, meaning

they were turning yellow or reddish around the edges. Whether the survival rate was good, I don't know and that's part of my reasoning to try to find out because this would be harvest time right now to see what our successes were in Bagrami and Kapisa.

Q: Earlier on, you mentioned that funding was always an issue because you didn't bring your own funds with you.

A: That's right.

Q: You said that DOD had approved certain projects and here we have the intervention of Nestle. In your particular projects, did you each time have to find funding or how did it work; was this project funded by Nestle or did you have some DOD funding as well?

A: No, Nestle just provided the seeds and the training for planting the soybeans. It was a modest investment, but a very important one. We were having trouble finding soybeans. Soybeans can be fairly expensive; I mean they're not outrageously expensive, but I would say they provided us with maybe 30 bags, 30 50-lb. bags of soybeans. They might have run at home \$50 a bag, so there were a few thousand dollars that they invested in our project. When you look at the whole crop demonstration trial we purchased a tractor. We put a perimeter fence around 60 acres of land. We provided money for labor to get the stuff planted. It was an \$80,000 budget so Nestle was only providing let's say \$3,000 or \$4,000 worth of that.

Q: Right and the \$80,000 was coming from?

A: CERP funds.

Q: DOD, the famous CERP funds. I've heard different things about them and I guess most recently they have ceased to exist, but did you find that that was an efficient mechanism and an effective mechanism to move the funds that you needed?

A: Yes, I believe that we came in at a time that was very good for obtaining CERP funds and the other two projects I did not yet mention were smaller projects. They utilized money for reforestation or tree planting whichever you want to call it. It really was more tree planting than reforestation. One of the projects was in Istalaf, which is a beautiful district in Kabul Province in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, an area famous for fruit production. It had been destroyed during the civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Many of the trees had been destroyed. This was sort of a community resource. It used to be like an agricultural research farm. They grew many types of fruit trees. We ended up replanting 2,600 trees there: apples, apricots, almonds and peaches. That was a success. We also provided money for labor for these people to work on the Istalaf farm until November so that they could care for and water them. That project was under \$25,000. I mention that because if it was above \$25,000 it went up to the regional headquarters and went into the pot and there were many different projects that were looked at. They would rank them and then eventually fund the top ones. When we were there, there was something called the commander's discretionary funds and if a project

came in under \$25,000 the commander just had to be convinced that this project was useful and he or she could sign off on it. In the case of my two tree planting projects, I went to our commander and she approved both of those projects. They were implemented almost immediately. Working for USDA and seeing all the difficulty there is in getting projects on the ground in the U.S., I was very pleased and heartened to see how quickly we could get these projects implemented in Afghanistan, because you have very little time. You're there for six months; you can't be waiting three or four months to get approval and then get them on the ground and then you leave. In this case, we wrote the PNF (Project Nomination Form), let's say on a Monday. I submitted it on a Tuesday and maybe Thursday she had approval and by the next week we were purchasing the trees to go in the ground. I mean it was really nice and a nice way of operating if you're there for a limited period of time.

Q: And you were able to get your trees pretty quickly? You knew where to go for them?

A: Yes. Most of the agricultural directors had connections because they were residents of that area and they knew the nurseries and they knew where to find these materials. We tried ourselves, but many times we kind of threw our hands up and we went to them and said, "can you find a nursery that can sell us these trees" and within a day they'd get back to us and say, "yes, I've got one." I've said this before to a number of people. You have a list of resources in the United States. You can go to the Yellow Pages; you can do so many things; you can go on-line. In Afghanistan, none of those things exist, so it's all word of mouth. For a foreigner to go out and try and find things, that is nearly impossible. You're really relying on your local counterparts to make those connections.

Q: Which is a good thing, it would seem, and presumably they had some impact also on what kind of trees would be planted?

A: Absolutely, yes.

Q: What about the bidding process?

[END SIDE]

A: I think DOD was very sensitive to that. They had a process in their bidding where they would get contractors to come in and they would get several bids and they would typically look at the bidding and not always take the low bid, but at least they felt that there were several choices there and they would pick who they felt was the best contractor. As I imagine in all Third World countries, and who knows in our country I'm sure it's a problem, that federal fees, government fees going for development purposes, there's always an accountability issue and that was certainly an issue there in Afghanistan.

Q: Right, we do see that a lot. There are two other subjects that I wanted to touch on. I'm noticing that its getting rather close to the end of your day there, but one is security

and the other would be NGOs, but let's look at security for a moment. You were based there at Bagram and so you did have access to troops to accompany you when you had to go out to the field. Could you describe how that relationship worked and what dangers you had?

A: Yes. In our case and maybe in some other cases this relationship changed quite a bit towards the end of my stay, but I'll tell you how it worked at least for most of the time while I was there. The Bagram airfield was very secure. It had very high security because it had a very strategic airbase. The central command for CG76 was there and many other official duties for the military were there, so getting in and out of Bagram was not easy. We had good facilities on base for food and sleeping and office quarters, for recreational, gym and so forth. It was a well provided facility pretty much all run by Halliburton. There was a detachment of Iowa National Guard, the 168, who numbered about 40 in our case, who were soldiers, assigned specifically to the Parvan PRT, and about a half dozen of those were civil affairs people. They were not part of the 168, but they were assigned as soldiers, mostly officers and then the commander, a lieutenant colonel, and then the civil affairs people who were doing redevelopment projects. Then the rest of the force protection, force pro we called them, were soldiers that were in small units that would travel out with us in convoys every time we had a mission. Each night we set up a meeting and went through the next day or sometimes the next week's schedule and determined what kind of missions needed to be done. The civil affairs people had schools and medical clinics that they were building and so they needed to go out and visit these sites. The agricultural people had our projects that we needed to schedule, go out and visit with our AG officials or go out and make sure that the project was being implemented. We had to schedule these in advance.

When the day came that we went outside the wire, we would meet at a specific time with our force pro and generally we would go out in two vehicles at least, sometimes more depending on where the area was. One of those would generally be a Humvee and it would have three soldiers in it, a driver and an assistant and somebody up in the turret. Then the other vehicle was generally a Land Cruiser or a pickup truck and we traveled in those and we would also travel in the Humvee, too, but it depended on how many people were going out. You always had to have at least four rifles, meaning four soldiers, and two vehicles and they were well equipped with communication types of things. When we went to our particular visits if I had to go into a building and visit with the agricultural official one of them would always accompany me. He would always be armed and would never leave my sight. If I had to go out in the field they would walk around with me. You got used to them and in many cases they became very good friends. They were there for a reason. They were there to protect you. I had no problem with that. I felt a little awkward walking around with you know, rifles behind me, but that was the price you paid when you were working in Afghanistan. That's how it worked. It seemed to be a very good system.

Towards the end of May the 168 was there for a year and their time was up and we found out that the PRT was not going to get a dedicated force to go out and provide security in the future. That they were going to have to sort of scrounge around and get resources

from Bagram airfield and for that last month and a half that I was there that became a real issue. The number of missions per day was down, let's say we might have had four to five missions a day. It might have been down to one, maybe two missions a day after that. It really stifled, I think, the progress of the PRT after the 168 left, which was really unfortunate.

Q: Because your mission continued, but you could no longer move about as you needed to?

A: Yes. We could not go out without the minimum number of rifles and the number of people that we could draw from shrunk tremendously, maybe from 40 to 12 let's say. That's probably pretty close.

Q: Now who would have decided to make this reduction and on what basis do you think?

A: Good question. I'm sure it was a military decision and I couldn't tell you on what basis they did this. I have to believe, and this is only my theory, that the military resources are being stretched thinner and thinner as you can read and view in the media and they just could not afford anymore to provide this amount of people to do this type of project work, which I honestly think is a terrible misjudgment because reconstruction is in my mind the way you win the hearts and minds of the people. It's not providing security and doing patrols. It's going out and putting roads down and schools down and agricultural projects down. That's where we should be dedicating our force pro and I don't think it's being utilized in the right way. I think the cutback - and this apparently was not the only PRT where we had that problem - when all of the Iowa National Guard, they were mostly 168 people, all around Afghanistan providing security for PRTs left, they were left sort of without security or much reduced size in security.

Q: Yes, from my point of view it seems a shame, too. Obviously these are the kinds of projects that seem to be working well and it was a successful formula, so you don't want to see it deteriorate.

A: No, you don't and I really was disappointed. I guess I was glad that I had most of my time with a full contingent of people. In hindsight having had it both ways, I saw how successful we were at the beginning and was thankful for that. I feel bad for our counterparts who have followed in our footprints. I don't know what kind of security they're getting and what kind of access they're getting to the outside world there, but it must be more limited than what we had. We were out almost everyday, which was really wonderful.

Q: Apparently your protection was adequate to the danger. I don't know if you escaped some IEDs or attacks?

A: I was very lucky in that of all the missions I had outside the wire, there was nothing that jeopardized my life or health. We were out many times and I can tell you that shortly after I arrived I stopped wearing my helmet. I stopped wearing my flak jacket

and I walked around as a regular civilian would fearing nothing because I just felt that my security was pretty safe and I, maybe I was being naïve, but I saw that the people I was working with and the areas I was in were not hostile. I felt very comfortable moving about in that countryside. I had often said to my colleagues, "wouldn't it be nice if we could just go out on our own" and had we been able to do that I would have done it without a question.

Q: Yes, of course, that would have been delightful if you could, but obviously you were not allowed to do that.

A: We were not allowed to do that. I know I talked to the four of us who left and came back together. Two of them were in the south, all three of them were further south than I and they kind of smiled and rolled their eyes and shook their heads and said, "not where we were, I would never do that." It's clear that had I been where they were I wouldn't be saying this to you, but I can say in the area I was the permissiveness was very good and I felt completely safe while I was there.

Q: Well, I'm glad you didn't have any problems and that you did come back safely.

A: Me, too.

Q: The other topic I wanted to touch on a little bit is the NGOs. I don't know to what extent they were playing a role in your area, but did you work with them very much?

A: Sadly, no and I'm not sure whose fault that was. Before I came, I was doing a lot of research about my job and I would "Google" PRTs and get quite a bit of information off the Web. Some of the articles I got were written by NGOs, one of which was a very lengthy one written about a year ago, probably longer now, by Save the Children, which I guess is British based; you've probably heard of them.

Q: I've heard of them. I don't know where their headquarters is.

A: It clearly was a British author of this article, which was probably 50 or 60 pages in length, and it talked about security in Afghanistan as it related to PRTs and NGOs. The upshot of that very extensive piece was that NGOs, some NGOs in particular, were very upset the PRTs were doing civilian type of work because it was jeopardizing their personal security. By that I mean that if I'm going out there and I'm working with units of government or Afghan civilians to put in AG projects and I'm surrounded by soldiers in Humvees and M16s, I am doing similar types of work to what the NGOs are doing. By some sort of connection they're saying, "okay, this person or organization is attached to the U.S. military and, therefore, is an enemy if you happen to be Taliban or Al Qaeda or whatever." They were very upset that at least in parts of the country the PRTs were making it less secure for NGOs to do their work.

Q: They believed that that was the case.

A: They believed that, yes. I came in having read these articles and feeling very uncomfortable about my role as a government civilian employee working at a PRT. However, maybe that may be true in the south of the country, but I can clearly say that it was not an issue in the area that I was at and NGOs ran about freely there. They had their own work to do. I didn't encounter any hostility from them nor did we tend to collaborate on much together. There were some providers that USAID worked with. I don't know if you'd call them NGOs, they were more contractors. People like Mercy Corps and individuals like that, we had some peripheral contacts with. I would call them. There was an organization called Roots for Peace and we would call them looking for nurseries and those kinds of things and they were helpful and they would try and give us information. There were opportunities where we met with the provincial governors on a fairly regular basis, maybe every couple of weeks and NGOs were always invited to these meetings and often times never showed up. I'm not quite sure what's going on, whether it was by design or that they had their own lives and they're doing their own thing and they don't really need collaboration with the military or U.S. agencies. It's hard to say.

Q: It sounds like it may have been a combination of both.

A: I think so.

Q: They didn't feel a need and they weren't anxious to promote the linkage perhaps.

A: Yes, and I think there's some of that, that if they could just sort of do their own thing and the U.S. did its own thing on the PRT, "okay that's fine. You can do it, but I don't want to be associated with you because now they're going to think of me as part of the military." I think there was some of that definitely.

Q: Well, we hear that and the attitudes often change when there's a crisis, but if things are going well...

A: That's right.

Q: Then it really wasn't a problem, I guess. Let me see if we can draw things to a conclusion. I feel we've covered a great deal of ground here, but I would like to ask if you have any suggestions for improvement, and then maybe a final word as to what degree you think the PRT as an organization is cost effective in accomplishing its mission.

A: Well, I'm sorry I was listening and comprehending everything, but your first question was?

Q: Suggestions for improvement; sometimes people think about training opportunities, for example?

A: Right and that's been tossed about quite a bit. I don't know if I think FAS did a good job in getting us prepared and ready to go. They were very good about giving us

background materials and seeing to our needs. While we were in country we had adequate supplies and provisions to get our job done. One would think maybe some training about the country and so forth. I don't know if that would work. I'm not a big proponent of training before you've had experience. A lot of times that to me is sort of meaningless training. I see that in my job all the time. We have some new software and we go get training on it and we get the software and I've forgotten half of what I've learned. You really need to be experiencing what you're doing there and then if you have questions or concerns, you can use your agency as a resource. I think they did a good job of that. They had a person in Kabul who was a contact person, a person that we could rely on to get answers or to get materials or whatever we needed and that was very helpful. From a governmental perspective I think they did a good job.

I mentioned already the lack of security that has been pulled out of PRTs, which I see as a terrible mistake from the military. I would encourage the civilians to somehow voice their objection to that or --and this is something that was evolving or may evolve -- eventually that there would be private security in the military's place. For example, there are groups like DynCorps and Blackwater that are private security firms that could provide protection. They would, of course, be paid by military or the U.S. government, which is probably much more expensive than doing it through the military, or they could start hiring and training the Afghan National Army there to provide some security, which I think would work as well. There needs to be something transitional going on and I believe that if PRTs are to continue, and I believe they should, that that transition has to be made. There has to be more of a private sector or local national input there.

Then what eventually could happen would be that the American civilian agencies such as State Department and USAID and USDA could act within a PRT with this private or local security and maybe be much more responsive to local needs and maybe much more fluid in terms of their ability to move about. I would like to believe that that could happen especially in the north, maybe not so much in the south yet.

Q: Yes, where it's a little more pacific, I guess, in the north. Much would depend on the local circumstances.

A: Right. Regarding the PRTs and whether I believe in them - Absolutely. I thought that the concept of a PRT was brilliant. It was an outpost in an Afghan area that provided a security presence there, provided some military presence, but also provided a fair amount of developmental funding for some much needed things. They were scattered about the country and so the hope was and I believe in many cases it was true, they were putting resources on the ground to help rebuild the central government. That was one of the big mission statements for PRTs, to extend the reach of the central government, to have a presence in an area where a historically weak government in Afghanistan was not able to. They were seeing the PRT as sort of a tentacle of the Afghan government and they were providing things. They were providing schools; they were providing roads. The needs were great and there were many complaints that they weren't doing enough, but I believe they were doing a lot. When you look at the number of PRTs that were out there and you look at the project sheets, it was pretty impressive.

Q: Yes, I've certainly been impressed talking to people. Was there a public affairs dimension to your work, were you able to get some recognition locally or back here?

A: Well, that's a good question and one that I was a little disappointed in. I'll give you just two little stories. Because we were part of Bagram PRT everyone that came through Afghanistan came through Bagram, because they flew into the airbase. We were so close to Kabul, if they wanted to get outside the wire many times the only way they got out was through the PRT; it was amazing to me that of the soldiers that were there for a year, most of them had never been outside the confines of the base. That is very sad to me to think that that was the case. When you did have dignitaries or people that were there for fact finding, they ended up at the PRT and so we had quite a few "dog and pony shows" and that ended up sometimes good, sometimes bad. You got to meet some pretty exciting people like Tom Brokaw, and we'd have CNN or we'd have many different reporters and politicians and high-ranking military generals and admirals. I mean it was just a parade of people coming through there. So, the word was getting out for sure. It got a little bit tiresome to have to do this a lot, but there was a part of you that kind of liked it, too.

Q: I was wondering if they needed someone as the public affairs officer in the PRT?

A: That's right, yes, well, there were public affairs officers at Bagram and they would come over and talk to the commander and say, you know, we'd really like you to take General such and such out next Tuesday to see some projects. There was a PA person there, but he wasn't associated with the PRT. They were actually with the CJ76 or the central command people there.

As far as doing personal interviews, that was a real big "no no" and it really upset me because I had wanted to have a correspondence with my hometown newspaper and send back stories and pictures. Prior to doing this I was thinking about it and I was thinking later in the spring when I had enough material to start sending back I would, and we got this rather nasty letter e-mail from FAS saying not to talk to anyone outside, in the media without our approval. I ran this idea by them and I sent them a few stories that I was going to send to the FAS public affairs person and they didn't like it and they said "we'll send it to this person and that person" and it just died on the vine. It just, nobody would make a decision and it ran around, I don't know, a half dozen different people; I call them censors and eventually no one got back to me. I was very disappointed and I just said "the heck with it and it's not worth it." I thought it would have been a wonderful way for me to spread the good news at least back to my hometown about what was happening with some wonderful pictures. I took some great pictures of the land and of the people that not many people have a chance to see first hand. I was very disappointed in FAS for being so censor-oriented about this. I didn't think the stories I sent back were in any way inflammatory or telling secrets. I just got very angry about this.

Q: Yes. It's a shame because people don't have a lot of factual knowledge and there are good stories. It's just we need more of them and while the military is trying to put them out, they can only do so much. Here you are offering to help. They're not willing to take

the chance that something you say could possibly be misconstrued.

A: I think that they're just being overly cautious and it's sad to think that that's the case.

Q: Yes, I'm sure that's precisely what's happening and it is too bad.

A: Well, we need to be a little bolder, I think, in getting the good news out. It's too bad that we're in this day and age of being very security conscious. While security is certainly part of it, the downside is that you get overly censored and then you don't get some of these good news stories out. That's the way I see it.

Q: I'm sure you're right and I'm glad they are allowing you to do this project anyway.

A: Absolutely. Had I not gotten that e-mail from Sarah saying this is sanctioned, I would have told you I couldn't do it.

Q: Sure, I understand; I know you had to get approval. Now maybe you can float your idea of talking to the Brattleboro Times and doing a slideshow for your local rotary club.

A: I intend to do that, yes. I'll do my little shows here and have fun with that.

Q: Okay, well, you've been real helpful, Drew and I've learned a lot.

A: A day doesn't go by that I don't think of Afghanistan and how much I enjoyed it and I love talking about it, so this was a pleasure for me.

Q: Well, I certainly thank you. You've been very articulate and I think brought some colorful, concrete examples; eventually, as I may have explained, the transcripts we edit hopefully will go on the USIP website. So, again, thanks for all your help.

A: Okay, very good.

Q: Okay, bye bye.

A: Take care.

[END TAPE]

[END SIDE]

[END INTERVIEW]