

USIP – ADST

Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #2

Executive Summary

The subject of this interview is an active duty Foreign Service Officer who entered the Service as a USIA officer. He served previously as a U.S. Army officer. He was stationed at PRT Parwan from January through April 2004. The PRT in Parwan covered an ethnically diverse region the size of West Virginia.

The subject arrived in Parwan just after the PRT was established by the U.S. Army. He received only informal training prior to his assignment -- unstructured consultations in the Department. He also read Ahmed Rashid's "Taliban," which the subject considered an excellent book.

The security situation at the PRT was focused very much on the immediate vicinity of the PRT. The subject described force protection mixed; it depended largely on which major military group was in country at any given time – mountain troops or armor or artillery all had very different views.

The subject had high praise for military civil affairs officers assigned to Afghanistan in general and to the PRT specifically. Most were reservists, older, with backgrounds as police officers or in other professions that heightened their awareness of the importance of local knowledge and engagement.

The subject served, in fact if not in title, as a POLAD. He advised the commander and his other military colleagues on how best to deal with the local situation. As an example of this, he noted how he recommended infusing a bit of sensitivity to local rules of engagement. This helped relations with the local population.

Early on, State/AID officers in PRTs had difficulty identifying the resources that they could bring to bear to improve the economic development of the region and thereby create a strong individual and institutional profile. The subject noted significant communications problems, notably a lack of e-mail (many of which have since been remedied). Subject also noted troubled intra-Embassy relations and difficult relations between the Embassy and PRT officers.

Subject noted his initial frustration with United Nations officers in country, who did little to register voters in his region. But subject praised the eventual election result. Subject noted a mixed response to PRTs from NGOs: some were willing to work with the PRTs and some were not. As a result, some local factions could successfully play one NGO off another to get double funding for projects.

Subject noted one tremendous advantage of having State officers in PRTs: they could show their usefulness to – and cement their relationship with – their military hosts by jumping over military layers of command and communicating directly with senior American officials in Kabul. They could therefore solve local problems at the higher, "political" level.

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

Interview #2

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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The subject is a Foreign Service Officer who served in the Parwan PRT January through April 2004. He is also a former U.S. Army officer.

(Editor's Note: We begin with the subject's preparations for his posting in Afghanistan.)

A: I contacted my Career Development Officer first, asking about overseas tours. I was initially looking at Iraq. He had told me that all those tours had gone to a minimum of six months to a year. I was looking for something a little shorter. He said, "Well, we still have three month tours and we're really looking for people to go to Afghanistan." So, he put me in touch with the people in the SA desk and I started talking with them about going.

Q: What were they telling you you'd be doing?

A: Well, they told me they were looking for people to be part of these Provincial Reconstruction Teams. They told me a little bit about what was going on, but it was very, very vague. I can remember everything up until I got to post, until I got to Afghanistan, was very, very vague. They gave me some choices. I remember, I did a little research. Of course, there wasn't a whole lot of research you could do on Afghanistan because it was still such a state of flux. But of the three places they gave me, I believe these were Gardiz, Jalalabad, and Konduz, I decided I wanted to go to Konduz. It was up in the north and it just looked like an interesting region to get involved with. As it turned out, I never did get there. That was the first non-U.S. PRT that they were standing up. The Germans took that one. There were some issues there with the Germans and they just felt they didn't want to put me in Konduz at that time. They were creating a brand new PRT in Parwan, so that is where I ended up going.

Q: Did they explain what a provincial reconstruction team was?

A: Again, it was kind of vague. They said that you would basically be out there and you would be working, reporting on some of the issues that were taking place in that particular region, dealing with the locals, acting as something of a liaison. But it didn't get too much in the weeds. As we'll probably get to later, it probably turned out to be a good thing that it was such a general description. When I got my assignment, nobody else was really sure what I was supposed to be doing, so it was just as well I didn't come in with specific ideas.

Q: Did you have the feeling at the time... When actually did you go out?

A: I went out in April of 2004.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the PRT concept and how it worked was pretty well gelled. Had they figured out what they really were doing with these things and so you were fitting into a set procedure?

A: Not at all. Actually just the opposite. They had the concept of the PRT. There were three or four that they had stood up already. I think that the military side of the house had a better idea than the State Department. In fact, I will say unequivocally, the military had a much better handle on what they wanted to see the PRTs do. But the State Department, I think, was still trying to get a handle on how useful and how to best utilize their State Department assets within the PRTs.

Q: Did you have the feeling when you went out – we'll talk about how it did later – that you were there to just have a State presence there, or were you to keep an eye on the military? Was there a subcurrent or a subassignment or not?

A: The military thought so. I still to this day laugh about this. My first day I arrived, I was brought into a meeting they were having and the base commander... The PRT I was assigned to was the Parwan PRT. Our original area of coverage was the Parwan, Vardak, Kapisa, and Kabul provinces, so we had an area about the size of West Virginia but probably the most diverse and populated demographic in the entire country.

Q: Where is this located?

A: The whole region, it extends from Kabul up into the Panjshir Valley, just where the Hindu Kush are coming down. It covered quite a bit of terrain and quite a variation. You had Pashtuns, Tajiks, smatterings of some of the other ethnic groups. It was a very interesting place. You could go from one province where nothing was happening to another province (for instance, Kabul) which was where everything was going on. That morphed a little bit over the course of time.

Q: Coming out of various things, did anybody brief you on tribal variations within Afghanistan and who these people are and where you're going, sort of the basic history?

A: Well, as Foreign Service officers, I think it's just expected we're going to do our homework, and I did. What I did is, I asked the person who was my primary point of contact back here in the Department. She was very helpful. She gave me the names of some people who had served in the PRTs. There were PRTs actually working that never had been officially stood up, so to speak. So there were some people who had a little bit of knowledge. There was one guy I remember who was a retiree who had gone out to the one in Konduz and he was sending me back... He had already come back to the States. He sent me some information as to what he did. But I think it's key to note that every PRT had a completely different set of circumstances, so you may have an area – for instance, I know, out in... Every PRT, especially if you were on the Pakistani border, you had security issues that were much more paramount and some of the topics

you were dealing with and the people you were dealing with were different than what you were doing, say, in the center of the country, where you were maybe dealing more with local ethnic groups and trying to get them their share of the government and their piece of the pie. So, yes, I don't think there was any one model to follow and I don't think there was any one set of instructions they could have provided because every place was different. They recommended that we read this book called "Taliban" by Ahmad Rashad. An absolutely fantastic book. For me it was almost a Bible. Even though it was slightly dated because it was leading up to the Taliban and everything, it really gave you a good sense of what you were dealing with. He was a Pakistani journalist and I think he really had a good sense of what was going on. As it turned out later in a PRT commanders conference, the colonel who was giving a speech basically stood there, held the book up, and said, "You all need to be reading this book." I ended up going through three books because none of my military commanders had the book, so I read it, I gave it to them, but I always wanted to have one, so I'd order another one. I went through three books that way, making sure that my military counterparts were reading the book also. I found it that useful.

Aside from that, I was interested in a lot of the logistics. What kind of clothing do I need to wear? What sort of things do I need to be aware of? These people gave me a basic readout of what I should bring.

Q: You were in Parwan for the entire time?

A: Yes.

Q: This would be from April '04 until...

A: You know what, I'm sorry, I was actually there from January '04 to April.

Q: We'll talk just a little bit about what the area you operated out of was like.

A: I'd say... That was interesting, that every PRT, some of them were living in palaces, some of them were living in just dirt hovels. But I guess we were kind of somewhere in between. We were actually based on Bagram Airfield. They housed us in what were called beehives, which were wooden structures that the locals would construct for them. The reason they did that was because they were functional and they didn't think they were too complicated for the locals to put together. So, in effect, I guess it was maybe about the width of this-

Q: We're talking about something about 30 feet by-

A: 60 maybe, not even. It was usually divided into about four or five little rooms in there. So you had enough room for a cot and a desk and maybe a shelf.

Q: What did your PRT consist of, the people in it, and what were they doing?

A: Well, all of the PRTs, and I can speak for the Americans definitely, were made up primarily of civil affairs troops. But we also had force protection and that changed depending on what the

major military group was in Afghanistan. When I got there, it was the 10th Mountain Division. Later, it switched over to the 25th Infantry Division. We actually had force protection. Field Artillery provided our force protection. They're actually out of Fort Bragg. It was kind of funny because most of these were young kids and I would think there are few other branches that would be less qualified to do force protection than Field Artillery.

Q: Their view was, what, five miles out?

A: Yes, and about pulling the lanyard and holding your ears. When I first got there, it was a little bit scary. I think they had a pretty good commanding officer that was whipping them into shape. By the time I left, I think they were pretty good at their job. When I first got there, I arrived in Kabul and I stayed at the embassy compound there for about five days - sort of an orientation. We could not leave that compound without an armed escort and being in armored vehicles. And that was just to go across the street. When we got out there to the PRT, we were really out in the hinterlands visiting these armed compounds and we were in just plain old Toyota trucks. Like I said, we had these young kids, Field Artillery, that were supposed to be covering us. So it was a big change.

Q: Within the civil affairs, about how big was your PRT and what were the civil affairs troops doing?

A: The civil affairs actually was a smaller part of this. We ended up with about four squads of force protection, so I'm going to say we had maybe 20 Field Artillery people with force protection and maybe... And the numbers changed. Anywhere from four to eight civil affairs people.

Q: Who were they? Where were they coming from? Were they National Guard, Reserves, regular Army?

A: This was interesting, too. It seemed like the civil affairs units, although they deployed mostly from their region... Just for background, with the exception of, I think, one battalion which is based in Fort Bragg, all civil affairs units are Reserve. These are people who have been training for years and have never really deployed. They're made up of people who have backgrounds that I think would prove useful in this sort of environment. I know that we had a couple of police officers. Our first commanding officer had been career Army, was now a lawyer. The major who replaced him was an engineer and project manager. So, most of them had some sort of background in what was needed to work in civil affairs, the understanding of projects and institutions and what needed to be done to stand those things up.

Q: When you arrived there, your military experience must have been a ticket, wasn't it?

A: It definitely was. In fact, to even get this assignment to Afghanistan – I didn't even realize this – they actually did, as much as they were screening for people, put us through something of a vetting process. I found out because I had a colleague in Afghanistan that said, "Oh, yes, I just vouched for you." I said, "I didn't know people even asked." They wanted people – and I think

they still do for Iraq and Afghanistan – with either language skills, previous time in the area, or military, and that definitely helped me. I walked in and I knew exactly what I was walking into.

Q: A little bit of a wiring diagram. Who reported to whom and up the line as you saw this.

A: Well, what I saw as the real benefit for me there was that I really didn't have to report to anyone and certainly not within the military chain of command. The way it worked was, I reported basically to the deputy chief of mission at the embassy in Kabul. I had other counterparts that I worked with but nobody specifically that I was mandated to report to. It was very much a... I didn't have any restrictions. I didn't have any kind of specific mandates. I was basically... It was frustrating at first because I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be doing and nobody was really giving me much guidance.

Q: Did anybody say, in a way, so often, Foreign Service officers, particularly more senior ones, we have what they call POLADS [political advisors] attached to military troops. Say, militarily, this might make sense, but civilian-wise or political-wise, saying, "Maybe you'd better not do this" or something like that. Did you feel that was a little bit of your role?

A: Oh, definitely.

Q: That was your role.

A: Oh, definitely. That was very much my role. Primarily my function as I saw it was to act as the government representative, the U.S. representative there in Afghanistan in that particular province. As such, there were certain political issues and certain mandates that I needed to project both to the people in the region as well as the military element there. I felt it was necessary that I kind of guide them and let them know. I can tell you of one incident that happened when I first got there. As I said, we had these young guys who were providing force protection. On a couple of instances, coming in and out of our base, little kids would be running out as the trucks drove by and (they) aimed weapons at us. We weren't sure if these were toy guns or real guns or not, but they did this as kids in this country would do, running out there. After about the second time, we came back and we had what they used to call "after action reviews" and we'd discuss what we had just done that day. The force protection guys were just very, very upset about all this. I think they were still a little bit nervous about their role and, as most of us would be, a little bit nervous about people pointing weapons at us whether they were real or fake, especially given the lawlessness of the country. One of them, one of the senior officers, NCOs, had recommended, "Maybe we should draw down on these kids. We'll all jump out and we'll point back at them." Immediately, because I didn't sense a whole lot of feedback to that, I jumped up and said, "No, you will not. You guys don't understand that what you do here reflects directly on the U.S. and what we're doing here overall." I realized at that point in time all it took was one photograph of some soldier drawing down on a six year old kid. It could have really done damage. But I realized at that time that I had as much of a mentoring role as anything, to bring these guys along and to let them know that everything you do is a direct reflection on the U.S. government and our entire venture in this region. There were some other instances where these kids were making obscene gestures and yelling obscenities as the troops went by, smiling the whole time. I went back and explained to these guys they didn't learn this

back at their house; their parents aren't teaching them this. This is something they learned from people here, soldiers here. I said, "These kids may never, ever encounter another American other than you. Every one of you is a diplomat. Every one of you is wearing that flag on your shoulder and is representing the United States of America and you need to conduct yourselves accordingly." I ended up... I probably became a pain in the ass for a lot of these kids. At least weekly I would stand up and give my little sermon about how little these people have, how much we had, and "Keep everything in relation. What you are here for, what these people are up against. You're going to go home. You may not like it here, but you're going to go home. You're going to get in your car and you're going to go to a house and you're going to eat a good meal. That's something these people will never have." So, it was always kind of bringing back home the reasons why we were there and how important it was that they understood their role in the grand scheme of things.

Q: In the PRT, who was in command and where did he or she report to?

A: This particular PRT – and I never answered your question from earlier – had come from Portland, Oregon. They had something of a command element that had come over and was at the airfield there, too. They called it Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force. Believe me, if I drew you a wire diagram right now, it would look like something like the interchange there in Los Angeles. I don't know where it was going. But there was a base commander who was in charge of the base in general and security-

Q: This was Bagram Airfield. That's a major field, isn't it?

A: Yes, it was one of the – and I found this out once I got there – it was probably one of the oldest places in all of Afghanistan. They're still finding artifacts there that are older than anywhere else. It is also probably the most heavily contested piece of land throughout the history of modern Afghanistan. The Russians, the Afghanis, the Taliban -- everybody has fought over Bagram. I think it changed hands at least six times when we came and were fighting with the Taliban. So, it was very heavily contested. Anyway, General Barno was in charge of all the military forces in Afghanistan. I believe he still is. He's a three star. He was working hand in hand with the DCM at the Embassy. Barno, of course, had his chain of command that was branching out in all different areas. But as far as our PRT, they reported mostly to some people who had actually come over from their Reserve unit that were... A number of the PRTs had civil affairs units that were all from the same area, so they were reporting back to their colonel who was there at the Joint Task Force.

Q: When you got there, was anybody saying, "Alright, now you'll do this" or "We're doing that?" Your team was about how big, the actual PRT team, not the defending force.

A: As far as deciding what we were going to do, I'd say there was maybe four of us max. There was the PRT commander. He had a second in command. Then there were other people that kind of came in and out that were also involved in the PRT, the officers.

So, I guess I should probably go back. When you asked me, "What did the military think of you" or "What was your role here?" I had been in contact with PRT commanding officer when I

was still in Kabul. He was trying to arrange for me to get there. Now, I'm assuming he was basically... He was a wonderful guy. Everyone I worked with was a great guy, so I have no complaints with any of the people. But I'm assuming somebody said to him at one time, "Take care of these civilians. We don't know what the hell they're here for, but make sure they're taken care of." I showed up. I was actually convoyed up there from the embassy and dropped off. The CO immediately welcomed me, showed me to my beehive, I sat down and gave him sort of my one over the world that I had just received at briefings from the embassy. He listened to everything I had to say. He was a West Point guy and he had been active duty for a number of years. He had his own way of doing things. It was pretty... He let me do what I needed to do as long as it didn't interfere with what he had in mind. And very rarely was there any kind of conflict. But that first day he took me to a meeting the base commander was holding with all the local Afghan leaders. As I was brought in there, I was introduced as somebody from the State Department who was here to keep an eye on what the military was doing and bring resources to bear on the region. I just laughed because all I could think of was that it sounded as if I were some kind of Political Commissar sent down there.

Then I kept scratching my head for the next couple of weeks, thinking, "What resources do I have to bring to bear on this?" But it soon became very frustrating. There was a person who was a very nice person who was supposed to be the Embassy PRT coordinator, but there was a lot of disorganization in the embassy. I think that led to it. So nobody really gave any guidance. I was just basically cut loose and told, "Okay, you're at the PRT" and that was about it. Nobody told me anything. I had no idea what my function, what my role was going to be. So, my first couple of weeks there... As Foreign Service Officers, we're constantly feeling the need to be productive, to be churning out something, be it a report or anything else. I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I was calling and sending e-mails when I could because communications were often "scosh" back to Kabul saying, "What am I doing? What do you guys want me to be doing here?" It was funny because now I look back and they just kind of took a very soft handed approach and just said, "You'll find what you need to do." Sure enough, after about two weeks, after going out on missions and starting to see what was going on, I was able to realize what I could and should be doing out there.

Q: With e-mail and all, was there the equivalent to a network of State-PRT representatives in the area chatting with each other e-mail-wise or not?

A: When I left, they had managed to cobble together something like that. But of course, e-mail is worthless if you don't have a medium to read and send on. I didn't have any kind of communication early on. I was eventually given a laptop, but sometimes the Internet lines didn't work. Quite often they didn't. You can understand. Phones were really... The ability to use a phone was also very limited. But it was interesting because towards the end I guess I considered myself kind of an old hand at this and as I was heading out the door, some of these younger guys who had just come in and kind of cobbled together this network, and they were very big on throwing ideas back and forth and I just would kind of look back and laugh and gave them a little bit of input here and there but "You'll find your way."

Q: Did you have a feel that the embassy in Kabul knew what it was doing? Or were you so far away that they really weren't interested? Did you have a feeling of almost a lack of, I won't say mission, but an organized entity out there?

A: I guess I'd be remiss if I didn't go into my thoughts and feelings on the embassy there. The embassy itself was an old building that wasn't very comfortable. At the same time they were building the new embassy next door and the work was going 24/7. But the old embassy was kind of a hodge podge of offices. People lived in Conex containers. You couldn't leave the compound, as I mentioned earlier, unless you had armed escort. Really there were few places you could go. I have never been to a place where the morale and the people were more miserable. I absolutely hated that place. I would have gone and walked to my PRT given the opportunity just to get out of there. I think some of this was because the ambassador, who knows Afghanistan very well, but he had called in what he called his Afghan reconstruction team, which was sort of an inner circle of people culled from a number of different places – government, private industry, whatever – and they took on roles which somewhat mirrored the normal mission roles. However - and I can say that everyone I encountered from this Afghan reconstruction group were all very nice and very professional – by virtue of them being there, they pretty much marginalized the typical country team concept. And so you had some people there that were just... I didn't like (an embassy section chief) at the time and I think he was frustrated by the fact this Afghan reconstruction group had marginalized him. There were just some attitudes and some people there that just... the type of people you didn't want to associate with. I thought it was pretty pervasive, too, throughout the mission. But there was a lot of confusion. I certainly sensed a lot of confusion and a lot of it, I think, had to do with the structure. Nobody was sure who to answer to. It had also been said – whether it was true or not, I'll let history determine that- a lot of the people that were filling roles there were people who were sort of on their last leg. They had nowhere else to go and they ended up out there to maybe salvage what career they had.

I found the young people were there because they really wanted to be in on the ground floor of something. But I think all of this was compounded by the fact that you were in such a tight area living and working space. You had nowhere to go. Most people worked seven days a week because they had nothing else they could do. It got to the point where the ambassador was sending e-mails on Sunday saying, "If you are reading this, you are wrong. Go home. You shouldn't be in the office." So, there was a lot of confusion and what I sensed was a very big morale problem. So, I never went back to the embassy. Once I left there, I would only come back for day trips just for a few hours. I didn't care what the risk was. I was not going to stay at the PRT. I'd be happy taking the roads back to Bagram.

Q: What did you do in Parwan?

A: Okay. Again, I think my primary role was that as a representative of the U.S. government and as the person who needed to help extend the reach of the Afghan central government. So, I very much morphed and maybe ended up being that political commissar or whatever. The PRT, the civil affairs guys, would go out and they would focus basically on reconstruction projects. "We need to put a well in here, maybe a school here, a clinic here" or whatever. They were all about building something, but they did very little when it came to any of the sort of social

constructions or helping to spread the democratic values that we were really trying to push. So, what I ended up doing was, I was something of a speechmaker, I guess. I would always get up there and I would talk to the leaders about registering to vote, which was something we were pushing real hard at the time with upcoming elections. I would get a little into the DDR process. That grew over the course of my time there.

Q: The what process?

A: It's "Demobilization, Disarmament, and Reintegration." It's funny because in different places I've been, that's been taken out to "DDDRRR," depending on how many things they want to plug in. What they were trying to do was, they had all these armed factions, most of them working under a warlord, that they were trying to disarm, get them to lay down arms, and reintegrate into society. The way they were trying to do this was by offering them basically an enlistment in the national military there. I still, I see it now and I think it's proven to be something of a failed concept in that country for any number of reasons... These armed warlords, their economic viability was tied directly to their ability to exert force and maintain their arms, and so to lay down arms not only sort of cut off their economic livelihood but it also made them easy victims for whatever local rivals decided to be stubborn and not lay down arms. So, I didn't think that the UN had a plan, and they were the ones pushing this. It was UNAMA, the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan. I just don't think they had a good plan, still don't.

Q: How did you communicate with the Afghans?

A: We had interpreters who ended up playing a very big role later on. We called them TERPs. We had a class two TERP-

Q: You were saying you had a class two interpreter.

A: Yes, and again, I don't know if it was ones that were the highest security clearance or threes. In any event, our class two was an absolutely wonderful guy. He was an Afghan-American, had been in the United States for 30 years, had come over- [END SIDE]

He had come back to the country because he wanted, he hadn't been back in probably 20 years, and he wanted to do what he could to help his country of origin out. A very well cultured, well educated man. The biggest problem we had with Afghans is that they did not view things the way we did. Sort of scheming and underhanded activity and things like this were survival skills. Deception, things like this. You really had to always watch when you were dealing with Afghans what were their motives, what were they trying to get at. I found in Abdul a man of real character and no ulterior motives. I'm telling you all this now because the trust between Abdul and myself and some other people there on the PRT was very important later on. In any event, Abdul was the person we depended on mostly when we had sort of high level interactions with governors and people at higher levels. Otherwise, we had local guys who were serving as interpreters. We always brought them along and they would translate whatever it was that we had to discuss.

Q: What would you do? You say you've got an area the size of West Virginia, mixed tribal... What did you do, say "We'll go to Point A today and Point B tomorrow and let's do a well here or there?" How did you set things up?

A: Not too far off there. When I got there, they had already gone out and they had met with some people. But that's what the PRT commander decided. In fact, he had decided he was going to every province and he was going to try to go to every district within every province. Every province had a capital and every district within that province also had sort of a seat of government. So, we would go out, and initially we would try to meet with the governor. We would talk to them about some of the issues that we were trying to push. That was where I came in, talking about the upcoming elections and the role of women, disarmament, things of that nature. Our commanding officers would discuss with them what projects they thought were most needed and how we could all get along better and things of that nature. So, they would say, for instance, "Well, this dam over here, if we could rebuild the dam, then we could generate power" or "This plant over here used to produce textiles. Can we go in there and maybe see that?" And so we would go out and we would... What we were trying to do was to empower the locals. We would find, for instance, an Afghan who had an engineering background and say, "Okay, now come in and give us a bid on this and tell us how much it would cost for you to do this." What we tried to do was empower the local people. We'd find the project, we would basically fund the project, and then we would try to find their experts. That again sometimes was precarious. But at the other hand, there was some diplomacy that had to come into play because, I remember one very poignant example was a school where the contracting office back at Bagram had awarded a contract to build a school in a Pashtun area but for whatever reason awarded the contract to a Tajik. We went out there and these Pashtuns – and I may have it mixed; it may have been Tajiks-Pashtuns; either way, they were up in arms. I mean, we had an old man screaming saying he would pick up rocks and he would beat the Tajiks to death if they came into his neighborhood. There was still a lot of animosity in some parts of the country. So, we had to go back and we had to figure a way around this because, you know, you didn't want to enrage and upset the Tajiks because you were suddenly pulling contracts away from them, but on the other hand, you certainly didn't want a civil war taking place between the Pashtuns and the Tajiks. So, there was a lot of that that you had to look at when you went into an area.

Our role, and I guess maybe in large part I had something to do with this, eventually started to morph. That came out of the security situation there. Because of Abdul, because we had a ministry of interior representative that were also attached to the PRT, they would come to me and they would say, "Tom, such and such element is operating in this area here. We have very good sources and we know what's going on and so on and so forth." And so I slowly got kind of pulled into this intelligence gathering mode.

Q: When you're saying "such and such an element," are we talking about Taliban or Al-Qaeda or just distance?

A: The biggest threat where we were was Hig Matyar. There were Taliban, but people would say "Taliban," they would say "Al-Qaeda," they would interchange them. However, Hig Matyar and his group there, Hig, and I don't know what that stands for, the Hig were, I think, one of the biggest problem in our region. They were a problem throughout the country. But they were

basically terrorists and he was against any western intervention. He was at that time probably as dangerous as anybody else.

Q: Was there a fundamentalist Islamic base to this?

A: Yes, exactly. Hig Matyar, just like Osama Bin Laden, just like many of the Taliban, had basically been brought up by these radical Arab fundamentalists and so many of them still believed that they needed to carry out their fatwa or whatever they were... So, there were still a lot of bad people operating when I was there. Outside of Kabul, I would say Bagram Airfield was one of the biggest targets. In fact, there had been a number of rocket attacks there on the airfield and we would hear rockets at night. We could hear explosions. Oftentimes, it was just our guys doing exercises. But there had been a number of times when we had to run and hide inside a building with helmets on and stuff. So, I started to notice that. There was a certain role that we could play. Interestingly enough, it coincided with a number of various intelligence elements asking if they could tag along with us because they knew we had access to the regions. But I think sometimes that got difficult because some of these people didn't really know how to act as part of the PRT. We were much more subtle in our approach. Colonel Khan, who was our MOI [ministry of interior] rep., was very well connected and at the time was really a good... Between Colonel Khan, Abdul, and myself, we managed to cobble together quite a bit of information. At first, nobody seemed too interested, but when the Marines came in (We had a different group of Marines rotate in and they ended up providing all force protection for the base), they were much more interested in what we had to say. I remember in the last month there, I was running back and forth almost nightly to the Marines' camp relaying information back and forth and stuff. I still to this day think one of our biggest achievements was grabbing some of these bad guys based on the information that we were able to gather. And some of these were very high ranking bad guys. But it was interesting. We went from a reconstruction and spread the word kind of mission, at least my role, to more of a "Let's find out who the bad guys are."

Q: How were you getting your information?

A: It came from a number of different reasons why we or I kind of morphed into this role, not the least of which – I remember how this all happened – we were going out to visit a warlord who the PRT had had dealings with for quite a while before I had gotten there. As we pulled in, one of the soldiers says, "Oh, yes, this is So and So. I think he was involved in some of those rocket attacks back in December or whatever." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes." Needless to say, I was nervous that entire visit because the warlords were very, very... They called them AMF commanders at that point. I guess it didn't sound so martial. But they were very hospitable. Everyone was very hospitable. They brought us down to a restaurant on the river and served us food. We all sat around. Of course, we were surrounded the entire time by people with machine guns and all sorts of weaponry. I looked around at our guys and looked at their guys and realized that if these guys wanted to, they could take us out in a second. There's nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. I started to think, "Well, I think maybe we need to know a little bit more about who we're dealing with." A lot of what the PRT was doing was finding ways to, for all intents and purposes, empower some of these local warlords. For instance, this guy had some contracts to deliver gravel to the base. Gravel was a big business in that region. I

started to think, “Well, if this guy’s involved in the rocket attacks and we’re paying him money, what’s he doing with that money?” So, I went back and started to dig and dig and dig and there were files on him I found back there when I visited some of the other elements there on base. Right away, my radar went off and I said, “You are not looking at the big picture here. We’re just figuring we’ll pay this guy, we’ll make him happy, and he’ll deliver gravel because we need it” when in fact you dig deeper and you find out that this guy is taking the money, turning around, buying rockets, or at least arming people to attack Coalition forces. Someone has got to keep track of this. Nobody was. I was really running around like Chicken Little for a while. What was very discouraging was that I met with a number of different people gathering information and intelligence there on the base and none of them... Every single one of them knew what was going on and every single one of them said, “Well, yes, but nobody’s doing anything about it.” They all knew it, but nobody did anything. So, I looked at that as something that was very important that wasn’t being done and I really started to concentrate my efforts there. The information, because Colonel Khan was an MOI representative who had... There were other MOI reps throughout the region. He was able to talk with them and they were very open to providing him information. In addition, our interpreter was back and forth to Kabul quite a bit and so he was picking up lots of information. So there was all sorts of information that was out there, but nobody was really collating it and doing anything about it. So, I just decided that “We need to make use of this. There are people who are going to be hurt if we don’t.” Again, we finally found a sympathetic ear when the Marines came in. They were very much interested in getting this information and acting on it. As I said, my last month or so there, I spent more time running back and forth and exchanging information than anything else.

Q: During your time, what happened to the gravel man?

A: Last I checked, he was still making money hand over fist. Coalition forces were paying him. In retrospect, I can understand a little bit more why this is taking place. I think the rationale, the reasoning behind this, was that, you know what? If you throw money at these people, maybe they’ll be less prone to attack. That was exactly, I think, the strategy that they were trying to take. From what we heard later, people came to him and said, “Look, we really want to attack the base at such at such and such time or whatever” and he said, “Well, what’s in it for me?” He knew where his bread was getting buttered. So, we figured, “Well, if it keeps this way...” There is a caveat that goes with that though. Every one of these guys knew that the Coalition wasn’t going to be there forever. They all basically had this attitude like, “We’ll just play along with them because eventually they’re going to leave. When they leave, look at how well situated we’re going to be.” So, we may actually be empowering individuals who are going to create the exact same situation that existed before we got there.

Q: Did you have any feel for how the Taliban was perceived in your area?

A: I think when people are that poor, it matters little religion or political leanings. I think it’s more “What can you do for me?” I think this was a fundamental element we were missing and I think it’s maybe improved a little bit since then. We go in there assuming these people are going to have the same western ideas and concepts that we do. We were trying to push these ideals of an Afghan nation with a president that you’ve elected and a parliament that you’ve elected. These people didn’t give a damn. For them, their priority was their family, their tribe, their

ethnic group, and maybe somewhere way in the back of their minds the idea of a united Afghanistan. But how is that going to help them? So, concepts of government, I think, meant little to them. They had been fighting for 25 years. They've lived in mud huts. Many of them didn't even have potable water. There was no electricity. I think whoever was in charge meant little. It was just "What can you do for me?"

Q: Yes. One of the things that happens, I think, to all of us who deal with these things, you get out of Washington and the UN and all these ideas of democracy, liberty, and all, and at a certain point when you're up against it on the ground, you realize it's potable water, it's minimal healthcare, and maybe a school or something like this. You quickly in a way find yourself changing your priorities. Rather than preaching, you're trying to get things done. Was this going through, do you think?

A: Oh, definitely. Definitely. As I said, I saw the whole DDR process as just a big waste of time. The elections... I was really surprised when they pulled off this election because what was funny – and I laugh at myself, I guess my own ego – we were going out to these various provinces and meeting with all the leaders. I would stand up and give my red, white, and blue speech, saying that "You all need to get out and register to vote and women need to register to vote." I used to use this little trick. I'd say to the Pashtuns, "I can tell you your Tajik neighbors are registering. If you don't..." I'd play this little one side against the other. All of them were assuring me that they had been registering in droves and that they were definitely going to vote in the election. Come to find out, the UN had not even set up any registration places there in the provinces outside of Kabul, so they were all just giving me lip service. I was walking around patting myself on the back that we were getting the word out and, in effect, they were just appeasing me.

Q: Let's talk about some of the American elements that were wandering around there...

A: The one problem we ran into that affected us... We had what was called OGA, other government agencies, and ODA, other defense agencies. You can use your imagination as to who was who.

Q: It's all basically intelligence types running all over each other.

A: Yes. And Special Forces and things like that. Now, the SF guys had their own compound within Bagram. It was very guarded. Within Bagram, you couldn't get in there. We were always trying to get in there because we heard they had good chow. And they had also been caught smuggling booze back into the compound, onto the base. So, after that, we were always getting searched when we came back. But the only problem that we had was that a group of them decided they wanted to get into the Panjshir Valley. Now, the Panjshir Valley was Fahim Khan's sort of home turf. He was the minister of defense. We were already facing issues with him. We were able to find out that he was telling all of his local militia commanders, rather than turn in weapons as part of the DDR process, he was giving them money to go out and buy old crappy, broken down weapons to turn in and was having them bury the good stuff in weapons caches. But the Panjshir Valley is a place that is not easily accessible and apparently that is

where he had a lot of heavy weapons stored. But we had some ODA guys decide that they were going to go up there-

Q: That was a defense agency.

A: Yes. And decide that they were going to go in there. Some Afghan guards there said, “No, you’re not going to get in here” and next thing you know, there was this big shoot ‘em up there, them saying, “Yes, we are going” and there was this big shoot out. Long story short, that area was basically put off limits to us through a number of different... Even the central government didn’t want us to go there because they thought it was just a powder keg. Right before I left, we had finally gained access. I never did get up there. But that was one of the problems with cowboys. They would go in there and decide “We’ll go wherever we want in this country” and they shut us out for quite a while.

Q: How about the NGOs [non-governmental organizations]? I’m thinking Doctors Without Borders. There are a whole series of these things. I understood that they were unhappy with the PRT concept because they thought that was their business. Did you run across any of that?

A: Yes, I did, and it was unfortunate because what was happening was, I mean, some of these NGOs were very willing to work with the PRTs and with the military. And there were some that didn’t want to have anything to do with us. But the Afghans were very quick to take advantage of some of this. What they would do is, they might contract with an NGO to dig a well, and then a PRT might come in there and say, “Yes, we’ll dig a well for you” or whatever and they were playing one against the other and getting paid double. They were very entrepreneurial in that way. So they were taking everything from everyone and you’d never know who was paying for what because there was a complete lack of coordination amongst the NGOs and the PRTs. That was something we were trying to work on when I left there. But I remember going to a couple of PRT commanders conferences and in one, this one guy just kept standing up and yelling – from the EC, I want to say, some NGO out of the EC – saying that any military elements, whatever, associated with NGOs completely undermines their mission, completely undermines what they’re trying to do, is ruining all the goodwill that they’re spreading. At the same time, we had other NGOs pleading with us to provide cover for them so they could operate in certain areas because the security situation didn’t warrant they could just go out and do it. So you had different NGOs that kind of viewed this in different ways. I found, and it was interesting because as the only civilian in a military element, I was told early on, “You don’t want to look like the military guys,” although I find it kind of ironic because I’m going out there saying, “I am the U.S. government representative.” With no armor and no weapons, I’m probably a bigger target than anyone even if I did. I mean, I dress very rustically and I think I probably looked as much like one of the military guys as anyone. But I found out that nobody cared. They didn’t care if you were military. They didn’t care if you were civilian. They didn’t care if you were NGO. It was “What can you do for me?” It undermines their mission, completely undermines what they’re trying to do, is ruining all the goodwill that they’re spreading. At the same time, we had other NGOs pleading with us to provide cover for them so they could operate in certain areas because the security situation didn’t warrant they could just go out and do it. So you had different NGOs that kind of viewed this in different ways. I found, and it was interesting because as the only civilian in a military element, I was told early on, “You don’t want to look

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Q: Did you have any feel for the sway of the government in Kabul?

A: The problem as I saw it was, everything was Kabulcentric. Karzai never left his compound. He was very, very paranoid, I guess. Well, maybe with good reason. Didn’t want to get out. Our ambassador, Khalilzad, was very close friends with not only Karzai but a number of other high ranking people. So, he mixed very well and quite often. If not nightly, at least a couple of times a week he was at the palace. I think they came up with a lot of ideas there. My only criticism was that these ideas worked within Kabul and within this sort of sense of a national Afghanistan but had very little to do with what the man in the other provinces was facing. Granted, they had an idea, and this was something that was also kind of part of my mandate, and that was to stand up these sort of central government buildings, administrative buildings, in each province, each district, and within those buildings they would hopefully house a minister of interior representative, maybe a minister of education, women’s affairs, whatever the case may be, so that they could in turn extend some of the influence of the central government. However, that was moving very slowly. My concern, and maybe it’s not a warranted concern anymore, was that if we were going to take too long in making things better for people, going back to my political background in the revolution of rising expectations, that somebody else might come in and this powder keg might get reignited. But it seems they’ve done a good job kind of removing the Ismael Khans and the Dawspins and some of the others from the equation, the people who are trying to collate and group other factions together.

Q: In the Foreign Service, there’s nothing better than to be assigned to a job where somebody, the person before you, had done a lousy job. I would have thought, to put it on a countrywide basis, that almost anybody would have been better than the Taliban. Were you getting a feeling that the Taliban wasn’t that bad?

A: Well, you know, it’s funny. Again, I think a lot of it has to do with expectations. I think the Taliban, although very repressive and very fundamentalist, I think that they did provide some sort of sense of order to these people. The reason the Taliban came in was because there was so much anarchy following the Russian pullout. Some of the things that were taking place – rapes and the pillaging and these armed factions and warlords – I think it basically created an opportunity for the Taliban. The people welcomed the return of order. However, I don’t think

anybody missed the repression of that regime. I can tell you, I never saw any women outside of Kabul. And if you did, of course, they were in a burkha, so you never really saw them. When you dealt with village leaders, when you talked to them about schools, it was still very much of a fundamentalist way of, at least in the treatment of women and children... If we built a school, we had to build two schools because after the second grade, girls could no longer be going to school with boys. Any time we went to a village, the women were shut up, locked away somewhere. We never saw them. There was a problem in one village... I remember them saying, "We need another well dug because if the women come to this well, the men look at them. So they need one over where the women are." I don't know if these were vestiges of the Taliban or simply the way of life in those regions.

Q: Did you find yourself getting into a pushing contest with the embassy which was trying to push equality? The idea of drilling two wells, one for women and one for men would be anathema in the United States. Was it one of those things you just did and didn't report it? How did you work this?

A: That's a very good question. Interestingly enough, a group came through (I'll never remember what they called themselves, but it was the Council on Afghan-American Something or Other), but Karen Hughes, Don Rumsfeld's wife, a number of very high powered, high profile women came through to exactly look into some of these issues. They were talking about equality. Of course, we had a number of people talk to us about equality along the way. But I felt that we've got to do the basics right now. We've got to provide the water, the housing. The basic staples of life needed to be provided. If you want to start going down that road of saying, "No, we'll only build one school because this is the way it should be," I think it's much too early, much too early. You've got to give them the basics first. Then you can start to try... It's a cultural thing. I think you get onto a very slippery slope when you start to, you say, "We will provide this for you, but you're going to have to do it this way." I think that would have been folly if we were to say, "We'll build one school and you'll have to let women and men." These are traditions. These are cultures that may be ingrained for a thousands years. You can't just come in and try to change that. I think they would view you in a completely different context. So, that was my personal philosophy. Frankly, it had never actually come down to that. But I thought it was very important that their cultural identities didn't get tampered with too much. Open some doors, but don't close doors saying, "You have to go that way."

Q: Did you have concerns that you would have the equivalent to a political commissar from Kabul come on down and say, "You're supposed to be politically correct in what you're doing?"

A: Well, to be perfectly honest, I didn't have to worry about too much of anything. People could come in and say all they wanted. Until they were there in the field with us, we were the people calling the shots and we weren't doing this out of a sense of ego or because we felt we knew best. But we were attuned to the local culture and we met with these people on a regular basis. I for one was not going to suddenly start answering to somebody who was not out in the field with me, who thought they knew best how to push things down people's throats.

Q: I take it you developed very quickly the normal field point of view as opposed to the son of a bitch in the big city. This is true of any organization.

A: Yes, to some extent, but to be honest, there wasn't a whole lot of guidance that was coming out of Kabul. It was more like we were sending them back, we were the eyes and ears in the field telling them what was going on out in the region. I was lucky. The DCM in Kabul was really a good guy to work for. There were some other people back there at the embassy who were very eager to hear our reports. Never did anyone tell me I had to do things this way or that way. So, I was fortunate.

I have to relay this one story because it was just too funny. This all goes to being a civilian in a military element. There were some changes afoot. They were going to start allowing these ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) forces, the NATO forces, to start to take over Kabul province and make that an area for them to operate in. We had a group come down and went into Kabul, which was part of our territory, ran up against an ISAF group (I don't know if it was French or...) They ran into this ISAF force who said, "This is our territory" and our guy said, "No, this is our territory" or whatever the case may be. It happened much quicker than we had heard it was going to happen. So, apparently, one side was telling the other that "This is your territory." Well, I sent an e-mail right up to the DCM in Kabul saying, "This is what we encountered today. We need to have somebody tell us what the damn line is here because we're wasting time and resources if we're both coming in the same place." He shouted across to General Barno, who is the three star in charge of everything. Dave Barno went back down his chain – he had nowhere to go but down – to the colonels, saying, "Who the hell is (Ed's Note: subject of this interview) and what the hell is he doing mixed in between ISAF and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah? What the hell is going on here and here and here and here and here?" Well, this came all the way down to my commander, our PRT commander, who was really a good guy. I went in to see him and he was just laughing. He said, "You won't believe what a mess has been created here" and he was laughing because he realized we had done nothing wrong. But because I didn't have the... The problem was that the colonel in charge of the PRTs was furious that this went around and circumvented him and the general was mad because he had to hear it, he didn't hear it from the colonel. I ended up becoming something of a big help to the guys in the PRT at that point because they realized I can completely circumvent the chain of command and there was nothing anyone could do about it. So, for instance, although we were based there on Bagram Airfield, it was just assumed that we had all these other elements to support us when, in fact, none of them were we able to access. We actually had less logistical support than the PRTs that were further out in the field. So, I would go into meetings with these colonels sitting around the table. Of course, I loved this, being former military. I could never have gotten away with it. I would basically just stand up and say, "You guys are screwing us out of this. We need this. You need to just open your heads and think about this." Some of the military guys would just be aghast, but what could they do? Sure enough, things came our way. So, it was very interesting. It was very humorous. It actually ended up being very useful that I didn't have to report to the military chain of command. I was told a couple of times, "Tom, reign it in a little bit," but there were other guys saying, "Go, go, go with it because we can't do it. You do it."

Q: Did you ever run against the UN and its role there?

A: I found the UN to be the most inept, confused organization I've ever encountered. But that doesn't mean they're not well meaning. I always draw the analogy, it's like a woman who

maybe is passed out on a busy street corner. You have 10 individuals running up and all trying to help her and tugging her in different directions. They're all trying to help, but because no one is coordinating the effort, they may be doing more damage than good. I had very little use for the UN when I was there. There were some really good people there. Certainly I remember getting a brief from some people who could tell you almost to the person who was operating where and what they were doing. But for the most part, they just for whatever reason don't want to hook themselves in with a number of the other factions that are there, be it the Coalition forces or the U.S. forces or the PRTs in general. So, I think they were somewhat disconnected.

Q: What were they doing?

A: Well, some of their big initiatives were, as I said, the DDR concept, which I think is doomed to fail or at least never meet the expectations, and the election. They were pushing the election. Those were the two big initiatives they were working at the time. They pulled off this election, which really surprised me. I never in a million years thought they'd get enough people to register and vote. My hat's off to them for doing that.

Q: Let's talk a little about... You were saying you were in Kabul and you couldn't go across the street without a military convoy. How did you travel? How did you get around?

A: We had Toyota pickup trucks and I think we had one or two HUMVEEs, one with an armored mount on it. So, we would just roll out in a convoy. We would plan ahead of time who was going to be in which vehicle and what order we were going to go in. Of course, we had all these defensive and evasive tactics that we were always staying aware of. We had radios to stay in contact with each other, but we always rolled out in a convoy. There really are no roads. There's one road that does run down from Bagram into Kabul. I think that's the one that they just opened that goes all the way to Kandahar now. We were on some really hellacious roads. I'm not even sure some of them were roads. One thing I always dispel people of, there's not a grain of sand in that country. There is no sand at all in Afghanistan. It's this fine dust about the composure of talcum powder and that's what's everywhere. And it gets everywhere. You breathe it in. It's impossible. You could put someone in a sealed room and they would eventually, this stuff would be there. Some of the weather, that would turn into mud real quick if the rains came. In the mountainous regions, you had to be a little bit more careful. Our biggest problem when we traveled was usually coming through somewhere like Kabul. The streets were so congested and you had so many people moving around, our biggest fear was getting stuck in some sort of bottlenecked ambush. And so we would literally push people out of the way, just blast through, because there had been a number of cases where they had actually used these bottlenecks to blow up convoys or people.

Q: Would you inform the governor of such and such a place that you were coming or would you just sort of appear?

A: No, we would. We would always try to let them know ahead of time. Occasionally, if we were in the area, we went to stop by. But it was almost always through prior appointment.

Q: Did you find many Afghan people that you'd meet would say, "Let's sit down. Let me explain about how we view things and the culture and all that?" Was it just "What are you going to give me" or were people trying to explain where they were coming from?

A: No, as I said, they were very hospitable people. The way we generally did business is, we would come in, we'd have a meeting, they would always have a bowl of nuts and serve tea. We'd chat and make small talk. Then we might go in and eat. Then we might come back and make more small talk. In fact, I would guess that the business only took up maybe 25% of the entire conversation. Everything else revolved around "This is what happens here and this is what happens here" and everyone would like to tell little stories about their family. They were very interested in hearing about our families. So, yes, they were always interested in discussing issues. I found very interesting the dating issue that some of our young interpreters would tell me. It's almost a sight unseen way of dating.

Q: How would they date?

A: Well, for instance, say a young man saw a young lady (and of course he may only see her eyes because she's wearing a burkha or something). He would then go to a female, be it his mother or his sister, someone in his family, and he would say, "I'm very interested in this girl I saw." That female family member would then approach a member of the other family and say, "My son was interested. Would you be..." And then they might go somewhere, and it's usually chaperoned, and spend time together. But at some point they might decide, "Well, let's get married" and you may end up marrying a woman you never see until your wedding night. So, it's interesting. And of course, because they're Muslim, there's also some people who have more than one wife, although it's not completely prevalent but it does happen.

Q: Did you have any problems... Here you're sitting with troops or young men. It's always a problem. Were our troops pretty well behaved towards...

A: Yes, I think... And you know, to be honest, like I said, we never saw women out in the region. If we did, we were just driving by and they were in a burkha carrying water or something. When you got into Kabul, you could actually see women who weren't wearing the burkhas, who might have a headscarf, but a lot of them dressing very modern. However, security, if there's one way to quell someone's libido, it's put them in a precarious situation regarding security. So, yes, I mean, they also have this General Order Number One, which applied to all the military which went "no drinking and no fraternization." Some of the biggest problems that they encountered were troops that were out in the field that were carrying on but nothing I think that was ever... And we had a few females in our unit, but no problems that I ever saw. [END TAPE]

Q: Were we looking at opium?

A: That was a big problem. It was everywhere. At the time, we were pretty much turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to it for a number of reasons which I think they're still wrestling with. As you know, it's really one of the only viable crops they can grow over there. Unofficially, I would guess that it's not something that affects us in the U.S. too much because most of this does

get to Europe but very little gets to the U.S. The Brits were supposed to take the lead on this and so they were the ones that are still looking at the eradication and the other problems that are involved with opium.

Q: But you weren't under any orders to tell people, "Cut out opium" or something like that?

A: No, I never did. It was brought up in one meeting that we had in Kabul, one of the commander conferences or something. Actually I think it was the Canadian ambassador who said that we just can't continue to turn a blind eye to this. But it wasn't something we were pushing on at the time. I mean, these people, to really understand how bad off they were... I used to come home every day and say, "It's amazing. I feel such a sense of accomplishment every day." The flip side to that is that there is so much to be accomplished. This is a country where, at least in my region, these people had nothing, absolutely nothing. I think that the last thing that we were concerned with was some farmer trying to make some money growing poppy. Now, whether we should have addressed it then or if we should let it continue on and then address it later when they're standing on their feet a little better, I don't know. I don't have an answer to that and I think it's one of the big questions that somebody who certainly makes more money and is smarter than me will have to decide.

Q: When you say "accomplished things," one gets the feeling that what's happening in Iraq today is that there is an opposition, the insurgency, which is essentially trying to stop things from happening – electricity, water, dams, everything. It's very hard to get reconstruction going. Were you feeling that what you all were doing was feeding into the reconstruction side?

A: Oh, definitely. Definitely. General Barno was always fond of showing this slide that was sort of a yin and yang kind of figure. It showed security and an arrow to reconstruction. In other words, you couldn't have one without the other. So, yes, I certainly think... In fact, I think that is the great advantage of the PRTs. Two things I came away with from Afghanistan... One was, these people are happy we came in. They really are happy that the Americans came in and the Coalition forces are there. Unlike what I'm hearing, and I can't speak definitively on Iraq because I haven't been there, but from what you understand and what the reports are, there's a lot of people who are unhappy the Americans ever got in there. But Afghanistan, I can say unequivocally, we did the right thing and the Afghans are happy we're there. A lot of that... I think much of that has to do with the reconstruction that we're doing there. These PRTs really are out there busting their butts and trying to do as much good as possible. I think it's also very useful that reconstruction is being associated with military elements. Generally you see military and you just think destruction. Well, these guys are going out there and doing a lot to try and build things up and make this country more viable economically and otherwise.

Q: How did you find the composition of the PRTs coming from essentially people who had had civilian careers which they were drawing on for reconstruction in your particular group?

A: It was funny because my PRT CO used to laugh because he had an engineering background but he was a project manager and he certainly didn't feel he was equipped to go out and look at a project and say, "Structurally, it needs this or this or this." And that was always a problem, finding actual qualified engineers to come and do surveys on some of the buildings that we were

paying for and constructing. There was a real shortage of them. And then there were other issues. I know that another major with this unit, who was a Seattle police officer, had gone into Kabul on her own volition, decided with some other female police officers she found to help train females, Afghans, to join the police force. There wasn't a whole lot of support for her doing that. So on one hand you can see where somebody had a background and couldn't really use it and another one did have the background and could use it but they didn't really have a whole lot of desire to see that happen. Like a lot of what was going on there, you were cobbling together your expertise and trying to do the best you could. Again, fortunately and unfortunately, you could do that because there was so much that needed to be done. Any layperson could probably contribute in one way or another.

Q: When you left there in April, did you have a feeling of accomplishment?

A: Yes. Yes, I definitely did. It was the greatest experience I had had in the Foreign Service. It was just so much to do. Really we were coming home every day dirty and tired and sweaty. But every day, we felt like we made a difference. I'll be very interested I'm sure for the rest of my life in following what goes on in Afghanistan and seeing exactly what we did do and how well it worked.

Q: There are elements of the American culture which, of course, are quite different from the Afghan culture, but at the same time, I always think that we have this "can do" attitude which I think... We've got a problem. Let's try to do something about it. Do you think that worked in this context?

A: Yes, definitely. And you know, it was really interesting... I think what I really walked away with appreciation of the most was not even our interaction with the Afghans and the stuff we were doing but watching these young soldiers that I worked with, watching them come in, originally very skeptical and nervous and almost anti-Afghani, and then three months later watching them out there playing with these kids when we'd go to a compound and kicking a soccer ball around and handing out candy and taking an interest in doing things and helping them. I remember, we had a donation of a bunch of bicycles. I don't know, they came from the PX or somewhere. These guys spent hours during their time off putting these bicycles together so they could bring them out to the various schools and stuff. So, there was a real change in the attitudes of the people that were within the PRT. I think that "can do" attitude, I think it was important that it had to spread amongst our own first before we could really do the job we were capable of with the Afghans.

Q: Well, you didn't feel then on the military side a very heavy hand of their supervision either, did you, as far as something from Kabul from the generals or something saying, "According to Order Such and Such, you're supposed to do this or that?" They were kind of on their own, too, in a way?

A: Well, you know, being at Bagram, it was more difficult. They were too close to the flagpole, I think. But the biggest problem I think our people faced was actual just staff. I mean, at one time there, I think we had maybe two or three civil affairs officers or people. They just weren't providing us with many resources. They had more than enough money. I mean, they were

basically being told, “Here’s your money. Go spend it.” But that’s difficult to do when you can’t get out because you don’t have enough people. We had another interesting thing called “office hours.” Every Saturday from 9:00-12:00 or 9:00-1:00, any of the local Afghans could come onto the base and meet with us and discuss issues that bothered them or things that they wanted to see or we could set up appointments or a number of things like that. They would really inundate us at times. Again, that came down to resources. I mean, sometimes we just didn’t have the people to listen. So, our biggest problem was, there was a bunch of colonels all sitting up there trying to figure out what to do and we could have probably used some of them out there in the field with us. But other than that, I think that there wasn’t anything that was too much of an obstacle being pushed by the military.

Q: Is there anything else you’d like to add here at this point?

A: My biggest concern is still and will always be that we approach this, I think, too much in an ethnocentric manner. We don’t understand that this is a completely different culture, an ancient culture, and we need to be very conscious. You just look at the history of this country. No outsiders have stayed there long, unless they were buried there

[END INTERVIEW]