

USIP – ADST

Afghanistan Experience Project

Interview #44

Executive Summary

The subject of this interview was the State Department's representative in Kandahar from late January to late May 2003. He worked with the 82nd Airborne in Kandahar and with the Civil Affairs Team that was established there after the area had been cleared of Taliban insurgents.

The interviewee's experience in the crucial initial phase of the transition from military pacification to civil affairs activities gives him a unique perspective on how the new PRT system differs from a purely military-run organization or the military Civil Affairs Teams (CAT-A) that operated in Kandahar province immediately after the conclusion of large scale military operations there. As elsewhere in Afghanistan, the PRT had to deal with a pre-existing power structure led by a governor whose main claim to legitimacy was his anti-Taliban fighting prowess. Raising the profile of the central government constituted the number one priority of the new PRT (aided, the interviewee notes, by the presence in the province of President Karzai's brother). To increase the PRT's accessibility and legitimacy, it was established in downtown Kandahar, not on the 82nd Airborne's base outside of town.

The PRT's American commander moved quickly to get an AID representative on site and to begin reconstruction projects that would gain good will for the central government. In early 2003 there was still no Afghan national police or national army presence in the area, but the local police chief was a pillar of strength. Having a large contingent of American troops close at hand greatly increased the sense of security in and around Kandahar. According to the subject, the security situation there was actually better than in Kabul during his four-month stay.

The interviewee returned to Kandahar briefly in the fall of 2004. He said he was sorry to see that the old warlord governor, who had been replaced by a new central government appointee, was once again in charge. Still, the situation had so changed that he was hopeful that even an old-style leader like the governor would be constrained to uphold the rule of law and follow regulations in an Afghanistan where people had taken to democracy with alacrity.

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

Interview #44

Interviewed by: Mike Anderson
Initial interview date: September 21, 2005
Copyright 2005 USIP & ADST

A: I was out in Afghanistan at several times including for four months in the spring, winter/spring of 2003 to help set up the PRT in Kandahar.

Q: Maybe you can just give me a little bit of background on when you arrived there, what you did, where you went.

A: Okay, well, I arrived in January of 2003. I arrived in Kabul, spent about five or six days at the embassy getting read and briefed in and then flew down to Kandahar. I was succeeding another colleague who had been there for about three months, but at the point at which I got down there, things were moving much faster and it was pretty clear that we wanted to make Kandahar one of the next PRTs to be stood up more because of the importance of Kandahar and the southwest region of Afghanistan than anything else.

Q: Things were moving kind of fast down there. Can you explain exactly what that means in the context at the time?

A: You had a situation in which the strategic interest of Kandahar and the southwest region was becoming increasingly apparent to American policy makers, certainly at the embassy and back in Washington. When I say American policy makers I mean the NSC, State Department and DOD, all three. You had the situation of a warlord/governor who nonetheless had some legitimacy having conquered Kandahar back from the Taliban, but who clearly didn't have in our view what it took to be a governor in the post war period. How better to steer events in that region than to establish a significant presence not just in the military sense -- because it was the first brigade of the 82nd Airborne in the base in Kandahar and operating all through southwest Afghanistan -- but more importantly, through what a PRT brought you.

Q: So, in Kandahar we were looking at one of the very first PRTs then?

A: No. The first I think was in Gardiz and in Herat.

Q: More settled areas of the country I guess.

A: Right. I specifically asked to go to Kandahar because it struck me as a more critical region. If we want to bring peace to the region, don't just go where its pacified already,

engage where it is the biggest challenge. I asked specifically to go to Kandahar and was not disappointed.

Q: What did you find there and how did you go about helping establish this?

A: Right. First of all, I found a pretty fundamental understanding -- actually I don't want to make it sound bigger than it was -- a very basic understanding of what a PRT could become. There was a CATC team, civil affairs team based in Kandahar. The military understood the importance of expanding the presence, but the trouble with the 82nd presence was they would go through, but it would be like a knife stroke through the water. Once they passed through they didn't leave a presence behind, whereas the CAT A team and the CAT C was designed to bring a much more permanent presence to the region and a permanent change to the region. That was the understanding, but there was no real understanding of what a PRT would consist of. About half the way through my tour there we were able to get a USAID officer down. We pressed for much of the time that I was there for a Department of Agriculture person to come down and we pressed allied countries to send representatives. We also explored the territory to try and find a location. We wanted to get it off the base, which was isolated from the population and into a downtown area where it would be much more in contact with the population. All the while working in close cooperation with the governor, because you didn't want to alienate the governor, but at the same time insuring that there was a central government presence and pushing in the direction of insuring that there was a central government presence in all of the activities so that the central government will get some credit when we went out and dug wells, built schools and constructed roads.

Q: Now, the governor, was he this warlord that had been there before?

A: Yes.

Q: Yes. So, he was a not elected sort of figure. He was a tribal.

A: Sure. No, none of the governors, no governor had been elected.

Q: Or appointed either.

A: He had a reputation or he developed a reputation of being someone who was strong and very forceful at fighting the Taliban, but in terms of the kind of practices of governance that we wanted to see established down the road that would win the population's loyalty on a more permanent basis, he didn't always seem to measure up or didn't always seem to understand what the task was.

Q: what was your title when you were there? I mean did you have a slot that you were filling or were you kind of advisor?

A: No. State Department rep in Kandahar.

Q: Okay, who was in charge of the PRT? I guess as it was established was there a person who was the commander of it?

A: First there was a Major who was in charge of the CAT A (Civil Affairs Team, Army).

Q: He was with the 82nd Airborne? Is that right?

A: No, he was with civil affairs unit that was managed out of Kabul and then he was switched out and a lieutenant colonel whose name escapes me, came in, who had a much broader concept. The major had a much more narrow concept and there again, it was the constant progress towards the formation of the PRT and developing a broader context and mission.

Q: What was your conception of what its role should be there I guess in a few words? What did you envision its function being?.

A: One, bringing the central government's presence and aligning ourselves with the central government's presence. But the first task was developing more of a central government presence. Two, engaging with the population to help them to understand the U.S. mission and the U.S. mission in support of the central government and the central government presence. So, what we ended up doing is enlisting President Karzai's brother, half-brother, actually, who lived down in Kandahar to participate in as many of our activities as possible because that was then an identifiable symbol in the eyes of the local population of the central government and what they were trying to bring to the region. Otherwise, it was the governor who was taking all the credit for himself for his own purposes and wasn't giving the central government any credit.

Q: Now, at this point in January 2003, was there, had the election for President Karzai and so on, had that already taken place to be?

A: No.

Q: So, in other words, we're still working with.

A: That was another aspect that we tried to bring. We tried to bring more institutions. We greatly facilitated the standing up of the Afghan independent human rights commission, which again was seen as the centralizing function of the government, and of the political class. We associated the central government in every way that we could with our activities, cooperating with the ministry of finance to insure the greater flow of tax resources to the central government. All this with the reluctant cooperation if not active opposition of the governor.

Q: Was the governor in charge of an armed group of people?

A: Yes, he had his militia. So, another thing we constantly pushed for and were only partially successful in achieving during the time that we were there, was to see a training

facility for the Afghan national army set up in Kandahar because many pashtuns wouldn't go up to Kabul for training. They saw that as going up to be trained by the northern alliance and they said there will be prejudice against our activities against our very presence and we said the only way to get around that is to start a training center down in Kandahar in addition to the one in Kabul. Soon after I left this came to fruition.

Q: I see. What about the international presence there, ISAF or I guess the other non-American allies?

A: No, there was virtually none. There were French down in Spin Boldak, which is a town heading for the Pakistan border to the southeast from Kandahar. They were virtually the only other foreigners along with a Romanian company on the base with the 82nd in Kandahar, but the Romanians were not at all part of the plans to push toward the PRT. The British had an element down there that was involved in the anti-drug struggle, but they didn't want to have anything to do with it [the PRT]. Our efforts again bore fruit after I left in the placing by the Germans of an officer in the eventual PRT that was stood up.

Q: Is this still under American command there in Kandahar?

A: It is still under American command, yes.

Q: What sort of a military compliment was in place there? I mean did the PRT have a military arm?

A: CAT A was a military element, civil affairs as its name indicates of maybe 30 to 40 at any one time officers and soldiers and the covering presence. The thing that actually provided more security than anything else in the region beyond just the guns CAT A carried with them when they went out of the wire was the presence of the first brigade of the 82nd Airborne which through daily shows of force was reassuring the Afghan population that there was a security presence in the region. They had an arm's length relationship with the militia of governor Sherzi. We had a much closer relationship with the militia of governor Sherzi to attempt to bring them over towards an attitude of more evenhanded and better governance.

Q: Was there a security problem for the PRT there? In other words, did you have?

A: Kabul saw more of a security problem than we did, but.

Q: You say they saw more?

A: They saw more of a problem than we did. We actually felt that conditions were rapidly improving. Obviously we nonetheless followed the force pro restrictions laid down by Kabul and maybe we didn't suffer any casualties except for one incident when we lost two men and had two injured, but that was almost, well I won't go into it over an open line, but that was because Kabul had sent us the wrong instructions over our advice

and two guys got killed, but I wouldn't go into any detail regarding that.

Q: So, was there an Afghan army presence there or the beginnings of an Afghan national army?

A: No, there wasn't.

Q: Not really?

A: No, just the militia while I was there. That was something we were pushing for very hard.

Q: The police, was there any kind of a local police presence?

A: Yes, the police was very effective and we worked very closely with the police under a very impressive chief of police, but he understood where it was that Afghanistan had to go, much more than the governor did.

Q: The police department, the police, national police, they were operating under?

A: No, it was still the local police, but it was under a more enlightened police chief and so we ended up working very closely with him.

Q: I see. How about non-governmental organizations, the various aid groups?

A: They were reluctant to cooperate too closely with the CAT A as they continued to be reluctant to cooperate with the PRT. Most of them. Some of them were willing to cooperate with us. We had a weekly coordination meeting downtown at UN headquarters in which we tried to share information about what others were doing. That was only partially successful.

Q: What was the cause for their reluctance would you say?

A: They viewed us as having a different mission and they weren't entirely wrong. They were overly suspicious, but they weren't entirely wrong in the sense that they didn't need to be seen running around with people in uniforms and carrying long guns. They felt that that would undermine their mission. At the same time they wanted the security that a military presence would bring, so they were somewhat schizophrenic in their own minds. I'm generalizing. Some were more enlightened than others and we worked very closely with some NGOs that did understand the value of close cooperation with official Americans.

Q: Now, you mentioned that you tried to get or did get an AID representative down there. Was there ability to do anything in the way of development work or projects?

A: No. Sanitation, water, as well as schools were the three things that the AID rep

focused on.

Q: Those were already underway at the time that you were there or this is something that?

A: No, he got them underway.

Q: Okay.

A: We knew it was a need. We didn't have the expertise to do it. We didn't have the budget to do it. Paul came down and he was able to bring those assets to bear.

Q: Okay. You got there in January 2003 and when did the AID representative?

A: He got there about March.

Q: Then you left shortly thereafter, so you were there what you said four months?

A: I left in May. I left towards the end of May.

Q: Let's see, what about promoting democracy, creating local governance, extending authority of the central government. I guess this was really the key element of your activity there.

A: That was certainly a central element of what I was trying to do. My military colleagues fully understood that at first. They were perfectly willing just to cooperate with the governor because the governor was the big bubba; he was the 800 lb. gorilla in town. They eventually came to see the need to stand up a central government presence and they moved much more aggressively in that direction. We did things such as meet with the constitutional Loya Jirga delegates who were going up to Kabul and met with them when they came back down as the constitution drafting procedure moved forward. We interacted very much with the delegates from the southwest region.

Q: Okay.

A: At that point no one was talking about elections and so that wasn't the primary focus. It was more the writing of the constitution and establishing the basis for democracy to go forward.

Q: What about the idea of human rights issues, women's rights?

A: Sure. We pushed that very hard partly because I had been there the year before helping to stand up the Afghan independent human rights commission and then through the chairwoman of the Afghan independent human rights commissions who I always saw when I went to Kabul. She was willing to start an office in southwest Afghanistan based in Kabul and then we worked with the governor to make sure that he would support that

office and not put spokes in their wheels. Then to help to provide their presence more permanently fixed on the scene in the region.

Q: What kind of activities could they engage in at least that you saw during the time you were there?

A: Hearing out complaints in a complaint procedure, serving as an intermediary with the governor as complaints came forward, with the governors because they also tried to move out into Zabol and Uruzgan and Helmand provinces as well. All of those areas were covered by the Afghan independent human rights commission office based in Kandahar.

Q: So, it gave people that felt that they had been wronged in some way a place where they could come and make their complaints?

A: Yes.

Q: Now, you mentioned this CAT A and CAT C, civil affairs teams and then how did they differ?

A: It doesn't have the mass of a PRT, it doesn't have the call on resources that a PRT has. It was a preexisting structure of the U.S. military presence in the U.S. military command and it wasn't something adapted to the Afghan reality as it was evolving.

Q: Okay, so the CAT would all be military people?

A: Well, except that I was on a CAT team. I was on, Paul was on the CAT team and I guess he, the Department of Agriculture rep came after it was formally established as a PRT.

Q: How did it really change? I guess, what sort of chemical change did it undergo when it went from being a CAT?

A: A) to the mission, B) the location. It moved off of the military base occupied by the 82nd Airborne into an independent location in town. It developed a separate identity and had a greater call on resources, but all this was happening as Kabul itself was evolving its own concept as to what they wanted the military's civil affairs role to be.

Q: Some PRTs were organized by the U.S. and handed over to other countries. I believe what we're seeing here though is much before that happened? What's your experience?

A: Correct, but I went back to help organize the elections last October and went back down to Kandahar and saw that we hadn't handed this one over. There had been talk of us handing it over to the Brits or the Germans or someone else. In the end the Germans put a person on the PRT after it was established, but didn't decide to take it over. I think that's partially a reflection of the fact that that's the hot area on the southwest border. All along the eastern border and then the southwest border, its really the hottest area because

it's the super highway bringing in Taliban and Al-Qaeda infiltration from Pakistan and I think other countries are more reluctant to take on responsibilities in that area which probably explains why others didn't take over.

Q: Now, you were there during the constitutional Loya Jirga.

A: Right up to the constitutional Loya Jirga, just as it was starting to happen. Certainly all the preparations.

Q: No other elections or anything that are taking place at that time on a local level?

A: Not at that time.

Q: So, you're basically still in the very early formative stages of the turnover?

A: Right. We did cooperate I see the next item on your list is police training and there we worked very closely with General _____ to help their police become more professional with hardware and things like that that the military provided to make General _____'s police more effective, but that was only in Kandahar province. We never got over to other provinces to do the same there. The same is true in the rule of law area where we engaged on a fairly regular basis with the judicial authorities to try and see what assets they needed and that we might be able to bring to bear.

Q: Did you travel around the Kandahar province at all?

A: I traveled all over the Kandahar province, but didn't get outside the Kandahar province.

Q: The PRT as it was established would have been just for that province? Is that correct?

A: Well, as PRTs have been established in other provinces nearby it wasn't necessary. The CAT C team, which is sort of a command headquarters, developed a regional concept that covered Uruzgan province that covered Zabol province to the east, Uruzgan to the north and Helmand to the west. It was in those operations that we suffered casualties over in Helmand.

Q: The security situation was such that perhaps you needed to wait to extend.

A: In all three of those provinces the security situation was far more fragile.

Q: So, Kandahar City itself you could see I guess more progress, more impact than if you were to go out into the countryside?

A: Yes, although since I'd left there have been terrorist acts there. I mean a senior Afghan General was assassinated. He had already left and moved up to a national

position in Kabul and came back down after one of the mullahs that we had worked very closely with had been assassinated by a Taliban and was killed when he came back down.

Q: Now, as I take it the PRT enjoyed a pretty good support outside of the governor perhaps. How would you characterize the popular or public reaction?

A: They were always happy to see us.

Q: Meaning that you went to see them? Was the PRT sort of in a fortified area?

A: As I say, when I was there we were still on the Kandahar airfield. When I went back down for the elections the following year in the fall of 2004, the PRT had become formally established and had a location offbase down near the center of town. It was much easier for Afghans to come by and call on them and meet with them and talk to them about how they could be supportive of their efforts and things like that.

Q: So, setting up government there in that area and establishing central government authority, was the number one priority. I guess the second would be the assistance AID projects of one sort or another?

A: Reconstruction. Correct.

Q: Reconstruction. During the time that you were there I guess the priority would have been more in the political area rather than in the reconstruction area or did they seem to go together somehow?

A: No, the two went together and it was deemed successful in the reconstruction area that we were bringing support for democracy.

Q: Okay. Achievements. The idea I guess that you saw it at a very early stage. Perhaps it was not possible to see or to sort of strike a balance as to what was going to be achieved. What would you say, have you sort of followed this in any way?

A: I sure have.

Q: Exactly where would you say this thing stands no?.

A: We made real progress when the warlord governor was replaced by a much more enlightened person sent down by Kabul and the PRT by then established, was able to work very closely with him. He has since moved on and the original governor has been brought back. What has happened since the original governor has been brought back I can't characterize, I don't know. I was very discouraged to hear that, but perhaps his predecessor, the one that I was fond of as I am was able to institutionalize things to such a point that the warlord governor couldn't do too much backsliding. I can't say for sure though.

Q: Well, it seems to have been pretty much common through the people I have talked with throughout Afghanistan that it was inevitable that you'd have to work with the existing power structure and there's no easy way to get around that. It just takes some time. Well, okay, assessment, what were the successes and failures? I think you'd say in general this has been a positive development?

A: Certainly a positive. It brings the central government presence. It brings a useful international presence into a region in conflict and I would say if there's a lesson if you're going to bring a PRT in, since it has a military component, don't take it into the more secure areas where probably the progress is being made, almost without the presence of the PRT, but take it into precisely those areas where many NGOs can't go because it's too dangerous and where the central government presence is more contested because it can bring something to the fight that your normal civil affairs units, that your normal NGOs, that your normal civilian international presence cannot bring. I also think it's absolutely critical given the basis on which we're all in Afghanistan that the PRT work very closely with the UN office. I didn't mention that in many of my comments here with you, but it was critical to the success of the PRT that it had close cooperation with the UN office in Kandahar.

Q: What exactly was the UN office doing there?

A: They were the ones putting together the governance. They were helping to put together the Afghan independent human rights commission. They were providing cover for and support for a number of these governance institutions that we were trying to promote the advancement of.

Q: So, in other words, it was a kind of, they were providing the structure within which you were operating would you say?

A: No, they were moving in the identical direction as us, but we weren't part of them and they weren't part of us.

Q: Yes, okay.

A: But the success of the international community and the success of the whole effort in Afghanistan is a critical blend of U.S. and UN, well, U.S. international community and UN efforts.

[END SIDE]

[END TAPE]

[END INTERVIEW]