

## Eastern Afghanistan, A Tour

By Brian B Donaldson, 15 February, 2010

Without a doubt, Afghanistan is just drop dead beautiful. The mountains remind me of many places I have been in the US, Korea, and Iran. I could not imagine being anywhere else, except maybe sailing on a vast ocean. I wished the roads were as beautiful as the mountains.

On one of my convoys through this beautiful land, I was informed that during the Soviet occupation the roads were built up and improved. But time and a lack of desire, or funds and skills, to maintain them has returned many of the roads to the camel paths of centuries earlier. On mountain sides, vehicle and mule drawn carts share the roads. In many locations, the roads are so narrow that only one car or truck can traverse the terrain. The dust is

also to be much respected. A very fine grain of sand that is picked up by the wind and whipped around. It is so fine it gets into everything.



Mountains east of Bagram Air Field



Typical scene on every road in Afghanistan

Since my arrival in April 2009, I have been to eighteen different military locations. It took me twenty-four aircraft of various types from C130 cargo planes, to UH60 Blackhawk helicopters, to small private mail carrier planes. Along with the flights I had the pleasure to travel in thirteen convoys with as many as seven heavily armored vehicles, and as few as three. The convoys however, are the most dangerous. If one of the planes or helicopters falls out of the sky there is very little chance of survival. In a way, this is good. But for a convoy, one is either killed by an IED or captured and killed by the planter of the IED.



Paktya Province, southeast region

I have seen lush green fields growing tomatoes and rice and other crops. I have also seen the desert. Unlike the lush green fields that support life, the desert will suck the very nature of one's existence from them. While flying out of Kandahar in the south, I witnessed what looked like the end of civilization and the beginning of hell on earth. The land just stopped being fertile and turned

arid and dry. Not a gradual decline but like a fence was erected and as the saying goes, it is always greener on the other side. Such was the case of this transformation. I have seen this only one other time and that was in southern California heading toward Arizona.

The eastern mountains with their evergreens were breath taking. The JBAD Pass, or Jalalabad pass from Kabul to Jalalabad, a notorious roadway where death waits at every corner. Not from the Taliban, they will not do any damage to this pass, but from the speeding and impatient drivers. The Taliban need the JBAD Pass as much as everyone else. High mountains with flowing washes and waterfalls. The cool fresh mountain air. The mountains with huge boulders and sheer cliffs. So much like the mountains of Iran or Colorado. I know I have seen these before but one never stops looking at the splendor and images of what could possibly be around the corner.

To the east of Kabul on the main road to Pakistan, one is greeted by a small lake. There one can see dots on the water. Coming closer to the lake it appears those dots are people on inter-tubes, fishing of all things. But then one is reminded that here is a poor country yet vastly beautiful.



Surobi, Nangahar District between Kabul and Jalalabad

Continuing easy out of JBAD Pass, a sight so splendid is seen. A dam of all things. What is on the other side of the dam?

I now arrived at Surobi. This is a massive lake or reservoir and has a massive dam. First time I have seen any kind of water of any size other than small rivers and mountain streams. The river that runs through the town is fast and furious. I guess one could bath or swim but the current is so strong it is not recommend. But sure enough, I watched some

Afghani men washing and some swimming, and one being taken away down river.

Everyone else just looked and utters Inshalah.

There are many places from large air bases such as Bagram and Kandahar to places with names like Rocco, Lindsey, and Fenty, Blackhorse, Phoenix, and Joyce. Combat Outpost (COP) Rocco, named after Maj. Rocco Barnes who was killed in a rollover accident when the road gave out from the weight of the MRAT he was riding in. A small COP with only six Marines and seven Georgia National Guardsmen. An outpost really in the middle of nowhere. All surrounded by high mountains and deep valleys. All controlled by the Taliban.



COP Rocco, now occupied by the French

When I arrived at COP Rocco, I went there

with the mission to repair their equipment and return back to my home base in Bagram. I didn't know that when I arrived there was no way to depart except the way I came in. Air departure was out of the question because the area was hot. Not by weather standards but by weapon standards, as in the hands of the bad guys. It took me almost three weeks to leave Rocco, but I left with much reservation. The Marines and Guardsman adopted me and treated me



French foreign legionnaires playing basket ball

probably better than one of their own. They made sure that I was comfortable and was afforded a weapon in the event of hostilities. I accepted their hospitality but declined the weapon. But they knew that if the worst thing happened that I would be alongside them and not covering somewhere else.

Rocco, a beautiful outpost stuck in the age of the wild west, like the old forts of a bygone era. Rocco, a place that will always be close to my heart and the Marines and Guardsmen will always have my highest respect.



The beautiful Uzman valley, yet so deadly



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