

The Sunobi Sentinel

Sunday, October 10, 2010

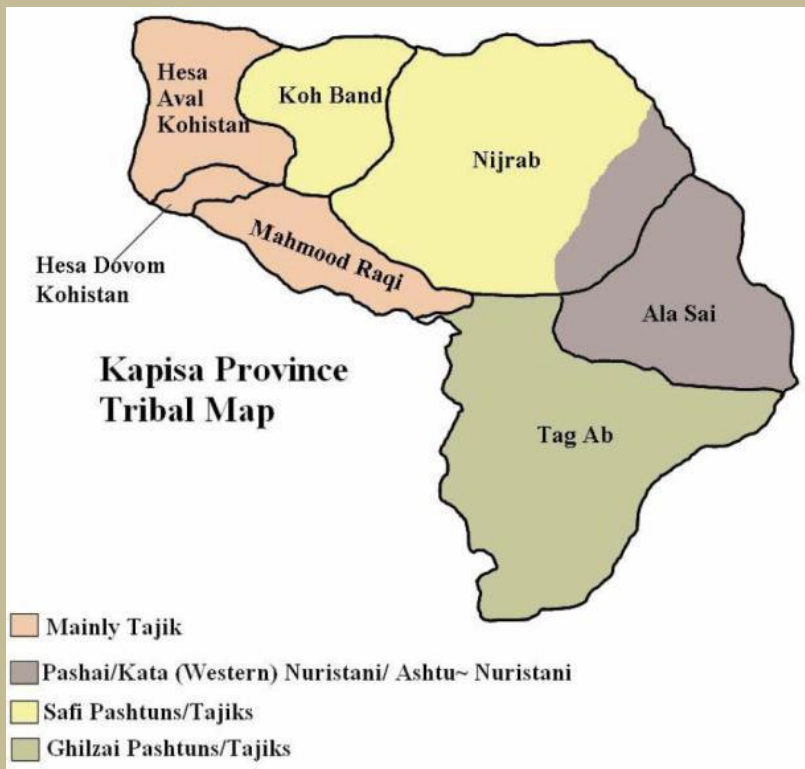
Greetings once again from eastern Afghanistan. Well, as you can see I managed to make it back from our 10 day operation. Needless to say it was everything I was not looking forward to and much more. The photos and stories will explain what I mean. I will tell you there was much more shooting both at me and by me than the previous operation earlier in September.

Unfortunately, my positive interaction with the population was very limited, but when it occurred I was provided with some useful information. One such interview was with an English teacher we had met at the all boys' school (highlighted in my last newsletter). He was more than happy to come speak with me and Curtis on our FOB (Forward Operating Base) and made a comment that nearly floored me. In fact, it got me thinking so much about what he said; I'm going to do some research on my own to see if what he said has some validity. He told me point-blank the people of Afghanistan have no clue why we came to their country. The Taliban spreads through intimidation and flat out lies the reason for the US and Coalition Forces coming to Afghanistan. It's to spread Christianity and to rape and steal. He stated the literacy rate is so low; nearly everyone who cannot read or write relies on word-of-mouth or various radio stations for their news.

Of course the word-of-mouth is coming from the Taliban, and the illiterate people are going to believe what is said, and why not, they have no way of refuting what is told to them. The same goes with the radio stations. Many radio stations are intimidated by the Taliban to spread lies, thus who are the average Afghans going to believe? If you think I'm kidding, I had one man last week say he was told the US invaded Afghanistan to rape their women and steal the country's rubies. The ruby topic will come during a later newsletter, I promise. It's disgusting how the Taliban make us out to be the boogey-man; all the while stoning women and committing other human rights violations in the name of Allah. Again, as long as the literacy rate lingers in the low double digits, this war will be won or lost depending on who is more successful winning the information battle.

More on the people of Kapisa

On the **human terrain** of Kapisa Province, I'll focus on the Pashai (pronounced: posh-eye-ee) and Nuristani tribes. The Pashai make up approximately 17% of the population and are mainly confined to Ala Sai's three main river valleys and Nijrab's mountainous southeastern slopes. Pashai and their linguistic cousins the Nuristani, speak different variants of Dardic languages and many Pashai consider themselves to be Pastun. Unfortunately, there is little useful data aside from intense research on their language. Often they are associated with or referred to as Kohistani and in Pakistan they are known as Kohistani. Definitely, more research is needed to better understand the Pashai.



The final group and one I find interesting because of their European traits is the Nuristani tribe. They primarily live in the higher elevations of the country and are neighbors with the Pashai. Nuristanis believe they are descendents from Greeks who conquered the area with Alexander the Great sometime around 326 BCE. Many Nuristanis have distinctly European features, blue and green eyes or blond and red hair. They favor neither the Tajiks nor Pashtuns, and tend to distrust outside involvement in their affairs. In the past two decades Wahhabism has spread amongst the Nuristani causing them to

take a fundamentalist view of Islam.¹ For centuries the Nuristani were known as “kafirs,” or infidels (this is still a derogatory word for them). This has changed as most have converted to Islam at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th. There are fifteen tribes with five languages and various dialects spoken. They do not have overly positive relations with Afghans or Pakistanis and have a strong animosity towards Arabs. Nuristanis remain protective of their distinct culture.² Of all the groups in Kapisa, Nuristanis are the only to not elicit help from the Coalition Forces.

¹ Naval Post Graduate School. Kapisa Province. Pg 2, (2007) <http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/kapisa.html>. Program for Culture & Conflict Studies, Monterey, CA.

² Program for Culture & Conflict Studies, <http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs>

A little more history on Kapisa Province

Kapisa is no stranger to conflict. The first recorded event was during the conquests of Cyrus the Great (600BCE -529 BCE). The Historian Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* (VI.92), states that Cyrus sacked Kapiši prior to his attack on the land of the Indians.³ After the death of Cyrus, a rebel general named Smerdis attempted to seize territory from Achaemenid empire in 522 BCE. He sent his own Satrap (Governor General) with an army to besiege the rebuilt city of Kapiši. Meanwhile Darius I, the heir of Cyrus, consolidated his reign over the rest of the empire and began to send men and supplies to the beleaguered city. The siege was broken on December 29, 522 BCE (estimated) and Smerdis was later killed ending the uprising.⁴

In the late winter of 329 BCE, Alexander of Macedon was pursuing the last Achaemenid King of Persia, Artaxerxes V Bessus. Bessus was able to put the Hindu Kush between his army and the Armies of Alexander as he wintered in Bactria (Northern Afghanistan). Alexander decided he would move his forces through Gandara (Modern day Kabul) toward the Panjshir Valley (and through its mountain pass) in an attempt to appear undetected in early spring on the left flank of Bessus. To accomplish this, Alexander needed a strong logistics base in which to winter his army and use it as a resupply point to kick off the campaign in the spring. He would found another city to be called Alexandria in the Caucasus and use the old city of Kapisa as its foundation.

He named it "Alexandria in the Caucasus" based on the belief that he had reached the Caucasus Mountain Range, when in fact it was the Hindu Kush. The city held a great strategic location near the mouth of the Panjshir Valley where the Panjshir and Ghorband Rivers created a fertile plain for agriculture. He established a permanent garrison of some 3,000 Macedonian and Greek troops in the city. After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, one of his successors, Seleucus I Nicator would gain the territory. The city and surrounding environs played a key role in trade sitting astride a juncture of the blossoming Silk Road. However, the Seleucid Empire would change hands a mere 20 years later (303 BCE), but not through war.⁵

The history lesson of Kapisa Province will continue with the next newsletter. Again, I know not everyone is interested in history as much as I am, but it's extremely colorful and somewhat amazing at how important this area once was, to be reduced to what it is now.

³ Litvinsky, Boris A. [History of Civilizations of Central Asia, Volume 3](#). Zhang Guang-Da, R. Shabani Samghabadi. Pg 40.

⁴ Iranian History. Vivana Breaks Siege in Kapisa. (04 Apr 08), http://www.fouman.com/history/Iranian_History_00522BC.html

⁵ Lendering, Jona. Alexandria in the Caucasus. (31 Mar 06) <http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexandria/alexandria-caucasus.html>

“The almighty says this must be a fashionable fight, it’s drawn the finest people”

-Braveheart

The arrival of the Afghan forces was quite the sight to say the least. For me, having never worked with them and only hearing negative accounts of their ability to fight, I reserved my judgment for the upcoming battle. However, I was surprised they were at least wearing uniforms, albeit not everyone was wearing the same uniform, they were however looking the part of a soldier.



Photos by: Paul



As an NCO (non-commissioned-officer) I was more excited to see an Afghan sergeant actually calling roll and making sure his soldiers were squared away than seeing them in the same uniform. It also seemed to me as the US Army had found another foreign military for which to hand off our old dilapidated equipment. The Afghans were wearing old BDUs

(battle dress uniforms) and carrying a mixture of M-16A2s, RPGs, and various Soviet light machine-guns. The radios surprisingly from the Vietnam era were still working. The vehicles they were using were also old and a mixture of US and former Soviet military.



The first vehicle to pull up was this humvee. Of course it's not up-armored like American humvees, but they do have the system to protect the gunner, so that was a plus. The next couple of vehicles were obviously left-over from the Soviet Occupation.

Photos by: Paul

The last time I had seen one of these BMP-2s was at a museum at Ft. Benning, GA and prior to that, as burning hulks in the Iraqi desert during the Gulf War of '91. Designed as an infantry transport able to carry a squad of six cramped in the back, it was the Soviet version of our Bradley. However, it has a much smaller profile than the Bradley.



These ANA (Afghan National Army) T-55 tanks were once the premier battle tank of the former Soviet Union. With a crew of five, it was a very capable piece of equipment in the hands of a well-trained crew. During the entire battle, this is exactly where they sat, unmoved for 10 days. So much for being a capable piece of equipment, right?

Time to get to work

The operation began very early in the morning before even the roosters crowed. We moved into a large open area by vehicle, and little did I know or anticipate, the next couple of days would be spent doing a lot of “humping” (aka. walking).

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Our arrival in the first village brought out not only the village elders, but curious on-lookers. The idea was to inform the elders we were there to cause no harm to the civilian population and to illicit their help in pointing out where the Taliban were.

Well, that went over fairly well and within minutes we received AK-47 fire from a nearby compound, scattering everyone in this picture as the picture below

shows. Miraculously, no one was killed or wounded. Boy did it get my blood flowing and my eyes scanning everywhere for more assailants. What really ticked me off was the fact no else one was scanning for anything.

For the next thirty minutes, we would receive harassing fire from an unknown number of fighters occupying a compound less than 150 meters away. The French leadership continued speaking with the village elders, trying to reassure them we were only there to rid the valley of Taliban fighters. I continued scanning for bad-guys when I noticed three more Taliban working their way along a stream into some thickets, unmolested by the ANA or French soldiers. I tried telling everyone who would listen there were more Taliban trying to catch us in a cross-fire, but no one would listen. Obviously, being able



Photo by: “Kara”

Photo by: "Kara"



to speak French would have come in handy at this point. One French soldier did put his rifle up and looked through his scope, but was unable to see what I was looking at. I noticed an ANA sergeant with a pair of binoculars around his neck and through my interpreter, I asked to borrow them. Just as he was pulling them from around his neck, we started taking fire from the three in

the thicket. I started yelling and pointing at them and finally people started noticing where the fire was coming from. A French soldier and I fired nearly a magazine at the three while everyone else scurried further down the hill. We soon followed once it was clear it was safe to move.

After a few minutes of trying to figure out what to do next, the decision was made to move parallel to the bad-guys and then in the opposite direction through what is called a "murder alley." I have never felt as vulnerable to an ambush as I did moving through this narrow alley. The walls actually separate pomegranate groves, but knowing there were bad guys wishing to do us harm,



Photo by: "Kara"

I was leery about walking down a perfect kill zone for them. Thankfully, the rest of the day was uneventful aside from the sporadic gun-fire.

The photos taken by "Kara" were taken by the Combat Photographer who was injured diving for cover. He was MEDEVAC'd with a leg injury but is fine now and will be returning to France in a few days.



Photo by: Paul

It wasn't all fighting

Although the two operations seen heavy fighting, we were able to conduct some business with local leadership. One large village in the valley is home to over 1,000 families and its Maliks came to the COP (Combat Outpost) to discuss construction of another water well.

The village currently has four wells, but with the ever growing population, a fifth one is needed. The Maliks met with the French CIMIC (Civil Military Cooperation) team from the COP and we were invited along to conduct a joint interview. The CIMIC team is the French equivalent to our Civil Affairs team. They handle all Civil Military operations, for example,



Photo by: Paul

oversee projects to improve the infrastructure (clinics, schools, wells, etc.). Much like the village I spoke of in the previous newsletter, farming is the main source of income for the majority of the locals. One main crop grown here is pomegranates, along with corn, wheat, potatoes, onions and spinach. I was first introduced to pomegranates by my wife prior to my departing for this adventure, but I had no clue how they grew or what they looked like, until this operation.

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I was pleasantly surprised at how sweet these were and since I was starving, I enjoyed one for breakfast. It seemed the owner of this orchard had fled with his family days before the operation, obviously knowing there would be a big fight. There was about three acres of pomegranate trees ripe for the picking. The sooner we left the better chances the farmer had for getting his harvest to the markets before it was too late.

Life on a COP



Imagine living on a COP as a hybrid camping experience. For those who live there permanently, there is a tent. But for the wayward vagabond such as myself, there is nothing but open sky and a cot. I can't complain because the weather is ideal for sleeping under the stars and with fall like temperatures gracing us now sleep is somewhat peaceful (in between the incoming rockets and out-going artillery).

With no plumbing and the rationing of water, sanitary conditions are a source of concern. This COP has only been in existence since May, so in the winter months using the facilities is going to be somewhat painful. Pictured on the right are the urinal tubes and below is yep, you guessed it, the Eastern toilets. Without being too graphic, the smell is horrendous and you definitely do not want to linger too long.



There are showers available, but more often than not the water runs out, leaving us with the only recourse but use several 1.5 liters bottles of water.

There is no other painful and eye-opening way to wake up early in the morning than by a bottled water shower.



The countryside

I had the opportunity when we were not walking, to ride as a rear gunner in the French VAB. It's designed to transport troops, much like our Stryker, but lacks the fire-power. The view is so much better not to mention I don't get motion-sickness as easy when I can see what's going on. This part of Afghanistan intrigues me with the lush valleys and large mountain ranges. Looking out during our travels, I became more and more mesmerized by the land. I couldn't help but think how much potential this country has if the security situation could stabilize.



Everywhere you look in the valleys you see villages. Some have been in existence for generations and some a recently rebuilt after the Taliban was driven away.

Terrace farming is practiced here and every piece of land that can produce a crop is utilized.

Photos by: Paul



This valley was a thorn in the side of the Soviet Army for 10 years. They never got a handle on the insurgency then and the French are finding out just how difficult it is 21 years later.

The Naghlu Reservoir is one of the largest bodies of water in Afghanistan and as I mentioned in the previous newsletter, provides a source of electricity along with a source of income to the fishing villages that dot its shores.



Photos by: Paul



According to the locals, the Naghlu Dam was constructed by the Soviets in 1967 to provide power to Kabul. The area around the dam housed a large military complex during their 10 year occupation in the '80s. But, today the area is home to families of the workers of the power-plant.

Downstream from the Naghlu Dam, the district center of Surobi sits along the banks of the Kabul River. Another dam near Surobi City forms another smaller reservoir which provides the area with much needed irrigation for local farms. It also provides electricity to local communities at a cost of \$22 a month.



School dedication

The week ended with a bright note. We were invited to attend the dedication ceremony of a school near the FOB. In attendance were local leaders and a delegation from the Ministry of Education along with French leadership.



Photos by: Paul

This school, like so many I'm finding out, was funded by Japan. I spoke with the engineer in charge of construction and he said the construction was done 100% by the local villagers and took right at six months. The school has four class rooms and is considered an elementary school, similar to our system. Boys from first grade through fourth grade attend this school.

I was a little upset that this too was an all-boys' school. It seems the Afghans have a gift of saying just the right thing to get something funded, but then turn around and manipulate the project to benefit them the most.

During this visit we did not deliver school supplies, but I do see an opportunity at another time.



More reconstruction in-progress

The reconstruction of Afghanistan is most evident in the outlying areas in the form of roads. Throughout history the winding road network in this part of Afghanistan has brought both prosperity and hardship. Riding in the gunner-position allowed me to see just such road work in-progress and hoping for a better future for the Afghan people, mostly the children.

This bridge spanning the Kabul River flowing from the Naghlu Dam was supposed to be completed in May. As you can see it's not quite there yet. The French Major I was riding with laughed and said, "Well, they didn't say which May it would be completed." He also had an interesting perspective that pretty much sums up work here. "The Afghans have the time, we have the watch."



Photos by: Paul



Yes, riding along this road was a little scary to say the least, especially when we inched towards the river. I noticed to in this country, there are no guard-rails. So if there is a slight slip, say a quick prayer because you're going over. Unfortunately, the French have lost a couple of vehicles to poor roads and deep ravines.



It was comforting to see workers going about rebuilding this particular road. This road is the quickest way to get into southern Tag Ab valley. The only other route takes several hours and entails going to Kabul and then north to Bagram and then...trust me, this is the quickest way.

Photos by: Paul

As a police officer when I'm not traveling the world's warzones, I have worked my share of wrecks and have witnessed some very peculiar driving habits. But what I witnessed on this trip was nothing short of amazing. The photo to the right shows traffic climbing a hill, and one car disregarding the stripes in the road. This would most definitely get my attention and warrant a ticket.



No, your eyes are not playing tricks on you; these people are passing on a hill one behind the other. I thought this was pretty funny and wondered when I was going to witness a collision. But then I remembered what an ANP officer told me. He said this stretch of road (about 25 kilometers) averages close to 600 collisions a month and I can understand why. There are no traffic laws here.

Photo by: Curtis

Team photo taken just prior to rolling-out



Well Ladies and Gentlemen that's it for another edition of The Surobi Sentinel. I hope this was just as informative and educational as the previous ones.

I did not want to dwell on the 10 days of fighting I witnessed and participated in since the media does a good job of doing that. That's best left to after deployment get-togethers. I see myself more as a teacher than

correspondent, so I hope everyone understands. Being shot at and returning fire is not my primary job here, but one that is obviously necessary when the time comes.

I do appreciate all the positive feedback from people saying how professional the newsletter looks. I guess after four deployments and tinkering with new ideas and layouts, I would say I'm happy with it. However, I'm never 100% satisfied with it and since I'm the writer/part-time photographer/editor/and publisher I often do not find mistakes until after it has been sent, so I apologize for that.

I want to take this time again to thank everyone for the kind words of encouragement and well-wishes I receive on a daily basis. You all keep me going day after day and I actually look forward to going outside the wire. Every mission is unique along with the people I meet and the stories I hear. And for that, I look forward to putting together each newsletter. For now we have no foreseeable big operations, so we'll be focusing more on the people close to home. I know the family is happy to hear that.

Until next time, enjoy the rest of the weekend and remember, if you like what you see please share it with others.

Take Care & Thanks for the Continued Support of the Troops,
Paul

Before you ask...No, I have not received any mail.