

# Perspectives on Afghanistan

Red Horse

*By Michael Yon*

Goaaaal

*By Matt Millham*



FOB Frontenac, Kandahar Province,  
Afghanistan.

# RED HORSE



Karez, underground irrigation tunnels, remain important throughout Afghanistan.

Some troops in Afghanistan go months without a shower. Major Ryan O'Conner, XO of the 1-17th Infantry in Kandahar Province, said during a previous tour his soldiers fought half a year without so much as a dip in a creek. Shortages of drinking water also affect combat operations.

For centuries, Afghans have dug underground irrigation tunnels called karez. The lines of craters seen around the country are shafts into a karez system. The shafts, which can be hundreds of feet deep, are used to lift out soil and stone while digging a karez. Karez can take years to build and are sometimes miles long. They are an intricate construction system, often built by teams for hire, using father-to-son knowledge passed down through the centuries.

Thousands of handmade underground irrigation systems range from China, through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, down to Africa, and up to Europe.

In Afghanistan, dating back to Alexander the Great, karez have been used to hide villagers, fighters, and weapons, or to move without detection.

Clean water is a high hurdle for Afghans, invaders, liberators, and social shapers. The showers on all U.S. bases in Afghanistan have signs that read:

## **Combat Showers Only Limit: Three Minutes**

How to take a combat shower:

- 1.) Turn on water
- 2.) Wet body
- 3.) Turn off shower
- 4.) Soap and scrub
- 5.) Turn on water
- 6.) Rinse off soap
- 7.) Done

BY MICHAEL YON

KANDAHAR PROVINCE

CULTURE





RED HORSE uses red lights on the rig, which makes it slightly harder for enemies to aim at them at night.

Forward Operating Base (FOB) Frontenac happens to be nearby the Dala reservoir, created by the Dala Dam, which was built by Americans a couple generations ago. Most of the larger bases, unfortunately, aren't blessed with reservoirs in Afghanistan. At Frontenac, a local Afghan contractor is paid to take water from the lake reservoir and recharge the holding reservoir on base for the toilets and showers.

FOB Frontenac is a short helicopter leap from the international airport at Kandahar Airfield, where even 747s land. In the middle of Frontenac, a tall water-drilling rig with an American flag flapping in the noonday breeze signals that someone is drilling for liquid freedom. Freedom from the incredible logistics nightmare—or at least a little freedom.

The drillers are from the Air Force "809 RED HORSE." Four Air Force water-drilling crews have been alternating on six-month tours to Afghanistan, having drilled 13 wells. There are two RED HORSE drilling crews per rotation in Afghanistan. Seabees and others are also there looking for water.

The crew lead is Technical Sergeant Nathan Laidlaw. He explained that after RED HORSE crews begin drilling, they work 24/7 without a break. The eight-man crew splits into two, and each works a 12-hour shift. Their improvised gym, just next to the

rig, includes a steel rod with chains wrapped around each end for weight. It looks like something that Fred Flintstone might have used.

The crew's deepest well in Afghanistan was 1,260 feet at FOB Wolverine. Laidlaw said they worked 45 days straight and finally got to water. Also, the teams have learned that Regional Command (RC) East produces far more water than RC-South.

In RC-East, according to Laidlaw, the wells produced 45-200 GPM (gallons per minute), whereas the first well (of two) on Frontenac was 750 feet deep and trickles at 6 GPM. For each soldier on a base like Frontenac, approximately 20 gallons per person per day can be needed, though use can vary widely. So 6 GPM is only enough for maybe 400-500 soldiers, depending on many factors, such as if showers and toilets are used.

Laidlaw's team is stationed at Hurlburt Field, Florida. He said that in Florida they can drill a 120-foot well in a couple hours, but in Afghanistan it can take days. Afghan well water is tested for contaminants. So far the RED HORSE wells have been free of man-made pollutants, but contain naturally occurring substances such as manganese. No harmful micro-organisms have been found and the crew decontaminates the gear to prevent contaminating

*Continued on page 48*





Strykers bathed in the glow of the rig, under the Milky Way. The bright streak is from an unmanned aircraft.





At the Fred Flintstone Gym. Right to left: Technical Sergeant Nathan Laidlaw (crew lead), Staff Sergeant Jason Dyer, Staff Sergeant Jason Williams, Staff Sergeant Rodolfo Pena, Staff Sergeant Randy Blount, Staff Sergeant Aaron Robles, Senior Airman Steven Brewer, and Staff Sergeant Cody Barboza.

aquifer. Laidlaw said there are many aquifers, but RED HORSE doesn't take from the shallow water because the Afghans tap shallow. Some Afghan wells can be hundreds of feet deep.

No geological surveys have been done in Afghanistan since the 1970s, and so part of RED HORSE's job is to collect data. I asked Laidlaw if he ever struck black gold like in the *Beverly Hillbillies*? He said no, but they did find copper in RC-East. The Chinese are already there.

The 1-17th Infantry at Frontenac asked RED HORSE if they could leave base to check local wells that had been built over recent years by NGOs. Thousands of small wells costing probably millions of dollars have been installed by NGOs since the war began. Yet many, or most in some areas, do not work due to simple parts that have broken.

Laidlaw found the schematics to the wells built by the NGOs. He said that the problems seemed to be minor—a plunger was stuck in one well and a pump-rod was broken in another. Captain Jamie Pope told me that of 14 wells in one village, only one still worked. Low-hanging fruit to pick. These shallow wells have already been drilled. Some might be dry, while others need simple parts.

And so our mission to assist the Afghan people, from protection to infrastructure—at even the most basic levels—continues. ★

—Michael Yon, a former Green Beret, was embedded in Iraq during the surge of 2007 and is currently reporting via [www.MichaelYon-Online.com](http://www.MichaelYon-Online.com) from Afghanistan. Reprinted with permission.

