

Family & Friends -

Greetings from dirty, dry, and dusty Kabul, Afghanistan.

This may take some of you by surprise – but I deployed to Afghanistan on 29 August. I had very little notice. The current schedule has me returning in mid January.

My travels took me from SAT to Baltimore to Ramstein (Germany) to Incirlik (Turkey) to Manas (Kyrgyzstan) to Bagram (Afghanistan) to Kabul – all in about 4 days. And during that time, the longest sleep I had was 3 hours while sitting upright. By the time I arrived I was having a tough time putting a sentence together, staying on task, etc. – I recall that it took concentrated thought to make my bed (kept sitting on it wondering what came next). Of course, there are those that would say that is ops normal for me J

Well, Afghanistan is an interesting and somewhat depressing place. Depressing in the sense that the challenges are overwhelming and will not be solved in several generations. And, it is not clear that the necessary economic/political/military support can be sustained for those generations. This is truly a long term investment with very questionable chances for what we would consider success (and it is debatable how one would even define success in this culture).

I am based at USArmy Camp Eggers which is close to the US Embassy, ISAF HQ (NATO International Security Assistance Force), the Afghan Presidential Palace, and a series of “safe houses” that house US military members since there is very little lodging at Eggers. The houses are a real treat (really, not so bad but forget the niceties of life (like telephones, bathrooms/showers nearby, etc.). There are 12 occupants in my safehouse; we have an Afghan houseboy – though he’s not much of a “boy” at 45. He’s trying to teach me a bit of the language.

I will have been in Kabul for a week tomorrow. Some observations:

- The entire country is brown – even the dust collects dust. My boots were new and looked good 10 days ago, they’re crap now.
- Don’t bother with vacuum cleaners, nobody can afford them and there’s no electricity to run them (only 4 hours a day in the city)
- There’s no refrigeration (due to electricity) hence lots of sidewalk vendors – “fresh” beef/goat/mutton/????, just shoo the flies away and cut some off
- We work 7 days/week with Fridays (the Muslim holy day) a “reduced tempo” day though I think all that really means is that we can wear our workout gear while at work
- The drive from the safe house to/from work as well as any travels outside the camp require full body armor so I count it as my daily workout J
- I travel the city a bit (to/from the airport and a few Afghan govt ministry offices around the city), always in full gear, always expecting the unexpected
- The limiting factor (speedwise) on the streets are the donkey and human pulled carts. Also, bikes, motorcycles, and Toyotas. Nothing but Toyotas. Buy stock.
- There’s no sewer system here. They come with big pump trucks ever few days and improve the prevailing odor. I saw the driver asleep on a big pillow under one earlier today.
- There is destruction from years of warfare everywhere
- Childhood only appears to last until around 12 – younger than that they smile and play – older than that they stare and frown.
- Inside the city, much is made of adobe. Outside the city, everything is made of adobe. Walled compounds are the norm – inside and outside the city.
- Lacking electricity, many people still cook over open fires; especially in the country
- There is no beer / alcohol here; this is a good thing. But, we have enough jet lag to go around and I seem to recall that fatigue is equivalent to 3 beers.....
- Kabul gets around 50 minor earthquakes a year – which is much better than one big one!
- Kabul’s definition of running water is hand pumps along the streets – the wealthy (are there any?) might have indoor plumbing but the hand pumps are on every street and well used.
- When reading the above, consider that Kabul, as the capitol city, is the most progressive in the country.
- When one works every day of the week they quickly lose track of what day it is (not that it matters much)

- There is a 9.5 hour difference between SAT and Kabul. ½ hour???? Only in Afghanistan. There is a fine line between pride and stubbornness.

That's it for now. Will try to update you every week or two (if you want me to drop you from distro, let me know).

Ron

Family & Friends –

Greetings from Afghanistan, a country steeped in history and trapped in the past.

Tomorrow marks the end of my 4th week away from home and Honey! It has actually passed fairly quickly from my perspective. I think this is probably due to the fact that everything is so uniquely different than anything I've experienced in the US and that every day brings a new experience, emotion, or challenge. This is not to say that I do not miss my "old" life – I surely do – but I'm here voluntarily to do something – to show the Afghan people that Americans do care and sincerely want to help them achieve a better existence without attempting to change their core values. Put another way, I want to show God's love for them through my actions, not my words.

I have come to realize that humans have an innate ability to adapt. It takes 10 – 14 days but one slowly accepts a new "norm" – whether it be a change in your surroundings, membership in a new "tribe", or exposure to stress and/or danger. One just accepts them and learns to function in the new realm. I think this is healthy, but I suppose the transition is easier when one knows it's not permanent.

So, enough philosophy! I wrote last time of initial impressions; I'll focus this letter on some experiences and perhaps a few more impressions.

- As I write this I can hear the evening call to prayer outside the constantine wire-topped 10' tall, 4' thick barricades which form the walls of Camp Eggers. We are now in the 2nd day of Ramadan. This is a lunar month-long period of abstinence and denial observed by the Muslim faith. Indulgences (such as eating, drinking, smoking, etc.) are not permitted between sunrise and sunset. Also, there are increased prayer sessions (number and duration). The LNs (local nationals) still eat 3 meals daily – after sunset, before sunrise, and around 2AM (they wake up to eat, pray, and then go back to bed). We are happy to see Ramadan because we hope it means a decrease in the number of suicide bomber attacks in the local area.
- We take a little pill every day. It protects us from malaria and who knows what else. The tuberculosis shot has left my left shoulder very red but at least it's not itching anymore! I opted out of the anthrax shot as I won't be here long enough to complete the series and you get very little protection unless you do. They give us repellent from the insects and we wash our uniforms in some chemical that probably causes cancer but protects us from some chigger-type thing that supposedly makes your flesh rot. I scratched myself on a hundred year old barbed wire fence out at the airport yesterday and am counting on my tetanus shot. All in all, I think the natural environment is a greater threat than the suicide bombers!
- We focus on cleanliness here – which is a real dichotomy since everything is so filthy! We must wash hands upon entering the dining hall (the lines are at the sinks, not the food – hmmm, maybe a message there). We carry hand sanitizer around with us and use it after shaking hands with LNs (but not in their sight!). We do all this because we live in such close quarters. As a colonel, I rate a private room but there are some colonels that must share and there are some enlisted personnel that live 24 to a tent. Speaking of the food, well, I can't quite explain it. On one hand on any given day we have a pretty good variety – but after a few days you see that there's a pattern so mentally, you seem to think they're always serving the same old thing. But, and this is really strange – the weird thing is that after awhile, it all starts to taste the same. Now you tell me, how can shrimp taste like pork chops? Maybe it's the cocktail sauce that we have to put on the pork chop to make it palatable? J
- Camp Eggers (where I work), the Presidential Palace, the US Embassy, the NATO compound, and the safe houses (where I sleep) all loosely fall within a 2 x 3 mile rectangle. Each is a separate entity and each has it's own series of checkpoints, machine gun towers, and security guards. I counted 8 checkpoints and 65 armed guards the other day when being driven from the camp to my safehouse. Needless to say, we are well protected. The guards at the safehouse are largely composed of former Mujahideen freedom fighters against the Soviets and the Taliban. Those that speak English have some tremendous stories to tell. If you act friendly (I try to), they will invite you for dinner and tea. I have learned the hard way that they serve leaded tea (caffeinated) – I was wired most of the night after having a glass at 9PM upon arriving "home". You must be careful with the tea – they must use bottled water and due to the uncleanliness of their teapots and glasses, it must be served boiling. At the

Embassy, they employ guards from Nepal – because they cannot be compromised by the locals, because they are extremely loyal to anyone who takes care of their needs, and because they are affordable.

- I have come to respect the Afghan people for their family values. Because they have lived in turmoil for centuries (having been conquered repeatedly by numerous marauders), they have little confidence in their government to protect them – plus, there are numerous examples of government corruption. Their sense of loyalty is to their immediate family, their extended family, their village (headed by a local mullah), and the local tribal elder (the most powerful of which form a league of warlords). There is a very strong sense of family honor and the youth still appreciates that they have a standard of behavior to observe until the family name is theirs alone – until they are the elders. This has little to do with religious values (though those certainly play into what is considered acceptable behaviors), it simply reflects the level of respect that is observed between generations. Marriages are an interesting process in Afghanistan – when a boy and girl find they are interested in each other, the boy will ask his family to approach the family of the girl. The two families will meet and must mutually consent to the relationship. They then enter the dating phase which is largely centered on family events. After awhile they may agree to marriage. The incidence of divorce in Afghanistan is very low (less than 3% I was told but cannot certify to be accurate).
- We are also serious about security. I cannot go into all the measures and countermeasures but we do this for a reason. The IED attacks (Improvised Explosive Devices – bombs) have increased over the past month. We are well trained on the warning signs but the truth is that one sees so many of them (e.g. motorbikes with two riders, bicycles with large packs, heavily loaded cars with one rider, etc), that you simply couldn't leave the safehouses if you sought to avoid them all. So, we use our best judgment, wear your body armor, drive fairly aggressively, and play the odds. There are probably hundreds of official (US, NATO, UN) vehicles in Kabul and only a few suicide bombers so you just take your chances – kinda like playing the lottery but in reverse. But, odds being what they are, someone has to roll snakeeyes sometime – and this happened to one of my 11 safehouse-mates last week. He was in the front passenger seat when a suicide bomber stepped off the sidewalk and detonated himself while approaching the driver side door. They had no warning and there was nothing they could do to avoid the attack. Both survived though nobody can explain how or why. The only explanation is that the bomber must have tripped at the last moment and that deflected the shaped charge downward at an angle. The left side of the vehicle was imploded and all four tires blown out – but the two individuals only suffered relatively minor shrapnel, primarily from flying glass and metal from the car door. The driver is being treated in Germany and will soon return to the USA as good as new (at least physically); my housemate is back on duty here in Kabul. I talk with him daily and he is so happy to be alive that he is almost giddy.
- I have attended chapel services twice thus far. I thoroughly enjoy them and have concluded that there is nothing like a bit of adversity to make one focus on the fundamentals and to overlook what become trivial denominational differences. I do not begin to say that our adversity in this headquarters camp begins to approach the conditions at the forward operating bases, but it is a very unique feeling one gets when they attend church armed to the teeth – along with everyone else! Talk about not wanting to create any friction by questioning the quality of the music, sequence of worship or method of baptism – now there's incentive! The only unarmed people in the chapel are the non-combatant chaplains. Even the choir is armed! Like I said, a strange feeling. I will never forget the experience of taking communion last week. Perhaps it is because we feel a constant low level stress associated with the unknown and unquantifiable threats that surround us. There have been several instances where perceived threats have required Blackhawks to be scrambled to circle the compound and once we had to evacuate the camp when explosives were detected on one of the sewage pump trucks. But, one adapts, accepts, and moves on with their duties and responsibilities. The bottom line is that one learns to accept that God has a plan and while you can do everything right, He can still take you when your time comes.

Okay, enough for now, I have to keep some material for the next time. I have enjoyed your notes and really like the attached pictures, thanks. Sorry if I haven't answered all the notes but I stay relatively busy. Thanks for asking/offering but I really have very few physical needs, we've been at this long enough to know what to carry in the post exchange.

One of the unfortunate things that has occurred recently is that due to the increased threat in the city, we've had to discontinue the outings to deliver donated items. We hope this doesn't last too long and that we can get back to "showing the flag" in the local refugee camps, schools, and orphanages.

Thanks again and God bless each and every one of you! And thanks for checking in on Barbara and the girls too!

Ron

Family & Friends –

Greetings again from Kabul where the Afghan people are beginning to wonder what tomorrow will bring.

My first update dealt with initial impressions and a bit of philosophy. My second was primarily based on experiences I had. I've decided to just ramble in this one.

I'm seven weeks into this experience and am grateful to be generally well and in good spirits. I caught a nasty bug a few days ago that had me down for a near 10-count a couple of times but have responded well to chocolate cookies, popcorn, and spiced cider (thanks everyone!). I absolutely never expected to see this in my life but on the rebound I actually made myself sick on chocolate chip cookies. My FIL (an army acronym for father-in-law) sent what I estimate to be 20 lbs of chocolate chip cookies. This was an impressive box. The cookies were neatly arranged to maximize the chip count. I unpacked these cookies into three gallon-sized bags. A few years back, when the girls were growing up, we had the "new toy" rule in our home – when a child received a present, they did not have to share the toy for the first few hours because, after all, it was THEIR present. Well, we generally observe this same rule in Afghanistan but it applies to care packages from home. I put two of the gallon bags of C3 aside (army acronym for chocolate chip cookies as well as composition 3 – an explosive) – but in plain view to cause as much jealousy as possible – and then proceeded to dive into the third gallon. I skipped lunch. Well, I didn't really skip it, I just ate at the office. I then proceeded to skip dinner as well. Well, I didn't really skip dinner, I just wasn't that hungry. Why is it that if you put a C3 side-by-side with an orange that you will eat the cookie every time? PS: I have given the other two gallons away to many people who are very grateful. Also, I have yet to finish that first gallon. When I look at the bag I get a bit nauseous – but the orange is still on my desk.

FACT: It is currently the year 1385 in Afghanistan. The year is based on the Islamic era which began with the emigration of Prophet Mohammad from Mecca in 622 A.D.

I guess optimism / pessimism cycles are probably natural – we see them in the US though primarily over the economy – but here they center around concerns for physical security and the stability of their government. Bad news sells (and spreads) as fast here as anywhere (guess human nature is truly universal) and it is now becoming pretty clear that the local population is being targeted as freely as the military. The similarity to Iraq of several years back is not lost on many – ideology observes no national boundaries and as long as one element is willing to kill all others and die in the process, problems will persist. My "barometer" for the local population is my houseboy, the guards, the locals that work on the camp, the locals that I interact with at the airport, and the numbers and behavior of the locals on the street. I sense they are becoming more protective of their children and find this telling. My houseboy tells me that a bomb was placed in his daughter's classroom last week but was fortunately discovered and removed. On the other hand, it is obvious that people are returning to Kabul. It is said that over 4 million people left Afghanistan during the fighting of the last decade. This is over 10% of the total population. Many were from the business centers, specifically, Kabul. Well, those folks are returning. One can tell the difference in the traffic in just the time I've been here. There are more sidewalk businesses, more bicycles and motorbikes, more foot traffic, etc.. I think this is a good omen for Afghanistan. However, with the increased risk, some are talking aloud about whether to stay or return to either Pakistan or Iran. From what I can tell, there are no immigration laws here, people move freely and have family or extended family throughout the region. It is common practice for families to live together – my houseboy's family of 8 lives in three rooms of a house shared with another family. A total of twenty people share a single bathroom and sleep on pads spread on the floor.

FACTS: the median age in Afghanistan is 17, life expectancy is 43, infant mortality rate is 15%, unemployment rate is 40%, and 64% of adults cannot read or write

Folks have asked what my work entails - I can answer that in generalities. I am serving as the lead USAF representative to several military and air-related entities in Kabul. There are two US Army headquarters here, one to fight the war and one to rebuild the country (this includes rebuilding the Afghan air corps). Additionally, the headquarters of the NATO ISAF (International Security Assistance Forces) and the Afghan Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Transportation, and Ministry of Interior are here (these deal with civil and military aviation and airspace control). I interact with each of these entities at some level. I like the variety of work but it has taken a significant amount of time to meet all the players, figure out who does what, and learn what is expected of me within each circle. My USAF boss is not located in Kabul. I have a small staff and have offices in multiple

locations. This all means that it is very easy for me to get lost without anyone knowing – they all think I'm being productive elsewhere! Last week I went country hopping. It was a blast and I got to see some friends from stateside. Unfortunately, military air transportation does not always run on the schedule one would prefer – or even the one that is published an hour ahead of time – so one must be prepared to wait for long periods of time only to be told that the plane is now going either nowhere or elsewhere, or to be told that if you want to go to a location 100 miles south that you will have to fly a 1000 mile trip via two other countries. My most recent hops took me through Qatar and Kuwait. I've posted some pictures on the website. I can honestly say that going 40 hours without sleep twice within a 96 hour span is not healthy, wealthy, or wise.

FACT: We still have a few days until Ramadan is over. It turns out that one of the “self denial” activities is bathing. This is becoming obvious.

I've mentioned before that I enjoy chatting with the Mujahadine that guard my safehouse. I've been traveling so much that I haven't had time to share tea with them recently. However, the last time I did, we were trying to discuss our families (in very broken English) and it came around to them asking me how old I was. I told them I was 52 and they did not believe me (hey, I'm well preserved, okay?). So, they called this other guard over and asked me to guess how old he was. Well, this guy is old and gnarly with deeply wrinkled skin and a solid grey beard and head of hair – he looks to be in his early 60s. It is obvious he has had a hard life. It is also obvious that I have been set up and am in a no win situation (guys, you know exactly what I mean here). So, I'm thinking...do I guess what I really think and insult the guy (he IS holding a loaded AK47) or do I guess low and lose my credibility? I've already told them that I'm older than all of them so I decide I'm gonna stick with my story and guess him at 50. I instantly attain “wise man” status as it turns out he is exactly 50. They then go back to not believing how old I am until I pull out my drivers license with a birth date on it. Even at 52 I have just a touch of grey in comparison to this fellow (who must be the oldest of their group). I think it is at this point that they realize how hard life is within Afghanistan in comparison. Later in that conversation they catch me looking up at the night sky and proceed to try to tell me about the 10 layers of existence...I don't follow much of it. They then go on to tell me how an Afghan astronaut landed on the moon. I think they are kidding – they are not. Evidently the Soviets have told them this when they occupied the country to gain their respect. I do not have the heart to tell them that I worked at NASA for 27 years and know otherwise. Given the literacy rate (see above), it is not surprising to see how this becomes fact. Unfortunately, this same principle applies to religious dogma as well.

TIDBITS:

- I am no longer taking those blasted malaria pills – I didn't drink enough water with them and they burned my esophagus. I was on mashed potatoes, soup, bananas and yogurt for two weeks. DO NOT TELL the docs - they will probably come up with a suppository version and that would not be popular.
- Even from the opposite side of the globe, Barbara continues to improve my memory – this is not difficult and she has ample opportunities to excel at it. It was not a tuberculosis shot that ruined my left arm, it was smallpox. Again, the docs at work....whatever does not kill you makes you stronger....
- One of the highlights has been flying around in Blackhawk helicopters with the doors open and my feet hanging out. I cannot believe they let old fellows like me have so much fun. Of course, someone fell out the other day and killed himself – all the doors are closed now.
- When we drove out of the safehouse the other day around 0630 there was a woman in a burka standing on the curb. As we went around the corner she crossed the street. Well it hit me – “she” walked like a man, was about 6' and relatively heavy set, wore combat boots, and was up and out well before you normally see women. I reported in immediately on my cell phone but “she” was gone before security could respond. Later that week, a man in a burka killed 17 at the Ministry of Interior. I sincerely do not believe there was a connection but I also do not believe what I saw was a woman.
- I actually saw a traffic light in Kabul the other day! At that moment I realized that I hadn't seen one since I got here. Of course, this light was not working (no electricity) and the pole it was hanging on was leaning well into the street. It is only a matter of time before a jingle bus goes through that intersection and takes it out. Nobody will miss it and nobody would obey it even if it worked. There are police at almost every major intersection attempting to direct traffic but absolutely nobody pays any attention to them. Most of the time I see them sitting on the curb watching the world go by. But, they have a job and that is a GOOD thing.

Thanks for your notes of encouragement – my apologies for the lack of responses at times!

Blessings from Afghanistan!

Ron

Greetings from Kabul, Afghanistan a country at a crossroads – both figuratively and literally.

Afghanistan is a land-locked nation surrounded by six countries – Iran to the west, Pakistan to the east and south, three of the soviet remnant “stans” (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) to the north, and a sliver of China in the far northeast. It is not in the best interest of any of these nations for Afghanistan to be strong economically or militarily. Afghanistan is composed of eight or nine ethnic groups which have strong cultural ties to counterparts in each of these other countries – hence, the countries can easily influence segments of the Afghan population to keep things unsettled. We’ve heard it said that the journey is more important than the destination – and so it is here. Afghanistan is not a “destination” country – there is little here of economic significance – but it is located such that the mountains “created” east-west trade routes between India, the Far East and Europe, and north-south trade routes between Russia and the Indian Ocean. The same mountains that created the trade routes also served to funnel the marauding armies of the past – from Alexander the Great to Ghenghis Khan. Afghanistan is quite simply, the most unsettled, fought over piece of geography in the history of the world.

The other night I spent quite some time discussing a tragedy which occurred in southern Afghanistan with my guards. There were several innocent people killed in an air strike on a suspected Taliban stronghold and the local media was very critical of the operation. The Taliban have learned well how to use the press to affect public opinion – this effect is amplified due to the illiteracy of large segments of the populace. The bottom line in our discussion is that freedom isn’t free. Each person in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan collectively as a nation, will have to decide whether they want to be free to think for themselves or whether they are willing to think as they are told. Unfortunately, we have an entire generation which has never had (or evidently wanted) to think for themselves. I asked the guards whether they wanted something better for their children – whether they wanted them to have some control over their lives, or whether they were willing to be controlled. Whether they wanted them to be free to fly kites, play chess, speak to females in public, listen to radio, watch a movie, etc (these are all things that were banned by the Taliban). If they want these things for the future, they must decide how badly they want them and what they are willing to sacrifice to attain them

Ramadan took its toll on the Afghans – you could see their energy level decreasing over the last week or so. They simply were exhausted from getting up in the middle of the night to eat and being dehydrated all day long. Ramadan ends with a party though and that kept them going the last few days. I suspect it will be like that for me when I’m within a couple of weeks of going home. Anyway, at the end of Ramadan is a three-day period called Eid el-Fitr, or just Eid for short. Eid is a time of feasting and gifts – kind of like Thanksgiving and Christmas combined. The first day is typically spent at home with immediate family. The next couple of days the roads are busy with people traveling to extended family and friends to eat and exchange gifts. This is a very joyous time for Afghan people – their equivalent to our Christmas.

FACT: My Update #3 FACT about not bathing during Ramadan was in error. I have learned my first lesson in the Dan Rather school of journalism – check your sources! My apologies.

I’ve had several mini-adventures since the last update and will attempt to relate a few of these. I choose to write in the first person because, well, it’s easier for some reason. Keep in mind that I am stimuli-saturated at present. I’ve experienced so many new and unusual things that I’ve become a bit numb to them. Nothing seems to surprise me because I’ve come to expect the unexpected – so at some level it has lost its shock value. I’ve also noticed that my sense of humor has dwindled a bit – perhaps because I’m just getting tired or perhaps because there’s not much over here that is truly funny.

- I’m in far southern Afghanistan, near the heart of the Taliban movement. We have been invited to a formal dinner with a member of the Afghan Air Corps – this man is reported to be from the wealthiest family in the country – the Sam Walton of Afghanistan. He has built a compound for the local Air Corps regiment with his own funds (since the corps has no money of its own). Even though he is a relatively young man and formally holds a rank of Lieutenant Colonel, he wears the rank of General and the Afghans call him General – even the real generals call him General! We feast on lamb kabobs, rice, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Meals are in the European tradition – they take hours. The attendants will keep bringing food until one leaves leftovers on their plate. It takes us awhile to figure this out as we are trying to avoid insulting them by eating all that is placed before us. We keep the translators busy. At one point an Afghan officer tells some ethnic joke that really makes no sense to us Americans but I get the crazy idea to take an old Aggie joke and substitute the names he has used. This simple joke brings the

house down. One would think I was Jay Leno or the Afghan equivalent. We then move outside to a soccer game for more entertainment. Keep in mind that it is well after dark and that there are few lights in the area. Also, there is no grass – the soccer field is gravel (which essentially turns the game into blood sport). To add a bit of intrigue, there is a large concrete pad in one area of the field that provides the random crazy bounce. The field is bordered by a six foot fence topped with razor wire. On the other side of the fence is a graveyard of soviet war vehicles entombed in a minefield. This is definitely out of bounds. However, once the game starts, it is not uncommon to see the ball sail over this fence, bounce randomly among the wreckage, and then watch helplessly as one of the players charges into the junkyard after the ball. One keeps awaiting the explosion. I must say, it does add a certain tension to the game. At some point, they bring out the green tea. Only this tea has a touch of milk. I later learn that this is fresh goat's milk. I pity this poor goat – there are 20 or so individuals at this function and the goat must look like a prune after making its contribution. It is conclusively proven later that the milk is definitely fresh – that is, not pasteurized. I am continuously reminded of this fact for the next three days. I come to loath goat milk. I am bleating at both ends by the time I recover from the substance. Unfortunately, I am not the only one that is affected in this manner. Also, unfortunately, we are all trapped on a C-130 for portions of this three-day period. Needless to say, we get to know one another very well.

- I am now in a relatively small town in southeast Afghanistan having arrived via Blackhawk helicopter and been driven into the town via humvee convoy. Humvees are only used by the US Army, the Afghan Army uses Ford trucks – but that is story #3, below. First, I must say that flying over Afghanistan is probably much like flying over the lunar landscape. The mountains are stark and barren for the most part. They immediately transition into vast desert areas and then immediately into the most rugged mountains one can imagine. But, this is not the moon – there is life in the random valley and there is greenery where there is life. It all seems so surreal. Why would people choose to live in one valley but not the next? And why do I see a random person or two in the absolute middle of nowhere? It might be hundreds of miles to the next obvious habitable area but there will be a person or a small group of people in the middle of the desert or on the side of a mountainside – doing what? Eating what? Why? Many times there will not be any herds or flocks with them, just the random person in the middle of nowhere. Anyway, back to my story.... So, I've gotten to this medium sized burg via armed helicopter and am now riding in an armed humvee through the middle of town. Everything about this town is completely foreign to anything I have ever experienced. It reminds me of that village in StarWars....and strikes me that an inch of metal and glass separate two worlds and two cultures – “my” modern Western world and “their” medieval Middle Eastern world – and that each is, and always will be, as foreign to one as they are to the other. They do not understand or want to live in our world as much as we do not want to live in theirs. The bulletproof glass is my friend. It protects me – not only physically but also psychologically. I do not want to live like these people – but most importantly, I have no common bonds with these people other than love of family – but even that love is different. I sense this because there are no females beyond the age of puberty in sight. This is a man's world and control appears absolute. In this town, there are not even any women in burqas visible. There is an occasional young schoolgirl in their mandatory black/white uniforms (the boys don't have a uniform), but no grown women. I have been told that up to four wives are permitted. I have no proof but get the definite impression that multiple wives are probably the prevailing practice in this town. This appears to be a bastion of extremism. The men do not smile or return waves. The children, while curious, appear to be fearsome. Adult males will shoo kids away if they stare too long. We make it to the airport that is to be evaluated without incident. We do our work and I take a few minutes to climb on and in old soviet tanks and armored personnel carriers. What a hoot. We are always careful to watch for mines and unexploded ordinance. We find none. On the trip into town we had noticed several fortresses on prominent overlooks around town. Once we join up with our Afghan Army hosts, we learn that the one closest to town was built by Alexander the Great, with additions by the Brits and Russians over the years. No Americans have visited this site in recent memory but we are invited and after a couple of milliseconds of thought, readily agree. Thirty minutes later, standing in the ruins of this fortress, one is simply dumbfounded by what they are experiencing. I'm not a history buff but even I can understand the significance of being at this place in this time. The soviets have added cannons and a large spotlight to bombard the city when restlessness occurred; these remain but are not functional. Looking to the east one can see another fortress in ruins. We learn that this was built by Ghenghis Khan after he conquered the valley. He left 1000 of his warriors in this fortress to rule the area. Wow! Wish I had a better command of our language to be able to describe the feeling but am quite inadequate in this department. On our return flight, we

are working our way up the valleys to fly through the mountain pass. The terrain is so high that helos cannot simply climb above the highest mountain and cruise along – we must work our way through the passes. Of course, this makes us somewhat predictable. As we pass through the highest pass, without notice the side gunners on both sides of the Blackhawk open fire on a ground target below us. I, sitting immediately aft of the port gunner, am peppered with empty cartridges. They are hot. The helo does not stop to engage, we just blow through. Ten seconds of excitement provide a fitting cap to this eventful day.

- I am now close to a large town in northern Afghanistan. We have flown here via C-130 to evaluate an airfield. When we arrive, we quickly learn that there is nothing of interest at this field because the Afghan Army garrison is well on the other side of town, approximately 30 miles distant. We do learn, however, that there is a dirt strip adjacent to this army garrison. The Afghan Army has come to the main airport to greet us and offers to drive us to the dirt strip. Mistake #1; we accept. The AA (Afghan Army), does not own humvees. I quickly deduce that this is a good thing as they think they are invincible enough in their Ford trucks and if they really had humvees would probably turn themselves into the terror of the country. To my dismay, I later learn that the American taxpayer is in the process of buying hundreds of humvees for the AA. Mistake #2; I climb into the right front seat of a randomly chosen AA Ford truck. My “driver” speaks no English and is all of perhaps 20. The “gunner” standing up in the bed of the truck is in for the ride of his life. I suspect this is the first time these soldiers have seen US Airmen and are eager to impress. We leave the airport at 40 mph on rough dirt roads and are unable to see more than 100 feet in front of us. Needless to say, the closest vehicle is at least 101 feet so we have no idea where they are – if we are hidden in the cloud of dust, we must be on the right track. Heaven help us if either we or the vehicle ahead slows down as the stopping distance at 40mph far exceeds our visual horizon. Bottom line: we are along for the ride. Our driver thoroughly loves this. He looks over at me on more-than-regular occasions with a huge grin on his face. For my part, I have one hand on my weapon and I point forward with the other hand whenever he looks my direction. I am attempting, unsuccessfully, to convince him to watch the road. I feel like using a certain finger to point but resist the urge. When he is not looking at me, he is gazing down for his favorite cassette tape. He loves to listen to a song or two and then swap out tapes. At one point he drops them all and is fumbling in the floorboard to pick them up. I point with my good hand and then proceed to pick up the tapes for him; I count eight. Mistake #3; I should have thrown them out the window (there was no air conditioning) when I had the chance and just accept the international incident. He is now singing along and yelling out the window for the gunner – who begins to join in. We are still on a dirt road at this point. I am wondering how the gunner is breathing. I turn around at one point to check, and see the gunner’s foot coming through the left side window in the back seat – he is trying to climb into the truck while moving at 40mph! I’m believing none of this. We now get to the main road, which has a moderate amount of asphalt guarding the potholes it was laid around. We are now really able to make progress and our duo can hear each other well enough to harmonize. The only problem is that there are other vehicles on the road going both directions. Don’t they know this is a military convoy and that we have right of way? There is an armed gunner on every other vehicle beginning with the lead vehicle. I am in vehicle #3. Vehicle one tires rapidly of the slower traffic in the right lane and simply occupies the left lane. Everyone else in the convoy follows suite. The lead vehicle has turned on it’s lights, is honking it’s horn, and the gunner is pointing their rifle at all oncoming traffic – this definitely gets their attention and vehicles in both lanes are taking to the dirt in droves (there are no shoulders). Well, if it’s good enough for the lead vehicle, it’s good enough for the others too – our horn is now keeping beat with tape #5. I am deaf and petrified. The colorful part is that not all oncoming vehicles are intimidated by these Ford trucks. There are some very large trucks in Afghanistan and I have seen some of their front grills up close and personal. This convoy quickly degrades into a game of chicken between the Ford trucks and the larger jingle trucks. Twice I succumb to my base fear and am yelling “nay nay” (no, no) when this testosterone-crazed driver is on the verge of cashing in my life insurance. I am seriously considering drawing my weapon and commandeering this truck. I’m also thinking ahead about asking for asylum in Uzbekistan. I am checking the gunner and he too appears to be in a state of shock. Pause. We make it through town. We are thankful. Mistake #4; we are overly optimistic – because we are only halfway there! It is then that I remember that we are going to a dirt strip. This means, well, more dirt. And dirt means absence of roads. We clear town; it is actually a quite pleasant town with many burqa-clad women (I’ve come to refer to them in private as burqa-babes) on the streets and both men and children that returned waves and smiles. Once we clear town, we quickly run out of pavement. This starts the real adventure for we subsequently run out of dirt road as well. We are now in the desert on patrol looking for the elusive

runway. We try several locations. Someone must have moved it. The desert is far from level and certainly not predictable – but it does not matter as we are #3 and that means we are in a permanent cloud of dust. When brushing my teeth that night I spit out mud if that tells you anything. My life is passing before me. Up to now, I was mainly afraid of the jingle trucks, now I'm afraid of land mines and unexploded ordinance. At one stop, we climb out to get our bearings (oh what I would give for a GPS receiver!) and find five unexploded soviet bomblets within a 20 foot radius of the truck – I climb back in, as does anyone with half a brain. We continue to ramble, we ultimately find the elusive dirt strip. In all honesty, this dirt strip is quite impressive. Nonetheless, as I step off the width (175 ft!), I find another half dozen or so unexploded shells. I have earned my hazard pay for this day. The trip back to the airport is no different than that coming – except we are all now singing to the music having turned our destinies over to God.

The next update will include a summary of my trip to the drug lord governor's office and the dozen or so explosions that occurred while there.

Well, these updates have been fun but I'm starting to miss home – it's the simple things, like holding Barbara's hand while we go for a walk, or driving a car, or sipping a glass of wine with friends; these are the things one misses most.

On the good news front, Kabul has been nice and quiet for the past several weeks. The police have done a good job infiltrating the bomber cells and even identified and isolated the last bomber before he could strike – all in all, very significant progress on that front.

Out for now, may God bless each and every one of you!

Ron

Friends & Family –

Greetings from Afghanistan, truly a land that time has forgotten. I've sent these updates every three weeks since arriving and they've become a great way for me to measure the passage of time.

Winter has arrived in Afghanistan, at least in the higher elevations. Kabul is at an elevation of almost 6000' and the latitude of northern New Mexico. It sits in a valley surrounded by mountains that rise to over 10000'. These mountains tend to trap pollutants and the air quality is not good. In the summer the problem is dust. Winter is the wet season so the dust turns to mud (everywhere) and the air becomes polluted with smoke from thousands of fires. The people of Kabul will burn anything to stay warm - this includes tires, cardboard, wood (which is rare), and animal waste (including, I'm told, human waste). This all leads to respiratory distress. Thankfully, I've avoided the cough and congestion.

When traveling between the safe houses and my primary workplace (I have offices in two locations within Kabul) we use several different routes to avoid falling into fixed patterns and thereby becoming predictable. The route we take more often than not runs by a soccer stadium which is across the street from the Afghan Presidential Palace. This soccer stadium is surrounded by a wall I estimate to be around eight feet high. On the street side of this wall, across from the palace, one can see a dozen pair of metal rings set into the stone wall. During the Taliban era, people who were found guilty of violations of Sharia (Islamic) law were chained to these rings for public viewing when their sentences were carried out. These sentences included flogging, firing squads, and stoning. It is difficult to look at these rings and imagine the pain and suffering which occurred at this location – or the mindset of the individuals who were subject to, enforced, or supported this strict form of justice. From all reports it did serve to limit lawlessness. I guess most things have both good and bad aspects and that one must learn to find balance. I am certainly no expert (though, having been here for almost three months one starts to think they understand a bit about the culture), but the Taliban movement seems to be somewhat a coalition within itself. There is a portion of the "resistance", though probably a small minority, that are "true believers" – they are ideologically tied to hard line, extremist religious beliefs. There is another segment that serve the resistance simply for economic purposes – resistance fighters, funded by neighboring countries and regional drug cartels who oppose a strong central government. The Taliban is reported to pay at least double what the Afghan government pays the police and army – essentially, these fighters are simple mercenaries. I suspect the largest segment is composed of illiterate people who have been raised not to question their treatment and are simply extending the behavior (and beliefs) of their forefathers - these are "the followers". And then there is the segment of the population that resists simply out of fear – if they support the current government, then they, or their loved ones will be in harms way - it is not unusual for a decapitated body to be found with a note stating that the individual was a US spy. In the US we are used to the rule of law - there is a large government presence and infrastructure, the government (in general) is viewed as "of the people, by the people, for the people" and we have confidence in "systems" that keep government officials accountable. Very little of this exists in Afghanistan. The central government does not have a large presence in many (most?) regions of the country and where it is present, it is often perceived as corrupt. I've previously stated that Afghanistan is at a crossroads and I do truly believe this - that there are enough "progressive" people here that desire the freedoms of democracy and the benefits of capitalism, and are earnestly seeking the support of the western nations, to effectively limit the power of extremism. But the extremists are gaining support and we are running out of time - the people are becoming restless. It's been over five years since the Taliban were ousted and things are changing, but not as rapidly as most would prefer. I've come to believe that the keys to Afghanistan's future fall into the "3 Es" - education, economy, ethics. Education so that people will think broadly, beyond their village or ethnic boundaries. Education will enable people to think independently and develop personal positions beyond what their mullah tells them to think or do. Education is also an economic "enabler" - people need jobs; those without jobs have time on their hands and are a breeding ground for discontent - they will be patient for only so long and will then demand something different, anything different, starting with the government. Ethics - the government must be perceived as having the people's best interests at heart and must not be "on the take". Unfortunately, none of the "3 Es" would characterize Afghanistan today: illiteracy exceeds 60%; unemployment exceeds 40%; almost 60% live in poverty and it is estimated by some that 75% of foreign assistance doesn't make it to the people. How do we change the national culture? I don't know - it will obviously take time, a national commitment to a very dedicated effort, and money, lots of money. Is it worth it? All one must do to answer that question is to look into the eyes of the children, who deserve a chance to experience we take for granted - life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I am walking down the sidewalk at a large base in a central location. It is mid morning and I am thinking about the objectives of my upcoming meeting. I walk past a sandbag that has obviously fallen off the back of a passing truck at some point during the night; it has burst a bit and there's a small pile of sand next to it. I think nothing about it as sandbags are everywhere. They multiply faster than rabbits. In the mornings you will find sandbag walls and enforcements that have appeared magically since you last noticed. There are sandbags lining walls, covering roofs, you name it, you'll find it. I continue on my way until it suddenly strikes me that I haven't saluted for a few moments - and then I note that there is nobody around me. This is a bit unusual - there is no foot traffic and no vehicular traffic on this primary thoroughfare to the main gate. I stop, look and listen. I resist the urge to hide behind a sandbag wall. What's going on? I'm completely alone on this sidewalk. I look down the road, to the next intersection. The security police are in the process of blocking the roadway and have stopped all traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian. I look back at the intersection behind me. Same story! I am completely alone in no-man's land. Why? But, things can't be too bad because absolutely nobody is paying any attention to me, there are no security policemen with foghorns yelling for me to put my hands up or to seek cover or to ... whatever - they are completely and utterly ignoring me. So, I continue on my merry way, sauntering along - hey, they're not worried about me so why should I be? I'm cool. I'm a colonel and should act colonely, right? I approach the roadblock and ask the security policeman "what's going on?". The military is famous for it's exercises so I figure we're having one though they could have picked a better street - traffic is starting to back up towards the front gate. I'm told that there is an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) in the roadway that I just walked down. I'm just a bit concerned by this and ask where this bomb is - I'm told it's in the street about halfway down. I say something to the effect of "oh, you mean that sandbag?" to which the response is "it only looks like a sandbag". Well, how can you argue with logic like that? I don't bother; I mean, the enemy could have penetrated our defenses and left a camouflaged bomb along side of the road. I say something like "well, if you REALLY think that's a bomb why did you let me walk within ten feet of it without warning me?" - to which I get the blank stare non-response. I decide to not press my point as there is not much to be gained with this particular individual. I do ask what they are going to do with it and learn that they will bring in special barriers to contain the explosion and will then detonate it with a bomb of our own. I sense immediately that this is going to be great entertainment - unfortunately, I have an appointment with a general and must move along. I continue my walk and make it to my meeting at the prescribed time - only to learn that the general was driving in from the direction that I had walked and is on the far side of the barrier. I cool my heels. I learn that the line to get onto the base now extends out the front gates into the local neighborhoods that have known "issues". I know from personal experience that there is no greater feeling of vulnerability than to be sitting in a traffic jam in the middle of a neighborhood with potential suicide bombers blending in with the locals. I'm trying to understand the logic of this situation and cannot find much. An hour later, the explosion occurs without notice. One would think they would announce a planned detonation - was this really a bomb? Was anyone hurt? But, no, as it turns out, that was the preventative detonation. I have my meeting and am walking back. They have removed the barricades and cleaned up the site. I happen to see a security policeman and ask him about the IED - his response: "Oh, you mean that sandbag?".

I am at my safehouse awaiting a van for the ride to work. I have an important meeting this morning. I have slept in a bit for a change and it is around 0900 on a Friday (our "casual" day, yeah right). The van finally arrives and I now have 30 minutes to make it to my meeting with the general. No problem, 30 minutes; only takes 10 to get there. Some background: two persons are required to travel, whether walking or riding - the concept is to have a wingman for protection, the logic being that if there are two of us, the enemy will be less likely to attack. Of course, my logic runs like this: the more passengers in a van, the more desirable it is as a target, the fewer individuals in a walking group, the more desirable they are as a target. No bother, I still have plenty of time - but I am beginning to think ahead. Should I ride alone through a benign two-block route or should I walk alone down a six-block route that passes by the Pakistan embassy (that usually has large crowds)? This is a no-brainer for me; I'll go alone in the van - less likely a target, more benign a route, quicker. Time passes; no wingmen arrive; I'm running out of time. I have three options: miss my meeting, violate policy by walking to work, or violate policy by riding to work. I climb in the van (the driver is a local national and does not count as a wingman) and indicate for him to proceed. He holds up two fingers and nods his head "no". We repeat this sequence several times; he is obviously afraid for his job if he takes a single passenger. I call the camp to explain my situation and request that they authorize the exception to policy and permit me to ride the van alone. I first talk to a sergeant and then a lieutenant. The lieutenant agrees that it makes perfect sense to ride rather than walk - but it is against policy! I quickly learn that this branch of the US military does not expect or reward independent thought. This branch also has no official identified to approve exceptions to policy. Logic has no role in this decision. The commander is unavailable and doesn't answer his cell phone - he's probably at the meeting I am about to miss. I have made absolutely no progress and am out of time. I now have to choose between going back to bed or walking. I am

here to do a job, this meeting is important, and there are too many people affected to reschedule it. I walk. I am immediately befriended by three local boys, probably 12 or 13 years of age. It would be unheard of for a young girl to talk to or be seen with an American. They are trying to sell me magazines or newspapers. I kindly tell them "nay, nay" (no) but this has absolutely no effect. They have adopted me. I hate to use them, but I can't get rid of them so perhaps I will be a less desirable target if they walk with me; it's not like I really had a choice. I decide to turn this into an object lesson. There are three boys, each selling merchandise for a dollar. I have a five - I will need two dollars in change. They don't have it, or at least say they don't. In broken English (the kids speak passably, I'm surprised), I tell them that their generation holds the future to Afghanistan and that it is important that they learn to tell the truth and to be trustworthy - that these personal characteristics are key for Afghanistan to again become a great nation. I tell them that I will only buy their papers if they will promise to provide my change the next time I see them (at an earlier hour it is easy to find wingmen and I walk this route regularly). We reach a deal and they each look me in the eye and promise to provide change the next day. I arrive safely at the camp, attend my meeting, and take up my travel policy issues with the appropriate level of leadership. I haven't seen the boys since.

I have landed at a small remote airfield in northern Afghanistan. Our C-130 drops us using an engine-running offload and takes off within 10 minutes of our arrival. There is very little here other than a runway, a few dilapidated buildings, some junked aircraft and vehicles, and a staff of around a dozen Afghan Air Corps personnel. We are isolated. These people live at the airfield in extremely austere conditions. There is no electricity, water, or sewage. There is a city 10 miles distant and we are told that supplies are transported in each day. They have no vehicles of their own. There are a few bicycles that are their primary means of transportation. There are no women or children, just these Afghan airmen. We sit down with them to discuss (through translators) the history of the airfield. We are told many things, one of which is that we are the first aircraft to land here in three years. We really feel isolated now. The meeting breaks up and we are starting to aggregate for a walk to the runway to look around. As I stand there, a mushroom cloud appears several miles beyond the runway followed in a few seconds by the sound of the explosion. Well, this is interesting...no aircraft so not an air strike, no visible ground activity. Perhaps an animal has discovered an old mine - but the mushroom cloud is too big for a mine. Oh well, the Afghans don't seem concerned and there's nothing we can do. No sooner has the dust settled from the first explosion than there is a second. Still no interest or concern, guess this is normal for this area. Suddenly, a new, black, SUV drives up from behind us in a cloud of dust followed by several pickups marked "police". We are wondering what is going on. A young (early 30s) man climbs out of the SUV. He is dressed in fine Italian-style slacks, turtleneck and sports-coat, all black. His shoes are fine leather, again black. He strikes us all as a mafia strongman. He explains that he is the secretary to the governor of this province and has come to escort us around the airfield and into town for a formal luncheon the governor has planned in honor of our visit. Now, exactly how did the governor know we were coming here? We try to travel unannounced to isolated locations such as this so that we don't have to take large protection forces with us. Where's the security leak? There are around a dozen of us and we are definitely outmanned; hence, we accept the offer for lunch. We climb in/on the trucks and proceed to follow the secretary's SUV. He drives to one end of the runway, back to the access road and then heads out of the airfield for town. Hey, what about that old hangar at the other end of the field? What about all those tire marks on the runway that planes make when they land? They don't look like three-year-old rubber marks to us pilots! What about.....? Best not to ask, we're in drug country. We drive into town uneventfully and are escorted to the governor's office. Very nice. Money. Couldn't tell it coming through town though. But, there were numerous burqa-clad women and children out-and-about (this has become my measure of religious extremism - the fewer the adult women, the more extremist the community). The governor is in his mid 40s and could not be described as "enfolding". He just has that brutal look about him. I would not want to find myself in disagreement with him. His staff appear to double as bodyguards, I suspect they are needed in this region. In Afghanistan, governors are not elected, they are appointed by the president. After perfunctory welcomes and comments, we proceed to walk across the street to a facility that has been configured for lunch. The governor's staff has deployed to the ends of the street and blocked all traffic - as we walk across the street I smile and wave to a few shop keepers who are staring at our party. No smiles or waves in return. I suspect there have not been US servicemen in this town in decades, if ever. I'm not sure if the severe looks are for us or the governor. In any case, we are the zoo animals. Lunch is very nice, but standard fare - lamb kabobs with rice and fruit. Though we've had this meal almost a dozen times, it remains delicious. Thankfully, no goat's milk in the tea. I am seated near the head of the table, close enough to engage the governor in conversation. This is expected during meals. We take turns asking questions between bites. I ask the governor what he had been doing prior to being appointed governor - turns out he was a commander of the Northern Alliance. This was one of the more ruthless elements engaged in the pre-Taliban civil war. During the gaps for translation, the governor is staring at me. I am not comfortable, but I'm not going to

permit myself to be intimidated either so I maintain appropriate eye contact with a smile and lightheartedness. The governor does not know how to smile. One of the other team members kicks me under the table. At this point there is an explosion outside, I'd estimate within four or five miles, but close enough to rattle the windows. The governor ignores it. We Americans look at each other, each of us probably trying to devise an escape plan. We are completely surrounded by "bodyguards". About 30 seconds later, there is a second explosion. Again, the governor ignores it. We are starting to look around at each other openly, he does not miss this nonverbal communication. About a minute later, there is a third explosion. At this point, he calls over a member of his staff and whispers in their ear. The staff member disappears into another room. Ultimately, it is my turn to ask another question. I ask him about his education (where he went to school). He explains that he didn't go to university and that his lifework is as a soldier. Another stare. Another kick. I later learn from reading his dossier that he didn't finish high school. Another explosion, the loudest one yet. The aide comes back and the governor explains that these are controlled explosions of mines that have been cleared. Okay, we can accept that - we don't really believe it, but we can accept it. Unfortunately the explosions continue - I lost count at 9 and am guessing there were 12 or 13 total. None of us were ever comfortable. The funniest moment occurred around explosion #8 when a waiter stumbled upon entering the far side of the room and the platter made a large clattering noise. Those of us on my side of the table who could see it occurring were prepared, those on the other side, jumped noticeably. I had to laugh. The governor stared. Upon our return (I have never been so glad to see a C-130 appear), I pulled the reports and confirmed there is significant corruption and drug trade in the province.

And so it goes in Afghanistan! I hope each of you had a fantastic Thanksgiving. I must say, that after being here for awhile it is very clear that we Americans have much to be thankful for - and very little understanding of how much we take it for granted. For my part, Thanksgiving was quite eventful - but that is another story!

May God bless each and every one of you - and may God continue to bless the USA!

Ron

Friends and Family -

Greetings from Kabul, Afghanistan; an enticing land of variety - in both the people and the terrain.

Time is passing quickly and I am definitely beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I am scheduled to depart Kabul in mid January (weather permitting - we've already had two blizzards) and arrive in San Antonio about a week later. I must be very honest that this elicits mixed emotions. I am very much ready to be reunited with my loved ones and friends. But, we all seek purpose in life and in Afghanistan there is a definite sense of work to be done and the impression that one person can truly make a difference. So, as I say, mixed emotions. Beyond the obvious things, there is a subtle sense of freedom that I severely miss. Yes, I've been out and about quite a bit while in Afghanistan - a lot more than most, but these trips have largely been under controlled circumstances (believe it or not!). I mean, it's not like I can get in a car and drive wherever I desire - or to even pull over and go into a store or take a walk in a park. The military has a host of rules and regulations that are meant to protect us - but also serve to limit our freedom of movement. Perhaps it is purely an American desire, to want to climb into the Chevy on any given afternoon and drive wherever one desires. So, I miss freedom of movement and will enjoy giving in to the whim to take an exit just to see what's there to see, or taking a walk where and when I want without having to be wary of landmines!

Speaking of landmines, Thanksgiving day comes to mind. It started out with a superb prayer breakfast at 0700. The speaker described all the things he was thankful for; these generally fell into five categories. He was thankful for parents that loved him enough as a child to live a value system, provide an education, discipline him, expose him to spiritual matters, and generally held themselves to a higher standard than the world around them. He was thankful for a country that permitted his family to improve their station in life, that, while not perfect, provided security and produced an economy that provided good jobs; a country that was able to change local and national leadership every few years without firing a shot. He was thankful for a spouse that supported him, a spouse that was free to fulfill herself, that was his equal, and was able to choose between family and career - and chose well. He was thankful for his own family, for children that lived with honor and made choices that were not driven by the herd, for children that listened, children that were physically, spiritually, morally, and ethically healthy. Lastly, he was thankful for freedom itself; freedom to worship as he pleased, freedom to say what he felt, freedom to pursue the dreams of his life. I came away from that prayer breakfast feeling that this person and I had much in common. I then went to Kabul international airport to meet a VIP and tour them around the north side of the airport where we are spending lots of our American taxpayer \$\$\$\$. This area has been under construction since I got here - and will be for another year or so. It seems to me they are just moving dirt from one pile to another but I suspect there's some method to their madness. Anyway, the road leading to the north gate was our route for the morning - we were to meet our VIP at this gate. Well, I've been on that roadway several times but this particular day, the road ended in a muddy field - the heavy machinery had obliterated it since the last time I had been there. No problem, I could see the gate several hundred yards away. The only problem was that I couldn't remember the exact pathway the road used to take. I had checked and was told the demining was complete in the area so I wasn't concerned - we'll just follow the ruts in the mud made by previous vehicles and all will be well. Besides, there are no "caution - mines" signs that are usually present where there is danger. We (two colonels and our enlisted driver/shooter) are in a 4-wheel drive heavy duty SUV. We start into the field and the going is pretty easy and the route is pretty obvious. We get a hundred yards into this field and the first of several forks in the road presents itself - this is more like one set of ruts go one direction and another set go another. So, we keep to the ruts that generally look like they're headed toward the gate we seek. It isn't too long before the path is pretty vague we begin to see blue stakes in the ground - this is cause for concern for these typically indicate that this area has been determined to be safe - that this area has been demined - which, unfortunately might imply that other areas, where there are no blue stakes (like where we had just been), have not been demined. Our objective suddenly becomes "find the ruts that are close to blue stakes". Sometimes this is possible, sometimes it is not. We stop when we see an Afgan in full body armor with a metal detector about 20' away from the car. He is intently scanning for mines! We have been in quasi-denial until this point - his presence is solid, unequivocal evidence that we are somewhere we definitely do not want to be. I call the individual who previously assured me the area has been demined. "Yes, it's been demined - but only to six centimeters (about 2.5 inches); now they're going after the big stuff a little deeper". Thanks a lot, you hadn't mentioned that last part when we talked earlier! Okay, let's keep going, but stay in the ruts! I don't remember hearing the explosion but when the world began spinning and the airbags deployed I knew we were in trouble. Okay, okay, strike that last sentence - you should know that fighter pilots can't help but embellish their

stories! In reality, we were able to follow the blue flags and ruts to the side of the field and then follow the roadway to the gate. Approaching the side of the field we had to pass a large slab of concrete that had been propped up as a sign to those entering the field (of course we couldn't see what was written on it from our approach direction). There's a picture of this slab posted on my photo website but generally it says "DEMINING -EOD ONLY!" (EOD is Explosive Ordnance Disposal). And thus, by 1000 I had already had one of the most eventful Thanksgivings in memory - and one more thing to be thankful for as well!

Speaking of Thanksgiving (don't you just love these transitions?!), the food here is more than sufficient. Yes, we had turkey and dressing, and plenty of it! Of course, they have been serving turkey for the past two months; I think they must buy it by the megaload. But, at least they threw in the dressing and sweet potatoes! I do not know how to describe the DFAC (dining facility; chow hall to you old timers like me) - but it's almost like going to Ryan's or Golden Corral every day of the week for every meal of the day. All you can eat buffet style. Plenty of food, pretty good quality, and what looks to be great variety - but after awhile you see that it's the same variety over and over. I've seen people gain 10s of pounds here in a matter of weeks - I guess they deal with the stress, or boredom if that is the nature of their job, by eating. Or perhaps it is a question of self discipline (hey, don't bring up the C3 chocolate chip cookies, okay?). Anyway, we do not want for food. They serve four squares a day. I started out ordering an omelet every day - now I'm happy to have a bowl of oatmeal with raisins. But, all in all, food is a high point - the problem is too much, not too little.

Another one of the good things about being assigned duty in Kabul is nice long, hot showers. Everywhere else that I've been "in theater" one has to take combat showers. These are limited to three minutes - 30 seconds to get wet, 90 seconds without water to suds up, bathe, and shiver, and another 60 seconds of water to rinse off. I'm not sure what would have happened if one had abused this by rinsing for 1:05 but I had some mental image of standing naked with suds in my hair in front of some general somewhere. Anyway, back to Kabul. So, I was enjoying a nice hot shower the other day when suddenly the lights went out. I was dismayed. You see, there is one shower in my safehouse where 12 people live - it was my turn at last and I was getting cheated big time. The bathroom has a window but it has been boarded up to install a vent mechanism. So, I'm standing here in the dark completely lathered up. It is not normal for the electricity to go out at the safehouses because we have our own generators and are not on the city grid. As a matter of fact, this is the first time in my three months that I'm aware of the electricity going out. So, I'm standing in the shower in the dark, wondering if I should just wait awhile. Immediately, but almost imperceptibly, the shower begins to diminish in intensity. Why? What's going on? Within 2 seconds, there is no doubt that the water pressure has diminished significantly. It is at this point in time that it suddenly strikes me -- I have never seen a water tower in Kabul! Within 5 seconds there is no water pressure whatsoever. So much for waiting, not only have I lost light and water, but the electrical space heater in the bathroom is out as well and it is freezing outside. Why is it that the vent mechanism somehow keeps out light but not air? My engineering mind is working overtime - all electricity gone - no light, no heat, no water - where's my towel??? These safe houses must have an electrical pump and reservoir system to provide water pressure. Now those hand pumps along the roadways make more sense! Gee, where's my towel??? Surely the electricity will come on pretty soon? Nope, this is Afghanistan. At least I have a flashlight in my room -- if I could only find it in the dark. The realization that this is the way that the vast majority of Afghan's live day-in and day-out strikes me later. It is so easy to begin to take things for granted. If Americans had to live like this for any period of time a good chunk of them would be rioting in the streets... and we wonder why there is growing discontent (recall my earlier "update" comment that the capitol city of Kabul only has around 4 hours of electricity each day at sunset).

I remember when I was six or seven and my father was deployed to Greenland for a year. In those days, there was no email and very little telephone contact. He was out of sight and after awhile, out of mind. I think he was able to call home three or four times the entire year. Today, policies (and technology) permit us to call once a week, but in reality the operators will patch us through so long as they have lines available. This is critical to one's mental attitude and emotional well being - and thus critical to our mission success. Email is also a tremendous improvement. They have an internet café on camp that has webcams - so if you have one of those at home, along with a high speed internet provider, you can see reasonable quality pics of your family while you chat. Another thing I've really enjoyed is music. Not the Afghan music, which is indescribably nasal, but the American music which I brought with me. The MP3 player is a solid candidate for invention of the decade. I mean, you can burn a gazillion mp3s to a DVD and then use your computer to load up whatever you want onto your chewing-gum-pack-sized mp3 player and take it for a walk. I do this regularly and have purchased a comfortable set of earbuds that I can actually sleep with. So, I've become accustomed to going to sleep to Josh Groban and company. I do hope Barbara doesn't mind singing me to sleep when I return.

I met a young man at dinner the other day. He was an American dressed in typical Afghan garb. He later spoke at the Sunday evening church service. It turns out that he is a missionary who made national headlines (in the US) as the only American relief worker to remain in Afghanistan after 9/11. His name is John Weaver and his story of service and survival has been published in a book entitled "Inside Afghanistan". I highly recommend it - especially the first half of the last chapter. It is one thing to come over here for a few months and live like pampered Americans in these camps and bases - it is quite another to come here and serve Afghans from within - living as one of their own. It is illegal for him to explain his Christian faith unless asked about it, but his actions speak louder than words and are the catalyst for people to ask. His life is truly dedicated to serving God through service to humanity. If only I had the willingness to give up all worldly comforts to serve God - guess that's another reason why I need a savior.

Speaking of which (another great transition!) - one of my Muslim mujahadene guards actually said "Merry Christmas" to me the other day. I was shocked and gave him a big smile and handshake. He does not speak English so there is no telling how long he has been practicing this phrase. There is no doubt in my mind that he understands the concept of Christmas because we "discussed" Eid immediately after my grateful acknowledgement (it went something like him pointing to me and saying "Christmas" and then pointing to himself and saying "Eid"). That simple act of kindness made my day. I have come to enjoy playing board games with my guards. Though they rotate to different locations and shifts on a daily basis, every so often they end up back at my safehouse when I'm returning from work (which is usually between 2130 and 2200 (9:30PM - 10:00PM)). When they see me coming they coerce me to come play chess or "checkers" with them - it doesn't take much. Sometimes I bring popcorn to go with their green tea. I say "checkers" because it is a game played with chess pieces but they move like checkers' kings (all directions). It took me a couple of games to pick up the strategy but I hold my own now. That seems to bother some of the overly competitive guards who, when I win, will simply not let me leave a winner. They will grab my hand, arm, or any body part they can get hold of and laugh and smile while setting up the board again (few speak any English). When we play a crowd usually gathers and if the guard starts falling behind, the others will take up a very animated dialog in Dari. I wish I knew what they were saying - probably razzing the guy mercilessly. If I start to reach for a piece they don't think I should move, they will nudge me in the back where the other player can't see. The other day I played until almost 0100 (1:00AM) and had a grand time. Another interesting thing about the guards is that they like to shake hands but will only do so with their glove off - it may be 15 deg but when they see you coming and start to take off their glove, you know what is coming. I've gotten to where I take mine off as well. Amazingly (or sadly) only about half of the guards even have gloves.

The thing that really gets me these days is the street children. I see the same ones over and over, never with an adult. They are usually aged 5-10. A driver told me they were the orphans from the last war - given their ages that seems to make sense. Sometimes they have packages of gum or some other trinket to sell. I would love to help them out and even tried to sneak a dollar out of my wallet the other day to buy a pack of gum from a beautiful little girl standing alone. But, somehow another child saw me and started running toward me. It was only a matter of seconds before I was surrounded by a dozen dirty, hungry, precious children. But, sadly, I got the distinct impression that it was survival of the fittest - if I had given the girl the dollar, as soon as I left the bigger kids would have probably stolen it and perhaps have hurt her in the process. I'm still trying to think of a way to help these kids.

Okay, that's about the end of my story here in Kabul. I may have one more "update" in me but if so, it will be a short one. I hope this one finds you healthy in all respects - physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, etc.. I also hope you have a wonderful Christmas season and that through all the capitalistic pressures you are able to find some time and peace to focus on "the reason for the season"!

May God bless each of you, and may God continue to bless the United States of America! By the way, I've come to develop an opinion regarding why God continues to bless the USA despite some of the negative trends we see in our country these days. Perhaps it's because God loves a cheerful giver - and the United States is the most giving country in the history of the world.

Ron

Friends & Family –

Greetings from Afghanistan - a country where freedom and democracy actually have a chance to succeed.

As I hope you have been able to tell from these Updates, this deployment has been the experience of a lifetime. I have seen the country of Afghanistan, primarily from the macro-view as I travel by air, but also from the micro-view as I interact with the people – both city dwellers and villagers. I have been to desert Kandahar, the heart of the Al Quida resistance. I have been in mountainous Khost, in far east Afghanistan near the Pakistan border. I have been to both Shindand and Herat in the plains of the far west – so close to the border that the Iranians provide the electricity. I've been to Mazar-E-Sharif, Sheberghan, Kunduz and Faizabad in northern and northeastern Afghanistan – areas that share common cultures with the peoples of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, former soviet republics. And of course I've been in Bagram, Gardez and Kabul – all in the heart of the country. I have traveled by helicopter, by air transport, by auto, by humvee, by Afghan truck, by VIP motorcade, and by foot. I have been surrounded by security and on an occasion or two have found myself in places I probably shouldn't have been. I have met the common man and those among the highest echelons of civil and military leadership. I have lived a hundred mini-adventures in the past weeks. I must say that such adventure can be addictive – it elicits the same feelings of vibrancy that I had when flying high performance fighters as a young man. Perhaps one never feels so alive as when they venture close to the edge. It is probably a good thing that I did not deploy to a war zone as a young man – the rest of my military experience might have been a bit disappointing – or perhaps I would have become a deployment junkie and my family would have suffered even more than they have. I wish I could fully relate my experiences and emotions to each of you, but I'm not nearly adequate with our language to do so – you'll just have to accept my enthusiasm for what we are trying to do in Afghanistan as evidence that it is worth the time, effort, money, and blood that America is investing here. Perhaps your experience in life has been similar to mine – that throughout our lives we search for purpose. Why did God put me on earth? Why me, why here, why now? I've always found purpose in my faith, my family, my work, and the ideals of my country – and the people of Afghanistan appear to be no different. Yes, they have a much different faith. And yes, they have different views of the roles of women in their society. But at the core of their being, they appear to be searching for peace and purpose – are we so different?

Okay, I can tell that I'm getting "short" here (ready to come home). Here are my "top 10" reasons when you know you've been here long enough:

10. When the thought of rush hour traffic doesn't sound so bad
9. When your body armor seems pretty light
8. When your old job seems somewhat irrelevant
7. When army or navy women don't look so bad
6. When you can do 3 miles on the treadmill without straining too badly
5. When there are 500 movies to check out and you can't find one you want to watch
4. When you really don't care what they are serving at the chow hall
3. When you drive all the way across town before remembering to load your weapon
2. When even the burqa babes look pretty good
1. When you're kinda looking forward to mowing the grass or working on the honey-do list

I am in the far northeastern part of Afghanistan fairly near the Tajikistan border at the headwaters of a river that flows through a beautifully rugged valley. I have gotten here via Belgian C-130, the workhorse of the US and NATO forces in country. The Belgian crew I flew with was kind enough to invite me to sit on the flight deck. This provides an outstanding view as this crew does not believe in unnecessarily gaining altitude - the entire trip has been flown near tree-top level through the canyons leading up the valley. This is a somewhat famous valley in Afghanistan - it marks the last holdout of the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. The valley is surrounded by the spectacular Hindu Kush mountain range that has some peaks towering above 20,000' and ends at the small, largely unimproved airport that I am visiting. These mountains provide a natural boundary that protects the valley and funnels opposing forces into numerous choke points as they attempt to work their way up. The Northern Alliance successfully defended this valley for years - the Taliban never did capture this area and thus, never fully occupied Afghanistan. The residents of the area are fiercely proud of their Afghan heritage. The Northern Alliance was led by Ahmed Massoud, the "Lion of Panshir", a fearless warrior and popular leader. When the Taliban could not defeat his army, they turned to a new tactic - the suicide bomber. Massoud was killed on 9 September 2001, two days before 9/11, as part of what many believe to be an integrated Taliban plot

to take the entire country while sending a message to America not to intercede. Perhaps they didn't quite think things through.

I find the VIP convoys, well, troublesome. I have never liked being the center of attention and the same holds true here – and here, when you attract attention, you also potentially attract the enemy. I have traveled in three or four high-visibility convoys sharing a vehicle with people of significant stature (the “ranking” individual of the convoy, the individual that would be targeted if the convoy were to be attacked). I prefer to travel in a single, unmarked vehicle that blends in with the others on the road by not speeding, honking, or cutting into/across traffic. Well, VIP convoys do all these things. Support cars surround the “primary” vehicle and speed up or slow down to cut off other vehicles. They veer right or left to attempt to block merging vehicles (which is nigh impossible in traffic circles). If traffic gets dense (as is unavoidable), the sirens come on and the convoy creates a lane of its own through traffic by being as aggressive (read that rude) as possible. All this to maybe save five minutes. At what cost? These “hardened” vehicles are so secure that we do not have to wear body armor or helmet when inside – in theory. The glass, if it is glass, looks to be an inch thick and is coated so that people cannot see in. Well, that's great theory but I'm aware of what a good sized IED can do to a humvee and there isn't any such thing as a bomb-proof vehicle. Give me a soft vehicle that blends into traffic anytime. My favorite tactic is to wear my body armor, and then drape a large “scarf” (like the locals use) over my helmet and upper body. That way, they can't see my rank (on the helmet) and have to look twice just to tell that it's a military vehicle – by then, we're past them. My real rub with these VIP convoys comes down to what falls into the "ugly American" category. We're fighting at least two wars here – one to limit the extremists long enough for the Afghan government to prove to the populace that it is viable, and one for the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan – and the convoys aren't helping with the latter.

Permit me to turn a bit introspective about my time here (those that are primarily interested in learning of more mini-adventures can sign off now). Specifically, I feel I'm getting a lot more out of this experience than I'm able to contribute to the cause here. Yet, people send messages praising my service. The truth, from my knothole, is that my sacrifice is minimal compared to those that are in direct combat or have been here for longer tours, much longer tours in most cases. I'm here for only 130 days or so. Most are here for a minimum of one year. I've talked to US Army guys that have been here for 18 months and have 6 to go. I've talked to a few individuals who have been home only six months out of the last five years. I know how they do it – like I have said previously, adventure and war can be addictive – and they certainly have my appreciation and utmost respect – but the people I REALLY respect are the loved ones left behind that enable them to be here. The wives, the children, the supportive friends and family, people like you – people that pick up the burden of everyday life, the same people that bear the emotional burden of not knowing how their loved ones are feeling, how much at risk they are (we always assume the worst, don't we?), where they are at any one time, and whether they will ever see them again. I travel roads that are subject to random attacks – just like you travel US roadways that have drunk drivers, road rage, and driveby shootings that cause death and mayhem on a daily basis – but the folks at the forward operating bases are being shot at almost every day. They have my respect. And you have my respect.

At one point I seriously considered extending my tour here to satisfy a personal goal – to have a military command – but after weighing the impacts at home, decided it was time, for once, to not be so selfish. So I'm coming home - soon. I will leave Kabul on 2 Jan 07 and make my way home over the next several days. I've had a tremendous career, first at NASA doing things, meeting people and going places one typically only sees on TV or in the movies, and then in the military where my experiences have been equally unique and rewarding. At both NASA and in the military I've experienced wonderful successes and horrible disappointments - and have lost several friends to tragedy along the journey. In a bit of irony however, all I ever really wanted to do at NASA was fly – but I ended up commanding. And what I really hoped to eventually achieve in the military was a command – but I have flown 24 of my 27 years. God knows best. To fill out the credits on this great adventure, I have to acknowledge the roles of a few individuals who shaped my careers. Fred Haise, Apollo 13 astronaut, convinced me to join the reserves instead of leaving NASA for an active duty career when I was 25. Dennis Naue taught me to fly F-4s a couple of years later and showed me one could be a Christian as well as a fighter pilot. Dr. Drew Gaffney, another astronaut, brought me back to health – and flight status – after stress-induced heart arrhythmias following the Challenger accident grounded me and my dreams of becoming an astronaut. Tim Cahoon brought me onto active duty in 2000 when there was a shortage of fighter pilots and it was the right time to pay something back. He mentored me, was largely responsible for my promotion to Colonel, sponsored me for this deployment, and was instrumental in permitting me to be close to my dad when he was in the latter stages of lung cancer. There are many, many, many more people who have played significant roles. I am indebted to each of them (you), and consider myself blessed to be so.

As you have surely deduced, this is my final installment of "Kabul Update". Writing it has been an enjoyable experience – I've previously never written anything other than technical materials and email. I appreciate the encouragement you've offered and hope that these have served to both inform, encourage, and perhaps entertain.

Upon returning to San Antonio I will transition back into my job as Reserve Advisor to the Commander of the USAF's training command. At the appropriate time, Barbara and I will be making decisions regarding the future - whether it be in the military, returning to civilian employment, or perhaps retirement; but the later scares me a bit in all honesty. Thanks for your prayers and the support you've provided us both. As you can tell from several of my stories, there have been times that prayer made the difference!

May God bless You and Yours and may you have a wonderful and rewarding 2007! See you soon.

Ron

Okay, you probably thought you had heard the last from me. I'm afraid you are not quite that lucky.

We all know men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Well, this Martian is back in Afghanistan, and has been since late February.

The Martian version: My return to life in the US was not easy. I loved being around friends, family, and Barbara, but it became exceedingly difficult to motivate myself to do headquarters staff work after some of the experiences I had had. The first week back I spent my time in-processing, reading hundreds of emails dealing with the same unresolved issues that were working prior to my departure, and adjusting to life in America. I had no idea what day it was or what time it was - and I really didn't care. After in-processing, one is supposed to get a couple of weeks leave to "reintegrate" if the mission will permit - well, I was notified I needed to be in Washington DC on week 2 so off I went. The Pentagon is not my favorite place though it is a very interesting place (in other words, a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to hang too long). Week 3 would have been a nice time to start some leave but the day I returned from DC I learned that I had to return during week 4 - so no leave until at least week 5! Back to DC I went. Week 5 - finally, leave! Monday was great. On Tuesday the word came - I have been offered the opportunity to return to Afghanistan as a wartime commander of an Air Expeditionary Group - but they need me sooner rather than later. And, they need me for 6 months. Yikes! That means I will miss Barbara's entire summer vacation! What will she say? What will my stateside USAF bosses say? What will all the people who read my last epistle say - I mean, I had committed to God and Friends that I wouldn't be selfish any longer - that I would consider Barbara's needs first! Boy, am I a liar.... So, how can I spin this one? Well, I can't. So, I say "thanks, I'm honored, but no, I can't volunteer for 6 months....I wish it were for 4". Yes, I did add that last part without talking to Barbara or my other bosses. I knew they wouldn't bring a commander over for 4 months, it just isn't being done. Wrong. The next day: "well, we would prefer a 6 month tour but since you know the region, players, and challenges, you will be productive from the beginning so we can accept a 4 month tour". Yikes again! At some level of my being I want to go, I really do...but I want to stay home with Barbara too. I have 24 hours to decide...24 hours to make a decision which may change life forever. I talk to Barbara; she is not happy. But we've always had a saying - that one is truly not showing love unless they let the beloved be free - so Barbara, even though she really didn't want me to go, said she would let me go. I left exactly 7 weeks, to the day, after arriving back home. I had to start processing to leave immediately and never got that leave. I will be here until mid July - "here" is Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan - the birthplace of the Taliban. I serve as the 451st AEG Commander over all USAF missions and personnel at the base. I am also the Senior Airfield Authority, governing the use of the airfield by all users - coalition military, civil, etc.. It is quite a heady job. I'm loving it.

The Venusian (is that a word?) version: What is wrong with him? Is it me? Is it my cooking? Why can't the boy grow up? Who's going to mow the blasted grass? What is wrong with him? Should I have him committed? What is wrong with me? Not again! What about all that stuff he wrote that was so kind? He's just full of *&^%! Is this his version of a midlife crisis? Does he have 4 burqa-babe wives waiting over there? What IS wrong with him?

Okay, I can't tell you exactly why I'm here. It all comes down to the search for significance and a belief that these types of things don't just happen arbitrarily - that when a unique, highly unlikely opportunity presents itself, it's usually something to be grasped - and if not grasped, one will spend the remainder of their lives wondering what it would have been like and what opportunities God had in mind. One only lives once and there are no do-overs - and when Barbara said those words, I knew I was coming back to Afghanistan. After I said "yes" I immediately started second guessing the decision. The preparation was agonizing. Barbara and I hung on each minute together. We cried. We laughed. But mostly we just stared and wondered what the future held.

For what are probably obvious reasons, I cannot go into great detail about what the 451st Air Expeditionary Group does. I can tell you where I am but not a lot of details about what goes on here. It is a fairly large base with tiered levels of security. I wear a weapon but have not loaded it. Nor have I had to wear my body armor or helmet since arriving - a big change from my experiences in Kabul. This is primarily because I will probably rarely, if ever, go outside the security zones as I did every day in Kabul. Thus, it also means I will not interact with the local population. This makes me sad. But, in the Kandahar region, I'm told this is not a bad thing - that the local population is largely opposed to our coalition presence. Well, I guess that is understandable since this is the informal capitol city of the Taliban. Osama's training complex was just a few miles down the road....perhaps I will visit it someday - but probably not!

So, I will remain on the base and focus on creating an environment where the forces assigned to the Group can succeed in their missions. This will be a rewarding challenge. Since arriving I have not had more than 6 hours of sleep a night - often interrupted by calls from the Command Post requiring decisions and waivers to standing policy (which are designed to permit me some sleep!). This can be heady stuff. But, when you step back from it, it's also kinda scary to think I've got no adult supervision anywhere close. Thousands of folks here and I and an Army guy are the only two US colonels - nobody out ranks us and all seem to think we have some edge on wisdom or something. I'm not sure what has prepared me for this level of responsibility and authority, but I am strangely comfortable in the job. This too is cause for concern as I know from experience that I don't know as much as I'll need to know to keep things running smoothly. When I see the younger Airmen and Soldiers around base I know it is ultimately my job to adopt policies and measures which will keep them as safe as is possible in this environment. These kids are sometimes younger than my two daughters and that association is not lost on me. But, when they leave the wire, as happens every day and night, I cannot help them, I cannot guard them, and the tables are reversed - they are pushing the insurgents away from the base, keeping them out of rocket range, and protecting me.

I spent over an hour tonight talking to an imbedded reporter from the Wall Street Journal. Who knows what kind of trouble I will be in when this story hits the presses. Another YIKES! I may be home well before July! Oh well, I call them like I see them - I mean, what are they going to do, send me to Iraq? Well, that would be a step down I guess... The reporter is here to fly with our Medevac helos. These guys are my heroes. They fly in any and all weather to bring wounded and injured personnel to our base hospital. We have a ten year old child in the hospital right now who's legs were blown off by a suicide bomber a couple of weeks back - he is alive due to the efforts of our Medevac crews. Our discussions tonight ended abruptly when the helo was scrambled and he left to fly. I pray they will recover safely. Many of the injured are local nationals - and when they are badly hurt they appreciate our assistance. These Medevac folks are fighting the larger war for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. We have forces in the Group that are fighting the war with bullets and bombs as well. As I said, heady stuff. I will never be the same. I seem to recall saying that about the Kabul tour - and I was right. I was different - but this time I will be different in a different kind of way (does that make any sense?).

So, I will sign off for now. I am not sure when I will write again. There will not be any outside-the-wire stories to relate this time around and I simply cannot share much of what goes on inside-the-wire, so am not sure what will come of these epistles. I am writing this one primarily so that you will know I'm here, that Barbara is a saint, that she needs any support you may be able to offer, and that I'm a hypocrite (based on my last epistle from Kabul!).

I would certainly appreciate your prayers - but primarily for Barbara, Amy, and Lindsay this time, okay?

Thanks much!

Ron

