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A typical day inside the wire

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At about 8:30 this morning a soldier knocked on my door – the Operations Officer wanted to see me.

I was up until about 1 a.m. the night before, chatting with my wife and daughter over one of the two webcams our camp provides, and was hoping to relax for a little longer this morning, but it wasn't meant to be.

I threw on my boots and headed to his office. An officer from another Canadian unit in the area was visiting the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT) and had some questions about a project I had initiated.

About a month after arriving on the ground, it became clear to me that Kandahar University's greatest need was a perimeter security wall. Although there were many other potential projects, a common theme I ran into was that without the security or even more significant, the perception of security that a wall would provide, few other projects would get off the ground.

If they did, they would likely be wasted, just as the two recently-built female dormitories sit empty. As the chancellor so passionately put it, the university should be a centre of progressive thought, but what women in their right mind would make themselves a target within the view of the Taliban's prying eyes?

Until they achieve the safety a wall will provide, they must be satisfied with expressing such progressive thoughts as public co-ed discussions or walking in public without a burkha, within the safety of a classroom.

I sat down for a cereal breakfast with one of my civilian peers from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). After a few months of co-ordination with several other organizations planning to aide the university, several visits there, and a lot of tea, CIDA has now agreed to fund this project that we now

affectionately refer to internally as “The Great Wall of Kandahar.”

My breakfast partner this morning happened to be the man in charge of the funding, and we chatted about its progress.

By 9:15 I had stepped into my office and the phone was ringing. There was a man from Kandahar City at the front gate to see me.

He was a wakil, or local community leader, and had brought a petition from his community requesting help from the KPRT. I explained to him that he needed to take his concerns to the municipality, and the municipal representative in his area of the city.

Although true, there is a functioning municipal government in Kandahar City, and an honest mayor. Because of this, we strive to support the local government, as opposed to planning projects directly with the people of the city.

The municipality will then come to us for help, after they have evaluated and prioritized the requests they receive.

Turning people away has become a daily fact of life for me. Sometimes, such as in this case, it is easy to do, because I am given an opportunity to explain a process that supports local governance.

I can give them examples where petitions to the government produced results, often with behind-the-scenes help of the KPRT. Usually, these people leave understanding, and happy.

There are other cases that are not so easy. Some visitors come begging for humanitarian aid, for whom I can only recommend they visit the ministry of Social Affairs or in some cases I just have to say, “I’m sorry, we can’t help you.”

There are also odd requests, such as one man who asked me to provide him a letter of reference to the Canadian embassy in Kabul, so his family could move to Canada, or the nutty widower who asked if we could give him some money so he could buy a new wife!

Walking back from the front gate, my local cell phone rang. A mullah from an Afghan army garrison in the city asked if we could refurbish a mosque for the soldiers. I recommended he request this through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and gave him their phone number.

Finally, with an opportunity to sit down at my desk, I scanned through three bids I received from local contractors to replace an old, rusted and cracked water storage tank in a small Afghan community.

Before I could finish, my local Afghan employee arrived. We had a quick chat about his newborn daughter, then got down to business.

We reviewed his current list of tasks, including: the inspecting of three culverts constructed in the city to ensure their proper completion; the translation of the mayor’s weekly address in a local newspaper; a report on the needs of an orphanage on the outskirts of the city; and an investigation into a rumour that someone was stealing their water.

Midway through our business I received another call from the front gate. The mayor is doing his best to establish a municipal waste collection system, and had directed his staff to determine garbage collection points.

The municipal engineer was here requesting our help constructing the first four. Aware of the plan, I had already received approval for this small project, and let the engineer know the dumpsters should be complete

in a couple of weeks.

Next I met with a local doctor who also works part-time for the KPRT as a liaison officer. He was here to report that a series of maternal and newborn health public awareness courses we had run throughout the city were now complete, and that the closing ceremonies would be held on Saturday.

He provided a sample of the simple hygiene kit that each woman was given for their family, an attendance list, and a final report prepared by the Director of Public Health thanking the KPRT for its sponsorship of the program. While I had him, the doctor also confirmed some local health clinic information I suspected was wrong on one of my maps.

With a few minutes left before lunch, I called a contractor to swing by for payment of several culverts he had built, and I spoke with the camp's security platoon commander about hiring local labourers to cut some tall grass outside the camp that was obscuring the security guards' field of view.

After lunch, I sat down with CIDA, the KPRT's Specialist Engineering Team, and the Dean of the Faculty of Engineering at Kandahar University to discuss flood water management at the university, and how we could build the wall to accommodate for the river that runs through the university in the spring, but is dust and sand the rest of the year.

The doctor came by again, and updated me on the status of a boy who suffers from hydrocephalus, a build-up of fluid in the brain. We are attempting to send him to Pakistan for surgery.

Before dinner, every CIMIC member gathered for our nightly co-ordination meeting to discuss the major events that had occurred over the past 24 hours, and confirm each of our plans for the next 24.

After eating, the complete KPRT gathered around our small garden with two flagpoles, one with the Afghan flag flying high, the other with the Canadian flag at half-staff. A short ceremony was held to honour a fallen comrade.

Finally, I prepared a formal summary of my day's activities, as I must every night, and began planning the next week's patrols and tasks. Normally, this is where my day would end, about 9 or 10 p.m., after 12-14 hours, but today was a little longer.


Several of the commanders for the next rotation of soldiers would be visiting tomorrow and I still had to prepare my presentation due last week.

Ah, what the heck, I'll write this instead.

My graduating class of 1998, the first from Timberline, is holding their 10-year anniversary this weekend. Hi to everyone who is back in town, and sorry I couldn't make it!

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