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# GLAD TO BE HOME What I won't miss about Afghanistan Grim conversations, close quarters, fearful locals, constant dehydration: The dust isn't all that gets under your skin

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CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD As you read this, I will be back in Toronto, undoubtedly wrapped about the world's greatest bull terrier, or more probably throwing a tennis ball for him again and generally being retrained as a worthy owner.

But I wrote from Kandahar, which I left Wednesday, the dust of southern Afghanistan still on my clothes and under my skin.

In total, I've spent about five of the past 18 months in that place, and between trips three and four, wrote a book about the experiences of some of the Canadian soldiers I met there. So in a whole lot of ways, I feel as though I've been there longer than I really have.

I always miss the same things – chiefly the feeling, like nothing else, of living on the edge. I'm not an adrenalin junkie by any stretch of the imagination. My life has hardly been about pushing limits. But in Afghanistan, whether you seek it or not, you're acutely aware of how fragile life is, how quickly and brutally it can end and how dearly you treasure your own.

Partly I suspect because of that, we scum of the press are always particularly congenial, and tend to behave better than usual (well, the fact that Kandahar Air Field is a dry base may also have something to do with it), with less petty scrapping than is normal. Just as soldiers form enduring friendships in a theatre of war, so do we, I think.

But maybe because it feels as though I've been here so much, there are some things I won't miss at all.

Afghanistan is catching unsolicited and unwanted snatches of whispered conversations about the grim manner in which someone died on the way to lunch, or the bathroom or to the Tim Hortons. Was it two legs that guy lost, or an arm and a leg? Did the fellow beside him get thrown out of the vehicle or not? Was that third person disemboweled? These aren't malevolent conversations, only natural ones, born of normal human curiosity. But all that said, I won't miss overhearing them.

Afghanistan is rarely being alone.

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Like soldiers, whether at bases big or small, reporters share communal work and sleeping tents, with only a zippered flap between you and the next guy, so that your snoring is effectively in his face and vice versa. And in the women's loo closest to my sleeping tent, for instance, the curtained shower stalls are directly across from the curtained toilet stalls, with the clash of both function and form that you might imagine.

Yet, as reporters, you are also almost always alone, if not in a physical sense, then always apart from the men and women in uniform you are there to write about. This is absolutely proper, as it should be, but there are times when the sting of not quite belonging can be acute, even as you are in the middle of a crowd.

Afghanistan is also never really knowing what anyone who is Afghan really thinks or means.

This isn't just because for the embedded reporter everything goes through interpreters who are usually accompanied by the armed-to-the-teeth soldiers with whom they work, though that doesn't help. Some 'terps are excellent; you can tell by their body language and the effort they make to capture the mood of both question and answer. Some are not.

But the real difficulty is Afghans themselves.

This country has been so often invaded or taken over, its people have lived under repression or occupation or with stark naked fear for so long, that telling others what you think they want to hear has become reflexive, as if in the genes. I'm not suggesting Afghans are inherently dishonest; of course they aren't. But they have had to survive by their wits for so long, and speaking anything approaching truth has been so fraught with peril, that they are wary and tend to err on the side of protective dissembling.

In Kandahar province, it seems no matter what you ask a local – about his life or situation, his prospects or lack of them, his family or the weather – his first and second and third response is, "We are very happy for the Canadians." In Uruzgan, they undoubtedly say similar things about the Dutch; in Helmand, about the British.

Oddly, the only really spontaneous praise I've heard has come from Afghan police or army officers, who generally speak with genuine warmth about the Americans who have worked with them and to whom they are grateful.

I will be glad for public bathrooms that are not posted with signs that read "Check your urine!" and that come with a colour-coded chart so that you might measure your state of dehydration, or not.

I will be glad to drink water only when I am actually thirsty, and not as a heat-exhaustion prevention measure. I will be glad not to have to line up for lunch or to have to pass inspection by the civilian guards at the dining halls, checking for bare toes, too-short shorts or God forbid, too much of an exposed arm.

There is much I will miss, and I plan to come back, but mostly I will be glad to be with my dog, in my house, in my bed, in my bathtub, in whatever is left of my garden. I will be glad to be back.

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