

Living & Working in Afghanistan

By Janette Brodeur
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The plane lifts off and I am actually on my way. I have been anticipating this trip for over a year now. Settling into my seat, I close my eyes and wonder what it will be like for me, a woman, working on a construction site as a Project Manager in Kandahar, Afghanistan, with the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT).

I tried not to have any preconceived ideas as I planned for my six-month stay with the KPRT, and to mentally prepare myself for whatever may come. So many friends and relatives have asked why I wanted to go to Afghanistan. "There is a war going on and people are being killed," they would say, with worry in their eyes.



As I sit in the plane, I contemplate that question again, and the same answers come to mind as when I considered this option a year ago. I am going for the challenge, for the adventure, and because I want to help make a difference in a place where the small victories add up to help this sad war-torn country along its journey toward democracy, good governance and – hopefully – peace.

My trip to Afghanistan takes almost 28 hours of flying time and almost 168 hours of waiting. Arriving at our lay-over point in the Persian Gulf region, I am struck by the scarcity of women. As expected, other than the foreigners, women are dressed in burkas and accompanied by men. I had the opportunity to spend one day in the city before flying on to KAF. The city is a mixture of old and new. In the older sections of the city, the streets are very narrow and crowded, and there are hardly any women or girls to be seen. The men seem to travel in groups, and they stare... an inescapable stare. It makes me feel very vulnerable and naked. I'm thinking being covered up by a burka may not be so bad!

The newer part of the city is very different – an incredible contrast from the older areas. The architecture is very modern and beautiful. You almost feel as though you have been transported to the future – or a big mall anywhere in North America! Here again though, are many contrasts, there are women in burkas and others in "western" apparel.

The next day, we fly to KAF on a Hercules. I am totally outfitted with 20 pounds of Personal Protective Equipment. On the Herc, and I am strapped in and stuffed between two very big soldiers. The landscape below is unlike anything I have ever seen. We are flying over desert – there is no green anywhere. It is very foreign to me, and very rugged looking.

After a three-hour flight I am anxious to get off the Herc. Stepping out of the plane at Kandahar Air Field (KAF), I am acutely aware of my surroundings; my first thought is "where have I come to?" It smells different, the heat is oppressive, the air is heavy with dust. Everything is literally covered in dust – buildings, vehicles, the ground, everything! The only colour I see is tan... and various shades of brown. No matter how prepared I thought I was, it is unlike anything I could have imagined. I feel so overwhelmed.

KAF is a miniature city with constant traffic and people moving about 24/7 – I don't think there is ever a lull. As we drive from the Air Field to our quarters, I note the amount of construction work in progress everywhere.

There are Armed Forces from all over the world – so many different uniforms. Together they represent ISAF, the International Security Assistance Forces. Well over 40 countries are represented here, both military and civilian. It is a wonderful and amazing feeling to see so many people from so many countries trying to help the Afghan people.

It takes a while to adjust to everyone in uniform carrying a gun. On my third day we experience a Taliban rocket attack; I don't think you ever adjust to a rocket attack. The building rattled and we stayed put until the 'all clear' was issued. It was surreal. We heard reports that same day that a bomb went off in Kandahar City leaving a nine-meter crater. Also that day, 15 little girls had battery acid thrown at them because they are going to school. My heart cries for them. It brings home the reality of where I am; this is a war zone, terrible things happen here.

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On a tour of the base one day, we drove around the perimeter, and I saw evidence of when the Russians had been in Afghanistan – bombed out barracks and a lot of bombed and discarded equipment laying all over the area. It is slowly being cleaned up. Again the reality of war is evident everywhere.

On another day, I went to the Entry Point Control (EPC); this is where local workers arrive at the base to work. They go through very stringent security checks before they are allowed entry into the camp. I understand the rigid requirements for security of course and, given the situation, I absolutely agree with them.

These men come to KAF to work so they can support and feed their families. I found it hard to look at the way these people are herded into waiting areas, my senses are assaulted with the acrid smell of unwashed bodies stuffed into a holding area and my first feeling is that it seems so inhumane! It must be unbearable on days when the temperature reaches 40 and 50 degrees. The human cost of war is huge. The workers all stare at me as I walk through the EPC, like I am an anomaly. I look straight ahead and keep moving.



Every Saturday the locals set up a market in KAF. All of the stalls are managed by men, and the children that are with them are boys of all ages. No women. At one stall I see two little boys, they are very cute and I ask their father if I can take a picture. I soon learn that Afghan's love to have their picture taken.

A lot of the goods are made locally, carpets, dishes and bowls made from marble, items carved out of wood, beautiful silk scarf's called "phashminas." There are also watches, pirated movies and electronics of questionable quality. I bought a beautiful opal bracelet and managed to barter a good price for it.

I finally am scheduled to leave KAF to go the KPRT. I travel by helicopter, sitting as close as possible to the open door so that I can see the landscape. It was a short but exhilarating ride. We flew close to the ground and the landscape didn't vary – desert on one side, mountains on the other, and Kandahar City below us. Kandahar City is a series of walled compounds for as far as the eye can see. I'm surprised; I didn't expect the City of Kandahar to be so big.

At the KPRT I meet the civilian I will be replacing. He helps me get settled and we discuss the projects I will take over. I have four projects to manage: accommodation for 298 people; an ablution facility; lookout towers; and the installation of 42 ISOs. (ISOs are 6m x 2m pre-fabricated buildings that are used for office space and accommodations.)

I ask him about the relationship between myself and the local workers and he comments that there are some concerns, but he feels it will work itself out.

As the days pass and I meet the Contractors, any misgivings or concerns quickly melt away. They all seem to be willing to meet me half way, and any direction I give them is quickly met. One site rep kept calling me "sir," each time I would correct him and explain that as a woman he could call me Jan or Madame. It was "Madame Sir" for a while, now he calls me Jan. Some of the e-mail I get are pretty comical, they are addressed, "Respected Mam" or "Dear Sir."

At first, when I went to the Accommodation project to do my inspections, a trail of workers would follow me. It was very amusing, I felt like the Pied Piper. I am a definite curiosity to them, most of them have probably never seen a woman on a construction site let alone a woman not wearing a burka.

Abdullah, the Site Rep on the Accommodation building, was very nervous and apprehensive around me at first. After the first week, however, I received an invitation from him to have a cup of Chi Tea. I take this as his acceptance of me – not necessarily as a woman, but as the person responsible for this construction site. It has become a morning ritual and the conversations are always interesting.

Over the course of our conversations he tells me about his family and I ask at what age his children will be going to school. He tells me that his sons will start school at age 8 and that his daughters will not be going to school. I tell him that in Canada it is very important that everyone, both boys and girls, receive an education. He very abruptly states that it is not important for him. I change the topic. I feel sad for his daughter who will grow up without an education and will likely be married by age 13 or 14. Abdullah married at age 17 and his wife was 13. He is now 21 and they have two children. He tells me about his brother who is 25 and has been married since he was 15, and has 6 children and two wives. He also tells me about another man on site, Baba, who is 45 and has four wives, the youngest being 15. I ask Abdullah if he will take a second wife and he laughs and says, "one is enough!"

It is so strange to me, that so little importance is placed on education for women, however, that is the sad reality here. Indeed, looking at pictures taken outside the wire, you would think you are looking at a scene from a movie depicting biblical times. A world caught between the 21st Century and ancient times, struggling like a breeched baby to be born.



It takes about a month for the Afghan contractors to get used to me, but they do. Now, every time I go to the construction sites they wave and smile and say good-morning. I always get a very warm welcome from the supervisor of the Ablution Project. He does not speak a word of English. Everyday he takes my hand in both of his and says good morning in Pashtu. He is always smiling and very gracious. It takes a couple of weeks for the site Engineer to warm up to me, but he does, and we have a very good working relationship. He is very articulate and intelligent. He has travelled outside of Afghanistan; he tells me that he has lived and worked in London, England for 5 years.

I asked him why he came back to Afghanistan, he explains that despite the war and turmoil this is his home and this is where his family is. Ultimately, we are all the same, we want to be close to our families and we want what is best for our children and ourselves.

All in all, my worries about how it was all going to work out and how the local contractors would react to me has been for nothing. Of course I hold the big one over their head, the dollars. I tell them the work has to be done and pass my inspection if they want to get paid. I also have the security of working inside the wire, with armed escorts. This, I am certain, adds to the willingness to cooperate.

Almost a month in KPRT, I am lying on my bed reading a book. I hear gunshots and stop to listen. Then I hear a thunder of gunshot and jump off my bed, it sounds so close, my heart is pounding and my head is spinning. All of a sudden someone orders me to get to a bunker. In my panic I still remember to put on my vest and helmet and as I run out the door to the nearest bunker. I can't believe my heart is pounding so hard, my body and mind are in survival mode and all I can think about is getting to a safe place. I enter the bunker and sit down. I am really scared. We are in the bunker all of five minutes when an officer arrives, telling us all is clear. Apparently there was a wedding in the adjacent community and it is traditional to fire weapons into the air in celebration!!!

All I can think is "holy —, what a thing to do in a war zone!" My heart slows as I return to my room and peel off my gear. It takes awhile to settle, but I finally fall asleep.

What do I miss so far? I miss not being able to hug my granddaughter, having a bubble bath, having a glass of wine and having a toilet near by at night (If I have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night I have to get dressed and walk outside to the washroom). We take so much for granted in Canada; I imagine my list of the simple things we take for granted in Canada will grow the longer I am here.

The hardest part of being here is attending the "Ramp Ceremonies." This is a special ceremony that is done when a soldier is killed. I have attended five ramp ceremonies since I have been here, so many lives gone. It is very difficult; words cannot express the feelings, the sadness, the anger, or the

frustration. The magnitude of these feelings is like a suffocating weight and is felt by all members of the KPRT as they stand at the Ramp ceremony in memory of lives given so selflessly.

The most amazing thing is how the soldiers carry on, they pick up the pieces of their shattered heart and go back outside the wire the next day. It's business as usual. They have an important job to do and they do it.

Canadian soldiers are brave beyond belief, they are here because they believe in what they are doing, they are professionals and excellent at what they do. I have always had a respect for our soldiers and for what they do, but I now have a new found respect for what the Canadian Forces are doing here. We owe all soldiers a huge debt of gratitude for the life of freedom and abundance that we have in Canada. And the work being done here is so important.

This place, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is a lot to take in – I don't think you can really take it all in, it's too much. However you absorb what you emotionally and physically can, and you go on. Each day weaves into the next. The alien surroundings become the norm, and the reality I am living now. It amazes me what the human spirit can adapt to.

There is constant change, new people are coming in, people are leaving to go on their break, people are leaving to go home because their tour is over, and the hardest is, people are dying. The day adjusts to the change. The landscape stays the same. I go on, and pray that the work I am doing, the tiny steps forward, are going to help make a difference. I pray that the future of Afghanistan is filled with peace, progress and prosperity for all of it's citizens both men and women. It will take a long time, perhaps a few generations.

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