

Sunday, January 02, 2011

# The Surobi Sentinel

*The unofficial newsletter of Surobi & Tag Ab Districts of eastern Afghanistan*



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Girl's school in northern Tag Ab,  
story on pg 7

Photo by: Paul

## Paul's random thoughts.

It's hard to believe this time last year I was back home getting ready both mentally and physically for a deployment to either Iraq or Afghanistan. Here I sit a year later wondering where the year went. Since I arrived very little time has been spent with little to do and since I arrived on this small combat outpost, this is the longest I have had the opportunity to sit. We started our journey from FOB Tora to FOB Kutschbach on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December and arrived on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The convoy was extremely cold and long, but I was able to see more of the country-side.



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We spent a few days preparing our equipment and other necessary essentials to wage combat and were afforded the opportunity to celebrate Christmas before our next endeavor would begin. The main topic of discussion of late has been the state of the war as those of us who live it every day see it. Nearly everyone agrees, this is actually “year one” of this now almost 10 year war. I know you're probably shaking your heads and wondering what the heck Paul is talking about, well allow me the opportunity to explain and see if it makes any sense.

This year we had more focus and resources to fight this war. More troops were sent into troubled areas, more funding for development projects is being filtered in and more projects with meaning are being constructed or in the process coming to fruition. Quite honestly, the war in Afghanistan sat on the back burner so to say for too many years while the focus of the previous administration was on Iraq. Now I for one am nowhere close to being a politician, nor do I pretend to understand how politicians think, I'm just a Soldier who goes where he's told and does the job to the best of my ability. But I challenge you to find a soldier who has been here once or twice to say enough was being done before this year.

This area I am now living in has seen some development projects in the past and is slated to begin seeing many more. But as long as this is the “wild west” many of these projects will be on hold. Trust me when I tell you this is as wild an area as you will find in Afghanistan. A foot patrol into the bazaar area is fairly safe, but you wander into the back country and you better have two things; lots of bullets and a sleeping bag, which I found out the hard way is something to have all the time. I carry 10 full magazines at all times, but the sleeping bag was something I didn't think about until my buddy Murphy visited and the plan didn't exactly go as expected.

Enjoy the newsletter and as always, if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions don't hesitate to send them my way. I promise I'll answer them in a somewhat timely manner.

# A little more history of Kapisa Province.

Continuing on with the history lesson this edition, I'll focus on the formation of the Karzai government and issues Kapisa has faced since the fall of the Taliban government.

On 14 November 2001 an interim Government took control of Afghanistan after the Taliban retreated from Kabul. Sayd Ahmad Haqbin was appointed the Governor of Kapisa by interim President Hamid Karzai. Governor Haqbin became involved in a counter narcotics controversy in February 2003. Poppy production in Tag Ab and Nijrab Districts started rising soon after the collapse of the Taliban. In an effort to stem the growth of poppy in an area not traditionally known for its cultivation, the government pushed eradication promising humanitarian assistance to the farmers. After eradication, however, no assistance was forthcoming. Haqbin eventually blamed the lack of funds to pay the farmers to get them through the winter, first on the International community and then on the Karzai regime. Haqbin would again publicly complain about poppy production in Kapisa the following year.<sup>1</sup>

Other more positive activities were transpiring throughout the province. One notable event was the construction of the Gulbahar Bridge spanning the Panjshir River. This project was funded by the Parwan PRT. Additional projects included a women's center and several grade and high schools throughout the province.<sup>2</sup>

Tensions were also brewing between several former mujahedeen and political groups. Jamiat-i-Islami the official name of the Northern Alliance was a predominantly Tajik organization and resided mostly in northern Kapisa. It had splintered after the fall of the Taliban and several armed groups vied for dominance. The south and west of Kapisa were in no better shape. Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin and the Taliban were in a struggle for dominance in Tag Ab and Ala Sai. In Kohband the struggle over leadership within Jamiat-i-Islami soon erupted in gunfire. A blood feud between rival local commanders Asadullah and Gul Nasir would result in 13 of their militias killed in action. The local populace first complained about the violence to Governor Haqbin and then to the Deputy Head of State Hedayat Amin Arsala.<sup>3</sup>

After media reports of the ongoing violence and the inability of the provincial government to stem the tide, Governor Haqbin threatened village representatives who met with the Head of State. He further

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<sup>1</sup> Programs for Cultural & Conflict Studies, [www.nps.edu/programs.ccs](http://www.nps.edu/programs.ccs)

<sup>2</sup> Solomon, Wendy. Building a bridge to Afghanistan's future. (25 Aug 03) The Morning Call, Allentown, PA. Pg 1.

<sup>3</sup> Tarzi, Amin. 13 Killed in Fighting in Kapisa Province. (25 Sep 03) Global Security Inc. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2003/09/33-250903.htm>

went on to ban several of them from participating in the Loya Jirga for the approval of Afghanistan's Constitution denying key constituents in Kapisa a voice in forming a better nation.<sup>4</sup> By the spring of 2004, President Karzai began to see Governor Haqbin as a liability. He soon replaced him with Abdul Satar Murad. Murad seemed like a perfect public servant, he had impeccable qualifications, program management skills and several years in Afghanistan's Foreign Service corps. He was a veteran of the war against the Soviets in the 1980s, later he earned a Master's of Science in Public Administration at Slippery Rock University in the United States. He also held a bachelors degree from Jawaher lal Nehru University in India and a doctorate from Kualalampur University in Malaysia. On top of this he was multilingual, speaking fluent English, Arabic, Urdu and several Afghan dialects. Murad came with a vision for Kapisa, he would attempt to create a more modernized city in Mahmood Raqi that would serve as a catalyst for economic development across Kapisa. His main concern was that most of the youth who were educated in Kapisa, would move to Kabul or other metropolitan areas because of the lack of jobs in the province. His vision was to create a modern Kapisa Center (city) that would attract the most talented individuals and keep their brain power in the province.<sup>5</sup>

His first forays were attempts to improve the lives of women in the province. He partnered with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United States National Committee, the Bagram PRT and USAID to move forward in this area. Soon the province had two Women's Community Centers in operation. One located near the district center in Hesa Aval Kohistan.<sup>6</sup> The other center was in the provincial capital in Mahmood Raqi. Both centers provide activities in literacy, health education and rights-awareness, poultry and hygiene education and legal aid and counseling as well as classes in computer science and tailoring.<sup>7</sup>

Though development was moving forward in the province, many of the disparate ethnic groups felt marginalized especially the Ghilzai who believed the Governor was focusing the projects in areas dominated by Tajiks. This caused an increase in Pashtun support for the Taliban, especially in Tag Ab Valley in late 2005. To meet the increased kinetic activity in Tag Ab due to Taliban influence, the special operations task force conducted offensive operations in the valley sending insurgent fighters fleeing out of the area.<sup>8</sup> I'll continue with more on the history of Kapisa next edition.

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<sup>4</sup> Ankara COI Team. Chronology of Events in Afghanistan, October 2003. (Oct 2003) United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Pg 13.

<sup>5</sup> Fipps, Guy. Kabul Journal. (23 Mar 06) United States State Department, Chapter 11 of his journal

<sup>6</sup> UNIFEM. Kapisa IDP Women's Community Center (Kohistan, Kapisa). (2005) United Nations Development Fund for Women and United States National Committee, <https://www.unifem-usnc.org/womencentersglimpse>

<sup>7</sup> Evans, Tiffany. Female Troops visit women's center. (14 Nov 05) Freedom Watch Magazine, Bagram Afghanistan, Pg 5.

<sup>8</sup> Blatt, Darin, Scott McGleish & Peter Fischer. Taming the Tagab Valley. (Jul-Aug 07) Special Warfare Magazine, Volume 20, Issue 4, Pg 20.

# History of the Taliban:

The Taliban are driven by two competing interests: the desire to re-conquer Afghanistan and the desire to reestablish the caliphate. The first is Pashtun-centric, the second more al Qaeda inspired. The danger of each wing to the Taliban is that the Pashtun-centrists may be amenable to cooption in a new Afghanistan, and that the jihadists with a more global view may be marginalized into criminals and simple terrorists.<sup>9</sup>

Because of these two divergent goals, the means are often similarly disparate. This is precisely what causes the friction in Taliban tactics: is it a terrorist organization, or an insurgent force. Ideally, it is thought, the Taliban would like to perform as an insurgent force, but it lacks the popular support and resources to make that possible. After 2001, a massive reorganization was called for within the Taliban leadership; it had been knocked out of government, was on the run, and not even the local population in the southeast, from whence the Taliban sprung, would support them. A combination of war-weariness, combined with the altogether too recent memories of Taliban brutality prevented the Taliban from achieving any real legitimacy as a popular “movement.” One of the hardships of insurgencies is generally free to make promises that cannot be kept, whereas governments must be seen as good to their word. The Taliban, because it actually has been in power, does not enjoy this advantage as much as other insurgent groups might.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2001, the Taliban has relied a great deal on terrorist tactics. This is ironic, as it was precisely a result of such tactics used by the Taliban’s guest, al Qaeda, that their time in power was ended. Unfortunately, this has encouraged greater cooperation between the Taliban and al Qaeda, and a sharing of tactics. The first recognized suicide bombing in Afghanistan took place on September 9, 2001, wherein disguised al Qaeda operatives killed Ahmad Shah Masood, the “Lion of Panjshir” and leader of the Northern Alliance. This can be viewed as an ipso facto gift from al Qaeda to the Taliban. From then until the Taliban rebound in 2004–2005, suicide attacks remained few in number primarily perpetrated by foreign elements (i.e. Pakistani Punjabis). In recent time, however; the number of suicide attacks has increased exponentially, and their lethality as well.<sup>11</sup>

I’ll continue more on the history of the Taliban next edition. I think it’s important to speak briefly about the Afghan government’s new plan to reintegrate low level Taliban/Insurgent fighters. The program calls for providing literacy as well as job training to try and entice low level fighters back to being responsible members of the Afghan society. I’ll speak more about later in the newsletter.

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<sup>9</sup> Programs for Cultural & Conflict Studies, [www.nps.edu/programs.ccs](http://www.nps.edu/programs.ccs)

<sup>10</sup> *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, U.S. Army & Marine Corps, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007

<sup>11</sup> *Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan (2001-2007)*, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, September 9, 2007

## New neighborhood, same problems:

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This is the view looking to the southeast from the bastion wall. The valley you see is called Bedrou Valley and full of undesireables.

Unfortunately, the French have not ventured very far into this ant hill and I'm not exactly sure why. Well, I do know why but I'll be nice, for now.

Looking due east from the wall is the mountain nicknamed "The Matterhorn." This area is relatively calm so to say and the cluster of building you see in the middle of the picture is the Tag Ab District Center.

The District Government is located here as is the local bazaar. I've been told on Mondays the population swells to nearly 10,000 shoppers. Reminds me of the "First Monday Trade Days" in Canton, TX where anything and everything can be found for the right price.



Looking to the northeast is the lovely Ala Say Valley and huge thorn in the French's side. The major offensive operation I took part in spanning over a 5 day period took place up there. To say the insurgency is dug in like a tick would be an understatement.

Photos by: Paul

The morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> was bitterly cold, especially when you ride in the hatch of a vehicle with no heat. Our mission on this day was to set up a blocking position to allow the ANA to go in and raid some compounds. My mission of course was to find out as much as I could about the area.



Interestingly for me, I found out this little village of 25 families has not one, but two schools, and a clinic to boot. Ironically, the schools and clinic were built in 1999 at the height of the Taliban era and funded by an NGO (Non-government Organization) called Swedish Committee of Afghanistan. Pictured above is the girl's school that to this day has not seen one female student step through its doors. For the past six years it has housed a small contingent of ANP (Afghan National Police) and as you can see by the pock marks from rockets and small-arms, it's a huge target

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teacher from the school a permanent fixture or the break in school. He

there all the time." As you can see this school too is a huge target with the majority of the windows

Directly across the street from the "girl's school" the boy's school sits. Currently, it's winter break for the boys and they will not return until March.

If you notice the sandbags on top of the school, it's because this too is used as a police station. I spoke with a and asked if the police are are they there only during told me, "Oh no, they are

blown out. Call me crazy and call my cooky, but if having the police there is going to bring added danger to the students, how about moving them. I know, I know that makes too much sense and we can't have someone with common sense making rash decisions like that.

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Another major disappointment in this area is the fact this clinic is standing empty, why? Well, according to the locals another clinic was built by the UAE (United Arab Emirates) in the district center,

about 2 kilometers away. Now I'm sure many of you think 2 kilometers may not seem very far, but anything outside of your compound walls is dangerous and having to walk that far, since most do not have vehicles here, is too far.

While we were in this area a small boy came to us and asked for medical attention, claiming he had a headache. Well, the French don't keep medics with them like the US forces, but someone did have some aspirin for him. I quickly remembered my team in '05 and how often we would go into a village and have dozens of people come ask for aspirin or eye drops. "Hey Afghan Government, here's a clinic, how about providing a doc and a staff, the people need it open and deserve to have it open!"

With thirteen rooms, this clinic has so much potential let alone it has not been targeted due to the lack of rocket or bullet strikes on the exterior walls. With the amount of money that has been spent in this country, it's clear due diligence was not been done. Obviously, in ten years we haven't learned much about providing villages with projects that will be utilized for its intended purpose.

I recently read a report where a village nearby has been approved for a girls school and construction will begin soon. I literally screamed, "NO!" when I read this. I was looked at like I had a third eye and when someone asked what my problem was, I explained the Afghans in this area do not let their girls go to school, so why are we spending thousands of dollars on something that will sit vacant. The answer was, "Because it shows we care." Wow, thanks tax-payer.



Just like in Surobi and southern Tag Ab, the ever present threat of flash flooding is a major concern in this area.

Flood retaining walls are one of the hot ticket items requested, especially by the villages who border the streams that are more prone to flooding.

It's hard to explain that no amount of walls or structures can be built to stop the flow

Photos by: Paul

of water once it's in a flood stage. What I really want to tell them is their building techniques are flawed and for a wall to be built to withstand constant flooding would one, require a lot of money and two, engineers from Europe who specialize in such flood control measures. Neither of which will be available until security is more stable.



As you can see this flood plain is so wide, I think it would take years to study the flood patterns and then come up with a plan that would help these villages. I know they want a quick fix, but again due diligence has to be done so the project would not be thrown together and then destroyed at the onset of the next flood. I know, there I go again with logic.

# Why I miss Iraq:

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There are certain pictures I go through from time to time and just can't help but wonder, how are these kids today? This little girl was in a village we frequented at least once a week when we moved up to central Iraq.

To this day I'm still not sure why we even went to this village. We had no projects there, but the place was so friendly and I know we ended up employing several of the men to work on our little base-camp. There was only one way in and one way out and every time we traveled down this road, you better believe if the kids were lined up along the road on our way in, they were there to greet us on the way out.

I'm sure everyone on the team was not as enthused as I was to stop and chat with the kids, or hand out Beanie Babies and food items. But I thought it was important to show not only the kids, but the adults we were not there just to run up and down the road. Even as a police officer I can't stand to drive around for an entire shift and not get

out and speak with people, one on one. When you get out and stop and talk with people, it shows you care. Over a period of time people become comfortable and then start providing information. I truly feel talking and spending time with people is a lost art.

These three shepherds were always either with their flock when we drove by or standing along the road when we came back by.

I'm pretty sure with the amount of Beanie Babies we handed out along this road; every kid had a complete set by the time we left, or pretty close to it.



Photo by: Paul

## A good day for me:

The final day of the operation ran nice and smooth, albeit long and cold. Although there was a group of knuckleheads less than a kilometer from us and word was they were waiting for us in the next village, we all came out on the good side of the fight. Thank goodness for heavy artillery and close air support.

Somehow the company we were supposed to be assigned to for this day never hooked up with us, so we fell in on a French advisory team supporting an ANA (Afghan National Army) company. I was pleasantly surprised to see these guys did not resemble the ragtag units in southern Tag Ab. These guys all had helmets and for the most part, US weapons. However, some carried RPGs.

Of course what dismounted patrol would be complete without walking through these darn “murder alleys.” I’m usually calm and collected, until we start walking down these narrow alleyways. Without knowing who or what is on the other side, I always become very tense.

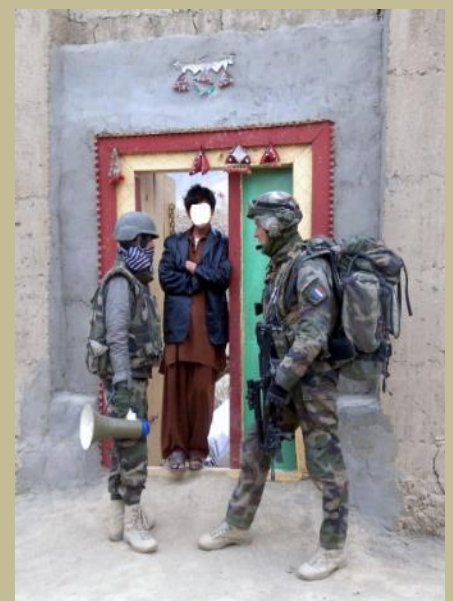
We’ve had grenades tossed over them before by unseen assailants, and luckily screaming and running in the opposite direction like a little girl is acceptable behavior.

Thankfully, nothing like that happened on this patrol, but the hair still stands on end until we’re out of these things.

This is Julian acting crazy and if you notice the person in front of him with the bullhorn, that’s our interpreter. Yep, the bullhorn was my idea from the last operation thank you

very much. It came in handy during this day as well.

Since I’m new to the neighborhood so to say, I found the operation very beneficial to me. Not only was I able to get a feel for the lay of the land, but I soon realized there is a lot of fight left in the Taliban/insurgents here. This part of Kapisa Province has been the epicenter of the insurgency in this area since 2005. Many operations have been conducted here with mixed results. Much of what I’m writing about will be addressed more in-depth in upcoming newsletters. What I find interesting is reading the history of this area and the walking the same ground that has seen so much conflict, and even fighting in some of the same areas.





Much of the day was spent traversing through this area slow and methodical. For one, we knew bad guys were waiting for us and two, as you can see, the land was not exactly ideal for rapid travel.

Again, this is the type of place that just drives me crazy with anticipation of something bad happening. I truly understand how the Troopers in Europe felt fighting in the hedgerows of France.

However, these places are more difficult due to the concrete like consistency of the walls and the ever present canals. Amazingly, no one fell in and it's a good thing too considering the temperature was in the 20s.

Photos by: Paul

Again, a huge part of our job is interacting with the population in a more positive manner. As I mentioned earlier, talking and listening to people is an art that is quickly dying off. Effective communication is both talking and listening and when you have to rely on an interpreter, the difficulty is multiplied, especially if he's young and in this case, Tajik. It's amazing to me how people here can pick up where you're from and what ethnicity you are by talking to you or looking at you. "Jon" is a good kid and very smart so his ability to get people to talk benefits us greatly. We spent nearly an hour in this village and the people became comfortable enough to tell us insurgents had been in the area days earlier and buried some munitions inside of a tree. Yes that's right, I said a tree.





Photos by: Paul

They also said the insurgents come from a neighboring village about 2 kilometers away. You know they were absolutely correct because the survivors from our little skirmish admitted to being from there.

Of course we wouldn't be able to corroborate their story until later. But again, these villagers were comfortable enough to talk to us and provide valuable information.

Are we making progress in this little area, I would like to think so. But like many from the different villages we visited told us, and something I wrote about a couple of newsletters ago, once we leave the insurgents will be back in

force, ticked off and looking for retribution. We are trying something new and it seems to be working effectively enough that they are constantly attacked.

What I'm talking about is RMTs (Road Maintenance Teams). These teams are basically villagers fed up with the Taliban/insurgents in their area. They've taken up arms and maintain check points along various roads in the area. Very much like their Iraqi counterparts called the "Sons of Iraq," these guys are battle hardened and are not afraid to pursue their attackers and finish them off so to say. At a distance they look like an armed group of insurgents, but these guys wear



an identifiable piece of clothing easily seen even at night. Are they effective? These guys are in constant contact with the bad guys. And by contact I mean fire-fights. If these RMTs can manage to pacify an area where they live, that's a huge victory for not only them, but this concept could possibly be used as a model for other troubled spots throughout Afghanistan.



In the final village we visited, I couldn't help but notice the little groups of children huddled together. I of course, was the "oddball" wearing a totally different uniform than my French and even ANA counterparts.



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Of course I had to be slick with how I took pictures considering the little girls everywhere. But I manage to shoot several pictures without getting caught. The video is much better as the three girls you see here actually giggled and acted shy when I took off my helmet and smiled at them.

## Final words:



Photo by: Julian

There you have it, the end of another newsletter. I'm in this area for a few more weeks and possibly once I come back from R&R in February, quite possibly could become a permanent fixture.

There is one constant in Afghanistan, uncertainty. The French group I'm working with is not as receptive to me being here and so here I sit for my third day. The two man PRT team told me to get used to sitting around because since they got here nearly 11 weeks ago, they have been outside the wire 10 times.

That my friends is unsat and I will not sit here for weeks on end with nothing to do. I know it's hard for some to come to terms with that there is actually a war going on and there are bad things happening. But when US officers tie the hands of Soldiers out of fear of losing someone, then a serious evaluation needs to be

done. Are we here to win this damn thing or not? As General Patton so eloquently stated, "Nobody ever defended anything successfully, there is only attack and attack and attack some more."

For those not aware, my lovely wife is currently deployed to southern Iraq and has already realized how wonderful it is to be supported by so many of you back home. Thank you for showing the same hospitality and support to her as you have to me over these many years.

Until next time, Take Care & Thanks for the Continued Support of the Troops,

Paul