

# Afghanistan—

## Lessons in Situational Awareness from a S.A.P. deployed in the Civilian Surge

### BOOK Two of Five

#### Getting There



From stiletto heels to combat boots... it's all about keeping one's balance.  
[I probably could have used Photoshop to get rid of the prominent  
veins, but that would make my story much less believable, wouldn't it?]

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## Part 1 – Pre-Deployment Training

### **Civilian Expeditionary Workforce – AFPAK Hands**

I am one of the few US Government civilian employees deploying as part of the Department of Defense's "Civilian Surge" in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Within this small group, I am one of the few *women* deploying. It occurred to me that precious few Americans even know there is a civilian surge, and that fewer still know anything about the challenges and opportunities for the women of this select cohort.

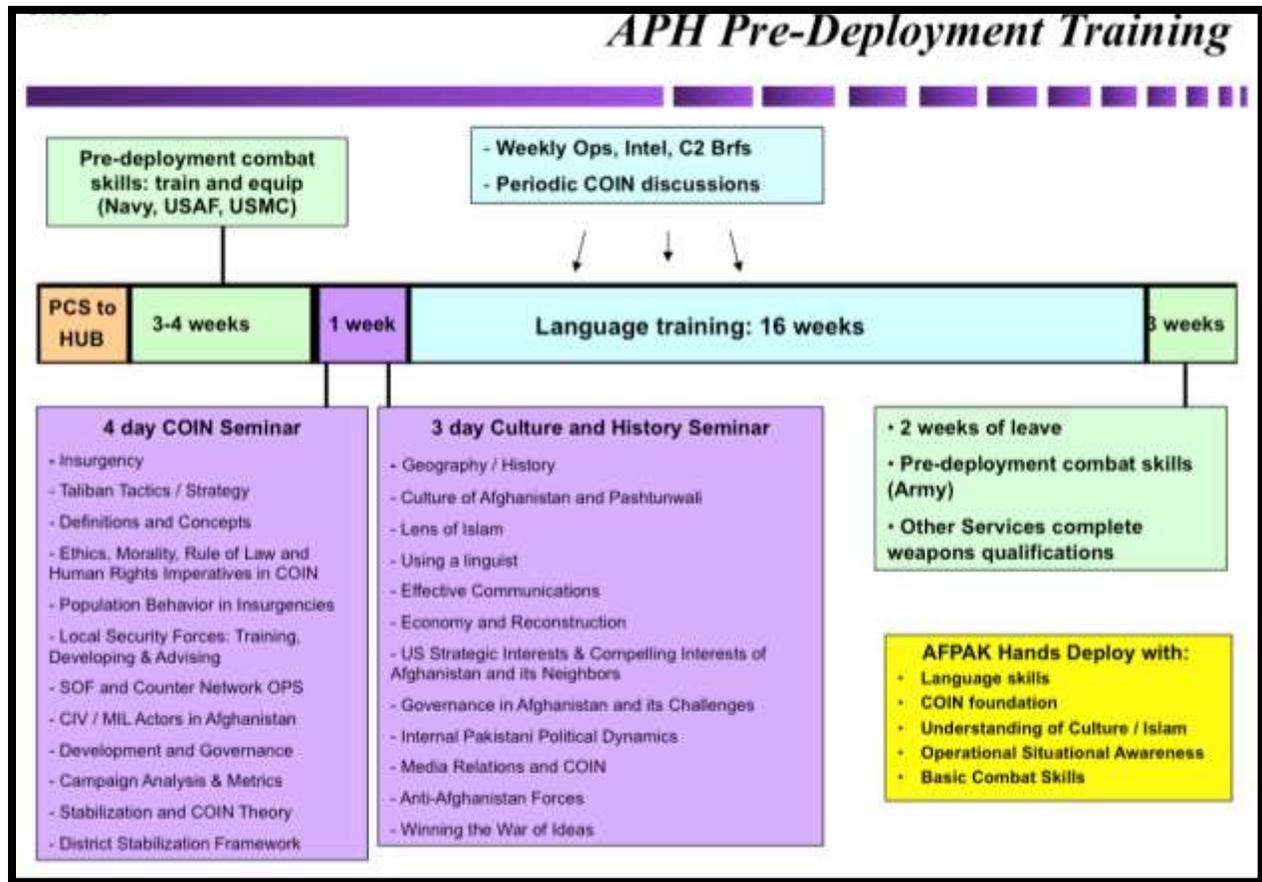


Figure 1: AFPAK Hand Training Schedule, Spring 2011

Suffice it to say, the AFPAK Hand culture and language training was intense. The schedule (Figure 1) was relentless. The cultural information was interesting, but hardest to imagine in current settings. Most of the foundational literature on the Afghans was written well before the people had suffered through almost 30 years of war. Jim and I debated whether or not there's a society-level scale for PTSD.

The counterinsurgency (COIN) training was not new as a concept because I'd worked with this in my NGA and USACE ERDC positions. However, actually planning to "do" COIN gave it a new twist. Excellent reads and engaging conversation complemented the lectures. I remained confused as to how to "measure" success, but I was not alone. All of NATO was having a difficult time with this.

Language training was the most fun! I already had a background in Latin, Classical Greek, Hindi, Spanish, Italian, and German. I love "breaking the code" of a sentence; I love the mathematical logic of grammar. I love learning how to write in Dari, a language that, like Hindi and Greek, used non-Roman characters. How cool to be learning the Arabic letters! BUT the classes, which met every day for about 6 hours per day, were taught by "native speakers" of Dari and Pashto. Though sweet and pleasant folks, most were not teachers. And like many "native speakers" of English, they were not necessarily well-versed in the grammar structure of their native language.

As a former teacher of Latin and Spanish and student of classical Greek, Hindi, and Italian, I knew many ways to help students such as myself learn a new language. AND I knew that moving full speed ahead every day, with new words and new content and with NO time to review would NOT work well for me. I also knew that after 6 hrs of focused attention in the class and a year-long deployment facing me, my after-school time would be spent doing things with my family, not doing homework! I focused on the words and content that I knew I'd need (information that would help me with the Helmand River water work and words for generally getting around, eating, etc.). I finished the course. Inshallah, I'll have the opportunity to use my words and to understand what others say to me. (I'm very very glad to know that I'll always have an interpreter working with me in the field.)

### **Snapshots of my Pre-Deployment Preparation –a.k.a the S.A.P. Essays**

For most of my 28 years of married life, my husband Jim has lovingly referred to me as his Southern American Princess, a.k.a. his SAP. As you read the snapshots and snippets below, you may detect some of the expectations I have for the way things need to be, as well as a little sense of “entitlement,” which I openly admit to having. These cannot be helped; they are part of my geographic predisposition.

#### **Catching the wave--being a part of the Surge.**

**30JUN2011. Arlington, VA.**

**68°F at 0500.**

As I look around the room in my home that has become my “staging area”--full of chem-lights, 550 cord, khaki-colored 5.11 tactical pants, kick-ass combat boots, and my general issue (G.I.)U.S. Army gear (including a 20 lb. IBA (individual body armor) vest, a 10 lb. helmet, a 3-day assault bag, and a gas mask)-- I ponder what it is that I, a well-educated, 5'5", 105 lb., 54 year old, happily married mother of two 20-somethings, am fixin' to do. BUT, whatever it is that I'm fixin' to do, I'm free to go! (My husband asked me to wait until we had an empty nest before I flew the coop. My youngest son Angus graduated from high school last week.)

Last year, as a relatively new employee of the Department of Defense, I jumped at the chance to sign up to serve as a member of the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce (CEW) and to be part of the DoD civilian surge in Afghanistan. I would be able to bring my experience and expertise as a research geographer and water-resources scientist, as well as my Dari language skills to help the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Government of Afghanistan with water projects in one of the driest, windiest, hottest places on Earth. How thrilling! Now, I'm just 2 weeks away from a year-long deployment to Regional Command Southwest with the Marines who are lovingly known as the “devil dogs.” I'll be based out of Camp Leatherneck in Helmand Province—in the Taliban heartland. Right now I know that I know what I know, and I know that I do not know what I do not know. And I reckon that it's what I don't know that I don't know that I will really wish I would have known in the very near future...

**The Medical Check-out: Getting injected, inspected, detected, neglected...**

**14DEC2010. Pentagon DiLorenzo Clinic.**

**30°F at 0800.**

As part of deployment, I have to get my medical clearance. Never in all my life has my health been so well monitored. I've had my eyes, ears, balance, and breathing checked. I've been vaccinated against Anthrax, Hepatitis A and B, typhoid, and a whole host of other potentially problematic conditions. And I've been inoculated against smallpox—again. (Good God! I thought smallpox had been eradicated! Why another vaccination? I'm not sure that my generation is aware that an inoculation given 50+ years ago has long passed its shelf life! In fact, according to a quick search on Dr. Google, "studies show that the smallpox vaccine is most effective 3-5 years after vaccination." All this time I've been unprotected!) I'm also armed with 400 Doxycycl Hyclate pills to take—one a day-- to prevent malaria. (Lucky for me, the military medics quit giving the once-a-week malaria medicine that was linked to psychotic dreams and suicide.)

Being older means that I have numerous small things that bother me—like the aches in my right shoulder and my left knee. Like that scoliosis I've dealt with since I was 16. I'm determined that these potential issues will not slow me down or burden those watching out for my safety. If it turns out that I'm wrong, I'll be coming home earlier than expected. I realize that there are some blessings that come with age. As an older, more mature woman going into the austere conditions of Regional Command Southwest, I'm grateful that I am post-menopausal.

My main medical concern is my weight. I exercise daily; I eat well; I have no body fat; I am a picky eater. Try as I might, I cannot make myself eat fried fast food—which should not be confused with really good Southern fried chicken or fried green tomatoes. I will not eat any junk food that contains Red Dye #4. They tell me that that when you have on your body armor, and you're inside of an up-armored vehicle in 100<sup>o</sup> heat, you will sweat off about 5 lbs. in an hour-long trip. I'm terrified. I have nothing to lose.

**"This is the Army, Mrs. Jones"**

**06JAN2011. Contingency Operating Base (COB) Panther**

**Muscatatuck, Indiana.**

**15°F at 0500.**

By the time I arrive at COB Panther as a member of the CEW, I am well-schooled in Afghan culture and counterinsurgency doctrine. But I need to learn how to work alongside the uniformed service personnel. Well, this one week at COB Panther is my Army 101 intensive training.

Housing on the COB is set up to simulate conditions in theater. Spartan is the first word that comes to my mind as I walk into my quarters, which is in one of the many former FEMA house trailers on site. (Rumor has it that the trailers come from post-Katrina New Orleans housing projects.) With awe, I stare across the rows of twin extra-long metal bunk beds, each with its clean cloth mattresses suspended on top of metal springs. The trailer is beyond clean; it is disinfected. In fact, the smell of the solvents used to clean the floor is so strong that I shuttered to think of putting my yoga mat down for my usual morning 'down dog' and 'sun salutation'.

Generally speaking, things are going well. The dining facility (now known as the "D-FAC", not the "chow hall" from *Gomer Pyle, USMC*) serves food that is palatable and the National Guard soldiers, who are training to do CEW personal security, are poised and professional. Training to get into and out of helicopters is exhilarating. Training to move with the personal security detail through a mock cityscape is unsettling as we are caught in a staged ambush. The most disconcerting part of training, however, is the up-armored Humvee "roll over" drill. As the simulator flips my vehicle first sideways and then upside down and then over a couple of times, I never really figure out how I'm supposed to pull the gunner out of the gun-mount turret while putting both hands on the roof for stability while yelling "roll over!"

I never figure out a graceful way to pee while wearing my 25 pounds of body armor. I stop myself from thinking about buying a pack of Depends adult diapers...I'm not THAT old. I'll find a way.

### **Vienna Sausage and crackers.**

**25JUN2011.**

**Individual Replacement Deployment Operations,  
Camp Atterbury, Indiana.**

**65°F at 0500.**

I am back in Indiana at Camp Atterbury for a week to complete my pre-deployment training, with only about three weeks to go before I'm due to leave. My days are filled with picking up gear, getting weapons qualified on my M9, and completing reams of paperwork.

As a girl growing up in south Louisiana, I had many wonderful opportunities to explore nature. Some of my fondest memories are of fishing with my great grandmother, Nannie. When we had our cane poles out at False River and were seriously fishing for perch, we would often have lunch of Vienna sausage, crackers, and bright yellow French's mustard. Nannie would have a Budweiser with her sausage and crackers; I'd chase mine with an RC Cola. It has probably been 40 years since I have held a can of Vienna sausage, much less had any to eat. But here's a can of them in my grab-'n-go lunch bag.

I have the metabolism of a humming bird, and I believe I'd enjoy living on arugula, grapevine tomatoes, and feta cheese topped with balsamic vinegar. I am not averse to eating very rare filet mignon or New York strip, as long as the steak comes from cattle raised in a humane

fashion and allowed to graze on grass, not force-fed corn. We'll see how long it takes before I'm wolfing down Vienna sausage with crackers and relishing some of the unknowns in my meals ready-to-eat (MREs) packs.

**The Bullet with my Name on It: Preparing for the worst case.**

**04JUL2011.**

**Arlington, VA**

**87°F at 1145.**

In so many ways, the "worst case" when going into Afghanistan for a year is a relative concept. Not being able to get a pedicure or to get my eyebrows waxed will be a worst case scenario. (I hear that Camp Leatherneck has a barber for the Marines, but I'm not sure he offers a nails/facial special.) Not being able to have a long soaking bath at the end of the day will be a worst case. (Really? No hot baths for a year??) But, of course, there are some serious, no joking worst cases that I could face. Regional Command Southwest is in a *combat zone*. It's a region full of insurgents and blowing sand, a.k.a. 'moon dust' because it is the consistency of talcum powder. (A wind-induced storm of this stuff can stop air traffic and ground convoys.) It's a region where the summer high temperatures are around 120°F in the day. (They say not to worry; there's no humidity, so it feels like 110°.) In a particularly funny episode of the BBC's *Black Adder* series, Private Baldrick has a cunning plan as the war in the trenches rages around him. He writes his name on a bullet and puts the bullet in his pocket. I decide to follow suit. Not wanting to be responsible for the bullet with my own name on it, I have given it to Craig, one of my closest DOD friends. He's keeping it safe for me.

Now I can limit my worrying to getting Leishmaniasis from sand flies, getting silicosis from the inhaling dust during sand storms, getting malaria. I review my military survival training daily to make sure that I remember all of the escape/evasion tactics I've been taught. Here are a few:

- Always be situationally aware (which can be hard for a woman who is known to walk in and out of rooms wondering what it is she's after).
- The mirror in a compact makes an excellent signaling device.
- When scavenging for food, eat the grubs because they are a good source of protein.
- If you are planning to eat a worm, first let it soak for 15 minutes in potable water. (This assumes you have potable water available!?! ) Yum.