

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 2 – Travel to the Dasht-e Margo

Shipping off to Kabul 2011: The World Tour

The Mad Dash

“Not to worry, if anything our departure date will be moved farther out.” At least that was the story on 12JUL. “Prepare for 18JUL departure at 0130.” Fine. This will give me one last weekend in Arlington, Virginia with Jim and our sons Emmett (25 yr. old vet of the U.S. Army 3rd Regiment Infantry--the Old Guard) and Angus (18 yr. old rising freshman at North Virginia Community College). I am at peace.

I go to Harris Teeter Supermarket and buy some expensive, thick New York strips, white sweet corn on the cob, and some yellow squash. I will cook a really big last supper on Saturday, the 16th, and then drive down to Norfolk Naval Air Station with Emmett, Angus, and Jim in the midafternoon on Sunday. At least, this was the plan.

Lesson #1 in the military—Have NO expectations.

I take a day of my annual leave on Wednesday 13JUL. I just want to sit in my chair swing in the yard and leisurely read the Washington Post. For some reason, at 1021 hrs. I happen to check my email. A new “**High Priority**” message was waiting for me, with the subject heading “**FLIGHT INFORMATION – WARNING ORDER.**” My heart stopped and then started racing. I began to shake as I read:

**The departure flight has been changed and will depart on 16JUL at 0120 hrs.
All personnel must report in 4 hours prior to departure (2120 on 15JUL11).**

I talk to myself in times of high stress. “OK- take a breath. Emmett and Angus will still be able to drive you to the airport. All will be OK.” I am fine, like Charlie Crocker in *The Italian Job*-- F- freaked out; I- insecure; N- neurotic; E- emotional.

We live 4 hours from Norfolk in perfect conditions—no traffic, no road construction, no bad weather. Allowing for current road construction in I-95 and for Friday afternoon traffic, we will need to leave Arlington around 1500. Jim works from 1430-2230 on Fridays and will not be able to go with me to the airport. I could cry. I think I do...

Well, crunch. (“Crunch” was what my sainted paternal grandmother would say when things were falling apart around her.) I already bought \$50 dollars’ worth of tickets to the IMAX 3-D 0940 hrs showing of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2* for Friday the 15th. Thank goodness I chose the earliest show time!! *Harry* will run about 2 hrs long, putting us out of the theater around 1130. When will I cook the steaks? When will I finish packing?? When will I have time for that one last pedicure and mustache wax???

Thursday is non-stop errands:

- Get power of attorney notarized so Jim can have access to my bank accounts and can sign documents for me.
- Run to Origins to get a couple more jars of high-priced Youthtopia skin-firming face cream.
- Head to Bed, Bath, and Beyond to buy one more set of Twin X-Long 400 count Egyptian cotton sheets to make sleeping on a 4” single mattress on metal springs more tolerable.
- Go to Ft. Myer Military Clothing to grab some more Thorlo water-wicking socks.
- Put iPhone on “military suspension” for a year.
- Get natural “nerve medicine” from Whole Foods. [For those of you who are not familiar with the Bach Flower Remedies, they are THE BEST natural nerve medicine! I pick up some “Star of Bethlehem” flower essence (that “softens the impact of shock, grief, or fright”), “Rock Rose” flower essence (that “adds courage and presence of mind in the face of terror or extreme fear”) and “Sweet Chestnut” flower essence (that “brings optimism and peace of mind when anguish overwhelms you and you can find no way out”). I also buy some homeopathic cures, just to be on the safe side-- kali phosphoricum (for “tension headache associated with intellectual fatigue”) and ignatia amara (for “grief, trauma, or sleeplessness”).]
- FINISH PACKING and GET ALL GORILLA BOXES READY TO SHIP TO MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP LEATHERNECK, HELMAND PROVINCE.

Around 2200 hrs., I climb into my queen size solid mahogany Henkel Harris four-poster bed with its feather pillow-top mattress and its 600 count Egyptian cotton sheets and its Scandinavian goose down pillows. Jim gets home from work around 2300 and joins me. I can’t sleep—it was all too perfect.

Friday morning 15JUL comes, whether I’m ready or not. At 0700 Jim and I take our golden retriever, Opie, out for one last long walk through our seemingly recession-proof, Norman Rockwell picture perfect neighborhood.

When we get back to the house, I wake the guys, and we head out to the theater. My kids and I have watched each of the *Harry Potter* features on its opening day since *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s*

Stone in 2001! This was the last of the *Harry Potter* films, and I was damned determined to continue our tradition. Half way through the movie, I realize that I was feeling a bit like Professor McGonagall facing the forces of The Dark Lord. Be brave! Face the unknown! It will all work out—it always does. But I am undone by events of the last 48 hours and unsure if my spells and potions will work.

We hurry home as soon as the film ends (without even staying to watch the credits, which is SO unlike us), and I run to the kitchen to start cooking. Sauté the squash with some Vidalia onions, make a green salad, cook the corn, and grill the steaks. It is a mild summer day, and the four of us eat outside on the patio. The yard is spectacular—grass freshly cut; gladiolas, roses, and nasturtiums blooming. I sit in my chair and try to memorize all of the shades of green that surround me. I have no appetite.

When we finish eating our steak-for-brunch, the conversation dies down and it gets too quiet, like the calm before a storm. Jim has to leave for work, and Emmett, Angus, and I need to pack the car and hit the road. It is then that I take off my wedding ring—which I've had on for the past 28 years—and give it to my husband to keep for me. (I am NOT prepared to give it up if accosted by thieves while gallivanting about Central Asia.) Jim replaces it with a thin gold band (that cost us \$35) that we'd bought at the National Pawnbroker on Lee Highway in preparation for this moment. It is the ring I'll wear on my finger until I come back home.

After we carry the dirty dishes to the kitchen, I kiss Jim good-bye, take one last look around the house (mainly so that when queried from afar, I can tell folks where to find the things they're missing), and at 1537 hrs, Emmett and Angus and I drive away.

And we're off. But they can't be serious! 36 Hours before we get to Kuwait? Where did I pack my eye mask?

The four-hour drive to the Norfolk Naval Air Station is uneventful. It's pleasant to drive through the Atlantic coastal plain and to see the sun set over Chesapeake Bay. When we get to the naval air station, we park, and as we're proceeding to the terminal, I notice that the rest of the folks in my unit are all wearing their military uniforms. In the flurry of emails, how did I miss this detail? Before I can check in, I have to unpack my bag to find my desert camouflage uniform (DCU) pants, blouse, and hat, and a tan cotton t-shirt. I'm a wreck in the women's bathroom as I change outfits, throwing my civilian clothes in a corner, putting on my DCU. It reminds me of my community theater days—the rush to change costumes between scenes.

I had been told to prepare for military transport, which meant that we could be flying on anything from a C-130 to a Department of Defense contracted passenger plane. Consequently, I am prepared! The C-130 is a cargo plane, and the temperature in the fuselage is not regulated for creature comfort. At cruising altitude above 30,000' the thousands of pounds of gear take no notice of the drop in temperature. However, I hear from previous human cargo that it can get a bit chilly. I have polar fleece a plenty (jacket, hat, scarf), as well as gloves and thick socks in my handy carry on pack. As luck would have it, I do not need my winter gear. I am assigned to seat 4D, in what would have been 1st class, on a contracted Ryan Airways flight. Not so bad. The 1st class stewardess brings around hot moist towels for those of us in the top dollar seats. I take a hot towel, wipe my face, put on my eye mask, put in my earplugs, and immediately fall asleep.

From 0120 on 16JUL until 0800 on 18JUL, we fly, stop, fly some more, stop some more. No joke. We go from Norfolk to Bangor, Maine, then to Iceland, then to Liepsiz, Germany, then to Qatar, and finally to Kuwait. One of our group suggests that we design a "tour t-shirt". We could list all of our stops on the back.

All in all, it wasn't so bad. In-flight movies played non-stop, and we were offered meals, juice, tea, coffee, and water continuously--AT NO CHARGE!

By the time we land in Kuwait, I am numb. The stewardess announces the local time, but not the day. Somewhere over Eastern Europe, I believe I've lost a day. I am dazed and confused, and the fun is just beginning.



7/16/11

From: Emmett Moloney

To: me

Angus and I are home, walked in the door about 5 minutes ago.

Love



7/16/11

From: Karen

To: me

Hey. Jeannie. Love you. Take care and keep a journal that we can read when we are 90. Love you!

--

7/16/11

From: me

To: Karen

Will do!! Just landed in Qatar on way to Kuwait. 88 degrees at 4am

The view of the sand dunes out the window was WILD

Sent from my iPod



7/17/11

From: Doreen

To me, Jim, Joan, Alto, Emmett, Angus, James, Heather, Elizabeth, Karen, Paul

Hey Jean,

I am sure you will be writing a book when you get back, and I can't wait to read it.
Remember, those big soldier guys are there to protect you, not the other way around.
Safe travels.
Love Doreen

To Jim and the guys,

I know you are all smart and strong. Stick together and if there is anything I can do here in NY, please don't hesitate to ask!
Love
Doreen

Transition into Theater

17JUL2011

Ali Al Salem Air Base, Kuwait, 1530 hrs

29°20'48"N 47°31'15"E

Temperature 48° C (~118°F)

Our mobilization is in a holding pattern as we wait in Kuwait for transport to Kabul. We're all a little tired and groggy after the flight that wouldn't end, but we're maintaining. (I'm sure a triage nurse would classify our entire group as "walking wounded.") As soon as our feet hit the ground, we're directed to load a bus that will take us from Kuwait International Airport to Ali Al Salem, the Kuwaiti Air Base. But because we are directed to the *wrong* bus, it takes over 3 hours to reach a destination that is just 23 miles from where we landed. [N.B.: Who are 'we'? I deployed as part of an "AF PAK Hands" Joint Command unit comprised of 13 folks. It's me, along with one Navy Captain who is the officer in charge of our group, one other Department of Defense government employee on temporary duty assignment to Afghanistan, one other female who is an Army captain, five Army officers and four Air Force officers of various ranks (I am horrible at remembering ranks!), and one "temp" civilian employee of the DoD who has his Master's Degree in anthropology and who was part of a Human Terrain Team in Iraq in 2009.]

Lord, have mercy-- IT IS SO HOT and DUSTY! As we travel down the highway, I'm struck by the absence of color and the absence of distinguishable features in the landscape. Granted, I'm not able to see very much because blue curtains, which we were instructed to keep closed, cover the passenger windows of the bus. Defying instruction, from time to time I do peep from behind the curtain next to me. From the highway, the Arabian Desert looks strikingly different from the Mojave or the Sonoran deserts that I know well. No jumping cholla or saguaro cacti are silhouetted against the horizon. No Joshua trees, no creosote or jojoba bushes or any familiar desert vegetation to be seen. Just an expanse of gray and tan sand stretching as far as the eye can see, accented only by blowing trash that seems to be EVERYWHERE. I'm sure that vehicles—such as armored battle tanks from that first Gulf War and Caterpillar trucks and equipment used for development/construction projects—busted up any naturally occurring desert pavement in the region, releasing fine grain

particles into the atmosphere every time the wind blows, which it does, non-stop. (As you'll notice when reading, every now and again the geography professor in me throws in her two cents!)

Exiting the bus (finally!), it looks like I'm fixin' to walk into fog. The dust hangs in the air, and I can't tell where the land ends and the sky begins. I had this same sensation when I was on a boat on the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Belize, not able to find the horizon that separated the blue water from the blue sky. But here at Ali Al Salem the only colors I see are shades of tan and gray. Well, that's not entirely true. The sign for the military convenience store—the post exchange (PX)—and signs for the concession shops run by locals are painted in red, white, and blue. And the "golden arches" of the camp's McDonalds are, indeed, golden against the tan summer sky.

Rank has its privileges. At Ali Al Salem, a deployed U.S. Government civil servant at the pay grade of GS 14 or GS 15 who is awaiting transport is housed in "DV" (distinguished visitor) "transient tent" quarters. Lucky me! I get a wooden frame single bed (not a metal bunk), a nightstand, and a lockable wardrobe in my DV tent. The tent houses a maximum of 10 women of similar rank (O-5 and O-6 in military terms—i.e., Lieutenant Colonels, Colonels, Captains, and Commanders), all waiting transport from Kuwait to somewhere. A few of my roommates are headed home on leave. A few are headed into theater. And they move in and out of the tent at all hours of the day and night.

Rules for transient tent lodging:

- *Wear an eye mask and ear plugs when you are trying to sleep.* Lights will go on and off at any time in the 24 clock cycle.
- *Keep food in eating areas and out of the tent.* This helps keep rats and their natural predator, that is to say snakes, out of the sleeping areas.
- *Shake out your shoes and clothes before dressing each day. Shake out your sleeping bag before hitting the sack.* Roger that! According to a flyer on the Armed Forces Pest Management Board, critters to look out for in Kuwait include death stalker scorpion, golden desert scorpion, desert horned viper, blunt-nosed viper, Persian horned viper, and the desert cobra. They all seem to like nice dark places to relax...

19JUL2011

Kuwait International Airport, 1730 hrs

29°14'15"N 47°58'26"E

Temperature 52° C (~126° F)

I've never been hotter in my entire life than I am today. (I'm hotter than I was on the summer day when Angus and I were canning bread and butter pickles in Greenville, North Carolina and it was 99°F with 80% humidity, and I refused to turn on the air conditioner because we could open the windows and use our ceiling fans!) At least there's no humidity in Kuwait—so 120° feels like 110°.

What a chore it is to walk up the loading ramp and into the military transport jet while wearing my full desert camo uniform, combat boots, IBA (individual body armor 20 lbs.), helmet (10lbs), 25 lb. assault pack (a.k.a. "bug out bag"), carrying my ~1 lb. computer carry bag.

Lesson #2 in the Military: HYDRATE OR DIE.

The temperature on the tarmac at takeoff was 52°C.
(Convert: $52 \times 1.8 + 32 = \sim 125.6^\circ \text{F}$!)

I consume an entire case of bottled water in 3 hrs. Thank goodness the C17, unlike the C130, has a toilet on board! (I'm well aware that the water I've consumed has to go somewhere—an intake / output equation, of sorts, and I've still not figured out how to pee while wearing all this gear.)

When the C17 enters Afghan airspace, its white cabin lights turn off and red ones turn on, letting us know that we are officially in the combat zone! I pull a Bach flower remedy from my bug out bag, not sure if it will hurt me to just drink (rather than take 4 drops in a cup of water!) the bottle of nerve potion. What'll it be? the Star of Bethlehem ("softens the impact of shock, grief, or fright") or Rock Rose ("adds courage and presence of mind in the face of terror or extreme fear")?

The flight takes 3.5 hours. As we get off the plane in Kabul, my first impression of Afghanistan is the smell of burning tires.

20JUL2011

Kabul International Airport (KAIA), 1100 hrs

34°34'00"N 69°12'32"E

Temperature: 32°C (~90° F)

"Kabul International Airport (KAIA) belongs to the MoT (Ministry of Transportation), which operates KAIA. It is supported by the Troop Contributing Nations (TCNs). COM KAIA (Command KAIA), under the command of COM ISAF (Commander International Security Assistance Force), operates the military component of KAIA, assists the Afghan authorities in operating KAIA"

(source: *GlobalSecurity.org*)

As fate would have it, I get to spend 2 nights in the female barracks at Kabul International Airport waiting for transport to the military base that would be home for the next three weeks. No Distinguished Visitor quarters here. My M*A*S*H-like transient tent is outfitted with an "air tube" that blows freezing cold air inside 24/7. (Cannot believe the number of Carrier air conditioning units I've seen here!) The tent contains two-dozen plywood bunk bed frames supporting lumpy, scarlet and gold brocade mattresses that look like they are hand-me-downs from a brothel. (Hum... I wonder if anyone who sleeps here worries about bed-bugs!) There are no nightstands, no lockers, no ladders. In the tent, there is no segregation by rank. I grab a top bunk—to be farther away from any of the critters that I suspect are on the local Armed Forces Pest Management Board—and fall asleep around 0230. I have to be up at 0630 to hit the DFAC before our 0800 briefing!

Kabul, Day 1—As I stumble out of the tent the next morning, my first glimpse of Afghanistan reminds me of Colorado. I can see the vague outline of high mountains surrounding KAIA, but unfortunately, the air pollution is so thick, a clear view is impossible. The pollution here is far worse than Denver's worst brown cloud day. (Earlier today I meet a British soldier who's stationed at KAIA. He said that today is the first day he's seen the mountains in three weeks!)

The air is thick for many reasons:

- (1) About 5 million people now live in the Kabul metro area, which has the infrastructure to support 300,000. Many are driving cars and riding buses that billow exhaust.
- (2) A substantial part of the particulate cloud in Kabul's air is dried-up fecal matter billowing out of the city's ditches and open sewage drains—a consequence of having a city of 5 million people with limited sewage treatment or public works.
- (3) There are countless generators all around the city and around airport that constantly belch out smoke. Obviously no emissions controls are in place. (And there are no NOISE ordinances! Planes, generators, and MRAPs (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles) are going non-stop. It's so loud!)

It's impossible for me to let myself take a full, deep breath. I want to wrap my face in my scarf.

Tomorrow a convoy will take me and my unit to Camp Julien—12 miles from Kabul—where we will have 21 days of language and counterinsurgency training. We'll be transported in a contraption called a Rhino. When I ask what a Rhino is, one of the Air Force officers in my unit tells me that it's the Army's armored Winnebago. I can't help thinking of *Space Balls* when Lone Star is out to rescue the Druish Princess.

As things stand, I'm scheduled to fly out on a helicopter to Helmand Province in mid-August.

Note:

I saw my first woman wearing a burka on the drive through Kabul City to Camp Julien. I'm pinching my cheeks! This seems like a dream...

23JUL2011

Camp Julien, 0430 hrs.

Temp: ~78; 6800' elevation

ALERT STATUS: AMBER

Clearer day yet. Can see the mountains.

The only sounds are the call to prayer and the twittering of a few birds. Otherwise it's quiet.

The base is on "amber" alert because it is right next to an Afghan National Army base/training area. Generally speaking, amber alert means security is heightened due to possible insurgent infiltrators. Amber alert for soldiers means to have a full magazine in your gun but no bullet in the chamber.

The camp's security guards are Nepalese Gurkha, known for being an integral part of the British army. Though I haven't seen any of their famous 18" khukuri knives, I'd bet that they have them on hand.

My unit has to get oriented to rules and regulations at Camp Julien before we begin our scheduled classes. Here are a few of the general directives and points to ponder that we are given:

- Keep in mind the 1% chance that one of the guys in the DFAC or at the guard station could be a suicide bomber. You are considered a prime 'soft target'. Only go out in groups. Keep a full magazine in your weapon; chamber empty. Regardless of where you go, have your weapon with you. Keep a full magazine in your gun; maintain AMBER. [N.B.: I have authorization to have a 9mm weapon, but it and the bullets for my mazines have yet to be issued.]
- If you hear a voice over the loudspeaker saying "Defend, Defend, Defend" and you are in a building--your barracks, for instance--then you are to activate the chem lite (taped to the inside door frame), toss it in front of the entry/exit door to indicate that the building is secure, close the door, put on your body armor, and hunker down. (Body armor should always be within arm's reach.
- If you hear a voice over the loudspeaker saying "Bunker, bunker, bunker," then, no joke, GET TO THE BUNKER. The warning means that the camp has taken some indirect fire, but it is not actively being attacked. (However.... There's that 1%. Hum...)
- Remember, remember, remember the biggest threat on this base is suicide bomber. Base is relatively open with "easy access." Be vigilant!
- Everyone should have at least one tourniquet and a pressure bandage with them at all times. Include a few tampons (of various "flow" capacities") in your first aid kit. If you get shot, the tampon will fit in the hole, absorb blood, expand, and help stop the bleeding. (When told that soldiers now carry tampons, at first I figured that this was a modern addition to the 'nylons and chocolate' package.)
- STAY ON THE MARKED ROADS/PATHS. There may yet be some Soviet-era landmines around the camp. (On that note, I forgot to mention what I needed to do with the second pair of dog tags I ordered. The common practice is to lace a dog tag (which has your name, SSN, and blood type stamped on it) through the laces of each boot. If your foot or leg gets blown off, or is otherwise separated from you, the soldiers, Marines, or medics will be able to ID your severed piece if it is found.)

OK-I get it.

As one of the two women in our specialized unit, I have further restrictions.

- NO walking alone beyond the security gate. Period.
- We all wear civilian clothes. For a woman this means loose fitting pants, baggy blouse, and shawl/head scarf.
- Cover but do not conceal your weapon. I can either wear my M9 on my belt or put it in my purse! (Too bad I didn't pack a purse; just brought my assault bag.)
- When walking to/from the dining facility (DFAC), go with at least one male. Last week an Afghan man sexually molested a female soldier.

Setting up my quarters, I elect to use the top bunk for sleeping and the bottom one for storage because the top bunk mattress is better. (Better than *what* remains to be seen.) Every night for four nights I crawl like Spider Man up and down the metal supports of the frame to get to and from the toilet at 0300 (which happens like clockwork). On the fourth night, as my right foot dangles into thin air while I try to find the floor below, it occurs to me that I do not need to be living this way. I'm 54 years old with a Ph.D., and surely I can figure out an alternative! Then I get the "ah ha." I move the top mattress to the bottom bunk. (How many days has it taken for me to figure this out?? It isn't even an *Odyssey of the Mind*, Division I problem!)
Not one night since my epiphany have I needed to get up to make my way to the female latrine.

Before I left Arlington, VA, I went shopping at REI and spent a small fortune on creature comfort camping items. Among the items I purchased are a goose down camping pillow (which I absolutely love!) and a Therm-a-Rest ProLite Plus sleeping pad. The 66" long, semi-rectangular pad does a beautiful job of adding a buffer layer between the lumpy mattress and me. (It worked wonders when I was stuck sleeping on the lumpy bed at the airport.) It is designed, however, to use under a "mummy" style sleeping bag, so there is little to no room for other than flat-on-my-back snoozing.

Now that I'm set up on the lower bunk, I sleep fine as long as I lie flat on my back with my arms crossed over my chest like Lilly Munster. If I had a flower to hold, the comparison with Lilly Munster wouldn't be far off! (I may not have a flower to hold in my hand as I doze off, but I do have a lavender scented eye pillow that I use. It provides close to the same *dead-and-loving-it* look.)

I miss my bed. :(

Home is where the heart is

Excerpts from emails sent home



7/21/11

From Jim

To: me

Hi Sweetie,

Thanks for the photos. Please keep sending as many as you can. It really puts things into some sort of cosmic reality for me. I'm sending you a caption and you send me the photo: "110 pounds of woman + 90 pounds of gear + One Tough 200 pound Fightin' Machine."

Be safe. I love you.

Jim

--

LJ Palmer-Moloney 7/22/11

To: Jim

It was sweet to know that some of my laundry is still cycling through the system! Makes me feel more connected to you all. Hey, I hear it might be hot in Missouri for the reunion. Make sure everyone stays hydrated! (Being in the Army has taught me this much...)

Will be posting more pictures tonight.

While here, I'll see if I can stage the photo that goes with your caption. You make me smile!

I LOVE YOU, and I miss you!!!!

(When we Skype on Sunday, I'll need you to take the computer upstairs to our room so that I can see our wonderful, soft, roomy bed. I'm dealing, but it does feel like I'm in a M*A*S*H episode.)

Jeannie

--



From: Laura Jean Palmer-Moloney

Date: July 22, 2011 7:36:26 AM EDT

To: Joan_Betsy, Heather

Subject: **decked out for 1st meeting with Afghans_ does this scarf go with my army boots?**

On Fri, Jul 22, 2011 at 12:29 PM

Elizabeth wrote:

I'm really not sure what adjective would go best with this picture as a caption. I can't decide if your expression is alluring, shit eating, or ironic. All in all you are SLAYING me Jean. How does the head covering affect your experience of the heat? It must be insufferable. At least you grew up on the bayou right? Encountered any Vienna sausages yet?

BB

--



From: LJ Palmer-Moloney 7/23/11

To: Elizabeth

Betsy-- Attached is a first draft of the next section of my SAP Deployment narrative. Thought you might get a laugh or two.

Give my love to your family! It's actually fun to have some time to write... THERE IS NOTHING ELSE TO DO from

~1900-0500. I canNOT go for a walk, even if I did want to subject myself to the Kabul pollution. NO WOMEN can be out and about on their own WITHOUT AT LEAST ONE MALE FOR EACH FEMALE. And I have to go out with a scarf on my head and with long sleeves and long pants and my combat boots. May as well stay in my quarters and write.

Cheers,
Jean



❖ Elizabeth Bloom 7/24/11

To: me

This is amazing Jean. You captured the bitter sweetness of your leave taking beautifully. It almost made me cry. I still can't believe that you're doing this! Keep writing!!!

Can you get a male escort to take you out just to look around? Even with all the clothes you have to put on you must be dying to look around. Are there people you can connect with? When do you get to go to Leatherneck? Keep me posted, I love living vicariously through your adventure.

Karen 7/27/11

To: me

GREAT photos! Thanks for staying in touch. Remember how we used to have to wear dresses to school? And I used to think that was super restrictive. I would have already been shot if I lived there....

Love you! Karen



24JUL2011

To: ALCON

(Military talk for "All Concerned," meaning "Hey there, all of my close friends and family on the distribution list")

...So far the deployment has been very interesting. ("Interesting" has to be the most useful word in the English dictionary. It covers the spectrum from something horrid to something splendid. I'm using it to be vague and non-committal.)

Today I went on a couple of field trips--a welcome change to the daily grind of classes and briefings! (I need to remind myself how exceptional my position is, in that it allows for and expects me to be involved in travel off base. Remember when my friend Ursula was deployed? She spent 4 months in Kabul and never went "outside the wire.")

The pictures tell a story; allow me to fill in details:

Trip 1. "Queen for the Day" was taken when we were out exploring the ruins of the Queen's Castle (the Tajbeg Palace, built in the 1920s; destroyed during Soviet war in the 1980s and the Afghan civil war in the 1990s).



The Castle is adjacent to Camp Julien and is an easy walk--for the MEN in the group.

For safety/security reasons, women are **STRONGLY** encouraged to venture to the castle **ONLY IF THEY HAVE AT LEAST ONE MALE ESCORT**. The base commander prefers a ratio of three men to one woman. I'm trying to get used to this type of "gender lock-down."

Women (when not in military uniform) are also strongly encouraged to wear long sleeves and to cover their hair when they are out and about. (This picture was taken around noon today; temperature was close to 100-degree F. I would've loved to roll up my sleeves!)



Trip 2. "Kabul Burka and Boots" was taken when we were out in Kabul today for "cultural experience" (shopping/dinner) in the Khair Khana district.

I bought a burka and actually wore it in the bazaar while we shopped. I wondered how one of these would look with combat boots. Now I know. The burka I'm wearing is a new style. Notice that it's front panel is mid-thigh length (though the rest of the garment hangs down to the floor. With this design, it's possible for the women wearing the burka to show off high-fashion outfits they may be wearing underneath. (I'm not sure this is a Taliban approved version!) All kidding aside, since the late 1980s when I first saw a picture of a woman wearing a burka, I've wondered how in the world any woman can MOVE in the tent-like clothing. How could she SEE? I can tell you a few things from my brief experience—

- a) It's very disorienting to have no peripheral vision. And it's dangerous to try to move around in the city. Crossing the street can be deadly because you can't see on-coming traffic. There are no crosswalks or traffic lights in all of Kabul, so forget finding a corner to wait for the "pedestrian crossing" figure to signal "good to go"!
 - b) I found it impossible to wear my glasses under the burka because its "cap" is too tight (and there's really no custom tailoring that comes as part of the purchase). What happens to women who need to wear glasses? (Contacts would be a difficult option in this environment of relentless dust and smog.)
 - c) I lost my depth perception. Not sure if this was caused by the grid in front of my eyes. It was really hard to go up and down stairs.
 - d) All the burkas I saw for sale, including the one I purchased, were made of thick polyester. The fabric does NOT breathe, and the summer temperatures here get pretty darn hot.
- I'll keep the burka in my "bug out bag" just in case I find myself needing to blend in when I'm out and about.
-

Anyway, just wanted to stay in touch with home.

I'm whipped and still have to wait for the clothes dryer to finish its cycle. I keep waiting for an extra hour or so during the day to do my laundry!

Wow, I don't know how I missed the detail that there are NO SCHEDULED DAYS OFF on this year-long TDY (temporary duty assignment)!



25JUL2011

To: Jim

OMG-

Last night I was working with the USACE office to make sure my "Time and Attendance" paperwork was submitted correctly. (It was 1500 hrs (3:00 p.m.) for them and 2330 hrs (11:30) for me!). Well, darn it all, I had to revise one of my reporting sheets. This meant that I had to make the corrections, and then run to the administrative office building on base to get the document printed so that it could be signed, scanned, emailed to me from the base computer, and then returned as an attachment via email to the states.

ANYWAY, I threw on my PT (physical training) shorts and my T-shirt, and my reflective waistband, grabbed my flashlight, and ventured forth. I suppose that my need to make sure I got paid trumped my caution re: wearing full-cover clothes and only moving around with a guy! I had hiked half way to the men's quarters when I remembered that I shouldn't be on the path. Then I realized that this was my first time outside at night at Camp Julien. I almost cried. I could see lights from houses on the hillsides that surround the base. It's been so long since I've seen the sky at night or even city lights! In Kuwait, I could see the moon, but no stars in the night sky because the suspended dust cloud blocked them! At Kabul Airport, the smog/pollution stopped a full-sky view.

Anyway, life is good. Tonight, in the midst of a star-studded sky, I found my buddy Orion. I have a trip out into Kabul tomorrow afternoon/evening.



26JUL2011

To: Betsy, Joan, Heather, Doreen, Karen, Mom

Modest dressing has its down sides.

I want to tuck in my shirt!! The elastic in the waistband of my 5.11 cargo pants digs into the top of my hips.

I didn't bring enough long-sleeved button-up collared shirts. If you have time to stop by Good Will or Salvation Army to grab me a couple, I'd greatly appreciate the help.

Whatever shirt you can send needs to be 100% natural fibers. This is so that IF I'm in a convoy vehicle that catches on fire—because let's say maybe that it hit an IED (improvised explosive device) or maybe just flipped because it's so top heavy—synthetic fabric like spandex and polyester will melt and stick to my skin. Word on the street is to go with 100% cotton, linen, or wool.



27JUL2011

To: Jim

Haven't had a day off (ha!) since I left Virginia, and there's not one showing up on any schedule we've gotten so far.

I'm soooooo tired! Up at 0500, breakfast at 0600, language class at 0730-0930, counterinsurgency training and briefings 1000-1200, 1300-1630 (but we did stop early today), and then language class again 1900-2000. And then there's the walk to chow. Am I really hungry? Every time I go to eat, it's a 1.4-mile round-trip—close to 4.5 miles per day. Do this for seven days, and it amounts to walking around 30 miles in the week over rocky, crappy, ankle-twisting road base to go see what the government contractor kitchen has cooked up! I'm gonna need a new pair of boots before September.

In addition to going to classes, briefings, and eating, I've been writing, downloading and sending pictures, doing laundry, cleaning my room, and trying to relax a little after I come back from language. This puts me in bed usually closer to midnight than my goal of 2230.

Anyway, not complaining, just giving you a head's up that I'm running on sheer adrenaline right now. Have my big trip into Kabul with my "piece" (M9) tomorrow, so I do have to get to bed early tonight! (Will be my first trip out carrying my weapon!) Gotta be able to hold my eyes open if I'm gonna be "ever vigilant."



From: Dave ^{7/28/11}

To: me

Dr. Palmer,

I enjoyed getting your note; thank you for including me. Also, while reading, it took me back to days in Iraq – less the perspective you have as a woman.

Hopefully when you get to Camp Leatherneck your walk to the chow hall will be shortened considerably. That does seem a bit extreme, and in the heat it's a real pain, as you are aware. As you spoke about Burka and boots, glasses, and vision, I was laughing out loud – swear to God (or Allah).

What are you missing in DC: debate in Congress & between the President on raising the debt ceiling – the Afghan government is beginning to look efficient, which is a scary thought. Heat here has been higher than normal, but complaining to you where you are is a bit fruitless. Football strike is over, but unsure if you follow (I don't, I just know they resolved matters).

This point of your deployment is interesting. You are motivated to be there and help, but you are reflecting on the long timeframe ahead of you, the heat, the burka, adjusting to varying timelines and personalities, and everything else that just seems to be getting in the way. You have to remember what you went to do and remain focused. The time may appear to

drag, but the days will very quickly blend together and weeks will turn into months – this I know from experience. Your efforts are very crucial, and you can assist the Marines tremendously.

Stay safe, attempt to stay cool, and maintain a positive attitude.

v/r Dave



28JUL2011

To: Joanie

Around here, the mantra goes: “Focus on Task, Purpose, Mission. Get the job done.”

That said, you may as well forget being a well-tended lady in this environment, but I give it my best shot. There’s precious little opportunity to use body care products or make-up. (You would be a wreck! After all, you, little sister, are much more of a S.A.P. than am I.) I, however, have to learn to deal. Here are a few of my observations and tricks:

There’s a water shortage at the base and in the geographic region. Camp residents are under water restriction orders. Can you imagine? I can run water in the shower for THREE minutes. That’s IT! No pre-shower water running to get the temperature just right. (It takes at least one minute to find out if there will be any hot water!)

There is no way to get wet, soap up, shave, and rinse in three minutes. Maybe five. And pardon me, officer with a crew cut. Are you for real??

The way I deal with this is that I wash my hair about every three days. To stay within the mandated time constraint, I have a trick. I bring an empty 0.5 liter water bottle with me. I fill it and then pour it directly into my hair. This is a “direct hit” compared to the shower, which is more of a “scatter shot.” I can almost wet, wash, and rinse my hair AND shower off in the time allowed...

Thank goodness it’s long enough to put in a bun or ponytail. (I’m so glad I let my bangs grow out!)

I am getting really tired of wearing combat boots. Don’t think I ever realized how often I like to kick off my shoes in the course of a given day! There is no kicking off combat boots. Every evening I have to take out the in-soles, rinse them, and let them air dry. I go through about 2 pair of socks per day!! It’s hot and there is nothing for my feet to do but sweat. I don’t know if I’ll be able to wear heels again!

I’m also getting tired of wearing cargo pants and a long sleeved over shirt every day. When preparing my “modest” wardrobe, I wonder if my pink hair-cover goes with my combat boots? Thank goodness I can “accessorize” with different color shawls. Just might start wearing my PT shorts and short-sleeved T-shirt under that burka I bought! You’ll get a laugh out of this! My female colleague came up with the “Top 10 Reasons to wear a burka”:

- Sleep through a meeting without being noticed (MOST IMPORTANT)
- Easily conceal your M9
- Wear it on those days you’re feeling fat. Much nicer look than sweatpants!
- Cover your “bad hair” on one of those bad hair days.
- Sneak snacks anytime you feel like it in places where food is a “no-go”
- Flip-off anyone you please right in front of them
- Wear whatever the heck you want to underneath!
- Listen to your iPod anytime, anywhere
- Knit in the middle of a boring briefing
- Text on your smart phone. (This works only with those phones that have a keyboard, i.e., BlackBerry)

I might send this list to David Letterman. (Does he still have a program?)

7/29/11

From: Doreen

To: me, Angus, Sharon, Elizabeth, Emmett, Paul, Ian, Heather, James Jim, Joan, Wayne, Karen, Dave

Hi Jean,

I love your first hand perspectives on questions "Western" women ponder. One of the courses in my graduate program is the study of women's narratives from Muslim regions. You are contributing to my material.

I would love to send you some stuff. I need an address.

I am filing all of your correspondence. I wish I was teaching Global History this year. My students will receive your reports one way or another anyway.

Glad that you are keeping your spirits up. What an adventure.

Love you,

Doreen



30JUL2011

To: Betsy

At dinner tonight, I saw a very interesting sign on the USO bulletin board! JOHN STEWART of the Daily Show is going to be in the Kabul area TODAY at 1330!! Wouldn't you know...I'll be within 10 miles of where he's performing, but I cannot go because (1) I don't have a way to get there, and (2) I'm required to be at a briefing.

Jim suggested that I put up a flier on the USO board similar to those found on college campus bulletin boards with my name and phone number to solicit a ride. Doubt I'll do this, but it was a cute idea.



30JUL2011

From: Jim

Subject: Strategy for Your Sanity

Hi Sweetie,

Angus and I will tape up your Gorilla boxes over the weekend and address them. What is the address to ship to? Write out the address in an email for us exactly how you want it on the label including whatever your using for a name these days.

If you can't get in a full 20 minutes in the morning to meditate, try to do a 5 minute "premeditation" before you leave your quarters in the morning. After all, time is relative; you have to look out for you!

Angus went to his new student orientation at NOVA and got his college ID yesterday so all we need to do is get his books for fall semester. Emmett has packed up and is making his way to Colorado.

Have a lovely evening.

I love you,

Jim



To take it all too personally...or not

27AUG2011

Camp Julien, 0340hrs

Temperature 26° C (~79°F)

N. B.: This is the last week of *Ramazán* (also known as *Ramadan*) in the solar year 1390 (~2011 A.D.). According to Wikipedia, *Ramazán* is “the Islamic month of fasting, in which participating Muslims refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sex during daylight hours and is intended to teach Muslims about patience, spirituality, humility and submissiveness to God.”

I made it to Camp Leatherneck (accounts of which are later in this chapter!) just long enough to say I’d been, before I was called back to the Kabul area for a meeting. It’s incredible how GREEN, maybe even LUSH Camp Julien looks to me now after a couple of weeks living on the edge of Helmand Province’s Dasht-e Margo (a phrase that means the “desert of death”).

As I write this, I’m sitting outside at a picnic table wearing my Army issue PT gear--black exercise shorts, orange reflective belt, and gray T-shirt--and my Old Navy issue lime green flip flops. The thinnest sliver of the waning moon hangs in the sky. A breeze is blowing, and I’m actually chilly, which is normal because I usually get chilly anytime the temperature falls below 80°F.

I’ve come with my computer to the one spot at Camp Julien where it’s possible to get a strong, reliable signal for the wireless Internet. At this time of night, few people use the system, and I’m able to download the episode of *Black Adder* that Angus placed on our home “PogoPlug” server. (Between PogoPlug, Skype, email, and DHL delivery service, I can’t say that I’ve felt all that disconnected from family and friends!)

After spending over half an hour saying my prayers to any and all saints, spirits, and angels who might watch over and ensure a wireless connection, I hear the mullah’s call to prayer coming from the mosque at the Afghan National Army base about ½ mile away. The Dari and Pashto translators (all 20-30-year-old Afghan men) who live at Camp Julien begin to mill about outside of their prayer room, which happens to be right in front of that one picnic table on the base that gets good wireless Internet. It’s time for their prayers and time to eat a meal in the wee hours before the sun rises and fasting begins. They walk past me in their long white “man jammies” (*shalwar kameez*) like ghosts in the night.

I get the feeling that they don’t like to see me—a *woman* in PT *shorts*!—sitting so close to where they are gathering, but I don’t believe they understand my predicament. I have precious little time to access this relatively fast wireless Internet before returning to Camp Leatherneck and unreliable connectivity. If I had realized that the devout Muslims would be out and about at this time of day/night, and that they’d need to be out and about in the same spot where I needed to be, I’d have put on my uniform. Inshallah (God willing), only 34 more minutes to go. I mentally ask all the devout who are staring at me to please accept my apologies. I avert my eyes and resume my own prayers, and the “loading” bar continues to show progress.

As I reflect on this awkward encounter and other personal interaction “lessons learned” to date, it’s evident that my observations on human relations deserve some note.

17JUL2011

Camp Julien

Fighting for Space—or “Bitchin’ over Billets”

In the military, the room assignments are known as “billets.” Upon arrival at a base, you take your orders to the “billeting office” to get a room. Best I can tell, this is the way billeting works now in Afghanistan:

- An enlisted soldier/sailor/Marine/airman typically is not housed with an officer.
- People who need accommodations for long periods of time are given quarters in “hard top” facilities—either in a stand-alone “can” or in a building, like a dorm—with concrete floor and hard walls and ceiling. Those who are just passing through get “transit housing,” which is “soft top” (which means they end up with a cot or a bunk bed in a tent).
- Sleeping quarters are assigned based on rank—Colonels and above, as well as GS 14/15s (top of the Government Service step pay-grade) and above (e.g., those who are in what’s known as the civilian Senior Executive Staff--SES) get their own quarters—space available. If they must be bunked with someone, it’s with someone of equal rank.
- A soldier/sailor/Marine/airman/civilian reporting to billeting with a long-term “permanent” assignment trumps a request for housing of a soldier/sailor/Marine/airman/civilian who’s just passing through.
- Quarters vary greatly, from “barracks” with rows of metal or wooded bunk beds that will house a couple dozen bodies, to private rooms with a single twin bed designed as housing for one.
- Selection of other furniture in the room varies, from nothing, to a simple lockable footlocker, to a more elaborate wardrobe or closet and shelving.
- Quarters can be “wet” (with a connected toilet/shower) or “dry” (you get it)

Upon our arrival at Camp Julien, there was no equivalent of the concierge ready to direct a bellhop to take my bags to my room. However, a sweet young Afghan man, employed by the base, tossed my bags into the back of a white Toyota pick-up and took me and the one other woman in my unit (Carmelita, an Army captain) to the building that houses females who are there on permanent assignment. Carmelita and I would be at Camp Julien for close to three weeks, and even though we weren’t *really* permanent residents (I wonder how long must one be assigned here to be considered permanent?), we were offered at least temporary permanent housing (which struck me as a bit of an oxymoron, like jumbo shrimp). The catch was that we would have to give up our single occupancy when/if women deserving full-time permanent quarters arrived. Each of the rooms was equipped with a metal bunk bed, but each room had only one desk, one locker, and one holder for body armor, so it seemed to me that one could dispute how in the world TWO women could share such a space.

Anyway...

It was interesting to watch how the room assignment drama unfolded...

As luck would have it, another woman of captain rank (this one from the Air Force) arrived just after us, and she, also, qualified for temporary permanent housing. HOWEVER there weren’t enough rooms for everyone who *qualified* for a single room to *get* a single room. Squabbling began when it became evident that each of the captains believed she should have the room occupied by Carmelita. How does the saying go? Possession is 90% of ownership? Turns out that the Army Captain Carmelita was “captain, Promotable” and had been an officer longer than her Air Force sister. Because space was tight, the very unhappy Air Force captain was ordered (with no chance for debate or discussion, mind you!) to share a room with a Sergeant Major (E-8) in our building or to take a bunk in the 24-woman barracks. I was a little concerned that the captain who lost out on the room was disgruntled and now double-bunked just down the hall from me with a loaded pistol and a loaded rifle at her disposal. No one else seemed to think twice about it.

As the senior ranking woman in the housing unit, I had my own room. I breathed a sigh of relief, and made sure my body armor was within arm's reach.

17JUL-08AUG2011

Camp Julien

Kaka knows best? Accepting Unsolicited Advice

In both the Dari and Pashto languages of Afghanistan, "kaka" means the paternal uncle, a term used to describe a child's father's brother. It is also used as a general, honorific term to address an older man who is not a blood relative. Robert (Bob) is the oldest person in my deployed unit; he's 63. He's also the senior ranking civilian in the group. This is his third deployment to Afghanistan, and he's headed for a position in the "head shed" at ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) headquarters in Kabul. I'm not sure how it started, but it didn't take long before everyone at Camp Julien was calling Robert as "Kaka Bob." For the better part of three weeks we got to have him hover over us. He made sure that we all knew the great and wonderful things he had done and all the important work he had been called back to Afghanistan to do. Unbeknownst to him, after the first week or so in country, the novelty of his advice-giving and self-absorbed non-stop dialogue wore off. By the time we left Camp Julien, many of my colleagues would smile and greet the elder statesman while mentally substituting the Spanish meaning of "kaka" in his title.

;))

In his well-intentioned way, Kaka Bob reached out to help each of us better understand how he saw our strengths and weaknesses. Before he and I left Camp Julien to go to our different duty assignments, Kaka Bob took me aside to give the following words of wisdom:

- *In Afghanistan it's age before beauty.* Being 54 and having some wrinkles and gray hair will get me far. Funny to think that my wrinkling neck skin might be an asset.
- *Dress modestly and try to look androgynous.* It's hard to be anything but a western woman trying to be polite, but I'll give it my best shot.
- *Afghans are impressed by titles. Insist on being introduced as "Dr. Laura" or "Dr. Palmer-Moloney."* Not a problem. In fact, just as Robert became "Kaka Bob," I was soon "Dr. Laura." I'd have to make sure I was not taken to be a medical doctor or a "Dr. Ruth."
- *Women with guns make Afghan men uneasy. Cover (not to be confused with conceal!) the M9 when out and about.* I believe women with guns make men nervous in general. In many ways I don't think I'll mind it if the Afghan men I'm in meetings with are a little uncomfortable because they know that I'm "packin' heat."
- *Smile more and appear nice and accepting and polite.* This is an interesting bit of advice. I find it hard to smile while I'm trying not to make eye contact. And believe me, I don't have a good poker face. There are sooooo many things I have a hard time swallowing, much less accepting! Many aspects of "Afghan" social norms (such as "Flower boy" Thursdays and treatment of women) and "Afghan good enough" capacity I find hard to handle. My tactic might well be to avert eyes and sit quietly...
- *Pace yourself—it's a marathon, not a sprint.* I'm sure I'll be my own worst enemy as far as this goes. The Marines and Coalition forces do NOT take a break. I hear they all work 14-16 hour

days, 7 days a week. I need to know when to stop work for the day. Once I get set up, I'll need to define my own battle rhythm.

- *Take the rest and recuperation (R&R) leave you earn.* For every 60 days I work, I get a 10 day leave for R&R. As my qualifying date approaches, I realize I'm anxious to get home. I miss cooking. And I miss sitting in the chair swing with my husband in the back yard, drinking a good cup of coffee while reading the *Washington Post*. I miss grass and flowers and trees and clouds. I miss my bathroom and my BATHTUB. And I miss my family and friends. But the temptation to just stay and get my work done is a real temptation. I've never felt more productive in my life. The troop draw-down is imminent, and this is probably going to be the only time I'm positioned in the field with Coalition forces.

31JUL2011

Near Massud Circle

Kabul City

"Well, don't mind us!" Determining right-of-way in a city of 3-5 million without one traffic light

Taking it personally? In the States, if someone cuts you off in traffic, you might decide to take it personally. Road rage could result. It becomes a "you" vs. "me" confrontation. I've lived in the Washington DC area for the past three years, and the traffic in the nation's capital makes any other traffic memories I have pale in comparison. BUT the traffic in DC is well-ordered and the drivers are expected to follow the law and obey traffic signs that help control potential chaos OR THERE ARE CONSEQUENCES. Tickets can and will be issued, penalties will be assessed and paid, cost of insurance could go up, etc. etc.

"Two-way Traffic." "Merge." "Detour." "Stop here on Red." "Road Closed." "Pedestrian Crossing."

Kabul is different. In this city that has grown exponentially and has had millions of international donor dollars invested in it over the past decade, there's not one traffic light. And there are thousands of vehicles trying to move from Point A to Point B the city streets. There appears to be no speed limit and no absolute directional flow of traffic on any road. Emissions controls are conspicuous in their absence. Buses and trucks and generators belch noxious fumes at will. And Kabul streets are crowded. From what I've seen, businesses and residences are built to within inches of the thoroughfares. No zoning ordinances or required frontage setback. There are no cross-walks used by pedestrians, and few, if any, sidewalks, and it's not unusual for a person or a donkey to be hit and killed in the street, run over by a car, a truck, or an ISAF tactical vehicle (i.e. MRAP or Humvee).

On the day before the start of the Muslim holy period of Rhamazan, my group was ordered to travel from Camp Julien to the New Kabul Compound in the center of Kabul to attend a daylong meeting. All of us had to attend, so we split up and loaded into 4 different armored SUVs for the trip. Because of higher than normal threat level (it being the day before the religious time of fasting), we traveled at "amber" alert status with full magazines loaded in our weapons.

Travel to the meeting was uneventful. The streets were full of buses, donkeys, humans pulling carts, pedestrians darting to and fro, beggars, women in burkas pulling their children, and kids running up to our SUV begging for bottled water. (We passed one car filled with guys in the front seat, a goat and a burka-clad woman in the back seat, and four kids sitting inside the open trunk facing out at on-coming

traffic.) Vehicles on the roadways in Kabul move as fast as conditions allow; the closer we got to the center of the city and the New Kabul Compound the slower traffic moved. But we did arrive, and the meetings took place (which is not always a given).

As we prepared to return to Camp Julien, a Corporal who was part of the ISAF drive team announced that the air conditioning was out in one of the three SUVs. The temperature was near 100 F, and the bulletproof glass windows of the SUVs do not roll down (a security measure). The soldier recommended that the three women who needed to get back to Julien (capt Carmelita (Army), Lieutenant Colonel Jodi (Air Force) and I) ride in one of the SUVs that had working air. Now all three of us are strong women and could have held up in the heat while wearing our 20 lbs of body armor and 10 lb helmets. We could have been more “liberated” and declined the special treatment as a sign of solidarity with our male brothers in arms. However, Gloria Steinem, be damned! We jumped at the chance for the air-conditioned ride, as did one of the interpreters. So we pile into the backseat, and off we go--Carmelita behind the driver, Jodi in the middle, and me behind the senior military guy who was both convoy leader and the head of our “personal security” detail.

As our vehicle meandered through the city, we navigated roads that were PACKED with people (90% of whom were men and children—conspicuous absence of women) who were shopping and eating and drinking in preparation for the month of fasting. We were in Massud circle moving about 2 miles per hour when we were hit by a little white 4-door sedan that was also moving about 2 miles per hour. It hit on my side. Traffic stopped (which didn't take much). One lone Afghan National Police officer managed to get to the scene. He held up a 10” diameter STOP sign and a blinking red light as he stood by the wreck, now in the middle of dozens of honking cars. In the moment before the accident, I had been thinking that I'd rather be shot than to have to wear my helmet another minute. I took that thought back rather quickly.

Our driver, a young man from Loudon County, VA (DC metro area) knew protocol. He sat tight, watchful, ready to respond as ordered. The convoy leader, an older (30 something) officer from Brooklyn (New York City) called one of the other SUVs in the convoy for back-up, and four soldiers with their “long guns” (M4s) got over to where we were to pull security. The convoy leader and the interpreter got out of the SUV to gather information about the damage done to the sedan. (There was no damage done to the up-armored SUV.) I found myself wondering how the military exchanges insurance information when in a wreck with a civilian...then I stopped myself. What was I thinking!?

As our guys with their long guns secured the vehicle, the police officer and convoy leader/interpreter and the driver of the car discussed what had happened. (I was not sure what there was to discuss, but the sedan had lost a bumper, so repair to his car—even though he was at fault!—seemed to be the issue. A report was written and pictures were taken. During this time, Carmelita, Jodi, and I are in the back seat. We've been told to have pistols at “ready” and to be scanning our respective sectors for security threats. Get the vision—here we are: an African American/Puerto Rican 30-something Army captain “diva” with medium length black hair pulled back in a bun, wearing very pink lipstick and her Army issue green “multi-cam” (uniform); Polish American 30 something Air Force Lt COL/PhD, with broad shoulders, blonde hair, blue eyes, strong jawline, and fair skin, wearing in her airman's battle uniform and a “don't mess with me” look, and me, a “Heinz 57” DOD Civilian/PhD 50-something wearing my tan Desert Storm hand-me-downs with gray digital camo body armor and a cock-eyed helmet that didn't even have a cloth cover.

We had our M9s with full magazines drawn but out of sight. I spied a man on the second floor balcony of the adjacent apartment building speaking into a walkie-talkie. I reported as directed. Noted. Also, a

large crowd of Afghan men in their *shalwar kameez* gathered at the scene. WHAT IN THE WORLD DOES A SECURITY THREAT LOOK LIKE??? None of these guys look very happy to see us. I put on a very serious face and moved my eyes as I do when scanning for approaching planes in the cockpit of a Cessna. Thank goodness nothing happened. It took almost 2 hours to get back to Camp Julien, but we made it.

What occurred: All traffic was moving less than 5 mph. Our SUV was in the round-about, when a white no-name 4 door passenger car hit our drivers side (by my door) and managed to get its bumper up under the rear wheel well of our SUV. Its driver was trying to enter the round-about and may have done this on purpose. As soon as the SUV pulled forward, the car's bumper was torqued and pulled away from the frame. The ANP (Afghan National Police) officer and the car's owner finished pulling the damaged bumper off the car, and then the owner demanded cash for repairs. Our NYC convoy leader filed his report.

[The tension between the locals and the Coalition Forces is palpable. It's a love/hate, sweet/sour relationship. They (most of the Afghans) want the international forces here for security, but it seems like that want to have their cake and eat it, too...]

OMG-When we got back to our barracks, we were starving! The three of us shed our IBAs and helmets. I combed out the French braid I'd worn (hair styles that work well with helmets are few!) and put my hair into a ponytail. As we were hiking up to the dining facility to eat, it occurred to me that Carmelita, Jodi, and I--in our respective uniforms, walking side by side with pistols on our hips—were the coalition forces equivalent of Charlie's Angels ;)

Don't worry. We've got your back.

Parting shots before leaving Kabul area for Helmand Province

Camp Julien

05AUG2011

Afghan culture workshop

BIG Lesson here—No surprise, but really, we're not in Kansas anymore.

As part of my training at Camp Julien, I was required to attend classes on Afghan culture. During a break, after our class on Islam as it is practiced in Afghanistan, I chatted with a Navy nurse who had come to join us for the day. In 15 minutes, she gave me the highlights of the state of things from her perspective. "We've got more problems here than figuring out who gets to pray where in the mosque."

She is in the eighth month of a twelve-month deployment and is working as a nurse in the surgery unit of the main hospital in Kabul. In general, public health care is poor. People get kidney stones from not having enough water to drink or possibly from drinking water that has a high concentration of salt and minerals. Both situations are common in Afghanistan. If a middle or low-income person in Afghanistan gets a kidney stone, the solution for him or her is not flying away to Dubai for expensive laser surgery. The accepted medical procedure is to cut out the kidney. Hum. What happens to the poor unfortunate who happens to get a second kidney stone?

Very often children are brought to the hospital with second and third degree burns on the palms of their hands. Most often a parent or guardian inflicted the burn, considered by some to be an appropriate punishment. Putting gasoline on the child's hands and setting them on fire is supposed to teach the child a lesson for her/his wrongdoing.

However, the stories she told me about care for women were the most stunning:

- There is no anesthesia for women patients in the hospital. If there is anesthesia to be had, men get first dibs. Last week she worked in surgery for a woman who was undergoing a C-section. There was no anesthesia to give to the mother; she was held down and cut from hip to hip. Her newborn baby girl was taken out, plopped on a table, and disregarded by the attending physician—an Afghan male doctor. The nurse interceded and had the doctor return to tend to the baby. When she saw the mom and newborn baby later on, the mom begged her to take the child. The mom soon died of “childbirth complications.” The nurse didn't know what had become of the baby girl.
- Because of the limited anesthesia, when women are brought to the hospital for amputations, and there is no way to kill their pain. A woman is restrained while the procedure is performed.

According to the nurse, HIV-Aids is the hidden but potentially the most detrimental condition facing the country. In Afghanistan in many of the ethnic groups it is culturally appropriate and expected for a woman to be kept from view and separated from men other than those in her immediate family. Because women are “protected”, it is common for a man to have a “flower boy.” I'd heard that “Flower Boy Thursday” (remember, Friday is the holy day) is a common practice in many communities. Though homosexuality is not uncommon, I get the feeling that it is not spoken of openly—especially in front of me. On top of homosexuality practiced by some, there is needle sharing for drug use that can spread HIV AIDS. This is yet another in the litany of issues that are seen by many but addressed by few.

In a country with so much that needs attention, where DO you begin? Can my work and my being here make a difference?

Well, enough of this “heavy lifting” for now.

06AUG2011

Camp Julien Firing Range

Close quarters drill

It usually surprises people when they realize that I'm a fairly skilled marksman. I may not be Annie Oakley with my Glock 19, but the formal training I had out at Blackwater's (U.S. Training Center) Moyok, NC facility—2 different summers, shooting ~3700 rounds total—paid off.

(For the past couple of years, my sons have given me the perfect stocking stuffer. They know you can always please mom at Christmas with a box of bullets.)

Tactical Pistol and Total focus:

A day at the firing range, shooting outside in rural in North Carolina, is very meditative for me. There are no phone calls, no email to check or send, no mind wandering through "if/then" scenarios...It's a mentally "be here now" space for me.

- Be aware of the *target*.
- Once target is identified, focus on the pistol's *sites*, and have a sense of *situational awareness* (check for others, look for cover, decide shooting position—prone? Standing? From primary or secondary side? From behind a barricade?)
- Just go with the flow...Respond to "THREAT":
 - Draw to "high ready"
 - Determine the target
 - Decide response-- (standing, kneeling, prone?? Cover/no cover?) Get the site picture. Take slack out of the trigger. Take a breath...take the shot.

Practical Tactical Pistol Lessons Learned...that apply to shooting and to life off the range, as well (so interpret these in the literal and figurative sense):

--Remember to do tactical reloads when the situation allows. *It's always better to set yourself with ammo BEFORE a critical time.*

--Remember to try to fix a misfire with "tap, rack" when the gun fails to shoot. *Don't just drop a magazine.* You could be losing a lot of shots that you'll need later!

--When you're moving and shooting, *you can still do damage*, though your precision will be off.

--Adjust your set time as distance to the target changes. *The closer you are to a target, the less time that's required for you to take a shot that will hit.*

--Know your target and its response to your weapon/ammo, if possible. Avoid splash-back! *Don't get hit by your own bullet!*

Before we go our separate ways, there was a need to make sure that everyone in my unit had some training in close quarters fighting. As my son, the former Army Infantry soldier, can attest, active duty guys and gals in the U.S. military (with the exception of those in Special Forces) get little training with their pistols.

On our training day, because our group is an odd number, I'm paired up with one of the instructors—a Brit. We are "spot on" for the warm-up exercise (25 yards, shoot within a 10" target). Others in my group scatter their shots all over their 4' x 5' paper targets.

After we warm up, very basic, second-hand office furniture (folding chairs, folding tables, a couple of file cabinets) is set up on the range. We're taught to shoot at a target about 7 feet away from a seated position—literally drawing and shooting from the hip. We practice to shoot under and over a table from a seated position, to move from seated position to kneeling then shooting. Accuracy is NOT the issue. You're close. There's a threat. You do not need to set your sites. Just aim in the general direction and shoot.

In order for us to be more "in the moment" of a potentially lethal situation, the instructor decides that we need to move back about 50 yards from our firing area, then run up to the firing line (to the furniture) and then shoot. He has us run in place and do jumping jacks to get our heart rates up and

our adrenalin going. After 2 minutes of running and jumping, he decides that we need to “drop” and give him 10. (This means to do 10 push-ups.) Everyone drops then and there, in the heat and gravel, and follow his order. Everyone, that is, except me.

Let me be clear on a couple of points:

(1) I am a DOD civilian deployed with the uniformed services. *I do not engage my weapon in an offensive fight. I only use it in self-defense.*

(2) I am a S.A.P. *I do not do push-ups on the rocky dusty ground, thank you very much.*

(To be honest, I wouldn't/couldn't do 10 push-ups on a mat in an air-conditioned gym!)

I smile, disregard his instructions, and continue to run in place.

07AUG2011

1700 hrs

Camp Julien—Last night before move to Camp Leatherneck

As is common at many of the military bases in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kuwait, a small number of shops and stands run by local nationals (in this case Afghans) are allowed on the facility. At Camp Julien, we have a small bazaar area with a number of shops: one for electronics and bootleg movies (coming from China, I'm told), another for knick-knack souvenirs (mainly from India and Pakistan), one selling gems (of questionable authenticity), and one selling carpets. There's also one Afghan restaurant selling traditional Afghan food and chai (tea). The restaurant is an eatery option if you don't want to make the walk up the hill to eat OR if you want to sit and linger and have a “normal” meal.

It's the first week of Rhamazan, and the Afghan-owned/operated restaurant on the base closes at sunset--~1900 hrs. (It is hard to imagine fasting (from food and drink) during the day, while cooking and serving food and watching customers eat and drink.) Tonight is the last night that Jodi, Carmelita, and I have together, so we declare that it's Ladies Night Out. We get dressed up in civilian clothes and head out to the bazaar's restaurant for kebabs. (Unlike eating at the base's dining facility, we'll have to pay in cash to eat at the restaurant; most dinners are ~\$10.)

Dinner out with the girls is a hoot. There's a lot of re-living our Charlie's Angels adventure in Kabul. We laugh about Kaka Bob's unending advice, and about the room assignment debacle. We order beef and lamb skewers served with rice/raisins/carrots. We drink lots of green tea (chai) and eat baklava for dessert. We're the ONLY customers in the restaurant tonight, and we're *women*—with no male escorts! We realize that we are probably making the Afghan men who are waiting on us uneasy.

A dust storm blows in as the restaurant closes; the faithful go off to their evening prayers and to break the day's fasting and the three of us walk back to our billets.

Three week ago, as I was leaving Kabul airport, I received instructions to contact the British booking clerk by phone once I was ready to fly to Helmand. For security reasons, all travel has to be handled by way of classified phone or email. As I'm preparing to leave Camp Julien to fly to Camp Leatherneck, I learn, much to my dismay, that at Camp Julien, there *is no* ISAF Secret-level phone. AND I can't use secure Internet because my secure email is not yet established because I've not

gotten to my official duty station yet! The First SGT at the base takes pity on me; I'm at the point of tears and he doesn't seem too comfortable with just watching me get there! He logs into his Secret level email and files my travel request.

Camp Egger's *Inshallah Airlines Flight Scheduling*, with the byline "*An unreliable flight schedule to get you where you don't want to go*", is the on-line site that coordinates flights into and out of Kabul. The SGT assures me "No worries, Ma'am." He shows me the on-line manifest that contains my name, last four digits of social security number, and blood type.

Tomorrow I'll get a ride to KAIA airport and will fly to southwestern Afghanistan from there. The flight should leave around 2100 and it'll take about 90 minutes to get to my final destination. I'm so glad that I took pictures of how Emmett packed my bug-out bag! I can do this!! I'm so nervous...

Before going to bed, I check the DHL shipment's tracking on-line. HURRAH! My trunks reached Camp Leatherneck YESTERDAY—a TWO DAY turn-around from Arlington, VA to Helmand Province, AF! (All 4 Gorilla boxes were mailed on 04AUG and arrived on 06!) I cannot WAIT to get to my things and to set up my new living space.

I take some of my Bach "Star of Bethlehem" flower essence potion, which "softens the impact of shock, grief, or fright," put my head on my REI travel-style feather pillow, and place my lavender aromatherapy eye-pack on my eyes. As I drift off to sleep I'm thinking--as so eloquently put by Miss Scarlet in *Gone with the Wind* --**tomorrow IS another day!**

08AUG2011

Camp Leatherneck

Helmand Province

2230 hrs.

89°F

"Don't worry, ma'am. The II MEF C-9 Gunny who's on drive duty will be waiting at the PAX to take you to your can."

When I hang up the receiver on the Secure telephone in the Marine headquarters at Kabul Airport (KAIA), I'm unsure of 90% of what the Master Gunnery Sergeant just told me. But as I wait to board the aircraft for Helmand Province, I am sure of one thing: *The Marines are taking care of me.* I will be picked up when my aircraft lands. I have a room, and my Gorilla Boxes will be waiting for me in that room.

The "Thumper 18," my C130 transport aircraft, will take 1 hour and 20 minutes to fly from Kabul to Camp Bastion, the UK sister camp next to U.S. Marine-led Camp Leatherneck. Scheduled departure: 2100 hrs.

My imagination's running wild. It's fear of the unknown that gets me every time.

Other than the time when I was 20 years old and had to wait a couple of days in Miami International Airport for my cheap charter flight to Spain (back in the days when someone would *watch* your things for you while you popped off to the bathroom rather than report you to Transportation Security Authority for trying to abandon luggage that might possibly be a bomb), this was the longest time I'd ever spent in an airport terminal waiting to get to where I wanted to go. 26 ½ hours. Carmelita and I got to KAIA yesterday around 1630, and we got to spend another night in the female "Transit Tent" housing. This morning we muscled our bags to the departure holding area by the terminal building, and she and I had a little time to visit before her flight left at 1100 for eastern Afghanistan. It was another eight hours before I would be allowed to check my bags or to enter the boarding area, so I had to settle into a holding pattern.

My Gorilla Boxes were in Helmand Province, so I didn't have to try to move them—thank goodness. BUT I still had to deal with:

- 70 lb. mobility duffle bag (OK—I admit, it has wheels, so I may be stretching the truth to call it a "duffle") filled with all of my slacks, blouses, t-shirts, 2 desert camo uniforms, boots, and underwear.
- 25 lb. "bug out" backpack (a.k.a. my "assault bag") holding change of clothes (5.11 slacks, Thorlo water-wicking socks, Victoria's Secret high-hip cut underwear and a bra, two white cotton handkerchiefs, Army-tan T-shirt, and a long-sleeved button-up blouse that provided an equivalent of SPF15 sunblock protection), 1 Cheese Tortellini MRE (meal ready-to-eat), summer-weight Army issue sleeping bag (in bright orange stuff sack), ThermaRest blow-up mattress (in light purple stuff sack), cotton/silk blend sleeping bag "sheet" (in navy blue stuff sack), toiletries (3 ounce bottles of shampoo, cream rinse, and olive oil (for dry skin!), toothpaste, floss, toothbrush, and tongue scraper), lime-green Old Navy issue shower shoes, medical supplies (including but not limited to 2 one-handed configuration combat application tourniquets, one pack of Quick Clot combat gauze, one 14-gauge Angiocath needle (to perform percutaneous transtracheal jet ventilation (PTJV) and restore gas exchange), one Asherman Chest Seal (to put over a sucking chest wound), three tampons (to plug bullet holes), a tube of Neosporin, one 2-ounce bottle of iodine, and 3 Looney Tunes Band-Aids with pictures of Daffy Duck), snack food (peanut butter, nuts, raisins, and Jack Link's Original Beef Jerky), Sure-Fire flashlight, PLB (personal locator beacon—Army issued type of GPS to use if you need to be evacuated or found!), Bach flower essence potions, and Camel-back filled with 1.5 liters of water.
- 15 lb. "carry on" day bag filled with "Apples" (my MacBook Pro laptop (in its pink neoprene dust-proof case), personal iPhone (in its pink and black dust-proof Otter case)), my work-issued basic black BlackBerry (in its basic black case), wireless keyboard (in its pink neoprene dust-proof case), my Kindle, 2 Army-issue green journals for note-taking, and my knitting
- ~30 lbs. of GEAR (helmet, plate carrier (body armor).

KAIA transit lodging offers the traveler a "soft cover" over head (that is to say, the opportunity to sleep in a tent), a bunk bed with a mattress (no sheets, no blanket, no pillow), and conditioned air. [N.B.: I've heard that Department of State folks traveling in theater are not allowed to stay in places that do not offer "hard cover" lodging. Where do THEY sleep when they're stuck at KAIA??] The tent has no lockers for securing gear while waiting for transportation, and it is the responsibility of each traveler to keep up with her/his bags and other cargo. The standard "no bags may not be left unattended" policy applies; all unattended bags are considered a threat and are destroyed if picked

up by security. So here's the situation: bags, cargo, etc. cannot be secured in the tent quarters and cannot be left unattended on sidewalks or around the terminal building or anywhere. The traveler is left having either to sit with or to walk around with her/his bags, gear, boxes, and such, which may be right up there with the labors of Hercules unless the traveler is Shiva or can hire a Sherpa or is able to rent a pack burro or camel.

For departing travelers, there are three "luggage racks" (staging platforms) in an open-air holding area on the east side of the terminal building into which luggage, etc. can be placed. Each platform is about 50' x 5' and has a 4 foot opening between it and the rack above or below. Along the lower edge of each platform is hefty 70-grade transport chain. An excessive number of signs are posted warning those leaving bags on the racks that they (the bags) will probably be stolen unless they (the bags) are secured to the chain. The traveler can secure bags and such IF he/she happens to have a locking system with a shackle large enough to encompass both what's being secured plus the hefty 70-grade chain. However, based on my initial survey of the situation, most soldiers, Marines, sailors, airmen, and civilians didn't bother to lock down their belongings. Bags were stacked five deep; flak jackets and helmets were tossed on top.

Coalition forces from Belgium, Estonia, and Canada were waiting in the staging area when I got there. Some sat at the available picnic tables playing cards and talking. Others sat on benches listening to iPods and doing Sudoku puzzles. Some slept on the ground, with caps pulled over their eyes as they laid on pillows made from bags that they hadn't tossed on the luggage rack.

I stood on the periphery of this scene, wearing my uniform (the Desert Storm camo), which I'm required by orders to wear when I travel using military transport. I had one pad lock with a shackle big enough to fit through a gym locker but not a 70-grade chain. And I had a lot of stuff. I placed my things on the bottom rack at the far end, closest to the back of the complex, so that I could set up my guard post on a bench next to the wall. I was held there by golden handcuffs, so to speak. If I wanted to be sure that my things were safe, I had to lock them in place, but I didn't have enough locks. I could leave the big stuff and not be too un-done if I had to replace clothes or first aide supplies, but what about my carry-on bag full of the technology that I needed so that I could stay connected to home? I couldn't, I WOULDN'T let anything happen to it.

My resolve to stay anchored to my bags and gear felt right for the first couple of hours. Then I started to get hungry and realized that I could not go to the dining facility (DFAC) with any of my packs. (Standard military policy—NO BAGS IN THE DFAC. No discussion.) If something happened to my technology, I would be cut off from family and friends. I would lose all of my pictures and writing. After a quick cost-benefit analysis, I decided that the security of my computers and phones trumped my need to eat. OH, but then I remembered that I had a stash of food in my bug-out bag--Clif bars, cashews, Trader Joe's fruit leather. And thanks to the military's "HYDRATE OR DIE" order, pallets of bottled water lined the staging area. I had access to as many bottles of water as I needed. I had my knitting and my Kindle. [Did I mention my knitting yet? Emmett warned of the amount of "hurry up and wait" down time to expect with military transport. To have something to do rather than pace or stare into space, I brought knitting needles and what I imaged would be enough yarn to make it until I was home for my first R&R.]

Two hours passed. I needed to pee. Urghhh. What to do?! Then, like a mirage, two men from my deployed unit appeared. They, too, were at KAIA awaiting transport. Bless their hearts! They sat with my things for an hour. This gave me the chance to go to the bathroom, get a sandwich and a cup of tea, and to go by the ATM and get \$200 US dollars, and to stop at a shop in the KAIA bazaar. Ho Joan, the woman who runs the “traditional” ladies clothes shop, helped me pick out the perfect cotton blouses--one blue and one purple. When she learned where I was going and about the work I hoped to be doing, she called me her sister and gave me a matching shawl to complete my ensemble.

By late afternoon, I had settled into being at the airport, but was getting anxious to go! My fear of the unknown had subsided—maybe thanks to the Bach flower essence potion that I used all day long; maybe thanks to the reassurance I got from travelers who were familiar with Camp Leatherneck. I made friends with a British major (named Angus!) who was also waiting for the flight to Helmand. He watched my stuff when I needed go to the loo or to just walk around and stretch. I moved around, switching my seat from picnic table and to bench, reading Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22* on my Kindle while knitting a scarf with my circular needles. [N.B.: It is possible for me to knit and read when making a scarf or any type of blanket/garment that has a repetitive stitching pattern. My eyes do not have to focus on my yarn; I don’t have to think about what my hands are doing. My fingers move to a muscle memory “over, in, around, out; over, in, around, out”, while my eyes focus on words projected on the Kindle’s screen.]

Finally it was 1900, the “show-time” to check bags and to get to the boarding area.

There’s actually a TSA-style check in at KAIA. I had to put my weapon and magazines (those devices holding my bullets, not my issues of *Yoga Journal!*) in a tray so that they could be screened, then I had to go through the security scanner. Once through, I had to pick up my pistol and magazines and put them back on before going to the boarding area. However, I was not allowed to proceed into the boarding area with the 3” Gerber knife that I kept in my pocket. It had to be placed in my luggage. Go figure...

AND I was also told I could NOT keep the bug-out bag OR the small carry-on bag with me. All bags without exception would be “palletized” and available for pick up after landing. NO discussion. NO time to grab a few things from the bags. “Let’s move along, miss.” (It’s hard to get too flustered with the cute British soldier who’s trying to get me through security.)

Call for boarding at 1950.

Put on flak jacket and helmet.

Walk to the bus; unload on the tarmac.

One of the guys who befriended me tells me to say goodbye to the cool night air.

Walk up the ramp.

Be careful. Remember to breathe.

Gotta watch where I’m walking (without having my helmet fall off!).

Find a seat.

There are no windows through which a passenger might gaze in a C130, and consequently, there are no window seats. Parallel rows of seats run along the fuselage and down through the middle of the

aircraft. I sit in my up-right red canvas chair looking into the face of the guy who sits across the foot-wide walkway that separates us. Our knees are almost touching. He sits in his up-right red canvas chair oblivious of me.

Cut off all electrical equipment.

It's so noisy.

I can barely hear and can't understand directions being shouted out as we're about takeoff. The crewmember is yelling at us in English, but he has such a thick Scottish accent that I have no clue what we've just been told. I watch what others around me are doing and follow suit.

White lights are cut off, and the interior lighting of the C-130 switches to a muted green.

At the rear of the plane, the cargo door, through which we entered, closes.

Our bags, which had been checked at the security desk, put onto pallets and then fork-lifted into the aircraft, are now bundled together and stacked in the middle of the plane, anchored in place by 5" wide webbing that hooks into clips in the floor.

Sitting with the luggage is comforting. No one seems to be fretting that his or her bags will end up in Dushanbe or Duluth.

Once we take off, there's no tension. No passengers are waiting to run to the toilet once the "fasten seatbelt" sign is turned off. There's no "fasten seatbelt" sign and no toilet. No one is waiting for a stewardess to come by with stale pretzels. No one is waiting to hear if cash or plastic is needed to purchase a mini-bottle of wine or a can of beer. There's no stewardess, no cabin service, no alcohol.

Once we reach our cruising altitude, we can take off our helmets. I put my fists on the top edge of my body armor and rest my chin there. My "Rock Rose" flower essence potion (that "*adds courage and presence of mind in the face of terror or extreme fear*") is in the computer bag that I was not allowed to carry. I try to use mind-over-matter to slow my heart rate, but it's not working. My heart is racing. This is it. FINALLY I will get to my duty station.

I can feel the change in the altitude of the plane change as the flaps lower and the wheels come down.

We put on our helmets.

Sit tight. Smooth landing.

Once we land, it seems like we taxi for at least 5 minutes.

The cargo door opens; pallets of bags block my view.

I get a glimpse beyond the plane. We're at a seriously big airfield.

Lot of lights, the roar of a plane taking off, the thump of helicopter rotors whirling nearby, and the sound of equipment rumbling around.

The bags are unloaded. Passengers stand and proceed to the back of the plane.

It's 2230. As I walk down the ramp, I feel like I'm in a scene from Star Wars...or Catch 22.

Construction equipment in motion, silhouetted against the glare from towers of lights. My first thought is about the commerce of war.

The air is hot against my face and neck and reminds me of the blast you get when sitting under one of those full-head size hair driers in a beauty salon.

The "baggage claim area" is a drop-point in rocks and dust. I find my things and stumble into the receiving area. I feel frazzled and look a mess. I have "helmet hair". I'm dirty. I don't even know how long I've been in these clothes.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Are you Dr. L. J.?"

It's the Gunnery Sergeant who's come to collect me.

A weight comes off my shoulders (literally and figuratively) as "Gunny" Bryan takes my bug-out bag. I can't help tearing up.

The poor Marine doesn't quite know what to do when I lean over and kiss his cheek.

I'm "home."



8/10/11

To Jim, Emmett, Angus, Alta, Joan, Heather, Elizabeth, Doreen, Karen, Paul, James, Sharon, Ursula, Mike

OK--now that fear of the unknown has given way to the new baseline for my current situation, I will be writing some more. Just wanted you all to know that all is well!

Attached photos--

1. Knitting while waiting for C130 transport to Helmand
2. My home away from home at Camp Leatherneck- "CAN" housing. (I'm in Section VI, Row 1, CAN #13)

ta ta for now--

Lj

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8/16/11

From: Mike

Classification: UNCLASSIFIED

Caveats: NONE

Don't tell us you're crocheting an Afghan afghan... (Sorry, too funny to resist) %^D

--

From: Karen 8/16/11

To: me

Hi Jeannie! Good to hear from you. I have been super busy! Brita is home for couple days before setting off to college. We are going to pick out new underwear and sheets, towels tomorrow. She believes that wearing red underwear on test days increased her scores.

Love you!
Karen

--

From: Heather 8/16/11

To: me

Jean, I think you have the picture for your dust jacket. Aromatherapy going out with mail tomorrow.

Heather

--

From: Alta 8/16/11

To: me

Thanks for the pictures so that I can get a vision of your location. Knit on, oh great artisan. Does it ever get cold there? Mason and Henry Thomas leave for Ohio tomorrow. Then there will be no blood kin. I think this is the first time in my whole life that I have lived somewhere all by myself. It will take some getting used to.

I will get a bed spreads and Gorilla tape to you a.s.a.p. Before the end of the week. We will SKYPE on Thursday (my Thursday) evening (your Friday morning?).

I talked to Emmett today. He sounded good and is restructuring his studies a little bit. I am sure he has told you about this. He seems to be in control of the situation and excited about being back in the mountains.

Will write again soon—you do the same.

I love you so very much.

Mom

