

Afghanistan—

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

BOOK One of Five

THE BACK STORY

“HOW I GOT TO NOW”



## Transitions

~~Does a caterpillar know what it's destined to become? Does she spin her chrysalis planning for the butterfly that will emerge?~~ [Need to rethink this. The caterpillar to butterfly is too cliché! What would be a better analogy for my metamorphosis? Kafka? The Incredible Hulk? The shaggy dog? Eliza Doolittle?]

I had no grand plan for how my life as an adult would morph over the course of 35 years, but morph it did:

- ❖ **From** living in our hand-made home on five acres of land above 10,000' in the Colorado Rockies, with chickens and a llama, no neighbors, no conventional electricity, and no phone service, **to** living in a 3500 sq ft. house with Jacuzzi hot tub, Internet, technology (5 computers, 3 iPads, 4 smartphones (3 iPhones, one Android, and one not-so-smart-Government-issue BlackBerry)), and neighbors, inside the Capital Beltway.
- ❖ **From** being a public high school teacher in rural Colorado **to** being a college professor and then a Federal civil servant working across U.S. Government agencies briefing Generals.
- ❖ **From** being a “hippy chick” (as my sons envision me in my 20s) **to** being a black business suit wearing partner in discussions at the Pentagon.
- ❖ **From** being a fertile young woman **to** being a post-menopausal “elder” in Afghanistan. [N.B.: I must have been too distracted to realize that I went through menopause while deployed! I had my last cycle as the calendar rolled 2009, and that was that.]

**Be here now.** Jim and I have a first edition of this yoga/meditation classic by Ram Dass, and for at least the past 35 years I've followed its advice—whether in my daily meditation and yoga or on expensive weekend retreats in upstate New York. There was something “be here now” *elemental* about being in a combat zone. There were times when I was keenly aware of myself at that moment in time, with my “head on a swivel,” as the military teaches. Yet a majority of the time I spent in Afghanistan was spent reflecting on the past and anticipating or fretting about the future.

Some moments in time mark transitions through life, such as graduation, marriage, childbirth, death<sup>1</sup>. Some moments in time mark transitions in world affairs, such as the shooting of Archduke Franz Ferdinand or the launch of Sputnik or the Neil Armstrong's first step onto the landing. On 22 November 1963, I was in my grandma Almie's living room watching her black and white TV as Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office. On 11 September 2001, I was in my office in the Geography Department of the State University of New York- College at Oneonta when I learned that a plane had flown into one of the towers at the World Trade Center. On 07

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was written before my son Angus passed away. Where I was, what I was wearing, the temperature of the room I was in, the look on Jim's face are burned in my memory and anchor the call from the Boulder County Coroner's Office in place and time -- 2035 hrs on 27 September 2015.

November 2007, I was in the airport in Elizabeth City, NC when I got the call from Emmett telling me that he'd withdrawn from RIT and had enlisted in the US Army.

From 2002-2009 I felt compelled as an educator and as a U.S. citizen and taxpayer to study what was happening in the post-9/11 world. I was a college professor with the academic freedom to develop and teach an upper level Political Geography course where I provided an environment for my students to learn about the complex issues in Afghanistan and Iraq. I emphasized Southwest and Central Asia regions in my lower-level World Regional Geography classes so that my students and I could better grasp the places that were in the news. Emmett made me a music video (scenes of the wars set to "Where is the Love?") that I used to augment my lectures. I set aside time in my classes for my students who were military veterans to show pictures and to talk about the combat experiences that they were willing to share.

In 2004 my family moved from upstate NY to North Carolina, home of Ft. Bragg, Camp MacKall, Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, U.S. Marine Corps Camp LeJeune, Marine Corps Air Station New River, and Blackwater USA. While at East Carolina University, my research agenda broadened to include military use of space (air and land) in North Carolina as I studied a proposed Navy Outlying Landing Strip near the Dismal Swamp. That same year, Emmett began his college career at Rochester Institute of Technology, on a "free ride" Army ROCT scholarship. But the only classes that interested him were his ROTC classes, and after three semesters he made the decision to withdraw from school and to enlist in the Army and become a member of the Infantry.

Thanks to military connections I made in North Carolina, I grew to appreciate the complexity of the current state of the world:

- (1) There are those in the world who want to see the United States fall. [A defensive posture is taken in the name of National Security to stop or to undermine the work of these people--"terrorists" (not sure I can fully embrace this noun, but for lack of a better one, let's go with "terrorists").]
- (2) Some of my tax dollars will be spent on Defense.

Maybe I could help those Defense dollars be spent more wisely.

When Emmett completed basic training at Ft. Benning, GA, in March 2008, the US was mired in two wars. The war in Iraq was raging, with fighting in Al Anbar Province and urban warfare in Falluja, Ramadi, and Baghdad. The war in Afghanistan seemed to lack kinetic military objectives. The newly created Afghanistan Compact was agreed upon to promote "conditions allowing the people of Afghanistan to live in peace and security under the rule of law, with a strong government which protects human rights and supports economic and social development in the country." What did this mean for the United States forces deployed?

My son could end up in either place! Who was providing the intelligence being used by policy makers? Who determined which interconnected layers of information were taken into account? Who analyzed the data and reported it to the decision-makers who would be giving

my son orders during his service? Even IF one of my enlightened students opted to consider federal government service, what chances would there be for her or his “big-picture” geographic analysis to ever reach the White House or Pentagon?

I frequently encouraged my students to consider working as Federal civil servants; the U.S. government needs geographers who “get” the complexity of the problems, which we, as a nation, face. By January of 2007, I had decided that, given the opportunity, I would leave the comfort of my ivory tower to work as a civil servant. I began researching government jobs, only to find out that “human geographer” wasn’t at the top of any agency’s list. My specialty was not International Relations, Sociology, or Political Science. My academic training was not in a natural science like physics or biology or chemistry. I wasn’t a mathematician.

Since World War II and days of the Office of Strategic Services, geographers have had a role informing intelligence and defense. I had a B.A. in Anthropology, an M.A. in cultural geography (with field experience in Central America during the political turmoil of the late 1970s!), and I had 20 years of teaching experience. I had a Ph.D. in education with a focus in geographic education. Wouldn’t I be able to help communicate science to policy-makers? And I was “all but dissertation” away from a second Ph.D. in coastal resource management. I had a solid background in wetlands ecology, hydrology, and resource management, which would be important even in landlocked Afghanistan. (Water is tied to life and livelihood as well as power and control!)

OK- Taking action, I visited an Army recruiter’s office. I was sure that my skillset, experience, and expertise would be useful in Military Intelligence. After politely informing me of that I was too old, the officer suggested I try the Central Intelligence Agency.

Months after submitting my on-line application, I got an unexpected invitation to interview for a position with the CIA. After the two-hour drive to Chapel Hill, I ducked into a UNC campus restroom to change into my interview suit and reported as directed to a non-descript hotel near the university. There I met a number of rather non-descript people who only went by their first names-- Sarah, Francis, Bob. A few weeks later, I had a follow-up phone interview with Alicia, after which I was required to complete a written (on-line) assessment. Long story short, I was offered a position in the Agency’s map library. ☹

Thanks, but no thanks. I didn’t want to end up sequestered in a library, in what I imagined would be a warehouse of horizontal files, organizing underutilized hard copy maps.

More searching on the Internet led to frustration and discontent but not to a job.

December 2007 is noteworthy for two reasons—I saw *Charlie Wilson’s War*, and one night while in my car on the way home after giving a final exam, I heard a National Public Radio (NPR) report on the military’s controversial “Human Terrain System” and the use of anthropologists in the field.

I wanted confirmation on Congressman Wilson, so I called the Greenville, NC office of my House Representative, the Honorable Walter B. Jones, Jr. The Congressman was home for Christmas recess, and I was able to get a face-to-face appointment with him. Congressman Jones wore a white collared shirt, navy slacks, and a beige cardigan; his look and demeanor reminded me of T.V.'s Mr. Rogers. The Congressman and I visited for almost an hour, during which time he confirmed that Congressman Charlie Wilson was “understated” in the movie. Congressman Jones, whose district included Marine Corps Camp LeJeune, also spoke with me at length about the cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By spring semester 2008, my entire Political Geography class was focused on the war in Afghanistan and Operation Enduring Freedom because these wars were receiving the least amount of attention by the media. Using my typical non-traditional approach, I incorporated films (*Road to Guantanamo*, *Osama*, *Kandahar*, *Kite Runner*, and *Charlie Wilson's War*), current assessments (i.e., the Brookings Institute's *Afghanistan Index*, reports from *Christian Science Monitor*, *The Economist*, and *Foreign Policy*), and writings (like *Descent into Chaos* and *Taliban* by Ahmed Rashid and *Ghost Wars* by Stephen Coll). I opened my classroom to a visiting university faculty/lawyer from Pakistan who helped us learn about FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas on the Afghan border) and sharia law.<sup>2</sup>

And in April 2008, I began the interview process for a position as Human Terrain Analyst (HTA) in Afghanistan. By August, I was offered a HTA position, starting as a “full-time, temporary” GS-15 Federal employee for three years, with a base pay annual salary that would almost triple my Associate Professor wage at Barton College. After much soul-searching and further research, I decided that those who had put together the Human Terrain teams (such as Montgomery McFate and Steve Fondacaro<sup>3</sup>) were missing my bigger picture. They wanted me because of my anthropology background, not because I was a geographer who would search for both the large and small-scale understandings. I needed to understand the issues in Afghanistan at all scales, from the villages, up.

And I wanted a real full-time, permanent government job, so I decided to keep looking.

On a whim, I applied to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (part of the Department of Defense), and in May 2008 I traveled up to Reston, VA for an interview. I was offered a “Visiting Scientist” position, but I couldn't begin until I had been received Top Secret security clearance, which ended up taking six months to acquire. With fingers crossed, at the beginning of fall semester I put in a request for “leave without pay” to start in January 2009. Barton College granted me the year's leave of absence, and I accepted the NGA's offer, reporting for duty on 03 February 2009. (Many thanks go to my Congressman Walter B. Jones, member of the House Armed Services Committee, who wrote me a letter of recommendation!)

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<sup>2</sup> He also taught the class and me that in the Pashto and Persian languages, *ṭaliban* is a plural form of *ṭalib*, a word from Arabic that means a student or seeker.

<sup>3</sup> See *The Tender Soldier* by Vanessa Gezari for a detailed analysis of the military's Human Terrain Teams in Afghanistan.

As a scientist in the Office of Basic and Applied Research, I was given the freedom to design a research project on Afghanistan. After pondering a map of the region for a minute or two, I zeroed in on the Helmand River, a blue line running through an otherwise barren region, eventually forming an inland delta at the Afghan/Iranian border. Someone, and it might as well be me, needed to understand that water system. I felt then—as I do now (2016)—that water in the context of national security is a key to economic and social stability and to peace in Afghanistan.

Being an NGA visiting scientist gave me an enormous amount of flexibility. Over winter, spring, and summer, I had the chance to visit other Federal agencies and to put together an InterAgency research team. Connections I made led me to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Engineer Research and Development Center (USACE ERDC) in Alexandria, VA. The technical director had been challenged to figure out the "human geography" of the battlespace in Afghanistan, but the ERDC research scientists were predominately engineers, mathematicians, and geospatial technology specialists. I happened to be a human geographer with an in-depth knowledge of the region. I also happened to be looking for a job. After going through yet another lengthy application and interview process, I was offered and accepted a research geographer slot at the USACE ERDC in Alexandria. I would head a team that was focused on adding the Human Geography dimension to assist the warfighters in Operation Enduring Freedom.

In August 2009 I notified Barton College that I would not be returning, and I started my work as a government civil servant on 15 September.

Perfect! Right? Well...it was great.

I had a great team of people with whom I worked. I put together the Civil-Military Operations/Human-Environment Interaction research package, and understanding the water security implications of the Helmand River became our proof of concept. We worked closely with the Marines, who had moved into Helmand Province in April 2009. We worked closely with the Pentagon's Strategic Multi-Layered Assessment Office. The Helmand Deep Dive Findings (Figure 1) illustrate some early research. I re-engaged with the InterAgency research team I'd started at NGA. I published articles and gave national and international briefings on the critical nature of the Helmand watershed.

<p><b>Principal Finding 1:</b> Water has a determinative impact on 1) agriculture and livestock, 2) population management, 3) energy, 4) public works and, 5) the drug trade in the targeted geographic area.</p>
<p><b>Principal Finding 2:</b> Humanitarian assistance projects supported by NGOs and USAID in association with ISAF to improve economic activity and employment—likely through agriculture—will require increased water use and must be supported by investment and improvements in water infrastructure and watershed management.</p>
<p><b>Principal Finding 3:</b> Though many players (NGOs, USAID, US Military with CERP funds, the international community) are involved in water projects, there is no coordinated watershed management plan to monitor and assess water quantity and quality in the region of interest.</p>
<p><b>Principal Finding 4:</b> ISAF efforts to stabilize Afghanistan must balance near-term gains in agricultural production with (a) the potential of increased transboundary conflicts over water and (b) the potential to exhaust Afghanistan's water resources. To mitigate these negative effects, actions must focus on improving Resource Policy/Water Resource Management capacity and effectiveness, with special focus on increasing efficiency of water quantity and quality monitoring and assessment.</p>

Figure 1. Geospatial assessment of Helmand Deep Dive, 11 Dec 2009.

ISAF's key objectives to formulate metrics:

- GIRoA is effective in key terrain
- Control of licit commerce at borders
- Negative influencers marginalized
- People have access to fair justice
- **Increased availability of essential services**
- Socio-economic development is improving
- **Agricultural development and productivity improved**
- ANSF provides security to enable governance and development
- Improve freedom of movement to increase commercial activity
- GIRoA leads district level security efforts
- Effective COIN (Counterinsurgency)

Figure 2. Key Objectives, from International Security Assistance Force, Joint Command. March 2010

I spent an ungodly number of hours in meetings at the Pentagon with the Joint Forces Command and in Brunsum and The Hague with NATO partners all trying to determine metrics for measuring keys to success in Afghanistan. (Figure 2)

But this wasn't enough for me. I was trained as a field geographer, and thanks to my roots at Louisiana State University and my professors of the Carl Sauer lineage--Dr. Robert West, Dr. Fred Kniffen, and Dr. Bill Davidson--I couldn't be satisfied without my own boots-on-the-ground knowledge of the study area.

**For Your Situational Awareness (FYSA):  
It is not possible to just decide to visit a combat zone and go.**

I had to be creative. Browsing the government Internet sites in December 2009, I came across a site for the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce:

*The Civilian Deployment Experience allows civilians to use their capabilities, experience, and knowledge as a crucial component of helping the Department of Defense accomplish its mission abroad. Individuals interested in applying their skills and experience in a unique environment can volunteer for open positions supporting the US Military in foreign theaters.*

Department of Defense employees were encouraged to apply. I WAS A DOD employee, and there was a job for something called an AF PAK Hand in Helmand Province.

According to the website, the AFPAK Hands program was:

*established (in September 2009) to develop a pool of "subject matter experts" on Afghanistan and Pakistan....to fill a void - the need for individuals who knew the culture, language, history, politics, and other aspects of the Afghanistan and Pakistan region...The individuals (chosen) are selected from the military and other U.S. government agencies by the Pakistan Afghanistan Coordination Cell (PACC). The "hands" attend a training course in Washington, DC and then deploy for one year to Afghanistan or Pakistan.*

This had promise! It would be TDY (at a temporary duty station), and I would be able to maintain my U.S. Government "real" job with the USACE ERDC. I would need to be clear from the get-go, that *the only reason I was volunteering was to work on the Helmand watershed and water-relevant stability operations.*

I checked with Army Corps boss; as a retired Army Lt. Col, he was thrilled that I wanted to deploy.

Then I checked with Jim. Hum. Not so thrilled. After hashing out the pros and cons, we agreed on a plan. I could apply, but if I were selected, I would not begin my deployment until after Angus graduated high school, June 2011. My husband let it be known that he would not support me flying the coop until the nest was empty.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> To be honest, though he graduated in June 2011, Angus didn't leave the nest. During his freshman year at North Virginia Community College, Angus and Jim were rather like roommates living at the same house. From what I've been told, Jim worked from 14:00-22:30 hrs. and Angus scheduled and went to his classes. Little did I know then that this would become treasured "guy time" with Angus for Jim.

Later, once he realized how much money I would be making, Jim majestically declared, *“I regret that I have but one wife to give for my country.”*

[N.B.: It would be good at this point to -read Jim’s character bio.]

Well, I applied. I was selected. My deployment was set for July 2011.

According to *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*, transition—the time between just being pregnant and actually having a baby—is the hardest part of childbirth.

- I had transitioned from academia to public service rather painlessly.
- I wasn’t so sure that the transition from government worker stateside to deployed DOD civilian in a combat zone would be as easy.
- For the record: I was not opposed to an epidural.