

AFGHANISTAN:
LESSONS IN SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

*From a S.A.P. Deployed in the
Civilian Surge*

L.J. Palmer-Moloney, PhD

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

BOOK Three of Five

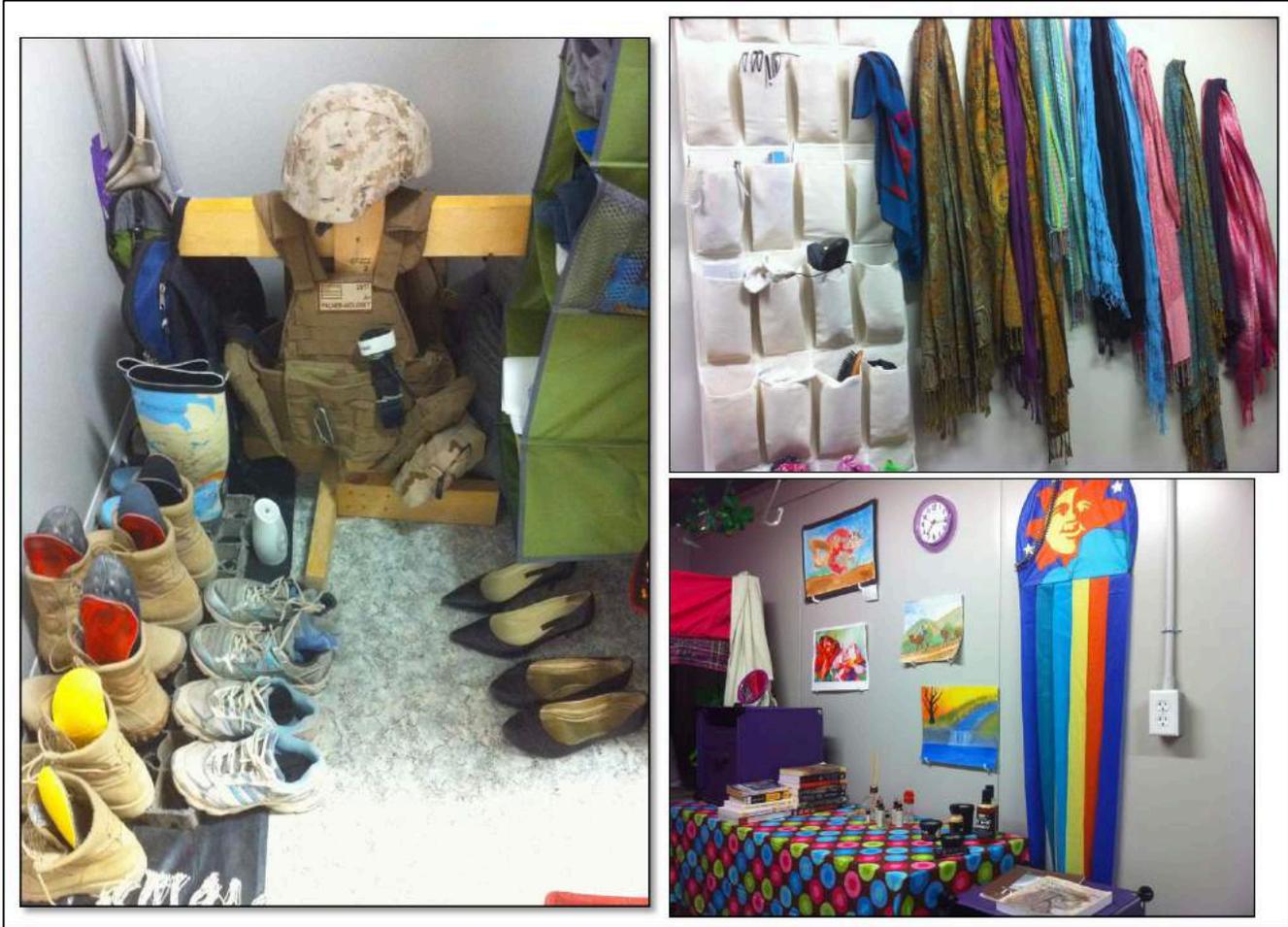
DEPLOYMENT

Part 1: Being There

by L. J. Palmer-Moloney

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Setting up house in a 'can' at Camp Leatherneck (LNK)



Examples of Nodes and Landmarks at LNK, 2011-2012

❖ **Book 3, Part 1: Being there**

Life at Regional Command Southwest Headquarters

- Kevin Lynch and the *Elements of the City* at Camp Leatherneck
 - Pathways
 - Nodes
 - Edges
 - Districts
 - Landmarks
- Learning the alphabet (military acronyms and abbreviations)
- Housing
 - Welcome to the neighborhood--Life Support Area (LSA)
 - Living in a Can
- Food
- Laundry
- Personal Care
 - Toilets
 - Showers
 - Medical/Dental
- Personnel
 - Military
 - Marines
 - UK
 - Other Coalition Forces
 - Civilian Contractors
 - Third World Nationals
 - US Civil Servants
- The daily grind as deployed civilian in C-9
- Out and about in the battle space
 - SAP Essays
 - Aircraft
 - Accommodations
 - Movement as civilian with and without security detachment
- Communications
 - The importance of connecting with normal: connecting to home and loved ones
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 - SKYPE/FaceTime
 - Phone
 - Lost in Cyber space Christmas fiasco
 - Snail Mail
 - Mail call
 - Packages—solicited and unsolicited
 - Food
 - Reading material
 - News and The Front

- Non-Stop saturation
 - 24/7 coverage, flat screen non-stop news, sports, and Family Guy
 - Disorientating—Sunday morning news show on Sunday night; Monday night football on Tuesday morning
 - Differences now vs other wars—Vietnam, Korea
- “River City” lock down. (No personal communication until next of kin of dead notified.)
- Brigadier General Dave, the one who pushed buttons and called in favors to get me to Helmand and always without fail responded to each and every one of my essays and emails. Having served umpteen missions with the Marines, some of those missions in combat in Iraq, he understood being deployed and the critical importance of hearing from home.



ISAF placemat showing RC(SW) in light yellow, extreme southwestern part of the country. (British PRT shown in Helmand Province. No PRT is in Nimruz)



Helmand Basin. (Camp Leatherneck is to the west of Lashkar Gah.)

30 OCT 2011

Camp Bastion Flight Line

0510

55 degrees F

Sitting at a table in the loading area tent, waiting for the C130 (flight 'Thumper 26') to take me to Kabul. The Marines, Brits, and Afghan nationals (probably interpreters) waiting with me are having a coffee and chatting, or watching football on the 50" flat screen TV, or catching a nap on a cot for the next couple of hours before departure. I'm more than a little uneasy because of yesterday's suicide bombing in Kabul --thirteen people were killed--8 of them civilians--right at the gate of Camp Julien. I'd bet anything they were folks like my deployment unit, based at Camp Julien for COIN (counterinsurgency) training, preparing to be embedded in Ministries in Kabul or to be sent into the field. They, like me, could have just been trying to get from point A to point B, heading to either the

“green” zone (the Embassy/ISAF Headquarters area) or the airport. I’ve ridden on that very shuttle (the rhino), at that very time of day, 1100.

Too bad the attempt to have predictable transport running on a ~predictable schedule led to disaster. When enemies know when and where you’re gonna be, you can easily become a target...

Anyway...I might as well write. I can’t believe I started out today with my Mac laptop only at a 50% charge.

I just realized that this is my first “solo” flight to Kabul. I’ve flown on my own FROM Kabul to Helmand before, but have never ventured from Helmand to the big city without colleagues. I’m not nervous about the travel; I think I’ve got this transportation thing wired. (I didn’t even remember to bring my Bach flower potions...)

So, where do I begin... Maybe I’ll start by trying to answer, “What’s it like at Camp Leatherneck?”

Life at Leatherneck: Dust Dancin' in the Dasht-e Margo

Right around the equinox, in September 1985, Jim and I were in Lafayette at the Cajun Music Festival, “dust dancin’” to the zydeco music. I can still hear the songs of BeauSoleil and Doug Kershaw. I love the memory of South Louisiana on that fall day—crisp cool temps; low humidity; the bitter sweet smell of pecan trees; the mouth watering aroma of jambalaya and crawfish etouffet; the sound of the accordion, fiddle, and wash board; the feel of the dust and grass under my bare feet as I’m twirling around as we dance; my husband’s smile.

I take a step. As I look down, a cloud of dust billows up around my combat boot. I’m in Afghanistan, and it’s 26 years later. I’m not dancin’ in this dust now, but I might before I leave here.

The Scene—General Overview of the Base

I’m standing on the ground, and the top of my head is 180 degrees from my feet. My extended arm is held out at 90 degrees, pointing toward the horizon. From what would be the horizon (were it visible) up to approximately 30 degrees is a tan cloud that hangs in the air about 80% of the time. Straight up above me, the sky is what I call “Colorado” blue—deep color with no atmospheric moisture muting it. On a clear day (one of those in the 20% balance), it’s possible to see steep mountains to the north and to the east of the base, but most of the time they are hidden in the haze.

About ninety percent of the built environment at Camp Leatherneck is one-story high, and most of the structures—the sleeping tents, the dining tents, the “cans” (sleeping quarters), the aluminum-sided plywood offices, and the warehouses—are the color of either galvanized steel, “natural” concrete, or tan desert dust.

The land surface around here is definitely desert DUST, not desert SAND. And Helmand’s desert dust is the consistency of talcum powder. When there’s no wind or vehicle movement through it, the fine particles lie in soft fluffy mounds. Once disturbed, they are suspended in the air for days. Considering there are ~20,000 folks (Coalition Forces military, US Government civilian support, contractors, and Third World nationals, etc.) on the base who are walking or driving “gators” (modified golf cart contraptions), SUVs, Humvees, or MRAPs (huge armored troop carriers), there’s always dust in the air here. Once it’s on your boots or your clothes, you either have to wash it out or beat your things to death on a non-dusty surface (good luck finding one of those!) until you knock the dust out...which just suspends it in the air. (It only takes one time to learn the folly of shaking out a rug near the open door of your can.)

I’ve been thinking about the “color wheel” used by artists, and the color *khaki*. The khaki colored dust here does have a smidgen of pink in it, but for the most part it is tan. Because color of the haze in the air matches the color of the ground and the color of the buildings, there are times when I feel like I’m in a sensory deprivation chamber like the guy in *Altered States*. When I get back to Virginia, every bit of clothing I have that’s khaki-colored is going to be donated to charity. (I’ll keep a pair of my combat boots even though they are khaki colored. They are the most comfortable shoes I’ve ever owned.)

The physical and human geography of Camp Leatherneck

So, here I am in Helmand Province, living on an ISAF “super FOB” (forward operational base) that covers an area just shy of 3 square miles. In order to understand Camp Leatherneck, I analyze the base like I would sort out a cityscape¹, dividing it into its essential elements: *edges, pathways, nodes, districts, and landmarks*. Though these elements don’t exist in isolation and generally do overlap, they are distinct enough to help me gain situational awareness.

Edges— Edges separate US (whoever we may be) from THEM (whoever they may be) and define sides. On any military base, this is the most fundamental element to know. You’re either on the base (inside the wire) or you’re off it (outside the wire), in which case there could be life-threatening consequences.

Edges can be tricky because not all of them are actual physical entities. Some are just “perceived.” Fences, ditches, walls are all examples of physical edges. Perceived edges are not as easy to define; they are culturally *understood* or they are evident based on one’s knowledge and understanding of a place. Take, for example, the perceived edge that separates the place for the congregation vs the place for the priest in a Catholic church, or the perceived edge that separates your stuff from another’s when you’ve set up a spot at the beach.

The most important edge is the line that divides the Coalition Force control area from the rest of Nad-e Ali District, Helmand Province—It’s EASY to spot, whether you’re on the ground or seeing the base from a satellite image. Defined by razor sharp concertina wire, fencing, Hesco barriers, and watchtowers, Camp Leatherneck/Camp Bastion line clearly separates “us” from “them” (Afghans) and their agricultural (opium poppy??) fields just beyond “our” controlled space.

Inside the wire, there are a number of edges. Some of the more important and obvious ones are:

Camp Leatherneck (US) vs. Camp Bastion (UK)

The cunning use of flags along fence lines helps to define the edge between UK and US efforts. Fencing, checkpoints on the road, and road signs also mark division between these zones. It’s not a heavily protected divide. (I’m always going with Brit co-workers to the Bastion side to grab a coffee or to go to the NAAFI. I’ve never had to show my ID...)

Divisions between “districts”

The use of T-barriers, concertina wire and fencing make the edges that delineate the different areas or “districts” from one another--housing, chow halls, II MEF Command Headquarters , etc.

Pathways—Pathways are the routes found both in the natural world and in the human built environment. River channels and animal paths in the woods are examples of pathways in nature. Dirt roads, interstate highways, and sidewalks are examples of pathways in the human world. At Leatherneck/Bastion, there are numerous pathways, including:

¹ Based on definitions from Kevin Lynch’s classic work *The Image of the City* (1960).

- Paved and unpaved roads for motorized traffic-- The main roads at Camp Leatherneck are laid out in a grid. North-South streets are numbered; the East-West streets are alphabetically tagged, Alpha-Foxtrot.
- Concrete walkways for pedestrians between rows of housing cans
- “Ground guide required” allies between can clusters (known as pods) for service vehicles (garbage trucks, water trucks, utility equipment, etc.)
- Rock and dirt paths for pedestrians
- Runways for aircraft (from C5s, C17s, C130s, Ospreys, and helicopters galore, to commercial jets) (One runway is ~11,000 feet and can accommodate huge jets—747s and beyond!)
- Ditches for routing rainwater runoff (in 5 months at Camp Leatherneck there’s been one thunderstorm that generated ~1.5 inches of rain. Most of that just sat on the surface in puddles and eventually evaporated. I’ve never seen any water in the ditches!)

Nodes—Nodes are places where pathways come together. Examples of nodes at Camp Leatherneck include:

- DFACs (Dining Facilities)-- there are 6, usually open ~24/7. A large DFAC seats up to 600 (I believe there are 3 big facilities); the smaller ones seat ~300.
- Laundry Trailers—Yes, there are a couple of “do it yourself” laundries set up with 7 double stacked washer/dryer combos in each.
- Laundry Drop-offs--2 that I know of; 72 hr turn-around for your clothes; no more than 20 items left at a time.
- US Post Office—a huge facility that covers an entire block! An unbelievable amount of mail (parcels, trunks, letters) move through APO AE 09510!
- PX for shopping—not quite like going to the Walmart, but a stunning collection of goods considering WE’RE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE IN AFGHANISTAN.
- Medical/Dental clinic
- Chapel--shared building for Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and UU gatherings
- MWR (Morale, Wellness, Recreation area)
 - Rec Center (films, phones, couches)
 - Gyms (one for cardio and one for weights)
 - Playing field for volleyball and soccer
- Coffee Shop (The Green Bean) (Incredible that they charge US prices! Why pay \$3.65 for a latte when you can go to the NAAFI coffee shop at Bastion and pay \$1.20??)
- Beauty Salon (\$7 for a hair trim!)
- Nail Salon (\$8 for a 45 min manicure!)
- Barber
- Bus Stops
- Smoke Pits
- Personal Hygiene and Bodily functions
 - Latrine Trailers
 - Showers Trailers
 - Port-o-loos
- Air dispatch arrival/departure areas
- Armory (weapons storage)

- Fall-out shelters (yes, let's not forget that this IS a combat zone, despite the nail salon, coffee shop, etc.)

Districts—Districts are places with a common function or goal. In a city, there can be any number of districts, from residential districts, business districts, historic preservation districts, to the “red light” district, and such.

At Leatherneck, all the districts (sleeping quarters/life-support areas (LSAs), office space, dining facilities, Morale/Welfare/Recreation (MWR) facilities, medical areas, etc.) are surrounded by 6' high concrete “T-barriers” that first became the vogue in Iraq.

The base's main districts are:

- ❖ II Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) Forward (FWD—deployed) Command Headquarters. HQ is cluster of offices built of plywood with aluminum siding. This is where I work—in the building right next to the Commanding General!
- ❖ Division Headquarters. I'm not really sure what makes the Division Headquarters different from the II MEF HQ. Many things seem redundant to me, but I'm not military! Division HQ sits right next to II MEF HQ, but they are separated by T-barriers and fencing.
- ❖ Security Controlled areas (places that are Top Secret and Secret information restricted). These districts are cordoned off by fencing and razor wire and marked by signs that say “Beware of Military Working Dogs” and “No Photography.”
- ❖ Sleeping quarters—a.k.a. LSAs (“Life Support Areas”). Many of the LSAs consist of clusters of “pods” of “cans”, others are clusters of dorm-like barracks. I live in a can --an 18' x 7' aluminum structure with 2 bunk bed “racks” that can sleep up to 4 folks (most sleep 1 or 2), set in rows of 15. Each Pod is made up of can clusters. My pod has 4 rows of cans—2 sets of 2 rows of 15 cans facing each other. The pods form little communities, like.
 - Little Britain (Leatherneck housing for UK military support) (LSA 6, Pod #5—right down the road from me) This neighborhood is easy to spot because of the numerous Union Jack's aflutter.
 - Long Term Individual Augmentee housing (for US military officers and US Government workers, like me) in LSA 6. I live in LSA 6, Pod 1, Can 13.
 - Civilian Contractors in LSA 7
 - Third World Nationals (folks from “friendly” Third World areas like Sri Lanka and Nepal and Sub-Saharan African countries brought here to work serving food, cutting hair, cleaning showers/latrines, etc.) (I know some of them live in LSA 6, pod 8...)

That said, there are some districts of Tent Housing:

- Temporary “transit” accommodations (similar to that found in Kuwait or Kabul)
- Housing for Afghan National Army folks in training at Leatherneck
- ❖ Training Ranges
 - Counter IED training
 - Demolition areas
 - Firing Ranges
- ❖ Flight line/airfield.

Interesting that all air efforts (flight line with jets, helicopters, etc.) are on the UK side. US depends on the UK support out of “Little Heathrow.”

Modes of transport-

- Fixed wing:

- C130 “Thumper” (British) or “Trash” (Marine) used To / From Leatherneck/Bastion to Kabul; daily, 2 flights (a.m. and p.m.). Massive a/c (aircraft) moving people and things across the country.
- C17 Just used coming from Kuwait to Kabul. Hear that’s the same plane that moves from Manas to Kabul.
- DFS (Dubai Freight Service) 777? Moving people and stuff from Bastion to Dubai. Straight connection to United flights that get to Dulles in 12 hours. (Thanks be to god, I have one of these flights in LESS THAN 2 WEEKS)
- Roto-craft:
 - Rocco- Contractor flown, (no gunner on board, no British Forces allowed to ride). Hops from small COPs and FOBs. Can carry ~2 dozen passengers and gear. Windows line the sides, but we all sit against the wall, facing one another. Catch a glimpse out the window when pilot banks, but otherwise just see the tan sky.
 - Merlin- (my favorite conventional helicopter) 3 gunners (one at tail, 2 on either side just behind the pilot). Only flown on this once – from Lashkar Gah to Bastion at night. My first time on an a/c with gunners (visible). Big windows in the sides, remember seeing the night sky. Kinda shook me—flying low over the houses of the city, with gunners at full-ready.
 - CH 53 – Military Marines, no frills, MESSY- roto lubricant everywhere; Once I put my bug out bag in puddle of grease. Have ended up with slippery boot bottoms any number of times, which is all I need to top my already unsteady movements off the helo.
 - Blackhawk- Practice at Camp Atterbury was the only time I’ve been on this a/c. See them flying around base often transporting VIPs.
 - Chinook – The work animal of the helicopters. Flying off to the COPs with pallets of bottled water for the Marines stuck in places that have no water wells.
- Hybred-fixed/roto OSPREY. I LOVE flying on these a/c! The back of the bird is always open, with the rear gunner harnessed in and ready to protect us. When landing or taking off, the props rotate into “helicopter” position; when flying from point A to B, they move into “plane” mode. The technology amazes me. (I first saw one of these land and take off when I was in my Cessna 152 on the runway at PGV (Pitt Greenville Airport), Greenville, NC in 2004.)

❖ Refuse Dumping Areas

- Burn Pits (where all debris—from worn out vehicle tires to car batteries, plastic bottles, and general trash—is incinerated). Both Camp Leatherneck and Camp Bastion have burn pits. On any given day, the otherwise cloudless but hazy sky is streaked with plumes from burn pits. Lord knows what we’re breathing...
- Black Water Lagoon (the place where the “black water” trucks dump the human waste from the latrines and port-o-loos) (Runoff water from the Black Lagoon supports agricultural fields just beyond the wire. I haven’t confirmed this first hand, but rumor has it that they grow some healthy looking poppies there.)

Landmarks—Landmarks are used for orientation when giving directions or describing location. Many landmarks double as pathways or nodes or districts. Features used as landmarks

vary depending on one's familiarity with a place. Some landmarks are huge, easy to identify, and known by just about everyone...like the Washington Monument in Washington D.C. Others take a level of awareness that comes with being in a place over time...like "Woody's Deli" on Spruce Street as a landmark in Oneonta, NY or the Greek Theater on the LSU campus in Baton Rouge, LA.

Landmarks are used to give direction or orientation—

"Meet me at the ____." Or

"Meet me at the PX." Or

"I live in the pod by the laundry drop off across the street from the cardio-gym."

Because almost everything on the base is single-storey, in many ways *my* landmarks amount to no more than the things I can see over rooftops to help me with orientation. Primarily these landmarks consist of flag displays and towers:

- Flags at Command HQ (all Coalition Force flags displayed in a circle)
- Flags at Division HQ (Marine flag, US flag, and another one that I don't know but recognize as a flag at Division HQ, flying to the north of my can, west of II MEF HQ)
- Flags at MWR (Marine flag and US flag flying to the west of my can)
- Radio/Internet Towers of certain colors and configurations (like the 4 silver internet towers to the west of my can, south of the MWR flags)

On clear days when I can see them, I use the mountains to the north of the base as a landmark for orientation. On those dusty, hazy days when the mountains aren't visible, it's easy for me to get turned around.

To get to work from home, I walk out of my can, turn left (north), and follow the paved walkway until I reach the wider rock/dirt path beyond the T-barriers/fall-out shelters. This walk parallels 4th Street. To the north of my walking path are Delta Ave and a row of Latrine/Shower trailers. The pods and cans of LSA 6 are to south. When I reach the intersection of 4th and Delta, I turn north, cross the street, walk the block, then cross 3rd Street. I walk in the direction of the Coalition Forces flags. I pass the turn for DFAC 5 (to my right (east)) and continue on to the sign for II MEF HQ (in front of me). I have to show my security badge at the gate, and then I can proceed into the secure area. I walk past a row of port-o-loos, then past the Commanding General's building to Bldg. 2213—C-9 Stability Operations. Up the four steps, punch in the combination for the lock (1,3,5), open the door, and take a sharp left. (To the right is the office space for Department of State/USAID/USDA folks of the Regional Platform.) My desk is the second on the right, just past the Master Gunnery Sergeant. The trip is about ½ mile and takes around 10 minutes (if I'm strolling into work).



Key LNK Nodes, 2011-2012



"Cans under the Clouds" at LNK, Nov 2011

8/31/11
From: Elizabeth
To: me

The clouds look lovely, but what in the world is lined up underneath them? They look like storage sheds in Jersey.

BB

--

From: LJ Palmer-Moloney ^{8/31/11}

To: Elizabeth

Hey girl-- Be careful how you talk about my neighborhood! Underneath those clouds are housing units. Yes, they do look like they came off the back of an 18-wheeler.

My "home" is a 10' x 15' "shotgun," that's known as a "CAN." (I'm sure this is an acronym, but don't know the meaning.)

8/31/11

My street has no lighting, but some of the CANs (those that are double-stacked) have lighted walkways!

--

From: Jim

To: me

Hi Sweetie,

Angus was originally looking for a less complicated calculator than the one he was using. He has since spent some time learning his way around it and he feels it will be fine for his school work. Your description of the weather over there is hard for me to comprehend. I thought Fairplay was an extreme climate but Helmand is definitely off the charts. We are fine and gearing up for a long weekend in STL. Wish you could bop in and surprise us. I was mowing the lawn today when you called and I'm sorry I missed you. Take care and be safe. Let us know when you get your care package. It should have been there by now.

Much Love,

Jim

--

From: LJ Palmer-Moloney <ljean.palmermoloney@gmail.com>

9/8/11

To: Jim, Emmett, Angus, Joan, Alta, Heather, Elizabeth, Doreen, Karen, Tom, Paul, Craig

Got back yesterday from a trip to Lashkar Gah. Exciting times flying in Osprey, Merlin (helicopter). Some pics are attached.

Cheers,

Lj

--



My 'boarding pass' to catch an Osprey to Lashkar Gah



Roses somehow manage to grow at Camp Jullien (November 2011).

From: Craig ^{9/8/11}

To: me

Love the boarding pass! Did you have to take off your boots at airport security ☺? How long were you in LKG and was it always that gray?

--

From: Karen ^{9/8/11}

To: me

Your skin is looking a little dry my dear. Do you have some Ponds cold cream? HA HA! Love you!! Karen

--

From: Heather ^{9/8/11}

To: me

Hi! Great pictures as always. You look happy, but sun/wind burned? Are you keeping up with that missy? How are the boys faring without you? I'll email them to see how they are doing, but probably won't get an honest answer.

Colin seems very happy at UNCA...eating at the veg restaurants downtown, ordering concert tickets and playing in drum circles(?). We're headed up to visit next weekend. Con and I are shuttling Meg back and forth to school and art classes. At least we'll be more eager for her to get a license in another week or so.
Keep asking for anything you need.

Heather

--

RC(SW) C-9



11 Aug

2012

MEMORANDUM FOR: Leatherneck DFAC Personnel

SUBJECT: AUTHORIZATION FOR CIVILIAN USE OF TAKE-OUT CONTAINERS AT
DFAC FACILITIES

REFERENCES: (a) Contract XXXXXX, TO 0004
(b) PWS 05.06 Food Service Operations
(c) PWS 05.06.07 special Meal Requests
(d) FRAGO 124 to OPOD 07-03 Food Service Orders
(e) USFOR-A FRAGO 09-310 Policy on food Service Operations

1. Dr. Laura Jean Palmer-Moloney, a DoD employee (GS-14) in the Afghan Hand program, is assigned to RC(SW) C-9 Development as a mission essential water resource management expert. As such, her duties require her to "engage with Afghan officials and the Afghan population" on such issues. (See COMISAF AFGHAN HANDS PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION DIRECTIVE dated 04 Oct 2011.)
2. Further, those duties require her to "operate outside [her] command's secure compounds in order to work directly with the Afghan government and local population." (See Memorandum of USFOR-A Director of Afghan Hands Management Element listing Dr. Palmer-Moloney.)
3. Dr. Palmer-Moloney serves as RC(SW)'s principal point of contact with Khan Aga, Director of the Helmand-Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA)- the principal agency for canal and irrigation regulation and management in Helmand Province-as well as similarly situation members of the Nimruz Provincial Government. Her meetings with local government officials often occur off Camp or FOB requiring travel in support of the RC(SW) mission during meal times.
4. Because of the need for flexibility in performing her assigned duties "outside the wire," the best needs of the RC(SW) mission and the requirements of USFOR-A FRAGO 09-310 are served by authorizing Dr. Palmer-Moloney the **use of take-out containers at DFAC facilities.**



OMG- Thank goodness one of the Marine Reserve Colonels in Stability Ops is a lawyer. With C-9's enthusiastic support, I am allowed to get meals to go, so that I can eat at my desk on workdays or in my can on Friday and Sunday mornings, when it would be so sweet to head to the DFAC in my PT shorts, T-shirt, and tennis shoes to grab chow. However, orders are "No PT Gear" in the dining facility. Urghhh.

Snapshots of LIFE ON THE BASE:

#1. THE MARINES ARE NOT AN OCCUPYING FORCE. Occupying means “here to stay,” and “here to stay” means sitting for awhile. So, it was explained to me that I should not expect anything more than “military minimum” on base. The only places to sit outside and relax are found at the bus stops and smoke pits...and at the few “picnic tables” (oh, ha ha...again, we’re not here to occupy so picnicking is probably discouraged) near the Green Bean or inside the HQ’s secure area. Otherwise, Marines are on the move. (What I’d give for a bench so that I could sit outside and read. At least that was my internal dialogue early on. The *craving* to be outside just enjoying the day was a desire conjured by memories that did not fit the reality of life at LNK, where the smell and taste of burning plastic wafted through the air in the constant plumbs of smoke from the FOB burn pits.

#2. Dining at the DFAC—Home cooking in a Combat Zone; Adjust your expectations

Unlike the DFAC in Kuwait or off at the small COPs (combat outposts), you can’t wear PT gear inside.

There’s always an interesting mix of food options to choose from, considering we’re in the back end of nowhere in a combat zone in Afghanistan. [N.B.—Seems as though Pakistan has closed off transportation corridors for about the next 90 days. Rumor has it that we might be down to eating MREs if the closure holds.]

“Liquid eggs” are used to make vats of scrambled eggs. Every morning I have a scoop of these along with a hash-brown pancake and fresh fruit.

For lunch and dinner, there’s a fairly predictable “bill of fare”:

- Most Sunday nights get steak and lobster. (no kidding—grilled rib eye steaks and good size lobster! Lord knows the point of origin for these goodies.)
- Saturday night Indian Bar
- Sunday nights (in addition to the steak and lobster) the seafood bar.
- ~ Once a week, usually on Taco Bar (with as much guacamole as you can pile on your plate), Potato Bar, Wing (NOT wine, as I first thought the sign read!) Bar, Oriental Bar,
- The Grill (grilled cheese, grilled ham and cheese, “Rueben”, Philly cheese steak, onion rings, French fries, and HAMBURGERS that melt in your mouth)
- Always available--rice, potatoes, succotash, broccoli, and green beans (no spinach! No arugula!)
- SO much meat—every kind of chicken, plus Salisbury steaks, turkey, ribs, pork loin, and meatloaf
- Always a salad bar with Romaine lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes (no flavor, but they look nice), onions and beets, shredded carrots, lemon, pasta salad options, cheese, boiled eggs
- Always a desert bar with Pecan pie, sweet potato pie, cookies, pudding, fresh fruit (which is hard as a brick bat most of the time)—grapes, tangerines, pineapple, apples, oranges, bananas, watermelon, AF melon, honeydew, kiwi—that usually comes out very frozen (even the bananas)
- Cereals of all sorts (from Kashi to Fruit Loops, Raisin Brand to Count Chocula)
- Drinks of all kinds (no alcohol, but Becks near-beer, energy drinks, box juice) and bottled water

- BUCKETS of Baskin & Robins Ice Cream are available at every meal. (I grab a scoop of Pralines and Cream when I need “comfort food” after a hard day’s work.)

At every meal, there are cooks --wearing their cobalt blue tops and blue/white checkered trousers and white caps--manning the short-order grill. It’s impossible to order any eggs that have an uncooked or runny part (like you’d get in eggs over easy) OR any vegetables that are not overcooked. One evening I had a slight confrontation with the cooking staff over my request for stir-fried vegetables from the Mongolian grill. I didn’t want the “mixed with meat” option (chicken or beef). I just wanted lightly stir-fried vegies. “So sorry, Ma’am.” End of discussion; food safety/force protection at its best.

There’s always great music playing in the food service area of the DFAC. Yesterday I noticed that many of us were swaying to CSNY (Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young) as we were waiting to be served. This gave me an idea: I’m trying to figure out how to stage a flash mob dance in DFAC 5 before I leave. Not sure how to choreograph the spectacle or how to circulate the dance steps to potential participants. (I know I could find out if I could get to YouTube, but the base blocks YouTube Internet access—as well as iTunes!)

In the main dining areas, there are 5-4 50” flat screen TVs constantly showing sports or news (both FOX and CNN). I always go to the DFAC without my glasses; I don’t want to sit and eat and look up at the screens around me. I want to engage in conversation with my buddies while we eat. Even though no one can HEAR what’s being broadcast, each TV screen (showing different programs, mind you!) is blaring unintelligible sound... It would be nice if I could find a remote to mute the news and sports commentators. Until I do, I’ve decided not to wear my hearing aide to the DFAC either.

Everything we use in the DFAC is disposable. Do the PITCH IT math! We have ~20,000 people eating, 3 times a day. Out go the paper plates or empty “take away” boxes; the boxes that held juice or milk; the aluminum cans that held soda, near beer, root beer or one of those “supplement” or energy drinks. The plastic bottles for water or Gator Aid and the plastic knives, forks, and spoons can be placed in a “recycle” bin, but few people take the time to do that! (I suppose at least there IS a bin for recycling plastic...but where do plastic items go????)

Inevitably, food is tossed out along with the disposable serving items. Many times people throw out food they were served but didn’t eat because they were given too much. I’m guilty of this; the server guys always HEAP food onto your plate! I’ve trained a few of them to understand that I want “just a little” instant mashed potatoes or just a small scoop of succotash or half a serving of scrambled liquid eggs.

Snapshots of Life in the Office

[Note—More of Office Life and Work realities are found in Book 3, Part 2: Working There! This is a preview...]

- It’s impossible to just kick off my combat boots (like I would a pair of pumps) while I’m work at my desk.
- The building rumbles during munitions detonations, and no one seems to be concerned.

- Marines make a lot of noise when they walk! The amount of boot scuffing and the loudness of steps across the plywood floor seem to define the importance of the individual passing my desk.
- It's uncomfortable to sit all day at a desk while wearing my gun. (The weight of the M9 constantly pulls on my waist; the magazine it keep in my cargo pants pocket constantly gouges into my hip.)
- I sit on a Pilates ball when I work at my desk. I think this might be a new concept for the Marines in the II MEF.

The staff of C-9 Stability Operations is a Coalition Forces shop, made up of ½ US Marines (most of them reservists, and most of them lawyers in their day jobs!) and ½ British officers from Air Force, Army, and Navy, and me.

We all work in a shared common office space; desk area marked by 4 foot high plywood walls. Everything echoes...boots on floor; conversations; strikes on the computer keyboard.

All buildings in the II MEF HQ and the Division HQ are made of high quality plywood (no wonder Lowes and Home Depot are out!).

The nearest female latrine is about 200 yards from the office. There are a couple of Port-o-loos for women that are closer...but they don't have sinks, so no hand washing or tooth brushing unless I trek to the actual latrine trailer. (This makes it hard to control for germs during cold season if you believe in the germ theory of disease!

I realize that at home I wash my hands a lot! When at least half of the office sounds like they should be hospitalized in a TB ward, I want to wash up, but there's no water or soap unless I walk to the latrine. The only options for fighting germs: (1) to use hand sanitizer. (2) develop fundamental mind-over-matter disbelief in germ theory of disease.

OMG (oh my god)... my office mates POUND their keyboards. Most are very heavy handed, 2 fingers strike typists. When they aren't pounding keys as they send out critical emails, they are telling war stories to one another in voices that are meant to carry throughout the building so that we all hear. (There are six Colonels in this one area, and only one of them is "in charge". The rest just try to on-up one another day in and day out...) I'm not sure why the sounds—typing, walking, and talking-- get on my nerves some days. When the noise bothers me, I put on my headset and work while I listen to a music CD... under my "cone of silence."

Defining the Work We Do

(This section is still in progress. I expect most of it will move into Book 3, Part 2: Working There...but wanted to give you this initial glimpse!)

The Military Billets (coming soon!)

The Contractors (Under construction!)

Who are the contractors amongst us? I can't really comment on their salaries except to say that there are quite a number of people rolling from active duty jobs into very well-paid contractor positions. I work with a number of the retired-officers-turned-contractors. Some have a ton of value to add to the understanding of the situation in CENTCOM. Many are using contract jobs as placeholders being paid by government contracts that are funded by my income (every penny of which is taxed).

Civilians (coming soon!)

Random Observations

We're in combat zone:

- Always expect a detonation; only worry if you hear the siren sound. Here at Leatherneck, sirens are tested every Monday at 1400. I remember in the 1960s you could set your watch by the 12 noon "air raid" siren...a daily Civil Defense measure during our Cold War with the Soviets. It's about 50 years later, and I think the Marines are using the same siren for our "incoming fire" alert.
- Weapons are everywhere—in chow hall, at mass, at the gym, at the clinic, in the Post Office. Get used to it. (It never hurts to let someone know if her/his "safety" is off!)
- "Clear your weapons" barrels are at each building entrance.

Determining "waste":

- Electric energy for LNK comes from hundreds of massive diesel generators. If someone took time to install light switches that turn off when no one is in the room, there's no telling how much electricity that would save. The amount of electricity we waste is unbelievable. THIS IS NOT THE SECURITY LIGHTING. This is light in meeting rooms, in the latrines, in the housing that's on all the time. IT ALL ADDS UP. I was shocked.
- Huge MRAPs and up-armored HUMVEES idle all morning while convoys are figuring out where and when they'll be moving. I bet they can't get 2 miles to the gallon, and the energy they waste idling is literally going up in smoke/exhaust.
- CERP (Command emergency relief program) funds seem to be directly tied to the changes in command. For the most part, based on the limited access I have to the bigger war effort, CERP funds are used on projects that can make commanders (from Captains, LtCol, Cols, on up...) look good, but that may have little to no sustainable future once ISAF forces leave.

Smells: (how can there be smells here in the desert? There is NO humidity here!)

- Pungent "aroma" of Gray and Black water and Port-o-Loos
- Sweaty body smells in the gym
- Bleach and cleanser smells around the dumpsters

- Chemical smells around sewage holding tanks (This smell reminds me of days when my family would go camping in the travel trailer—when dad would dump the “holding tank.”)
- Grease smells around the DFAC
- Burning trash smells from the BURN pits—coming from both Bastion and Leatherneck—Plume of black smoke over the camp. Burning everything so that “insurgents” cannot benefit from what we might leave behind, i.e., 100,000,000 plastic water bottles!

Dust:

Can't be good to run in this (especially when the dust is combined with the smog from the burn pit). One of my office mates sounds like he's hacking up a hairball—coughing all day; claiming it's not a cold. (Each of the guys here plans to make sure to put a lung-compromised condition on his medical discharge.)

Heat:

The hottest day was the day of my Counter IED training. I thought my Kevlar helmet was going to melt. It was up to 128 F. (As a DoD civilian I have options. I opted out of the last hour of drills in the sun and went to sit in the shade with the “higher ups” who were observing the session.)

Chatting with US Marines:

Stuart (at the laundry mat)— A soft-spoken, polite young man...Offered me a place to sit while we were waiting on our clothes. He's based out of New River Air Station in NC. Wants to learn to fly when he's finished with his Marine contract. He's going home in a month. He notes that washing clothes at Leatherneck is a positive change from washing clothes in a bucket out at his base in northern Helmand Province.

I know that soon we'll be starting some kinetic offensives in this part of the battle space. I hope he gets to learn to fly.

Rob (met out in southern Helmand Province on a Combat Outpost (COP))-- He was my main “go to” guy helping me get readings on Helmand River. Rob has a bachelor's degree in history from a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. He is from Nantucket. After he returns from Afghanistan, he wants to get an MBA and go into business for himself. I wonder how being in Afghanistan will affect where he heads in life. For another 8 weeks, he's doing Civil Affairs in Helmand Province. It's a “hot” (ha... kinetic, as well as climate heat here!) area.

Us v Them

Divisions between all forces based on military ranks

Divisions between US and the rest of the international Coalition Force

Division between US Marines, Army, Navy, and Air Force

Division between Marines and Coalition Forces based in the amenities of Camps Bastions/Leatherneck and those based out in the rural rest of Regional Command Southwest.

Division between any military and civilians

Division between DOD civilians and other civilians

Division between DOD civilians based on GS pay grades

Division between those with Top Secret clearance and those with just Secret or below

Division between US contractors (non-DOD civilians) and "3rd world nationals" from Mexico, Sri Lanka, India, and parts of Africa who are here cleaning toilets and holding tanks, dealing with trash, cooking and serving food, doing construction work, etc.

Life and Death: Dignified Transfers/Vigils

The first dignified ceremony I attend is less than one week after I arrive at Camp Leatherneck. US Marines lead the dignified transfers for their fallen brothers/sisters. All Coalition Forces and force support civilians (like me) are invited to attend.

As Old Guard infantry, Emmett was at the other end of this ceremony. I stand on the flight line, watching the flag draped casket get carried onto the C-130s and think of the sorry and pain of loved ones in the States. I think of my friend Gary who used to fly a C130 transporting bodies back from Vietnam.

So far I have been to a dozen...Brit, Estonian, and US.

The US ceremony is very short and to the point: everyone into formation; casket passes crowd and goes up into the C-130. A few words are spoken about the deceased, and a prayer is said. Then dignitaries pass by casket in the plane while the rest of formation waits. Done in ~15 minutes.

The British vigils take about ½ hr. These services are more about the person than about transfer of the body. In fact, I've never seen a flag-draped British casket in theater. (I believe the vigil takes place after the body has already made its trip back to the British Isles.) The Brit ceremony includes bugle playing and firing of a cannon.

(One of the Brit vigils was for a Nepalese Gurkha soldier who died just a month after going into northern Helmand Province with his British unit. The young fighter was 21 years old; he was from a small community in Central Asia. His body was sent to UK, and his parents would have to go to UK to get him. That might be their first trip to Europe...)



06 Aug 2013

From: me

To: Dave

IT IS SO GOOD TO BE ABLE TO SHARE THIS WITH YOU AND TO GET YOUR FEEDBACK ON MY IMPRESSIONS OF WHAT'S GOING ON!

I can only imagine your experience in Iraq and the way relentless incoming fire must have worn you out.

So far I've been to the flight line for 4 "Dignified Transfers" (Marines) and 3 "Memorial Vigils" (British). 5 of those killed were killed by IEDs. I believe seeing a coffin loaded into a C130 is a scene like no other. Very sobering reminder that the stakes are high, and that all sides (coalition forces and local nationals) are paying a price in blood as well as treasure in this war.

When I get home--and who knows how soon that might be, considering the draw down of forces, the imminent merger of RCSW back with RCS, and reduction in billets (job assignments)--I'd love to join you there in Arlington for a cup of tea (or a mug of beer!).



Counter-IED (Improvised Explosive Device) Training

A 9 hr. activity in ~120 F degree heat. My training buddies (all of us new to the base) are from intelligence, legal, and just plain grunts.

(I had my first MRE (a veggie burger) at IED training!)

I'm conflicted over Doxycycline warning: "Avoid prolonged or excessive exposure to direct and/or artificial sunlight while taking this medication."

As part of Force Protection procedures, we are all required to take Doxy. Whatever.

I learn one KEY tip as to potential IED presence in an area is fertilizer. Well really?? In an agricultural area like the Helmand watershed where I work, this could be a challenge. EVERYONE uses fertilizer! There are bags EVERYWHERE.

We have multiple modules to cover that are all part of the Force Protection solutions: how to use jamming systems to stop use of remotely controlled devices. How to develop observation skills for spotting IED triggers. How to use metal detectors. How to walk with an IED patrol.

I also have to learn how to exit a Humvee and MRAP after IED clearing. USE other people's footprints. Step ONLY WHERE others have trod.

How the hell can you tell where "disturbed soil" is in the Dasht-e Margo?
How hot can a Kevlar helmet get?

During patrol role-play I retreat to the shade. Talk some with lance corporals running the show. Things that they miss (after being at Leatherneck and in RC(SW) area of interest for extended periods of time)—smell of grass, being on the couch, hanging out with friends. They don't think they'll miss sand. Could go anywhere for R&R, but all are going home. They all miss family and friends.

Counter IED training paints a great picture of Marine Combat Lifestyle:

Make do with what you have. It's a lot like working on an Odyssey of the Mind team.

For instance, the benches in amphitheater: the wooden seats, made from slabs of wood that had formerly been a hammered together as a packing pallet, were balanced on empty munitions cans. Et voila—theater seating.



From: LJ Palmer-Moloney

8/21/11

To: Jim, Angus, Emmett, Joan, James, Alta, Elizabeth, Heather, Doreen, Karen, Paul, Sharon, Michael, Craig, Ian

Just an update to let you all know that I'm doing well. Marines are making sure I get all the training and equipment I need before I head out into the field. Attached are a few photos from yesterday's NINE hour COUNTER -IED training--conducted outside in the 112 heat and Helmand "moon dust". Was GREAT eye-opener for me regarding how much the Marines out in the field endure. They have the heat/dust conditions, the helmet and body armor PLUS their M4 rifle and 3-4 magazines of ammo and other gear that they have to carry. And they can't "opt out" of work in the middle of the heat of

the day.

The most challenging part of the day for me was wearing my helmet and body armor (plate carrier) in full sun with no lick of shade. OMG---I had no idea my head could get so hot or that my neck could hurt so much or that I could SWEAT as much as I did. (I believe I consumed at least 12 bottles of water while we were out, and I'm pretty sure I sweated off 10 bottles.)

I also "cooked" my 1st MRE (meal ready to eat)! I prepared a "veggie burger with BBQ sauce" in a chemically heated bag. Yum...(I'm not 100% sure, but I was pretty close to being hungry enough to eat a can of Vienna sausage or Deviled Ham or even Spam.)

BUT, I'm doing well today. (Thank goodness I brought a BIG bottle of Ibuprofen!)

Thought you might enjoy a few more pictures :)

Much love,
Lj/mom/Jeannie/Jean

--

From: Karen 8/21/11

To: me

Love the uniform! Be sure you keep electrolyte balance -- don't just drink plain water -- am sure you know this, but just a reminder. Am super busy with real estate. Sales have picked up - lots of buyers.

Will visualize you in a glacial blue ice cloud.

Love you!

Karen

--

From: Doreen

8/22/11

To: me, Jim, Angus, Emmett, Joan, James, Alta, Elizabeth, Heather, Karen, Paul, Sharon, Michael, Craig, Ian

Thanks for the update Jean,

I will never complain about the hot summer days we have here. Whew! I can't wait to share your experiences with my students. The pictures are great. I am also going to incorporate your input into my paper on the Muslim women of the East. Do you want some reading material? I could use a reader if you have time on your hands.

A note from the education world: it looks like the Common Core Standards for the National Public School System may actually encourage our kind of teaching. I have been reading articles on how we will have the opportunity to allow students to think and write. Whoohoo! I do that anyway, but now I don't have to worry about my job as much because of my rebel teaching style. Tests? State tests?! What tests?

You would think I wouldn't have to worry about tests since I am teaching the non-Regents senior PIG and Economics classes. But our new evaluation process takes local assessments as 40% of our evaluation. I sure hope the kids show up in class. Maybe if I tap dance, or should I pole dance?!

I hope some good ol' teacher strife from America makes you feel at home. Let me know what you see of education while you are there.

Stay safe (it sounds like you are doing a good job at that)
Love you,
Doreen

--

From: Craig 8/23/11

To: me

I'm glad to see you found at least an ounce of shade for your picture! :) I start in Chantilly next week so PLEASE keep sending me messages at my craig.pullen@tasc.com address (cc'd on this message).

I can't believe they have veggie burgers as an MRE! Stay safe and hydrated, and I'm looking forward to each and every installment of the SAP in AF.

Are you able to receive messages on your iPhone? If so, I thought you might like to see a pic or 2 from home.

--

LJ Palmer-Moloney 8/26/11

To: Craig

What a GREAT PICTURE of you all!!! I'm sitting outside at Camp Julien today, enjoying the cloud cover and light rain before I head back to Camp Leatherneck tomorrow.

I miss you all!! Am putting together some more SAP chapters. My chapters got toooooo serious, and I had to cut a lot of what I've been writing lately...though it feels like a dark comedy blend of *Catch 22* and that movie *In the Loop*.

Thank you so much for staying in touch with me; it means a great deal.

LOVE YA!

Jean

--

From: Elizabeth 8/28/11

To: me

I hate to say it Jean but you look like a little kid dressed up in army clothes in this picture. It was great to talk to you yesterday! You sound strong and positive as ever! Hope Jim isn't getting washed away in VA. Everything here has been shut down for Hurricane Irene/Armageddon. So far, besides a wet angry cat who spent the night outdoors and the lid being blown off the neighbor's garbage can, we're making out just fine. I think CNN likes to make sure they're selling enough toothpaste and car insurance by stirring up a panic.

I WILL DO MY SYLLABI NOW.

Love,

BB

--

From: LJ Palmer-Moloney <ljean.palmermoloney@gmail.com> 8/28/11

To: Jim, Emmett, Angus, Joan, James, Alta, Elizabeth, Heather, Doreen, Karen, Paul

Yesterday I spent nearly 2 hours wearing camo and body armor while crammed in the "way-back" (the luggage area) of an ISAF (Internat'l Security Assistance Force) command SUV with a bunch of Marines, traveling over bumpy, pothole filled roads to get to Kabul airport.

When we finally got to the airport, I had to find something to do to occupy the 6 hrs before we would board the C130 back to Leatherneck.

Kabul airport's military side (vs. civilian facility) is run by NATO, not by US Forces-Afghanistan. That said, there are support facilities--including privately run concessions--to support our European partners and us.

THANK GOODNESS FOR THE NATO-SUPPORTED EFFORT!

I was able to get a facial and pedicure (\$30 for both!) at the Korea-run "Green Spa." After almost an hour of being pampered, I went to the Italian PX where I bought a cappuccino and tiramisu (\$3 for both!). I took my treats to a picnic table in the garden area by the Belgian barracks, where I drank my coffee and ate my dessert while soaking in the colors (GREEN and purple and pink and yellow). Smell of pansies brought back wonderful memories of summer.

all is well!

ciao

Lj

01 NOV 2011

Kabul Airport, waiting for transport back to Camp Bastion

1850

50 degrees F

Today I'm leaving Kabul after a trip to ISAF headquarters. At 0915 this morning, a Romanian/American drive team in an up-armored Toyota Land Cruiser picked up me and one other passenger-- an army first sergeant who is re-deploying (military speak for "going home"!). Coincidentally, this particular first sergeant was part of the security detail that picked me up three days earlier, and as we'd traversed Kabul, he and I had already engaged in polite chitchat as well as some serious discussion about the situation in Afghanistan.

So here we are together at the airport, and he's started the process of going home! [N.B.: This could take a week or more! First he will leave Kabul to fly to Baghram airbase, AF, no 50 km away. Then he'll catch a flight to Kuwait where he'll wait until there is available transport to Ft. Benning, GA.] He seems anxious. I decide to do my good deed for the day. If I weren't here at the airport with the sergeant, he'd be just another "individual augmentee" (military term used to designate a person deployed on his/her own rather than being deployed as part of a military unit) waiting for a flight. He'd be sitting on a bench in the Departure waiting area, probably alone with his thoughts. But instead, I give him the opportunity to talk about his deployment, to share some of his personal story, and to feel that someone cares about what he's done and the personal sacrifices he's made. If he had left Kabul without sharing this, would it be like a lone tree falling in the forest with no one to hear? I was happy to help him sort out his time in Afghanistan.

When the drive team left, I knew I'd have a long time to wait. "Show time" for boarding wasn't for about eleven hours. I'd planned to go get a facial and a manicure at the Kabul Airport spa (such a deal--\$16 for the facial and \$4 for the manicure!!). BUT I find myself with the sergeant, and I can't bring myself to abandon him. So instead, I go to the Italian PX and buy us each a piece of tiramisu and a coffee, and I sit with him and listen to his stories while we wait. I learn about his divorce after he'd come home from Iraq on his last deployment, about his current girlfriend, his kids, and his plans to work on the railroad after he gets out of the army.

Before leaving on this trip, I grabbed a copy of *Shopaholic goes Abroad* from the "take and read" collection at Little Heathrow. In the quiet spaces between the different topics of conversation with the sergeant, I sneak in few pages of reading. The sergeant tries to catch a few winks of sleep. At one point, I realize that while I was reading something happened. I look up and about 200 Afghan men are staring me down. The sergeant is sitting straight and tall with his M4 across his lap, looking very protective of me. Seems that two busloads of new recruits for the Afghan National Army were unloaded and lined up to wait to board a flight to who knows where, while I was engrossed in the shopping sprees of Rebecca Bloomwood.

The sergeant has on opaque black Oakleys, and I can't see his eyes. He faces straight ahead, but tells me he noticed the Afghan men giving me the once-over. Now, I'm no "knock-out"

today. I'm wearing my Rocky combat boots, a pair of khaki 5.11 cargo pants, a deep rose colored collared button-up blouse, and my M9. My hair hangs down below my shoulders, and my purple scarf is over on the luggage rack, out of reach. If I could have reached it in a nonchalant manner, I would have put it over my hair. BUT it's out of reach. I'm talking to the sergeant as I look at my book and as he looks straight ahead into the lines of Afghan men who look at me. It's so uncomfortable. I casually reach into my pocket and pull out a hair scrunchy. I bundle my hair into a bun, but my head is still uncovered. I feel so exposed. It seems like hours before the new recruits move into the terminal building to check in and to wait for their flight.

My time with the sergeant is time well spent. I can get a facial when I get back to Arlington—which will be in less than two weeks!!

ELEVEN DAYS AND COUNTING BEFORE I GET TO GO HOME FOR R&R. I'm not even going to bring a suitcase, just my assault bag. I want to carry my computer and my phones and travel like a Marine, tight and to the point. I have a cedar chest full of sweaters waiting for me. In my closet are the soft leather, fleece-lined boots I had made for me by an artisan at the Renaissance Fair. Oh, and my nice leather jacket is hanging downstairs in the coat closet. All of my toiletries and skin products will be in the bathroom cabinet.

I fly from Bastion to Dubai, then Dubai to Dulles, leaving Helmand at 1300 on 12 NOV, arriving in Virginia at 0635 on 13 NOV. I'm not really sure how many total hours I'll be traveling, but I don't care! Anybody can do anything for eleven days.

Thinking about clothes...and shopping...

I realize that I use money so infrequently I can't really remember how it feels. I'm not buying gas for the C-9 SUV, not buying food at the DFAC, not paying for all the bottles of water I drink, not paying for my laundry to be done, not even paying for the washer or drier or detergent when I do my laundry myself!

When I get to ISAF HQ, I have a couple of hours before any meetings begin. ISAF HQ is an international base located in the middle of Kabul, adjacent to the US Embassy. ISAF HQ has trees and international flags flying and roses in a garden with tables, chairs, grass, and cats running around, and PLACES TO SPEND MONEY. I buy a cappuccino and take my cup of Italian coffee and my book to the garden area beside the Italian restaurant. A couple of chapters into the *Shopaholic*, I realize that there is probably an ATM machine at ISAF, AND that there may be SHOPS on the base. For goodness sake, I'm going home for Thanksgiving and would be missing Christmas if I didn't strike while the iron was hot.

About \$850 later, my fingers have remembered the feeling of money, and I have had my fill of retail therapy. NOW I'm ready to get back to Leatherneck and then to leave for R&R.