

The military-humanitarian complex in Afghanistan

Eric James and Tim Jacoby

Manchester University Press

Rights Reserved 2016



Manchester University Press

Preface

The origins of this book began nearly 15 years ago. About six weeks after the attacks of September 11 2001, I boarded a plane for Dushanbe, Tajikistan where I joined a couple of other aid workers. We made our way to the Afghan frontier a few hour's drive to the south. Once there, we came to the Amu-Darya River crossing and found it teeming with people – fighters, war correspondents and aid workers – waiting to transit. Standing on the shore, I took out our map and guessed we were at least 15 kilometers east of the frontline.

We watched more trucks go by and then, all of a sudden, explosive shockwaves rocked everything. On a ridge where Taliban forces held firm, a line of smoke several hundred yards across rose into the sky. I looked directly overhead and saw what appeared to be a B-52 about 40,000 feet up leaving a white contrail as it turned back to the south. Those around me watched for a few moments and then went back to waiting and taking care of mundane tasks. Once the bulk of weapons and ammo were shipped on the precarious barge, we made it across and onward to the village of Dashti-Qala as sunset. That was my first day in Afghanistan.

The war came at a convenient time for me. With a freshly minted master's degree and an emergency medical technician certificate, I was looking for my next relief job when September 11 2001 happened. I might have used my degree for writing funding proposals (often wasted on slow moving donor representatives), but it was the medical skills that helped save two local boys. They were playing with a disused mortar shell; seriously wounding one and nearly killing the other. I had the smallest role in a response that was a collective effort of aid workers and Special Forces.

In the weeks that followed, the Taliban regime faded away and we expanded our relief efforts including health, water, education and efforts to stimulate the local economy. This also included going to Kabul to establish a new office and programs there. In January 2002, the bombed out road route to the south had just reopened and so I set out with a local driver named Ahmed in an old Russian UAZ jeep. After fording a river (Ahmed shut off the vehicle and we were then towed by a horse), we crossed tracks of desert and narrow fertile valleys before starting up the Hindu Kush mountains.

There is one passage open “year round” through the Salang tunnel. During the summer months, the route can be a pleasant drive with stunning views but in the winter it can be deadly. We climbed the foothills to the tree line as a blizzard set in. Ahmed continued with quiet confidence as he gained my trust and respect. With only about three mutually intelligible words between us I reminded myself that Afghans have a love for poetry and proverbs, a few of which I copied in my notebook before leaving. One saying goes, “There is a path to the top of even the highest mountain” (*ko ar qadar ke beland basha baz am sare kbud ra dara*) – where there is a will there a way.

The snow fell hard as we made our way up the mountain road. We passed massive military transports as well as 4x4 jeeps as they lay stuck spinning their wheels; ordinary cars were forced to stop or turn around long before this point. Along the upper reaches, landmine markers lined the way forward. At one point we started spinning toward one and then fishtailed across the road toward another. By luck and by pluck, Ahmed managed to negotiate each turn rising higher and higher toward the tunnel. Often shrouded in mist, the entrance is little more than an archway protruding from the side of the mountain. The opening was jammed with traffic, people yelled (those with Kalashnikov's seemed to be the loudest) as vehicles jockeyed for position to enter the tunnel. Lacking proper management, at

least an hour passed before it was finally our turn. Finally inside, we crept forward in first gear. There were deep icy puddles, few lights and no ventilation; noxious fumes filled our jeep.

After about two and half kilometers we made it through, covered in soot and the smell of exhaust. Several weeks later, during my second trip, an avalanche trapped traffic inside and as drivers left their motors running several people succumbed to the fumes. Making it down the southern route was no less of an adventure with several close calls. I did not know what to expect as it grew dark. Still in the mountains, we had not yet reached the long Shomali plain, a long way off to Kabul, when we pulled over to rest for the night.

Very vulnerable, the only foreigner at the Afghan truck stop, Ahmed once again took me under his wing finding a plate of pulao, hot chai and a warm mattress. As we prepared for the night, I read through my notes: “The first day you meet, you are friends. The next day you meet, you are brothers” (*yak roz didi dost, dega roz didi bradar*); friendship grows into brotherhood. It was proven to me that night and many times since that the hospitality of the Afghan is unrivaled. Even where language failed, I will forever recall the knowing glance so many Afghans have shared with me as if to say, “I know this place is difficult but we’re here to help each other through it now.”

I stayed on in Afghanistan for about another year and half, and have made it back most years since then. Looking back, that time was filled with more than a few close shaves. Even with high levels of insecurity, the truth is of course I was relatively safe in that statistics were on my side. The overwhelming suffering is borne by the local populace – Afghans in this case but the same is true anywhere aid workers operate.

It was from these experiences that I found that people’s conceptions of security, aid and peace are often incomplete and sometimes just wrong. Tim and I have put together our best effort in offering better analysis and understanding of these issues. Far more than simply an academic concern, these issues have real consequences and we hope this contribution will help those engaged in making these situations better.

Eric James