

LTC Garrett Yee's Update #12
(November 7-13, 2006)
Finishing up in Afghanistan

Dear Family and Friends,

Tuesday, November 7, 2006. Election Day. This day, I reflect on one of the great privileges that we have in the United States—our ability to elect our government. This is exactly what we have been assisting to do in both Afghanistan and Iraq in their reconstruction efforts. There are so many simple things that we take for granted that this country does not have. In many regions, Afghanistan does not have schools, water, electricity, and paved roads. So, today, I get re-elected to the Ohlone College Board of Trustees since I'm running unopposed. Hopefully some day Afghanistan will have more colleges. They first need to build elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as find male and female teachers, so more kids can be in position to attend college some day. It is going to take time.



Kabul in the fall is not bad at all. It is cool and brisk in the early morning and the leaves are starting to turn color. When the United States came into this part of Kabul, I heard we bought up an entire neighborhood and converted it into offices. So, unlike other military bases where you have rows of tents or temporary buildings, we have blocks of residential homes, albeit nice homes, that serve as offices, dining facilities, meeting rooms, a PX, etc. In between the houses, we placed large shipping containers for storage and built additional structures. The result is that getting around

from one place to another requires some practice. In the middle of the compound there is a small motor pool, where I happened to see the California National Guard shoulder patch. Upon inquiring, I found one Soldier, Sergeant Ali, who is a 1997 graduate of James Logan High and lives in Union City. Of course, I took a photo.

Later in the day, I had the opportunity to sit in on a meeting with a Canadian Brigadier General and a British Commodore (equivalent to a Brigadier General) to discuss lessons learned in Afghanistan—right down my alley. On the way to dinner, I bumped into Mr. Timothy Sugrue, who I previously met in Jalalabad. We had coffee after dinner and he gave me an update on his efforts to pair business school students with businesses in Afghanistan. Things are looking up for his project.



Wednesday, November 8, 2006. Big travel day. Today, I'm heading out to the Mazar-e-Sharif Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). Mazar is said to be a popular place for growing special flowers. In any event, I was able arrange a ride from Camp Eggers to the airport—nothing is



easy—at least not the first time. Short story is that I met someone by chance the other day who said that if needed, they might be able to take me to the airport. As it turned out it was just what I needed. Along the way to the air port, I could see kites stuck in trees. It reminded me of a book I read at Maria's recommendation, written by Khaled Hosseini, "The Kite Runner." The kids here love to fly kits. Of course, no trip anywhere is complete without animals walking through the streets.

By the way, from my last letter home, Ron Fong looked up and found the following: Camp Eggers was renamed in March 2005 from the Kabul Compound in recognition of US Army Special Forces Captain Daniel Eggers, of Cape Coral, Florida, who was killed on May 29, 2004 when his vehicle swerved to avoid a mine and was hit by an IED near Kandahar, Afghanistan. Thanks Ron!

At the airport, we finally found a small white airplane hidden amongst several large airplanes. My driver literally drove onto the flight line looking for the aircraft—I don't recommend this back home. We found it and I was good to go. I met a British officer named Bryan that I had met the other day at the International Security Assistance Forces headquarters. Although Brian is a British Soldier, he is from Ireland and so he confuses



people with his Irish accent—they expect a different accent.



Today, the good news is that I have a flight to Mazar-e-Sharif. The downside was that it was the scenic route. I flew south to Kandahar, then east to Herat, then north to Mazar-e-Sharif. People call it "MeS" or "Mazar" for short. The passenger sitting next to me told me that during the Taliban regime, he was jailed twice for two weeks because his beard was not long enough. His co-worker said that he was jailed once for watching just a regular video—after that he fled to Iran until after the Taliban were taken out of power in 2001.



I finally arrived at the Mazar airport and it looked like a scene out of an old movie. It was in the middle of nowhere. As I waited inside the lounge, the place felt deserted, even though there were people around. Finally, a petite blond Swedish Soldier came up to me and checked my name and said she was there to bring me back to the compound. She took me to the convoy and off we went in a Mercedes military SUV-type vehicle (Gelendawagon). On the way back, we drove through town on dirt roads. There are lots of kids, animals, shops, and just people out. Almost all the kids seemed to be waving as they recognized the military vehicles. Mazar is a PRT on Camp Northern Lights run by the Swedish military, and so this base camp is mostly Swedish. There are also Finnish, Romanian, Polish, and Danish Soldiers on camp. Out of about 300 Soldiers, there are no US Soldiers assigned. So, it feels a little like Scandinavia. In fact, as I try to check my email, I am struggling with a Scandinavian keyboard and Scandinavian version of



Microsoft Outlook. I meet with LT Isak and CPT Kia of the intelligence section and receive an overview of the enemy activity in the area and a tour of the facilities. The Finnish have built a little camp within the Swedish camp. It has a great barbecue grill, and of course, a sauna!

The next day after the morning brief, I decided to stay at the base camp since I had a scheduled flight out of Mazar mid-day. Precisely at 10:30 a.m., winter came to Camp Northern Lights. Although the weather did not look good, the flight out was not until the

afternoon, so we thought we would be okay. As it turns out, the dust storm was too thick, and then coupled with the wind and rain, all flights were cancelled. So, I'm at Camp Northern Lights for another night—not necessarily a bad place to be. The Swedes (and Fins) are great. I did get quite a bit done today—I got to speak with the Chief of Staff of the PRT, LTC Peter Oberg, met with the USAID representative, Kim Yee (good name), met with the Department of State representative, Karen Malzahn, and of course got some excellent insights on how international PRTs are yet even more different than US PRTs. In the late evening, I stopped in at the Finnish camp and sat by the fire inside the Kota. I need to get one of these at home.





On Friday, all I can say is that we tried again. We got up early, took a Swedish armored personnel carrier escort to the German air field, got on the German cargo plan (C-160), and took off. We landed in a place called Kondoz. At Kondoz, you could see soviet aircraft hulks all over. They are most interesting to look at (and take photos). We then took off and flew to Kabul. This would have been fine, except for the fact that once we got to Kabul, the pilots

couldn't land due to weather. So, we turned around and flew right back to Mazar. Back at the German air field, we ate lunch with the Germans who were kind enough to offer us hot food. It really hit the spot. After we got back to Camp Northern Lights, we had a mid-Friday afternoon snack of waffles with ice cream. I was able to get my laundry done, which was a good thing given the fact that I had run out of clean clothes. I was starting to wonder why everyone was giving me more space... After dinner, Captain Kai (Finland) and I played a game of foosball with two Romanian Soldiers. It was close, but we lost. After that, I spent a little time writing and sending out my update to family and friends.



Saturday, November 11, 2006. One of my worst days deployed so far. The cumulative toll on my family is evident. I wish I could be home. Thank goodness for my good friend Darin Lee. I don't know what I'd do without him. Darin was the best man at my wedding and has been my good friend all these years. As if the toll of family is not bad enough, I got word that my former Command Sergeant Major Ahmed Hussein's wife, Zabeen, suddenly passed away. She was a vibrant woman full of energy and fun. She was the inspiration for his achievements. She was always behind him. I have mixed feelings including this in my update, but it is my way of remembering such a wonderful woman. (I checked with Ahmed before including this.)



This day, we tried for a third time in as many days to fly out of Mazar, but once we got to the air field in our armored personnel carrier, we were turned away. So back to Camp Northern Lights for us. As we were about to have lunch, we got the call that a Netherlands plane was flying through Mazar and on to Kabul. We rushed over to the airfield, then found out that we were about 45 minutes early. However, we made good use of the time by having lunch with the Netherland

contingent at their DFAC. Of course since it was Saturday, lunch included traditional rice

porrage. To our surprise, although it should not have been, we got on the flight and it took off. It was a large white plane called a Fokker 50. It had real seats. It also landed in Kabul

International Airport. Forth time is a charm I guess.



Upon deplaning, I said goodbye and thanks to my hosts and the Swedish Ambassador that had been traveling with us and I walked over to the PAX (passenger) terminal to see what flights were available. To my good luck, there was a flight going to Bagram Air Field (BAF) in the next hour. I jumped on the opportunity and got myself back to Bagram before dinner. My laundry had been waiting for me from when I dropped it off before

heading out so I was good to go. Once back at BAF, I checked on flights going to Qatar (so I could go back to Iraq) and found one that I had to show up for at 0200. So, I won't be getting much sleep, again...

Very early Sunday morning. I tried to get some sleep before my report time. Of course, I couldn't sleep, but I did rest. At about 0145, I walked over to the PAX terminal and reported for my flight. There I waited and watched the Florida vs. South Carolina football game on the terminal television. It was a close game, but in the end Florida won by one point. When our plane was ready to board at about 0430, we boarded the Air Force C-17 cargo plane. It was almost empty. There were 14 passengers and that's it going back to Qatar. Once we



were airborne, most of us slept a few hours on the floor of the plane. This really beats flying on C-130s.



We arrive in Qatar mid-morning and it is already hot. Big change from the cold of Afghanistan. I check the flight schedules and I'm able to get onto another C-17 headed to Balad Air Field, Iraq, which is near Baghdad.

I'll still need to get a flight to BIAP (remember Baghdad International Airport?), but this gets me closer. One step at a time. On the flight from Qatar to Balad, we had 5 passengers on a C-17. Once I got into Balad, I checked with the PAX terminal and found there was a flight later that night. I called my friend Ross to see if he could pick me up and as luck would have it, he would be available if we got in that night.





While I was waiting at Balad, I saw a bunch of 1st Cavalry Soldiers from Fort Hood, Texas. I inquired about my nephew and found his Command Sergeant Major, who by chance did know Diego Vera. He said that Diego was doing well. I passed along my greetings and told him that if possible, I would try to visit Diego once he hits the ground and gets settled in the next week or so. I caught the flight, which again was a C-17, less than half full, back to BIAP, where Ross picked me up around 2045. I dropped by bags off at my room and headed into my work area. There I found about 10 boxes—nine from my work in San

Francisco, and one from my old unit at Fort Bliss. What a big surprise to come back to. I'm too exhausted to open the boxes so I will open them in the morning. I call it a night around 2200 so I can get back to my hooch and shower before heading to bed. It feels good to be back in my own bed.

Monday, November 13, 2006. This morning, I tried to sleep in but awoke because I was so cold. Winter has come to Iraq. Although the day would be sunny and warm (comfortable), nights and mornings are getting cool. My body aches all over. The last 17 days on the road traveling away from Camp Victory and into Afghanistan has been exhausting. I get into my work area a little later than normal after doing my laundry and putting everything away. I open the boxes of goodies and am almost speechless on how much support that I have from my civilian work (Workers Compensation Insurance Rating Bureau of California) and from my old unit (3rd Brigade, 91st Division). I meet up with my co-worker, LTC Jeff Adkins, who just came over to Iraq after spending seven months in Afghanistan. Ross, Jeff and I later go to Camp Slayer so I can get a haircut, and while we are there, we stop by the Flintstones and walk around a bit. The Flintstones is a structure built for one of Saddam Hussein's sons who liked the Flintstones. I'm not sure where the day went but before I know it, it is 2200 and time to call it a day. Some how, it's good to be back in Baghdad. Sounds funny, but that's the way is.



That's it for now.
Cheers!

Garrett