

# Update from the Middle East

by Ohlone College Trustee Garrett Yee

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Dear Family and Friends,



As I sit down to write my second letter home, it's the last day of 2011. Since November 26th, so much has happened. We had just celebrated Thanksgiving in Kandahar Province in Afghanistan and now it seems like ages ago. I've also included a map of the various places I've traveled during my tour in Afghanistan. Hopefully this will give you a better idea of the cities and bases around Afghanistan. This is a long letter so if you just want to look at the photos, I understand.



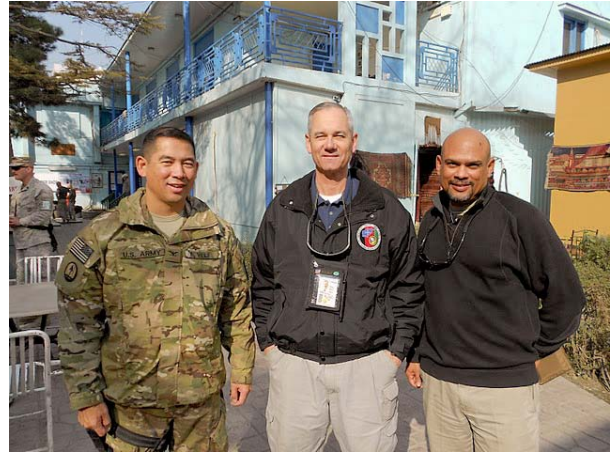


A few days after Thanksgiving, we traveled to Bagram Air Field where I have a team stationed in support of the 1st Cavalry Division out of Fort Hood, Texas. I remember arriving in Bagram the first time in November 2006. It's November again but this time, although it still had Disney Avenue, I couldn't have foreseen all of the growth. In fact, Disney Avenue is now paved and an I-beam from the World Trade Center now stands as a memorial to those that lost their lives on September 11, 2001. In 2006, Afghanistan had become the "other" war while Iraq captured all of the attention in the news.

If not for all of the land mines in Afghanistan from the 1980s, Bagram would make a great ski resort. No kidding. If you drive around the perimeter of the air base, you can see where the mines have been cleared as well as where they are identified awaiting clearing. This is one job I wouldn't want to have.



People say it's a small Army because you frequently run into people you know from past assignments. By Tuesday, November 29th, we were able to make our way to Kabul by flying into the North Kabul International Airport, referred to as North KIA. A drive team picked us up in an up-armored SUV and drove us through the streets of Kabul to Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix (Camp Phoenix) where we have another team stationed. Camp Phoenix would become my new home away from home. Here I met Colonel (Retired) Nick Moore who I worked with in California. Nick continues to serve in retirement and will be working with me again, this time in Afghanistan.



Over the next several days, we would travel to various locations in Kabul known as the Greater Kabul Metropolitan Area. We traveled to the New Kabul Complex where I have a team stationed, Camp Eggers where we have projects under way, and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters. While at Camp Eggers, I met up with my former military supervisor, Colonel (Retired) Robert Visbal who is continuing to serve our Nation in retirement. While at ISAF, I met Colonel Dennis McCormack, who was one of my Infantry Officer Basic Course classmates at Fort Benning, Georgia, in 1988. After we got back to Camp Phoenix, I was eating lunch in the dining facility and ran into Sergeant Major Robert Hammerle, who I had served with in Iraq during 2006. Sergeant Major has been through a lot since we last served together, to include spending over a year at Walter Reed Medical Center.



On December 4th, which happened to be CPT Singhaseni's birthday, our drive team picked us up at Camp Phoenix and took us to North KIA to catch an Australian Air Force C-130 flight back down to

Kandahar. I was just walking out of the German store near the flight terminal where I had purchased some Cuban cigars (for a friend) when I ran into Major Tuminero and Specialist Drake. MAJ Tuminero had previously served as my S1 (Administrative Officer) when I was the 650th Regional Support Group commander in Las Vegas and Specialist Drake served in one of my subordinate battalions. Talk about surprise to see these two!

We spent a couple days with my team down in Kandahar then we departed for Kuwait on a C-17 on December 5th. As always, our colleagues from Camp Arifjan met us at Ali Al Saleem Air Base ready to take us on the 2-hour journey back to Camp Arifjan. But, before we made the trek, we had to eat at the Desert Diamond Chinese food restaurant-Captain Singhaseni's favorite place to eat at Ali Al Saleem. It's not very fancy-in fact, it's in an old trailer but it serves big shrimp. CPT Singhaseni has been my traveling partner for these past several weeks and is a big food fan. He can give you a food rating for most of the major military dining facilities in Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan.

After spending about four days down in Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, we packed our bags ready for cold weather and took the two-hour trek back to Ali Al Saleem on December 11th, ready to head back to Afghanistan. We had a 2100 report time to the air field which meant it was going to be another long night without sleep. Our C-17 flight delivered us to Kandahar at 0430 in the morning where our Kandahar team picked us up from the air field and took us to lodging where we rested for a few hours before getting ready to take a C-130 flight up to Kabul. We arrived late that same evening and prepared to stay the night. However, while on the flight, I met COL Kim, who had previously served with the 335th Signal Command and happened to be stationed at Camp Phoenix as well. We rode with his drive team back to Camp Phoenix and arrived around mid-night. It was a strange feeling, but the feeling was that "it was good to be home."



We spent the next few days at Camp Phoenix getting settled in and doing laundry. I'm staying at a place called "Legoland" where the stacked shipping containers converted to temporary lodging look like a lot of large legos snapped together. I get half of a container or "half can."

On December 15th, our drive team picked us up and took us to North KIA where we flew a German Air Force C-160 to Mazar-e-Sharif located in northern Afghanistan. The last time I flew into Mazar-e-Sharif, it was November 2006, and it was getting cold. This time, it was December and it was already cold. SFC Hall, one of my team members stationed at Marmal, a German run base in Mazar-e-Sharif, met us at the air terminal and took us to our tents where we would spend the night. That evening, we had dinner at a German restaurant called the Oasis where we had German Schnitzel. It felt strange to be eating German Schnitzel in Afghanistan-then again, nothing is normal here in Afghanistan, especially during a war.



The next day, we took a short Canadian helicopter flight to Forward Operating Base DehDadi where we reviewed the projects under way and flew back that afternoon. DehDadi is a very austere site where the most exciting part of the trip was getting back on the helicopter to fly back to Marmal. On December 17th, we flew in on a Chinook helicopter to Kunduz, our northernmost remote site where I have a one-man team on station. Sitting next to the gunner's



window, we froze the entire flight. We landed on the German Provincial Reconstruction Team side of the base and then caught an MRAP convoy to the American FOB where we met SFC Lopez. This was intended to be a short trip, but due to the weather, we were delayed for three days. We did get a chance to visit the bazaar where CPT Singhaseni and SFC Lopez went shopping for clothes while I tried to remain warm by hanging out with the local workers around a garbage can fire.



As a "black out" post, Kunduz is pitch black at night and getting around at night with limited moonlight makes life interesting. As a small outpost, we were lucky if we had warm food for breakfast and the standard lunch fare included cold sandwiches. Did I say it gets cold here up in the north?





When it snowed, we were lucky if we didn't get snow on the food carrying it from the serving line to the dining tents. As for the PX, the inventory as so limited that the Soldiers running the PX had all of the prices memorized.

We worked our way back to Marmal where

we got weather delayed as well. The day before we left Marmal, I woke up to take a shower. I had to walk 110 steps in my shower shoes in the snow. I was all set to take a shower but when I turned the water on, NO WATER. It's below freezing outside so I went to the next shower pod, NO WATER. I go to the third shower pod and finally warm water! I get in. Two minutes later the water starts to turn cold! I guess I'm done with the shower. We finally got back to North KIA, and then back to Camp Phoenix taking Canadian and German flights on December 22nd.



Back to our home base at Camp Phoenix, it felt good to dawn a fresh set of uniforms. Our 3-day trip had turned into a 7-day trip and it was time to get some laundry done! My colleagues from Camp Arifjan in the meantime had been making their way up to Kabul to meet with us.



On Christmas Day, my colleagues arrived on a Blackhawk helicopter on our base. Although December 25th is a work day just like any other day in Afghanistan, we did take some time out of the day to enjoy and celebrate a little. Some of us helped out and served meals to our fellow military members at the dining facility and later in afternoon, we raised flags over our new building. In preparation for holidays, Mrs. Alma Chiesa's third grade class sent letters to Soldiers that we used to decorate our building. Christmas Day 2011 in Afghanistan will remain in our memories for a long time. I have included a photo of our Camp Phoenix team and colleagues from Kuwait raising the flag on Christmas Day: (left to right: SPC Olivo, SFC Walker, SGM Damo, me, CPT Singhaseni, SSG Stovall, COL Everett).

Between Christmas and the New Year, we remained mostly at Camp Phoenix with short trips around the Greater Kabul Metropolitan Area. Over the past week, we have been incredibly busy with activity all around the Southwest Asia area, more than I had imagined.



Some day, I may be able to talk about it. Thank goodness for the technology of secure video teleconferencing, I am able to remain plugged into key actions in Iraq and Kuwait!



At the same time, it is times like this that we all miss our families the most. For me, it's my wife Maria, and our children Gilbert, Michael, Alissa. It's my parents Gilbert and Michi, my sister Grace and her family, my brother Brendan and his family, and my extended family on my side and Maria's side.

While we huddle together as a family overseas, it does not replace the love and affection of those closest to us. I do miss my family but I am glad that I do have my comrades in arms to share the holidays.

As we close out 2011, we all look forward to 2012 when we will be returning home. Happy New Year!

Regards,  
Garrett