

4:55pm, August 1, 2010. Here Be Dragons

MRAPs, Sprained Ankles, Air Conditioning, Farting Contests, and Other Snapshots from the American War in Afghanistan

By Ann Jones

In the eight years I've reported on Afghanistan, I've "embedded" regularly with Afghan civilians, especially women. Recently, however, with American troops "surging" and journalists getting into the swing of the military's counterinsurgency "strategy" (better known by its acronym, COIN), I decided to get with the program as well. Last June, I filed a request to embed with the U.S. Army. These were my experiences.

Polite emails from Army public affairs specialists ask journalists to provide evidence of medical insurance, a requirement I took as an admission that war is not a healthy pursuit. I already knew that, of course -- from the civilian side. Plus I'd read a lot of articles and books by male colleagues who had risked their necks with American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. What struck me about their work was this: even when they described screw-ups coming down from the top brass, those reporters still managed to make the soldierly enterprise sound pretty consistently heroic. I wondered what they might be leaving out.

So I sent in a scan of my Medicare card. I worried that this evidence of my senior citizenship, coupled with my membership in the "weaker sex," the one we're supposedly rescuing in Afghanistan, would raise questions about my fitness for missions "outside the wire" of a Forward Operating Base (FOB, pronounced "fob") in eastern Afghanistan only a few miles from the tribal areas of Pakistan. But no, I got my requested embed -- proof of neither fitness nor heroism required (something my male colleagues had never revealed). In the end, my age and gender were no handicap. As Agatha Christie's Miss Marple knows, people will say almost anything to an old lady they assume to be stupid.

Boys and Their Toys

Having been critical of American policies from the get-go, I saw nothing on the various Army

bases I visited to change my mind. One day at that FOB, preparing to go on a mission, the sergeant in charge wrote the soldiers' names on the board, followed by "Terp" to designate the Afghan-American interpreter who would accompany us, and "In Bed," which meant me. He made a joke about reporters who are more gung-ho than soldiers. Not me. And I wasn't alone. I had already met a lot of older guys on other bases, mostly reservists who had jobs at home they felt passionately about -- teachers, coaches, musicians -- and wives and children they loved, who just wanted to go home. One said to me, "Maybe if I were ten years younger I could get into it, but I'm not a boy anymore."

The Army had sent me a list of ground rules for reporters -- mostly commonsense stuff like don't print troop strength or battle plans. I also got a checklist of things to bring along. It was the sort of list moms get when sending their kids off to camp: water bottle, flashlight, towel, soap, toilet paper (for those excursions away from base), sleeping bag, etc. But there was other stuff too: ballistic eyewear, fireproof gloves, big knife, body armor, and Kevlar helmet. Considering how much of my tax dollar goes to the Pentagon, I thought the Army might have a few spare flak jackets to lend to visiting reporters, but no, you have to bring your own.

That was perhaps a sign of things to come, as I was soon swamped by complaints from soldiers and civilian contractors alike: not enough armor, not enough vehicles, not enough helicopters, not enough weapons, not enough troops -- and even when there seemed to be plenty of everything, complaints that nothing was of quite the right kind. This struck me as a peculiarly privileged American problem that seemed to underlie almost everything I was to see on the eastern front of this war. Those complaints, in fact, seemed to spring from the very nature of the American military enterprise -- from its toxic mix of paranoia, entitlement, and good intentions.

Take the paranoia, which I suppose comes with the territory. You wouldn't be there if you didn't think that there were enemies all around. I turned down a military flight for the short hop from the Afghan capital Kabul to Bagram, the main American base -- a rapidly expanding "city" of more than 30,000 people. Instead, I asked an Afghan friend to drive me out in his car.

A Public Affairs officer warned me that driving was "very dangerous," but the only problem we met was a U.S. military convoy headed in the opposite direction, holding up traffic. For more than an hour we sat by the highway with dozens of Afghan motorists watching a parade of enormous flatbed trucks hauling other big vehicles: bulldozers and armored personnel carriers of various vintages from Humvees to MRAPs (Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles). My friend said, "We don't understand. They have all these big machines. They put them on trucks and haul them up and down the road. Why?"

I couldn't get an answer, but I got a clue when I took an Army chopper from Bagram to a smaller base and met a private contractor partly responsible for Army vehicle maintenance. He gave me a CD to pass on to his foreman at the FOB I was headed for. Rather than music, it held an instruction manual for repairing the latest model M-ATV, a hulking personnel carrier with a V-shaped hull designed to repel the blast of roadside bombs. These are currently replacing the older MRAPs and deadly low-slung Humvees. The Humvees are, in turn, being passed off to the Afghan National Army, whose soldiers are more expendable than ours. (You see what I mean about entitlement.) Standing in a lot full of new M-ATVs already in need of fixing, the foreman seemed pleased indeed to get that CD.

It's a measure of our sense of entitlement, I think, that while the Taliban and their allies still walk to war wearing traditional baggy cotton pants and shirts, we Americans incessantly invent things to make ourselves more "secure." Since no one can ever be secure, least of all in war, every new development is bound to prove insufficient and almost guaranteed to create new problems.

Still, Americans feel entitled to safety. Hence the MRAP was designed to address a double whammy of fear: roadside bombs (IEDs) and ambushes. I was trained to be a passenger in an MRAP for a mission that never materialized, but in the process I learned where the built-in handholds are for those frequent occasions when the top-heavy MRAP rolls down a mountainside.

The trainer talked so assuredly about what to do in case of a rollover that he almost gave me the impression you could swivel your hips and right the vehicle, like a kayak. But no, once it rolls, it's a goner. You have to crawl out and walk. (So much for ambush protection.) Then, one of those big trucks we saw on the highway to Bagram has to come out and haul it back to base, where the foreman with that new instruction-manual CD may have a go at fixing it. That, in a nutshell, is why the 7-passenger MRAP is being replaced by the 5-passenger M-ATV, a huge armored all-terrain vehicle not quite so inclined to tip over. Because it holds fewer soldiers, however, you have to put more of those vehicles on the road, and I'm sure you already see where that leads.

One benefit of our addiction to expensive, state-of-the-art stuff, however faulty it may prove, is that the private manufacture of armaments now helps keep our economy on life support and makes some military-industrial types rich. One drawback is that -- though it's a hard point for American soldiers in the line of fire to grasp -- it actually undercuts our heralded COIN strategy. Afghans out there fighting in their cotton pajamas take Western reliance on heavy armor as a

measure of our fear -- not to mention the inferiority of our gods on whose protection we appear unwilling to rely. (By contrast, the watchman at the small Afghan National Army base adjacent to the FOB I was visiting slept on a cot on the roof, exposed to enemy fire with his tea kettle beside him, either trusting his god, or maybe knowing something we don't about the "enemy.")

### All the Comforts of War

On the great scale of American bases, think of Bagram as a city, secondary bases as small towns, FOBS as heavily gated communities in rural landscapes, and outlying COPs (Combat Outposts) as camps you wouldn't want your kid to go to. A FOB is, by definition, pretty far out there on the fringe, but I have to say straight out that when the chopper dropped me off in full (and remarkably heavy) body armor and Kevlar helmet at my designated FOB, it didn't look at all like "the front" to me.

I should explain that my enduring image of war comes from the trenches of World War I, from which my father returned with a lot of medals, lifelong disabilities, and horrific picture books I wasn't allowed to see as a child. In that war, men lived for months on end without a change of uniform, in muddy or frozen trenches, infested with rats and lice, often amid their own excrement and their own dead.

The frontline FOB where I landed and its soldiers, by contrast, are spic-and-span. Credit for this goes largely to the remarkably inexpensive labor of crews of Filipinos, Indians, Croatians, and others lured from distant lands by American for-profit private contractors responsible for making our troops feel at home away from home. The base's streets are laid out on a grid. Tents in tidy rows are banked with standard sand bags and their super-sized cousins, towering Hescos filled with rocks and rubble.

The tents are cooled by roaring tornados of air conditioning, thanks to equipment fueled by gasoline that costs the Army about \$400 per gallon to import. It takes fuelers three to four hours every day to refill all the giant generators that keep the cold air coming, so I felt guilty when, to prevent shivering in my sleep, I stuffed my towel into the ducts suspended from the ceiling of my tent.

More permanent buildings are going up and some, already built by Afghans and deemed not

good enough for American habitation, are scheduled for reconstruction. Even in distant FOBs like this one, the building boom is prodigious. There's a big gym with the latest body-building equipment, and a morale-boosting center equipped with telephones and banks of computers connected to the Internet that are almost always in use. A 24/7 chow hall serves barbecued ribs, steak, and lobster tails, though everything is cooked beyond recognition by those underpaid laborers to whom this cuisine is utterly foreign.

There's a remarkably speedy laundry and, as for the toilets and showers -- I can speak only for those few designated "Female" -- they were the best I'd seen anywhere in Afghanistan. A sign politely suggested limiting your shower to five minutes, a nod to the expense of paying for-profit contractors to hire truckers to haul in the necessary water, and then haul out to undisclosed locations the copious effluence of American latrines. (At Bagram, that effluence goes into a conveniently nearby river, a water source for countless Afghans.) The other detritus from this expanding FOB is dumped into a pit and burned, including a staggering, but undisclosed, number of plastic water bottles. All this helps explain the annual cost of maintaining a single American soldier in Afghanistan, currently estimated at one million dollars.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not making a case for filthy trenches. But why should war be gussied up like home? If war were undisguisedly as nasty and brutish as it truly is, it might also tend to be short. Soldiers freed from illusions might mutiny, as many did in Vietnam, or desert and go home. But this modern, cushier kind of pseudo-war is different.

Many young soldiers told me that they actually live better in the Army, even when deployed, than they did in civilian life, where they couldn't make ends meet, especially when they were trying to pay for college or raise a family by working one or two low-wage jobs. They won't mutiny. They're doing better than many of their friends back home. (And they're dutiful, which makes for acts of personal heroism, even in a foolhardy cause.) They are likely to reenlist, though many told me they'd prefer to quit the Army and go to work for much higher pay with the for-profit private contractors that now "service" American war.

But the odd thing is that no one seems to question the relative cushiness of this life at war (nor the inequity of the hard scrabble civilian life left behind) -- least of all those best able to observe firsthand the contrast between our garrisons and the humble equipment and living conditions of Afghans, both friend and foe. Rather, the contrast seems to inspire many soldiers with renewed appreciation of "our American way of life" and a determination to "do good things" for the Afghan people, just as many feel they did for the people of Iraq.

I emphasize all this because nothing I'd read about soldiering prepared me for the extent of these comforts -- or the tedium that attends them. Plenty of soldiers don't leave the base. They hold down desk jobs, issue supplies, manage logistics, repair vehicles or radios, refuel generators and trucks, plan "development" projects, handle public affairs, or update tactical maps inscribed (at certain locations I am obliged not to name) with admonitions like "Here Be Dragons" or "Here Do Bad Stuff." They face the boredom of ordinary, unheroic, repetitive tasks.

The most common injury they are likely to suffer is a sprained ankle, thanks to eastern Afghanistan's carpet of loose rocks -- just the size to trip you up. On the wall in the FOB medics' clinic is a poster with schematic drawings and instructions for strengthening ankles, an anatomical part not enhanced by any of the fitness machines at the gym. The medics dispense a lot of ibuprofen and keep a supply of crutches handy.

## What's Going On

As this is an infantry base, however, most squads regularly venture outside the wire and the characteristic, probably long-term disability the soldiers take with them is bad knees -- from the great weight of the things they wear and carry. The base commander reminded me of one of the principles of COIN: security should be established by non-lethal means. So most infantry missions are "presence patrols," described by one officer as "walking around in places where we won't get shot at just to show the Afs [Afghans] that we're keeping them safe."

I went outside the wire myself on one of these presence patrols, a mission to a village, and -- I'm sorry to say -- it was no friendly stroll. It's a soldier's job to be "focused"; that is, to watch out for enemies. So you can't be "distracted" by greeting people along the way or stopping to chat. Entering a village hall to meet elders, for instance, may sound cordial -- winning hearts and minds. But sweeping in with guns at the ready shatters that friendly feeling. Speaking as someone who has visited Afghans in their homes for years, I have to say that this approach does not make a good impression. It probably wouldn't go over well in your hometown either.

Nor does it seem to work. Since the U.S. military adopted COIN to "protect the populace," civilian casualties have gone up 23%; 6,000 Afghan civilians were killed last year (and that's undoubtedly an undercount). No wonder the presence of American troops leaves so many Afghans feeling not safer, but more endangered, and it even inspires some to take up arms against the occupying army. Ever more often, at least in the area where I was embedded, a non-lethal presence patrol turns into a lethal firefight.

One day, near the end of my embed, I watched a public affairs officer frame a photograph of a soldier who had been killed in a firefight and mount it on the wall by the commander's office beside the black-framed photos of seven other soldiers. This American fighting force had been in place at the FOB for only a few weeks, having relieved another contingent, yet it had already lost eight men. (Five Afghan soldiers had been killed as well, but their pictures were notably absent from the gallery of remembrance.) The Army takes a photograph of every soldier at the beginning of his or her service, so it's on file when needed; when, that is, a soldier is killed.

Most American bases and combat outposts are named for dead American soldiers. When a soldier is killed -- or "falls," as the Army likes to put it -- the Internet service and the phones on base go dead until an Army delegation has knocked on the door of surviving family members. So even if you're one of those soldiers who never leaves the base, you're always reminded of what's going on out there. And then usually toward evening, some unseen enemies on the peaks around the base begin to shoot down at it, and American gunners respond with shells that lift great clouds of rock and dust from the mountains into the darkening sky.

### Doing Good to Afghans

On the base, I heard incessant talk about COIN, the "new" doctrine resurrected from the disaster of Vietnam in the irrational hope that it will work this time. From my experience at the FOB, however, it's clear enough that the hearts-and-minds part of COIN is already dead in the water, and one widespread practice in the military that's gone unreported by other embedded journalists helps explain why. So here's a TomDispatch exclusive, courtesy of Afghan-American men serving as interpreters for the soldiers. They were embarrassed to the point of agony when mentioning this habit, but desperate to put a stop to it. COIN calls for the military to meet and make friends with village elders, drink tea, plan "development," and captivate their hearts and minds. Several interpreters told me, however, that every meeting includes some young American soldiers whose locker-room-style male bonding features bouts of hilarious farting.

To Afghan men, nothing is more shameful. A fart is proof that a man cannot control any of his apparatus below the belt. The man who farts is thus not a man at all. He cannot be taken seriously, nor can any of his ideas or promises or plans.

Blissfully unaware of such things, the Army goes on planning together with its civilian

consultants (representatives of the State Department, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and various independent contractors who make up what's called a Human Terrain Team charged with interpreting local culture and helping to win the locals over to our side). Some speak of "building infrastructure," others of advancing "good governance" or planning "economic development." All talk of "doing good" and "helping" Afghanistan.

In a typical mess-up on the actual terrain of Afghanistan, Army experts previously in charge of this base had already had a million-dollar suspension bridge built over a river some distance away, but hadn't thought to secure land rights, so no road leads to it. Now the local American agriculture specialist wants to introduce alfalfa to these waterless, rocky mountains to feed herds of cattle principally pastured in his mind.

Yet even as I was filling my notebook with details of their delusionary schemes, the base commander told me he had already been forced to "put aside development." He had his hands full facing a Taliban onslaught he hadn't expected. Throughout Afghanistan, insurgent attacks have gone up 51% since the official adoption of COIN as the strategy du jour. On this eastern front, where the commander had served six years earlier, he now faces a "surge" of intimidation, assassination, suicide attacks, roadside bombs, and fighters with greater technical capability than he has ever seen in Afghanistan.

A few days after we spoke, the Afghanistan command was handed to General Petraeus, the sainted refurbisher of the military's counterinsurgency manual. I wonder if the base commander has told Petraeus yet what he told me then: "What we're fighting here now -- it's a conventional war."

I'd been "on the front" of this war for less than two weeks, and I already needed a vacation. Being outside the wire had filled me with sorrow as I watched earnest, heavily armed and armored boys try to win over white-bearded Afghans -- men of extraordinary dignity -- who have seen all this before and know the outcome.

Being on the base was tedious, often tense, and equally sorrowful at times when soldiers fell. Then the base commander, on foot, escorted the armored vehicles returning from a firefight on to the base the way a bygone cavalry officer might enter a frontier fort, leading a riderless horse. The scene would look good in a Hollywood war movie: moving in that sentimental Technicolor way that seems to imbue with heroic significance unnecessary and pointless death.

One night I bedded down outdoors under a profusion of stars and an Islamic crescent moon. Invisible in the dark, I couldn't help overhearing a soldier who'd slipped out to make a cell phone call back home. "I really need to talk to you today," he said, and then stumbling in his search for words, he broke down. "No," he said at last, "I'm fine. I'll call you back later."

The next day, carrying my helmet and my armor on my arm, I boarded a helicopter and flew away.

Ann Jones is the author of *Kabul in Winter* (Metropolitan, 2006). Her newest book about women in conflict zones, *War Is Not Over When It's Over*, will be published by Metropolitan in September.