



Marines with 2nd Combat Engineer Battalion work into the night constructing an observation post along route Cowboys, Helmand province, Afghanistan, Jan. 07, 2010. 2nd CEB's mission included the construction of three observation posts on route Cowboys.

Photo by Lance Cpl. Walter Marino

Destination: Afghanistan

By Jennifer G. Williams

With President Barack Obama's recent call for a troop surge to Afghanistan in 2010, the military's attention now focuses on this landlocked Middle Eastern country roughly the size of Texas.

The expected additional 30,000 troops will bring the total U.S. involvement to about 100,000 service members by the end of 2010. While many of these service members may have already deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan presents its own unique set of issues. Better understanding the country's history, culture and people will help any deploying service member acclimate to their new surroundings.

Afghanistan's positioning between the Middle East and Asia has made it a crossroads for conquerors throughout history, including Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. This real estate also has been tempting to modern powers, including Britain and the Soviet Union.

More than half of the country is at least 6,500 feet above

sea level. The Pamir Mountains, Karakorum Mountains and the Himalayas converge in Afghanistan, and much of the country is covered in jagged peaks and deep valleys.

More than 33.6 million people live in Afghanistan, with roughly 2.2 million in the capital city of Kabul.

The History

Alexander the Great conquered the area now known as Afghanistan in the fourth century, B.C., but never really won over the region's inhabitants. Arabs introduced Islam to the area in the seventh century A.D., and Afghanistan becomes the center of Islamic power and civilization over the next few hundred years. In the early 13th century, Genghis Khan invaded the country and destroyed the irrigation systems there. This has been blamed for destroying the once-fertile soil there and creating the massive deserts that spread across the country to this day.

A modern Afghanistan is established in the 18th century, and rises to become a great Muslim empire; but constant internal fighting over the next 200 years undermine its power. Britain tries a few times to conquer Afghanistan in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but fails to do so. Russia repeatedly vows to respect border with Afghanistan, but keeps pushing the issue. In 1934, the United States officially recognizes the country of Afghanistan. Following WWII, Pakistan is carved out of India and Afghanistan lands, angering the Afghans, and the U.S. rejects Afghanistan's request to buy equipment that would modernize its army.

In 1973, a military coup overthrew the existing Afghanistan monarchy and the Republic of Afghanistan is created. In 1979, the Soviet Union-backed communist party takes over, assassinating the president. The U.S. Ambassador was also killed in the melee. The Soviet Union invades the country in December, finally withdrawing in defeat in 1989. During the civil war that followed, in which most of the damage to the country was done, the Taliban rose to power and in 1996, the Taliban establishes new, much harsher treatment of women, imposing a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Over the next few years, mass graves of those killed by the Taliban are found and U.N. sanctions are passed against the country for offering sanctuary to Islamic extremist Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

In 2001, the world is first outraged at the Taliban's destruction of ancient

statues and historic sites in Afghanistan, then by the September 11 attacks that killed more than 3,000 people in the U.S. Osama Bin Laden assumes responsibility for the attacks and the U.S. holds the Taliban responsible for aiding him. By December, the Taliban has fallen from official power and Hamid Karzai is chosen as Chairman of the interim government. In 2002, a multi-party form of government is established. Elections were held in 2004 (president), 2005 (parliament) and 2009, but a resurgence of the Taliban has coalition forces working to further stabilize the government.

The People

With so many ethnic groups sharing one country, there is bound to be conflict within the borders. Making up more than half of Afghanistan's population, the Pashtuns can be found in all regions of the country, but are mainly concentrated in the east and south. Pashtuns are typically farmers, and are subdivided into smaller tribal units, to which they are fiercely loyal.

The Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group, typically living in Badakhshan and in the valleys north of Kabul. These farmers, merchants and artisans speak Dari – which, along with Pashtu, is the official language of Afghanistan.

The Hazara people mainly live in the country's central mountain ranges. Most are shepherders or farmers, and follow Shia Islam teachings, putting them in the minority with the dominant Sunni Muslim population. Dozens of other ethnic groups make up Afghanistan's population. The majority of the country's people work in agriculture – whether it be animal herding or nomadic farming. Each ethnic group is also split into smaller, tribal groups – many of whom have their own regional dialects – making it even more difficult to connect with the locals. Having so many small groups who desire their own share of power in the country historically and currently presents a problem in trying to unite the nation under one rule.

The Culture

As expected, with so many different ethnic groups, the culture in Afghanistan

varies widely, as well. One common thread is the sense of honor the nation's men follow. And while honor may be interpreted in different ways to different groups, courtesy and gift-giving are two widespread ways to show respect.

And while the culture recently has been changing to include girls going to school or women having jobs (mainly as teachers), it still is mainly a patriarchal society, with the father and males of the household dominant at home and in society. Many women – particularly in smaller villages – still wear the *burkas* forced on all women by the Taliban nearly 20 years ago.

Several generations of one family usually live in a mud hut or compound surrounded by high mud walls. There are more than 10,000 settlements in Afghanistan with fewer than 100 houses, while there are about 1,000 settlements with 100-250 houses. There typically are no schools or stores in the smaller villages. Each village typically has a *malik*, or village headman; a *mirab*, or



DOD Photo by USAF Staff Sgt. Bradley A. Lail

U.S. Army General David H. Petraeus, Commander United States Central Command, has some bread and chai with a few locals and shopowners at a bazaar in the town of Baraki Barak, Afghanistan. GEN Petraeus was in the region visiting the Logar Provincial Sub Governor as well as the Afghan National Police station in the town of Baraki Barak.


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master of the water distribution; and a mullah, or Islamic teacher. Many times, a large landowner — or *khan* — will take over a village as both its *malik* and *mirab*. The Soviets killed most of the khans and leaders of the tribes, leaving a vacuum of power. Many mullahs gladly filled the void, leading to a change of society in which the mullahs gained much of the coveted power in rural Afghan society and culture.

Most Afghans drink tea and eat *nan*, an unleavened flat bread, which many soldiers have enjoyed while in theater. Afghans also usually have soup, vegetables, fruit and a yogurt called *mast*. The country's raisins are quite good, and were once a valuable export to the rest of the Middle East. Soldiers caution against eating the yogurt as it may cause serious gastrointestinal problems, due to the unpasteurized goats milk used to make it.

Two of the most important holidays in Afghanistan are *Eid*, a Muslim holiday which marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting; and *Nowruz*, or New Year's Day, which is celebrated on the first day of spring each year. 



The HC-130P/N is an extended-range version of the C-130 Hercules transport in Afghanistan. Its mission is to rapidly deploy to execute combatant commander directed operations to austere airfields and denied territory for expeditionary, all weather personnel recovery operations to include airdrop, airland, helicopter air-to-air refueling and forward area refueling point missions.

WHAT TO BRING:

The military issues much of what you will need while deployed to Afghanistan. But some service members say they needed a little something extra from home to make their deployment more enjoyable. What to know before you go:

“You wouldn’t think of it when it’s summertime and 140 degrees outside,” says 5th Armored Training Support Brigade Executive Officer LTC Ward Marshall, who deployed to Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007, “but you need warm gloves, socks and stocking caps to wear in the winter, when all of a sudden it’s freezing cold.” These are items that are not typically issued, he says, and that can be difficult to get once you are in theater.

Another good-to-have item is an LCD or LED flashlight, says Marshall, who is currently stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas. “The batteries and bulb can last about 10-20 times longer than a normal flashlight. You can literally use it every day for a year’s deployment and not have to replace either.” This can be a real plus, especially if you’re in the field a lot, or if you are stationed in a remote area where such items are hard to come by.

At the remote forward operating bases (FOBs), even a haircut can be hard to come by. The Police and Army training teams are issued barber kits, which most team members scoff at — until they get eight hours away from the nearest barber. Then a self taught soldier-barber comes in very handy, often with more “business” than they can handle.

One luxury item that’s nice to have in Afghanistan is a laptop with a built-in camera, which makes communicating with friends and loved ones back home a little easier, if you have access to the Internet. Be sure to check with your insurance company about coverage — some offer coverage for electronics...even from sand damage.

And speaking of electronics, digital cameras and today’s mini video recorders are also handy. They sell these in theater, but they tend to be very expensive and it’s better to bring along

something you know. Plus, you can load your music, photos, and movies before you get there as a way to pass the time during the lonely time off.

As far as friends and loved ones sending care packages, several soldiers spoke of the joy in receiving home-baked cookies or other food items that are specific to your home — such as barbecue sauce from a favorite local restaurant. Movies on disc are always nice, say service members, along with digital music or photos from home. Marshall suggests having friends and loved ones use a photo sharing site, such as Kodak or Snappfish, to upload digital photos to share. That cuts down on the time to download pics from email, and the service member can choose which ones to print.

Other little extras great to have include a month’s worth of lip balm, sunscreen, toothpaste, shaving cream and razor blades. Yes, you will be able to get more once you arrive and you don’t want to weigh down your ruck with excess items, but you really do not want to run out on the way to your destination.

Veteran soldiers caution against taking or asking for large items that must be carted around or even sent back from theater. But not to worry if you wish for the large items — service members who cannot bring televisions, mini refrigerators, space heaters and pieces of furniture home after their deployment will usually sell them to newcomers at bargain prices.

Phone cards are great, but some places have MWR phones that you can use to call home for free. Don’t buy hundreds of dollars of these cards before you deploy — wait and see what they have. Plus, you can also see if you can use the Internet to make calls home for much less.

Pillows can be picked up at the large bases where you in process, as can blankets and sheets, just think about picking up these little extras before you leave the big bases — they can be next to impossible to get once you are in a remote location.