



Photo by Master Sgt. Juan Valdes, U.S. Air Force

U.S. Army Sgt. John Clayton with 2nd Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division makes his way through a river while on a joint patrol with soldiers from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division in the Arghandab River Valley of Kandahar province of Afghanistan.

Destination: Afghanistan

By Jennifer G. Williams

With President Barack Obama's 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 background. 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 became 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 was established in the 18th century, and rose to become a great Muslim empire; but constant internal fighting over the next 200 years undermined its power. Britain tried a few times to conquer Afghanistan in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but failed to do so. Russia repeatedly vowed to respect border with Afghanistan, but keeps pushing the issue. In 1934, the United States officially recognized the country of Afghanistan. Following WWII, Pakistan was carved out of India and Afghanistan lands, angering the Afghans, and the U.S. rejected Afghanistan's request to buy equipment to modernize its army.

In 1973, a military coup overthrew the existing Afghanistan monarchy and the Republic of Afghanistan was created. In 1979, the Soviet Union-backed communist party took over, assassinating the president. The U.S. Ambassador was also killed in the melee. The Soviet Union invaded the country in December, a decade later 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 established harsh 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. 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 had fallen from official power and Hamid Karzai is chosen as Chairman of the interim government. In 2002, a multi-party form of government was 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 Pashto, 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 communicate with local tribesmen. 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. 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.

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



Photo by U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Dayton Mitchell

U.S. Army Sgt. Daniel Satterfield, with 2nd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, hands a newsletter to an Afghan man in Kashk-e Nokowd, Huta, Afghanistan. Weekly newsletters tell readers how U.S. and Afghan National Security Forces are helping residents.

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 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.