

## Bartle Bull's Trip to Afghanistan: *Summer 2010*

The essential object of my trip to Afghanistan was to support the purposes of the Initiative to Educate Afghan Women (IEAW) by interviewing candidates for our program, by refreshing our ties with our key friends in Kabul (notably my distinguished and considerate hosts Anwar Ahady and Fatima Gailani) and generally by 'showing the flag' on behalf of the IEAW and staying in direct touch with the setting for our work. No American from the IEAW had visited Afghanistan since 2008. I do think that every two years someone should go from our American board.

On a more personal level, I was interested in experiencing first-hand the realities and context of the conflict in which we are participating. I have been to over 100 countries, but the closest I had been to Afghanistan was my visit to Kashmir in 1962, when I went on a camping and hunting trip in the mountains. I also thought I might write something about Afghanistan. So I wanted to do more than just stay in a tightly-guarded house in Kabul and interview schoolgirls, though that was my prime focus.

Accordingly, before going I made certain arrangements. Before leaving New York, I was fortunate to have breakfast with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, a leading candidate against Karzai in last year's election. Through my friend Gary Berntsen (the former CIA field officer who led the hunt for Osama Bin Laden around Tora Bora in 2001) I arranged to meet an old friend of his in Kabul. Through another friend I arranged to be one of the first civilian visitors to the COIN Academy on the edge of Kabul. (COIN means counter-insurgency.) There, in a city made of steel shipping containers converted to shelters, an Italian-American West Point colonel is training officers from many countries in counter insurgency techniques. I was told that if I brought him a 5-pound Italian cheese from NYC, he would invite me to dinner at the COIN Academy. That happened my first evening in Kabul. Finally, I arranged to visit an American FOB (Forward Operating Base) in Zabul, the neighboring province to Kandahar. There the commanding colonel was very interested in women's education, so he invited me to visit the base and to speak at the girl's high school he had built in Zabul, the first one in the province. 1400 girls attend that high school.

In Kabul I was blessed to be staying with our fellow IEAW directors. They were gracious hosts, dedicated to our educational project, and highly intelligent and courageous and patriotic citizens of their country. The IEAW could not have better supporters in Afghanistan. I was also fortunate to be working every day in Kabul with one of our distinguished IEAW graduates. She was my daily translator and guide. We conducted all of the candidate interviews together, outdoors in the courtyard garden of my hosts' house.

Spending time with each of these courageous young women was a remarkable experience. Each one told me the story of her life, her family and her education. Even to hear one of these stories was a confirmation of the validity and value of Paula Nirschel's creation, the IEAW. No matter what happens on the broader national level, we should all be very proud of the contributions being made by the IEAW. We are changing lives, and these women will change their country.

Apart from the interviews, I wanted to broaden my experience. I had many meals with my hosts, two with my hostess's distinguished father, one with the colonel commanding the COIN

Academy, another with a group of Gary Bernstein's sturdy friends, a lunch with Ted Achilles and his students, several meals with our graduate student and her friends, and a tour of Rory Stuart's Turquoise Mountain project (Rory is a pal of my son's from their Iraq days). For fun, I wanted to ride horseback and hit some balls on the old British golf course. I was told these were foolish ideas due to the Russian land mines that still decorated these settings, but I managed to hit one five iron and briefly to ride a horse.

When my interviews were completed, Col. Goepner, the commander at FOB Smart in Zabul and the leader of the Zabul PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Team) arranged for me to fly by helicopter (the only way) to his FOB. They won't let you on these flights without a flack jacket (now called 'body armor') and a helmet. But Gary Bernstein's pals had stopped my host's car on the highway after it met me on arrival in Kabul and given me Gary's old helmet & body armor, so that got me onto the helicopter. The copter ride was a thrill, weaving between the mountain tops. I was the only passenger. Open doors. The machine gunner in each door was a retired Brit SAS soldier. Each door gunner had his own bodyguard on board (a retired Gurkha soldier). "In case we go down," said one of the Brits. "These Nepalese are the best in the mountains."

Had an amazing time at the base. Slept in an alcove in an "Alaska tent" with the soldiers. 82 men & 6 women American soldiers. Two were killed the previous week when they were loading medical supplies on a truck for a clinic. A Talib dressed in a Burkha exploded & killed them. Can't tell you how impressive all these Yanks were. I had about 18 meals with them. All were professionals, volunteers, a couple of tours each in Iraq & Afg. Great racial & gender relations. Nobody whining about coming home. Absolutely no comparison to Vietnam. Very interested in the FOB's educational projects. After they tested me a bit, I went on three foot patrols. 97 degrees, helmet & body armor. They told me I was the oldest guy ever to go on a foot patrol in Afg. On one long patrol we walked to a crowded primary school (for both girls & boys) that was in very bad condition. I met with the female teachers. Another day the colonel and I went on a patrol to the girls high school he had built. The girls sang songs for us. We had a big tea party with the teachers. They gave us plastic flowers. I was asked to speak. I took questions. They asked me why was I doing this? I said because of my grandmother, who in 1907 became the first woman lawyer in Illinois, led suffragette parades in the street in Chicago in 1919, and ran for congress in the 1920's and 1930's. She also founded an orphanage and initiated courses to teach women how to manage their own money.

I also attended two shuras (community meetings) in the provincial governor's office, discussing education etc. Our PRT is doing amazing stuff - working with elders, education, wells, health etc. I was sorry to leave the base and have been staying in touch with it ever since, getting their weekly bulletins.

Altogether, my experience interviewing young women in Kabul, visiting the primary and high schools near Kandahar, and participating in the educational shuras all confirmed the central importance of the IEAW's mission: educating the women of Afghanistan and preparing them for leadership roles in the development of their country. Education is the enemy of our enemies, but it takes time, and for now requires the protection and security that only international forces can provide.

Respectfully submitted,

Bartle Bull  
IEAW, Board Member