

Downrange Experience in Afghanistan

Kambiz (Tommy) Akhavein
August 2020

My employment with the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) started in October of 1994. I was hired in Germany as a math and statistics lecturer and taught a variety of these courses in the UMUC curriculum. Although by no means similar to a typical academic position in the U.S, my teaching life was quite normal in the beginning. Traveling and teaching in different bases and cities in Germany was the norm for many UMUC faculty. Generally, the teaching load would include one course at noontime and a one or two courses in the evening. Each evening course met two times per week with three-hour periods of instruction. The noon courses were conducted four times per week lasting one and one-half hours per session.

During my time with UMUC, I volunteered to teach in support of the U.S Military in different downrange locations, including Hungary, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Qatar, and Kuwait. Although I experienced many challenging situations in all these locations, the teaching assignment, which comes most to my mind, is one in Afghanistan. In fact, it was the most overwhelming teaching assignment I had because the entire living, teaching, eating, sleeping, and even walking experiences were shaped by the war.

I arrived in Afghanistan via a flight from Germany to Russia and to Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan. The trip from Manas to a forward operating base (FOB) called FOB Salerno was an exciting flight in which the C130 had to land on an unpaved strip in total darkness. Fob Salerno is in the southeastern province of Khost, Afghanistan, in the vicinity of the city of Khost. It is roughly 25 km from the border of Pakistan, which made it a frequent and favorite target for the Taliban moving between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Due to its proximity to Pakistan and the supply route of the Taliban, which caused the frequent attack on the base, FOB Salerno stayed in blackout during the entire year that I spent there and to the very last day of its closure in November of 2013. At nighttime, we had to use tactical flashlights to move around between buildings. The types of attacks we endured were mostly by mortar and rocket fire with minimal losses. However, there were occasional large-scale attacks on the FOB as well. Every week, at least two of our nights would be spent in shelters due to attacks. The living conditions were eight persons to a tent with shelters usually very close to each group of tents.

The Salerno Education Center was located next to the runway. The Taliban routinely targeted the runway. Typically, these attacks were made during the very early morning hours or late in the evening when it was dark. However, I do remember an attack in mid-day that shook the education center because in the process of attacking the runways, some of the rounds hit very close to the education center. Luckily, at that particular time, there were no classes in the education center, and we simply had to make sure that the UMUC and the education center staff moved quickly to the shelters.

I also remember an assault by the Taliban in which they used suicide bombers to breach the perimeter. The following day, one of the military policemen in my class showed me gruesome pictures taken after the attack. They displayed blown-up body parts of the insurgents and also of innocent Afghan civilians who worked on the base. Fortunately, as UMUC instructors, we were mostly shielded from the violence around the FOB, and we could concentrate on our jobs, bringing education to service members.

One interesting phenomenon in FOB Salerno was that the medical clinic would routinely ask for volunteers to help the doctors and the nurses. They needed help with burn injuries

sustained by Afghan civilians. As temperatures plunged to below freezing from November to the end of February, there was another major killer in Afghanistan different from four decades of war and strife. Many Afghans use a gas-operated lantern for lighting and a device called Aladdin for heating. They also use Aladdin to cook or heat food. Often, the small gas-operated lamp is in close proximity to the Aladdin, particularly during the night when people go to sleep. Sometimes the gas capsules inside of these lanterns heat up and explode, which causes death and injury. Frequently, the Afghans sustaining burn injuries would be flown into FOB Salerno for medical treatment.

Due to the shortage of medical staff, the medical clinic frequently requested volunteers to help with the burn injuries. Many of us working in the education center or for UMUC volunteered to clean the skin of these patients. There is absolutely no teaching position anywhere that would give instructors such an experience.

Our classes were a mixture of active duty, reserve, and national guard students. During my one-year assignment, I remember Arizona and Wisconsin National Guard students. The teaching hours and schedule at downrange locations were very irregular. Sometimes, the courses would vary due to the need of a certain unit that could not take classes on the normal schedule. In one of the terms, I taught seven classes, which is unheard of in Maryland Europe or Asia. One of the classes was from two to four in the morning, while my last class of the day was from 18:30 to 21:30. This means that I had only couple of hours of sleep before going to the next class. However, this particular term was an outlier. Normally, I would have 4 to 5 classes per term from morning at 11:30 to 21:30 with one or two hours of break in between. There were no days off. I found the students very motivated to learn, in part because there were few recreational activities for soldiers or the civilians. No soldier or civilian was allowed off base unless on

official orders for a particular mission. The recreational activities on the FOB included a small bazaar run by Afghans, a tiny movie theater, a large and well-equipped gym.

Other forms of recreational activities would include Afghan civilians performing plays or dances, cooking Afghan food, or engaging in cultural exchange activities. At times, the education center was also involved in sporting competitions such as soccer or basketball games, which fostered a lot of camaraderie and excitement. The Afghan translators who were U.S citizens had their own quarters, and they would frequently participate in sports activities and conduct cultural awareness classes.

One interesting aspect of my Afghan experience came because my mother tongue is Persian-Farsi (The national language of Iran) and is very close to Dari which is spoken by many Afghans (as well as the Pashtun language). The difference between the Farsi and Dari might be compared to the difference between the English language used in the King James Bible and modern English. The Afghan Dari language is spoken using very old Persian-Farsi words and with a pleasant accent. This connection was extremely interesting for me. I was able to connect with Afghan nationals in their own language which made my experience richer and the personal connections deeper. Many nights, we spoke about politics and religion, what would lead to better understanding of the cultures, and why the situation is as it is in Afghanistan.

One of the Afghans, speaking in Dari, blamed the country's continuous civil war on no group being strong enough to dominate after the Soviets left Afghanistan. The groups kept fighting with no one coming out on top. My Dari-speaking friend then mentioned that it was perhaps a blessing in disguise that in Iran after the revolution, there was a strong force to put down the internal and external opposition and take charge of the country. Otherwise, Iran could have also been ripped apart by a devastating civil war between the different groups that made its revolution

possible. Nobody likes to see people killed. Nevertheless, after reflecting on his statement about Iran, I concluded that it was likely better for a few thousand to be killed in Iran at the start of the revolution (unfortunately) so the country would not be ripped apart similar to Afghanistan, causing millions to die or suffer. As an Iranian-American, the Afghan translator's words offered some of the best insights that I gained about the situation in Iran vs. Afghanistan.

During the time I spent in Afghanistan, I never feared for my life or encountered any extreme danger. After leaving Afghanistan, however, I suffered many months of nightmares, which I think came from this experience. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I had blocked the possibility of getting hurt or being in danger so that I could do my job. Once out of the combat zone, my mind was free to express itself.

In summary, although I took part in operation Desert Storm as a young soldier serving in the U.S Army, the Afghan experience, teaching for the University of Maryland at a Forward Operating Base, remains the most adventurous academic assignment of my life.