



# Nick Zoa

Camps Sharana and Leatherneck  
Afghanistan  
Terms II and III, 2011-2012

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In 2011, I learned that America was spending a billion dollars per day on our “peacekeeping mission” in Afghanistan. Curious to see how anyone could spend a billion dollars per day, I requested a 5-month downrange teaching assignment from Lisa Henkel. Afghanistan turned out to be the most miserable place that I’ve ever lived and worked. It was also a fascinating learning experience about the modern military, and a credible test of my ability to function in unpleasant environments.

Before flying to Afghanistan, I spent a week on an US Army base in Germany where I was trained on important survival skills, such as: How to put on IBA (Interceptor Body Armor) in 30 seconds or less, how to treat punctured lungs and arterial bleeding, what to do when one encounters an IED (Improvised Explosive Device), and how to extract oneself from an overturned MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicle. I also learned a lot of military acronyms.

I participated in workshops and simulated exercises about what to do if captured by a hostile force. My first step if captured would be to determine the military affiliation of my captors. Then, depending on who my captors were, I was instructed to wait patiently for my rescue, work covertly with other prisoners to attempt escape, or pray

for a non-violent death that didn’t involve torture. I was also issued a bag of potent earplugs and told that I would need them.



Military Airlift Command (MAC) was how I travelled from base to base within Afghanistan. To prevent planes from being shot at while departing or arriving on base, MAC had an unusual flight schedule: Specifically, there was no schedule. To go from Kabul to Sharana, I went to the airfield and put my name on a list. Then, on a day when there *might* be a flight to Sharana, I donned my helmet and IBA, reported to the terminal, took a seat in the waiting area, and settled in for what I was told would be a wait of between 15 minutes and 15 hours. To pass the time, I watched endless reruns of recent American sporting events on gigantic high-definition monitors.

After several hours, there was a single, brief announcement over the PA system that my flight was ready to depart. Thankfully, I was awake enough to hear the announcement. The soldiers and I grabbed our gear and marched out the terminal across the tarmac into a plane whose giant propellers were already spinning. Boarding was fast and efficient. For a large plane with 100 passengers, boarding took about five minutes. There were no boarding passes, seat assignments or metal detectors. We found seats, strapped in, and lodged our rifles into the gun brackets – except for me. I was the only unarmed passenger. I noted that I was also the only passenger without at least one grenade attached to my belt. The plane started rolling as the door closed. Once in the air, I was glad to be wearing my IBA. It kept me warm in the unheated C-5.



Flying MAC in Afghanistan

My first assignment was at FOB Sharana, a Forward Operating Base in the mountains near the Pakistan border. My classroom was inside a Quonset hut insulated by sandbags. I lived in a Russian-built bunker. My “bedroom” was a cubicle whose walls were made of plywood tacked to 2x4s. There were no windows. The indoor temperature alternated between freezing and sweltering. The toilet and washing facilities were 100 meters away on the other side of a morass of mud and snow.

For my second assignment, I was deployed to Camp Leatherneck in the desert near the Iranian border. I taught geology and computer science inside a canvas tent with folding tables and chairs. I lived in a shipping container. Compared to my first abode, this was luxurious. I had a concrete floor, electric lights, heating and a window. Although my housing was better than at FOB Sharana, I still had to slither through 100 meters of mud to find a Porta-potty.



Porta-potties with a view of the Hindu Kush

Leatherneck was surrounded by a perfectly flat plain. The highest point in the region was the base's garbage dump where discarded materials were bull-dozed into a huge pile about 20 meters high. Afghan scavengers sorted the materials for metals and things to sell. On cold days, they ignited the garbage to keep themselves warm. Toxic smoke from burning tires and smoldering packaging (i.e. Styrofoam) would drift across the base. I maintained a habit of checking the wind direction before going outside.

At both locations, the weather was dismal. Winter in Afghanistan alternates between blizzards and bone-chilling winds. When wind blows across the desert, dust and snow mix together. Consequently, the precipitation is brown and sticky. It plasters itself against every surface and then congeals. Sometimes we had rain. Beneath the dusty topsoil was an impermeable hard pan. The rain turned the topsoil into mud. Since the moisture had nowhere to go, the mud remained mud for weeks and eventually turned into a brown slush several centimeters deep with the consistency of whipped cream. As convoys plowed through it, the mud splashed and splattered on everything.



Springtime at Camp Leatherneck

Whether it snowed or rained, everything was brown. My shoes, my clothes, the buildings and the floors inside buildings were all brown. In the Quonset huts and bunkers where I lived and worked, there were few windows. To see out a window required ten minutes work with a scrub brush and an ice scraper twice a day.

To add to the tribulation of being here, loud explosions occurred frequently and at random intervals. Some of these explosions were the result of bombs lobbed at the base by the Taliban. Other explosions occurred when land mines and IEDs were detonated or defused. Many of the explosions occurred at night. I learned to sleep with earplugs every night.

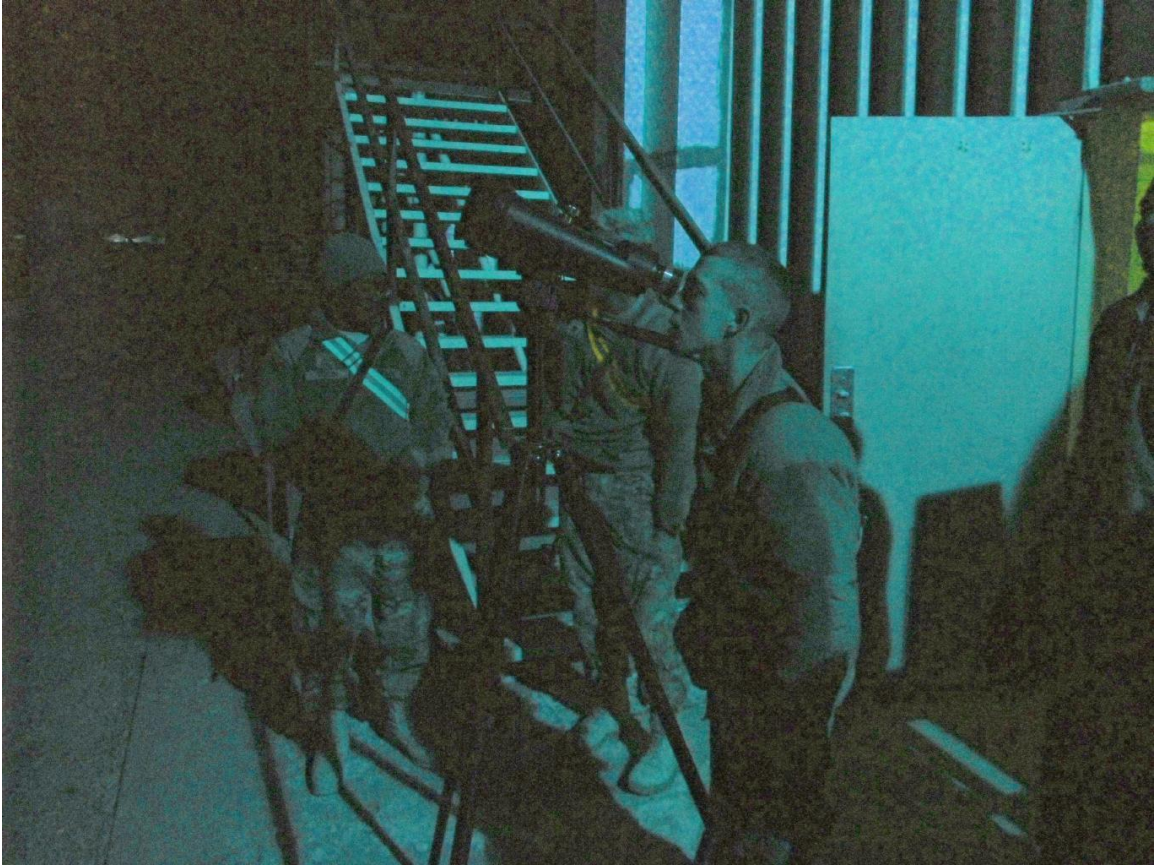
Before going to Afghanistan, I was well aware that I'd be living in war zone. I expected falling missiles, exploding bombs and death – hopefully not mine. What I didn't expect were three bizarre events that occurred while I was stationed there:

1. At a nearby base, Americans detained several Taliban. The Americans discovered that their prisoners were communicating with each other by writing notes in the margins of their Korans and then exchanging their Korans. To prevent further subterfuge, the Americans burned the Korans – a serious Islamic taboo. An Afghan soldier, who was part of the US-trained defense force, was so incensed by this act that he entered the American headquarters one morning and assassinated the base commanding officer.
2. While on patrol, American soldiers ambushed and killed several Taliban. After collecting the bodies of the Taliban, the Americans videotaped themselves urinating on the corpses. This video was uploaded to youtube, reported by Al Jazeera and was widely viewed in the Middle East. This resulted in two weeks of heightened tension between American troops and their Afghan counterparts.
3. On my last night in Kandahar, an American soldier got drunk on illegal home-made alcohol. He walked into a nearby village and killed a dozen women and children with his automatic rifle. My flight out of Kandahar was the last one to leave before the airfield was closed in anticipation of local retaliation.

My deployment in Afghanistan had the potential to be a very depressing experience. In 2012, the U.S. military's suicide rate surpassed combat deaths. I heard seasoned troops tell new arrivals that the best way to get through a 14-month deployment was to sleep 12 hours a day. That way, fourteen months in Afghanistan would feel like seven. I gave this some thought. I was teaching classes I'd taught before. It would have been easy to retreat into my quarters, put in my earplugs, close my eyes and avoid depression by sleeping 12 hours a day. Instead, I maintained my discipline and discovered a few bright spots. More than one of my students told me that their classes with Maryland were the only thing keeping them sane.

I taught Astronomy at FOB Sharana, elevation 2237 meters. One of the benefits of being stationed on a US military base in a war zone is that every light source is blacked out at night to prevent the enemy from being able to target weapons at the base. On cloudless nights, the combination of Sharana's altitude, the cold, dry air and no light pollution enabled fabulous star gazing. In preparation for our first evening of star gazing, I asked my students to bring to class any telescopes or binoculars that they might have. The night-vision military hardware that showed up that evening was powerful enough to see Titan orbiting Saturn and the Andromeda Galaxy. Thanks to

some good timing, we started class one evening with a stunning lunar eclipse rising over the snow-capped Hindu Kush.



Astronomy 100 at Camp Sharana



Geology field trip at Camp Sharana



Learning that rocks have names in a tent at Camp Leatherneck

Afghanistan was an exciting place to teach geology. Many of my students were involved with mine-sweeping operations. I'll never forget one student telling me that she never knew that rocks had names. She went on to say that being attentive to rock types and geologic formations made it easier to spot IEDs. One of my mine-sweeping crews accidentally drove their MRAP over a mine. It exploded, overturning the MRAP. That evening, my students came to class excited by the rock samples that they'd been able to collect from the blast crater.



Mine sweeper with a Christmas wreath

During the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980's, the Russian military built many large bases. When Russia withdrew in 1989, Afghan clans took ownership of these bases. When America invaded Afghanistan in 2001, it made sense for our troops to occupy the existing Russian fortifications. To accomplish this, America negotiated with the Afghan landlords to pay rent. America also agreed to permit local nationals to provide goods and services on base. Consequently, the shops at Sharana and Leatherneck weren't the usual US military base exchanges full of boring American products.

Afghanistan is famous for its untapped mineral wealth, especially its "blue treasure." I made frequent visits to the rock shops on base and picked up dozens of specimens of Lapis Lazuli. Just outside Leatherneck's housing area was a row of Bedouin tents. Camels were tethered outside. Inside were exotic crafts that looked like something from Aladdin's Cave of Wonders. After doing my Christmas shopping here, I had a US post office at my disposal from which I could mail these gifts back to the states at US domestic rates.



Afghanistan's "blue treasure"

Every base that I visited in Afghanistan had a fitness center. These fitness centers weren't small rooms with a few barbells. There were enough treadmills, rowing machines, stationary bicycles and workout benches to occupy at least 100 athletes at a time. There were big screen TVs showing sports and news in front of every machine. People came to these exercise tents to work out for hours at a time. Staying physically healthy was a good way to maintain mental health. The gym organized basketball games. The weight room offered bench press competitions. These events were well attended. Being surrounded by active, health-conscious soldiers helped me focus on my routines and duties. My students and I supported each other's ideas and programs. In Afghanistan, I taught some of the best courses I've ever taught.

Because Afghanistan is a conservative Islamic country, the US military enforced a strict no-alcohol policy at all US bases. To compensate for this restriction and to support the

morale of the troops, the US military went overboard with its food service. Friday nights were surf and turf night. On Friday nights, our troops enjoyed all the Maine lobster and Nebraska beef they could eat. On other nights, guest chefs (and their ingredients) were flown in from San Francisco, New York, New Orleans, Tokyo, Mumbai and/or Paris to prepare feasts for the 200,000 people stationed here. Meals were served four times a day in huge air conditioned mess tents. As I saw – and ate – these fabulous meals, I began to understand how America's expenditures in Afghanistan could be a billion dollars per day.

Mission accomplished, I flew from Kandahar to Thailand for some much needed R&R.