

## USIP – ADST

### Afghanistan Experience Project

#### Interview #30

#### Executive Summary

The interviewee is a Schedule C officer and senior advisor in the State Department. He was a PRT rover in Afghanistan from February 2004 until August 2004. He is also a Naval Reservist.

The interviewee says that the PRTs impact was determined by location, how it looked, operated and what its missions were. He says the PRTs played a critical role in establishing a relationship and network between Governor of region and Ministry of Interior or President. In other words, diplomacy was a large portion of their job.

With regards to reconstruction, It is easier to use military funding (CERP) because it is smaller. Smaller projects were funded through military fund while larger projects were harder, because they are funded by USAID or Washington, which takes longer lead time. The reconstruction projects, while often modest in side, had a great impact. The interviewee describes how they assisted the Afghans to stand on their own.

The interviewee also believes that security for PRTs was definitely adequate. But he also said that the security situation largely depended on what area of the country you were working in. The whole process was slow going but still doing a good job.

While going about their mission, the PRTs did their best to meet with the power brokers in the region, trying to work with religious leaders, warlords and the appointed governor. For elections and other political events, PRTs acted as eyes and ears in the field and as valves to distribute information.

The relationships between NGOs and military depended on communication. Sometimes the military didn't know any better. If security was good the NGO could handle the project like building roads, etc. If security wasn't up to par, the military handled it.

Being a PRT rover gave the interviewee the opportunity to take lessons learned from each of the PRTs and share them. PRTs didn't have much to do with police training, other than getting clothes, equipment for them. There was not much involvement in setting up court system, other than to identifying local judges.

One challenge the interviewee identifies is counter-narcotics. Additionally, integrating ex-Taliban into society will be extremely tricky.

Overall, the interviewee feels that PRTs are a success and have helped in almost every aspect. He believes them to be critical if Afghanistan is to be a success story.

United States Institute of Peace  
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Afghanistan Experience Project

**Interview #30**

*Interviewed by: Pat LaRue  
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*Q: This is an interview on behalf of the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. It is part of the Afghan Experience Project. The subject is a Schedule C officer who served in Afghanistan on-*

A: February of 2004 until August of 2004.

*Q: First of all is the location, organization. Describe the location history, the physical structure, size, staffing, agencies, Afghan government represented in the PRT.*

A: Great. I was the PRT rover during my time in Afghanistan, which meant that I wasn't detailed to a particular PRT for my entire six month tour but rather was covering down on a number of PRTs that were as of yet unstaffed by the Department of State. During my time there, I visited all the PRTs that existed. I spent anywhere from a few days to a month at each of the PRTs. I spent a month in Ghazni and a month in Herat and then shorter periods at the other PRTs. PRTs were very different entities depending on a number of factors. Everything can change the face of a PRT from the number of soldiers involved, the type of soldiers involved, the security situation in the province. Where the provincial reconstruction team was located had a significant impact on what the PRT looked like and how it operated and what its missions were. The provincial reconstruction teams ranged in size from 50-ish, 60-ish soldiers to up into over 100. The vast majority of those forces are support as opposed to the crux mission of the PRT, which we can get into later. The vast majority of the provincial reconstruction team is security for those involved in the PRT, food, sustainment, those type of things. The shape of the PRT also depended a lot on security. Some of them, particularly those in the less secure areas - during my time there, that was the south and the east - looked much more like a military forward operating base. Those in more secure areas - for instance, Herat, Mazar-e Sharif to a certain extent, Konduz - looked less like a military base. Frankly, the PRT in Herat was a row of Iranian townhouses, so they varied a lot in size and shape.

*Q: The role and the mission, the formal and actual role, mission of PRTs, elementary schools, promoted education... What types of projects did you work on?*

A: The crux of the mission of the PRT was to extend the reach of the central government of Afghanistan. In some areas, much like the size and shape of them, the missions varied based on the particular province. In those areas that were less secure, extending the reach of the central government meant some very basic things like ensuring there was a governor who was in power

and was relatively secure. In other areas, in the more advanced areas, more secure areas, it meant very different things. For instance, the governor is appointed by the president. Therefore, he is a representative of the central government. However, the governor's opinions on issues is often very different than the president's position on issues. So, the PRT played a critical role in establishing a relationship and network and determining how to proceed with the objectives in the area. A list of reconstruction priorities from the governor looked very different from that of the Ministry of Interior or from President Karzai. There was a mission that the State Department plays in those sorts of areas, too, to deconflict and to the best of the capability of those on the ground extend the reach of the government into that area.

On the projects... Do we get into different funding pots later? There are a number of different funding pots that are used for reconstruction. The largest funding pot is the U.S. Agency for International Development funding. A smaller funding pot is called Commanders Emergency Response Fund [CERP], which is a military fund. The military fund, while much smaller, is much easier to use. It is the PRT commander's authority to sign a check as opposed to USAID, which are larger projects which often have to be approved either by Embassy Kabul or by Washington. So, for the smaller projects, if it was building a well, helping a governor with a truck so that he could clean the streets, those sorts of projects were often handled through military CERP funding. The larger projects from building a school all the way up to, I think some of the PRTs were working on small dams and water projects, were funded by USAID, a much more robust program; it also takes a much longer lead time to work through the bureaucracies.

*Q: You've touched on governance and reconstruction. How about security? What was the specific role and what was the level and nature of the threat? Did the PRT rely on Afghan forces for protection? Was the overall force protection adequate? Were personnel able to operate in the field? If necessary, how could security have been enhanced in order to make the PRT more effective?*

A: First and foremost, security of the PRTs is absolutely adequate. To my knowledge, there were not any incidents where somebody was hurt. As at every military facility in Afghanistan and a lot of civilian facilities, there have been strange attacks and strange incidents. Unfortunately, there have been some people hurt. But that said, the level of security for us, for State Department representation, was extremely good. The bigger issue with security gets at the crux of the effectiveness of the PRT. Especially in the less secure areas of the country, where there is a PRT operating in close vicinity of a U.S. or a coalition military facility because there are Taliban or Al-Qaeda remnants or people predisposed against the Afghan government working, it is not as easy for the PRT to get around and to achieve its mission. For instance, the PRT in the west, in Herat, may be able to do six or seven or eight missions outside the PRT per day. If that means meeting with the governor to coordinate or doing a village assessment of a village somewhere in the province, they were able to get out and about. In order for a PRT, say, in Qalat, in the southeast, to get around involves much more planning, much more security, much more force protection, and therefore the PRT is handcuffed in its ability to achieve its mission. They still do a very good job. They still are succeeding. But it's a slower process because of the challenges of security.

*Q: You touched a little bit on the governance. Describe PRT activities related to promoting democracy, creating local governance, extending authority of the central government. What was the relationship between the PRT and the Afghan power holders? Local councils? Did you assist in conducting elections, things like that?*

A: First, the relationship with the Afghan government was very good. Usually the first action that a PRT takes is to identify who the local leaders are. There are a number of pieces to that. Obviously, there is the appointed Afghan governor by the central government. There are ministries. For instance, there is a ministry of interior, a ministry of education representative in each province. So, identifying those individuals. Often what the PRTs struggle with is that the power brokers in the past – and this is transitioning – have not been those officials. The power brokers in the region have been a self-appointed police chief or a mullah, which created a lot of issues for the PRTs to identify how best to work with religious leaders who are viewed by those in the province as the person who is most powerful and as the person that they should listen to. So, there is no easy textbook solution to how to do it. But the core mission was to extend the reach of the central government, which meant the officially elected government in Afghanistan appointing members of the government, so those were the people that the PRT seeks to empower. The other power brokers in the area - police chiefs, in the north ISAF had to deal a lot with warlords – you take those people into consideration and try as best to manage their power for the good of the people in the region.

The elections. UNAMA was in charge of conducting the elections in Afghanistan. There was a very thin line for the PRT where they wanted to promote the central government, promote democracy, but also not blur the line between what were seen as coalition forces and what were seen as UN personnel. This was a particularly touchy subject for the UN, who sees themselves as a neutral organization and does not like to be seen as standing too close to the military of any nation. The UN had a steep learning curve. For the first time in their history, they found out that they were targets and it was a very hard thing for them to swallow that for their own security and for the betterment of their mission they might actually have to accept security from coalition forces. To the best ability, we put an Afghan face on the security. They were happy to be seen taking security from the national government. There was often U.S. planning and U.S. support and, when needed, a U.S. quick reaction force in the area to provide security, but to the best of our ability, we allowed the UN to do their mission.

The PRTs on the civil side do their best to talk about democracy in all of their meetings, to talk about freedom of speech and these items. We did not get into it more than that.

*Q: Political events. Describe the role of the PRTs in Afghanistan's major political events. The emergency and constitutional loya jirgas and the presidential election.*

A: The loya jirgas are sort of the constitutional congress of Afghanistan. It is the mechanism that they employ to hear the voice of the people on how they wish to move forward. The role of the PRTs in those. Most of that was coordinated through Kabul, most of the broad strategic planning for the elections. The benefit of the PRTs is that they are out in the field and are able to reach into the Afghan countryside. Most of the planning for the loya jirgas, most of the

implementation, was done in Kabul. The PRTs acted as eyes and ears in the field and as valves to distribute information.

*Q: Reconstruction. Describe PRT activities related to economic reconstruction and development. What U.S. agencies were responsible for these activities? Did civil affairs soldiers participate in reconstruction and development? What was the impact of these efforts?*

A: First and foremost, the impact was fantastic. There was no better way to win hearts and minds in Afghanistan than reconstruction projects. It was very clear. It was not uncommon to run into a village in Afghanistan whose memories of occupying forces were obviously colored and still had very distinct memories and stories from their families about the soviets' invasion and what they thought of occupying forces. It was an incredibly effective tool both to reconstruct and help Afghans stand up on their own, but also to show that we had no intention of hurting them, that we were there to help them help themselves. So, reconstruction as a tool was fantastic.

Getting to the more tactical, there were a lot of different players in the reconstruction projects. The civil affairs teams, often of which there were two at every PRT, led the civil affairs projects. Civil affairs projects to different entities within the U.S. government are very different as well. The U.S. Navy has Seabees and they envision civil affairs projects as building things. The U.S. Army Civil Affairs Officers envision civil affairs projects as contracting to build things. They don't often build themselves. They find an Afghan that they can help support, provide resources to, that will build a project. In addition, there are USAID at many of the PRTs. At the coalition PRTs, for instance, the British have their version of USAID, which is DIFID, and they have large pots of money to put into reconstruction. Then of course the non-governmental organizations there as well.

*Q: That's one of the questions. Were international relief and humanitarian assistance organizations present? What were their functions? Were there overlap activities? Was there tension in the relationship with the NGOs? Could the NGOs have done a better job than the military of providing required assistance?*

A: The tension or success of the relationships between... First and foremost, there were many NGOs, more in the secure areas, less in the less secure areas. The NGOs that are called NGOs in the less secure areas are actually Afghan companies that call themselves NGOs. But the NGOs as we know them traditionally existed but mostly in the more secure areas of north and western Afghanistan. The success or the failure of the relationship between the coalition forces at the PRTs and elsewhere and the NGOs was really based on relationships and communication. The successful relationships, of which there are many, succeeded because the PRT commander sat down with the head of the NGOs or the State rep at the PRT sat down with the head of the NGO and they coordinated and deconflicted very successfully. Unfortunately, in some cases, the communication wasn't open. This often happened before a State or a USAID rep was present and the military just frankly didn't know any better. They hadn't had experience in working with NGOs before. In some of those cases, there were some very sharp elbows and some very hard feelings. It gets to security, to the role of mission. Some issues I could highlight would include PRTs are often unable to use U.S. military vehicles in Afghanistan because the roads will

simply not support a U.S. military vehicle. They're not wide enough and they're made out of dirt. So the U.S. military goes to buying local trucks, which are white, which is the same thing that the NGOs use. They have very strong feelings about being identified as being in the U.S. military or the U.S. military pretending they're an NGO. Those are the sorts of issues that can be worked through through good relationships and often were worked through, but not before a few bumps in the road.

As far as could the NGOs do the mission better? I don't see them as being the same mission. There was often overlap, but it had to do with security. The coalition forces were there to help extend the reach of the central government and help the Afghan people, which NGOs are just in the second half of that. A lot of it came down to it being very clear what the U.S. military can do and what the NGOs could do. For instance, it would become clear in a region that if there was a better road between one village and another village, it would increase communication, it would allow medical help to get from place to place, it would allow for commerce to increase, it would allow for more money to come to the area. So then the question became, if an NGO was willing to do it and if an NGO was willing and able and excited about doing it, the U.S. military would stand down and allow an NGO to work on the project. If, however, security wasn't up to par or there were other challenges, the U.S. military was more than happy to step in and provide the project – or USAID would step in. The answer is that, while there may be some overlap, they are distinctly different missions and a lot of it is based on the security parameters of what is going on there. The success or failure of it had directly to do with the relationship between the particular organization and the coalition forces.

*Q: Handover. Some PRTs were organized by the U.S. and handed over to other countries. How was this arranged? What was the process of transferring control? How did the non-American PRTs differ from the U.S. PRTs and each other?*

A: I was there when the north transitioned hands from coalition forces to ISAF forces. I was there for that and I saw a number of PRTs go through the process. Just like U.S. PRTs differ, coalition PRTs differ. The handover in our experience was not too difficult. The other forces, the coalition forces, came in, spent time, did missions with U.S. PRTs, and were up to speed on how to do it. That said, the U.S. isn't the holder of all knowledge on this. When some of the other nations stepped in to take over – the Germans in Konduz, the British in Mazar-e Sharif, the New Zealand contingent in Bamian is a perfect example – they had some ideas about how to do it that we hadn't thought of yet and appeared to be extremely successful. I think the handovers all went very well. One of the nice things about my job being the PRT rover and spending time with different PRTs was that I was able to take lessons learned from each of the PRTs I visited and share them. I think we could do a little bit more of that, sharing lessons learned. As we continue to transition the entirety of Afghanistan to ISAF, I think that will be a huge net gain by having one command in charge of all the PRTs and can share lessons learned and challenges and address these issues.

*Q: Police training. Several of the PRTs are collocated with U.S. police training centers. What was the relationship between these two activities? Describe the PRTs' level of engagement with local police.*

A: To my knowledge, when I was in Afghanistan, none of the PRTs were doing police training or were collocated with police trainers. That said, because the Afghan police are an extension of the central government, the PRTs also supported to the local Afghan police. In some cases, that meant furnishing the Afghan soldiers with uniforms or shoes. Many of them wore sandals and used old AK-47s. Part of the support was providing a vehicle or a stove for the police office, those sorts of things. Then there was a broader mission, which the PRT as an extension of the central government tried to do its best to facilitate the relationship between the Afghan police, which traditionally have been separated from the central government, to training pipelines and resource pipelines of the Afghan government based out of Kabul. So both as a network of Band-Aids through providing small resources and through the strategic picture of trying to open the pipeline between Kabul and the local police, the PRTs did their best to facilitate that.

*Q: Rule of law. Describe PRT involvement with Afghan police, courts, and prisons. Were local courts and prisons functioning? Describe any PRT involvement with informal or traditional justice systems. Did the PRT promote legal institutions? What were the local attitudes towards PRT activities in the area of rule of law?*

A: I arrived in Afghanistan in February 2004. If you think back to us going into Afghanistan, you think October of 2001. It seems like it had been a long time and there should be a significant amount of success along those lines during that time. The fact of the matter is that much of that three year period, the early part of it had been spent on the really tactical operational military missions. It wasn't until shortly before I arrived in Afghanistan that we were – the general liked to say “sitting in the enemy's backyard.” To that time, we had been running military operations out of two main facilities, Bagram just north of Kabul and Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. The forces would sleep at the base, wake up in the morning, go do a mission, come back and sleep at the base again and do those sorts of things. So, our footprint was very small and it was set up to have an operational impact on Al-Qaeda. The mission started to shift from anti-Al-Qaeda and anti-Taliban to an effort to support an Afghan government, when we really started to expand the footprint and as the general said, “Sit in the enemy's backyard,” set up PRTs out in the hinterlands. There had been a few PRTs but none of them had been in particularly contentious areas. None of them had been out in what had previously been considered the wilds of Afghanistan. So, all that to say, when I was there, the PRTs were still standing up. Many of them were going through construction. Many of them were still building relationships with the local governments. The PRT commanders did a good job of identifying who the local judges were. In many cases, it was a self-appointed person or a person that had no law background. At that time, and to my understanding now, they are still going through a process of extending the reach of the central government to the court system. It is an important piece, but we still have a ways to go.

*Q: Only a couple of more questions. Achievements. Are the PRTs accomplishing their mission? Is the PRT an effective vehicle for 1) providing security, 2) expanding central authority, 3) reconstruction and development, and 4) utilizing American military and civilian resources?*

A: I'm obviously biased because I spent time there, but I'm a believer that the Afghan provincial reconstruction teams are a huge success. No matter what your metric of judgment is, if it is the construction of roads and wells and schools to support Afghans, there has been a huge measure

of success that would not be there were it not for the PRTs. If your measure of success is a more enduring political metric, I do not know of another way to extend the reach of the central government to allow the Afghans to understand democracy, to understand the process, to become part of their own government. As far as security goes, if that is your metric, as long as coalition forces or the forces supporting the Afghan government are holed up in a few locations only to pop their head out, strike someone, and come back in, the security will never be enduring. It takes an enduring presence out in the countryside so that the local Afghan can feel comfortable enough to stand up and support the central government. I liked to use the visual when I returned from Afghanistan to explain what I saw as the timeline as being when I arrived in Afghanistan at the end of 2003/the beginning of 2004, the average Afghan was just for the first time realizing who coalition forces were. Because we hadn't been out in the field, been out in the countryside, they didn't really know if we were the good guys or the bad guys. In my timeframe there, by the end of 2004, the average Afghan had decided for himself in my judgment that the coalition forces were a good thing. That's a huge success, a huge victory, but not enduring yet. The next stop when I see us as achieving some sense of enduring success in Afghanistan will be when the local Afghan, the average Afghan, feels that good support from the international community is enduring. That doesn't mean that we need to keep tens of thousands of forces there forever. It means that the average Afghan who walks out of his house knows that if the bad guy down the street takes some action against him, there is somebody there to support him. If it's Afghan security forces backed up by the international community, then that is the mechanism for it. But right now, in the average Afghan's mind, there is still some uncertainty. Until they reach that sense of certainty, we will never hear them stand up and speak out vocally against the Taliban. We'll never hear them come out and speak out vocally against Al-Qaeda because they'll back to their history and say, "The minute we do that, the good guys leave and somebody starts shooting at us again." So, we've reached some great successes in Afghanistan because of the PRTs, but it's important that we maintain the presence in the field at least for a little bit longer so that we can build that sense of certainty with the Afghans.

*Q: Our last is assessment. What were the successes and failures of your effort? What lessons did you draw from the experience? Could PRTs be approved? Should we adapt another approach to accomplish the same objectives? What advice would you pass on for future operations? Can you suggest other returnees that we could interview?*

A: One of the great joys of coming back is telling everybody the stories and having a number of my friends over there now – I have five or six people that I came back and bragged about our successes to that are now over in Afghanistan at the PRTs. So, the best recruiters for these jobs are people that have been there and been on the ground.

When I finished in Afghanistan - so much of what you do every day is in the weeds - I stepped back and made a left hand column and a right hand column and said, "This is what I saw when I arrived in February and this is what I see when I left in August." I'll pull it up so I can refer to it because it's been a little bit of time. The great changes I saw were the peace I just mentioned, the strategic change from a skeptical population still learning what the coalition forces were all about to a supportive population that was maybe skeptical about our enduring presence and an enduring presence of some sense of security for them, which is a huge stride forward but clearly there is one more great stride before we can reach some sense of enduring success in



Afghanistan. Much the same way, when I first arrived, the PRTs were learning, still trying to figure out who was what and what they were to be doing. I think the PRTs have now learned their lessons and are now in a stage of implementing their lessons learned. We're seeing PRTs becoming exponentially more effective at what they do every day.

The long term enduring answer to security in Afghanistan is obviously the Afghan security forces, both the police and the Afghan national army. Most of the training is done in a few sites around the country, but the effect that the PRT can have by being a coalition presence in the field to support Afghan security forces through training and through support should they need it is a force multiplier that will in the end be the end game to us having large numbers of our friends and neighbors to (inaudible) to Afghanistan.

Challenges still ahead of us. The number one challenge on everybody's mind is counternarcotics. We're walking a very thin line on how we deal with counternarcotics. We've reached great success in Afghanistan. We don't want to undermine that success by taking a step backwards, so we're walking a very thin line on addressing a huge security issue and a national problem but also doing it in such a way that does not alienate the average Afghan and rather gets at the crux of the problem, those that are making the money off of it, which is not the average Afghan. That is a huge battle ahead of us.

How we deal with those people that were sort of Taliban/sort of Al-Qaeda's in the past, how we reintegrate them into society will be extremely tricky. There are still a number of challenges ahead of us.

Resources. I believe the PRTs are critical. If you want to call it the PRT or if you want to call them something else, if you want to change the format of them, I think we can always learn lessons. The piece that we cannot deal without is an enduring presence in the hinterlands of Afghanistan. The average Afghan has to know that there are people there to help them, to provide security for the long term. Eventually, one day, that will be Afghan police and Afghan national army. We're already seeing Afghan police and Afghan national army take over part of the missions in some places. Until the day when the police and the army are capable of providing security for the average Afghan, that it critical that we maintain the presence out there as much to build roads and wells as to provide a feeling of support for the average Afghan.

That's all I have.

*Q: I think that's it. I think you've touched on everything.*

A: One thing I might say on resources which I think is very important is that the U.S. army has done a fantastic job in stepping up to the plate at the request of their bosses to field provincial reconstruction teams. People think of a PRT as this interagency effort out in the fields of Afghanistan. In actuality, it's 99% U.S. army. There may be one State Department officer. There may be one USAID officer. We need to do a better job in the interagency to support the U.S. military. They love having interagency support. They welcome with open arms... For those of us in Washington, it's a strange feeling that the U.S. army, believe it or not, welcomes with open arms support from the State Department, from partners in the UK... If there's

somebody from DIFID that wants to go to the U.S. PRT, the U.S. army would love it. There are other agencies which can be a critical help. The Department of Agriculture only has a few people in the field in Afghanistan. There, they could do great things. More USAID people. Department of Homeland Security people. We have great police minds in the United States that aren't military. Find a way to get those to Afghanistan. To make the PRT more of a true interagency support mechanism would provide exponentially more power to a PRT to empower Afghans.

*Q: Okay. I really appreciate all that you've said.*

[END TAPE]