

The 'Other' Mission

by John Young, Construction Representative

Bagram, Afghanistan was many things for me – a hectic base; a curtain wall of mountains in every direction, forbidding and beautiful; the “Hundred Day Winds” that roar from the cooler mountains all summer into the baking valley floor and scour everything with sand; and just outside the perimeter fence, the adobe ruins of cracked towers and rain-melted walls like something out of ancient Ur, but people are moving back into them.

Bagram, for me, was minefields marked by red signs and covered at first by red poppies and later by purple thistles bristling with spines. It was a never-ending air show of cargo planes and warplanes coming and going with no regard for sun or moon. It was “jingle trucks,” ornately decorated, driven by men who braved death to haul sand, gravel and goods for the coalition – men I thought of as heroes.

Bagram was weeks without weekends; it was coming home to a cot in a plywood hut with no bathroom; 12-hour workdays at construction sites like a new runway, hospital, and a 36-acre Entry Control Point (ECP).

I volunteered for Afghanistan because I thought it would be a great opportunity to learn a lot in a short time because of the fast pace of construction typical of a war zone. I went as a quality assurance representative and verified that work was being constructed in accordance with the plans and specifications.

It was on the project sites that I found treasure, by meeting the Afghans.

Afghan laborers stood hours in line; worked in 100-degree heat, to earn \$6/day. They come on base wearing the national dress – light, baggy pants and knee-length shirt, vest, and head cloth, a square yard of black plaid worn either on the head, around the shoulders, or over the nose and mouth, depending on the sun and wind.

What is our mission, and how can civilians contribute to it?

I concluded that, along with my formal job duties, I would try to address what I saw as the “other” mission, which is to give Afghans reasons to like Americans. For most of them, I was the only American they would ever meet – in effect, I was America. I decided to make a uniquely civilian contribution. I would make friends.

My first goal was to learn a little of the local language, Dari. So I started with “salaam” (“peace,” also the easiest way to say “Hello” in Dari.)

I got to practice the word when I saw a laborer had paused to rub his blistering hand. I walked up as the crew paused to watch, apparently expecting him to draw a reprimand. Instead, I got out my first aid kit and gave him a Band-Aid, then asked the manager to get work gloves for the crew. After that, he and his crew never failed to greet me with thumbs-up, grins and embraces.

In the next weeks, I became a charter member of “Doctors Without Orders,” helping with minor first aid on the site and trying to display American values. For instance, I gave a laborer at the ECP a Chap Stick for his grossly swollen, cracked lips (I had to show him how to use it.) A couple days later, I showed a curious worker how to apply sunscreen; I’ll never forget how astonished I was when the big bearded guy began to giggle in excitement as he rubbed it on his cheeks.

There were lots of other adventures – land and labor disputes, followed by a few rockets; unexploded ordnance turning up in the excavations; a worker with a dangerously impacted kidney stone; a worker whose home burned; a fist fight; workers remaining on the site at night because they were afraid to go home. I turned down “bakshish” and refused to make (illegal)

purchases at the PX for people, but I accepted lunch, and freely dispensed salaams and sunscreen. It all took just minutes a day, but gave me wings.

When I left Bagram, the ECP medic, Dr. Wahid, told me the workers were saying that they would miss “the American who cares about Afghans.”

I thanked him and pointed out that all the Americans care about Afghans, and came 8,000 miles to prove it. He smiled politely, but it was clear to me that sometimes a Band-Aid can speak louder than an A-10.

Even after the mission is accomplished and the Bagram airfield gives way once again to apple trees, Afghans will remember Americans. I hope they remember us fondly; for my part, I will always treasure my time at Bagram, and the friends I made there.



John Young (center, right) stands with Dr. Wahid (right) and two members of the medical staff he met while he was deployed to Afghanistan and working on an entry control point project.