

Mike Bisson's story

2010/2011 – Civilian assignment – Public Safety Canada



*Military and civilian vehicles move through Kandahar City
Photo provided by Robin Thibault*

Authors' note

The principal authors of this text, aside from the individual recounting the story, are John Cochrane, a former member of the unit, and his niece Marina Tinkler, a Concordia University student. This record of events was prepared in 2015, many years after they occurred. The authors prepared this record principally using information obtained during interviews with the individuals involved. Where possible, this information was corroborated through interviews with others and a review of pictures and other publicly available information. The record presents the events as the individuals involved remember them several years after they occurred.

Mike Bisson's story

Mike Bisson deployed to Afghanistan as a federal government employee on three separate occasions. The first was from January to July 2010, the second was from March to April 2011 and the third was from November to December 2011. While he was on the first two missions, he was still serving as a member of the Royal Canadian Hussars. When he completed his third mission, he had transferred to the Regiment de Hull, having been asked by his employer to work full time in Ottawa.

His Afghan experience differed from those of other Hussars in that he did not deploy as a reservist, but rather as a civilian specialist by virtue of his employment with the federal government, more precisely, with a department called Public Safety Canada. During his first deployment he worked on occasion providing support to Task Force Kandahar (TFK) headquarters, but spent most of his time at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Graceland, which was situated adjacent to Kandahar University on the northern edge of Kandahar City and abutting the small mountain chain that separates the city from the Arghandab district.

On one of these missions, he deployed to Kandahar with three of his colleagues. As they were a small group, they travelled directly to Kabul from Frankfurt aboard a plane operated by one of the Afghan national airlines. Mike found the arrival to be a little harrowing. He remembers that the plane came over the mountains that surrounded Kabul and then side-slipped to rapidly lose altitude before hitting the runway. The sky transitioned from the clear blue mountain air to the pervasive smog that typically enveloped the Afghan capital. After landing, they were quickly kitted out with weapons and protective clothing and taken to a Canadian Embassy guest house for the night. The next morning they boarded a small US military transport for the flight to Kandahar Airfield (KAF), stopping along the way at Bagram Airfield (BAF) and several small Forward Operating Bases (FOB's). At one of these locations, he remembers seeing the airplane taxi to the side of the runway to make way for a Reaper drone that was returning from a likely eventful mission seeing as its holding bays were empty of munitions.

After arriving at KAF, they spent a couple of days going through the normal in-processing routine and tried to take in the sheer size of the place and the concentration of military might there. They had arrived during the period of the American troop surge so there was a great deal of activity. They noticed multiple construction sites on the base. Despite the impending Canadian draw down, the level of activity indicated that the overall mission was still in full swing.

Mike was fortunate in that the position he occupied allowed him to travel in and around Kandahar City quite a lot. He visited a number of FOB's, the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT) at Camp Nathan Smith (CNS), some of the provincial and district combined operations centers, and the offices of various Afghan Ministries.

He still remembers his first road move, not because it was the first, but rather because it was a very rude introduction to the realities of Kandahar. The team was returning to FOB Graceland after having spent a day at Camp Nathan Smith. The team was travelling low-profile in a two-vehicle convoy of armoured SUVs, rather than in military pattern vehicles. The passengers in the vehicles were also wearing local garments over their protective clothing to avoid attracting undue attention. When the convoy arrived at

an Afghan National Police (ANP) check point at one of the bridges crossing the irrigation canal in the city, the first vehicle was allowed through, but the vehicle and the garb of the passengers in the second vehicle apparently caused some confusion with the ANP officers. They rapidly surrounded the vehicle with weapons drawn and started frantically shouting instructions for the vehicle to back up. For some reason, possibly due to the bulky clothing that was being worn by the passengers, the police officers did not want to approach the vehicle as they were fearful that the passengers were suicide bombers set to explode.

Ironically, a local resident, showing no fear whatsoever, came right up to the vehicle, stuck his head into the passenger window and started a conversation with the interpreter and explained the situation, while the stressed policemen were pointing their weapons and shouting at the vehicle from a short distance.

Several minutes later, a well-dressed Afghan appeared and also approached the vehicle. He spoke English and introduced himself as being the area ANP commander. Right away, he understood that the team was comprised of Canadians and instructed the police at the checkpoint to let the vehicle pass.

Mike feels that this incident represented some of the complexities and confusion that were ever-present in Kandahar. He found that working directly with Afghans required a whole new skill set. The skill set required a mix of patience, diplomacy and other skills that soldiers do not usually need. Trying to understand the Afghan mentality, and trying to win over people who for decades had experienced nothing but violence and hardship, was definitely a challenge.

Closing message from Mike

“During my time in Afghanistan, I was able to feel the special bond that we share as Hussars and as former Hussars. I was always happy when I crossed paths with another Hussar. This included my meetings with the late Captain Terry Sykes, who spent three years in Kandahar working in information operations at NATO’s Regional Command South (RC(S)), first as a Hussar, and then as a civilian employee. I also had the pleasure of meeting Captain Ali Raju, another Hussar who was busily employed as a CIMIC officer in Kandahar province. We Hussars may well be proud of our service in Afghanistan and the contribution that we made to the international efforts to provide security there. For those who had the opportunity to do so, it is a bond that we will always share, and one which will be remembered in perpetuity by way of the theatre battle honour which was granted to the Regiment in recognition of that service.” - Mike Bisson – May 15th, 2015.

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