

Afghanistan: Bureaucracy & terrain. Hints for Special Forces.

Somerset writer James Crowden, who travelled widely in Afghanistan during the 1970's offers the US troops and special forces some hints on coping with the country's bureaucracy and the terrain.

The public might, with some justification after all the Presidential and Prime Ministerial rhetoric, wonder what the Pentagon and the Ministry of Defence are up to. They are we are told pursuing the war through diplomatic channels… Maybe the Special Forces are still waiting for their visas to be processed by Taliban Ministry for Infidel Affairs.

Things change slowly in Afghanistan and machinations of bureaucracy are always a delight to them. Getting across the Afghan frontier from Meshed to Herat was always an interesting business. It would take all day to process your papers, first on the Iranian side then across the few miles of 'No Man's Land' the bureaucracy, all over again on the Afghan side. Sometimes passports would go missing. One man I met in desperation found his passport jammed under the leg of a rickety wooden table covered in dust, holding the table steady so that the official could write with greater ease.

Once in Afghanistan, bureaucracy escalates, particularly if you want to go to restricted areas like Badakhshan and Nuristan north of Jellalabad. These are some of the most mountainous areas of Afghanistan and held out longest against the Russians. My own reasons for wanting to go to these remote regions was inspired by Eric Newby's excellent book *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*. I simply wanted to come down from the north cross the main range of the Hindu Kush and visit the other five or six valleys of Nuristan, which very few travellers had ever seen. It took ten days to get permission in Kabul. Officially I was still in the army and so the Third secretary at the British Embassy advised me to get a revolver, but I bought a long curved knife instead which I wore under my shirt. Undercover forces however rarely worry about getting their passports stamped, and anyway the offices in Kabul will have been flattened by now.

The first British Army officers to go into Nuristan were all under cover, a small expedition in 1885, led by Colonel Woodthorpe, Royal Engineers, all in Afghan clothes. Even today their full reports are hard to find. A second and more prolific man was Sir George Scott Roberston, a medical officer who later wrote a book called *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush*. This region was so remote that they were only converted to Islam in 1896.

As far as maps were concerned these were of two sorts. The old 1940's British Survey of India maps which were very accurate in some places but non-existent in others. There were large patches of white, which looked like snow, but were in fact unexplored. And then there were the American Air Force Maps prepared by the Defence Mapping Agency at St Louis, Missouri. These were very impressive at first sight but because they were from photographs shot at 30,000 ft the detail on the ground were negligible. No villages were marked and some rivers went over passes.

On the ground you had to follow your nose and speak either the Afghan form of Farsi, Dari, or Pashtu. In Nuristan, a good hiding place for Osama bin Laden, it was so remote that each valley had evolved its own language. The best book on Pashtu is written by Dr Ernest Trumpp of Tübingen University in 1873, it contains such wonderful phrases as 'the throat of every man is moist by his own spittle'. And 'Come quick, O Physician, for God's sake, otherwise I die'.

As far as equipment was concerned, I had sought the advice of Wilfred Thesiger, the well-known Arabian explorer, who had been up in Nuristan with Eric Newby in the 1960's. Thesiger simply said. 'Don't take a stove. petrol is so messy.' And so we relied on twigs and firewood throughout the two months in the mountains. You simply had to keep your matches dry and carry a little tinder with you. But smoke gives your position away.

Our journey lasted two months. One of the secrets was to travel light and fast, if that was possible, but beware of altitude. One of the passes we crossed was 16,500 ft and even the horse nearly died. Sometimes we were carrying 60lb packs at altitude and even after a month or two, the acclimatisation was only just beginning to take effect. The idea that Special Forces can waltz in their wearing burkas and flip-flops and still perform effectively is laughable. When in Afghanistan do as the Afghans do.

As to the terrain, it is formidable in so many different ways. First there is the desert in the south and west. Then there are the mountains, which are in effect the western tail of the Himalaya. A barren country with very little vegetation and cover. Irrigation channels have been destroyed, crops are not even planted. It is a fragile existence at the best of times. And then there is the snow and the cold which always comes at this time of year and is bitter. One moment you are at 14,000 ft, the next you are back down to 7,000 ft.

Often there are paths but no guides. You navigate by following goat dung, but once the snow comes down you cannot even see that. And there is another problem… these passes are still littered with small anti-personnel mines, dropped by the Russians in the nineteen eighties, brown, grey, green and white to cover all the seasons. And then there are problems of leaving tracks in the snow. Helicopters are good but they are noisy and can be shot down very easily. With stinger missiles, every Afghan goatherd is a potential risk. Once grounded it is as well to remember a few lines of Kipling…

'When you are wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,

And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
And go to your Gawd like a soldier”.