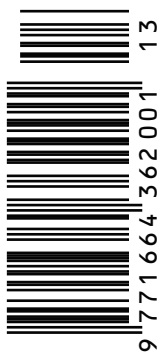


GLOBAL

#13

FUNDING GREEN
THE FUTURE
OF PEACEBUILDING
ELUSIVE DEMOCRACY
IN ZIMBABWE
BEHIND THE AFGHAN
FRONTLINES

Creating the New Russian Dissidents





A group of men, likely Afghan, are shown in profile or three-quarter view, standing in a line. They are wearing traditional headwear (turbans) and shawls. The background is a bright, hazy outdoor setting. A semi-transparent white box with a dark border is overlaid on the image, containing the text.

A Place Only Soldiers
and Children Can See

A small boy
in a village in
Helmand Province



A mother and
her two girls
wait outside the
Egyptian Women's
Hospital in Bagram



The battle in Afghanistan continues after ten long years. Beyond the frontlines and the fighting, a generation has grown up amidst the ‘reality’ and ‘insanity’ of conflict. For one returned US Army Reserve Captain, the moments shared with these forgotten women and children will forever shape her understanding of war.

text and photography by REBECCA MURGA

After ten years people tend to forget. They tend to forget what war does. What it does to soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. What it does to the women and children who are ‘lucky’ enough to live through it, and grow up knowing nothing but war. War plays with the mind. It blends the worlds of reality and insanity and creates a new place that only soldiers and children see. That was made clear on a trip I took to Daykundi Province in 2011 to visit one of the ‘Cultural Support Teams’. These all-female teams were established by the US Army and Marines to reach out to the half of the population that people tend to forget about – women and children.

It was visiting one of those small villages that helped me understand what war does. The Taliban once controlled this particular village. That fact was difficult to imagine because I was able to walk, hand-in-hand, with small children to a nearby local home to visit some of the women. The Afghan men in this particular village had grown tired of the Taliban and decided to join the Afghan local police to protect their homes by the time I arrived in May of 2011.

The hospitality in Afghanistan is like nothing I’d ever seen or experienced before. The women welcomed us in with hugs and kisses to sit and talk. They cooked for us, and as we ate our Afghan rice and laughed together, it seemed for a brief moment entirely possible that this small reality we created in this clay home could actually last. We talked about their families and daughters; we brought them some fresh pineapple that had come in on the last military shipment. The sour look on their faces right before they spat out the pineapple and laughed was priceless. The meeting only lasted about two hours, but after we left their home and walked back to the small forward operating base, I sat under the brilliant stars of the Afghan sky with a feeling I could only describe as euphoric. I was naïve enough to believe in possibility and hope. I was naïve enough to think a moment like that could last.

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and talked to the women, smiles
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want: to take care of their
children and families*

It was what happened the next day, and every day after that helped me to understand what happens in a war. I was asked to grab my camera to document a small child, and when I finally saw him, I understood why. I watched as the young Special Forces medic tenderly treated the three-year old boy with burns to over 80 percent of his body. I saw the care and sadness in his eyes as he cleaned his wounds and administered morphine. It was then that the reality of the world I was in kicked me in the teeth. It was then I received my education on war.

I learned that some Afghans punish their children by dipping them into boiling water. The medic told me later it was a common occurrence. It made him angry. But what could you do about it, he asked. You just try to help the kids when you can. I learned that most of the young, beautiful girls I met on my travels would have marriages arranged for them by the time they were 12 or 13 years old, usually to the highest

bidder. I learned that the girls' orphanages should not really be called 'orphanages', because most of the girls would never be adopted. Though an argument could be made that the girls living in those orphanages were better off than most. At least they would receive an education and be lucky enough to escape a teenage wedding night.

In the reality of war there is no adequate healthcare for most of the women in Afghanistan. They gathered, some coming from miles away, in a small Egyptian hospital in Bagram for basic healthcare. They sat for hours in their bright blue burkas in the hot summer sun, hoping to see a female doctor, some with ailments that hydration and proper nutrition could most likely cure – but that would have required the women to have basic health education and access to clean water.

The reality is that only 15 percent of women can read and write, according to the UN Children's Fund, and only 27 percent of Afghans have access to safe drinking water. The 'hospital' consisted of a small building and small shack for an admin room, with the women sitting on the dirt floor outside the building waiting to be seen. I learned that if you just sat and talked to the women, smiles began to appear and you realized they wanted what most women want: to take care of their children and their families.

Their children, dirty but happy, sat around looking at me as we walked into the hospital. The girls followed me around, watching what I did, how I did it and wondered who I was. I saw the curiosity in their faces. I couldn't help but hug them, despite the warnings that most might have TB. I didn't really

A Cultural Support Team member talks to a group of girls outside the boy's school in Khakrez – without a school of their own, they stand outside looking in the windows watching the boys learn



care at that point. I didn't speak Dari, they didn't speak English, but somehow we shared something, even if it was just a smile. One of the girls took a small bracelet off of her hand and gave it to me, smiling. I shook my head but she insisted. She told me through an interpreter that it was a gift. I instantly felt guilty about not being able to help, and I couldn't help but wonder how her life would end up.

I once heard an officer say: if we could give a man back his dignity, the women hope, and the children a vision for a better life, we would have succeeded in our mission. But what if we couldn't? I began to understand why soldiers got frustrated and angry. I understood why they became despondent as they looked back on their deployments and wondered if they had made a difference. I still wonder what happened to

that little girl who gave me her only real possession. I wonder if she is even still alive. I get sick at the thought that she might not be. I learned that Afghan girls are all quiet, standoffish, shy and curious, but polite. The boys on the other hand, they loved to talk to us. They were pushy, inquisitive and loved to fight. I learned that passing out candy to kids was a bad idea. There was never enough. Everyone wanted a piece; they all expected it. They pushed and shoved to get some. I also learned to always keep a hand on my weapon. "Some of the boys like to grab at the weapons," one soldier warned me, "just keep an eye on yours."

I learned that you wouldn't always have the answers to questions. You would never be able to do enough. Sometimes the war just wouldn't make sense. You just had to try to do your best and eventually come to the realization that war does indeed play with the mind. War blends the worlds of reality and insanity and creates a new place that only soldiers and children can see. I just hope that someday, they will be able to understand it. ✚

Captain Rebecca Murga meets with a group of girls at an orphanage in Kabul, where they are provided with classes, healthcare and English lessons



Small children in Gizab walk three Cultural Support Team members to their Forward Operating Base after visiting women in a village that was once a Taliban stronghold







▲ A family checks in at the Women's Egyptian Hospital in Bagram

▼ The Afghan women's soccer team before a match with their ISAF counterparts - final score 1-1



