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Us and Them

by Phat Doan

The Journey...

July 6th, 2010, there was no turning back. We resigned our full-time jobs, put our educations on hold, said goodbye to our family and friends and prepared for the unknown adventure to come. Two months later, dusts swallowed the plane combat landing from the empty sky. Our hearts sunk as we raced off the plane under the cover of darkness. Thoughts of snipers and mortar observers, from the million stories we've heard, immediately crossed our minds. Picking up our rucksacks, reality finally hit us as we walked through the quiet, lifeless land. The moon shined with little light reflecting; grasping our weapons tightly, we tried to make out the familiar faces of our friends looking for any little comfort. *So it began...*

Them...

A five-year-old child was in agony. Every part of him described malnutrition but there was something about his tiny body that caught the eyes: his oddly large stomach. He was living with Thalassemia, a type of sickle cell disease, causing his spleen to enlarge, expand a little every day, push and crush his internal organs. Thus, he could eat only two fingers of bread a day. Though hunger always lingered on his mind, anything more could only cause pain to his fragile body. His livers started to fail. He was on his last few months. His two older brothers passed away from the same illness a couple years ago. Every day was a struggle for him and his parents. He received dialysis twice a year and each treatment was a quest by itself. He had to travel to Pakistan for the dialysis and most times he was given the first available blood, not necessary the one matching his blood type. After all, he lived in the countryside of Afghanistan, not a place advanced medical care would exactly come to mind.

Us...

We had a good Lieutenant in the platoon. He truly cared for his counterparts and the local nationals. His actions reflected deep affection. He took times to learn the local language, Pashto. He put aside many hours to read and analyze the demographic and political geography of the area. He devoured any books that were related to military conflicts. While other American convoys blasted through Khost city, he took times to stop and talk to the locals, to learn about their concerns and to understand their troubles; it helped him to understand their struggles. In his beliefs, there must be a way to help these people. Many care packages were delivered. Many schools were visited. Many civil affairs missions were conducted. Many construction and reconstruction projects were initiated. One time, he wrote a promise of treatment note to an injured elderly man due to the situation constrained. The elder was able to receive medical care days later thanks to his note. He is an officer who deeply cared.

However, he was just a minority in an arrogant army. There were those, the majority, who didn't believe in his actions or counterinsurgency [COIN]. They deemed it unnecessary, that those he helped were unfaithful "creatures", only to accept his help with smiles and turn around stabbing him in the back. Their examples were the lethal buried Improvised Explosive Devices [IEDs] along the routes his convoy would travel. He did, after all, lose his best friend just two weeks into the deployment to insurgent IED. Three months later, another close friend of his was killed to dismount IED. These were his challengers' case in point of why this place should be nuclear bombed into a parking lot. Still, he stayed strong and kept caring.

Us & Them...

It was a long patrol in early October. We set out early to clear an unimproved [dirt] route along a hotspot village in Khost Province. The convoy slowly crept through the village scanning for IEDs while the dismount teams were on both sides of the convoy scanning for a triggerman or as we called them: the Taliban man.

A family hesitantly approached the Lieutenant. Their son was in a dire situation. The parents were in tears begging the Lieutenant and his almighty American power to save their son and salvage a family's misery. The boy looked full of life but confined in an exhausted body.

The Lieutenant, without hesitation, was on full speed helping the family. The platoon medics were immediately dispatched to his location for an on spot medical evaluation, only in shock to see the boy's body. Bad news was delivered: there was nothing they could do to save the boy; only a surgeon could.

In America, the boy could be saved with a routine surgery available in most hospitals. However, there were only few in Afghanistan and most were out of reach to ordinary Afghans. The Coalition Force operated surgical centers in many Forward Operating Bases [FOB]. However, accessibilities and treatments were mostly limited to Coalition Force and their counterparts. Local Nationals may be granted treatments on case-by-case basis.

"This is a severe case," the Lieutenant assessed. Immediately, he was on the radio calling command post requesting a U.S helicopter medical evacuation [Medevac]. His request was unorthodox; it was definitely not the first but not the norm either. Command post shot back a "Denied" to no one surprised. What followed was an hour long of high-level bureaucracy truly at work.

At each level, the authority argued the risk versus the benefit of evacuating a non-urgent medical [not life threatening at that exact moment] local national. Yet, none of them actually saw the boy's worn out body or the father's hysterical face. They only saw a concept, an abstract of the situation, presenting through waves of radio traffic. For a while, they wrestled the idea, negotiated and compromised with each other for the best approach to this rather unusual situation. Finally, a decision was made: the boy would be brought to the FOB Salerno hospital in a week for an evaluation. The medics knew this in no way would guarantee a treatment; however, at least the boy got a foot in the door, they reasoned. It took two more weeks of efforts by the medics, the Lieutenant and the company commander to justify and convince the higher commands and the field surgical team to fully come on board. "The father's show of faith and courage out to be rewarded by our best effort. If we don't reward that then what the hell are we doing here?" was the winning argument.

The father also had to fight his own bureaucracy battle to save his son. Knowing the village was heavily Taliban influenced and that approaching the Americans in broad daylight could bring death to his whole family, he still risked it all to give his son a chance. While the Americans were deliberating on how to best treat his son and the situation, he was convincing his village elders to allow the Americans to help his son.

Us...

The minority was mostly those of higher rankings in the company. Like the Lieutenant, they showed affection for the locals. They wanted the local to be out of poverty, to be on their own feet fighting and building their own country. After all, helping the local is helping them. The sooner the country is on its own, the sooner they will come home to their family, many of them reasoned.

However, it was the majority that carried out the minority's orders. They were the grunts, the hard charging frontline Joe that did the work. They didn't bullshit around when it came to it. Their lives were on the line.

The average age was 20. They agreed to put their lives on hold for a year to proudly serve their country. In this place, there was no mom, no dad, only a band of brothers baptized by fire. They shared hungers, endured the sizzling sun and tolerated cold sleepless nights together. In addition, they got blown up ... together. It was just they and their brothers against the Taliban man. They carried each other through physical and emotional roller coasters that were caused by the stress of the deployment and sometimes the stress of broken families because of the deployment.

They had frustrations with this country. Almost 10 years have gone since the initial push; things were still the same. Mud huts were still the way of living. Dirt roads were still the main travel routes. Paved roads were still being blown up left and right with IED, leaving potholes and impassable culverts. Trashes scattered along the roads, filled the streams and obstructed the low water crossings. Little kids with no jackets in a fierce winter barefoot scavenging the local trash dumps. Men squatted and peed on the side of a road like it was their private outhouse. In the age of technology, where was a sign of modern civilization?

They had frustrations with this war. They were not fighting a million men army like their grandfather did. Rather, their opponents were elusive and mysterious. They could not tell who was good and who was bad. They could not distinguish a friendly pro-coalition villager and the Taliban man who wanted to cut their throats. They were not the one to blame either for their inability to distinguish friends and foes. The Taliban man chose to live among the friendly villagers and, well, he looked just like an Afghani. [Duh!]

They had frustrations with their counterparts, mostly to the apathy. Many of the Afghanistan National Army [ANA] soldiers showed an indifference attitude toward the American training efforts. The ANA soldiers didn't take trainings seriously and even joked around in serious situations. If the ANA soldiers die, it is *Inshallah* [Allah's Will.] The ANA soldiers saw the war as the Americans' responsibility. Hence, they referred the ANA soldiers as "creatures", a kind that lives off others' efforts, not as "human" counterparts.

They also had frustrations with the way this war fought. They were constrained to the strict rules of engagement. They could not shoot without questions asked first. They sat

helplessly watching their friends blown up and the Taliban man rode away on his little red Honda motorcycle. At that exact moment, their request for engagement was still working its way through the usual bureaucracy at a comfortable higher tactical command center, miles away. By the time it trickled back down the chain, they were mostly back at their respective FOB while the Taliban man was probably having a feast celebrating his feat against the almighty infidels.

It is hard to understand what they go through. Then again, how would you explain the feeling of telling your family you just got hit, suffering traumatic brain injury, on Christmas Eve, all thanks to the Taliban man? How would you explain the feeling of watching the dust cloud of an exploding IED swallows your brothers, knowing the locals standing nearby have prior knowledge of the buried IED but fail to warn you? How would you explain the feeling of losing your love one and seeing the locals with smirks on their faces? Only your brothers in arm could share those feelings and bear with you through it.

To them, the majority, it was madness. Why should they smile and wave at the locals that secretly support the Taliban man? Why should they care if the locals have foods, clean water, medical clinics and schools when the locals secretly signal the Taliban man of their coming? Why should they hand out care packages to the local children when it is their dad the Taliban man? To them, it didn't make sense.

Them...

Sadat was a quiet man. Always cheerful with a grin on his face, he was the oldest of his troops. An Uzbek ethnic and a husband, father, brother, son, he answered his country call of duty. He would be away from home for months to years at a times, traveling with his unit across the Southern and Eastern part of his war torn country, fighting and hunting the Taliban man. Married, he left behind his wife and their two sons to fulfill his duty. At the time we met him, his youngest was only few months old. He is an Afghani.

Marx was an educated young man with a cripple footstep. No one really knew what happened to his right leg. No one dared to ask either. In his late twenties, he was wise and ambitious. He loved literature and his one wish was to study abroad in America, to read up on the world literature and immerse himself in its beautiful history. But for now, he put aside his dream [and his safety] to pay due for his country. A Pashtu ethnic and a son, brother, fiancée, he answered his country call of duty by being a translator for the Coalition Force. Many times he came home to death threats, drive by shootings or an explosive booby-trapped door by the Taliban man. Many times for many years, he got shot at or blown up while conducting missions with the Coalition Force. And every time without fail, he came back to work ready as ever to proudly contribute to Afghanistan's new future. He is an Afghani.

Then there were them, the ordinary citizens. They were father, mother, husband, wife, son, and daughter. They experienced tremendous hardships from the very early life. They worked from early dawn to humble dusk on their many generation farmlands. They raised herds of sheep and goats on the desert wastelands. They tended family, bear kids and cared for their elders with whatever resources they had. They are Afghanis.

Most Afghanis were ill-educated. Their main thought would be putting food on the table. Sure, they all heard about the Taliban man. Heck, they might even know one or two who are or were. Yet, they chose to either ignore or live with him. It was just a daily part of life. After all, what could they do? While the "Amrica", the Americans in their language, were also part of their

life, they usually showed up five or ten minutes and then disappeared for days to weeks. The Taliban man, on the other hand, was there for days in end. And yes, he was there to stay.

How many three cups of tea have their village elders had with different Amrica commanders? First cup of tea, you are a stranger. Second cup of tea, you are a friend. Third cup of tea, you are family. That's what it would take for a trusted relationship to be established. Yet, a three cups of tea relationship only lasts until a new replacement arrives, usually within a year or so. With new faces every year, a new three cups of tea has to be redone and everything is back to square one.

How many times have their elders asked for help to be greeted with enthusiasm and a long wait of nothing? Empty promises seem to be normal business for the Amrica, *or so they thought.*

Us & Them...

We were instructed to mentor a platoon of ANA. Not many greeted the news with enthusiasm beside the minority. To them, this was why they came: to train ANA soldiers to fight and build Afghanistan's future. The majority, of course, thought it was harassment. Now they had to spend their "off days" [Xbox times] "interact" [baby-sitting] their "new counterparts." Now they had to go to breakfast, lunch, and dinner with these "oddly" strangers without even a common language.

Then, came the cultural shock. The ANA soldiers rarely showered. They used hands to eat instead of silverwares. They emitted rather unpleasant odors most of the times. "Why don't they use deodorant?" asked by a young soldier. They hold hands and hugged each other like a reunion of a long lost couple. They savored "chin chai" [China green tea] with sugars. Apparently, the "assumed" universal hand and sign language was not even universal after all with these guys. A "thump up" from us meant "up your behind" to them. No one could understand each other without an interpreter. Ironically, they all had to go on dangerous missions together. *"How the heck in the world would this work?" the majority asked.*

A group of 25 men, they came from all parts of life. The majority of them were Tajik, Uzbek and Hazarat with only two were Pashtuns. For many, this was the first time they interacted with the almighty Amrica. They heard many things about the invincible Amrica. They all had seen the Hollywood glorified infamous Amrica soldiers in Rambo, Predator or Black Hawk Down. They envied the Amrica soldiers with their modern technologies and finest equipments. They wondered when would their Army be advanced like that? They wanted to befriend and follow the Amrica into battle. They entrusted their lives in the Amricas' hands. *"When bullets fly, everyone will speak the same language!" they responded.*

The ANA soldiers were excited and ready to learn from their almighty counterparts. However, it was completely different than they could imagine. Their counterparts brought a couple of them out on mission at a time. They sat in a truck until called up to dismount to chase some kids or act as security cordoning off an area. *"Where is our hand on route clearances learning?" they asked.*

Conducting route clearances while mentoring without a common language was an oversight right from a start. We only had one interpreter with us at any given time while the convoy could be stretching up to 15 vehicles. While the Lieutenant talked the mission through

with Sadat in his vehicle through Marx, his interpreter, other ANA soldiers could only sit in other vehicles without knowing due to language different. When situation rose, information started to flood from all directions, decisions had to be made within seconds, and million things would have to be done. Explaining what was going on to our counterpart would be the last on that list. On our off days, we conducted basic soldiering skills training to shape up our counterparts; however, there were not much we could teach about route clearance. It was kind of a hand on thing. *"Trials by fires, right?" we would answer.*

Me...

Living and working with ANA have brought me back to my father's experiences 35 years ago. All 35 years have passed but the majority still has not changed their way toward their counterparts and the local nationals. Yes, there are those who care but minority can only do so much.

My father served in the Army Republic of Vietnam [ARVN] as an infantry officer. He worked and fought along the side of the American Army. For many years he did not talk about his past, a time when he lost his youth to a "lost cause war" as perceived by the 1970s American population. A high school chemistry teacher, he got draft into the Army and became an officer in the surge of 1970. A humble man in a time of war, he sacrificed his youth to protect his love affair with his country. There, he was the few who believed in his country and her ideology, proudly fought and shamefully lost everything in that process. Like me, he was the few who cared.

I served as a team leader in a Sapper company, conducting route clearance across the Regional Command [RC] East of Afghanistan. On theory, my unit worked and fought along the side of the ANA. Of our 12 months deployment, we were only with our counterparts for less than two months, not that many in the company actually cared. To many in the company, this was a "lost cause", like 35 years ago. "COIN does not work" and the ANA are not doing their jobs" were common sayings among. They cited many reasons.

I feel related to my father who, 35 years ago, fought for his country's freedom. Like my father, most of the ANA soldiers fight for their country's freedom. They hate the Taliban just as my father hated the Vietcong [VC]. They put aside their family, their times, and their youth so that their country can one day enjoy the prosperity it once had. They fight with any and everything they have. With or without the Americans' support, they still fight ... to the end, like my father did.

Yet, many American soldiers ignore those efforts or choose to look away. They argue that the Afghans are not doing their parts. But how, I ask? Isn't their sacrifice enough? Have they forgotten the bureaucracy was more than often the culprit, not the Afghani soldiers? Have they forgotten the saying "When there is bad, there is also good?"

I feel related because everyday I see the ANA, I see my father 35 years ago, fighting proudly for his country freedom and in doing so, he was fighting for my freedom.

Us and Them...

A family has a new future. Their son's life has been prolonged for another 20 years. For once, they would not have to stand helplessly watching their son in pain.

In the end, both sides compromised for the better, put aside their differences to save a life of an Afghani child. The surgery was a success. The boy was fully recovered and discharged to his family after three days. To the family, it was a miracle. To the doctors at FOB Salerno, it was just a routine surgery. They volunteered to help the boy even after they were told they were fully responsible for the outcome. Of course, bureaucracy got to have its say before anything can go forward. The outcome was worthy of the fight. They gave an Afghan child a new life, a new hope and a new future that just days ago, he could never dream of. Everyone who was involved can now breathe easy with a smile.

We saw Sadat again one afternoon in March by coincidence. It had been 4 months since his departure. Driving slowly down a mountain switchback to see outside the window our dearest friend, still cheerful with a grin on his face, guiding his men. It was a moment of long lost family reunion. He now led his platoon clearing the routes without the American guidance. Over the past month, they have defeated many Taliban IEDs and provided freedom of movement to American convoys. They were now on their own, more independent than ever and eager to take over the responsibilities from their American counterparts.

Slowly just like that, his civil affairs projects came to fruit. Just like that, schools and medical clinics were in better condition, stocking with full supply. Wells and crickets fields construction were completed in many areas. Like that, his just will and determination slowly won the heart and mind of a many once hardcore Taliban-supported villages. Hopefully, his replacement will have a heart like him.

So it ends...

The plane is fast approaching its final destination. Just as abruptly as the forming of our unit two years ago, everyone, soon, will part different ways to start a new journey. Some will go back to their civilian jobs, some will return to their interrupted education; many will settle down, get married and start a family; most will finish their remaining military adventures in other units, and few will stay in for another tour in three years. Those few remaining will form a new foundation, prepping and preparing the new crops for the upcoming tour. They will tell the saga, recount the frustrations and proudly show their triumphs. Then, in three years, they will lead their green crops returning to this place. They will become the new "Us." There will be a new "Them." Hopefully, the new "Us" and "Them" will have better hearts, better relationships and better three cups of tea than their predecessors. However, to good faith, there will be no more "us & them" or "minority & majority," only "We: Americans and Afghanis" for a better Afghanistan.

Final words...

A new warfare has emerged during the past twenty years as the military increasingly fights insurgency wars rather than big army's apocalypses. We took Baghdad in 30 days but more than seven years to suppress Iraqi insurgency and established a reasonably stable Iraq. We chased the Taliban out of Kabul in less than two months, yet ten years later we're still fighting insurgency in southern and eastern provinces of Afghanistan with no end in sight. This warfare requires a different approach from our generation warriors.

Our soldiers now have become peace ambassadors more often than war fighters. They "supposedly" represent the US Government and its intention of helping Afghanistan and

Afghanis building a democratic government and free country. However, they are struggling between the duties and responsibilities they are entrusted upon and the frustrations they encounter while serving. Only if the *minority* can paint a clear big picture of counterinsurgency and the *majority* is willing to put aside their conservatives and accept the big picture, then together they'll have a better chance at charming their counterparts and winning the locals. Only when, together, they put whole hearts and minds into the operation despite all dissatisfactions then can they expect to win the hearts and minds of Afghanistan.

I wrote this essay not to criticize; rather, I wanted to present the many sides of the “lost cause,” “wrong war” or the “Obama’s war” [however the public perceived] that I’ve observed over my tour of duty.

I was someone who cared, and I was a Joe. Putting myself in danger to see little result was a frustration; yet, seeing my hard works bear fruits is worthy of the efforts. Not everyone is friendly but not everyone is an enemy either.

Many sides in an endless war, *how would you behave?*

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