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Afghanistan Remembered: A Conversation with Major Michael Barrett

Years after returning home from his military service in Afghanistan, Major Michael Barrett still gets spooked by unexpected noises, like the sound of an approaching fire truck. “Still, to this day, if a fire engine comes up behind me with its siren on, and I don’t see it coming, it freaks me out,” Barrett explained during an interview for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project. What outsiders might consider jumpiness or edginess was, to Barrett, a life-saving reflex while he was completing his first tour of duty in Afghanistan in 2008. Along with a team of about nine other men, Barrett was sent to train the Afghan police force. The mission was simple enough on paper, but Barrett and his men soon discovered the difficulties involved with reforming the Afghan police force from the ground up.

Only ten years earlier, Michael Barrett had been just like any other college kid on The Citadel’s campus. In between studying for classes, his weekends were spent hanging out with friends and, occasionally, causing a little chaos. “I threw a party at my parents’ house one time when they were out of town for a bunch of knobs,” he remembered. “All the upperclassmen were

confused and upset that the underclassmen were able to drink but they weren't." Lucky for him, Barrett's parents didn't find out about the party, and he made it through his years at The Citadel unscathed. Despite being the son of a military veteran and attending a military college, Barrett himself didn't seriously consider the military until after he'd graduated: "Senior year I was more worried about having freedom and [hanging out in] downtown Charleston. Then I suddenly said, 'I wonder what I'm going to do for a job?'" Unsure of what he'd do after graduation, Barrett decided that the military sounded like a good plan, and soon he was off to Fort Bragg for basic training.

Barrett had been training for the Army since entering college on an Army scholarship, but his training really began one hot summer at Fort Bragg. Training in the southern heat was miserable at times, but Barrett remembers finding some fun in it: "[Everything] we did in the field reminded me a lot of being a kid growing up. We had to crawl on the ground, play in the mud, shoot real rifles instead of little toy rifles. We occasionally got to blow some stuff up. To me it was like getting paid...to be 12 again." Ten years passed between Barrett's commissioning date and his deployment date, during which he completed additional training in Columbia, South Carolina, and Fort Riley in Kansas. Then it was off to an entirely new world: Afghanistan.

Listening to Barrett describe the geography of Afghanistan conjures up images of another planet—Mars, perhaps. The red dust and lack of vegetation Barrett describes easily evokes a scene from a science fiction movie; for a year, this was the site of Barrett's deployment. The grandeur and sheer spectacle of that part of the world was in part due to its varied topography. Barrett recalls that "The terrain would go from desert, hard, rocky earth, to mountains that would go straight up to the middle of nowhere." But perhaps the most memorable part of the terrain was the pervasive bright red dust. As Barrett explained, "You had the normal dust, and then, in

certain places, they had this red moon dust. It was so fine and silt-like...that you couldn't ever filter it out. I've never seen anything like it in South Carolina."

The foreign landscape was the first of many new realities Barrett and the rest of the troops had to contend with while overseas. Once they arrived in Afghanistan, the members of Barrett's unit learned that they had been assigned a new mission. Rather than train the Afghan Army, Barrett and his men were to train the police force. When they learned that their mission had changed, Barrett's group wasn't sure what to think: "Our first question was, 'What do we know about being a cop? I've gotten a speeding ticket before. But what do we know?'" The men quickly realized, however, that in a time of war, a police force and army troops were practically one in the same, and the American soldiers' goal ultimately became simply showing the Afghan police force how to survive.

On their first day in the field, Barrett and his men lined the Afghan men up to take inventory. They counted 160 men, but day by day, they noticed that their group was dwindling. It became clear that the Afghan police force was nowhere as reliable or as disciplined as the U.S. Army. In fact, Barrett and his team were lucky if a group of trainees made it through the entire day of training. "For the first hours they'd be very attentive. They would do what we asked. The problem was once you hit about noon they would get hungry...They would lose their attention spans. It was like children almost. Good children, but children. We would have to cut the training day in half," Barrett explained.

To combat the Afghans' lack of discipline, the American soldiers came up with inventive strategies. One common tactic was to use food and drink as motivation. The Afghans were told that if they completed their work, they'd have Gatorade to drink instead of water, or, if they had water, it would be bottled water rather than water from the river. The biggest challenge

Barrett and his men faced, however, proved to be one that was out of their hands: the corruption of the Afghan government. More often than not, the Afghan police who completed their training would not be paid, and, if they were, they were forced to give a cut to their corrupt bosses in order to keep their jobs. This corruption led many Afghans to drop out of their training and find more reliable sources of income, like farming or goat herding. Despite their efforts to spur positive change, Barrett and the other soldiers resigned themselves to the fact that corruption was a way of life and in Afghanistan and would remain a challenge long after their mission had ended.

What was perhaps the most difficult day of Barrett's service began on a day like any other. Barrett and a group of soldiers were in the midst of a meeting with a local village's tribal elders when they got word that their Canadian allies needed assistance. The men left the meeting and headed to the Green Zone to await their next orders. Eventually they got word that the Taliban had been spotted eating on the side of a nearby road. Confident that their group of 40 Afghan police officers and nine American soldiers could defend themselves against what were estimated to be nine Taliban members, Barrett and the rest of his group decided to forcibly remove the Taliban insurgents from the village. As the American soldiers approached, the insurgents fled into nearby buildings. The situation quickly deteriorated as Barrett and his group were left standing on the road unprotected. The soldiers followed the Taliban through a maze of clay Afghan buildings, trying to disperse them and get them to yield. "It turned into a running gun battle like something out of a bad movie—control became nonexistent," Barrett recalled.

The battle only worsened when Barrett's best friend, Cesar, was shot. "It happened out of the corner of my eye. But I can still see it," Barrett said. "The first thing that popped into my mind, and I can't remember if I said it or not, was 'Why did you drop your weapon?,' which was

totally the wrong reaction, but you're always trained never to drop your weapon." Cesar had been shot first in his right hamstring and then in his right shoulder. According to Barrett, the order of these shots saved Cesar's life. The shot to his hamstring spun him around, ensuring that the shoulder shot didn't go all the way through his body. With Cesar and two other Afghan policemen injured, Barrett needed to regain control of the situation.

After a brief silence and a lull in the gunfire, Barrett began trying to find a way to safety, but his attempts were soon halted. "I kicked down the door of this [mud] building [when] a guy comes around from the opposite side," he said. "If this had been in New York City, we would have bumped into each other and said excuse me; this wasn't New York City. He had a weapon, I had a weapon. It very quickly turned into who could do what to survive. I'm still here." "It was such a shock after it happened," Barrett said. Eventually, Barrett was able to get Cesar and the two wounded Afghan policemen out of the combat zone, but he still remembers the trauma of his experience: "Nobody wants to glorify combat. In the movies it's so heroic and romantic, but that's not what you're thinking [when you're experiencing it]. There's not background music playing. It's chaotic and spastic," he said.

A year after his deployment, Major Michael Barrett completed his tour in Afghanistan. While he feels that there was some progress made during his tour, he emphasized that, in Afghanistan, change comes slowly. "There was some progress made," he said. "By the time we left they began instituting a banking system." In relation to his own efforts, he thinks that there were some Afghan police who made significant progress with the help of the U.S. military's training. "The good part is that of the 160 we started with, there were about 60 to 70 core police officers who really believed in what they were doing. [They] wanted to be there and wanted to do the job," he said. Those officers were the ones who really benefitted from the training.

Perhaps the most satisfying part of his experience was his—and his fellow soldiers’—coming out of it alive. “Everybody I mobilized with and everybody I knew really well came home” he said.

Thankfully, Barrett did, too.