

Twelve weeks in Afghanistan

In 2007, Stephen Meloche spent three months working as a meteorologist with NATO forces in Kandahar airbase (KAF), Afghanistan. Nearly 20 years later, he has taken a look back at his experience and rather than stick to a chronological sequence of events, has written this compelling and insightful account from the perspective of our senses (scent, taste, sight, touch and sound).

Twelve Weeks in Afghanistan (27 April - 30 July 2007)

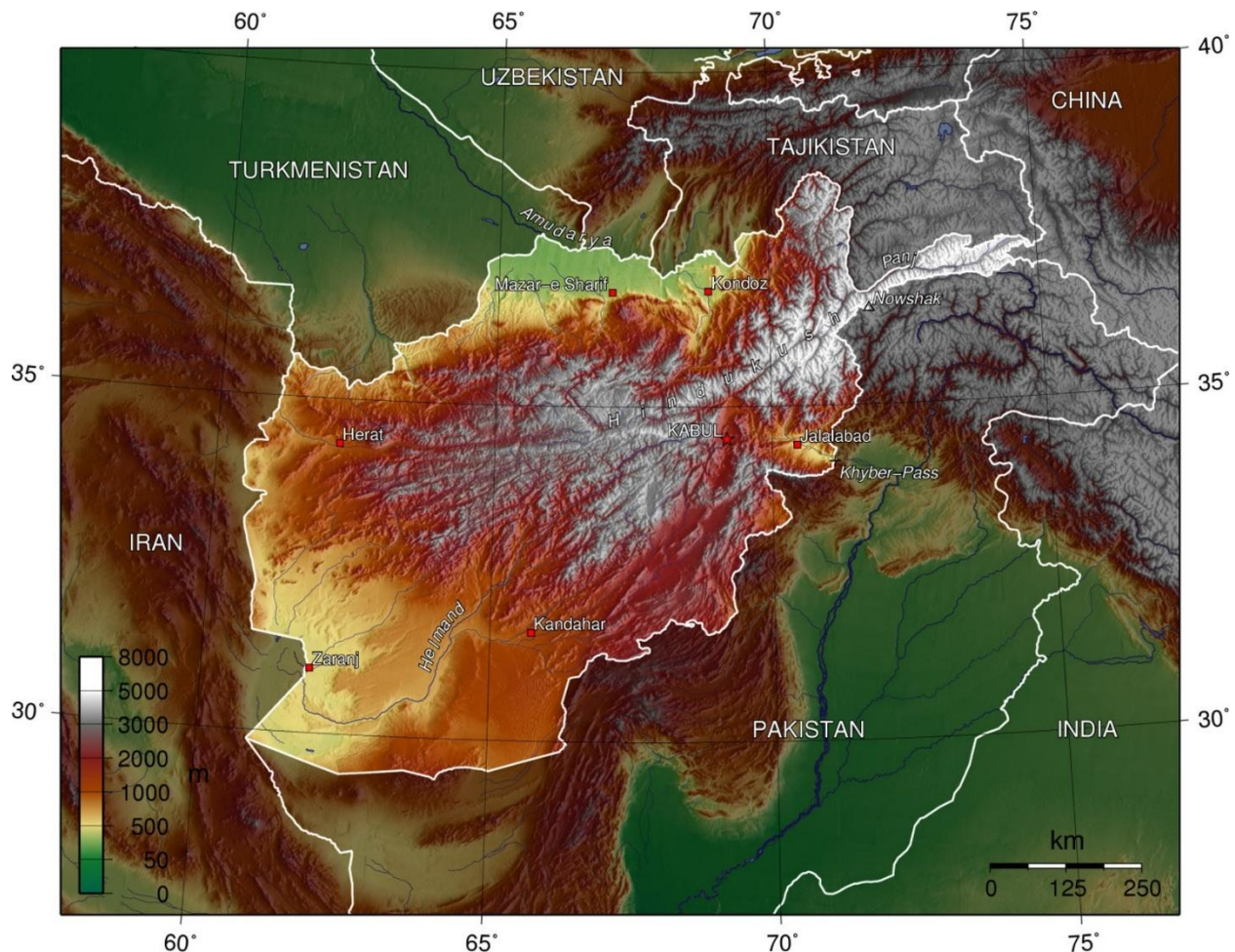


Kandahar Combat Weather Team Patch. (USAF 451st AEG/CWT)

I became a USAF Weather Observer in 1981, then progressed to Weather Forecaster in 1985. My 10 years of military service and subsequent 15 years of experience as a civilian meteorologist allowed me to gain the tools and discipline needed to work in data-sparse, chaotic and dangerous environments. I was born with none of these traits, but embraced each of them as they presented themselves.

Kandahar Air Base (OAKN) is in southern Afghanistan (lat 31.5N - lon 65.85E) at an elevation of 1005m (3300ft) above sea level. Its climate is classified as (Koppen-Geiger classification) of Arid Desert hot (BWh) & Arid Steppe hot (BSh). I was a Civilian

Meteorologist, embedded with NATO ISAF forces during the hand-over of control from the US military.



Physical geography of Afghanistan (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Afghanistan)

When I arrived on KAF I was given two weeks to acclimatise to the heat before starting my duties. I was given the “job” of assisting at the “live fire range” collecting valuable (and often polluting) lead or depleted uranium bullets and projectiles as well as the brass casings from small arms and grenade launchers. Everyone except civilians carried a weapon, but I never felt unsafe during my time there.

Scent

My first memory of KAF, once I stepped off the RAF aircraft (VC-10), is being struck by the heady mix of aviation fuel, wet-dusty roads, burning waste and the notorious Kandahar “poo-pond” (sewage works for 25,000 personnel, baking in the desert)!

Shortly afterwards, as we were being assigned to our units and accommodation, we were taught how to breathe. Yes, breathing through one's mouth (as most of us do) expels 1 litre of water from the body each hour! Breathing through your nose (as nature intended) conserves this and living in the desert is all about conserving water.

There are many smells that I remember, such as “midnight chow” as night-shift breakfast was always welcome with competition between the Brits and Yanks for the best breakfast being intense! We had a NAAFI (British) and a Tim Hortons (Canadian) “cafe” and again, competition for the best tea and coffee was on another scale.



KAF (red pin) on the edge of the Rigistan Desert (<https://mesonet.agron.iastate.edu>)

Unfortunately, departing KAF (Kandahar Air Field) at the end of July onboard an RAF C-17 flight home (via Qatar and Cyprus due to fuel shortages) was memorable with the distinct whiff of smelly combat boots (having spent a summer in the desert) and stale cigarettes.

Taste

My first encounter with a Kandahar “dust devil” happened as I rounded a corner of a 30ft wall of shipping containers, walking into an 80mph whirlwind of powder-fine dust. Biology dictates that the lungs inhale sharply and I got a throat-full of desert! I quickly put my face into my T-shirt and clicked on my collar light (red flashing) so we could see each other in

the darkness. And as soon as it had begun, it cleared, leaving a handful of us, wandering around dazed, until we regained our bearings, continuing on our way!

Living in a war-torn country exposes oneself to diseases that most of us never imagine, such as “cutaneous leishmaniasis” a flesh-eating disease caused by fleas. Foul-tasting Malaria tablets had to be taken daily at breakfast, with a weekly booster tablet as well, the bitter aftertaste lasting for hours. This medication rendered all of us unable to donate blood for at least 2 years after our last dose.



My “pit” in Barracks with my 25kg “bug-out bag”, body armour & helmet (carried daily) © Stephen Meloche

Living on an American Airbase, we were exposed to the lifestyle in which I grew up (Florida). Daily stops at the BX (base exchange), using paper coins (metal ones are too heavy to justify transporting), we would stock up on beef jerky, American candy, salted sunflower seeds, ice tea and Gatorade.

The Americans had seemingly won the “breakfast war”, but the Brits had an ace up their sleeve in the form of Curry Night. The queue into the British “mess hall” was a sight to behold. The curry was hot (no one was completely sure what type of meat was used) and the naan bread and chutney was to die for. Many Americans had never experienced curry!

Sight



Canadian “dust-hockey” is played in the cool of the morning or evening © Stephen Meloche

The Canadians built a dust-hockey rink and also carved several Native American totem poles which they proudly displayed around the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) “zone” of the camp. I remember one day they managed to fly out the Stanley Cup (National Hockey League trophy) and I’ve never seen so many grown adults crying since!

The Arghandab and Tarnak rivers flowing south from the Hindu Kush, enter the Dori river then abruptly turn west as it runs into the Rigestan (or Red) Desert south of the camp. One can easily see the Red Desert from the camp, the dunes rising up to 50m+ in some places, butting-up to the sheer mountains on the Pakistan border.

Night shifts are always the busiest and most productive shift, it’s the foundation for the day’s “products” to be built upon, mostly fueled by much good coffee. One memory was of the illumination flares which the RAF Regiment would fire whilst patrolling outside “the wire” on foot, looking for Taliban who may be encroaching on KAF’s perimeter. The flares would light up the night so that you could easily read by them, although only lasting a few minutes before more were fired aloft.

One night after shift-change, a colleague and I left the office and passed under the observation deck (a bomb hole in the TLS roof, see image below) where the US Marines erected the American flag in 2001. We suddenly heard the screech of outgoing US Army

rockets and saw them arching outbound, towards the Taliban 30 miles away, who had opened fire on Allied aircraft.



The TLS roof observation deck (bomb damage), with Russian and American aircraft © Stephen Meloche

We continued walking “home” to our accommodation, down a dust road in the darkness, when we suddenly noticed a green laser, from behind and above us, between our heads and falling onto the road in front of us. It was an RCMP sniper on duty, watching us. We felt fear and comfort at the same time, and I suppose that showed the high level of trust you had to put into the hands of others.

Dust devils were very common and would pull aloft tons of powder-fine dust in multiple funnels, criss-crossing the airfield, this dust would sit aloft in a layer at 2,000 to 3,000ft before settling out and reducing our visibility significantly for days.

In late June 2007 (25-29th), we had an upper level disturbance (500mb = 20,000ft) that produced a lot of high-based cumulonimbus (bases above 7000ft) with cool, gusty downdraughts and several days of dust storms across the area. Dust storms mean our air-cover drones (operating at 20,000ft) can no longer see Taliban ground movements, allowing them to encroach on the airbase and lob RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) or mortars onto the camp (which they did eight times during my twelve weeks). Weather has always been a useful cloak to hide behind in warfare over the centuries.



Cumulonimbus and a rain shaft with wall cloud, during the 5-day convective event © Stephen Meloche

The thunderstorms became more frequent over Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, bringing flash floods to many parts, including KAF with 3.55in (90.2mm) falling in only a few hours. We had several inches of standing water widely across the camp for 2 days as the ground is hydrophobic. Several days later, we had a “plague” of frogs which seemed to come from nowhere (probably the dry riverbeds) and remained for several days before disappearing. Across the region, scores of people lost their lives to these flash floods.



A friendly scorpion found hiding in the toilet block! Boots were also very popular! © Stephen Meloche

Wildlife that was often seen on the camp included scorpions, which always found their way into one's combat boots overnight, needless to say, we checked them routinely before putting them on. They would also appear in the toilets...so you always inspected before sitting down! Some people would wear cat flea/tick collars on the wrists and ankles (also on bedposts) to ward off the wee beasties which were everywhere.

Large (palm-sized) Camel Spiders were also common and they were particularly aggressive, running towards you instead of away! At night, I would see large bats circling hundreds of feet aloft in the dim airfield lighting. Smaller bats flew much nearer to the ground, both were obviously feeding on the insects (mainly mosquitoes!) which congregate in the cooler night air.

One can't escape the death and suffering of warfare and I have to say that many of my abiding memories include this. The TLS building (my office) was stormed by the US Marines in 2001 as they hunted for the Taliban leadership and Osama Bin Laden. Much of the

interior of the TLS was shattered and blackened. During the initial bombing and “clearing” of the compound, many Taliban were killed. The Marines painted 124 stick-figure “gingerbread men” along the inside walls of the building.

As we were working on the TLS roof observation deck, erecting more communications antennas (you can never have enough!), we spotted something in one of the gullies. It turned out to be human bones, which had been overlooked after the battle. The Environmental team attended and took the remains away to be buried properly.

It was a sad day when six Canadians and an Afghan interpreter were killed when their APC (Armoured Personnel Carrier) was struck by a roadside bomb. The fallen had already been repatriated and the vehicle was on the ramp awaiting its flight to Canada on a C-17 aircraft. I can honestly say, I cannot remember a day in 12 weeks, that the flags on camp were not at half-mast, it was always sobering to think you may have eaten a meal with them.

Touch

Looking back, arriving over Afghanistan on the flight from RAF Brize Norton, we passed over the Hindu Kush at night and started our descent into KAF. Due to the high risk from small arms and RPG fire, the RAF used a “death spiral” approach. At an altitude of around 10,000ft they ordered us to put on our helmets, sit on our body armour and buckle-up, before starting a steep spiral down to the airfield, minimising the time exposed in a very steep final approach. Remember, KAF is at 1,000m elevation and the atmosphere is still very thin for a heavily loaded aircraft. It was an abrupt landing!

My best friend during my time in the desert was my sweaty, dusty, sun-faded cap! It was often the only source of shade on the camp with very few trees...and we ALL knew where the shade was...as everyone had to walk due to severe fuel shortages, vehicles were limited to essential military staff. Underneath my cap, was usually a very short haircut. As we were on a military base there was only one style we could choose from, known as a “high and tight” cut, often referred to as getting 2 haircuts for the price of one! Enough said.

What’s locally known as “120 days of wind” had begun during May, with a “heat low” developing over the Sistan Basin bringing hot, dry and gusty westerly winds which usually last through the summer. Every day in June and July, the daily max temperature exceeded 35°C (reaching 40-45°C at times). The only exception was during the 5-day convective event (25-29th June 2007) where east to northeasterly winds prevailed and maximum temperatures plummeted to around 25-30°C. However, during this “cooler” period, the humidity became oppressive due to the influx of moisture.

Most days on KAF were spent doing the routine things, like having our laundry done. This was always a source of great amusement. If we could get our own clothes back it was always a bonus. But we also noticed that our clothes were coming back just as dirty as they went in...except in different places...such as if one's left trouser leg was particularly dirty, it would come back dirty on the right leg!



Dust storm (reduced visibility) at the start of the 5-day convective event © Stephen Meloche

We'd check daily to see if we had any mail at the camp post office from our kids and families. Mobile phones were switched off and SIM cards were removed on arrival. There was an amazing display of "seized" items taken from outgoing mail that people thought would be ok to post home, such as grenades, bullets, knives, spiders and scorpions!

Sound

Kandahar was largely a very noisy existence in the middle of nowhere, this included being woken up from a nightshift in the afternoon by the repeated thud of 105mm howitzer shells hitting the distant range as the Army practiced.

My office (TLS building) was situated on the flightline ramp and often had transient aircraft there. Nightshifts were usually noisy, as that is when most covert ops took place with several Special Ops C-130s or AH-64 helicopters running up their engines while aircrew

were in the office getting their weather briefing. Sometimes you could feel your teeth vibrating!

Other sounds we got used to were the regular air raid sirens, meaning the Taliban has been detected close enough to the base to fire RPGs or mortars at us. Having said that, in the 12 weeks I was there, only one person was lightly injured, as the Taliban were notoriously poor shots and relied on luck.

The last two sounds show the contrast of existing on the edge of the world, which is the joy of making a phone call home to your kids and trying to reassure them that you are safe in Afghanistan. On the flip side, was the sad dirge of a single Scots Piper as the bodies of the fallen are placed on an aircraft ready for repatriation home. We spent 2 or 3 nights each week, paying our respect in rare silence.



Stephen Meloche in front of the TLS command building (his office)

6. DATA SOURCES:

- Climate of Kandahar
https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/pub/access/cebrequests/engineeringwx/WMO_40990_EWD_SI.pdf
- OAKN Kandahar Station Weather Data
https://mesonet.agron.iastate.edu/sites/site.php?station=OAKN&network=AF__ASOS
- Summer 2007 Weather History at Kandahar International Airport, Afghanistan
<https://weatherspark.com/h/s/148935/2007/1/Historical-Weather-Summer-2007-at-Kandahar-International-Airport-Afghanistan>

About the author



Stephen Meloche began his career in meteorology as a Weather Observer with the US Air Force in 1981, becoming a Forecaster in 1985, and attaining the rank of Staff Sergeant. He has been a meteorologist for the US, UK, Bermuda and Jersey Civil Services as well as numerous private companies, within the Aviation, Marine, Industrial and Media fields. Stephen has also served with NATO forces in Afghanistan (Operation Herrick, 2007) as a senior meteorologist.

A life-long student of Ecology, Earth System Science and Sustainability, Stephen is an active member of the Moray Climate Action Network and enjoys rewilding their four acres of coastal land in northern Scotland.

Posted to the Air Weather Association website from the Royal Meteorological Society's Met Matters website at [Twelve weeks in Afghanistan | Royal Meteorological Society](#) by the author's request.