

John Clayton: New school of thought for Afghanistan



JOHN CLAYTON

ANYBODY out there remember Afghanistan?

Anybody out there remember the first front in the war on terrorism, the place that strikes such fear in the hearts of visiting soldiers that Rudyard Kipling — in a poem written more than a century ago — offered warriors the following advice:

*“When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,*

*Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An’ go to your Gawd like a soldier.”*

By any measure — be it climate, terrain or the xenophobia that reigns there — Afghanistan is hardly renowned for the welcome it extends to visiting soldiers, and yet, Brian Moore is doing all he can to win the hearts, the minds and most importantly, the trust of the Afghani people.

“It has been heart-warming to know that we are helping to change lives here,” said Brian, a staff sergeant with 15 years of service to the New Hampshire Army National Guard.

Brian has been in Afghanistan since February.

Multi-purpose

He’s there as a part of an embedded training team. He’s also working as an advisor and mentor to a company commander in the Afghan National Army, which is a far cry from his one-time role as a history teacher, soccer coach and junior high school administrator at Nashua Christian Academy.

For all of his duties as a soldier, however, it is the teacher in Brian Moore that may make the greatest difference to the Afghanis.

“These children, especially the girls,” he said, “are getting their hands on learning materials that they would never see otherwise. To me, that is more powerful than all the weapons we have, and worth facing any Al Qaida or Taliban ambush.”

Possible location

And by now, Brian must be somewhere in the mountains east of Kabul along the Pakistani border, because his unit — part of Task Force Phoenix — sets out on long and regular excursions to train the Afghanis to fend off Taliban incursions.

And when he does get back to base?

He looks for packages from “Moore-Mart.”

Not Wal-Mart.

Moore-Mart.

“That’s how all of Brian’s fellow soldiers refer to us, because we carry it all,” laughed Brian’s sister, Terry (Moore) Biggio, who directs the Moore-Mart operations with her brothers (and Brian’s brothers) Ray and Paul Moore.

And it’s all free.

“It was my daughters who suggested we could help the soldiers as well as the children,” Carole added. “The children from Nashua Christian have taken up collections for the past two years and we’ve been able to supply Brian’s unit with hard-to-find items and basic necessities, from toilet paper and baby wipes to hand warmers, coffee, Motrin and sunscreen. We’ve even sent marshmallows and S’mores supplies.”

The S’mores are for the soldiers.

Afghani kids have different needs.

Touching letters

“Brian’s most moving letters aren’t about battles or rebuilding towns,” Carole said. “They’re about the children of that region. As an educator, a father and a seminary student, Brian truly has a heart for children, and the ones he’s acquainted with in the remote villages love attending school.

“School consists mostly of listening,” she added, “as there are little to no school supplies. When the children run alongside the soldiers’ trucks, I thought they’d be crying out for candy, but no. Brian said all you hear is ‘Pens! Pens!’ If they’re lucky enough to have a pen, they can practice writing and do their school lessons.”

Thus, the informal network that is Moore-Mart has already shipped tons of school supplies to Brian — thousands of pens included — with much more to come.

American-style back-packs are key.

“We make contact with the elder of the village to get permission to distribute school supplies,” Brian explained in a recent e-mail, “and later, these village children will bring home-made yogurt to our base to show their appreciation.

“That’s especially moving — considering how poor these villagers are — that they would give us a considerable portion of their families’ daily food. So is the thought of these children walking for hours from remote villages to ask for a back-pack.”

The GIs pack them personally.

“My fellow soldiers and I pack each one individually, with note pads, pens, crayons and coloring books,” he explained. “We discovered that if we did not hand the packs to the children directly, they might not get them. This is because the teachers might keep the packs for their own families, which is one more cultural difference we had to come to grips with.

Close families

“In Afghanistan, family and tribal connections are paramount to the exclusion of all others. I’m not implying that the teachers are dishonest; it’s just that these people are so poor that giving something to others — before family — is just not done, but once we personally hand each child their own back-pack it will remain with them.”

Communicating with kids is comparatively easy for a teacher and father of four, but in his e-mails, it’s easy to see that Brian — who is close to completing studies for his Ph.D. in theology — is also adept at communicating with Afghani adults, even when the subject turns to issues of faith.

“Most of these people, just like Americans, just want a peaceful home to raise their families in,” Brian said. “They are not overly political or zealous about their faith or concerned about mine. They see Christians not as the enemy, but as brothers descended from Father Abraham, and they would rather someone be a devout Christian than have no faith at all.

“I am a Christian,” he added, “and when we were deployed on the frontier, I would read my Bible every morning or evening, depending on the mission at hand. The ANA soldiers would ask what I was reading. I answered, ‘my Holy Book,’ and they always smiled and would reply, ‘Good, sergeant.’

Many differences

“Please don’t misunderstand,” Brian said. “There are still some major theological differences between our two faiths, yet we’re willing and able to see past that difference and just see each other as friends.”

Meanwhile, the friends and family of Brian Moore are already collecting material for their next Moore-Mart shipment.

“Normally,” Carole said, “my brothers and I pay for the shipping, but the one that went out on Tuesday — 31 boxes — that cost \$400 to ship and this time, it was paid for by Hewlett Packard. That means a lot, because that’s \$400 we can spend for the next shipment that goes out on Nov. 16.”

You can chip in on that shipment.

“Brian asked us if we could start looking for new hats and mittens for the kids in the village, so we’ll be gathering those things, and, in addition to the usual food and toiletries, we’re going to send Christmas decorations for the soldiers. That, and lots of Christmas cards, so if anyone would like to send cards to the soldiers — the ones from my Sunday School class are completely precious — we’d love to send them along.”

If you’d care to send along Christmas cards for the National Guardsmen, you can forward them to Paul Moore’s law office at 23 Factory St., Nashua, 03060.

If you’d care to send along something more substantial — and thanks to an arrangement with the Greeley-Parmenter-Harrington American Legion Post 27 in Londonderry, all contributions to Moore-Mart are now tax exempt — you can contact Carole Biggio via e-mail at carole@mooremart.org or by phone at 603-888-9030.