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Coming Home

Edward Pennington-Ridge

Adopt-A-Minefield

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The task of ATC 7 in New Bakhshi is easy to describe: They must remove every metal fragment from the soil within and immediately surrounding the buildings. The reality, however, is difficult to comprehend—this village was a frontline battlefield and metal fragments are everywhere. There are no shortcuts—each and every time the metal detectors signal a fragment, it must be identified, excavated and removed. Barbed wire, bullet or landmine, the signals are indistinguishable until a visual check is made.

ATC Field Officer Mohammed Arif explains why mines laid by Mujahedeen forces are much more difficult to detect than mines laid by Soviet troops. “The Soviets were trained to lay mines in a zigzag pattern, but Mujahedeen forces laid mines at random,” he says. “There is no pattern—and no clues as to where the next mine may be. The presence of a metal signal is the only indication we have that a mine may be in the ground.”

The short walk from the ATC project base area is a surreal experience. We are dressed in black jackets, helmets and plastic visors and must maintain a 5-metre (5.5-yard) distance between members of the party. We are an interesting spectacle for the local children as we move slowly away from their homes.

The reality, however, is difficult to comprehend—many refugees still live in makeshift mud buildings and the twisted remnants of war lie baking in the sun. After parking our off-road vehicles in carefully marked bays bordered with white painted stones, our briefing begins. We learn about safety on the site, why the area is mined, that ATC 7 is the chosen implementing agency and the inter-factional conflicts that followed. Nobody knows exactly how many people fled from 25 years of unrest, made a return to their homes impossible.

From a Western viewpoint, New Bakhshi Khil village is a desolate place. Crumbling mud buildings and the twisted remnants of war lie baking in the sun. Life is returning to this place just as fast as the deminers can clear the land. With 24 deminers, that’s about 206 square meters (one-half acre) per day.

Manual demining is a tortuous business, but it is quite simply the only way to be sure that an area like New Bakhshi is safe. Mira Jan, a team leader with ATC, describes the enormity of the task with great clarity: “The flat area has been cleared by hand, every inch of soil removed with the tip of a bayonet.”

Deminers sweep a small area with their metal detectors, marking each metal signal with a small red disc. Another disc is placed eight inches from the centre of the signal and this marks the point where the deminer will begin to scrape away the soil. The minimum possible amount of soil is removed, just enough to identify the signal, but even so, every signal is likely to take at least two minutes to identify in ideal conditions. In the summer, when the ground is hardened to the consistency of concrete, it can take much longer.

Demining is an area of expertise and ATC 7 is the chosen implementing agency. They must remove every metal fragment from the soil within and immediately surrounding the buildings. The reality, however, is difficult to comprehend—this village was a frontline battlefield and metal fragments are everywhere. There are no shortcuts—each and every time the metal detectors signal a fragment, it must be identified, excavated and removed. Barbed wire, bullet or landmine, the signals are indistinguishable until a visual check is made.

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As border crossing points, brightly painted buses transporting the refugees roll by in an almost constant flow. The buses carry not just the people and their worldly possessions, but hope for the future of Afghanistan.

For many returnees, the journey home will mean a totally new beginning, rebuilding their mud-block houses left derelict from the effects of rain, snow and sun following years of conflict. For some, even this opportunity to begin from the ground up is denied; their homes are contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance, making any sort of new beginning in Afghanistan impossible.

Until recently, this was the reality for the inhabitants of New Bakhshi Khil, a small mud-brick village in Bagram district of Parwan province, just a few miles from Bagram Airbase. Mine and UXO contamination, the remnants of Soviet and inter-factional fighting from 25 years of unrest, made a return to their homes impossible.

On the outskirts of the village I meet up with Afghan Technical Consultants Team 7, the men who are clearing New Bakhshi of landmines. I am about to see exactly what Adopt-A-Minefield funding can achieve.

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