

# One Piece of the Puzzle:

## Setting up Civil Affairs in Gardez, Afghanistan

by Robert W. Jones Jr.



A large part of the work in Afghanistan centered on Civil Affairs (CA) teams working in remote locations and hazardous conditions. This article is a “snapshot” of one location—Gardez, Afghanistan—and some of the situations in which CA teams found themselves while trying to accomplish their missions. The incidents and conditions discussed in this article occurred in 2002, but are representative of the difficulties still faced by CA teams performing the ongoing mission in Afghanistan, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. The majority of long-term CA support for OEF has come from a variety of U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command units, building on the initial missions undertaken and fulfilled by the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (CAB).

While the U.S. Army Special Forces and the Coalition supported the Northern Alliance fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, CA units moved into the war-dev-

astated country to begin the rebuilding process. By early November 2001, the 96th CAB deployed two CA companies (C and D companies) to the theater. The companies supported the two special operations task forces (Dagger and Kabar) fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan.

The 96th CAB teams began to fill the humanitarian aid void in parts of Afghanistan at war. It was much like inserting critical pieces into a large, complex jigsaw puzzle. Within days of arrival, the four-man Civil Affairs Team—As (CAT-As) (twelve teams, six per company) were conducting humanitarian assessments throughout the country. The initial data collected helped the Coalition establish priorities for aid and assistance. In order to accomplish their missions, the CA soldiers established what became known as Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells (CHLCs) throughout the country, operating primarily with Special Forces teams.<sup>1</sup>

As the 96th CAB established the CHLCs in key coordination hubs throughout Afghanistan, a new CA headquarters, the Coalition Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force (CJCMOTF), was established. By December 2001, the advance party of the CJCMOTF had arrived in Kabul to begin operations. While the 96th CAB’s CHLCs conducted operations, a larger Army Reserve force was mobilizing at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On 18 February 2002, the first echelon (thirty-eight soldiers) of the 489th CAB (Knoxville, Tennessee) arrived at Bagram Air Base to replace the 96th CAB. In the weeks that followed, the rest of the battalion arrived in Afghanistan. The 489th CAB was augmented with thirty-one soldiers from the 401st CAB (Webster, New York) in order to expand operations and provide support to the U.S. Army units operating throughout the country. The 489th CAB “fell in on” the established Civil Mil-



Map of Afghanistan showing Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells.

tary Operations Centers (CMOC) in Bagram and Karshi-Karnabad, Uzbekistan (the base commonly referred to as “K2”), to provide command and control as well as logistics support to ten CHLCs as they deployed to replace the 96th CAB teams throughout the country.<sup>2</sup>

Gardez, the capital of Paktia province, is important because of its strategic location. It is a major crossroads for the north-south and east-west road system. The province sits astride the major routes in and out of eastern Afghanistan. Nestled along the Pakistan border, the area is easily accessible to al-Qaeda and Taliban forces who regularly slip from the frontier region into Afghanistan. Although located only sixty miles south of Kabul, it is separated from the capital by a major mountain range. The sixty miles that would take an hour and a half to drive in most Western countries, would take convoys anywhere from two and a half to six hours, if the convoy could get through at all. The two-lane road snaked through a mountain pass that rose from 6,000 to 9,000 feet above sea level before dropping down to the valley floor. Gardez sits at 7,053 feet.<sup>3</sup> The task was daunting because the CHLC had to cover an area the size of South Carolina with three to five personnel on a team.

The entire Paktia province, including Gardez, was a

Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cell (CHLC) was a new term (non-doctrinal) used to identify Civil Affairs teams. The term was “invented” to mollify civilian aid agencies wary of working with the military and Civil Military Operations Centers (CMOC). The three to five man teams covered large areas of Afghanistan well beyond the typical capabilities of a Civil Affairs team.

contested area. On the outskirts of town, the Special Forces had established a forward operating base during Operation ANACONDA and the Shah-e-Khot Valley fighting in 2002. It was home to various Special Forces operational detachments alpha (ODAs) from January 2002 to August 2002. An ODA from 5th Special Forces Group and ODAs 394 and 395 (from 3rd SFG) operated from the Gardez compound in the spring and summer of 2002. They were replaced by an ODA from 20th SFG in the summer of 2002. Captain Ken Harrison\* moved his CAT-A 56 (Company E, 96th CAB) to Gardez on 7 February 2002, established a CHLC, and conducted assessments.<sup>4</sup> After coordinating humanitarian deliveries of food and blankets to villages in the Shah-e-Khot Valley following Operation ANACONDA, the team moved back to the Special Forces compound. During the deliberate assessment of Gardez in support of Advanced Operating Base 390, Harrison and his team discovered that political infighting between two warlords had divided the city. With weapons pointed against them everywhere, humanitarian assistance to the city was impossible. Gardez was regarded as a “no win” situation. Protecting the limited CA assets, the team moved to Khowst on 29 March 2002

to conduct operations.<sup>5</sup> This caused a gap in the area’s CA coverage, although the Special Forces ODAs in Gardez had conducted some civic action projects as part of their missions. The absence of a CHLC and dedicated CA assets sent the message to the competing factions in Gardez: cooperate with the Coalition or the aid coming into Afghanistan would bypass Gardez and be sent to more friendly areas.<sup>6</sup>



Afghan Militia Forces on Operation ANACONDA-1 March 2002.

CJCMOTF planners continually reassessed the security situation throughout Afghanistan. In June 2002, additional CA assets from the 360th Civil Affairs Brigade arrived in Kabul. This freed up the 489th CAB soldiers for duties outside of the capital. One of the CJCMOTF priorities was to set up a CHLC in Gardez. This posed a challenge. There was no CAT-A designated for Gardez. To fill the gap, soldiers from the 489th CAB’s Public Health Team were formed into an ad hoc CHLC under Major James Collins\*.<sup>7</sup>

The newly formed CAT-A/CHLC 13 moved by ground convoy from Kabul to Gardez on 18 September 2002.<sup>8</sup> Almost immediately, the CA team began providing support and humanitarian assistance throughout the province. The four-man team had a daunting task and CHLC 13 needed the cooperation and support from the population. To achieve this, it had to aggressively interact with the provincial governing officials.<sup>9</sup>

To accomplish its mission, the soldiers of CHLC 13 established two priorities: the first was to assess needs and propose Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) projects with local input; the second, to work with the non-governmental organization/international organization (NGO/IO) community. This part was key. Accurate, up-to-date humanitarian assistance and security assessments of the area were needed to support NGO/IO return to Paktia Province. The CHLC assessed the towns of Gardez, Zormat, Mihlan, Dara, and some smaller villages in the Shah-e-Khot Valley. Based on the assessments, it prioritized eleven high impact OHDACA Projects to be started in the first thirty days and then the projects were submitted to the CJCMOTF. These included the construction of new schools, health clinics, and the drilling of water wells. Project selection and priorities were closely coordinated with Provincial Governor Dalili and the Paktia Province Departments of Education and

\*Pseudonyms have been used for all military personnel with a rank lower than lieutenant colonel.



*CHLC soldiers conducting an assessment in Gardez.*

Health to inculcate local participation.<sup>10</sup>

The CHLC was very aggressive. It had to quickly meet and coordinate with the few NGOs and IOs operating in Gardez and in the rest of the Paktia province. The CHLC office in the Special Forces compound often became the coordination center for local humanitarian assistance actions. There, CA soldiers provided the NGOs/IOs a daily province situation and threat briefing to strengthen their commitments.

Getting the NGO/IO to be more proactive in Paktia province became a priority for CHLC 13. In October 2002, the CHLC briefed the humanitarian assistance needs and current status of Paktia Province at a NGO/IO meeting in the Kabul CJCMOTF. The briefing fostered more meetings with high-level United Nations officials who were keenly interested in returning to Gardez and Paktia Province to implement development programs. Increased NGO/IO activity was designed to achieve a fundamental CA goal—to work the CHLC out of a job.

While the 489th CAB continued its mission in Afghanistan, an even larger CA force was mobilizing at Fort Bragg in September 2002. The 450th CAB (Riverdale, Maryland) arrived in Afghanistan in October 2002 to replace the 489th CAB. To expand the CA mission in Afghanistan, two other CA battalions “plussed up” the 450th CAB. The 403rd CAB (Mattydale, New York) and the 414th CAB (Utica, New York) each sent thirty soldiers.<sup>11</sup> As the new units arrived in Afghanistan, they helped the CAT-As by establishing a CMOG for command, control, and coordi-

*Civil Affairs conducting negotiations with local contractors.*



*Kabul traffic after leaving the CJCMOTF compound. Convoys had to move amongst erratic civilian drivers. As conditions improved in Kabul traffic congestion hindered CA missions.*

nation, as well as to reduce administrative requirements for the operational teams. At some sites another CAT-A was added to expand the Coalition presence. Gardez was one of these areas.

A convoy of four non-tactical vehicles, Toyota “Hilux” trucks, left the CJCMOTF compound in Kabul about 0900 on 21 November 2002, headed to Gardez an hour later than planned. One of the trucks, with three Afghan civilian mechanics to repair rented vehicles, was originally slated to be the last truck. However, since the Afghans had no communications or weapons, they became the third vehicle for security and control.<sup>12</sup>

The Gardez-bound convoy from the CJCMOTF was typical of many that left Kabul. Personnel with different missions were regularly combined for security reasons: an inspection of several humanitarian assistance projects, final payments for the completed projects, vehicle repair and maintenance, and an assessment of a new “home” for the CA in a walled compound adjacent to the Special Forces facility in Gardez. This new site for CA was slightly bigger than the Special Forces compound—a 200 square-foot area—but made of the typical mud brick common to Afghanistan. Ten-foot high thick walls contained many rooms. However, the majority of CA soldiers would live in tents reinforced with wooden floors in the compound. Prior to habitation, several trips had to be made to determine equipment and construction requirements in the compound.<sup>13</sup>

The compound used by the Special Forces detachments was bursting with soldiers. The Special Forces facility was a basic, rectangle structure with mud brick walls and guard towers about twenty feet tall on the four corners surrounding a central open area. To many Americans, it resembled the Alamo. At any given time, two to four ODAs, a Psychological Operations team, intelligence teams, and Coalition SOF teams lived in the rented compound where an extended Afghani family of ten people and a few animals had previously resided comfortably.

The convoy worked its way south from Kabul without incident. A few miles from Loghar, when the second vehicle turned a corner in the road, an improvised explo-



*Crowded interior of the SF compound. There was no additional space in this facility to increase CA presence in Gardez.*



*Outside of the SF compound in Gardez.*

sive device (IED) was set off triggering an ambush.<sup>14</sup> A large white cloud of smoke and dust obscured the blast area. The first and second trucks sped out of the kill zone. In the last vehicle, Second Lieutenant Charles Kramer\* was speaking with another occupant when the concussive force of the explosion startled him. Then, the vehicle lurched to a sudden halt to avoid rear ending the third vehicle carrying the Afghan mechanics that had stopped abruptly in front. Driver Staff Sergeant Peter James\* slammed on the brakes, forgetting the clutch. His truck stalled in the kill zone. At first James thought that the Afghans had been hit; but they had simply panicked and stopped. Both Hilux trucks were enveloped by a thick cloud of smoke and dust. Since the truck was stopped, Kramer grabbed the door handle to dismount and return

fire. “. . . I remember, because we were not going anywhere, and I knew that, from all the training, that we were sitting in the middle of a kill zone.”<sup>15</sup> His M16A2 was too long to be employed from the back seat of the cramped Hilux truck. Dismounting seemed to be the only option.<sup>16</sup>

The four Americans and the Afghani mechanics found themselves suddenly left behind. The first two vehicles had bolted down the road at breakneck speed. In what was seconds, but seemed like hours, Sergeant James restarted his truck and yelled to Kramer, “Stay in!” He hit the gas, intent on ramming the stalled Afghan truck, to knock it out of the way. But, then the Afghan truck began moving. James careened his truck around them while Kramer waved to the Afghans to fol-

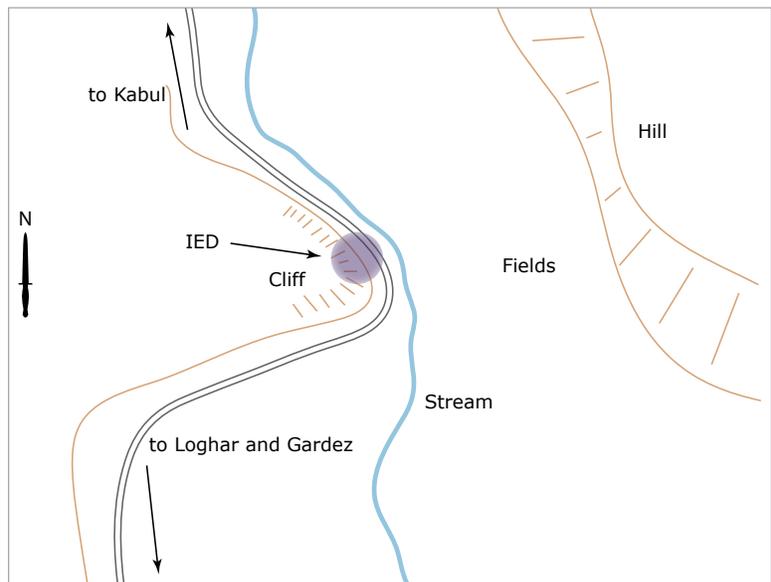
low. When the two trucks had escaped and were speeding down the road, the convoy commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joe Sykes, who was riding with James, used his Motorola radio to halt the two lead vehicles. Over two miles down the road, the trail vehicles saw the first two trucks stopped in an open area. The four vehicles “circled the wagons” to check for injuries and inspect the trucks for damage. Using an Iridium satellite telephone, the only equipment in the convoy capable of reaching the CJCMOTF, the convoy commander called in the ambush location. A reaction force from the 772nd Military Police Company (Massachusetts National Guard) responded, but after a thorough search found no enemy at the ambush site. There was only a crater where the IED had exploded. Luckily for the soldiers, the IED was improperly aimed. The majority of the force had gone upward instead of laterally into the vehicle sides. With no injuries and only minor damage to the last two trucks, the convoy continued on to Gardez, alert for another ambush. The soldiers still had missions to accomplish in Gardez and a new CA concept to test.<sup>17</sup>

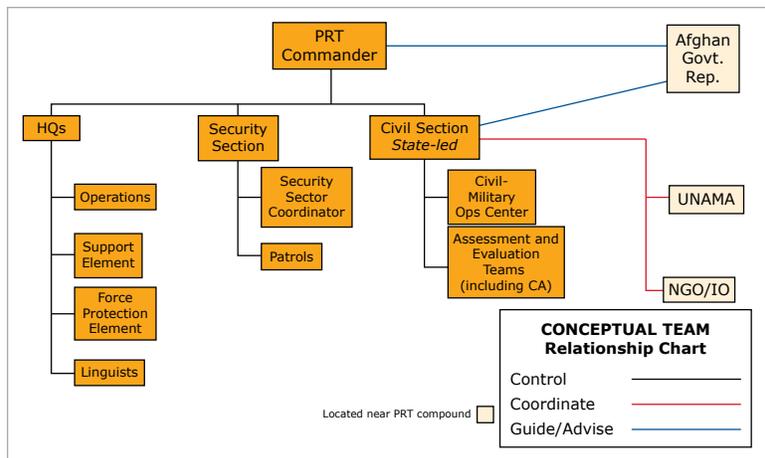
This new CA concept, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), was to be evaluated in Gardez. Once validated, it would become the model for Coalition CA efforts in Afghanistan. The PRT was to be a self-contained civil

The Toyota “Hilux” truck is the export version of the Toyota Tacoma and widely used throughout the developing world for its dependability and toughness. The Hilux is a right-hand drive standard shift. This is a problem for American drivers because they have to shift gears with the left hand and many “younger” drivers have never driven a standard shift. Until sufficient drivers could be trained, senior sergeants and officers often drove the trucks.



*Diagram of ambush area.*





PRT organization diagram.

military task force composed of CA, security, and government agencies (including the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development). The PRTs were to expand the reconstruction and recovery effort throughout Afghanistan. Manpower and resources limited CHLC effective coverage because province efforts centered around several major towns. A PRT was designed to expand reconstruction to the provincial or even multi-province level.

Once it was determined that Gardez was to be the first PRT site, the team had to arrange logistics support and collect supplies to become operational. That task was assigned to Second Lieutenant Kramer, 401st CAB, and a small group of experienced noncommissioned officers. Equipment was requisitioned in Bagram and Kabul, but most was purchased on the local economy. The team—armed with a list, cash, and an interpreter—went shopping to obtain the necessary equipment by visiting several shopping districts in Kabul known simply by what they sell, i.e., “Metal Street,” “Electric Street,” etc. (all in accordance with the pertinent regulations). Engineer renovations were made to the new PRT compound in Gardez while Kramer’s team gathered supplies and equipment. Then, a convoy of NTVs (non-tactical vehicles), HMMWVs (High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles), and two LMTVs (Light Medium Tactical Vehicles) was organized to deliver everything to Gardez. The vehicles were loaded the previous night to save time in

*The convoy stopped in the flatlands for a communications check unaware that there was a blizzard raging just miles up the road. The vehicle closest to the camera, with the satellite communications antenna on top is a Toyota Hilux.*



the morning.<sup>18</sup>

The seven-vehicle CA supply convoy left the CJCMOTF compound at 0800 on 23 December for Gardez. The chill of the Afghan winter night gradually dissipated into a pleasant, sunny day. After wending its way through Kabul’s traffic without incident, the convoy headed south. They made one scheduled stop on the plain before heading up to the mountain pass. “Everything was fine until the mountain pass. Then, I think about four or five miles before the pass, at one of our [radio] checkpoints, it started really snowing. I took a small video picture for Sergeant Paul\* [at the last stop], and it was typical desert conditions: sand and sun. Then the next thing up the road, five or ten minutes later, it was a white out.”<sup>19</sup>

The convoy commander in a NTV stopped to render assistance to a United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) Land Rover stalled along the side of the road. He signaled that the rest of the convoy should continue up the mountain. However, the road became extremely hazardous as the snow continued, narrowing the road to less than one and one-half car widths. Compounding the situation was the road itself. It had been cut into the side of the mountain with only a very small shoulder on the right with a sheer drop off on the left. Assistant drivers constantly watched the left while looking up to guard against a dropped grenade or rolling rocks intended to knock them over the cliff.<sup>20</sup>

Instead of the enemy, the primary threat became the weather. The road soon accumulated a layer of ice with two to three inches of powdered snow on top. Vehicles started to slip and slide on the ice and snow—chains had not been part of the deployment package. The convoy of CA tactical and non-tactical vehicles soon became separated by intervening Afghani cars and trucks. 2LT Kramer, riding in the lead HMMWV, and one LMTV surged ahead in an effort to reach the final hump of the mountain pass before the road descended down into Gardez. But a half a mile from the top, his way was blocked by a “Jinga” truck jackknifed across the road. Based on the weather, the convoy commander cancelled the mission and ordered them to regroup for a return to Kabul. Kramer thought that it would probably be best if his two vehicles continued on

*As weather conditions in the pass continued to deteriorate the civilian traffic compounded the problem. Here, the convoy was more than a mile from the summit.*



to Gardez. They were already more than three quarters of the way up the pass, almost beyond the summit where the gradient was a lot less steep. The convoy commander appreciated his effort but decided it was not worth the risk.<sup>21</sup>

The colorful cargo trucks seen around Afghanistan are “Jinga” (brand name) trucks although some soldiers call them “jingle” trucks because they have ornate designs and jingling bells attached everywhere.



LT Kramer faced the problem of turning his two vehicles around to make the trip back down the mountain. Luckily, they were at a wider spot with just enough solid, flat land on the right to make a three-way turn. Both truck drivers, fortunately, were from upstate New York and were experienced winter drivers. Sergeant Hallam\*, the LMTV assistant driver, ground-guided the truck at five miles per hour in and out of the many stalled civilian vehicles. Some Afghans were trying to put chains on; others were wrapping rope around the tires to gain traction. The return trip down the mountain took more than ninety minutes.

Normally it took fifteen minutes. Safely at the bottom of the pass, the convoy reassembled. The CJCMOTF was informed that the convoy was returning to Kabul.<sup>22</sup>

The convoy succeeded getting to Gardez on 28 December after the weather had cleared in the pass. This experience was typical of the problems CA soldiers faced simply moving about Afghanistan, much less accomplishing missions. Every day was some new challenge.

A combination of factors made Gardez the ideal testing ground for the new CA concept for Afghanistan, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). CHLC 13 operations in Gardez became a model for Civil-Military Operations and demonstrated that Coalition military units and the NGO/IO community could work together to stabilize a troubled region. Based on their success in Paktia Province, Civil Affairs received a friendly reception and the cooperation of a local population that had earlier supported the Taliban. Ultimately the PRT concept was

*Convoy commander and his CSM waiting for the rest of the convoy to regroup before returning to Kabul.*



expanded across Afghanistan during 2003–2004 to manage reconstruction and stabilization at the regional level. The PRTs became another key part of the reconstruction puzzle that is Afghanistan today. ♣

## Endnotes

- 1 Major George Jensen\*, Commander, Company D, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Staff Sergeant Patrick Jennings, 126th Military History Detachment, 14 May 2002, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording 126-OEF-I-004, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg; Major John Bowman\*, Commander, Company C, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Sergeant First Class D. J. Moriarty, 126th Military History Detachment, 10 May 2002, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording 126-OEF-I-003, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Lieutenant Colonel Roland d’Marcellis, Commander, 489th Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Major Paul Landry, 126th Military History Detachment, 22 October 2002, Kabul, Afghanistan, digital recording 126-OEF-I-039, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 US Army Center for Military History, *The United States Army in Afghanistan. Operation ENDURING FREEDOM October 2001–March 2002 (CMH Pub 70-83-1)* (Center for Military History: Washington DC, 2005), 30.
- 4 Captain Ken Harrison\*, CAT-A 56 team leader, 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Dr. Richard Kiper, 11 May 2002, Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Charles Briscoe, et. al, *Weapon of Choice, U.S. Army Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 328.
- 5 Harrison interview; Briscoe, et. al, *Weapon of Choice*, 328.
- 6 Briscoe, et. al, *Weapon of Choice*, 328.
- 7 Major James Collins\*, 489th Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Staff Sergeant Patrick Jennings, 126th Military History Detachment, 29 October 2002, Gardez, Afghanistan, digital recording 126-OEF-I-087, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 Major James Collins\*, 489th Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Staff Sergeant Patrick Jennings, 126th Military History Detachment, 29 October 2002, Gardez, Afghanistan, digital recording 126-OEF-I-087, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Collins interview.
- 10 Collins interview.
- 11 Department of the Army, U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command G3 Mobilization Section, *Request DA Mobilization Order to conduct Normal Rotation for a Civil Affairs Battalion ISO CJTF-180 (090049)JUL02*, dated 16 July 2002, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; The 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion element was activated as “Company D, 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion” under the command of Major McClellan, author’s notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 12 Second Lieutenant Charles Kramer\*, 401st Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 27 December 2002, Kabul, Afghanistan, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 Kramer interview; Captain Donald McCluskey\*, CJCMOTF Staff Engineer, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 28 December 2002, Kabul, Afghanistan, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 14 Loghar is also spelled Lowgar.
- 15 Kramer interview.
- 16 Kramer interview.
- 17 Kramer interview.
- 18 Kramer interview; Staff Sergeant John Parnell\*, 401st Civil Affairs Battalion, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 24 December 2002, Kabul, Afghanistan, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 19 Kramer interview.
- 20 Kramer interview.
- 21 Kramer interview; Parnell interview.
- 22 Kramer interview; Parnell interview.