

perspectives

...on the Semiahmoo Peninsula

Alison MacLean's documentary to premiere in February

Videographer returns to Afghanistan

This fall, Crescent Beach documentarian Alison MacLean returned to Afghanistan for her sixth media embed in a war zone, this time with the German forces. She writes of her journey for Peace Arch News readers.

Alison MacLean

Special to Peace Arch News

‘What is your endgame for Afghanistan?’

I was asked this question while on a flight to Kabul from Dubai on Oct. 3. The military contractor/former U.S. Navy commander was the only other non-Afghan on the flight. I was the only female not in a burka.

I was travelling to Camp Marmal for the second time in two years, courtesy of the German government. The contractor was concerned for my safety, as he was wrapping up his business affairs in the country due to the increased violence and targeting of westerners by both the Taliban and ISIS (or Daesh).

I thought of his comment, as I waited for my flight to Mazar-e-Sharif. This trip was different than all my previous ones since 2010. I was delivering direct aid to both the Afghan policewomen and a orphanage.

The trip was unique, because I raised the funds locally in White Rock and Surrey. I was helped by former Newton MP Jinny Sims and Canex – the Canadian Forces Exchange System – the Chinese Canadian Military Museum Society and local Rotary clubs. I spoke at three Indian festivals (Melaas). White Rock Probus donated educational supplies.

Through these efforts, I was able to transport educational supplies, health items, cash, computer tablets and body armour/uniforms.

The shipment was even more important than usual, because I had received 10 soft-armour vests from Surrey Gang Task Force for Afghan police officers, and Delta Police Department had provided uniforms for Afghan police women.

It was a logistical nightmare, trying to navigate two boxes, a suitcase and my camera gear from Vancouver to Amsterdam, then Dubai. From there – to Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif – it was exhausting, expensive and a bit discouraging.

The flight from Kabul required more intense security measures, as I was on a flight with numerous tribal leaders who had been in Kabul for meetings.

As the only westerner – and only female in the departure area – they made their anger known. I had been travelling for three days without sleep, and their open hostility was frustrating.

This ‘old guard’ is part of the reason why Afghanistan is struggling to move forward. As long as the Taliban and ISIS are supported by corrupt tribal leaders, the violence will continue – particularly toward women.

I watched as the airport sniffer dogs checked the baggage twice for IEDs (improvised explosive devices). Some of the tribal leaders had armed security with them on the flight. It is not surprising to me, that the Kabul airport continues to be a blast zone. It is hard to curtail the obvious gaps in Afghan security.

I am very aware of my surroundings when I am in the war zone, and try to keep myself as safe as possible.

Although tired, I was observant of what



Contributed photos

Alison MacLean (centre) poses for a photo with two members of the German military on her most recent tour. Left, a pair of Afghani policewomen.



was occurring around me. The bathroom had a window that I could exit through if necessary. The tension in the lounge was obvious; I was prepared to secure myself.

Arriving in Mazar-e-Sharif, I was grateful to see a German soldier scanning the crowds. His country's Bundesministerium had granted me a media embed with German forces, to complete a new segment for my documentary *Burkas2Bullets*, featuring coalition soldiers in Northern Afghanistan. Filmmakers do not usually have the opportunity to return to a war zone and document new stories of courage and service. Without the support of the soldiers and the public affairs office, I would not have been able to do this trip.

I had arranged for a local fixer and driver to deliver the aid with me, as coalition soldiers are not allowed to deliver aid. The coalition sniffer dogs and IED team checked my shipment. I was secured separately from my baggage.

Although this was my sixth trip to Afghanistan, it was the first time that I was

secured at the airport and with such support from the soldiers. In 2012, I had negotiated my way out of a Kabul Airport abduction.

Camp Marmal is my favourite Base. I am amazed by the design and layout of the roads and housing. As a camera person, I am happy the sand is controlled by gravel and paving. This enables me to document with less dust damage than in Kandahar or Bagram.

The base radio station provides news and entertainment. The food is varied and healthy.

Each day in Afghanistan was fully booked. The chief public affairs officer had arranged a schedule to document coalition stories, with German-force protection off the base.

On the first day out, I was able to document the German police mentors, working with the Afghan policemen and women. I was happy with the footage that day, as it was different than my trip in 2014.

The policewomen had a kinder-care program, funded by the German government. This allows officers to have childcare at the police station. Seeing some of the policewomen visit with their children at lunch time was special.

Documenting the Afghan police women over a six-year period has enabled me to witness considerable growth in the numbers and competence of recruits. Literacy has improved, and there is more access to physical training and driving courses.

My fixer and driver arranged for me to document street scenes in Mazar-e-Sharif. This was exciting, as on my previous trips I was unable to move about the city so freely with my camera.

This time, I visited the Blue Mosque and was impressed by the beauty of the architecture. I was able to speak with Afghan university students who were raising money for the people of Kunduz. They were articulate and passionate about helping the community.

A group of angry men started to harass me for being in the area. The students stepped forward to defend my right to document the mosque and street scenes.

My fixer was constantly assessing our security, and the driver had the vehicle ready for us to move quickly to the next locations.

It was very difficult to see burka-clad women begging in the streets, with their children. They have little support from the community. We gave them the money that we had, and as a result we were followed throughout the market.

I seemed to be the only westerner in the streets that day.

One of the most exciting aspects to this trip was travelling on a Russian helicopter with Dutch female soldiers, who were training the Afghan military women in boxing and fitness.

Arriving at the base for the training session caused some reaction by the Afghan military. A tense moment occurred when some of the officers demanded that the female coalition soldiers lay down their guns. After some discussion, the female soldiers and I proceeded – with their weapons. Coalition soldiers, and especially female soldiers, need to be armed at all times.

When I arrived at Camp Marmal, a U.S. soldier was killed by a Afghan trainee.

> see page 12