

Lock, Stock & Barrel



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An Artist in Afghanistan

Liveryman Lynne Moore recently visited Afghanistan as artist on expedition for the Light Dragoons. There will be an exhibition of her work at the Cavalry and Guards Club on 4, 5 and 6 March 2014.

My little trip all started with a chance remark by a military man who had seen my web site, liked the paintings of Namibia, which reminded him of Afghanistan and asked if I had thought of going.

“Well, not really.” said I. “It’s not exactly at the top of my list of favourite holiday destinations.” But this got me thinking: maybe not such a mad idea. Another

chance weekend visit to Charlie and Rachael May in Northumberland, and I mentioned my new-found enthusiasm for an adventure with the military to exotic climes. “Well, you’re in luck,” boomed Charlie. “The Light Dragoons are here tomorrow, as we’re hosting an over-night stop for a vintage car rally to raise funds for The Colonel of the Regiment’s Appeal.” The idea seemed to go down rather well, and following my initiation into the delights of Spiney Normans, everything seemed possible! (Spiney Normans being the Regimental cocktail, named after a fish which lived in an ornamental pond outside the officer’s mess in Germany.) A telephone call from Colonel Plant in Afghanistan followed and things started to roll.



Lynne Moore on expedition, and her painting for General Andrew Stewart.

First, a visit to Swanton Morley (lovely gardens!) to view the paintings in the Officers' and Sergeants' Mess: some wonderful paintings by some serious artists. So, no pressure then! There I met Major Milson who was a life-saver when it came to sorting out my kit list. I mean – ballistic knickers? Excuse me? (Turns out to be pretty much what they sound like: Kevlar pants.)

Then followed the HEAFAT course (hostile environment awareness, first aid training) at Sunningdale, where my accommodation was booked into Sandhurst under Captain Moore. Quite an eye-opener for a mere civil! A week followed tearing my hair out while trying to get accreditation to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Having lost my battle with an ancient scanner at home, and failing broadband, the MOD came to my rescue and scanned documents for me. Even they got it wrong – Bless! – and scanned my Kenyan visa instead of my nice new Afghan visa!

Fully kitted out and trained up, I was good to go – I mean – embed! (Apologies to you all who have rushed around Salisbury Plain and undergone some serious training.) A few days later and I was on a flight to Bastion. I think I shall pass over this save to say it was LONG; and minus an on-board drinks trolley, an essential in my book. I had downloaded the excellent movie, 'Girl with a Dragon Tattoo', but was mortified when it came to the sexy bits! I thought "Oh no! I'm surrounded by soldiers who will think I'm watching porn." They probably thought me quite neurotic, periodically slamming down the lid of my laptop in an attempt to conceal what was going on!

In Bastion, I was kitted out with 'proper' body armour and underwent an induction course where I met the wretched RODET. (roll-over something or other training) For those blissfully unaware of this gadget, it is primarily a mock-up of the interior of a Mastiff armoured personnel carrier. Once inside and strapped into a harness, the 'vehicle' is rolled, initially to 45 degrees and then, 180 degrees. Exit comprises a lot of scrambling around – well, on my part – is expected to be speedy and by a more unorthodox manner, for example, the top hatch. Now I am not good hemmed into small places, but this was like the interior of an oven and with

virtually no daylight – claustrophobic panic was quickly setting in. I didn't do the 'bracing' bit very well and ended up with an impressive array of bruises. I was later asked who had hit me! Nobody told me about that.

I was next on a flight in an Osprey to Lashkar Gah, where I was convinced we were under attack, as a series of flashes whizzed by the back opening (not sure what you call this!) and the aircraft banked sharply to starboard. I later learned that it was all to confuse the enemy. Nobody told me about that. Smiling Light Dragoon faces welcomed me and I was taken off to meet Colonel Plant, who did look rather amazed that I had actually got there. Me too. Lash was quite unexpected, with gardens, dripping with vines, comfy seats and fantastic 'grub' – bar the absence of a wine list of course. I had reckoned on losing weight in Afghanistan, but the rate at which I was getting through the pancakes, my plan was about to abort!

Captain Tod became my 'dresser' as I was still learning which way up the body armour went and Captain Dunn branded me with my own rubbery Light Dragoon bracelet. An amusing moment having after-lunch coffee in the garden – I was twittering about my laundry, as girls do, when Colonel Plant suggested that if I were to put it in his laundry bag, it would come back ironed. That got everyone's attention as the guys (not sure what the collective noun is for Captains) pondered on who did the ironing. A further pause – "Well actually," said the Colonel, "If your laundry comes out of my bag, it may raise a few questions.....!" One can see the headline now – "Cross-dressing Colonel exposed!!!"

After an interesting road move – my first, and in a Ridgeback – and a visit to Fort Bost, I was despatched to Military Operating Base (MOB) Price, another well-appointed base, with more pancakes. By this time, I was beginning to melt in the heat and I was starting to fantasise about a very large, very chilled, G&T. I had long since abandoned any attempt at looking feminine as make-up simply melted and slid off my face. The relationship I had with my body armour was bordering on deep hatred, but at least, like Lash, this place had air con. My first night, I was awoken by a series of deafening 'thumps'. 'Contact' thought I! "And I've left



An armoured vehicle ventures into the desert, and Lynne Moore's painting for the Light Dragoon's Officers' Mess.

my body armour in the 'office.'" "Wish I'd brought my 16 bore." This turned out to be some confuse/light up the enemy flare thingy unleashed by the camp's detachment of Royal Artillery. Nobody told me about that, either.

From Price, I went MOGing, in the desert. This is what the army calls travelling as a Mobile Operations Group, carried in a vehicle-borne patrol, which can be self-sustaining for two to three weeks. But in 40 degrees heat, an afternoon was sufficient for the artist to get the gist of it. A drive through Gereshk, with its market stalls, heavily laden donkeys and brightly garlanded bicycles, took me to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Clifton. This was something of an eye-opener in more ways than one, with a certain amount of night time activity close by, and my first experience of army rations. From a sangar (a small fortified position), I watched two Apache helicopters giving cover to a Chinook as it carried out a MERT (Medical Emergency Response Team). I was shown a checkpoint near by with an amazing, panoramic view of the green zone: a welcome sight after a continual fog of brown dust. Back to Price and more pancakes.

Next came a road move to FOB Ouellette, with an over-night stop en-route at Durai, so that I 'could see the mountains.' Thoughtful: I was beginning to think that I was being spoiled; a notion quickly dispelled when I saw the 'facilities' Ouellette had to offer. Rather amused to see that the 'washing-machine' was a cement mixer, but less amused to see the w.c. situation. This place was seriously at the 'pointed end'. Some very noisy nights ensued, with the locals letting rip to mark the end of Ramadan and the guys doing their stuff.

It was decided that 'The Artist' would benefit from an improved view of the mountains from OP Dara. A short 'hop' in the back of a steaming Warrior, with a 'barming' session/i.e.d. sweep, mid way. Now this place made Ouellette look positively luxurious. Not sure how these guys managed, marooned up there. A viewing from a sangar – I was instructed to stay behind the glass – revealed a truly astounding sight of the green zone, with mud compounds stretching into the *dasht*, Afghans milling about and I'm sure, 'goings on' best for the artist not to dwell on.

A treat was in store for me with a 'shuragh' (as the Afghans call meetings) with the Afghan National Army and a little light luncheon, served on a paper tablecloth, decorated with Christmas holly! Photographs were duly taken of them, attired in full kit, weapons to the fore, and with a back-drop of a healthy-looking crop of rather dodgy green 'plants'. Quite surreal. No wonder the locals looked quite 'chilled'.

Back then, to Camp Bastion as my visit was coming to an end, or so I thought. A little trippette to Kabul with the Adjutant and the RSM, and my first flight in a Hercules, albeit on the flight deck with cups of tea and chocolate biscuits. It was fascinating to see the bustle of downtown Kabul as we gingerly made our way to Fort Julien. The Queen's Palace, overlooking the camp, which must have been wonderful in its day, was now a rather sad relic of past wars, with the President's Palace even more so. The old Russian Officers' Mess perched high up the hillside, looked like something from a James Bond set.

Back in Bastion, I spent a morning with 'The Hookers' (the guys who hook nets full of supplies on to a hovering Chinook), and some time on the flight line being given a conducted tour of an Apache by one very proud pilot – SERIOUS kit! I watched the Brigade Reconnaissance Force (BRF) boys depart in darkness from the US flight line, feeling rather anxious for them, and, in due course, watched their safe return. A Vigil Ceremony, one evening, for the fallen before being repatriated to the UK, rather brought everything home to me; very moving and emotional.

This was an experience which will be with me forever. It was a privilege indeed; I am simply full of admiration and respect for all the wonderful guys whom I met: for their humour, their camaraderie, their strong sense of duty and pure professionalism. Rather humbling really. My education was further completed by learning a number of military acronyms, my favourite non-rude one being, p.o.n.t.i. – person of no tactical importance. I have yet to use it, though I'm sure that the moment will arise! Thank you to everybody – in the Light Dragoons and further afield – who looked after me and looked out for me. — *Lynne Moore*



The Green Zone, towards Gereshk from near PB Clifton