

Good afternoon from FOB Sharana, where this morning I celebrated my last Mass in Eastern Afghanistan on Pentecost Sunday. I would have liked to have given you a more substantive letter about Afghanistan, but instead you are going to listen to a tale of inefficiency in the Service and some scattershot impressions of the war.



All of us Sailors entering Central Command, which is the American military region involving the Middle East and Afghanistan, do so with orders delineating the expected number of days in-theater, which we know as boots on ground. My target date to leave the Middle East was June 11. 45-60 days out from that date, we are supposed to contact the Navy's headquarters in Bagram, who start rolling a series of administrative and travel requests to get us back to our units and home. On schedule, I was able to contact the Navy back in April, who then proceeded to pass along a series of email attachments for me to read, fill out, and return. A senior officer informed me at that time that I was going to be extended in Afghanistan until the end of June. Because my life is one of very long Sundays doing Catholic and administrative work, followed by travel Monday through Saturday, it took me two weeks to complete the packet. Naturally, many of these Army computer systems are not compatible with the Navy's, which didn't help trying to get things done! But I dutifully finished the paperwork and also informed the diocese and parish leadership that I was going to be delayed returning to San Jose.

A couple weeks ago I was accessing an obscure site obtaining amplifying paperwork on the redeployment when I ran across my demobilization orders. These are the orders that gives direction to various naval administrative and travel offices to get me back to the States. Written back in February while I was still in California on leave, these orders had set a revised date of April 30 for me to leave Afghanistan. Since I found them on May 9 this posed a bit of a problem. Looking at the message addressees, it was apparent that the orders had never reached Afghanistan. I forwarded them to Navy Afghanistan and soon enough I had bureaucrats contacting me pretty steadily for the next 24 hours, alternately apologetic and angry. In the end, the senior bureaucratic level involved in the decision decided to cancel the extension and order me out of the country by the end of May. Roger out!

So tomorrow I'm supposed to be off to Bagram to begin redeployment, a term which includes everything involved with the transition from being deployed to being back in the United States. Redeployment looks organized and functional on paper, but like everything else in the military one never knows how accurate that is until it is experienced personally.

Besides my petty personal drama, things are heating up around Afghanistan. Over the past week a number of attacks have been launched against some large American bases here. Most of us are surprised that Sharana has not been hit yet. The two largest bases, Bagram and Kandahar, were hit, as well as that convoy in Kabul. A much smaller FOB I had visited earlier last week was hit the day after I left, but only made a small mention in the American press.

Even though we have access to the internet news services, it is hard to feel how things play out in the press in the US, since we rarely get to watch the network and cable news programs. The attacks certainly figured prominently on the web news outlets. One thing I didn't pick up from them was the universal response from the Soldiers here about these long-awaited attacks: except for the Kabul suicide bombing, they were a complete failure. The Taliban has been threatening an offensive for the spring and summer to drive us out of the country. If this was the opening round it certainly did not go well for them.

This week's attacks underscore a few things: the immense defensive strength of the American bases and tactical superiority of American troops; the wide-spread nature of the insurgency; and how difficult it is to understand what is going on here. General McChrystal,

who understands more than anyone else in this country what is going on, spoke the truth a few weeks ago when he said that nobody is winning this war. The Taliban cannot defeat us; we cannot pin down the bad guys long enough to defeat them; the Afghan population, who decides the winner, is split a thousand ways- each valley is a political entity unto itself. It is no wonder that the press does not know how to report this: this surely is the most socially complex war we have ever tried to fight, even more than Vietnam.

The area that I have been working in has gotten progressively more violent. Weather in the mountains is the primary factor affecting combat. One can think of being a fugitive during an amber alert and treating Afghanistan like Nevada and Pakistan like California. In theory, the easiest way to escape from California to Nevada is I-80, but the odds of getting caught by the authorities are high. The slower but safer way is to take a smaller highway, local roads, or even move on foot across the Sierras. Summer is easier than winter when the roads and passes are covered in snow.

The bad guys' best fighters are based in Pakistan. To cross men and supplies from there to here means crossing mountains similar to the Sierras. Snow on the ground makes travel arduous and puts a natural winter break in the fighting. Now that the snow is almost completely melted, the number of enemy and the quality of their weaponry have increased greatly and firefights are more common while on patrol. I feel as if I'm leaving this brigade just as the most dangerous time of their deployment is starting. That's not a great feeling.

Fortunately, an unexpected gift dropped out of the sky this past week: an Army priest. For several weeks I've been under the impression that when I left, this area would be without a full-time priest. He's not based at Sharana but at the headquarters base north of here, but he will at least attempt to serve the same area that I have been serving. Since he is an Army priest and higher ranked than I am, I'm hoping that he will have more success traveling than I have had. My record is poor. Three months here and there are several COPs (the smaller fighting bases) that went without a visit. It is maddening to recall how many times I was stranded on outlying FOBs and COPs or never even left Sharana even though scheduled to fly. I figured that I effectively traveled less than half as much as I should have. Occasionally the delays were understandable: attacks, snow, rain, and dust storms preventing flying. Mechanical breakdowns accounted for some cancellations. But the majority of the stoppages were administrative in nature: somebody, somewhere, either failed to properly pass along the air movement request (military equivalent of an airline's passenger reservation) or decided that chaplains' movements, regardless of Army doctrine, was less important than some other movements. And that problem has gotten worse the longer I stay here. So I leave this brigade honored to have served a good number of true heroes and warriors, but immensely frustrated at how limited my outreach to the Catholic soldiers has been.

I doubt that I will get another Update letter written before returning to the United States next month. I do have some observations about the Afghanis in my head that I would like to get on paper at some point. Perhaps it will take a few hours of quiet sitting in my den at the rectory for me to organize them into a coherent letter. Thanks to all of you for reading this and for the many wonderful responses, questions, and emails of support I have received over the past year. God willing, I should be back in San Jose mid-June and back in the saddle at St. Victor July 1, dealing with the big loss that Fr. Lim's retirement represents but also looking forward to working with Frs. Jonathan and Paul and the parish staff and, most of all, reconnecting with family, friends, and the great parishioners of St. Victor.

God bless you all! Fr. Michael