

The View From Swimming Pool Hill

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By Ahmed Rashid

KABUL At the top of Swimming Pool Hill in Kabul, there is, strangely enough, a huge Olympic size pool, built from raw concrete with concrete diving boards. It was built by the occupying Soviet forces in the 1980s, who were probably posted on the hill to watch out for Afghan mujahedin. It has never been used as a pool, because there was no way that even the Soviets could get water to travel uphill at such a steep angle.

The Taliban did use it in the mid- 1990s, however, taking blindfolded criminal offenders and homosexuals to the highest diving board, giving them a push and allowing them to crash onto the floor of the pool. If the offenders survived they were deemed innocent and allowed to live. Not many did, according to local Afghans. The blood stains on the concrete were visible when the first foreign troops arrived after the defeat of the Taliban in 2001.

Now British soldiers under the command of a baby-faced brigadier, Nicholas Pope, use the hill as a lookout point because of the stunning 180-degree views of Kabul. Pope - public school, Cambridge University, another brother in the army - commands the 1st Signal Brigade. He has 800 men scattered all over Afghanistan. Some are running the computers and wireless networks being used in the NATO- led offensive against the Taliban in the deserts of Helmand Province, where 3,300 British troops are based.

Other signalers are based with the 9,000-man International Security Assistance Force in Kabul, where they take part in foot patrols and help troops from 36 nations maintain a common signaling network. The rest of his signalers are still based in balmy England.

Right now, temperatures in Helmand are searing, and Pope's men have to operate in a heat haze, with dust swirling around them. But here on Swimming Pool Hill it's more like a summer's day in the English countryside. The only problem is that I am stumbling across the hill laden with full body armor, trying to conjure up what it would be like fighting in this outfit.

Once we get off the hill and reach the road at the bottom, armored Land Rovers are waiting to take us onward - thank goodness a foot patrol does not mean you have to do it all on foot.

ISAF foot patrols in Kabul are hugely popular with the local population. They have brought down the crime rate, protected women and school children, set local police an example about community service and provided the kids someone to chase after on their way back from school.

Foot patrols are a tradition based upon British Army experience in Northern Ireland, and were started in Kabul by the first commander of ISAF, General John MacColl, in December 2001, just weeks after the Taliban were defeated. I remember accompanying one of the first foot patrols at that time and seeing the faces of the surprised Kabulis. Equally surprised were American troops, who never get out of their vehicles if they can help it and certainly don't patrol on foot.

Pope seems to know everyone important in the locality. He points out the slums where houses made of mud, tin and cardboard boxes stand like orphans amid the gleaming multistoried homes built by the drug barons and warlords - an affront to the eyes, comprised of every conceivable gaudy architectural style.

"These houses are why the riots took place," I say to Pope and his soldiers. "If you were a slum dweller living amid such ostentation, you would riot, too." I am referring to the May 29 riots in Kabul in which more than a dozen people were killed, which left the government of President Hamid Karzai badly shaken.

Pope leads the way to the British Cemetery in Kabul. Renovated with funds from Britain's Ministry of Defense and guarded by an Afghan gardener who has been at the job 37 years, the cemetery holds the graves of British dead from three Afghan wars in the 19th century. The epitaphs on the gravestones are poetic. I imagine the great British poets of World War I lounging on the grassy verges of the graveyard, composing verse about the English dead.

There are other plaques of more recent tragedies - the deaths of Spanish ISAF troops in a plane crash in 2004, and the deaths of Germans, Swedes and soldiers from other nations in bomb blasts, mine explosions and vehicle accidents. Five years after the Taliban were driven out, they're back and ISAF's tasks are just as hard.