

Operation Wroorwali: The Brotherhood by Georganne Schultz Hassell

It was a quiet, lonely ride into the desert. The brief glimpses of life outside armored walls were demoralizing, at least by American standards. The bazaar we stormed through was more of a shantytown, and we quickly escaped it, heading into the barren hills, into the unknown.

The Mine-Resistant Ambush Protective vehicle we used for all ground convoys was a sand-colored beast of metal and armor. It held less people than the average SUV and was definitely less comfortable with seat cushions sliding off and a harness for a seatbelt. The vehicle didn't take speed bumps well, either. I was guaranteed to bounce a foot out of the seat and hit my head every time.

Earlier, while I waited inside the metal cocoon to depart the base, a gruff sergeant with weary red eyes and a constant wad of tobacco in his mouth gave me a quick instruction: "If the shit goes down and the gunner's firing, you'll have to hand him that," he said, pointing a rocket launcher tucked to the right of the gunner's legs. He then pointed out a few gun holes we could use to fire from, laughed and wished us luck. The heavy door was shut, locking us into the monster of a vehicle.

Now moving quickly on what I wouldn't even call roads, I glanced at the green cylinder waiting behind two rows of ammo boxes. I didn't want to guess how much the rocket launcher weighed or if we would have to use it. The four men in the vehicle with me -- driver, gunner, truck commander (shotgun seat), and the intelligence sergeant next to me -- all seemed content, as if we were driving to church, the quiet anticipation of having to sit through a long service ahead of us. I fidgeted with my rifle, trying to comfortably rest the magazine on my thigh. Peeking through the back window and straining to see out the front, I tried counting the number of MRAPs tearing through this bleak countryside. Five trucks and 25 people were making this journey with me to a rural village called Jangora. I was the mission commander for this round of Operation Wroorwali, having taken over for another lieutenant who was on vacation. Wroorwali is the Pashto word for brotherhood, but I was the only woman on the mission. The goal was to hold a shura, or traditional meeting with the village elders, and the Afghan government officials we dragged with us. Typically, Operation Wroorwali shuras discussed construction projects to help their basic needs, like building a well or a school. My unit had traveled to Jangora three weeks ago, prior to my arrival in Afghanistan, and the villagers told us that the Taliban would destroy anything that looked like government assistance. The Afghan National Police told us it was useless to come back.

Defying defeat from the last visit, we arrived to the same location and parked our vehicles in a wide circle facing outward. Our truck commander shouted back to us from his seat, saying he would do the 5, 10, 25 checks and then would open the back door. That series of numbers would have been meaningless had I not just learned IED detection measures a month earlier. I knew the sergeant would be the one to circle our vehicle at those meter intervals, searching for mines and booby traps. We sat in a long silence before the back door

rocketed open and the sergeant told us we could get out. "There's a lot of loose dirt out here, so watch your step. Make sure you don't step on anything and get blown up," he said. His warning forced me to look at the ground every time I put my boot down, looking for wires, excessive trash, anything that could hold a charge and go boom.

While the gunners and drivers stayed with the vehicles, the rest of the group met up at the mosque. It wasn't a mosque with a bright golden dome and loudspeakers to call men to prayer; it was more like an adobe hut, set apart from the village's mud walls. Still eyeing the ground, I tried to catch up to the group already assembling there. We had brought along an Afghan government official, Gulam, and an Afghan engineer, Khalid, to guide them in reconnecting with their people. That didn't really seem necessary when Gulam was greeted as a dear friend by village elders who gripped him in a tight embrace. They politely shook hands with the rest of us.

Two interpreters who went by the pseudonyms Cobra and Mac were assigned to this mission. They quickly relayed to me that this wasn't the village we were looking for -- this was not Jangora. It was my first Wroorwali mission and I couldn't even get to the right village. Ballistic sunglasses hid my mounting frustration as the stares of men friendly and foreign looked to me for a decision. The elders were already assembled and talking with Gulam and Khalid. We had come to here to ask what they needed and how we could help, and I couldn't just move on to the next village, blatantly ignoring this one. We began the slow process of discussing the village's needs, which seemed simple: security, water, improved roads and education. The men raved with bloodshot eyes that the Taliban are everywhere, and they would attack if they knew the government was helping the village. Each of their soiled faces told the same story -- their fear entrapped them.

I felt at once useless to them, because I knew our Provincial Reconstruction Team had no means to provide security for these villagers. We had just enough protection to cover ourselves, and we couldn't stay in their village to keep them safe. There was no way for us to force their own police or army to maintain a presence, either. We were left to try and make basic improvements in their lives, constructing wells, cleaning irrigation ditches, and donating pesticides. But when we offered these fragments of hope all they saw were shards, ready to pierce.

The elders brought us to see their irrigation canal, which they said needed cleaning. We walked over to the shallow ditch that was supposed to carry the village's water. It was filled in with dirt and weeds had sprouted in the center, the obvious reason water had stopped flowing. When we asked if they needed help cleaning it out, they said they had all the supplies to take care of it. When we asked if manpower was the problem, they said no, there are enough men here. My sympathy for them was dissolving. With wavering patience I asked the interpreter to find out why the villagers didn't just dig out the dirt themselves. He relayed that they wanted money to pay the unemployed men of the village to clean out their own water source. Of course they just wanted money. Their complete lack of initiative to take care of themselves baffled me. Their only water source was overgrown with weeds and instead of getting their hands dirty they assumed we would just hand over cash. Gulam and I agreed that there was nothing we could

do for this village until they wanted to help themselves. Paying a contractor to do the work would give them no ownership of their problems. We moved on to the real Jangora just up the hill.

A crumbling brick wall and several young boys were there to greet us after a brief walk on the dusty path. Again Gulam was welcomed like an old crony, and we waited patiently as a white-bearded man who seemed older than the land itself walked silently over to our amassing group. He asked to sit down near the deteriorating wall, so I dropped to the ground, grateful for the knee pads that caught me. The weight of my gear finally off my shoulders, I squatted in the dirt and looked at the brotherhood around me. The boys were covered in the familiar dusty sand and they stole mischievously glances in my direction. It was the first time I really noticed their clothing. Draped in dark brown, tan and grey colors, they were a stark change from the bright costumes I saw at the girls' school.

With Cobra the interpreter by my side, I listened to the conversation between the elders, Gulam and Khalid as they discussed the village's needs. The Taliban held the upper hand, again. But these elders prized survival over fear, and said they could use our help cleaning out their irrigation canal. Just a stone's throw away the other village had a totally different reaction to our offer, so I had to ask what they would do if the Taliban came and saw them with new cleaning supplies. The frail man with the snowy beard said they would tell them that Jangora's people had no choice but to fix the canal -- it was their livelihood. The boldness and strength of this elder to fight for his village's needs was more refreshing than the breeze wafting through the village on this arid summer day.

After taking the elders and the engineer to survey the canal to determine the supplies they needed, we began to trudge back to our MRAPs. Our mission had dragged on longer than I expected, but it was worth it having found a way to help the village. The young boys surrounded us playfully while we walked, as they had all morning. Earlier they weren't convinced a woman was hiding under my helmet, so I had taken it off to show them my hair. Now two of the boys linked arms and kept grinning at me, so I asked Cobra what they were doing. "They're protecting you," he said.

Perhaps this is what we mean by woorwali: brotherhood.