

An illusion lost, an experience gained

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Introduction

In this article the reader is taken to Afghanistan, 2003. It presents an account of a suicide attempt during a transport of personnel, which the writer, in contrast to several others, can give in good health. The aim of the article is to provide a case that describes the impact of terrorism on the work of a soldier. This is done by a description of the events that took place on 7 June 2003 and the period immediately after. The account is based on personal observation, experiences and memories.

During my first function as a lieutenant in the Army Medical Corps, I got the opportunity to go on a mission to Afghanistan. I took it with both hands and in May 2003 found myself en route to Kabul as a member of ISAF-6. My function in the Kabul Multinational Brigade (KMNB) was that of Staff Officer Attached to the Movement and Control section. I was the second of a German captain. Together we were responsible for the transports of personnel in Kabul, which in practice came down to ferrying personnel going on leave or starting their tour between Kabul International Airport (KIA) and the city. As it happened my superior was on leave in the week the suicide attempt took place, so that I was temporarily in charge of the transports.

On 7 June 2003 at 08.00 o'clock in the morning, a suicide attack was carried out on my transport. I was transporting German personnel to Kabul International Airport. They had completed their six-month tour and were going back home. During the roll call it appeared that the Germans had their full personal equipment with them, which normally was sent after them due to a lack of space in the aircraft. In this specific case the unit needed their personal kit immediately on their return in order to be deployable again as soon as possible. The 4-ton truck that we had at our disposal was too small by far to take along all the gear. While we were discussing the problem, one of my coach drivers offered to come along with a second coach so that all the gear could be taken to the airfield in one shipment. This sparked of a new discussion on how to divide personnel and gear over the two coaches. One of the drivers insisted on separating the bags from the men, as he feared that the bags could cause extra injuries in case of an accident. I decided to transport the men in one coach and the gear in the other, as he proposed. A little before 08.00 o'clock I drove through the gate in my MB, followed by the coach with the gear, then the coach with the men, the 4-ton truck and two German MBs.

Personal experience

I never saw the car, or the terrorist. At the moment when the explosion followed on the flash of light I did not realize what was happening. I felt the blast on my body, but I could not comprehend what had happened. I looked in my rear view mirrors and all I saw was some rubble on the road. My German co-driver screamed, 'The coach, the coach'. I braked, looked again in my mirrors and saw that I was no longer followed by our two coaches. At that moment, a feeling of panic began to grip me in the stomach. In a reflex, I turned the steering wheel around so that I could see what had actually happened. I shouted at my co-driver, 'Funken Mann, funken' (That means, 'Signal man, signal'), not quite realizing what had happened. I got out, loading my weapon with trembling hands. The first thing that hit me was the smell of the smoldering wreck with bodies by the side of the road. Then I heard the smothered cries of pain and disbelief slowly swelling up from the wreckage. At that moment, however, everything was still coming to me subdued, as if under a wool blanket. It seemed an eternity before my brain finally could not deny anymore that the smoldering wreck there was our ISAF coach that had driven behind me just a few seconds before.

From that moment onwards the adrenaline, the stress took over (Situation That Releases Emergency Signals for Survival). Time flew, after an hour and a half it slowly began to emerge to me that "something big" had happened to me. Eventually the emotions overcame the adrenaline. A Dutch doctor had me taken back to the camp in a Patria vehicle. In the back of the vehicle I solemnly promised myself I would never use that road again, that the whole country could sink in the mud. Two hours after I had gone through the gate I got back to Camp Warehouse, still not fully grasping the extent of what had happened. Later that day I was told that this had been a terrorist assault. In the first instance my anger was directed at the young Afghan who had been run over by the coach. He was still alive when I found him covered with dirt, his clothes completely torn off his body from the blast. Later that day he died of internal wounds. At the site of the disaster I had caught his eye and felt pity for him, now I could only see in him the terrorist who had blown up the coach. No doubt, I projected my anger and impotence on this personification of the attack. Afterwards, of course it appeared that this boy too had been a victim who had happened to stand by the side of the road when the coach exploded.

The rest of the day I went on automatic. First the debriefing with the MDD (Armed Forces Social Service), together with my partner and somewhat later my buddy. Then I took a long shower to wash away the blood and smell from my hair. When I reported back at the KMNb building it was lunchtime, but I could not eat much. Then came the "hunt" for the wounded survivors who had been taken to hospital. Together with my co-driver and a Dutch colleague, we visited the coach driver who had been wounded and

we tried to see the doctors who had operated on the wounded. I was desperate to get as much information as possible about everything that had to do with the assault. In spite of all that had happened that day I had a good night's sleep, and, to my surprise, this stayed so the rest of my tour.

The consequences of the attack

Immediately I was faced with an important situation. Even if your world seems to stand still when you are trying to come to terms with it all, life around you goes on. The next day brought the usual bustle of planes arriving full of people that had to be met on KIA. The practical problems were there immediately: there were no coaches to transport them anymore, and besides one driver had been wounded and the other was in too much of a mental shock. The head of G4 arranged small armored vehicles, which allowed us to set up to ferry the personnel from the airfield to Camp Warehouse. This first trip after the attack was important for my further functioning during my mission. The terrorist had reached his goal: not only had he caused a great many casualties, he had also created fear. The moment I left the gate with five armored vehicles on my tail, I was very much afraid. What made me go out on the road again was my sense of responsibility. The German drivers of the other vehicles were at least very tense and I had to set the example. Apart from that it was my duty to collect the servicemen from the plane and to tell them what had happened. During the drive I felt much threatened. Every time we passed an Afghan car I thought that might be the end. When we had transported all the personnel to Camp Warehouse safely, I felt mainly relieved, even a little proud of myself. I had crossed the threshold of going to back to Kabul, although it never quite disappeared. Each time I left the camp I had to literally force myself across it. Its height varied with the extent of terrorist threat during the rest of my time there.

What I found striking were the reactions of my superiors in the first days after the attack. In my view they retrenched on a "befehl-ist-befehl structure". They were all looking for clarity and structure, wanting to build in certainties, and they found them in the command structures. This became painfully clear in the order for the funeral, written by a German colonel. According to this order the means of transport arranged for the escort of the dead colleagues to KIA was a coach. I confronted my commanding officer with this and I argued that this plan was not advisable in view of the intense associations this vehicle would no doubt evoke among the members of the escort of the coffins. Apart from that the discussion about what constituted safe transport of personnel had not been concluded yet and therefore use of the coaches that we had left was officially suspended. My commanding officer said that he had sympathy for my arguments, but that he was going to execute the order. Driven by emotion, but with rational arguments

I ended up in the office of the German Head of G4. This lieutenant colonel also chose not to refer back to his higher echelon, and he, too, was going to execute the order. Next, I went to the German Brigade Chief of Staff, who concurred with me, but referred me to the colonel who had initially written the order. I argued with him that an alternative would be to carry out the transport by armored personnel carrier. He indicated that it did not matter much to him how the transport was arranged, so as far as he was concerned the armored personnel carriers were all right. Nevertheless, he was not quite sure of himself and he announced he would put it to the general. The night before the funeral, 36 hours after the attack, MOVCON received the general's permission to arrange armored personnel carriers for the transport. This incident is one example of behavior that has drastically reduced my confidence in my military superiors. Given the fact that I mainly cooperated with German colleagues, I was very negative and disappointed in the "German way of doing things".

It also appeared to me that many servicemen developed a fear to leave the compound. Especially those whose activities had kept them from going outside the camp much were reluctant to go out. Those who did go out regularly on patrols or for other reasons, had much less trouble with this. It took me about three weeks to be able to drive more or less relaxed through Kabul, but the old feeling never came quite back. Even though it may have been terrorists from another country that had attacked our transport, I was convinced that the citizens of Kabul had known about it, given the empty streets, closed shops and the lightning speed with which El Jazeera was at the location of the attack. Although I have never been able to prove my suspicions, it made me feel very bitter and I could not really enjoy my work and Afghanistan anymore.

Cooperation and social contacts

After all my German colleagues who had been with me in the attack had returned home I had to rely a lot on my Dutch colleagues. I had the feeling my German colleagues did not know how to deal with me and the result was distance at a moment when I needed closeness. The Croatian major refused to work together with my German colleagues, one of the reasons being, I heard later, that the thought it a disgrace that a woman had to do 'such dangerous work'. A British major, working at the KNMB, felt he had been passed over as his advice about how to deal with terrorism had not been heeded by his commanding officer. I could get along better and better with my New Zealand, Canadian and Danish colleagues, though. I have the impression that this was caused by the fact that these people, just like me, had been posted on an individual basis in a preponderantly German staff. That this was not only nation-bound is borne out by my drastically deteriorating work relation with a Dutch commander. This happened after

he had impaired my coping process and functioning by handling my position in the wrong way.

Coping

During the mission I only summarily paid conscious attention to coping with the events. It has, however, been of great importance for my unconscious coping process that I stayed on in Afghanistan. Every day I drove past the place where the suicide attack had taken place, every day the threat warnings kept coming in. The realization that this attack was not an isolated incident, but that it came in a whole series of events, was a tough but necessary lesson. After several weeks, explosive charges were found along our route, clearly intended to hit our transports again. Other vehicles were attacked with mines, explosive charges, etc. The realization of continuous threat has been important for my awareness of the reality of things. A number of German colleagues who were taken out of the area immediately after the attack are still struggling daily with a number of unanswered questions: 'Why us? Could it have been prevented? What if...?' They are still having problems with this, because they have not been able to give the attack its place while still being over there.

Back at home the coping process starts. Not catching my sleep, reliving, jumpiness and grumpiness are just a few of the normal reactions to stressful occurrences. What was hardest for me to cope with was not the suicide attack or the sight of the dead and the wounded. Two things are more important. First of all, it has been quite difficult for me to accept that some colleagues impaired the coping process more than they realized, through their failure to understand and their ignorance. On the one hand, this is enhanced by a difference in nationality, as the cultural and linguistic differences can form an aggravating factor in this process. On the other hand, a shared nationality is no guarantee for good contact. Secondly, the suicide terrorist has forced me to change my view of the world. His act robbed me of my certainties, which I have had to reconstruct one by one. This costs much energy, patience and time. Finally, a large claim was laid on my environment. Often the role of one's next of kin is underestimated in situations like these. A stable home front is indispensable in a mission like this.

Now, more than two years later, I am convinced that the attack has changed my life, not only in a negative, but also in a positive way. To quote the doctor at the Dutch aid post: 'An illusion lost, and experience gained'.

