



AFGHANISTAN

Kelsey, left, with first Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) Commander Lieutenant Colonel Rusty Kaskel, second from left, and visitors from Task Force Warrior.



PHOTOS COURTESY TOM KELSEY '88

Leading THE Charge

Thomas Kelsey '88 translates policy into results in the Panjshir Valley.

BY BEAU MILLER '04

The Hindu Kush is a craggy mass of snowy mountains and fertile valleys that spans 500 miles across northern Afghanistan and Pakistan. With peaks towering over 25,000 feet, this sub-range of the Himalayas has a history rich with military lore and losses dating back to Alexander the Great, who transited the area in the fourth century B.C.E.

More recently, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, its army launched nine different offensives—without a single success—for control of the Hindu Kush’s strategic Panjshir Valley. After the Soviet troops withdrew in 1989, the Taliban similarly tried and failed to capture the Panjshir.

The victorious defense of the valley is largely attributed to the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary “Lion of Panjshir,” who was killed Sept. 9, 2001, by Al Qaeda assassins disguised as a television news crew. Just two days later—on Sept. 11, 2001—Al Qaeda struck again, effectively intertwining its fate with that of the Taliban.

Today, the mission of the Panjshir Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) is to enable the local government to extend its authority and legitimacy in order to facilitate and enhance security, stability, and private investment in the region. Although there are 27 PRTs operating throughout Afghanistan, the Panjshir PRT is the only American team led by a civilian. That civilian is Tom Kelsey ’88.

Upon graduating from Claremont McKenna with a degree in government, Kelsey, like his father, joined the U.S. Army, and served as an officer in the Gulf War. After the war, Kelsey retraced his career to sign on as a foreign service officer with the U.S. Department of State.

The last time *CMC* checked in with Kelsey was in 2002, when he was finishing an eventful two years as special assistant to Secretaries of State Madeline Albright and Colin Powell. Subsequently, he became the Department’s country



Kelsey stands on a Soviet rocket launcher with two live rockets still in the tubes: typical, he says, of Soviet equipment left all over Panjshir.



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desk officer for Germany, then the consul for political and economic affairs at the American consulate general in Munich.

During Kelsey’s time in Germany, word came from Washington that he would be trading the comforts of Western Europe for the spartan lifestyle of a one-year forward deployment in Panjshir. Drawing on his experience as an officer during Operation Desert Storm, he would lead a 94-person team comprised mainly of Air Force and Army soldiers, as well as American government personnel from State, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Department of Agriculture.

“My first view of Afghanistan was from the aircraft as I flew in from Dubai,” Kelsey recalls. “I remember gazing down and thinking how rugged and desolate the country looked. I wondered what was going on beneath us. Was it a Taliban-controlled area or relatively secure? It all looked the same from 30,000 feet.”

Before traveling into the Panjshir Valley, Kelsey visited Bagram Air Field, a former Soviet, then Taliban, base secured by U.S. forces in December 2001. “Bagram reminded me of the cantina scene from *Star Wars*: a mix of military from various countries, civilian contractors, Afghan workers, and guns—lots of guns.”

A few helicopter and Humvee rides later, Kelsey arrived in the valley that would become home for the next twelve months. “I had studied so many photographs that it looked almost exactly as I had expected,” he explains.

When asked if he could point to any classroom experiences that helped ready him for this assignment, Kelsey admits, “I’m not sure anything really prepares you to live among the mujahedeen for a year in the Hindu

Kush. Having said that, much of what I do requires an understanding of history, an appreciation of and sensitivity to foreign cultures, as well as the ability to translate Washington policy decisions into results on the ground.

“Afghanistan’s history is one of almost continuous conflict and intervention by its neighbors and the great powers,” he says. “You can’t understand the dynamics at work in Afghanistan today without understanding this history, including the role of U.S. foreign policy over the past several decades. CMC helped shape my world view in a way that prepared me very well for what I am doing now. I think my courses under Professor Edward Haley probably had the greatest influence on me in this regard.”

Addressing his position as the lone civilian in charge of a PRT in Afghanistan, Kelsey notes that his time in the army helped him appreciate how the military operates and also helped garner him credibility in the eyes of the soldiers under his direction.

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Tragically, these “human costs” were brought to fore on May 26, when a PRT convoy traveling between Panjshir and Bagram was attacked by a suicide car bomb and the lives of the team’s military commander, the civil affairs team noncommissioned officer in charge, a driver, and the Afghan law adviser were lost.

“While we all understood the inherent risks of serving in Afghanistan, I think we had a sense that this wasn’t supposed to happen to our PRT—Panjshir is among the most secure real estate in Afghanistan, and the PRT’s mission is not a combat one, but reconstruction,” Kelsey says. “The loss was felt all the more deeply given that the team is a relatively small unit in an isolated location away from the large support structures of places like Bagram or Kabul. Our fallen weren’t only members of the team—they were our friends. We held a memorial service and put up plaques, but the real memorial to our fallen teammates is the PRT’s work in the valley, and all the lives that have been improved through their efforts.”

“The PRT is not intended to be here forever,” Kelsey explains. “Through building the capacity of the government and creating the conditions for private investment, we hope to work ourselves out of a job in a few years.”

Kelsey concluded his Panjshir assignment in July. Next up is a return to Athens, where he served his first tour in the foreign service, this time as the embassy’s deputy political counselor.

First row: Kelsey poses in Khenj, against a backdrop of a river gorge and, in the distance, a PRT road under construction; the road eventually will cross the Anjuman pass into the border with Badakhshan province. **Second row, left to right:** Kelsey with second PRT Commander Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Mark Stratton, second from right, and members of the Panjshir Provincial Council (Stratton, along with team members Army Master Sgt. Blue Rowe, Senior Airman Ashton Goodman, and Afghan civilian adviser Abdul Samad, was killed May 26 by a suicide car bomber.); with a group of local children encountered on a hike to the remote village of Mokani, where the team reviewed potential school sites; and with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, left, and third PRT Commander Lieutenant Colonel Steve Lancaster. **Third row, left to right:** Kelsey with Stratton at a PRT built wind farm, the first power-generating wind farm in Afghanistan; and with Master Sergeant Blue Rowe, second from right, on a project visit.