

RELEASE IN PART
B5, B6

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, August 16, 2011 9:35 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: In Afghanistan's Garmser district, praise for a U.S. official's tireless work

FYI

From: VonHippel, Karin L
Sent: Tuesday, August 16, 2011 9:30 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D; Barton, Rick (USUN)
Subject: RE: In Afghanistan's Garmser district, praise for a U.S. official's tireless work

[Redacted]

B5

From: Mills, Cheryl D
Sent: Tuesday, August 16, 2011 9:29 AM
To: VonHippel, Karin L; Barton, Rick (USUN)
Subject: RE: In Afghanistan's Garmser district, praise for a U.S. official's tireless work

[Redacted]

B5
B6

From: VonHippel, Karin L
Sent: Tuesday, August 16, 2011 9:25 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D; Barton, Rick (USUN)
Subject: RE: In Afghanistan's Garmser district, praise for a U.S. official's tireless work

I saw that and know him, [Redacted]

B6

From: Mills, Cheryl D
Sent: Tuesday, August 16, 2011 9:24 AM
To: Barton, Rick (USUN); VonHippel, Karin L
Subject: FW: In Afghanistan's Garmser district, praise for a U.S. official's tireless work

Food for thought . . .

From: Toiv, Nora F
Sent: Tuesday, August 16, 2011 9:18 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: In Afghanistan's Garmser district, praise for a U.S. official's tireless work

The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

In Afghanistan's Garmser district, praise for a U.S. official's tireless work

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Published: August 13

GARMSER, Afghanistan — Since September 2009, this district along the Helmand River has seen five different Marine battalion commanders, two governors and two police chiefs. The only constant was a compact American whom everyone here calls Carter Sahib.

Carter Malkasian, who had been the State Department's representative in Garmser until last month, is perhaps the only foreign official in the country to have been so widely embraced as a sahib, an Urdu salutation once used to address British colonial officials that Afghans now employ as a term of honor and respect.

The adoration stems from his unfailing politeness (he greeted people in the traditional Pashtun way, holding their hands for several minutes as a series of welcomes and praises to God were delivered), his willingness to take risks (he often traveled around in a police pickup instead of in an American armored vehicle with a squad of Marines), and his command of Pashto, the language of southern Afghanistan (he conversed fluently, engaging in rapid-fire exchanges with gray-bearded elders).

Afghan officials and U.S. commanders credit Malkasian with playing a critical role in the transformation of Garmser from one of the country's most violent, Taliban-infested districts to a place so quiet that some Marines wish they had more chances to fire their weapons.

He was dispatched to this farming community in southern Afghanistan to provide political advice to U.S. troops, mentor the fledgling Afghan government and supervise reconstruction projects, all of which military leaders deem essential to their efforts to stabilize the country. The rail-thin 36-year-old was uncommonly effective, in large part because he was willing to forge his own job description, even if it meant bucking the State Department's rules.

Seeing his role more as a proconsul than adviser, he single-handedly cajoled influential tribal leaders and mullahs to return to the district, correctly betting that it would lead others to follow. He won the trust of skeptical residents through countless meetings and roadside conversations, persuading them to reject the insurgency and support their government. And he provided vital institutional memory in a mission that has generally forced Afghans to build fresh relationships with new waves of Americans each year.

He also shaped the Marine campaign here in a way no civilian has in other parts of the country. He served as a counselor to each of the battalion commanders, influencing decisions about when to use force, and helping them calibrate it with a political engagement strategy. He built such credibility with the Marines — the result of spending so much time in Garmser — that if he urged a different course of action, they almost always complied.

"We need a Carter Malkasian in every district of Afghanistan," said Maj. Gen. Larry Nicholson, a former top Marine commander in Afghanistan.

"You can surge troops and equipment, but you can't surge trust. That has to be earned — and that's what Carter did," Nicholson said. "He provided a continuum of trust that was essential in turning around Garmser."

Staying in the field

Malkasian was among a surge of civilians sent to increase the State Department's presence in Afghanistan, which now stands at about 1,150 people. Many of them, including Malkasian, are temporary hires, not career diplomats.

But he was not like most others selected by State and the U.S. Agency for International Development — and that was a big reason he was regarded as so effective by the military and the Afghans. He asked to work in the field, not stay at the comfortable embassy compound in Kabul, which features a bar, a swimming pool and two-bedroom apartments with kitchens. He lived in a trailer on a dusty forward operating base, and his meals consisted of whatever fare was being served to the grunts, if he wasn't eating goat with Afghans.

Because he was not vying for a cushy embassy posting in Europe as a reward for the privations of the gravel-strewn base, he did not feel compelled to toe the State Department's line on war policy, which further endeared him to the Marines.

He thinks President Obama erred in announcing his troop-reduction plans so publicly. In Garmser, he contends, the president's statement has generated doubts among Afghans about who will eventually prevail — a fear that could lead some to once again side with the Taliban, threatening the progress that has been achieved.

"We shouldn't have said we are leaving," Malkasian said. "The nuance is lost here. If it's a little foggy to me, to the Afghans it's utterly confusing."

What really set him apart, however, was his willingness to stay at the district level for two consecutive years — very few State personnel have done that — and his tendency to flout the department's strict security rules, which mandate a near-zero tolerance for risk, as opposed to the military acceptance of some danger in pursuit of a mission's objectives. Malkasian regularly ventured around the district with the police chief, placing his security in the hands of rifle-toting Afghans — a potential firing offense if his bosses in Kabul ever knew.

"The only way they will trust you is if you show that you trust them," he said.

In January 2010, when a mob of more than 1,000 angry men descended upon a small American outpost in Garmser to protest what they thought was the desecration of a Koran by the Marines, Malkasian walked out of the protected base to talk to the group. He sat down with the leaders, seeking to convince them that there was no truth to the allegation and that they had been whipped into a frenzy by Taliban propagandists. Even so, he promised to have the Afghan government investigate the claims. They eventually relented and ordered the men to disperse — only because they trusted Malkasian.

"Carter went out there, courageous as all hell, and calmed the group down," said Marine Maj. Scott Cuomo, who was at the outpost that day. "He prevented a major meltdown."

Speaking their language

Malkasian's most striking asset was his skill with Pashto. He took language classes for only two months before deploying — many embassy personnel get far more training. But then he did something that any other civilian could do but precious few have: He spent two hours every morning and an hour every evening studying, and he engaged interpreters on the base in conversation at every opportunity.

The result was interaction with Afghans to a degree that almost no other American officials in the south managed.

When two elders from southern Garmser recently came to the district center to seek permission — and funding — for a village defense force, their first stop was not the Marine battalion commander or the police chief, but Carter Sahib.

Malkasian, whose soft-spoken manner belies fierce negotiating skills, knew his price before the meeting. He would give the elders some village defenders if they committed to sending some of their men to the police academy in the capital of Helmand province, which would demonstrate a commitment to the government.

The elders initially were reluctant.

“It’s very dangerous where we are,” one of them said.

“If it is that dangerous, then you need all the equipment the real police can bring,” Malkasian shot back in Pashto, without the awkward pauses that are a feature of interpreted conversations.

“We do not have enough men to give to the police,” the elder said. The other elder said he worried that any men they sent to the police would be deployed in other areas, which would not help their village.

Malkasian gripped the first elder’s hand and looked into his eyes. “They may be taken to another place for an operation, but they will return,” he said. “They will be trained well, and they will be part of the government.”

His assurances did the trick. A few minutes later, all of them walked in to see Omar Jan, the police chief. A deal was struck: The elders pledged to send five men to the police academy in exchange for permission to set up a 15-man village defense force.

In a recent survey conducted by the Marines, Garmser residents identified “Carter Sahib” as the most influential person in the district, ahead of their tribal elders and Afghan government officials, according to U.S. officials familiar with the findings.

Many Afghans saw him as a pseudo-independent, culturally sensitive figure. He was not a uniformed Marine, nor was he a self-serving Afghan government official. And he never seemed to leave.

He took just 2 ¹/₂ months of vacation in the almost two years he spent in Afghanistan, one of which was for the birth of his daughter. The State Department’s leave policy allowed him to take almost twice as many days away, but he deemed it bad form to be gone that long.

“He has done very good things for the people of Garmser,” said one of the district’s top religious leaders, who has been skeptical, at times, of the U.S.-led military effort. He did not want his name published because he is concerned about Taliban retribution.

Part of Malkasian’s appeal was that he learned to push back in the passive-aggressive way that is common to discourse here. If someone sought to interrupt him in the middle of a conversation, he did not ignore them or lecture them about proper meeting procedure. He would summon a Pashto proverb.

“If your father owns the mill,” he often uttered, “you still have to wait in line.”

An academic takes action

After earning a doctorate in the history of war at Oxford — his dissertation focused on the Korean and Vietnam conflicts and why, as he put it, “people fight long, grueling wars” — he seemed headed for a comfortable life as a professor. He spent his first year out of school teaching at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

Then he talked to an uncle who had been a Navy physician in Vietnam, serving with a Marine battalion that suffered the highest casualty rate in the war and came to be known as the “Walking Dead.” The uncle was on

his deathbed, and he admonished Malkasian to experience war if he was going to write about it. "You don't really know anything about it because you haven't seen it," Malkasian recalls his uncle telling him.

Soon thereafter, he joined the Center for Naval Analysis, a military-affiliated think tank in Alexandria that offered the opportunity to visit U.S. forces in the field. That led to an assignment in Kuwait as the Iraq war was commencing, and then a year-long posting with the Marines in Anbar province starting in 2004. The job involved conducting research projects for Marine commanders into the performance of the Iraqi army and the outcome of various U.S. battalion-level operations.

He returned to Iraq for another tour in 2006, and the following year, he spent five months on a provincial reconstruction team in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar province. That assignment was about not research, but action. He got to engage directly with Afghans and work with fellow Americans in solving problems. He resolved to return.

The opportunity arose in 2009 as more U.S. troops were deployed to southern Afghanistan. He put up his hand. Once selected, he made only one request.

"I specifically asked for somewhere that would have fighting," he said. "I didn't want to be stationed in a place that wasn't part of the main effort."

When Nicholson and his political adviser, John Kael Weston, heard Malkasian was headed to Afghanistan, they pulled strings to get him sent to Garmser, which was then the most intense battleground for the Marines. It was not an obvious assignment for a slightly nerdy war-zone academic, but his Iraq experience convinced the Marines he could handle it.

Although those who have served in Iraq are sometimes loath to draw on those experiences in Afghanistan, Malkasian had no reservations applying what he had learned elsewhere. When the Taliban started targeting elders and government officials in Garmser last summer, he opted to not remain uninvolved as he had when similar killings occurred in Anbar.

Instead, he reached out to contacts in the provincial capital to ask them to encourage other elders to return to Garmser in a sign of defiance of insurgent intimidation. And he urged the police chief to travel around the district to reassure residents.

"If an elder gets killed, you can't sit back and write about it," he said. "My job was to mobilize the people to stand up to the Taliban."

A winning mind-set

His assignment provided the ideal perch for an academic to evaluate the U.S. war strategy. But he abstained.

"I haven't spent a lot of time thinking if there was value in being here — I just assumed there was value," he said on his final day in Garmser. "To me, it's like being in a boxing match: If you're not going in with a mind-set that you're going to win, there's no point being in the ring."

That attitude shapes his view of the need for a continued U.S. presence in the area. Although he thinks Garmser can get by with fewer Marines next year, assuming it receives more Afghan forces, he believes Americans will be required to mentor the army and police for a few more years.

"We've already invested so much in Afghanistan, we might as well finish the job," he said. "I have good friends here, and I don't want to see us abandon these people."

In his last weeks in Garmser, he spent much of his time addressing concerns about the upcoming U.S. drawdown. He repeatedly told residents that they would not be abandoned by the United States, and that the Marines would not leave until the Afghan army and police were "very strong."

Malkasian's model for departure is his own. When it was time to head home last month, he told only a handful of local officials. Most residents, even elders who met with him dozens of times, had no idea he was returning to his wife and young daughter in Arlington.

"It's better this way," he said. "There's no need to make a big deal of it."

So he left. Not on a Marine helicopter, but in Omar Jan's pickup, with his bags in the bed, hoping the security guards at the provincial reconstruction team office in Helmand's capital would not ask him how he made his way from Garmser to their front gate.

As for his replacement, Malkasian said he was informed by his superiors at State that there was no one immediately available to fill his position.

© The Washington Post Company