

**CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW CONTROL NUMBER: 31D 12 Laplante

INTERVIEWEE: Rosalee Laplante

INTERVIEWER: Amber Lloydlangston

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 4th, 2011

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Gatineau, QC

TRANSCRIBED BY: Amber Lloydlangston

Transcription of Interview Number 31D 12 LAPLANTE

Rosalee Laplante

Interviewed March 4th, 2011

By Amber Lloydlangston

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program interview with Rosalee Laplante at 105 Hotel de Ville, 4 March 2011. So could you please present some basic biographical data? (00:14)

LAPLANTE: Okay. My name is Rosalee Laplante. I was born in North Bay, Ontario, in 1981. I went to St. Joseph's Scholar Hall, graduated there in North Bay. I went to Nipissing University. I studied Liberal Arts and while I was there, I went on exchange to the University of the West Indies in Barbados, which started to fuel my interest in international development. When I returned, I went to the University of Ottawa where I did a degree in international development. And then I had some co-op experiences with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and began working there full time doing what I like to think of as domestic development. And finally ended up at the Canadian International Development Agency and also part time was working on a Master's in Public Administration in the international development stream.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me what promoted your interest in development work? (01:21)

LAPLANTE: Yes. I was always interested in international relations, primarily, to begin with and just traveling and experiencing other cultures, but I think once you start to do that, you start to see that not everybody lives the same way that you do. And then realizing how privileged I was, being born in Canada, and being born to a middle income family, I sort of felt it was an obligation to be able to use all of the advantages that I'd been given to help other people to be able to better their lives.

INTERVIEWER: So can you tell me a little bit about your work up north and how that might have prepared you for what you encountered in Afghanistan? (02:04)

LAPLANTE: Sure. My experience at Indian and Northern Affairs, I found that most of the aboriginal groups that I was working with suffered from the same development changes that you see internationally. There's issues with education. There was issues with, in certain terms, governance. There were issues with respect to water, health...just basically all of the issues you expect so... Then there's on top of though there was issues particular to Canada aboriginal groups in terms of a legacy of, of dependence I guess in some way and also the feeling that, you know, the shift from a more traditional livelihood and those challenges to a more modern setting. The, unfortunately, there's a history of family violence, drug and substance abuse, so and alcohol abuse so I guess dealing with a lot of those particular issues. And, well, a lot of the work that I ended up doing with the First Nations that had entered into land claim and self-government

agreements with the government of Canada to try and move their community forward into the modern era while retaining their traditional cultures was very, had a big impact on me, helped me basically to understand development a whole lot better, especially at the community level. And also, just I think, also it was just very motivating and uplifting, because you could see communities basically, you know, willing to change but also, you know, keeping the good parts that they had and also just, I think, enriching Canada for it, I think, we're getting to see more of what they could bring to the table for us; it wasn't just all change on their end. It was change on our end, too.

INTERVIEWER: So what motivated you to switch over to CIDA? (04:17)

LAPLANTE: Basically, I had, because I had always been interested in international development, I wanted to move from domestic development to international development. It's funny because in university, I never thought I'd see myself working for CIDA. [laughs] I thought that I'd be out there more with the NGOs, on the ground, and I kind of felt that maybe the Department's development agenda might be a little influenced a little more politically than when you're an idealist in university but the best way sometime to, to create change is to go within the organization so. And then they had, I got... I had been following Afghanistan in the news but I hadn't really looked at in-depth until I saw that there were advertisements, you know, looking for Canadians to go to Afghanistan so I started researching more and more about Canada's mission there. And it really surprised me when I realized that it wasn't just a military mission but it had a big diplomatic and development component to it. When I...the first few times, I was unsuccessful [laughs] in getting in the Department but eventually I got there. I worked in, worked in Headquarters, started learning the ropes about CIDA and the Afghanistan program.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me how your previous work experience prepared you for Afghanistan? (05:45)

LAPLANTE: Yes. In my previous jobs, I had the opportunity to work with different cultures. I also worked with different levels of government, whether they be aboriginal or territorial or provincial. And then also working closely with other departments at the federal level so for kind of...it was basically a whole of government approach in that respect to aboriginal affairs. So that would, would definitely helped me. Also working with, I guess, project management and complex issues and the analytical skills that you would use there and just the time management skills. All those kinds of day to day skills were definitely transferable.

INTERVIEWER: When did you go to Afghanistan and how did you prepare your own self, your family, friends? (06:39)

LAPLANTE: I first went in January 2009. It was for a temporary assignment so I was there until early March 2009. And then it was determined it would be, that I was needed out there longer so I went back out in April 2009 and stayed there until June 2010. So before...there is a bit of different preparation between each of the ones because if you're just going out for a month and a half, it's a different mindset than when you're going out for longer but...My family was pretty supportive, I would say. My, my Mom and my Dad could realize, I think, that if I had put my mind to something, to do something, I was going to do it regardless of what they said so they just

kind of knew that they had to be supportive, no matter what. Probably, if they had told me, “No” it would make me want to go more. [laughs] They, they’ve, I’ve travelled over, around the world quite a bit before I went to Afghanistan so it wasn’t completely out of the blue for them. My grandparents didn’t take it quite as well. They were a lot more upset. And my brother didn’t take it very well, either. I only have one sibling. He’s my twin brother and he was very worried for me, very upset that I was going. It was very interesting, though, because he has quite a dangerous job. He works in mining underground, as does my Dad, so, it was kind of like, “Really”... trying to explain that the dangers weren’t as bad as they thought when all they ever saw on the news was soldiers coming home in caskets. They, they didn’t quite believe me that I would be safe. But, so in terms of preparation, there was, I knew that I wanted to go to Afghanistan. I just didn’t know when I would be going so I had been preparing myself for about a year and a half in terms of trying to read up as much as I could about the country to understand it. Even then that wasn’t even enough time. [laughs] There was just, it’s so complex and it’s got such a, a, a rich history. But when it came down to when I actually knew I’d be going, there was some, there was training. DFAIT had inter-cultural effectiveness training that the Department sent me on where we got to meet with some Afghans and also learn how to, kind of, you know interact to make our work more effective. Also went on Hostile Environment Training with the Canadian Forces so to better understand how they operate, when they’d be taking, because they were providing for our security, kind of, what was expected on our end and, and what to expect from them. And, as well, I guess, just there was also support from Foreign Affairs in terms of getting ready by, to pack up the house and getting rid, moving all your possessions in storage, and that, and that kind of thing. So, there, that was pretty much, I guess, the extent of the preparation. It ended up between my temporary assignment and my going out there, it ended up being a bit rushed but I think it was probably for the best because you don’t want to start thinking about it for too long and start doubting yourself. You just want to get back out there.

INTERVIEWER: Can you speak to me a little bit more about your training? (10:16)

LAPLANTE: In addition to the inter-cultural training and the Hostile Environment Training, there was an exercise that CIDA had put on in Kanata at the Connaught Ranges in partnership with some CF forces and it ended up with a range of scenarios of what we could expect to deal with while out there. I was there with CIDA participants who had been already selected to go and so they were training you and some of us who hadn’t been selected but they were maybe thinking about selecting us or just kind of wanted to give us a taste of what we might be in for. It was a pretty neat experience in, in, in that we were, kind of, living in a little bit more of a military environment like there wasn’t a whole lot of military personnel there at the time but you could just kind of get that feeling from the way the dorms were set up and the scratchy blankets and the, we were there in the summer and it was hot, like hot as hell. It was 40 degrees and there’s no air conditioning so it was kind of a coincidence but I think it helped because Afghanistan is hot, well, the south is. And then there was a number of CIDA people who had been in Afghanistan came back to help put, to act as Afghans or, and to play roles so we kind of got to have a better understanding of what we might be in for. So I remember there was this one shura and we had some of our colleagues who would, who were playing Afghan roles, they would start listening, taking calls on their cell phones and wandering off. They were wearing the traditional garb and in some cases they might be picking at their toes or they might, they might just get angry about a past incident that had nothing to do with the shura that we had thought we

were discussing. So it really kind of gave you the idea that you had to be on the ball and that they could, you know, bring up any issues and, in terms of just some of the cultural expectations, they were different. Sometimes there's a tendency to address the men in the group rather than the women so preparing you for that. There was also some of our military colleagues over there so we got to start maybe working with them a little bit to understand how that relationship would work out. We had some of our communications people there to prepare us for dealing with media interviews. And then a lot of it, too, was they just crammed a lot of information in a short amount of time with very little sleep to get the, to replicate how you would have to perform at your best on little sleep. And that would happen throughout your time abroad so I definitely thought that that helped.

INTERVIEWER: What did you know of the political, social, military, economic situation in Afghanistan prior to going? (13:15)

LAPLANTE: I believe that most of my knowledge had been more at a national level. There had been some discussions to distinguish how Kandahar in the south would be different than the rest of the country but I don't think that it was until I got there that I really got to see that for myself. In terms of, I mean, there's, there's so much different material available for, at different periods of time in Afghanistan so, I mean, I had obviously had read a lot about the, when the Russians were there because a lot of people were comparing our being there to that. However I understood it a lot differently because we were there at the request of the Afghan government. We were there under a UN mandated mission. We were there with, our forces were reporting up through NATO and ISAF, the Integrated Security Assistance Force or is it the International Security Assistance Force? Something like that. So it was, it wasn't in my mind, an invasion of any sort.

There's also the political situation was that there had already been an interim government and that government had then been re-elected, had, Karzai had been elected back in. So it really wasn't this interim government anymore. It was, it was still shaky on its feet but it wasn't, it wasn't early days when I was contemplating going.

The social, the social situation was interesting because that was a little bit more where you get to distinguish the difference between the south and the north where you had the south being more traditional. That you had this, you also had this kind of Pashtun difference where it was very, that was, I guess, the ethnic group and then you had a number of the tribes in that area. And so being a little more, I guess, more traditional and, and Kabul having at one time been quite a bit modern and, you know, you hear of women wearing mini-skirts in the capital back in the, I think it was the 70s. So and how, and then the change with the Taliban, having gone from, the country had been going towards, towards a secular country and having gone back to a radical Islamist country and then, and then...so there's those tensions. So you had these, you had these kind of tribal tensions. You had these religious tensions. The economic, like, it was one of the poorest countries in the world, at the bottom of the Human Development Index. But, like I said, I don't think anything really, you know, thinking of something on a chart, doesn't really prepare you for seeing it once you get there. So, I think that's all I have on that one.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see any changes in these areas during your time? (16:21)

LAPLANTE: When I was at the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team, I didn't get out very much so I didn't, I wasn't really able to see much there. But once I was a stabilization officer in the District of Dand and I was living out in that district, working with the district government, the line department staff that were out there, meeting with village leaders and elders and Afghans that came to the District Centre to discuss about their, any of their grievances or just to meet with the District governor and staff who were there, I started to notice changes. I found that, working with the district government and being there, I think that when we show them our commitment to helping them to be able to govern better, to deliver more basic services to their communities, you could really see a difference in the, there was a difference in attendance of the village elders who would come to the shuras. The representatives of the District Development Assembly, once they felt there was an opportunity to maybe implement some of these projects to address some of the needs in their comm..., in their villages and district, they were more willing to come to participate. So I think what might have been holding them up was the feeling that meeting and talking was pointless, that there's no, there's no need to show up to do work if there's no resources to do work. So it's almost as if, there was this one expression, a little funny but something about, you know, you can talk to a goat but if it's dying and you just tell it don't die, it won't do anything. It'll just die. And that was kind of, it was one their kind of expressions. I probably messed it up but basically, you need action. It can't just be words. So think once they're able, and the villagers, too, once they're able to see action, they put more of their trust in their government.

And on, we worked closely with the district government to be able to help extend its outreach and talk to its people. So we had a radio installed at the District Centre and they would do broadcasts by the district leader to let them know, the people in the district know what they were doing. He started having, going out more to the villages. His safety had increased. He felt that he had, with the Forces that were there and the patrolling that they were doing, the capacity of the Afghan National Police had been improving. I saw the work that my Canadian, then later American, colleagues had been doing, helping, partnering with them on patrols, helping them with their, their tactical procedures, they seemed to be more confident. Where, in the past, when the call came in, our guys were waiting and waiting and waiting for the ANP to get ready, we started to see where the ANP were already there, they'd be at the gate before our guys were ready to go. So it was, it was, you could see progress, quickly in some areas.

Though, a lot of times, you would see improvements, it was always very fragile and it could always change. For some cases, when I was working with the district government, if I'd leave to go on vacation, then they thought they didn't have to meet anymore or if the district leader was away, they wouldn't meet anymore. But they started to understand slowly that they could continue working, that it didn't have to be around, it didn't have to be people-centred, that it was process-centred. Yeah, so, I mean, there was, and I think then that we started to see more children out on the streets. And there was, when I got to fly in a helicopter, sometimes I'd see green which I never expected to see along... things were growing and I'd have, I'd see pictures from our comms team who'd go out and, you know, they'd get to see markets, see markets with more food than you'd had in the past and you'd have villagers coming in telling us about a project they had where, you know, for the first time, they'd earned, in years, they'd been able to earn money raising some chickens or something to do or that they were getting more water for

their farmland because parts of the canal had been cleared out so. But it was, you got to see all the changes but it was all at the really local level.

INTERVIEWER: So what were your motivations for wanting to go to Afghanistan? (21:02)

LAPLANTE: I had a variety of reasons. Some of them were practical in terms of, you know, getting experience in international development, having an opportunity to work out in the field. And then other ones were a little more personal. Wanting to contribute to Canada's mission and just feeling that, you know, I have it so good in Canada that I wanted other people to be able to experience that kind of life. Sometimes you'd walk around and just think, like, I don't have to worry where my next meal is coming from, I don't have to, I feel, as a woman, completely secure to walk around in my shorts and t-shirt on the street in the middle of the day, like I don't have to worry that I'm going to be harassed. And I just have that security, the security to drive my car without worrying that it might hit an IED and blow up. I don't have to worry when I go shopping that the market could explode. I don't have to worry about if going to school that it could be attacked. So just all of these things, like, having such a good life here is what I wanted for other people to have so that's why, that's one of the main reasons why I wanted to go.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me about your responsibilities in Afghanistan? (22:16)

LAPLANTE: When I first went out to Afghanistan on a temporary assignment, I was sent out to fill in for the monitoring information reporting officer position. It was a new position. No one had been in it yet. It was a whole of government position so I wasn't going necessarily directly just as CIDA. It was going to the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar to help with the, as the title would imply, the monitoring aspects, the information management aspects, of reporting. The majority of the, well, all of the CIDA officers, development officers, that are there are project managers and then you had a development director and a deputy director. And so the deputy director kind of dealt with, you know, the management of those development officers and the locally engaged staff. And then the development director was the spokesperson for CIDA. So, but they, there was need for support in terms of tracking of results, reporting of results, but then also not in a stovepipe way but in a way that was all of government. So what is the entire government of Canada contributing to in Afghanistan and what results are we seeing and getting those, that information from the PRT to the, at the time, the Representative of Canada in Kandahar, was at the Kandahar Air Field, out to the embassy in Kabul and back to Ottawa. And so for all, for all, for DFAIT, for DND, for CIDA. So that was a primary focus.

When I was, so that was, on TD, I worked on that and then when I returned, it was still that, it was still the role but, what ended up happening was I helped co-found the Kandahar Stabilization Fusion Cell because they found that there was a need, the KPRT director and the commanding officer, so both the civilian and military leadership of the PRT, realized that they didn't have a common operating picture. They couldn't say what anybody was really doing where and when you're in an environment, a conflict environment, where there's still a lot of, the military refers to it as kinetic operations and activities going on, they need to know where the development activities are happening so that the kinetic operations don't negatively impact them and vice versa. We don't want our development activities to cause instability. And you have to link that in with the political aspects, in terms of power brokers. You don't want to inadvertently give,

change the power dynamics and giving some power to some tribal groups or to different war lords or, you know, just so basically, it's a way of how to respect some of the traditional power and leader, leadership that's in place but at the same time, in a way that it's beneficial for all of the people that you're trying to reach, the ones that are in need. So the Stab, the Kandahar Stabilization Fusion Cell started out with myself and a major co-leading it and we had a couple of staff. Over a year it grew and ended up that we had about eight staff and we were basically trying to put this common operating picture together. And it was quite challenging because for CIDA, in the past, they didn't work in a way, in their traditional way they didn't need to know exactly every little village where things were happening because they just needed to know kind of at a bigger level, at more, I guess, I forget the word but a rolled up results level. They didn't need to know exactly kind of each individual person who was receiving something. They just kind of needed, you know, an aggregate of, of the impact they were having. And so that, that took a lot of time to try to change how we worked in that way. And, and, and how we previously dealt with partners, too, because you have to balance not giving, not being a burden on them to ask for all this detailed information but with needing it to be able to have the information to make decisions and to better understand the context and the environment that you're in. Part of the challenges, too, were the government of Afghanistan themselves have difficulty keeping track of things and. You know, you'd talk to the Department of Education. They wouldn't know which of their schools was open or not or where they were located and necessarily what condition they were in. So we did, so part of what our work in the Fusion Cell was working with some of these departments to build their capacity and build their knowledge of their own infrastructure and, in the hopes that with a better knowledge then you would have projects that would be, would be better. So after a while working with the Kandahar Stabilization Fusion Cell, which was really interesting and I really enjoyed it and I had a close working relationships with the military and that was new for me. You know, there's always those adjustments that you have but it was a great learning experience. But I found that, personally, I wasn't getting the warm fuzzies that I wanted to get from working out, actually kind of being a little more on the ground, seeing what the Government of Canada was contributing to.

And so there was an opportunity in Jan, I guess it was February of 2010, to become a stabilization officer and work in the District of Dand. I had been following the stabilization file in Dand and the previous summer, I had filled in briefly and helped out. I was always very interested in that so when that opportunity came up, I was, like, super excited, though I didn't really tell my family about it because it was a little more dangerous to be going out a little more further outside the wire and travelling and more frequent travel. But it was definitely worth it because when I was in the District Centre in Dand, my work was, it was all these different things. It was kind of a jack of all trades because I was the only civilian out there and I mentored the district leader on good governance and how a district government should work. Worked with the different line department representatives to help, to kind of push sometimes to get them to go out and visit the district and see what it was their villagers needed, to kind of report back on the status of, of how, for instance, for education, the state of the schools and how the construction was going on some of them and how the headmasters were feeling and what they needed, if they felt their needs had been met. So there was all those kinds of aspects. I had been working with the district government to develop a plan for their district, a strategic plan that would, something that all the donors could get behind so some of the aspects would be funded through existing funds that would come down from the provincial level. Some of it would be existing

programming that CIDA and DFAIT had in the area and then other pieces would be where we could, we could leverage some of our CIMIC projects, those were from the military, to support this plan. And then again other organizations, because we weren't the only people working in Dand. The...it's called ComKaf. Basically, they're the ones responsible for ensuring the security around the Kandahar Air Field and so that group would sometimes do these CIMIC projects where they were basically trying to win consent and to, to make that area more safe. So, how to kind of partner up those consent-winning activities with development and, so that you would kind of get more benefit out of it and you would maximize the, the intents so you would get the goodwill but you'd also be laying the foundation down for future development projects to really take off from. So there was a lot of work with that.

There was a lot of work with community development councils. That was...the government of Afghanistan had a program called the National Solidarity Program where they had created these community development councils. And unfortunately...well, these councils were elected from the community and they would, they were trained on how to do community needs assessments. They would come up with a plan and then with fund, funding from the government of Afghanistan, they would implement projects in their community. Unfortunately, the funding was sort of like a one-time funding and once they ran out of funding they didn't really exist anymore. So what we tried to do was revive those structures and funnel some of our projects through them to, to build up that governance and to, that community voice and then link that community voice at the district level because we had a district development assembly. It was also, you were trying to work on a development plan for the district so it was how to, how to link them with their community development council colleagues so that they could really understand what it was that was wanted at the village level, what was needed. I think one of the biggest challenges we had was that there were so many needs and so trying to prioritize amongst them. And I think working with the district governor, what we found was that a lot of the Afghans were pretty reasonable. They just needed to hear no sometimes. That was something that never, the district governor, the government never wanted to say.

So what would happen is all these key villagers, elders would be communicating their needs and then, you know, and then somebody else would come by and say, "What do you need?" And nothing would happen. And somebody else, "What do you need?" And nothing would happen. So they got really discouraged. So once it was explained, "We're going to ask you what you need but then we're going to tell you what's possible. And if what you need isn't the highest priority for this year, it's not going to happen this year." So at least they knew they were listened to. Even if they didn't get what they want, they actually felt they had been listened to and that was huge. So and that, and that came out with, CIDA had a project to fund a communications officer, an Afghan communications officer to help the district government get that message out and get it...and then sometimes, one of the interesting things they would do is that communications officer would help organize youth shuras so that the district leader could hear challenges specifically needs from a youth angle. Because sometimes what would happen is you would have different, you'd have people in government thinking they knew what was best for the people at the local level and the local level would say, "Well, that's not what we want." And so you'd have that tension and so really convincing that, you know, even though the people at the local level may not be educated, they often know what they need. So there was that kind of dialogue happening quite a bit.

Another part of the function, besides from mentoring the district government, was to, sort of, keep an eye on CIDA projects and, and DFAIT projects that were happening so monitoring as much as I could. Didn't actually get to go physically visit these projects but talking to villagers in the community who came about whether or not they'd seen them, coordinating with my military colleagues to see if they'd seen, see how it's going and the Afghans who were implementing them having them come to the district centre, let me know when there was challenges in implementing them, whether it be a security challenge, if it was a government challenge. Often times, there was, there would be obstruction from the government but it was often unintentional. They just didn't realize, kind of, what the intent was. So basically if just often involved bringing everybody to the table to talk it out and explain and once everybody understood what was going onboard, it was no longer an issue. Sometimes it involved preparing the district leader to go brief the governor to get the governor's approval because sometimes it was the governor causing problems. But he didn't realize that the district leader was onboard and supportive so it was... And sometimes it was, they just, between the two of them, they didn't understand the process. It was just like, "Do you approve it or do I approve it?" or this, this kind of ambiguity because it was, you know, it wasn't, you know, like a real manual that explained everything on how to do their jobs so it was just, kind of, sometimes winging it and figuring out how to, how to make things move forward.

Another part of what I do was if I would see need for projects I would communicate those back to the specialists back at the PRT in the different sectors and work with my military colleagues to try and find a way to, to get those funded. Often, they would be identified in the plan that we were working on but then also just for expediency to try and get something, the paperwork spooled up in anticipation for that request. There was also... I spent a lot of time with my military colleagues briefing them on development and governance issues to, to increase their awareness and understanding and how, and their role, and how that, you know, sometimes when they were in projects they were political whether they wanted them to be or not and that... And basically how to get the best impact they could because it was often a lot of pressure on them to be seen delivering results and to, just to do something. So it was how to do something that wouldn't create harm or be detrimental to further development efforts down the road. And, in fact, often they were being charged with setting the conditions for development but often that was just an empty phrase. What does that mean? So it was kind of explaining and breaking that down to really help move things forward.

Also, just by virtue of the length of the civilian posting, I was often kind of the, you know, the one with the corporate knowledge because by default you'd often end up being the one there the longest. So it was like, this is the situation that happened in the past and, you know, this is how we resolved it. A lot of times you would have, when you'd have new players in the game, people would try and go back and renegotiate things you'd already negotiated. So that happened quite frequently so you had to have that knowledge and say, "Hold up! Let's keep a consistent approach to this." I did a lot of political reporting in terms of being, what was going on in the district and passed that up the chain for, for everyone like the RoCK particularly. There was also a number of high level visits. Dand was seen as kind of the model village and, well Deh-e-Bagh was the model village in Dand. So there was on the civilian and military side important visits but usually it was on the military side and often reporters needed background information. Then

there was a handover in the district to the 1-71st Cavalry. So but I remained behind and a few Canadian soldiers from the CIMIC team, that's the Civ/Mil team, and the engineering team who remained behind but after that it was all American. So it was basically briefing, getting them up to speed and my American or my military colleagues had a lot to do with this, briefing, getting them up to speed on what we had been doing. I focused more on the governance and development side. They were very good on the security side and just over all our experiences and what we had been working on to go forward and what we had agreed to and, kind of, the, the path we were taking. So, yeah, I think that's, that pretty much describes everything I did as a stabilization officer.

INTERVIEWER: What was the reporting structure like? (39:21)

LAPLANTE: When I was the monitoring information reporting officer when I first came out, it was envisioned that I'd report to the Deputy Director, CIDA, and the Deputy Director of the political section, so Foreign Affairs. That was really difficult being pulled, sort of, in two different directions. And being asked to work on things by... 'cause each of those people were responsible for their particular department and that and their mandate and their mission. So I had approached the director of the PRT who was responsible for the PRT writ large, in conjunction with the commanding officer, about, about this relationship and how it was, you know, really difficult. I felt like I was being torn in different directions and I didn't feel like the bigger picture was being seen and he agreed. So I ended up reporting to him because he had that overall strategic government of Canada lens on things. And so that became a lot, a lot easier. In some ways it was challenging because he was very busy, you know, obviously with that role. So I had a lot of independence. It was actually awesome! He put a lot of faith in me to tell him, kind of, what I needed from him and to, to keep him updated so it was, it was a lot of room, it was great to work in.

When I was in the Kandahar Stabilization Fusion Cell, I co-led it with a military major and then the rest of the people in that Fusion Cell were military so they didn't have a mechanism to allow them to formally report to me. But they... for... like, you know, all intents and purposes, they did. So when it came to coming, like, I came up with strategic work plans for our group, vision, mandate, coming up with individual taskings for people and assignments. So often, at first it would be my major colleague who would just kind of, you know, take the paper work and read it out and dole it out and by the end, I didn't have to pass it through him. It was fine to work directly with the soldiers and they were great. They understood. I mean, I didn't have any, I didn't have any kind of role in their, I guess, like, management in terms of, I guess, the human resources side, like leave and that kind of stuff; they only get one leave anyways. But anything like that or any sort of discipline issues, I wasn't involved. But when it came to the end of their tour, when it came to performance evaluation, I was involved, gave feedback to the major who was responsible for writing their evaluations.

When I was a stabilization officer, that one was a little more tricky and it was never really explained to me how that one worked out. But again, I was out in Dand. There was no other civilians there so whatever the relationship was I had a lot of leeway and a lot of freedom. The battle space commander in Dand, he was the highest military person in the district and it was envisioned that I was on par with him so we were colleagues that worked together. I didn't report

to him and he didn't report to me. A lot of my, for things like leave requests and travel requests, those went through, the leave requests because I was from CIDA, went through Jim [Melanson], sorry, the Development Director. And then a lot of the more strategic type stabilization activities, they, I often consulted with Howard Chafe, he was a CIDA head, like a stabilization manager, he was on the stabilization file and he was like a liaison at the PRT and would help me track down information and people when I needed. And when it came to I think the kind of strategic, a more, I guess that was more on the tactical side, more the strategic visioning side, that was the RoCK, the Representative of Canada in Kandahar, kind of had a vision of what he wanted to see achieved in the district and how he thought that we could contribute to that stabilization effort. So...

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me with what other organizations you worked and how that actually worked? (43:57)

LAPLANTE: When I was the, in the Kandahar Stabilization Fusion Cell, I worked...well that cell was all Canadian military. That relationship, at first, was a bit awkward, starting to understand another corporate culture, a person's approach, sharing leadership over something is sometimes, it can be tricky, especially because I had been sort of there in the initiation and visioning and ideas and then when it actually came to fruition that was when my colleague, my co-lead came in. He came in after the sort of visioning and stuff. So he had direction. We both had and, you know, we both had different reporting chains so you had, he reported to the Commanding Officer and I reported to and, no sorry, he reported to the Deputy Commanding Officer and I reported to the PRT Director. So we had these civilian and military lines. So there was, there's sometimes, not at our immediate level, but sometimes just in the grander chain, there would be sometimes different, I guess ideas and, and coming down, and priorities on things. But I found after a little while that working with the Canadian Forces, I was really impressed. They were really professional, courteous, very smart. They had to adapt. The guys that I worked with in the Fusion Cell, they hadn't been trained for that specifically. They had thought that they were going to go out to FOBs and be CIMIC officers and deal with the local Afghan population. So when they became more information management and that kind of thing, it was a whole different ball game for them. So they really had to think quickly on their feet and adjust and so I was very impressed at how well they were able to adapt. Especially, too, to maybe doing something that wasn't quite as exciting as they were expecting, you know. But they, they, they were there to do the job and they did it and they did it without complaint.

I also, in that position, would work with, you know, as I mentioned before, DFAIT and CIDA officers to collect information and stuff but I'd also work with, we had civilian police that were present and we had corrections officers who were working at Sarpoza Prison. So I worked with both of those groups to understand better what their activities were and the kind of results they were getting from that and also to help them improve their reporting of results so...Then there was also the Americans who were at the PRT. When I was first there, they were there in small numbers so it was working with the Department of State and the US aid agency. So the USAID agency had similar challenges in their information and actually maybe even more so than we did 'cause their operations were a lot more centralized. So it was, that was, but there were...I found working with the Americans great. They were very positive. They were open to, you know, Canadian ideas. And then eventually what happened while I was in Afghanistan was the PRT

transferred over to Americans and then Americans started outnumbering Canadians. And, but the relationship for me was still pretty much, no matter what role I was in, was still the same. They were very respectful. They were very, looking forward very much to receiving our information and our input and our views and figuring out how they could best work with us and how they could, what they could bring to the table that would just maximize what we had been doing and, and results for Afghans so. It was a really positive relationship. The 1-71st that I worked with out in Dand. That was a little different because as a military organization they were different than the Canadians. And, and I don't mean that in necessarily a negative way. It was just the, I think, for the Canadian military, the level of professionalization went down even throughout the ranks and where I think it was a little more in the American military that the higher up officers were, had more of that professionalized training. The lower down you went, the less likely you were to see that. I also found that it was just a bit of a different atmosphere with the, with the American civilians it was great. It was fun and with the Canadian Forces there I was basically like their little sister and I was spoiled rotten. It was fantastic. They would help me carry my luggage and they'd make sure, you know, I was vegetarian, that I'd get vegetarian food. They would, we shared a tent together and so they'd put up little walls so I'd feel like I wasn't in a tent with 14 guys. So they'd help me with privacy and they didn't have any for themselves. So, I mean, they really took special efforts to, to make sure that I felt at home and so, and so I was really fortunate that I had those guys to work with. And I found, actually, sometimes when I was working with, especially with the Canadian Forces, there was a couple of guys who really stood out in my mind for their understanding of development. Like, I mean, oftentimes, there's this idea, "Oh, they're just soldiers. They only really understand, you know, kinetic operations and that kind of thing" but some of them, I think, had a better understanding of development than some of our CIDA officers did so. I was pretty impressed. Not all of them. Just a couple but... And I found even, too, like in the leadership for the Canadian military, at certain levels, there was a really good understanding, too, by them, as well, of what we were trying to accomplish and, and an openness to, a realization that they would support that so...

INTERVIEWER: What about NGOs? (50:32)

LAPLANTE: As the monitoring and information reporting officer and then in the Kandahar Stabilization Fusion Cell, I didn't have a lot of interaction with NGOs. I mainly dealt with, actually, a UN organization, UNOps, because they were constructing a road, a very large road, in Afghanistan and it was, it was very, it was a multimillion dollar road. It was a big priority because of how it would increase freedom of movement, not just for our Forces but for Afghans themselves. So we spent, I spent a lot of time working with them. And then there was, I had occasional opportunities to work with NGOs to help out some of my CIDA colleagues when they were bringing their partners in. So I would work with them just... I guess I wouldn't even say working with them. I guess it was really just meeting with them. It was, I had an opportunity to learn more about what they were doing and it was more information gathering. As the stabilization officer in Dand, I had an opportunity to work with NGOs to get a better idea of, of how their operations were going. The NGOs that I worked with in Dand, they often had, well, not often, they always had a partnership with Canada and had contacts at the PRT. So I wasn't their primary point of contact but I would work with them to find out how their project was going and if they needed help, if they were having obstacles and I would sometimes, I would facilitate meetings with government officials at the district level or sometimes they would ask to

host meetings at our, at the District Centre, so that they could show the district government, bring in a bunch of villagers and kind of have them tell the district government how this project was going so that they could hear from their own people rather than just hearing from the NGOs.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me anything about working with the local Afghan population? (52:46)

LAPLANTE: When I was in the Kandahar Stabilization Fusion Cell, I didn't have much opportunity to work with local Afghans except for we had issued a contract to try and collect some information on the locations of schools, specific coordinates. So that experience didn't actually end up working very well 'cause the contractor, unfortunately, didn't want to get the work done and was late so it was just, kind of, you know, work, contract completion issues but that was just one small incident. Then as, and then other than that it would be working with, we had, CIDA and DFAIT had locally engaged staff and so helped them and understand more about results-based management and help them to improve their monitoring and reporting. And they were great to work with. I mean, it was very easy to work with them because they spoke English so. And it was, often it was, it was really interesting to get a sense of, to have people you could, you could speak to so freely and find out about, about their lives. Because you, they put, they were taking a lot of risks working with us and coming to the PRT everyday. So it would be interesting to, to find out why they were doing that.

Some of them, it was because they, because the, the pay was so well, it was the best they could do and they had large families and needed to support their families. And for others it was because they believed in what we were doing and they wanted to be able to support that so. And it was really interesting like, for a lot of the guys we worked with, they were really young, they were between 18 and 21 type of thing. And it was funny just to kind of ask them like about, about their culture and, and how, their family relationships and so. For instance, some of the Afghan colleagues I talked to, they'd tell me about weddings they'd attended and sometimes they'd show me Youtube videos of the weddings and how the bride and groom were separated and they had the guys dancing on one side, which was hilarious. All the guys were dancing. And then the girls would be in another, kind of, like a closed off part of the room. And I don't think they were dancing as much but they were guys so they didn't show me videos of the girls' side. They only showed me videos of the guys' side, the dancing and they're really open to dancing. They would sometimes ask me questions about Canadian culture and Canadian women, often quite funny 'cause, I think, they based a lot of their ideas on American movies. [Laughs] So I would get asked questions like did we play, like in university, did we always play strip poker all the time kind of thing. And it was not quite the...so we had to explain that those were just for fun and they were the real extreme, that, you know, most, you know, it might have happened occasionally but it wasn't exactly what Canadian life was like. Often a lot of them were really young and so we'd find out about them being engaged and find out how they felt about that at such a young age. Or some of them being excited because they were looking forward to it and others not so much. They, because they were starting to have more of a Western outlook because they had access to the internet, TV, and whatnot. Then there was, it was funny, I often got the question asked if I was married and if, and when I'd say no because I didn't want to make up anyone, then, and then they'd be like, "Why not?" I think that the answer I gave that they most seemed, they seemed to understand the best was that I would tell them, "I didn't want to be

married because then, because not being married meant I was the boss. So I got to do what I wanted.” So they understood that one. But then what they didn’t understand was why I didn’t have children. [Laughs] So, they’d often tell that I should have nine by now because I was so old but being 29 I should have had at least nine kids. But the funny thing was they often didn’t realize how old I was until I told them. They often thought I was younger just because, I guess, in Afghanistan, unfortunately, the life expectancy is really low, in the 40s, so we look pretty good for our age.

Working, there was, when I worked in Dand, the Afghans that I worked with there, none of them spoke English except for the interpreters so everything had to be through interpreters. And I was really lucky that when the Canadian military was there, I was able to use one of their best interpreters and he was just fantastic. It took a little getting used to because he’d worked with the British previously so he had this British accent and so it was, at first, he didn’t understand me because I was a woman and he wasn’t used to speaking to a woman. So I found that a lot when working with the interpreters that it would take them a little bit to get used to speaking to me and then once... usually though within a week they were, they were fine. And then I got used to his accent. And he was pretty good, he was really interested in development and governance and, you know, he preferred when I had asked for his services because he got to talk about those issues even if he was just translating them because he found that, you know, when he was working with the Canadian Forces, it was, things were a lot more, you know, “Stop there” and “What are you doing here?” kind of thing. It wasn’t the kind of things that he found interesting. And he was actually a pretty funny guy because he had told me about his wife and that he, that he was only going to have one wife. And often, it’s allowed in their, in their, whether it’s allowed in the Koran or whether it’s adapted local culture, there’s kind of a debate on that but they can take up to four wives and he only wanted one. He loved her and that’s the only one he wanted. But he had some other girls who were chasing him down because he was such a prospect. [Laughs] So it was quite entertaining.

Then I had some close working relationships with the rep, the district leader, oh sorry, the district representative of the ministry of rural rehabilitation and development and the Department of Agriculture and Irrigation and Livestock. I’d often, after we were done work for the day just sit and have tea with them and we’d talk and talk about their lives and which parts of Afghanistan they were from and how they felt about things and they’d tell me about their families and I’d tell them about mine. Often they’d be, often they’d offer to find me a husband. [Laughs] That was always fun but I never took anybody up on that one. The thing I think though that surprised me the most was that they were, I had expected being a woman and also being young to have difficulty working with Afghans. And... and I was, I was told before I left, you know, not to be surprised if this were to be the case. And then I was also warned though that, on the other hand, they would just see me as international so my gender wouldn’t matter. When I got there I kind of figured in some ways it was more that I represented money and that was what didn’t matter why I was young and a woman. But that’s what I thought at first but then as I got to meet more of the Afghans I found that some of them hadn’t always lived in a time where women were necessarily thought of as, as such a low position. Also some of them were from other parts of the country so maybe their views were a little bit more moderate to begin with. And I also found that it was just the novelty of being able to talk to a woman was often very fun for them and maybe they felt they were doing something a little risqué or different. So I think that’s what helped the attendance for meetings sometimes was that, “Oooo, we have a chance to talk to a girl!” So, so, it

was, it was, it was fun to, to just be able to have those relationships and I think that sometimes that what unfortunately usually was difficult in translating was our humour. The Afghans have a very different sense of humour. Most of the time I didn't understand it. [Laughs] But they, sometimes, sometimes I'd get it and we'd all have a good laugh and sometimes I'd try to make a joke and they wouldn't get it and we'd all laugh at how not funny I was so! [Laughs] They, often, some of the, the people I worked with for example there was a, he was in the administrative staff in the district office, he was actually one of the land registers and he looked ancient. He was probably only 60 but he looked like 90 or something. He was telling me about how, his reasons for working in the government. And basically he was there to support the executive assistant to the district leader because they were such good friends and he felt, you know, it was such a dangerous job that he wanted to be there with his friend who was doing it. And he had a son who was killed by the Taliban so he felt that it was kind of his, a little bit, his way, you know, to help the cause against the Taliban was to support the government. So it was, it was really neat working with him. And, I mean, just a lot of, a lot of the people that were there, I mean they took risks every day. And just so their bravery, I think, showed, it was pretty apparent. And even just people like coming to the district centre showed a lot of bravery because you could be targeted for even being seen to like hang out or trying to support...even if you were going there to complain...they didn't know why you went there so. There was also a lot of poverty and that and there was a lot of people coming to the district centre for charity, for support. And, you know, things, we did, we didn't have any way to help because we're not a charity, the government of Canada or CIDA so it was, you know, it was sometimes really heartbreaking. We'd have Kuchi people come in and they had lost their livelihoods 'cause there was a storm, a bad storm, and their hut collapsed and it killed, you know, most of their sheep. So in the blink, in one night, they lost their livelihood. So they needed help rebuilding but there was nowhere to go to get that help. And to have to turn them away was devastating.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me about your personal daily routine while you were there?
(01:04:08)

LAPLANTE: Yes. [Laughs] Pretty straight forward. Let's see. There was eat, work, work out, sleep. [Laughs] It was, it was, let's see...most days, I would say, a minimum of working 12 hours, often more than that. There, being at the PRT and also being at a FOB in Dand, they're both small, enclosed spaces so and in both, in both cases, meals were at certain times. And so basically, you pretty much part of your life was dictated to you, right? So, if you wanted to eat, you had to be up by a certain time and there at a certain time, and, with the military rules, showered before you go. No showing up in pyjamas and flip flops like some of the civilians were wont to do. At the PRT they had pretty good gym facilities so, I think most of us pretty much worked out every day just to, to get, to burn off some energy, to get some, to relax, just to keep healthy. You never know when you're going to need it. Then there, there were sometimes, so that was pretty much most of your day spent either, well, most of your day was spent working and then the odd breaks for meals and the, and break for the gym.

Sometimes there was events that would happen. Sometimes they'd have, post a movie in the pit, so there was a big white wall, so they'd have a projector and in the summer they'd have a movie playing against the wall so you could watch that or they had little hockey rinks so there were hockey teams. I played soccer there. Sometimes we did yoga out under the stars at night. We had

a couple of people who volunteered to run us through a yoga routine. Another colleague of mine, he knew how to dance tango so he would hold tango lessons sometimes. For a little while we had a pool. It wasn't really a pool, it was a reservoir because we were in an old converted canning factory. And so it was filled with water and the military would take care of it and so we could go swimming in it. There was no ladder or anything so you had to be able to get yourself out. [Laughs] But it was, it was nice in the summer, on the hot summer days...when it was a small camp. After awhile it got too big, you couldn't, it wasn't really fair to have when you couldn't have everybody access it. There was, you know, a lot of times you'd just hang out with some colleagues in the office.

In my office, I ended up buying a Wii, a Nintendo Wii, in Dubai, and we had this huge screen that was meant for briefings but after hours we'd hook that up and we'd play golf or volleyball or something. I remember one night having, thinking I was alone in the office, because everybody had left and it was pretty early but it was 8 o'clock so I thought, "Oh well! Everybody left early so this is great!" So I took out the Wii and I was doing the ski jumping one where you're squatting down and your hands are up over your head and my boss, my major colleague came back with a couple of generals. [Laughs] They thought it was awesome. They just loved it. They thought it was great that we could have some fun. Unfortunately, the next rotation that came in, they were a little more serious and they didn't like it even being in the office so I had to hide it.

But, so, so often with other colleagues, we'd just walk around at night, just walking in circles, at because there was nowhere to walk to. Sometimes we'd go onto the helipad and lie out under the stars and try to pick out the stars because we had a, one of our colleagues was bit into astrol...astronomy, so he'd tell us if like comets were coming or we'd see something interesting so he'd kind of send out a schedule to meet out at the helipad at midnight to look at things. Unfortunately, as time wore on by the end of the time I was there, there was more and more helicopter activity so hanging out at the helipad really wasn't good anymore 'cause you could get landed on. There wasn't a lot of notice. So, but, yeah, I mean, there, eventually, there was a little, they had developed a common room where there was pool tables set up and foosball and people would go play poker. I was only allowed to play once. I beat everybody and they never let me play again so it was...

Sometimes there was holidays. The, the camp, the CF would organize things. We had a pumpkin carving contest for Hallowe'en. Somehow they managed to get pumpkins shipped in. We celebrated Canada, Canada Day. We celebrated Christmas, that kind of thing. So, I mean, I think we were all really busy but we all tried to make an effort to, we became like this huge family and we tried to make an effort just to have some fun. For civilians, they started to make Fridays a mandatory day off. So if you're stuck there you had to figure out what could you do on the day off, right, so. They also had on Fridays a market where Afghans would come in and sell items like carpets and baskets and jewellery and recovered items like binoculars or like the singular ones, I forget what they're called. They'd have those and old coins, a lot of DVDs, pirated DVDs, so we never missed out on the latest movies that were playing in Canada 'cause we'd be able to buy them at the market for like a dollar. It might have Russian sub-titles or something but, yeah, so, so, it was pretty good, I mean, it's surprising how much of a social life you can have in a place like that.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell be a bit about the specifics of your living and working conditions? (01:10:21)

LAPLANTE: I was one of the very fortunate ones in that for most of my time at the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team, I had my own room. Often, though, it had to be ready at a moments notice 'cause we had bunk beds and you could have visitors coming in and you'd have to share it. Because I had seniority from having been there longer than a bunch of other civilians, I didn't have to, I wasn't forced to share. I was very lucky. The rooms were quite small. They were magnetic. I guess they were made out of like a sort of a tin. They, they, they're called isos. I don't know understand the acronym for that but basically they were like pre-fabricated type pod type containers that, that were very quick to be able to be constructed. The mattresses were terrible so luckily because I'd had a temporary duty first when I came home I was able to get a big memory foam and bring that back and, oh my God, it totally revolutionized the bed! It made it so much more comfortable. Couldn't really keep the windows open because of dust. There was a lot a lot of dust and you had problems with the air conditioners or the heaters with all the dust. Well, you had problems with them anyways because of that but... The, there, the rooms, yeah, they were small. You could hear in between the rooms so you'd hear a neighbour laughing at something and you'd hear someone sneezing so sometimes even though you had your own room, you didn't feel all that private.

There was light discipline so at night you had to keep your blinds in your room shut because you didn't want the white light escaping. It was rules on the camp. You had flashlights but they were often red or blue for the reason that they can't be seen so far away. And so sometimes it was difficult navigating around because they're not really that bright so often stumbling on stuff. The, the, most of the camp was dirt. It wasn't, it wasn't paved or anything so we were always dirty all the time. And then if you were outside when a helicopter landed, you just got full of dirt and so we were showering as much as we could but you had to be conscious of water and resources. So the combat shower was, was supposed to be adhered to. The idea of that was you turn on the water, you get wet, you shut it off, you soap up, you turn it back on, you rinse off and you're done, so... [Laughs] That was, you know, you know, after a hard day, you want that long hot shower. It's not necessarily going to happen. PRT had more of a water supply so I don't, most people didn't really adhere to that. But when I was in Dand, we had to adhere to that and there was a few times where I'd go about five days without a shower because people hadn't adhered to that so.

With the, at the PRT it was pretty neat, everything really was taken care of for you by the Canadian Forces so there, there was, they had meals all prepared. You didn't have to do that. They took care of the camp. They had local Afghans who did our laundry so you just dropped off your laundry and picked it up. So it was, so you really had more time because you weren't, to work, because you weren't doing a lot. And everything was so close to everything. Like the commute from your room to the gym or to the office or to the meal hall was usually never more than like three minutes. So there was no more commute time anymore. So you just, so you had no, so it was kind of an adjustment when you came back. All of a sudden all of these things take up so much time, doing your own dishes and cooking for yourself, doing laundry and cleaning and, oh yeah. The food itself... the Canadian cooks were pretty good. I was vegetarian so I'm a little, my pain's a little different from most people's. Didn't really find a whole lot of stuff that I

liked but they always had cereal. I mean, I didn't starve. I was perfectly fine. I had friends who would ship me like granola bars and all sorts of fun food. My mom always sent candy which got eaten by all the guys in my office in about five minutes. But even the military, the military, they had lots of junk food around, too, so. But for, and the, although they had the regimented meal times, they, the Canadian policy was the kitchen was open. Not the back kitchen where all the food was but they had certain food that they would leave out at all times so you could, you know, you could always go and get ice cream or pop or water or cereal and toast and that kind of thing and fruit. They had a big fruit fridge and it was great. Surprisingly, they had a lot of fruit to offer. Occasionally, we'd eat Afghan food. We'd have either some of our locally engaged staff bring it in. Usually it was some sort of rice with saffron, lamb, kabobs that were like lamb, beef I guess, lamb and, I don't know, chicken, yeah, it was chicken. They would have like a naan bread. It was really good. The egg plant they made was really good and so was the okra. The salad was always the same. It was this tiny little dish with a couple of pieces of lettuce, a piece of mint, a cucumber, a slice of cucumber, a slice of tomato. It was, it was very small. They weren't so big on the salad. It was more the rice, the bread, and the meat. I remember going to a dinner nearby and the provincial chief of police was there and he had noticed that I wasn't eating meat and decided I needed more beef on my plate so had somebody come over and bring some kabobs and have them on my plate. And eventually I was able to shuffle them down to some other hungry soldiers without anyone noticing. Apparently, I was told later on, that that's how people flirt, they give over the good meat sticks so I should feel flattered. Then they also joked about seating me at the ANP [Afghan National Police] table because it was the singles table. The, they, a lot of the ANP would probably be single because they couldn't afford to marry. But they would have been happy to have my company. The, they weren't offended by that joke. The, let's see, we talked about food...

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me about any significant events that happened while you were there? (01:17:07)

LAPLANTE: Yeah, I can think of quite a few. One of, one of the events that comes to mind was when I was in Dand, it held an education shura. Worked with the district officer of education to hold a shura where we invited a bunch of different stakeholders, primarily headmasters but some were teachers. We'd hoped to have some parents but I don't think any were able to attend. And the purpose of the shura was, I had been working with the district education representative to develop an education plan or component of this overall district plan and the idea would be for him to communicate this plan back to these people and to let them know what the idea was. And so he communicated the plan back and then what ended up happening was a bunch of the headmasters started being like, "Oh, well, my school wasn't on there. My school needs this and my school needs that." And then the district education officer turned to me, quite upset, and "See! I told you what would happen! You made me invite these people and now I have to add more to the list!" And he was getting quite riled up and writing away. I told him, "No. You don't. Talk to them. Find out is this a priority? If these aren't priority things then they don't need to be on this list." And it was like something just transformed in him. He turned around and he let them have it. He told them, like he point, took a turn and pointed at a bunch of them, was, you know, pointed at one man and was like, "You! This is disgraceful! You're asking me to make a request for something that costs 50 Afghanis (which is about a dollar Canadian) to repair this. You want a project for that? Do it yourself!" Another man: "You! I'm not going to ask for this.

You want a road? We're not the road department! We're education. You don't need a road. This is, why am I asking for this? I'm going to look stupid if I go ask for this." Another guy: "You! I'm not fixing up your school! It's all damaged because you let your goats live in there! Get the goats out!" And then he turns around to another one and then it just kind of went on like this. And then some of the other headmasters started jumping in and jumping on board and said, like, "Yeah! Our school needs toilets. You're asking for carpets! Toilets are more important." So it kind of, kind of got everybody on board to realize what were the priorities and not to just ask for the sake of asking and, and so I think it was a really good breakthrough.

And then at the end what ended up happening was a lot of the headmasters started coming up with ideas of how they wanted to improve education and how they wanted to meet together like this more often and share best practices and maybe, you know, institute a prefect system because, you know, they recognized that the teachers were having difficulty running their classrooms because the children were so, I guess, lively and outgoing and they didn't quite have the training to keep the room disciplined, at least for some of the younger teachers. And so they were talking about how could they accomplish this and how to make the education better for their students. And they also talked about the fact that, you know, in addition to educating students on math skills and language skills, that they needed to be taught how to be good people and how to be, how to be moral. And so it wasn't a religious bent to it at all. It was just that, you know, basically to instil values that were consistent maybe with what had been lost recently in their culture in terms of, you know, not trying to, like corruption issues just escalated probably since the international community's presence and more available resources. So a lot of these things that, you know, some of them were new issues for them and, you know, and supporting insurgents, not necessarily, or criminals and... I mean they weren't getting at it in the way of don't, not in an ideological way, "Do not support the Taliban" but more of a, you know, "Don't take quick projects to go lay an IED for like five hundred bucks," type of thing because there were a lot of those offers. People who were not necessarily Taliban and not ideologically aligned with them were doing work for Taliban for financial reasons. So kind of trying to build more of a moral background that, you know, despite how impoverished you are, you wouldn't sell yourself that way. So it was a very, I think that was a very, a moment I was very proud of because I felt like, at that point, I didn't, they didn't need me anymore, that there were able to, that they would continue to hold these discussions themselves, that they had gotten an understanding that they really needed to focus on what was important. And so I had complete faith that when I left that, that they would continue to work together and, and, and improve government.

I've... another time where I was thinking of was probably not so positive was I was in Dand. It was my first time. I had gotten there less than three or four hours and it got, it was, I hadn't been really shown around. I had just kind of arrived. They brought me upstairs into the district centre and this was before it had been finished renovations and turned back over to the district government. And so I was there meeting with the military leader of the district, oh sorry, the Canadian Forces, who was responsible for that FOB. And what ended up happening was it started to be turned dark and then there was a vehicle borne IED that exploded just out in front of the camp. And the shock waves were so strong that I thought for sure our building was going to collapse and it didn't. And then about three seconds, the longest of my life, everybody ran and took off and I didn't know what to do so 'cause I hadn't been briefed yet 'cause I had just arrived and they hadn't gotten around to the security protocols. And so they all, they all knew what to do. So they had all left. They had instructed me to get my PP, my personal protective equipment,

which had been left outside the district centre, by the tent I'd be staying in. And when I went to go get it, I realized it was really dark. I couldn't see. The light discipline there was so strong and it was such a dark night and I didn't have a flashlight with me and then there was gun fire and I didn't know where it was coming from. And where I was standing in the stairwell, there was, the windows had been blown out because of the suicide bomber that had been in that district centre earlier and that was why it was being repaired, so I, there was no real protection there. I was just kind of, I was scared but I wasn't completely like, I wasn't not thinking, but I didn't know where to go, I didn't know what to do so I thought I don't want to be a bother. I don't want to get myself in a position where I could be hurt so I just scrunched down into a little ball and hid in a corner hoping that I would kind of, something would come to me of where I should go and what I should do. So as I was scrunched down, a Canadian soldier came by and took note of me and he asked me, "You know you can't be here. This isn't a good spot." "Like I understand but I don't know the rest of the building. I can't see. I don't know where my PP is." So I told him where it was. He went and got it. He moved me, hid me under the stairs, got my PP, found my other civilian colleague. He'd been in the shower at the time. I'd been so worried. I thought maybe he'd been killed. But they brought him so we were both hiding under the stairs. And then they took us and relocated us to another part of the building. And it turned out to be the cooks who did this and it was their bedroom and it turned out to be kind of a funny event because they started to put, they wanted to take care of us. So it was almost like we were six. They brought us like sippy, they brought us juice and snacks and they put on a DVD. We watched "Anchor Man." It was pretty surreal. We could hear people still screaming because they had been injured and they were bringing in Afghans to try, Afghan police who had been injured, putting first aid on them before they could get escorted out. The here we have "Anchor Man" going in the background. I think we stayed that way for about five hours until finally it was all clear. But then I guess, at some point, somebody had been looking for the civilians but no one had been told that we had been stashed away so there were some people who had frantically been looking for us. But eventually everything was straightened out. The ANP had gotten help and they came back and we were able to go back to our tents outside. And after that, there was a joke that I was bad luck. [Laughs] That I couldn't come back to Dand. I think, and I think they figured I wouldn't want to come back so when I did go back they were all quite surprised. So I think they realized that maybe the civilians are a little tougher than they gave them credit for.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about the work you did in Afghanistan? (01:26:25)

LAPLANTE: I'm... the work that I did in the Kandahar Fusion Cell, Stabilization Fusion Cell, I was quite proud of that. I felt that we were innovative. There was a gap that had been missing for a number of years and we had contributed a lot of work to that and we really had pushed forward on enabling everyone to see kind of what was going on in Kandahar and I think the progress we had on that common operating picture on governance, reconstruction, development, security lines was phenomenal. And then, while I gave that up to fit in, to go work in stabilization, around the time that I left to do that, I had discovered that a new, the new, there was another roto coming in, that they didn't quite see the value in the work that we had done and they were pretty much dismantling what we had done and it was really hard. It almost felt like kind of a year of like hard work that you had been putting into this kind of just kind of fizzling away because people, some people didn't understand its value or just re-prioritized the manpower that would have been required. So that was tough. But at the same time, I had that great opportunity to work out in

Dand and that was I think, I think something I'll never forget. It'll stay with me for the rest of my life.

When I came back to Canada it was really hard to come back. Felt guilty for leaving. Wanted to go back. Felt bored here. Felt like kind of like what was the relevance of the work that I was doing. You don't see the efforts that you make. So I know like when I first got back, I immediately, went back to Canada, I immediately thought I'd made a mistake and wanted to go back to Afghanistan. I was extremely exhausted but I still wanted to go back and work, and continue like the work that I was doing. Even when I was getting ready to leave, I kept thinking of all the things that needed to be done and all of the things that I wanted to help with. And so it was kind of hard to let that go. I find it even hard now to read reports on it 'cause it's just like, it was so, so much a part of you for so long, and you give everything to it so...

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me about some of your achievements that make you really, really proud, that you're most satisfied about? (01:29:10)

LAPLANTE: While in Dand as the stabilization officer, working with the district government, the line department representatives, one day, well, two different instances, I should say, but one of them meaning more to me than another. In one case the district governor, I was giving him advice on something and he turned to me and said and I said, you know, I think I was worried. I didn't want to offend him and I said, "You know, you don't have to take what I'm saying, you don't have to do what I'm saying. It's just my advice to you." And he responded, "You're my mentor. I, I want to listen to you." And so I was really touched by that. But and then, I always had that kind of little bit of doubt whether or not, how sincere he was in terms of was he just trying to tell me what he thought I wanted to hear, type of thing. 'Cause I never introduced myself to him as a mentor. I always offered to him that I was someone there to help, you know, help him get, increase the effectiveness of the government and help them move it forward and get resources down to the district. So I never introduced myself that way. So hearing him say that I still had a good feeling about it but it was when the ministry rural redevelopment representative told me that I was his mentor that it really touched me and I kind of, for him, I had a special relationship. He kind of reminded me of my dad, in a way. Whenever I'd meet with him, he'd pull open his desk drawer and he'd have candy that he wanted to give to me. And often times when I was in his office, I'd end up fixing something on his computer or his printer, helping him out that way. And he was trying to learn English so sometimes we'd practice English, you know. But just hearing that, that he considered me a mentor was immensely flattering and just, because I think for myself, I really worried when I went out there that, you know, was I going to be good enough for them and would I bring them what they needed to have and you know being young and this being my first field posting.

So like, in most cases, I was always very confident with my level of education and my skill sets but just, you know, wanting the best for them, you start to doubt, okay, am I the best that they can have? So to, to, to realize that they, they appreciated the efforts that I, I had made to help them was great but then to see, I think the change over all in some of their behaviours and attitudes in terms of the district leader giving up some of his power, in a sense, to, to empower the rest of his government to, to be more willing to open, to see, to take their advice and hear from them and not see it as a zero sum game or if they're telling him things that it means that

he's lost some power. So I think just the change in understanding of what his role is in the government and, and to hear, before I went in, he'd often talked about, well not often, but he'd talked to some of the Canadian Forces about wanting to leave and go to Canada and just kind of stay while it was good. A lot of times when I had spoken to him, it seemed that he seemed to really kind of more care and realized the importance of what his job was and how important it was to Afghans and the recovery of the country and I think, I think that he matured as well over the years, over the time that we were together and the time since he'd had that position and I think he really came to see how, just how much of an impact he had on the lives of Afghans and when he got to go out and meet them. And so think that really, that really, that will always stay with me.

INTERVIEWER: How 'bout regrets, any of them? (01:33:15)

LAPLANTE: I definitely still regret when I had the Kuchis come in to visit me who had lost their sheep. At the time, I considered giving them some of my own personal money to help them but I thought against it because I thought, I don't want to start a trend where I have a whole bunch of Afghans just coming to the PRT for charity and requesting funds. And there was, I had no, there was no programs or anything that I could put them in touch with. Maybe I should explain that Kuchis are sort of like, they're a nomadic group, they're kind of like the same status as aboriginal people have in Canada sometimes, historically, if you look at it that way. Kuchis are a marginalized group and often looked down upon. They often don't receive the services that they need and so in a country that's so poor, they're the poorest of the poor. They're the most, the like, the least likely to receive the help that's needed so. I mean, some of our programming is targeted at them but it was more in terms of education so there was nothing that I could find and even talking to my colleagues at the PRT to find other programs, there was nothing for them. And I wish, and they used to walk maybe 20 kilometres that day to come see me, I wish I had just given them some of my personal funds anyway to help them with their sheep.

INTERVIEWER: Would you go back and why would you? (01:34:42)

LAPLANTE: I'd definitely go back. No, my family would hate it, but I just, I felt like when I left that I wasn't finished. And there's just so much need in that country and I think that right now is the critical time for Afghanistan. I mean, 'cause the international community is looking to transition more responsibility, well secure, responsibility for security, also just probably for a lot of things basic services and what not in 2014 and so the build up to that, like this period right now is just one of the most critical periods for that country. I'm sure that my colleagues are very capable. It's not to take away from them or other donors and members of the international community but it's just, you know, I think for the investment that we've given personally for ourselves, for friends, colleagues who have lost their lives, just you want to see this country succeed and for the people, the Afghans that you met, you want to make, you want them to be, you want to know that when we leave in 2014, the international community leaves, that everything will go well for them, that the progress that we've started will continue and that it just won't be the Taliban taking back over, that they're not just waiting for us to leave and all of a sudden everything falls back to hell, that they're able to stand up for themselves and they're able to protect themselves and they're, they're on a path that's just moving forward in a good way.

INTERVIEWER: So how do you think this has contributed to your career, your own personal growth? (01:36:28)

LAPLANTE: I would, I wouldn't say that it's negatively contributed to my career but I wouldn't say that it's a significantly positive contribution either. When you're out in Afghanistan, you're kind of out of, out of touch, you're, you're kind of, nobody really sees you. A lot of like, especially when I was out in Dand, there's not, there's not a lot of visibility on the work that you're doing, the reports that you send out because of the system they use, there's not a lot of people see them unless they're really active, like a lot of them didn't get back to headquarters like I'd hoped. So there's, those aspects, I mean, I have, I haven't been demoted in any way but the expectations when I came back that I would work on different, different files or maybe work on, to the embassy, none of that really panned out and so it hasn't necessarily been a big step but for me, personally, I think that the experiences that I had there have made me like a different person than, they've given me experiences that I'll carry into whatever job I do and I think overall the benefit, that I'll get and give to the Agency, I mean, to be able to tell my experiences and my story to give, I guess, more I guess richer an analysis to things back here in headquarters. So, yeah, I guess, like there's no question on the personal growth side but on the career side not so much but maybe it's just a matter of time. I mean, I've only, I haven't even been home for a year yet so it's just, it could, I think this could set me up well in the future to continue working on stabilization type efforts and so hopefully that, that, that will pan out.

INTERVIEWER: Canadian War Museum Oral History Program interview with Rosalee Laplante, interview ends. (01:38:34)

END OF TRANSCRIPT