Air-conditioning plants outside transit tents, Bagram, 2013

INSIDE BAGRAM

Last month, Nato launched its new mission in Afghanistan, sending 12,000 troops to assist national security forces. Their main hub will be Bagram, once the largest US base in the country. In an extract from his new book, photographer *Edmund Clark* describes his last visit as Operation Enduring Freedom wound down

There is a small blue-domed, whitewashed mosque in the heart of the US airbase at Bagram. It is set back from the main road at an angle to the grids of plywood huts, tents and endless metal containers that typify the architecture of America's largest enclave in Afghanistan. The front of the mosque is a modern extension but the rear has the uneven surface and beam ends of an older building. Perhaps it was here when the first runway was built in the 1950s, predating even the Soviet occupation.

In 2013, as Operation Enduring Freedom drew towards its close, American medics described past atrocities – Russian soldiers strung up by Mujahideen from the high beams of hangars. A journalist recounted how he had witnessed frontline fighting along the runway between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, holed up with a warlord in the Soviet control tower. The tower was still there, along with the hangars, except for one that had become an internment facility in the new war. Men had died there too; others had been sent to Guantánamo. Mid-October afternoon clouds of arid dust raised by machines of construction and destruction cloaked the base, an occidental oasis of high-grade technology and low-grade living.

Immediately underfoot, tarmac tributaries served prairies of rough gravel and concrete, a panoply of hardware spread out across them: Hercules, Thunderbolt, Apache, Stealth, Liberty, Blackhawk, Chinook, Predator, Reaper came and went around the clock. The busiest military airfield in the world has power and water plants, state-of-the-art sewage treatment, waste disposal, recycling and landfill, suburbs of storage and newly built barracks, town planners and a director of public works. Facility management for 40,000 personnel is outsourced to big contractors and staffed by multinational civilians who made good money servicing the US base. Daily about 7,000 security-screened local workers are allowed inside the wire. Perhaps they prayed at the blue mosque; perhaps their grandfathers did too. ▶

Bunker outside wooden accommodation huts

Recycling site and salvage area

Perimeter road with protective barrier at entrance

Barrack huts used by contractors and army personnel

Makeshift volleyball court

◂ There was little movement in the other direction. The legions of non-combat personnel might meet a cleaner or a cook, or visit the weekly bazaar, but they were confined to their oasis for the duration of their postings. The vision of Afghanistan for these tens of thousands of men and women could be distilled from two views: what they could see of the country over the perimeter walls, and the representations or simulations of Afghanistan they saw within. The view from Bagram is dominated by the Hindu Kush. The fortress of sand, gravel and concrete is two-thirds encircled by the constant, looming presence of these mountains, sometimes almost hidden behind dust or cloud, at other times sharpened by light and snow.

My stay coincided with Eid al-Adha, the Muslim festival of sacrifice, and a period of enhanced insurgent activity. Most nights were punctuated by amplified chants of "incoming, incoming", and two to a dozen distant impacts. No one was killed. I saw a hole pierced in an empty 500-man tent by a defective rocket. The tent next door was full.

Like the mountains in which they hide, the insurgents are ever present. Wars of resistance are characterised by fluid insurgencies fighting far more sophisticated occupying powers held stationary within fortified walls, watching across a technological gulf and separated by mutual incomprehension and ignorance.

Inside a dining facility at Bagram, I found a series of paintings of mountains and monuments that showed a different Afghanistan. Simple but not unskilled, they would probably be described as naive or primitive in the lexicon of western art. These paintings transcended the confines of the base, taking the viewer to passes and lakes in the Hindu Kush and a verdant Kabul.

It was hard to know who they were for, or which Afghanistan they were intended to represent. Were they the result of an artist romanticising his landscape for his people, a reflection on a country discomposed by conflict? Or perhaps they were sentimentalised mementos or postcard images designed to appeal to the tastes of souvenir hunters?

Their location on the walls of a dining hall on America's main base was significant. How many tens of thousands of pairs of western eyes passing through Bagram had registered the pastoral peace of these mountainscapes? Had they considered what they meant to the country they were playing a part in occupying? Had their experience of Afghanistan been altered by them?

All the paintings carried the signature Majeed. I have no information about him or the provenance of the paintings. He is universalised by his absence and our ignorance of him.

There is distance between the tranquil mountains created by his hand in paint on canvas and wood, and the military enclave captured in high resolution by the latest digital technology. Two cultures divided by landscape and time. But in both, the mountains belong to Majeed. **FT**

An exhibition of Edmund Clark's photographs is at Flowers Gallery, London E2 (flowersgallery.com), February 27 to April 4.
"The Mountains of Majeed" is published by Here Press (herepress.org)

"Salang", one of the paintings signed "Majeed" that hangs in the base