

He brought to the job a deep knowledge of Afghan culture, especially given the influence of his father, who had worked in 13 provinces and dealt with the dynamics, customs and traditions of the country's various tribes and ethnic groups. With his cultural expertise, Hotaki was appointed to work with the KPRT's commanding officers and civilian directors, as well as to assist with justice, human rights and governance projects.

In the early days at the KPRT, he worked with Glyn Berry, then its political director. He recalls Berry's passion, curiosity and enthusiasm, especially on a journey they took in December 2005 to visit tribal elders in the remote Maruf district. "He wanted to know everything." When Berry was killed in a car bomb attack on another trip a month later, "it was shocking and very sad news," Hotaki recalls.

Security was always a worry. Hotaki travelled on more than 1,500 patrols around Kandahar, from meetings with government officials to visits with PRT staff in far-off districts. Each time they returned to the camp "was another surviving day for us," he says. "It gave us new life when we came back safe and secure."

On one trip in December 2007, he was sent with a Quick Reaction Force in a light-armoured vehicle (LAV) to the Arghandab Valley, a district north of Kandahar City where the situation was especially bad. Indeed, a Canadian vehicle had been hit there

by an improvised explosive device (IED). Its wounded occupants had been airlifted out; the force's mission was to tow the damaged vehicle back to the KPRT or to KAF. "There was a real possibility of an insurgent attack, an ambush or another IED," he recalls. Travelling as fast as possible to avoid an enemy attack, the LAV driver lost control and the vehicle rolled over. Although no one was seriously injured, Hotaki was knocked unconscious by the impact. "When I opened my eyes after a few minutes I saw smoke around me and some soldiers and ammunition on top of me," he says. "We were all so lucky to survive."

There were also lighter—even entertaining—moments as an interpreter. Once when Hotaki was helping the Canadian military provide support to the parliamentary elections, a sergeant ordered a convoy he was in to wait for a dog—a detection canine used to search vehicles for bombs. But Hotaki understood the word the soldier used to be "doc" and told the Afghan commander that a medic was on the way. "He was quite surprised when our furry friend arrived instead."

Living in Kandahar had its personal stresses, especially as Hotaki had to travel home to Kabul to look after his aging parents. Soon he also had a wife, through a marriage his parents had arranged, and then a baby daughter named Shahida. When a position as an interpreter and translator came open at the Kabul mission in October 2010, he gratefully applied for and got it.

In Kabul, Hotaki's cultural expertise and guidance continue to come in handy. He has posted a document on the mission's shared I-drive that's full of social tips, such as how to receive guests, as well as some basic words of greeting.

Jess Dutton, who worked with Hotaki from 2009 to 2011 while serving as the KPRT director and deputy head of mission in Kabul, says his hard work and dedication were invaluable. "He was a wealth of knowledge about Afghan culture and an incredible interpreter who put his life at risk countless times serving Canada," stresses Dutton, now a director in the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force.

Hotaki is pleased that his new position in Kabul has exposed him to domestic politics, human rights and Afghan legislation, especially as he still hopes to become a judge. "I would still like to have a chance to go in the law faculty, inshallah; it is my dream."

The Canadians, he says, are well regarded in Afghanistan for "the heavy price of blood and treasure they paid for the people of Kandahar." He'd like some day to live in Canada, where he has several relatives and friends. "It's a multicultural country with good people who have comfortable lives."

Meanwhile, he appreciates being in Kabul, close to his family and farther from harm's way. And he will always remember the years in Kandahar and the role he played there at a special moment in Canada's military and diplomatic history.



Jess Dutton (left) and Khalil Hotaki  
photo: courtesy Jess Dutton