

GIS at Work: Interview with Justin Arnette

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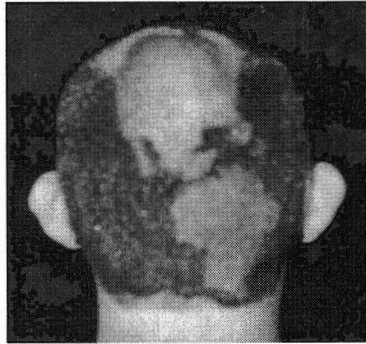


Figure 1. Justin Arnette's hair when he was a geography major at UNC-Wilmington.

Background:

Age: 27

Hometown: Carolina Beach, NC (moved from Raleigh when he was 3 years old).

Education: Graduated from UNC Wilmington in May 2002 with a B.A. in Geography and Environmental Studies.

Employment: Cartographer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington Office.

Q: When did you discover your interest in Geography?

Well, I needed 5 more courses to complete an Environmental Studies degree. I found out I was good at cartography, plus I enjoyed it.

Q: Do you have plans to continue your education?

Hopefully. I'd like to complete a masters program in geography.

Time Spent in Afghanistan:

Q: What did you do while in Afghanistan?

I worked for two major organizations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). I upgraded their software and hardware first, because without it you can't do anything. They had very few maps of the area, and the ones they had were Russian maps from the early 70's that were scanned into a digital format. I was working for the military, but they weren't very forthcoming with their maps. I used older and declassified maps to help people who were traveling to get where they needed to go quickly and safely. I contacted people in the military and the Army Corps of Engineers for satellite images of the area. With those data, I created route maps for people to get to and from destinations.

With the Corps of Engineers the maps I made were mostly route maps, site maps, site layouts, and real estate maps. I helped to pick sites for border and highway police stations through topographic maps and digital imagery. These helped to make sure the sites were easily defendable and gave the people scout-

ing the sites an idea of what to expect when they got there. With USAID I worked on irrigation maps, road maps, school and clinic construction maps, and power grid maps. These were maps to help track the building of the Afghan infrastructure. In addition, these maps helped to manage the water supply for the irrigated lands used for farming.

My typical day started around 5:30. I would work for a couple hours, get some breakfast and do any field work in the morning when it was the coolest. Around 8 a.m. I'd start doing GPS work. I usually worked 15-hour days; I always wanted to meet deadlines.

Q: Who is going to use your maps?

The military used a lot of my maps for traveling, but mostly they are getting the maps to turn over to Afghanistan so that Afghans can build a new society.

Q: What was your job title?

Cartographer—that is my job title here in the States and that is what I told people there but that wasn't my official title because all the job titles there are very generic so that they can get you to work on a lot of different projects.

Q: How long were you in Afghanistan?

I was there for six months. I left Wilmington in April 2004 and returned in October.

Q: What was the international presence like?

There was definitely a military presence, a lot of Iranians and Pakistanis. I noticed a very "Russian" look—red and blonde hair with green eyes—evidence of their extended occupation in Afghanistan.

Q: Was security tight?

Yes. We weren't allowed outside of the compound unless we were in a vehicle, and even then we were not allowed outside of vehicle. I always wore a Kevlar vest that weighed about 40 lbs. We always had to have a Kevlar helmet too, but we didn't have to wear it while in the vehicle.

Q: Did your concept of the people change?

I expected nothing but desert dust and people living in little huts. But everyone was extremely nice and respectful. The only thing I didn't understand was having to eat anything that was offered to you. I'm a picky eater, so I did a lot of apologizing.

Q: How do you feel about dust now?

I hate the dust.

Q: Where does Kabul get its water?

They get their water from an underground aquifer. They like to waste water too, love to wash their cars.

Q: Did you drink the water?

We were told not drink the water unless we wanted to lose a lot of weight.

Q: Did you see drugs in the market?

No, not really. I'm sure there was, but we didn't see it. The bazaar that we went to was searched ahead of time and it actually came into our compound.

Q: Do they drive on the left or right?

They drive where ever they want to.

Q: Are there no yellow lines, stop lights or signs?

No, not really—there is a median in some places but people just drive right over it. You definitely have to be an aggressive driver.

Q: Do you think they are spending their money smartly and planning for the future?

There is still a lot of waste over there, but they seem to have really toned down the spending. The first barracks they built for US soldiers that I saw were really extravagant for soldiers. They had big single rooms and air conditioning in every room.

Q: Were you able to watch the news?

The Armed Forces Network was available, but I didn't watch any TV while I was there at all. There was only one TV in the TV room and I chose to work more than watch it.

Q: Do you have plans to go back?

I am eyeing a June return if I can work it out with my supervisors and family.

Q: What was the most rewarding part of your job?

It was great to be able to help Afghans rebuild their country.