

NAWA DISTRICT

SOUTH UIST

Island home:
Archie's grandad Archie MacDonald outside his croft on Uist

THE CROFTERS OF HELMAND

AN expert sent to help rebuild Afghanistan has revealed how growing up on a Hebridean croft helped him understand the tribal leaders of Helmand.

By ANNIE BROWN

Archie Lightfoot said community meetings with the Afghans reminded him of the chatter he would hear growing up in his grandfather's croft in South Uist. He said: "Take away the turbans and the beards, dress the men in tweed and have them speaking Gaelic instead of Pashtu and chances are that they would be having pretty much the same kind of conversation as my grandfather and his neighbours.

was very similar to that in Afghanistan. He added: "There is a lot of storytelling and getting together to talk things through with neighbours."

A former officer in the Royal Tank Regiment, Archie, 51, has just returned from working in Helmand as head of operations for the Stabilisation Unit, a joint civilian-military mission.

He was based in the Helmand capital Lashkar Gah but travelled across the province working with local governors, elders and farmers to help create a more stable community.

He said: "One of the big differences between Helmand and South Uist is that island crofters have rights in perpetuity to the land, whereas in Afghanistan, after 40 years of war, land rights is a major issue and a cause of friction."

In his 10 months in the country, Archie developed an enormous respect for the Afghan people and quickly learned never to make assumptions.

Afghans over 60 may look traditional but they remember more liberal times, when their country was at peace, when Kabul was a thriving cosmopolitan city where women wore the latest fashions and went to university.

Archie said: "It is the older generation who are more moderate in their thinking.

"If you were to go into a room for a conference and half were in traditional garb and half were young men in sharp suits, the chances are that the young

men are likely to be more radicalised." The Stabilisation Unit use a team of 1000 civilians with various areas of expertise, deployed in fragile countries across the globe.

The slow pace of progress in Afghanistan can be exasperating and there is corruption in every tier of government.

But Archie said: "Let's not be too quick to throw rocks. There are plenty of examples of corruption in Britain. You just need to look at MPs' expenses."

It has taken time to build the trust of locals who have in the past co-operated with the coalition only to be abandoned to their fate with the Taliban when troops have been pulled out.

Helmand remains one of the most dangerous places on the planet.

The violence in Afghanistan eases off in winter as the fighters move to Pakistan to re-arm, rest and train. In the spring, there is the poppy harvest but then many farmers join what is referred to as the "summer fighting season".

The Stabilisation Unit won't know before then if they have won enough hearts and minds to discourage locals from joining the insurgents.

Archie said: "There are grounds to be cautiously optimistic about the future.

"In the past there have been moments of clumsiness but I think we have the right level of troop density in Helmand at the moment which allows us a greater chance for success.

"Afghanistan was a rat's nest of terrorist training camps. If it can be made stable there is less chance of trouble in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran"

HELMAND THE FACTS

LOCATED in southwest Afghanistan, Helmand's capital is Lashkar Gah.

The province is divided into 13 districts and more than 1000 villages with a population of just over a million.

In the 1950s, Helmand was known as "Little America" because it was the centre of a US development programme building irrigation channels and a hydroelectric dam.

Unemployment is high. The economy is largely based on farming and the main crops are wheat, corn and opium poppy.

The US Marine Corps have 20,000 troops in Helmand in addition to 9500 British troops.

Rebuilding country: Archie



'Take away the turbans and they are just like my grandad'