Since our flight was delayed we returned to Camp Phoenix and just prior to leaving we had an opportunity to visit with some of the Afghan Children in the area, separated by a fence on the airport boundary.
Shortly after taking this picture the man with the shovel ran straight towards me making myself a little nervous with his quick advance. We thought that well, if I was the father of these children talking with soldiers through a fence I would want to be there as well. When he got within about 10 meters he stopped and used the shovel to redirect the water in the irrigation system to change direction and flood the small plot he had been working on. He continued to stand close by and although we never had an exchanged I could tell he had little concern for my presence.
The Children would often give us the American thumbs-up signal making us feel welcomed. This same gesture can be considered an insult in Afghan culture but the children in the areas frequented by American troops know us well and know what it means to us… I know the difference in their faces and having been on the receiving end of a different not so friendly gesture made to us by an adult Afghan.
MacGyver gives the children a small treat. This picture reminds me of a story told to me by Yagamatsu, an elderly Okinawan man who was the age of these children when American Marines landed on his native Island of Okinawa. Although, I do not have any reason to believe that the Taliban says this about American Soldiers and Marines today, then the Japanese told the native Okinawan people that the Americans were cannibals and they would torture eat their families. Sadly many Okinawans believed this and men women and children leaped to their death in a collective suicide over a cliff at the end of the island fearing the advancing American force. Yagamatsu as a small boy hid in a bush near this cliff and watch many of him family friends and community leap to their deaths. He told me had sat there and cried until an American Soldier found him and leaned down offering him some chocolate and water. He had not eaten for days. Today, Yagamatsu runs a restaurant in Okinawa and is a friend to so many. His generous hospitality is reflective of his nature and his love for the Americans who brought peace to the island of Okinawa. Whatever the Taliban say about Americans and American Soldiers and Marines you can be sure that it is less than flattering. I hope that we can be to the Afghans what the Marines were to Yagamatsu, a liberating presence that brings peace and with that educational and economic opportunity. Terrorism cannot survive in an environment of freedom and liberty and then Afghanistan will no longer be a place where the sponsors of terror find support and safe harbor.
I have been encouraged by a number of things since my arrival in Afghanistan, they are the strength of the Afghan National Army, the pride and love the Afghans have for their families and communities, the support of much of the world through the work of ISAF and the hope I see in the children of Afghanistan. Since our arrival, we have brought freedoms and peace to most of the country of Afghanistan. Although I was not able to get a picture of it, I saw young girl with books in a bag headed to school in the morning and I know that but for our presence with the support of ISAF here and the support of freedom loving Afghans that could not happen. I thought of my college motto at the University of South Carolina “Education humanizes the heart and does not permit it to be cruel.”