

CAPTIVE

MY TIME AS A
PRISONER OF THE
TALIBAN

JERE VAN DYK



Also by Jere Van Dyk

*In Afghanistan:
An American Odyssey*

CAPTIVE

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**My Time as a Prisoner
of the Taliban**

Jere Van Dyk

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To the memory of my mother and father

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Author's Note

In the summer of 2007, I signed a contract to write a book about the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. I had a long background in this area, which is now considered the headquarters of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

I first crossed the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan in 1973, when I drove an old Volkswagen through the tribal areas. I was a young man, exploring the world. Six years later I watched on television as the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and knew I would return. In 1981, as a freelance reporter for the *New York Times*, I flew to Pakistan and took a train to Peshawar, the headquarters of the mujahideen, the Afghans fighting the Soviet Union. I had read that these fearless men shouted “God is great” and with old British rifles fought valiantly against a modern superpower. I met the leaders, traveled into the tribal areas, and hiked into Afghanistan, where I lived with the mujahideen along the border.

On Thanksgiving Day 1981, the Afghan army and Soviet forces attacked the mujahideen group I was with. I heard the bullets sing overhead, saw the faces of the young soldiers as they approached us, saw the teenager next to me get shot and the commander wave to me to get back, trying to protect me from his guest. Many men died that day. That night Soviet tanks surrounded our village, and the mujahideen sneaked me away in the night, to save me.

Upon my return to the United States I published several articles in the *New York Times* and wrote a book, *In Afghanistan*, about my time with the mujahideen. I gave speeches, wrote other articles, and worked the politics of Afghanistan in Washington, D.C. I eventually left the country and again traveled the world as a journalist. *National Geographic* sent me to faraway places. I traveled the length of the Brahmaputra River, into western Tibet, hiking alone, foolishly, up a glacier, when the snow gave way but then miraculously held, and I found the river's very source. I made a similar journey up the Amazon River and scaled a mountain to where the stream became a trickle. But still, no matter where I was in the world, I thought of Afghanistan.

In December 2001 I returned to Afghanistan, as a freelance radio reporter for CBS News and WABC television. It was two months after the U.S. invasion and three months following the 9/11 attacks. Over the next six years I returned on several reporting trips for CBS to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Always I was drawn to the border region. I wanted to penetrate deep into the tribal areas, to return to where I had lived with the mujahideen as a young man, to find the leaders I had known from that time, to learn the true story of what was taking place there, in this new time of war.

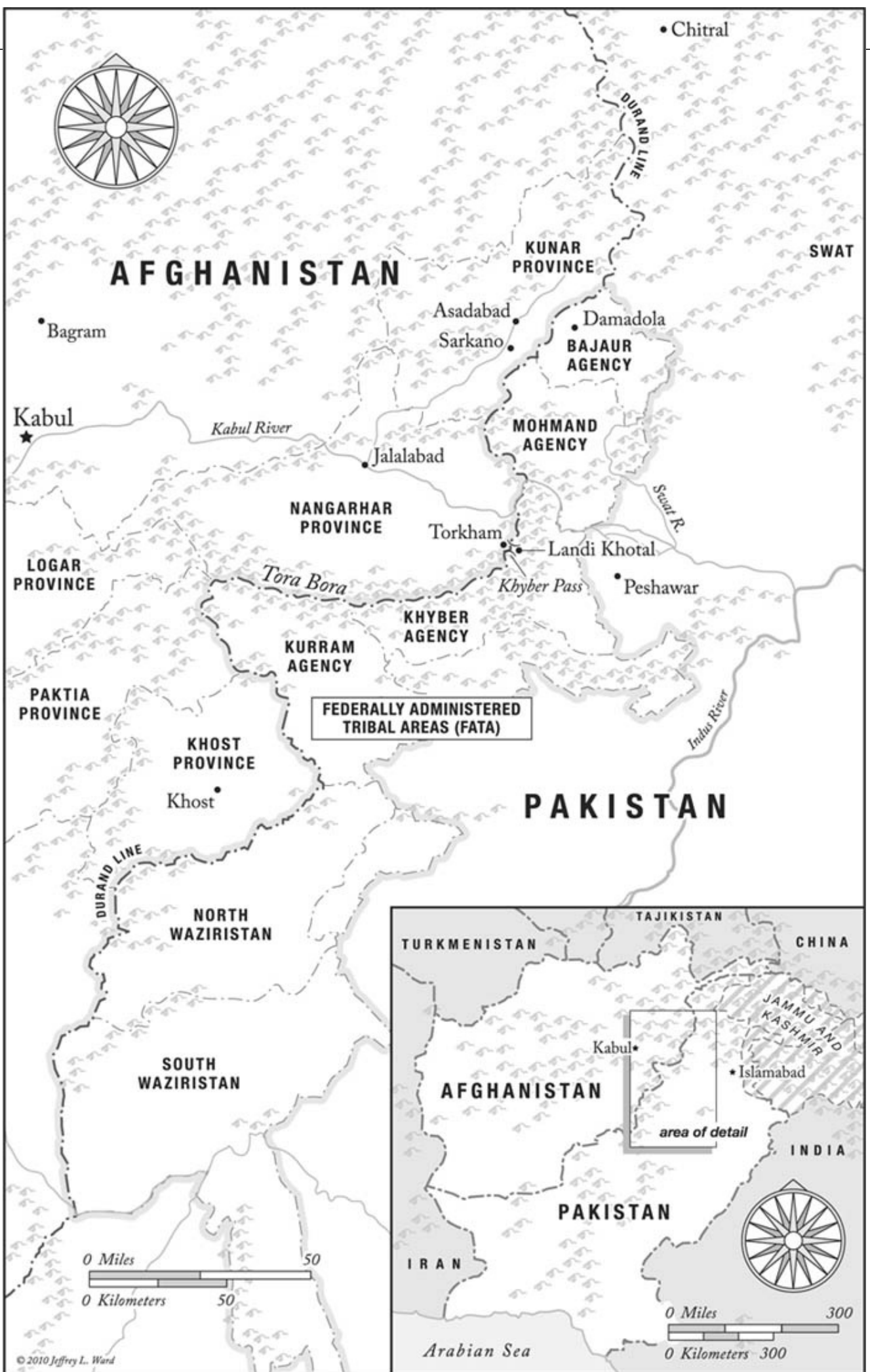
I returned to Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, in early August 2007 and began my preparations to travel along the border and to cross into the tribal areas of Pakistan. No Western reporter had done this since the rise of the Taliban a decade earlier. It would be dangerous, but I felt that I could do it. I had contacts that no other journalist had. I knew this region. I knew its culture. There were countless reports that the Taliban had reconstituted itself in the tribal areas of Pakistan and that Osama bin Laden was hiding there. I would go to the men I knew from my recent reporting trips, and through them find the mujahideen I had known twenty-five years before, some of whom were now Taliban leaders.

I let my hair and beard grow. Ramadan, the month of fasting, began in late August, and I began to fast. My goal was to disappear as much as I could into Afghan culture, specifically the culture of the Pashtuns, the people who lived on both sides of the border, in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. I maintained a social life in Kabul, but I kept my work hidden. I began to travel secretly along the

border, sleeping in villages, meeting with tribal leaders, mullahs, and the Taliban. I began to cross the mountains into Pakistan. I knew that this was what I was supposed to do, where I was supposed to be, and I was determined to push it to the very end.

I kept in touch via e-mail with my editor in New York, my literary agent, a woman I was going out with, my family, and various editors and producers at CBS, but gradually I sent fewer and fewer e-mails. I ate in Afghan restaurants, wore Afghan clothes, and more and more avoided Westerners. I was increasingly on edge and nervous. On January 3, 2008, I wrote a letter to my editor. It would be my last correspondence with him.

CAPTIVE



Prologue

Thursday, January 3

Dear Paul,

Happy New Year. I want to give you an update on the book and to let you know where I am on it at the moment. I am writing a letter because I don't trust e-mails. I am not completely paranoid, but close to it.

I began working on the book at the end of August. I have traveled through most, but not all, parts of eastern Afghanistan along the border. I have a few important places yet to go. I will go to them this winter or later in the spring. I have interviewed a great number of people: tribal leaders, local people, politicians, and mullahs. I have an interview scheduled with President Hamid Karzai on the 10th.

I live in Kabul, but when I am away I live like a Pashtun. I have sneaked four times into the tribal zones of Pakistan, our goal. I have been deep into Mohmand Agency, one of the zones. I went in with very religious drug traffickers. We sneaked past the border post where, a week before, the Taliban killed four policemen.

I have crossed with tribal leaders into Kurram Agency, also in the tribal zones. I have twice been into Chitral, in the north, where Gulbadeen Hekmatyar lives, and where many feel Osama bin Laden may be hiding. I know our goal is to cover the tribal zones, not just eastern Afghanistan.

I have been with the Taliban three times. Once in the mountains, about a six-hour hike south from Tora Bora. The Taliban there came from North Waziristan. They invited me to come with them, on another trip, to their training camps. We shall see. The day after I left, the government came and arrested some tribal people. I don't know if someone recognized me, or learned that a foreigner was there.

Before that I met with a Taliban commander in Kunar Province in the north of Afghanistan, along the border. This meeting represents the first time any journalist has been with the Taliban in eastern Afghanistan, so I am told. A member of al-Qaeda, along with other Taliban, was watching when I interviewed the Taliban commander in Kunar.

The next day the U.S. Army came and attacked them, from the air and on the ground. They did so because the Taliban attacked the army base that night. I was not with them when they attacked the base. I won't do that.

The Taliban leader has since called my translator, and my go-between, a number of times. He wants to take me to their training camps. I haven't agreed to go yet because I am not sure he doesn't want to kidnap me. My go-between is going up into the mountains to talk to him now.

I had one of my biggest scares thus far on New Year's Eve. It is still not over. I sneaked across the border from Kunar, with two guides, and went into Chitral, in the tribal areas. It took a month to arrange this. There I met with a Taliban commander. In every case, thus far, with the Taliban, I have taken a camera and taken their pictures. I take other pictures also.

After I finished my interview—and this man, unlike other Taliban I have been with, was not even remotely friendly—my guides and I took a different route, hiding behind rocks, evading a Pakistani military truck, and sneaked back across the border to Afghanistan. This all happened at night. Most of my trips are at night.

It was a two-part package deal. I was to meet at 3 a.m. the next morning with a Pakistani Military Intelligence officer who would come across the border to meet with me. I wanted confirmation from him of all that I am learning about the military's involvement with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The tribal chief, who arranged the Taliban meeting, would bring him. He promised that the officer would answer all my questions, including those about Osama bin Laden.

Everything went terribly wrong. I insisted that we meet at dawn, so I could take video of our meeting. I did this for a few reasons. The camera has the recording. I knew I would need proof of such a meeting. The tribal chief decided, because of this, to move us to a different location. At 4:00 a.m. the Taliban commander, and eight of his men, came to where we were originally, to capture or kill us.

The tribal chief was gone to meet with the MI man. My guide and I, and the chief's young brother, were at another, secret location. I didn't sleep that night. There was machine-gun fire coming from near the U.S. Army base a few miles away. There were helicopters coming and going.

At dawn the next morning, on the way to meet us, the tribal chief and the army man were captured by Afghan intelligence. His men had to get me out of there. We sneaked down the mountain and found another truck. The Afghans risked everything to get me far away from there. Above all a Pashtun will protect to the death a guest. It is part of Pashtunwali, their ancient tribal code, which often takes precedence over Islam. That is why Mullah Omar refused to give up Osama bin Laden. He destroyed his government, his country, and much else all to protect Osama bin Laden. So it was with the men and me.

The tribal chief had given one of his younger brothers to the Pakistanis as a guarantee that he would bring the army man back. He promised the MI officer that if anything happened he would take care of his family for life.

The area where we operated is filled with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Al-Qaeda had kidnapped a man who worked at the U.S. Army base a week or so before and beheaded him.

A tough nineteen-year-old Afghan, the youngest brother of the tribal chief, and who guided me down a mountain in Chitral and over a stream and back to Afghanistan, and who slept in a room with us to protect us, drove me and my guide fast on a rough track out of the area.

Afghans at a U.S. Army check post stopped us and this time I was discovered, and they took me to the army fire base. The sergeant was as nice as could be, even said he recognized my name and commented on my long experience in Afghanistan, and said he and others had been reading some things I had written. He asked if I wanted anything to eat or to see his commander. All I wanted to do was get out of there, which I did. I was afraid they would find out what had happened.

We rushed on. When we were near a paved road and relative safety, four hours later, I asked the driver to stop. I went down to the Kunar River and washed my face. I came back to see the young Afghan crying softly. He finally broke down. His two brothers were in prison, one being held by Afghan intelligence, the other by the Pakistanis. The full weight of everything hit me. I stood there filled with sadness and, yes, shame.

I was responsible for this trip. I demanded certain things and they followed my instructions. They did everything for me. In return I was going to pay them some money.

My guide is in touch with one of the men who took us to Chitral, part of the tribal chief's family. I learned last night that the Taliban have now kidnapped the MI officer. I don't know what they are going to do with him. If anything happens to him, the Pakistanis may well execute the tribal chief's brother. The local Afghan intelligence people are keeping this out of the media. Kabul doesn't even know.

The leader of my group is the tribal chief along the border. He was released two days ago by Afghans.

intelligence. I learned yesterday that a Pakistani MI officer, a friend of the officer with whom I was to meet, had secretly alerted Afghan intelligence that his fellow officer was coming over. It gets even more complicated. It is a very murky world here, a place of ancient tribal ties, betrayal, warfare, double-crossing, and where a man's honor and tribal codes count for everything.

The Afghans I was with are doing everything to keep my name out of it. They promised they would protect me. They have kept their word. This trip is not a game.

I do not have the full answers yet. I am still not out of this. I have to go back to Kunar. I have not yet told you the full story. I am too sick to my stomach. I met with my guide this morning. We do not know what is going to happen to the MI man, and the young man in prison in Pakistan. We worry.

My guide and Taliban go-between are now planning a long trip. It is almost set. I sent trusted men to talk to people to arrange it. The trip will take three weeks to a month, I am told, through many parts of the tribal areas. I am going to go to all the places that you and I discussed. I will go with our enemies. I will leave after my interview with Karzai. A blue suit one day and Afghan clothes the next.

I sent my men back to double-check with the others yesterday. After what happened on New Year's Eve (I forgot that was the date) in Chitral, I am scared.

Everything I am doing costs money. I have about twelve people on my payroll at different times. I use different men for different tribal areas. A man must belong to the area, and to the right tribe, to do anything. The Pakistanis are using the Taliban, I believe, to try to destroy the tribal structure. They are deeply involved in backing the Taliban. They are, I believe, using U.S. taxpayer money to kill U.S. soldiers. The Taliban get money for what they do. A suicide bomber gets the most, although it goes to his family.

I stay away from journalists here, as much as possible, although I know many people here, because they don't want to talk. I can't tell people what I am doing. I don't really trust anybody. It is too dangerous.

By the way, all the Taliban in the north thought I was a journalist from Nepal. If they found out I was American they would kill me, or so my guides said. I said I didn't look Nepali, but my guides said the Taliban wouldn't know. They are that isolated from the world. I can't believe that the al-Qaeda fighter, who watched me interview his commander in American English, thought I was Nepali.

I have been talking with the U.S. Army about going on an embed along the border, but I have postponed that for now. I was at a dinner the other night, with the deputy commander of ISAF, a three-star British general, who invited me to go with him on a trip whenever I wanted. Maybe, but only after I finish my own work on the ground. I am staying away from the CIA. I do not trust the CIA. I can't afford to let it know what I am doing. I have heard they are along the border. I don't know exactly what is going on between the CIA and the ISI, the main Pakistani intelligence agency, although I have heard that MI is more ruthless. Who knows? I had hoped the Pakistani military intelligence man would have enlightened me about a number of things, but now he is in prison, somewhere, if he is still alive, in part because of me.

I, like every Afghan I have met, am not sure what U.S. goals are here. I will see about talking to U.S. officials after I have completed my work on the ground. I am talking to Karzai now because he will see me, and because I want to use that as leverage with the Pakistanis, including President Pervez Musharraf.

I have a great deal to do, a great number of places to go. I will hopefully still get an official visa for Pakistan, but right now it doesn't matter. I will continue to cross the mountains. Our goal is to understand what is going on, on both sides of the border, which is the center of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the "War on Terror."

There is not a tribal chief along the border who believes one word that Musharraf utters. Journalists

have written that Afghans and Pakistanis call him “Busharraf,” a combination of “Bush” and “Musharraf,” meaning that they are both the same, outsiders fighting the Pashtuns, but what they are really saying is “Besharraf,” meaning, in Pashto, “a man of no dignity.” It is a play on words and, for them, the truth. They all believe that Bush and Musharraf are deceiving the world. One *malik* (tribal leader) called it “a drama.” Others agree. I don’t have the answers yet. As one *malik* in Pakistan said, “I have money, men, weapons, and ammunition, but I don’t have the ability to make a suicide jacket.”

Strange, is it not, that as Pakistan burns, Musharraf can throw lawyers in jail, and judges and politicians, and yet the government has yet to find anyone responsible for one single suicide attack, while they rage across the tribal zones, in Pakistan proper, and here in Kabul.

I know you are concerned about Osama bin Laden. He and al-Qaeda are a big part of this story. I will bring him up, whenever I can, in interviews.

I know the manuscript is due in August. I went to see the Pakistanis again last week about a visit. Still nothing. Everyone says they don’t trust me. I don’t know. I’ll get the information one way or another, even if I have to go to Peshawar and Islamabad disguised as an Afghan.

I will continue to stay in touch.

Best wishes,

Jere

PART ONE

The Way of the Pashtuns

Tuesday, February 12

It was midmorning in Kabul, cold and cloudy. Daoud, my translator and guide, called to say that he was waiting outside. I looked out the window at the hills to the west, covered with snow, took my backpack, locked the door to my room, and went quietly downstairs. I wrote a note to the guest house manager saying I would be back in a few days. I left the keys on the counter.

I could be gone a few days longer, but it didn't matter. I always left notes like this. I didn't tell anyone else I was leaving. After the attack on the Serena Hotel, in January, the Taliban said that they would now target restaurants and guest houses where foreigners stayed. I didn't know who was watching.

The taxi was waiting outside the steel gate, thirty yards away, its exhaust spewing in the cold. I had told Daoud never to let the taxi park near the door. We drove through gray, crowded streets with snow and ice on both sides piled up. The driver didn't seem to notice that I was a foreigner. We reached the Jalalabad taxi station, a strip of dirt with a few cars and men standing around. Daoud told me, in English, ruining my cover, to stay in the car. I paid the driver. Daoud found another car, and soon we headed east on the high, cold, windy, dusty, polluted plains of Kabul toward the warmth of Jalalabad.

Once this plain was calm and beautiful; now it was part of an expanding, ever larger, uglier, overcrowded, nervous city, and the Taliban slowly were beginning to tighten the noose around it. We stopped at a police checkpoint, where the driver handed over a small bribe, and began our descent. For a moment I was happy. How I loved this road. Every time I drove it, my mind flashed back, if only for a second, to how happy I was as a young man driving my Volkswagen here. The sun was out, and Afghanistan was romantic. I wasn't afraid then.

In 1973, I bought an old Volkswagen in Frankfurt, a city I knew from when I had been in the army nearby a few years before, and with my nineteen-year-old younger brother drove across Asia to Afghanistan. Kabul was smaller, friendly, and exotic then, the bazaar dark, deep, and mysterious, and long camel caravans came slowly through the empty streets, silent in the afternoon sun. There was the smell of hashish, sewage, and wood-burning stoves. Schoolgirls wore miniskirts with long socks and laughed in the streets. Not once did a child put out his hand to beg, as children did in other poor countries. There was pride here, born of a hard life, I felt, and a wildness and a warmth that drew me in. One evening I watched a bearded old man in a turban with a rifle on his shoulder walk slowly, head back straight, across a street and into the bazaar. To me he was Afghanistan.

We shot down now through the deep, narrow, dark, winding gorge, the layers of rock in some places folded over, rippling like a bodybuilder's stomach. I thought back to that sunny, quiet day so long ago when I pushed the sunroof back and drove with a smile past the never-ending line of Kuchi caravans making their way down to their warm, winter pastures in Pakistan, as Afghan kings had once made their way on this same road to their winter palaces in Jalalabad, and before that in Peshawar.

That was before war came again to this land, through which for centuries ambitious men with

armies had come and gone. I had seen the mujahideen begin their rise to fight the godless Soviet invader, before the rise of the Taliban and their foreign allies, al-Qaeda, and before Afghanistan lost its soul, at least the one that I knew. The taxi left the gorge and raced down now past wide, brown empty rolling hills. Men and boys stood by the road holding strings of fish for sale. There were blankets of snow in the shadows. The wide green Kabul River was on our left, its water running east to Pakistan, and beyond it were baked-mud villages in the hills.

Rows of brightly colored pinstriped Pakistani trucks, laden with matériel for the United States and its allies, geared down as they climbed upward, spewing their thick black fumes. We threaded our way through another canyon, and on our left in the east appeared the craggy, snow-covered Tangay Mountain. To the left was Kamon and to the right the Tor Ghar, beyond which lay Pakistan.

I was on my way to cross the border.

I would be going where no Western reporter had gone in years, into the tribal areas of Pakistan where al-Qaeda and the Taliban were said to be regrouping, and where there was no law except that of Pashtunwali, the ancient, tribal law of the Pashtuns. I would go to Bajaur and Swat and then down into Waziristan. No one else was doing this; no one, to my knowledge, had done this in twenty years. I still had a long way to go. It was so different now from what I had experienced in the 1980s, when I lived with the mujahideen as they fought for their country, and their faith, against the Soviet Union.

I had felt safe with the mujahideen, and I had written a book that brought their story to the people of America. This time I would be traveling with the Taliban and living with them. My life would be in their hands every minute, in Pakistan, where there were no American soldiers. I had to go, and I wanted to do this. I was scared.

I wanted to find out what the Taliban were really like, to see how different they were from the mujahideen. I wanted to learn what they thought and what their goals were. I wanted to go to the training camps. I wanted to explain the Taliban to the outside world. I wanted to go deep into the heart of Taliban country, to get to their leaders, men I knew from the 1980s, and through them perhaps even to find Osama bin Laden himself. I felt that with my contacts, my history with the mujahideen, and my knowledge of Pashtun culture, I could do what no one else could do. I knew these people. We had once been friends.

I wanted, as well, to do something harder and more dangerous than anything I had ever done before. I wanted to really test myself, one last time. Though I was past sixty, I was in pretty good shape, and I still thought of myself as the runner I had been as a young man. I had set a national high school record and had traveled the world on U.S. track and field teams. In college I was a contender for the U.S. Olympic team, and four years later I was a finalist in the Olympic trials. In the U.S. Army I had won my race in the main international military meet in Viareggio, Italy, and I had carried the American flag in the closing ceremonies of a U.S. vs. U.S.S.R. meet in Leningrad at the height of the Cold War. I still ran, even in Kabul, and I did exercises.

The Kabul River rushed over rocks, was calm, and rushed again through canyons with pine trees on either side. The wind was hot and dry now, and we made a rest stop by the road. The driver said there were no mines here. I walked out into the desert and felt the hot, dry wind in my face.

We stopped by a row of small ramshackle shops by the road to have lunch. There were rows of boxes of big red pomegranates, from Kandahar in the south, and oranges from Pakistan. "We will have fresh fish," said Daoud.

A boy brought four ten-inch fish to us. "These are not Pakistani fish, are they?" asked our driver.

"No," said the boy. "Pakistani fish will make a man sick. These are Afghan fish."

Once this land, from western Iran across into India, was ruled by the Pashtuns. Then the British,

their turn, came to conquer. Afghanistan grew weak from two Anglo-Afghan wars (1839–42 and 1879–80) and was forced to accept two treaties that took away the fertile Afghan land of what would become known as Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier Province of India, today parts of Pakistan.

In 1893, Sir Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of British India, and Emir Abdur Rahman of Afghanistan negotiated, in Persian (the French of Asia), the Durand Line, the border today between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This line, like a sword, cut through the heart and soul of the Pashtun nation and through some of the most rugged, starkly beautiful land on Earth. Pashtun nationalists today call the region Pashtunistan or Pakhtunkhwa, the land of the Pashtuns, of which Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of the Afghan nation in 1747, used to sing, this nation of proud men who worship honor, the Koran, and the gun.

The British wanted this artificial frontier, 1,610 miles long, to extend the formal reach of the empire and to create Afghanistan as a landlocked buffer state to protect British India from the expanding tsarist Russian Empire. In the years following Abdur Rahman's acquiescence, no Afghan government has accepted the Durand Line as a border. Afghanistan was the only country to vote against the admission of Pakistan to the United Nations in 1947, because to do so would have implied recognition of the Durand Line. There are about 14 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, 42 percent of the country, and about 26 million in Pakistan, 15 percent of the country, mostly living in the Northwest Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The Pashtuns are the largest tribal society in the world without their own country.

The three of us sat by the river eating grilled fish, bread, and salad. Afterward, we drove on through a tunnel, and the road kept descending. Boys now appeared selling cellophane bags of chopped sugarcane. We stopped at another police checkpoint, where a man holding a long stick waved us on. We were in Jalalabad. It was warm and sunny and people walked slowly. The streets were filled with men and motorized rickshaws.

Daoud and I checked into the Khalid Guest House and went to our room, on the fourth and highest floor, in the back, away from people. From the concrete walkway outside our door I looked down at the barbershop, the parked cars, and the large rusting boiler and listened to men shouting. Inside our room there were two cots and a thin mattress on the floor. Daoud found the synthetic prayer mat rolled up under a cot. It is called a *jahnamaz*. *Jah* means "place," *namaz* means "prayer": a place to pray. A *jahnamaz* in Afghanistan is like a Gideon Bible in America. There is one in every room in every hotel and every guest room in every village. After he prayed, Daoud turned on the small television, which sat on a shelf in the corner. An American movie played, this Western intrusion, the women in it half-naked, it seemed, but their bodies were blurred by the censor, as they and the men fired their guns and cars piled up on the streets.

I went for a walk and watched a slim young woman, in a blue silk pants suit and high heels, her ankles showing, her face covered in a *chadari*, walk down the street. She walked with another woman, also hidden. How elegant she looked, how mysterious and so much more enticing than the Western women with their guns on television. A weary young woman about seventeen, with her *chadari* back over her head, stood, holding a baby, begging as cars stopped at a traffic light.

I bought some oranges and returned to the room. Daoud went to get his hair cut and his beard trimmed. He returned wearing a white *qwalie*, or prayer cap. He looked like a serious madrasa student and made me slightly nervous. He went into the bathroom, performing his ablutions, and prayed. Twice he had prayed now. He too was nervous.

I had first met Daoud last September. It was Ramadan, the month when the Koran was first revealed to Muhammad, now when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. I was fasting, too, to understand Islam.

better, to draw closer to the Afghans than I ever had before, to enter deeper into their world, to be more acceptable to them, to make them more comfortable, especially the Taliban. I needed to do whatever I could. I was going for broke.

I had previously been working with an experienced interpreter, called Sami, along the border. We had started in January 2007, when we had gone up into the mountains to where Pat Tillman, the U.S. soldier and football star, was killed near Khost, near the border. In early September, when I began my book research, we had crossed the mountains into Pakistan into Mohmand Agency, in an old car on a dusty track with drug traffickers, my first trip across, for one day, from dawn until after dark, avoiding the Taliban, and we met with a tribal leader. A month later we met at midnight with the Taliban high up in the mountains, with a Predator buzzing overhead, where Pakistan fell off to one side and Afghanistan to the other, and again Sami was courageous, but he was scared as well. His close friend Ajmal Naqshbandi, a fellow fixer, had been beheaded by the Taliban in April.

Sami's wife didn't want him to go on any more trips across the border with me. I understood. I tried for weeks but couldn't find anyone else to cross over. If I wanted this to work, I had to avoid Afghans, Pakistani, and all foreign intelligence agencies, and all military organizations, including those of the Americans. I had to disappear into Pashtun culture.

I went one hot, dusty afternoon to see Professor Rasul Amin, a former minister of education and the head of the Afghanistan Study Center in Kabul. He was a friend of an old Afghan hand I knew in New York and thus a tie to the past, someone I felt that I could trust. We sat on a sofa in his office waiting for *iftar*, the Evening meal to break the day's fast.

I told him a little about my project. One of his assistants, Zarmina, a young Afghan in jeans, came in smiling, shaking my hand, and she sat in an easy chair, her two cell phones ringing constantly. "Don't cross the border again," said Amin. "It's too dangerous for you."

We shared *iftar*. I said I needed a fixer. Amin asked me to come again and to bring him a copy of my book on Afghanistan, which I had promised him the last time we had met, in 2002. Zarmina and her driver took me back to my guest house, talking as if we were old friends. She called a few days later, being friendly, and I wondered why. I saw her again on my next trip to see Professor Amin. I was curious about her. She had grown up in a refugee camp in Pakistan. Her father had died and she was the breadwinner for her family. I admired her. She called again and said there was someone that she wanted me to meet. I was wary. "Please," she said. "He speaks good English. He will be good for you." I sensed that he would be the one. I said okay, grateful to her. She would send him over.

He came the next day. The guard opened the steel door and he entered the compound, smiling brightly, and introduced himself. His name was Daoud. He wore a brown suit, had a short beard, and looked to be about thirty-five years old. We sat at an outside table, where there was no one around. "I want an education," he said, "but I have no facilities. I am looking for help. I can be your assistant. Professor Amin was his uncle. He had worked in the center's library, but he was now a schoolteacher." "I have seen your book. Afghans must see this book. I will translate it into Pashto." I liked his energy and that he wanted to better himself. "I thirst for education. I want to go to Peshawar University, but I need five thousand dollars. The Americans have so much money, and they are giving it away."

I wasn't the U.S. Embassy. Why didn't he go to Kabul University? It was cheap, and it was in Afghanistan. He said that his wife and five children lived in Peshawar. His parents lived in Kunar, the Afghan province along the northeast border. He supported all of them. "I can introduce you to many people in Kunar," he said. This piqued my interest. I asked if he could take me from Kunar over the mountains and across the border to Bajaur Agency, part of the tribal areas, and to Chitral, just north of them. "Yes," he said, smiling again, easily. "No problem. Will you help me get an education?"

One step at a time.

That Evening, I asked a friend, Fazul Rahim, the CBS manager in Afghanistan, to run a check on him. I was a consultant to CBS News on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Fazul knew the owner of the school where Daoud taught English. A few days later Fazul called back to report that Daoud seemed okay.

I met with Daoud again. "We'll try it once," I said. "I want to leave as soon as possible." I wondered if he knew how dangerous it was.

"Thank you, sir," Daoud said. "We can cross the border easily." He was too nonchalant about the whole enterprise; what did he know that I didn't know? He leaned forward and looked at me closely. "Can we have an agreement, that my neck is your neck? If anything happens to my children, you will take care of them?" He was serious. He did know. I paused, then said yes. "Thank you, sir. We can do all the things you want."

I smiled to myself. Things always work out.

Three times since then we had met with the Taliban, for a few hours each time, twice in the mountains of Kunar and once across the border in Chitral. Each time Daoud had been scared, even shaking, but each time he had translated patiently. No one else would do what he was doing. He lied to me, always trying to impress me and tell me things he couldn't. I understood that and overlooked his lies because he was risking his life for me. Now we were going much deeper, to live with the Taliban.

Evening came. I went out for another walk. A warm wind blew, stirring dust and bits of garbage from the streets. The few restaurants were open, and half a dozen young men stood outside, over long narrow charcoal grills, waving fans to keep the embers burning, turning over the kababs, as trucks raced by. The road through Jalalabad was the main route from Pakistan to Kabul. Once it was the main road from India.

I returned to our room. Ahmed, our driver, was there. He gave me a big hug. It was good to see him again. We were all a team. He was a friend of a friend of Daoud's. He was about my height, just under five foot eleven, and solid, probably in his forties, with a short gray beard. He had driven us on dirt tracks through Taliban country to isolated border regions and, once at night, to meet with the Taliban. I trusted him.

My cell phone rang. It was Nazaneen, an Afghan woman I had seen in Kabul a few weeks before. We met six years ago, but she was married. Now she was living on her own. I liked to go to her house and have dinner and sit by a fire and talk. It was a real home. She had a guard, a cook, and a driver and though they were friendly and kept to themselves I knew they were watching us. I had to protect her honor above all else, and I had to protect myself. One Evening, after I had come over almost every night for two weeks, I took a chance and told her briefly of my plans to cross the border and go deep into the tribal areas. I had to tell someone. The tension was building up and I was nervous. She stood by the fire and looked at me for a long time, saying nothing. I wondered what she was thinking. I told her who I was trying to avoid. I was crossing the border illegally, trying to find out what the U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani governments were not telling us.

I was living in an increasingly dark world, in Kabul and especially along the border. I worried about my phone calls and e-mails, about walking down the street and sitting in cafés and restaurants. I had been threatened twice, once in writing. I looked at people closer when they approached. I was becoming like an Afghan, always wary.

But I was determined to make this trip. I was tired of reading what politicians in Congress, the White House, so-called security analysts, intelligence officials, journalists, Pentagon officials, and countless armchair experts from the United States and Europe said about the Pashtuns, the Taliban, and

Qaeda, and the tribal areas, where everyone said Osama bin Laden was living in a cave. They said this was the center of the War on Terror, the center of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

I didn't believe them anymore. Few if any of them had ever lived with the Pashtuns; few knew what they understood, or cared about these people in the mountains, their culture, their tribal codes, and even who the Taliban really were. In the 1980s, the joke was that the United States would fight to the last Afghan; they were wild men with swords in their teeth, good as cannon fodder against the Russians. Nothing had changed. Except America was on the war-path now.

I came to Afghanistan a second time in 1981, a young man with a short letter of introduction from the *New York Times*. I flew to Pakistan and took a train up to Peshawar, carrying a portable typewriter and wearing a seersucker suit. It was romantic then, what I wanted it to be. I met Gulbadeen Hekmatyar, Yunus Khalis, his associate Hajji Din Mohammed, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and other mujahideen leaders. I particularly liked Khalis, an old man with a deep voice, callused hands, a long beard, and a bandolier of bullets across his chest. He reminded me of relatives I had known as a boy: strong, quiet men who wore dark clothes, farmed in Oregon, and read the Bible at night.

I traveled with Khalis's men down through the tribal areas to Waziristan and hiked up into northern Afghanistan, where I lived with Jalaladin Haqqani, a guerrilla leader under Khalis, and his band of mujahideen. I began to learn about the Pashtuns' code of behavior and the role of Islam in their fight against the godless, communist Soviet Union. I hiked back out in the snow to Waziristan, went south, and crossed scrubland on a motorcycle into Kandahar, where I saw the mujahideen more as normal men who bled and cried, not as fierce, ideological Muslim warriors. I came out with a guide, across the desert, by camel, slept in the sand, and carried a rifle in my saddle. That was enough, then.

I wrote a series of articles for the *New York Times* and a book, *In Afghanistan*. I gave speeches and wrote other articles on Afghanistan. It became my life, but few cared about Afghanistan then. I couldn't forget these men, who, with nothing, said they would fight to the death for their land, their faith, and their families. They had risked their lives to save mine, for I was their guest. They had pleaded with me for something with which to shoot down the Soviet helicopters that controlled the skies. In 1983, I wrote an op-ed article for the *Times*, passing on their plea.

Later on, after the article helped spur action in Congress, I felt guilty for what I had done. I wanted to help the women and children, but I now realized that if the United States gave the mujahideen anti-aircraft missiles, the Soviet Union would come in with even greater force, and that more people would die.

A year later, Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American and a consultant to the State Department, asked if I would be the director of Friends of Afghanistan, a nonprofit organization designed to help the Afghan people. I agreed and later learned that it would be overseen by the National Security Council and the State Department. On March 21, 1984, the first day of spring, the Afghan New Year, I sat in the White House and watched President Ronald Reagan put his arm around an Afghan teenage girl and say, "We are with you." He called the mujahideen "freedom fighters" and said that they were "like our founding fathers."

That summer, the United States and Pakistan brought the newly formed seven-member Afghan mujahideen government-in-exile to America to present its credentials to the United Nations and to meet with President Reagan. I was their guide in New York. Hekmatyar was the president. He and I spent hours together. Friends of Afghanistan hosted a reception for the mujahideen so they could meet UN delegates. I stood at the door greeting guests when Hajji Din Mohammed entered, smiling. "Where are you coming back?" he asked me. I felt warmth spread through me. I was accepted. I didn't know until then how close I had become to these men who had so little but had shared their rice and tea with

me and had protected me.

Now, more than twenty years later, Hekmatyar was leading his own faction against the United States. Haqqani was a leader of the Taliban. I wanted to reconnect with them, to learn the truth of what was really going on. I had already seen Khalis, in 2003, before he died, and Hajji Din Mohammed now the governor of Kabul, a few weeks ago.

“They’ll take care of you,” Nazaneen told me. “But it would be a good idea to learn a few phrases of the Kalima, just in case.” It was the Muslim profession of faith to *al-Lah* (literally, the God) in Arabic, the one true God, not the idols that the Arabs once worshipped in Mecca, the trading center where businessmen hoped that graven images would bring them good fortune, before Muhammad destroyed them. “*Al-Lah-o-Akbar*” does not mean “God is great,” but rather “God is greater.” The one true God is greater than all the other gods. Christians and Jews also pray to Allah, whom we call God. That Evening Daoud and Ahmed taught me the beginning: “*La illaha illalaha Muhammadur rasullalah.*” There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger.

I knew the importance of God in their lives. I understood their fundamentalism. I had grown up in what today would be called a fundamentalist world, but to me “fundamentalists” are political. We were not. We were Plymouth Brethren, a quietest, separatist deeply Christian group who believe that the Bible is the word of God and that we are to remain separate from a corrupt and evil world. I felt that we were separate even within our own small religious community. Most of the men wore dark, somber clothes, and the women wore modest, self-effacing dresses and hats and veils. My mother, however, wore bright, almost flashy clothes that she made herself, and my father wore nice suits. He owned a small millwork company, and we lived in a modern, distinctive house—at odds it seemed with our beliefs—overlooking the Columbia River and the lights of Portland, Oregon, a big city, and all its worldly temptation. We had horses and went hiking in the mountains and swimming in forest streams, a wholesome Northwest outdoor life, and we were deep, thoughtful Christians. We didn’t go to movies, drink alcohol, dance, play cards, or watch television on Sundays. We prayed before our meals, after which we read the Bible and my father preached to us.

I felt that because of my own upbringing, I understood a Muslim’s deep belief in God, his certainty that he was right, his desire for purity, his abhorrence of decadence, his fear of sin, of being tempted by worldly things, which counted for nothing against God and eternity. I understood his submission to God, ruler of Heaven and Earth, and to His will, and the knowledge that against God man is nothing.

The Evening news from Pakistan, in Pashto, came on television. The day before, the Tahreek-e-Taliban, the Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan, had kidnapped Tariq Azizuddin, the Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan, near Landi Khotal in the tribal areas. A massive search operation was under way for the ambassador.

“It’s all a game,” said Ahmed, laughing. “Everyone knows that. Pakistan is behind this.” He then left to be with his family. We didn’t need him today. The news ended, and it was time for evening prayers. Daoud took out the jahnamaz from beneath the bed and prayed again. Three times now he had prayed since we arrived. I sat on my cot eating oranges and studying my Pashto lesson book.

He finished and I asked him, as I had many times that day, to call Abdullah to tell him that we were in Jalalabad, waiting.

I had never met Abdullah, a member of the Taliban, but now I was going to live with him and his men. In September I had gone to a friend, a parliamentarian, who had worked with Yunus Khalis in the 1980s and told him what I wanted to do. He advised me not to go. It was far too dangerous. We shared iftar over a series of Evenings outside on a lawn with various Afghan officials. One night my friend introduced me to another parliamentarian called Mullah Malang, who had been a famous mujahidee

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