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Into the Land of bin Laden

FROM *National Geographic Adventure*

SOMEWHERE ON THE BORDER between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a thunderous *whup, whup, whup* is the soundtrack to a graceful, intertwining aerial ballet above my head on a cold December morning. Two Huey helicopters are circling a hilltop five hundred yards to the east. They zoom in close enough to my perch that I can smell their turbine exhaust and clearly make out a bug-helmeted door gunner gripping his minigun.

The flat, deep sound echoes off the mountains as one Huey prepares to land, feeling for the ground as if hesitant to touch down in this hostile place. The other helicopter dives and swoops behind the hills like an angry hawk, looking for attackers. On each hilltop surrounding the base is a sentry post hastily built of Hescos — four-by-four-by-five-foot-high gray cardboard-and-wire-mesh containers filled with gravel. On top of these are sloppily stacked sandbags and a clutter of ammunition tins; silver loops of concertina wire add a touch of paranoid sparkle. At a distance these makeshift citadels have the look of Crusader castles.

From my own redoubt atop a steep cliff, I overlook a wide valley across the barrel of a battered antiaircraft gun aimed toward Pakistan. Below sits an unnamed armed outpost, a mud fort manned by Special Forces and Afghan troops and unmarked on any official map. Its loaded weapons are pointed at an ally nation; its vehicles and gear are left packed for a hasty departure.

"Your Americans!" says the smiling Afghan soldier who's manning the post alongside me, pointing to the arriving choppers. Outfitted in U.S. Army–style fatigues and blue-tinted fly sunglasses,

he is one of about forty hired guns — "campaigns" — at this base, each of whom makes a healthy $150 a month. The tiny base beneath us watches over a well-known mountain pass between the Pakistani city of Miram Shah and its Afghan neighbor, Khost. Between them lies the Durand Line, the official boundary between the two countries that was established by the British in the nineteenth century and has been ignored ever since.

There are four of these quickly thrown-together bases along this border, the front line of the war on al Qaeda. Miram Shah was a famous supply and R&R base for *mujahidin* rebels who fought against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and remains a major smuggling center. The mountainous Pashtun tribal areas between Khost and the northern Pakistani city of Peshawar are also where the U.S. military, the Pakistan government, and others believe Osama bin Laden is hiding. This is the region where bin Laden worked and fought with the *muj* in the eighties. This is where he helped build the massive cave system at Tora Bora. This is where coordinated attacks against Afghan and American forces continue at their highest rates. Bin Laden is even believed to have used the area around Khost as the backdrop in his videos sent out to threaten the Western world.

For all the secrecy and danger at the front, however, the base was not hard to locate or to reach. Informants in Khost, easy to spot with their $800 Thuraya satellite phones and eager American slang, gave us directions. The bearded Afghan commander of this firebase seemed unsurprised to see an unarmed American show up at his front gate in a battered yellow taxi.

I am back in Afghanistan almost two years to the day after the start of the war in late 2001. Back then, my host was Northern Alliance general Abdul Rashid Dostum. I had traveled alongside a covert American Special Forces team who, it could be said, turned the tide of the war. I was at Qala Jangi when the famous Taliban prisoner uprising occurred, when John Walker Lindh was captured, and when the first American combat casualty of the war turned out to be a CIA paramilitary, Johnny "Mike" Spann. At the time of my five-week visit this winter, the U.S. military had just kicked off Operation Avalanche, which will send some two thousand troops and hundreds of helicopter sorties into the border area around Khost. Their goal is to eliminate both the resurgent

remnants of the Taliban (the indigenous radical group that took over the country in the mid-1990s) and the loose network of foreign, mostly Arab, extremists known collectively as al Qaeda. In 2001 Dostum and the Regulators, as my companions in the Special Forces unit dubbed themselves, were practically brothers-in-arms by the end of their campaign. But two years is a long time, especially in this part of the world, and I was anxious to see how Afghanistan's hosts were getting along with their American guests.

What I quickly learned was that in the borderland, the enemy has returned in force and the Americans and Afghans are attacked and ambushed on a regular basis. The United States has already abandoned two of its four border outposts, those in nearby Lwarra and Shinkai. The others, soldiers here tell me, come under increasingly frequent attack and occasionally change hands between the Afghans, the Taliban, al Qaeda, and the Americans.

The attacks come from the Pakistan side and almost always happen at night. The Afghan regulars say that the fiercest begin with rockets, followed by rocket-propelled grenades, and finally three-wave assaults: one waiting to advance, one lying down to fire, and one advancing to repeat the process. Often, the mystery attackers take the base from the Afghans for a few hours, only to be chased out by arriving American air support or daylight. The nearby border-patrol base at Shinkai came under fierce attack in August. When the sun came up, the rudimentary base was surrounded by more than twenty dead bodies, their identities a mystery. One Afghan fighter insisted that the attackers couldn't possibly have been Islamic fundamentalists. "The bodies were already rotting the next day," he told me. "We could smell alcohol. They had been drinking cheap wine."

As I scan the area through my binoculars from my clifftop aerie, to the right I can see rolling foothills, steep valleys, and widely spaced scrub pine trees. Off to the left, in the foreground, is a mountain from which my Afghan hosts say the frequent rocket attacks have been coming. Far below us on the dusty road, colorful and overloaded *jinga* trucks clank and groan as they bring goods from Pakistan into Afghanistan. Or to be more accurate, toward Afghanistan. One reason that bin Laden and former Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar are still at large is that things can get fuzzy in the Pashtun borderlands. The U.S. military denies that any

of these bases along the Durand Line, armed by Afghans and utilized by American forces, are situated outside of Afghan territory. Maybe my GPS is acting up, though. It indicates that I'm standing eight kilometers inside Pakistan.

At the landing area, the two Hueys depart, leaving a group of silver-haired officers, each wearing a bulletproof vest and a pistol. Driving toward the base are two armored tan Humvees, a beige camouflage pickup with an orange marker panel on top, and a brown-and-green-camo Land Rover to transport the VIPs, all followed by a convoy of Toyota pickup trucks overflowing with Afghan troops who wave and show off their heavy weapons and their new sand goggles, shooting gloves, and sunglasses.

I walk over from my perch and casually begin talking to the assembled American soldiers guarding the landing area. This looks like part of Task Force 121, an elite group drawn from U.S. Army Special Forces, Delta Force, Navy SEALs, and CIA paramilitaries and ordered to hunt for "high-value targets." (The group's existence — and ability to operate inside of countries, like Pakistan, where conventional U.S. forces are not stationed — was a closely held secret until the *New York Times* reported its existence in November.) The group here comprises a sergeant from the U.S. Army's 20th Special Forces Group, a unit of army reservists shipped in from Alabama, a young Air Force Combat Controller, and an unshaven American in civilian clothes: khakis, photographer's vest, hiking boots. He wears Oakley shades and keeps a finger-forward grip on a battered AK-47 — an unusual weapon for an American, even in this neck of the woods, and the mark of a contractor rather than a soldier. He quickly leaves after the convoy disappears.

I strike up a conversation with a young sergeant. He has a wispy beard, and his M4 rifle has been spray-painted brown and tan. He seems a little rattled by the recent attacks in the area. "We got hit pretty bad a few weeks ago," he tells me, adjusting his dirty Jack Daniels cap. "Six guys in our unit got Purple Hearts. [Our air support] can't chase them all the way back into Pakistan. So we just wait up here to get hit again."

He points to a spot a little more than a mile away. "They fire rockets right from that hill on the Pak side. The joke is we meet with the Pak officials every month right on the border. They smile,

we smile, they B.S. us, and we B.S. them. Then they watch us get attacked without lifting a finger."

I ask him if the men who attacked him were Taliban, Pakistanis, or Arabs. He looks up at me and squints in the sun and spits.

"I have no idea who we are fighting."

In the chaos of the ground war in 2001, having a go-between like General Dostum had been invaluable. He kept me informed and, on more than one occasion, kept me alive. On this visit, I knew that if I was going to understand the situation in the Taliban-friendly borderlands, I needed the support of a local potentate. The word in Kabul was that 120 members of the Pashtun leadership were holding a meeting in a compound outside of Gardez, a few hours south of the capital. The meeting had been called to discuss the new national constitution and why most of them had been left out of the ratification process.

It is there, during a break between the endless discussions, that I was introduced to a man everyone calls Hajji, who had been railing at the group about the need for the king (how they describe the nation's ruler) to be a Muslim and married to an Afghan and for Pashtu to be the official language of the new nation. In Pashtun greetings, the palms-out, half-lean-forward air kiss is for strangers, and the big bear hug and double buss is reserved for good friends. Hajji gives me the air kiss and holds my hand while he talks to me. The fifty-something elder from the Khost area, with his big white beard, large turban, and ready smile, does not stand out from the others, but he seems to command a special respect from them. Hajji is well known from his days as a *mujahidin* commander fighting the Russians and, before that, as a cross-border trucking czar and drug smuggler. He was also a supporter of the Taliban back when they were better known for crushing warlords than for hosting al Qaeda. He's now retired but remains a man who can be called upon to resolve critical problems and defend the weak. Without hesitation he invites me to stay at his home for a week, on the condition that I not reveal its exact location or his full name.

I am surprised that we drive to his home in a beat-up Toyota hatchback with Dubai plates. His son is behind the wheel. "Only NGOs and the Americans drive big cars around here," Hajji says. "I keep my Land Cruiser in the garage." Hajji sits in the front seat,

carefully telling his son which routes to take and which to avoid. "Mines," he explains. When we pass the shrine of *shaheeds* (Taliban martyrs), Hajji holds his palms up in prayer. Martyrdom is a powerful force here; the Taliban and the Arabs who have died in this war and the war against the Russians are revered even by their enemies.

Afghan society is structured along ethnic lines and divided into tribes. These tribes are led by elders, whose power comes from consensus among the members of the tribe. It is democracy at its simplest, with a dash of feudalism. The elders do not lead solely by dictate but rather by suggestion. They are called upon to meet and make decisions on legal, family, property, and other disputes. To disagree or ignore the advice or decision of an elder is to risk confrontation and ostracism. Even Afghanistan's interim president, Hamid Karzai, cannot order or demand something from an elder, for if his request is refused, he has no recourse and thus loses face. In the Pashtun regions, the elders typically accommodated the Taliban. Recent rumors from the area suggest that bin Laden still travels between Gardez and Khost, the historical center of Taliban and foreign *jihadi* strength.

A measure of Hajji's importance is that he lives in one of the largest compounds in the Gardez area. Each of the four walls is more than nine hundred feet long and thirty feet high. (He is known as Hajji in honor of his having made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Ironically, "Hajji" is also an all-purpose derogatory term used by American soldiers to refer to local Afghans.) The compound sits on a barren plain just outside of town under the dramatic backdrop of the Taliban-infested mountains around the U.S. firebase at Gardez. In the mountains to the south is the deadly Shahikot valley, the location of March 2002's Operation Anaconda in which eight American servicemen died trying to dislodge al Qaeda holdouts. Beyond that is the mountain redoubt of Zawar Kili, another massive cave system built by bin Laden in the 1980s to defend against the Russians. To the north and east are poppy fields.

Inside the compound is a guest house and beyond that two more walled areas, one for Hajji's family and the other for his crops. His home is designed for maximum defensibility. Even the outside toilet, a long walk up a rickety ladder, has three gun ports. Each corner of the compound has a large square tower for defense, and every section is fully stocked with weapons and ammunition. The

towers used to have antiaircraft guns, Hajji tells me, but he removed them out of fear of being bombed by the Americans.

Hajji and I immediately fell into a thrice-daily pattern of a long meal served on the floor, followed by endless cups of green tea and hours of conversation through a translator. The first night we engaged in small talk. His stance was neutral. Yes, he supported the Americans, he said, even though he still seemed to harbor resentment over something that happened in 2001; he wouldn't specify what it was. Yes, he thought the Taliban were finished. The second night we discussed more detailed concerns: There is violence here, no government, only one school but no teachers. By the third night, as the remains of dinner were picked up and tea was poured, Hajji was more forthcoming. I asked him if the reports of the Taliban's return to the area were true.

"Yes, they come here. Usually at night. They ask for food or shelter. They do not stay long, and we do not ask them where they are going. In some cases they intimidate people, and in other cases they pay. But they seem to know who to talk to. In every group of twenty or so Taliban, there are about four or five Arabs. They need to be with the Afghans because they do not know the way and they do not speak the language."

Hajji has enough stature to speak his mind about the Taliban, but even he sees the need to be cautious when discussing the Arabs. "People do not like the Arabs here, because they are arrogant and act superior to the Afghans." He laughs. "We like to say they are more interested in taking videos than in fighting."

It is clear that al Qaeda is still here and still intimidates. Back at the tribal meeting before Hajji invited me to stay with him, I asked to stay with another prominent elder from the border region, and the long-bearded man replied, "You are welcome to stay, but the Arabs will leave a letter at my door that unless you leave the next day, they will kill me and my family." I thanked him for his offer and accepted Hajji's invitation.

"During the *jihad* against the Russians, there were people in every village who would cook food and help us," Hajji says. "No one ever worried about being betrayed or discovered. No one even posted sentries. Now these same people are scared when they see the Talibs or the Arabs. The Arabs have to use sat phones to com-

municate and sneak into villages at 3 A.M., usually leaving before light the next day."

Hajji says he first met bin Laden in the 1980s, when the wealthy young Saudi was helping the *mujahidin* from the Pakistani town of Peshawar. Pakistan's secret service (Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI) had given Hajji three truckloads of rockets but no way to transport them back to Afghanistan. "What was I going to do with three truckloads of rockets? The ISI told us that Osama had an office near the University of Peshawar and to go and ask him for help.

"The odd thing about Osama was that he used to work only on Fridays. We went to his office and filled out an application so that he would pay for the camels and mules. They wanted to know things like how much the rockets weighed. I didn't know how much the rockets weighed." Since Hajji wasn't with one of the Saudi-backed *mujahidin* commanders, bin Laden said he couldn't help them and sent them on their way.

What does he think of bin Laden now?

He pauses as he sips his tea. "I never thought that bin Laden would turn into something like this. I just thought he was someone helping the *mujahidin*."

Is bin Laden winning in Afghanistan?

"I don't think Osama will succeed. The Afghans are tired of migrating and fighting."

Where does he think bin Laden is?

"Chitral would be the most likely place." Chitral is a valley town on the Pakistani side of the border. "That is where people traditionally hide from those who seek them. There is little movement there in the winter. The airplanes don't work well that high up, and you will know when people are coming. Bin Laden knows the tribal areas very well, and the tribes know him very well." His answer makes sense but doesn't quite ring true somehow. Bin Laden's Pakistani biographer recently told CNN that he believes bin Laden is roaming southeast Afghanistan and that his latest videotape was shot near Gardez. My guess is that Hajji probably has a pretty good idea where bin Laden is but knows that it would be dangerous for an Afghan to be known to possess such information. A close friend of his was sent to Guantanamo Bay for knowing the same people that Hajji knows.

What about Mullah Omar?

"Mullah Omar was in Miram Shah during Ramadan and has now moved to Quetta [a Pakistani border city] for the winter." This time his tone is matter-of-fact. He doesn't say how he knows this, but his guess coincides with Karzai's statements that Omar and other senior Taliban have been spotted at prayers in Quetta, long a bastion of Taliban support.

Despite having worked with the Taliban, Hajji has little good to say about their reign in Afghanistan.

"I met many times with Mullah Omar and all the other Taliban commanders. They were not educated men. They were not even good Muslims. The Taliban took all the prostitutes to Kandahar, and the Arabs were all screwing around. In time, they considered themselves separate from the people. To them a foot soldier was more trustworthy than a tribal elder."

What does he think of the Taliban now?

"There are two categories of Taliban: the *jihadis*, who want martyrdom, and the people who fight for money."

Hajji places himself in neither category.

"The Taliban are not Pashtun. We have dancing, we sing, we make decisions in *jirgas* [traditional voting councils]." The Taliban, Hajji says, are entranced by Wahabis, the Saudi-backed religious extremists. "Afghans do not like Wahabis. The Taliban relied on other people and lost touch with the Afghan people. That is why, in the end, the Taliban could never be governors, only occupiers."

What about the Americans?

"I can guarantee you the Americans will not succeed. They rely on people they pay money to. Now they are surrounded by people who want money. They have turned away from the tribal elders and made bad friends."

I ask him which ruler he would choose if he had to: the corrupt Taliban or the American-backed Karzai.

"I try not to involve myself with these things," he says with disgust. It is clear neither has his full support, perhaps because both seem to view the role of tribal elders as increasingly irrelevant under the new system.

From the early morning until late into the night, the sky above the compound is filled with Apaches, Blackhawks, Chinooks, B-1B bombers, and jet fighters. At night, after our talks, I leave the warm, damp guest house and climb up the rough-hewn ladder to

the walls. Above me, stars are sprayed across the sky. I listen to muffled booms and automatic gunfire. I watch the blue-gas triangles of afterburners and listen to the sound of blacked-out helicopters ferrying troops. In the crisp, frosty mornings, the sky is etched with contrails from bombers; low-flying helicopters return from missions, and, later in the day, unmanned Predators whistle through the sky.

One day while driving around on a tour of Gardez, Hajji tells me that he is in the midst of mediating a dispute. A widow was found in her room with a man. The man was shot dead by members of her family, and the woman sought shelter in a house of a neighbor. The widow's family wants her returned so that she can be stoned to death and has informed the family giving her refuge that they have forty days to turn her over. How this will be resolved is unclear, but he is certain she will pay with her life. Hajji shows me the spot already chosen for her stoning.

In an attempt to explain bin Laden's ability to hide in this region, much has been written about the Pashtun code of hospitality, sanctuary, and revenge. *Melmastia* is automatic hospitality shown to visitors without expectation of reward; *nanawatey* is the obligation to provide sanctuary to those who seek it, even at the risk of one's own life; and *badal* is the righting of wrongs, regardless of how much time has passed. Hajji insists on the necessity of a system in which the entire family and tribe takes responsibility for the act of one person, even if that requires stoning one's own widowed daughter for promiscuity. The goal is to resolve disputes with finality and allow the tribes or families to coexist peacefully once the sentence has been carried out or reparations paid. Penalties, he says, can be as simple as fines or as drastic as death, but justice must be done.

Later, at the compound, lit by the yellow glow of a propane light, Hajji explains to me how one tribe or group can sometimes take over or resolve another group's blood feud. When an injustice is done and a tribe is weak, he says, another tribe or elder may take up their feud. The weaker tribe is then indebted to the stronger one. This is a natural way to build power. Hajji says this explains not only how the Taliban are indebted to bin Laden but also why they insist on revenge at all costs.

In the Pashtun worldview, a wrong that has been done to one

person has been committed against an entire tribe. Hajji cites as an example an American bombing raid that happened nearby a few days ago, in which nine children were killed.

"When will this wrong be righted?" he asks.

I grow to like Hajji, and he treats me like a son. He insists that I sit on his right-hand side. He urges me to eat the best part of the sheep and won't clear the vinyl eating mat until I have eaten to his satisfaction. He makes sure I sit on the warmest part of the floor. He pesters me to grow my beard out and tugs at it every day as if that will speed the process.

That night, Hajji tells me a story that he had been reluctant to share. In December 2001, as it became obvious that al Qaeda and the Taliban were truly beaten, Hajji and eighty other tribal elders headed off toward Kabul to meet with Karzai, who had returned to Afghanistan as interim prime minister. En route they were stopped by the warlord Pacha Khan Zadran, who refused to let them pass. "Khan is a simple man, a former truck driver who was working with the Americans then. He told us that we could not go to Kabul, because Karzai is not the legitimate king of Afghanistan. We knew we couldn't get by him, so we turned around and chose another route, one we knew from the *mujahidin* days," he says. "We called the U.S. embassy in Islamabad [Pakistan's capital] and the UN and told them that we were driving on this road and not to bomb us.

"That night we could not get over a mountain pass, so we turned around. Then I heard jets. They hit the trucks behind me first, and I ran as fast as I could."

The bombing began at around 9 P.M. and continued until four the next morning. Eleven elders were killed and twenty others wounded. Some forty Afghans in surrounding villages were also killed. Hajji, however, seems most concerned about having lost a pickup truck in the bombing.

"The Americans continue to search our women, bomb our houses, and kill our children. Even Karzai said they were wrong and promised to replace my pickup. But nothing has been done." Hajji does not seem to be angry, just stating fact.

"There is a saying the Pashtuns have that if you take your revenge in a hundred years, you are rushing things."

Hajji looks upward in an exaggerated supplication to heaven,

then lowers his gaze straight at me. "Now God has sent an American to me so that I can trade him for a new pickup truck." He laughs with a goofy, rasping laugh, but I check his face carefully to make sure it was a joke.

The next morning, Hajji picks a driver to take me to the "secret" base by sending his oldest son to the taxi stand. He tells his son to make sure the driver is a member of their own Ahmadzai tribe. Out in the countryside, that is more important than a truckful of armed guards, for if someone harms him or his passengers, they will have to deal with Hajji and anyone else he brings into the blood feud. His instructions to the young driver are to "go where he goes and never leave." He also sends for a local doctor, someone educated who speaks English, to act as my interpreter and guide. A few hours later, our tiny crew sets off in a battered yellow taxi. The stereo blared Hindi pop songs, and the road dust swirled around our heads as we drove into Taliban territory. The first thing my driver tells me is how he made a lot of money driving Arabs escaping from Gardez to Khost after the war. He drove the highway with his tiny Toyota Corolla wagon loaded with the Arabs and their families, weaving around burning Hilux pickup trucks, ripped corpses, and craters. The Americans would attack trucks and Land Cruisers but let taxis go through. It is no coincidence that when Afghan eyewitnesses saw bin Laden leave Jalalabad in a convoy of fighters in December 2001, he was riding in a small white Corolla hatchback.

As we begin to climb toward the Shahikot mountains, I'm told that we are officially in Taliban territory. "The fighters will watch from the mountains, and if they see a suspicious vehicle, they will stop it or attack it," my driver tells me. This is the same area the Taliban stopped a *Christian Science Monitor* reporter's car and beat the off-duty driver when they discovered there was no journalist inside to be kidnapped. Thankfully, our well-worn taxi is just as invisible to the Taliban as it was to the Americans.

After cooling my heels for a couple of hours at the American outpost's landing area, waiting for the officers to depart, I once again bump into the American with the AK-47 — the Contractor, as I'll call him. He starts off not with a greeting but with a warning. "They're not gonna let you cross into Pakistan."

I ask him who "they" are.

"T.F." is his curt reply. Task Force.

Apparently, some quick videotaping I did earlier has not gone over well. "You've filmed their base and vehicles. If the bad guys catch you across the border, they will use it to hit this place."

He asks how I got here without getting attacked. "Did you see those antennas on all four corners of that pickup truck?" he says, pointing to one of his vehicles. "Those are jammers. People around here bury antitank mines and then detonate them with cell phones or car-alarm triggers. They hire kids to sit at the side of the road and wait for Americans. They tried to kill Musharraf yesterday, and his jamming system was the only thing that saved him.

"Delta can't figure how you got here in one piece. I am sure they are looking you up right now." He smiles, then walks off.

I head down to the main firebase. The once friendly Afghan commander quickly approaches. "You came here to take pictures," he says. "You have enough pictures, now please go." His orders are to get me off this hill and going in the opposite direction of Pakistan. Then, in a typical Afghan gesture, he asks me to join him for lunch before leaving.

The Contractor reappears as I am packing to leave and inquires about my destination. I tell him I've been staying in Gardez with Hajji and invite him to join me. The opportunity to go through Taliban-friendly territory obviously intrigues him. He tosses his battered mountaineering backpack into the ancient taxi. We start to head back toward Khost, but first I insist we stop at a small market a few miles from the base. Sixty dollars turns my new American friend into a rough facsimile of a bearded farmer, complete with wool hat, waistcoat, and light blue *salwar kameez* tunic. Satisfied we both look like idiots — but Afghan-looking idiots — we take off.

As we head into the series of switchbacks that mark the start of the mountains, the Contractor starts to loosen up. Despite his initial bluster, he is not used to being so exposed, so out in the open. As we come up on various Taliban checkpoints, he drills me on how to evacuate the car from the same side, how to keep a pistol under my leg, and how the windshield will deflect rounds. We have a long time to talk on the ride, bouncing and rattling down the potholed dirt roads. He agrees to answer some questions about his work but

makes clear that he won't talk about anything that might harm his mission and asks that neither he nor his home base be identified. I agree.

"These days the Agency has plenty of money, so it's easier just to hire us than train new people," he says. He is one of about a hundred paramilitaries operating along the border. "There are the soldier-of-fortune, beer-bellied, raucous, ring-wearing types you see in town. Then there's us, the guys who are into fitness, in their late twenties to late forties." Most of the operators are "sheep dipped," he says, serving in some official capacity to provide a plausible military or civilian cover but actually working "black ops," top-secret operations that are never revealed in their military CV.

"Working in Afghanistan is pretty easy," he says. "I was contracted at about $150K a year. You sign up, train up, and fly in. Most of the operators go into Tashkent [in neighboring Uzbekistan] via commercial and then to Kabul on a military flight. You land there, and they pick you up in a truck and check you in at the hotel. Nobody asks any questions. You don't show ID except for the helo ride to the base.

"They divide you into teams. 'Victory' are the security guys; 'Eagle' are the hunter-killers; 'Wolf' do escorts and surveillance; and 'Viper' is the rapid-response team for case officers who get into trouble. You check in, get a couple days in town, and then talk to the chief of base. You get your walking papers and fly out to Khost, Ghazni, Kandahar, or wherever you're going." The going wage for most contractors, he says, is $1,000 to $1,250 a day, slightly better than in Iraq. Three months is the usual tour of duty. "People get freaky if you leave them out here more than ninety days."

Our driver and interpreter, whom I've dubbed "Doc," stare straight ahead, looking for freshly disturbed potholes, where the Taliban like to hide remote-detonated mines. I've told them that the Contractor is my cameraman, and he is enjoying his undercover role as sidekick. He uses his GPS to mark checkpoints and track the road as we travel up into higher altitudes. The checkpoints, manned by Taliban and warlords' foot soldiers, are simply speed bumps followed by armed men who stare into the front of the taxi. My driver boldly waves them off and keeps going. I try to look as Pashtun as a blue-eyed *feringhi*, or foreigner, can. I tuck my glasses in my pocket, pulling my dirty brown blanket tightly around

my face and staring impassively out the front window. With his heavy beard, the Contractor looks more like an Afghan than I ever will. We somehow easily pass through four more checkpoints where both trucks and passenger vehicles are being stopped and emptied.

The first base the Contractor was assigned to, he tells me, was set up in the most remote area that could be resupplied by helicopter. "They flew us in dark on a nighttime resupply mission on a CIA Russian helo — a bird that wouldn't say 'Here come the Americans.'" A four-truck convoy came out to meet them. The new crew hopped off, the old crew hopped on, and the helicopter was gone.

"When I first saw the terrain through the NVGs [night-vision goggles], all I could think of was the surface of the moon. There was nothing but stars, rocks, and a medieval mud fort in the distance. Inside there is this big bearded guy with a Western hat, warming himself over a diesel fire in a fifty-gallon drum. He sees us, laughs this crazy laugh, with his face lit by the fire, and yells out, 'Gentlemen, welcome to the edge of the empire!' Man, I got the crazies when I heard that."

Some of the men in Task Force, the Contractor says, are recent ex-military brought in through the trusted old-boy networks, but most are Special Forces, Delta, and members of the elite SEAL Team Six, recruited in advance of discharge. "The line between traditional military and covert work is blurring. People make fun of the Agency, but all the Special Forces guys are trying to work there. You get whatever you need, you don't get messed with, you have your own chain of command, and you don't answer to the local military commander. You travel on your own passport using a tourist visa."

The hunt for bin Laden, he says, is not like the hunt for Saddam, with thousands of troops looking under every carpet and behind every tree. Even the Pakistanis can't operate in the tribal areas without serious backlash.

"Our job is to shake the apple tree," the Contractor says. "We aren't hunting bin Laden from the top. Our strategy is to focus on the little guys. Just like how they do drug busts in the States. Put the heat on the runners and little guys until they get nervous and start contacting higher. Then we intercept their calls and the hunt begins. We are just hired killers. Guns with legs."

The Taliban, he says, aren't a priority. "Mullah Omar is not an is-

sue for the U.S. government. We are looking for al Qaeda, or whatever you want to call al Qaeda. These days that's pretty much shorthand for a foreign national — an Arab, Pakistani, or whatever. We are looking for people connected to bin Laden.

"We ask simple questions like, Where do they sleep at night? Once we can find where they sleep, we can monitor them. When we find the house, we can pick up any electronic communications and send them directly to Langley, [British intelligence in] Cheltenham, or Washington.

"Once you find their base, you don't want to hit 'em; you let 'em talk and use that intel to roll up the lower-level people. We can do voiceprint on them and even know who they are talking to if that person is in the database. If they set up a meeting or give us a GPS location, somebody might get hit the next day. If they still don't contact higher-ups, then you snatch another guy or make him disappear. You do that a couple of times and they will get nervous."

The Contractor adjusts his rust-colored wool hat and admires his Afghan look in the mirror. Doc, I notice, has been listening intently.

"The trouble is that we are doing this inside Pakistan," he says. "That's why you need a contractor. Our government can say that 'we' are not going into Pakistan. But you can be damn sure that white boys are going into Pakistan and shooting bad guys."

He shifts his AK, then smiles. "These days the Agency is looking for Mormons and Born Agains. People with a lot of patriotism and the need to do good. At least we start that way." Most of the contractors at his base spend their downtime working out, running sprints between the helicopter pad and back, and doing triceps presses with big rocks.

"We like to stay in shape. When you're in combat, you want to make sure you're using everything you got. You want to make sure you take a few guys with you even if you have only your bare hands. Most of us are into steroids big-time. D-balls [Dianabol] to bulk you up and Sustanon to help you maintain what you gained. The doctors turn a blind eye to it. We get the stuff across the border in Pakistan. When you see guys bulked up, you know what they are on. We keep control of it, though.

"I don't drink, smoke, or eat [illegible]," he says, smiling. "My only weaknesses? Pepsi and women."

*

Hajji welcomes me with the bear hug and double buss of a prodigal son. He quickly senses that my friend is much more than a cameraman — in addition to carrying an AK and Oakleys, the Contractor has a habit of pacing twenty yards back and forth as if doing a security sweep, and he scans every room he enters for hostile elements. But since the Contractor is my friend, he is welcomed without question.

At dinner, Hajji wants to know all about my trip. He pushes food directly in front of the Contractor: choice cuts of greasy mutton with fresh bread and a dish — specially prepared by Hajji's wife for the guests — of what seems to be curdled milk with oil poured into it. The new guest keeps his arms folded and declines, mumbling, "Gotta get to 10 percent body fat." Hajji makes several attempts before giving up, stares hard at the Contractor, then looks at me. "Just pretend to eat something and compliment the food," I mutter. He doesn't take the advice. The Contractor frequently stands up in the middle of the hours-long meal, making excuses about having to shoot some video. When he leaves the room for good, Hajji turns to me and asks, through the interpreter, "What's wrong with your friend?"

The scene is repeated at each breakfast, lunch, and dinner for three days. The Contractor mostly stays silent. He appears genuinely interested in the conversation but doesn't seem to know how to interact with Afghans who aren't informers. We are usually joined by two of Hajji's sons and an ever changing parade of locals who've come to ask favors from the elder. Hajji's brother visits with his three-year-old grandson and occasionally asks me to come by and try to fix his satellite phone. The Contractor refuses to eat even a grain of rice, and I come to dread Hajji's stonefaced looks in my direction. Hajji even tries shopping for us himself, apologizing for not having eggs at one breakfast because it is too cold for the chickens to lay. The Contractor, meanwhile, gets by on Atkins Bars and sips of bottled water, pulled from his pack at daybreak and before bedtime.

Hajji adamantly wants his opinion of the recent bombings to reach someone of authority inside the American forts. Finally, on the third day, he breaks out of Pashtun protocol and tells the Contractor the jist of what he has already told me about the increasing frustration that the tribal elders have with the Americans. He has

received word that a family of eight has been found dead in an abandoned house in the nearby town of Seyyed Karam. How he knows the details of their deaths so soon is a mystery to me.

"A local thug lived there for eighteen years and has been threatening to rocket the meeting in Kabul," Hajji tells us. "An informer called the Americans, but by the time the air attack took place, the man was long gone. Instead another man and his family were hiding out in the house because the man had killed someone in a property dispute. He, his wife, and his six children were found buried under a wall."

Hajji explains that the people in town are upset. Not about the fugitive, since this was perceived as an odd form of justice, but for the man's innocent wife and children, who had no quarrel with the Americans or townspeople.

"This man could have been arrested with a minimum of violence, but the Americans chose to attack the house with aircraft and weapons designed to destroy tanks."

What's going on is clear to Hajji. "The informers are making money from both sides." The Contractor says he understands, and the meal ends in silence.

After breakfast I thank Hajji for his hospitality. He talks to me like a clucking mother hen, pushing me to get a move on and to stop messing around with my camera. He is in a hurry to have us go in case we are spotted outside of his compound. Across the horizon, the rotors of Blackhawks slice through the crisp morning air. As we pack up, I don't bother to relay Hajji's repeated joke about keeping one American to exchange for his lost pickup truck. I don't think the Contractor would find it funny.

On our way back toward the border, the Contractor wants to stop in at another base and talk to someone from OGA, or "other government agencies," a euphemistic term used to describe high-level clandestine operators from the CIA, FBI, and other groups that don't fit into the traditional military structure. He seems eager to pass along Hajji's complaints about the Americans' use of excessive force and reliance on double-dealing snitches. I stay outside.

He emerges shaking his head. "Seems the OGA guy wouldn't even get off his cot to say hi. He just sent his local peon to say he already had the intel."

The Contractor holds up a stack of dirty Pakistani rupees. "The puke said thanks and here are some rupees for the cab ride." He shakes his head. "Company policy is to always give something to someone bringing intel."

Looking at the pile of grubby notes, he shakes his head. "That's [illegible], man."

To be fair, the idea that an armed American civilian would just stroll into a firebase with relevant information about the Taliban might give any official pause; also, I assume OGAs prefer to work only with established intelligence sources. But it is clear that being on the other end of a wad of dirty rupees ticks off the Contractor.

"A while back, Rumsfeld said we might be creating more enemies than we are killing," he says, getting back into the car. "Well, duh. Before last summer, we had Yale graduates hiding in hotels, using the phone to meet informants inside bazaars. Their idea of intelligence work was posing as a cell phone engineer, setting up meetings, and handing informants five hundred bucks every time they handed over information. Good or bad."

The lack of good relations with the local population compounded the security problems, he says. "When you do a *madrasah* hit" — that is, a raid on an Islamic secondary school — "the locals get pissed. You don't always find bad guys, but everyone gets slammed to the ground, zip-tied, bagged, and tagged. You forget to give them a hundred bucks at the door and they'll swear to get you. They will, too. The next time the Americans are on patrol in their Dumbvees, they are set up."

But he insists things are improving. "Now we want to get inside the heads of the people we are dealing with. We want a softer, more personal relationship, instead of basing the transaction on money. Just like when you meet with people. People trust you because they like you, not because you pay them."

At the end of January 2004, the American general in charge of operations in Afghanistan declared that bin Laden would be captured this year. Newspapers published an outline for a major spring offensive that would include sending U.S. troops into the mountainous borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. President Musharraf immediately responded by saying that U.S. troops were not welcome in Pakistan.

"For some reason Pakistan is still like the Catholic Church, where you have sanctuary," the Contractor tells me. "The bad guys are inside Pakistan using Pakistani protection to attack Americans inside Afghanistan and then running back knowing they won't be chased. Hopefully, things will change."

For now, though, covert operations continue and Task Force looks for excuses to cross the border, the Contractor says. An American civilian operating inside Pakistan could need help, which gives the U.S. military a reason to cross the border in support, hot pursuit, or just to call in mortar and air fire on nebulous "bad guys."

This new war depends on men, like the Contractor, willing to work and fight in a shadowland largely beyond the reach of U.S. power. I ask him if there's an extraction plan if a mission in Pakistan gets messy. "The extraction plan is that once you are across the border, you are on your own. There is no uplift. You are screwed if things go wrong." But that vulnerability is essential to the role of a contractor. "You are not in the federal system or in the military system," he says. "You are deniable, disposable, and deletable."

That independence — and the secrecy that goes with it — is part of the Contractor's code. And, as far as he is concerned, it should remain inviolate even in death. "We have lost two guys set up and ambushed," he says. "We lost a case officer in a training accident. That, along with Spann getting killed in the middle of an interrogation, adds up to four CIA operators killed in this war." Traditionally, the CIA does not disclose an operative's connection to the Agency, even if he is killed. But in those four cases, the Agency released the men's identities to the public, an action the Contractor sees as a breach of faith even if it means the men are honored as heroes.

"This is a war where terrorists have global reach," he says. When the identities of operatives are disclosed, "it exposes the tradecraft and leaves the wives and families exposed." While willing to live and even die according to the harsh code of his tribe, the Contractor now finds himself embittered at seeing that code compromised.

The Contractor asks me to leave him off a short distance from his base. He doesn't want to have to explain what he was doing driving around in Taliban territory in a taxicab. I say goodbye to him near his little mud fort at the edge of the empire and carry on in my little yellow taxi.