

Mullahs on Motorbikes



*Unlike other wars, Afghan wars become serious
only when they are over*

SIR OLAF CAROE

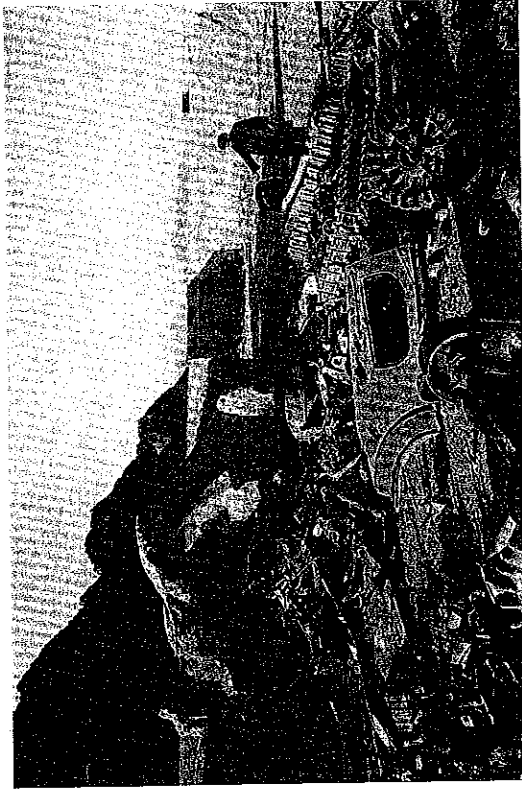
TRAVELLING IN AFGHANISTAN was like wandering through the shadows of shattered things. Khalil Hassani's story had meant more to me than he realised for Afghanistan had left its own dark place in my mind. When he spoke of Kandahar, I pictured a land the colour of dust, its old caravan trails littered with burnt-out tanks and dotted with bombed terracotta villages which from a distance resembled the ruins of some forgotten civilisation and probably looked little different to when Alexander the Great founded the city in 330 BC giving it his name, Iskandar in Arabic. But I saw something else too.

The first time I went to Kandahar I was on the back of a mullah's motorbike and thought it the most desolate place on earth. Nothing but tufts of coarse grass grew on the stony plains and the distant mountains were barren and flesh-coloured. The turban wound round my head offered scant protection from the ancient grit driven into my eyes and mouth on a scorching desert wind that was said by Kandaharis to be so hot as to grill a fish held on an upturned palm.

It was 1988 and the giggling mullahs on motorbikes who taught me to tie a turban and shared their rations of fried okra and stale *nan* bread with me under Soviet tank-fire, would later become the Taliban. No one had heard of the Taliban then, it was just a word in Pashto that meant 'seekers of knowledge' or religious students. And not many journalists went to Kandahar in those days. The journey to Afghanistan's second biggest city was complicated and dangerous, starting off from the remote desert town of Quetta where the earth seemed in a constant state of tremor and to which flights were sporadic.

Most reporters covered the war from Peshawar where there was a five-star hotel and the seven mujaheddin parties fighting the Russians had their headquarters, making it easy to arrange trips 'inside', as we called getting into Afghanistan. There was an American Club where one could drink Budweisers, eat Oreo Cookie ice-cream and listen to middle-aged male correspondents in US Army jackets with bloodstains and charred bullet holes on the back hold court with stories of conflict and 'skirt' from Vietnam to El Salvador. Their eyes had seen so much that they saw nothing, they knew the name and sound of every weapon ever invented, their faces were on the leathery side of rugged and even at breakfast there was Jim Beam on their breath. One of them wore hearing aids which he informed me loudly was because of 'bang bang'; most had children in various places but never carried their photographs, and all of them went to the Philippines for R and R.

It was different for me. I was a young girl in a place where women were regarded as property along with gold and land - the three *z*s of the Pashtuns, *zar*, *zar* and *zamin* - and kept hidden away behind curtained doorways. The closest I had ever come to war was doing a report for Central Television News in Birmingham on a cannon used in the Battle of Waterloo that 'Local Man' had rescued from the sea. I found the weapon names confusing with all the acronyms and numbers and for a long time couldn't even tell the difference



The Kandahar desert had been turned into a battlefield.

between incoming and outgoing fire. I was young enough to believe I could change the world by writing about the injustices that I saw and foolish enough to think that I could be a witness without bearing any responsibility. What I knew of the Afghans was a romanticised vision distilled from Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and various nineteenth-century British accounts such as the first by Mountstuart Elphinstone who went out to parley with the king on behalf of the East India Company in 1809 and wrote, 'their vices are revenge, envy, avarice, rapacity and obstinacy; on the other hand, they are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependents, hospitable, brave, hardy, laborious and prudent.'

After having taken various 'resistance tours' inside from Peshawar, I decided to go to Kandahar largely because I liked the name. Alexander the Great had conquered many peoples and founded a number of cities on his long march from Macedonia towards India, most of which bore some variation of his name. But there was something magical about the name *Kan-dahar*, which pronounced with the stress

on the first syllable and a long breath at the end, seemed to convey a sense of longing for the place.

Kandahar was where everything had started. Under the shimmering turquoise dome that dominates the sand-blown city lies the body of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the young Kandahari warrior who in 1747 became Afghanistan's first king. The mausoleum is covered in deep blue and white tiles behind a small grove of trees, one of which is said to cure toothache, and is a place of pilgrimage. In front of it is a small mosque with a marble vault containing one of the holiest relics in the Islamic World, a *kherqa*, the Sacred Cloak of Prophet Mohammed that was given to Ahmad Shah by Murad Beg, the Emir of Bokhara. The Sacred Cloak is kept locked away, taken out only at times of great crisis¹ but the mausoleum is open and there is a constant line of men leaving their sandals at the door and shuffling through to marvel at the surprisingly long marble tomb and touch the glass case containing Ahmad Shah's brass helmet. Before leaving they bend to kiss a length of pink velvet said to be from his robe. It bears the unmistakable scent of jasmine.

In a land of war, the tomb of Ahmad Shah is a peaceful place. Only the men with stumps for legs and burqa-clad war widows begging at its steps hint at the violence and treachery which has stalked Afghanistan since its birth as a nation-state, founded on treasure stolen from a murdered emperor. Part of that treasure was the famous Koh-i-i-Noor diamond, then said to be worth enough to maintain the whole world for a day and now among the Crown Jewels under twenty-four-hour guard in the Tower of London, stunningly beautiful but blighted by an ancient Hindu curse that the wearer will rule the world but if male will suffer a terrible misfortune.

A member of the war-like Pashtun tribe of Abdalis, Ahmad Shah

¹ Until Mullah Omar took it out in November 1996 and displayed it to a crowd of *ulema* or religious scholars to have himself declared Amir-ul Momineen, Prince of all Islam, the last time had been when the city was struck by a cholera epidemic in the 1930s.

was commander of the bodyguard of Nadir Shah, the great Persian conqueror who in 1738 had captured Kandahar from the Ghilzai, another Pashtun tribe and traditional rivals of the Abdalis. Nadir Shah moved east to take Jalalabad, Peshawar, Lahore and finally Delhi, where angered by locals throwing stones at him, he ordered a bloodbath in which 20,000 died. He left laden with treasures of the Moghuls including the fabled Peacock Throne of Emperor Shah Jahan, creator of the Taj Mahal, which was solid gold with a canopy held up by twelve emerald pillars, on top of which were two peacocks studded with diamonds, rubies and emeralds. Among the precious jewels he packed on his camels was the Koh-i-Noor, named after his exclamation on first seeing the 186-carat stone, describing it as 'koh-i-noor' or 'mountain of light'.

After India, Nadir Shah travelled west, conquering as he went, but with the Koh-i-Noor in his turban, he became more and more ruthless, convinced that everyone was trying to kill him, even his favourite son Raza Quli whom he had blinded. One night in 1747, travelling on yet another military campaign, someone stole into Nadir Shah's tent and stabbed him to death. Ahmad Shah fled the camp with his 4000-strong cavalry and headed to Kandahar, taking much of the emperor's treasury, including the cursed Koh-i-Noor.

Freed from Persian domination, the Abdalis held a *jirga*, a tribal assembly of elders and religious leaders to decide on a ruler. After nine days of discussion they settled upon the twenty-five-year-old Ahmad Shah, partly for his charisma, partly because he was a Saddozai, from the tribe's most distinguished line, partly because a holy man stood up and said he should be, and largely because he had a large army and lots of treasure. A sheaf of wheat was placed on his head as a crown.

Ahmad Shah's affectation of wearing a pearl earring from the looted Moghul treasures led his subjects to call him Durr-i-Durran, Pearl of Pearls, and the royal family became known as the Durrani clan. He set up a *shura* or tribal council to govern the country, and,

quickly realising that the best way to control Pashtun tribes was to indulge their taste for warfare and plunder, he used Nadir Shah's booty and a succession of military adventures to keep them in check. Helped by the fact that to the west Persia was in disarray after Nadir Shah's death, and to the east the Moghul Empire was crumbling, Ahmad Shah ended up carving out the second greatest Muslim empire after the Ottoman Empire, taking Kabul, Peshawar, Attock, Lahore, and eventually Delhi.

Never the most modest of men, he had coins minted with the inscription, 'the Commandment came down from the peerless Almighty to Ahmad the King: Strike coins of silver and gold from the back of fish to the moon'.

After his successes in India, Ahmad Shah moved west to capture Herat which was still under Persian rule, then north of the Hindu Kush to bring under his control the Hazara of Bamiyan, the Turkmen of Asterabad, the Uzbek of Balkh and Kunduz, and the Tajik of Khanabad and Badakshan to create Afghanistan as it is today. But he had to keep returning to India where his territories were threatened by the Hindu Maratha armies from the south. Invading India for a fourth time, he acquired Kashmir and Sindh.

Yet he always missed his homeland. A deeply religious man and warrior-poet, he wrote of Kandahar:

Whatever countries I conquer in the world

I can never forget your beautiful gardens

When I remember the summits of your beautiful mountains

I forget the splendour of the Delhi throne.

Each time he left Kandahar there were plots to overthrow him, often by his own relatives and whenever he returned home from extending his empire, Ahmad Shah would spend the first few days executing dissidents. A later king, Abdur Rahman Khan, would refer to his country as Yaghistan or Land of the Unruly, and as the great Afghan scholar, the late Louis Dupree remarked, 'no Pashtun likes

to be ruled by another, particularly someone from another tribe, sub-tribe or section'.

In an attempt to deter the pretenders, the king started executing not only the plotters but also ten randomly chosen members of each sub-tribe involved, yet the intrigues continued. A sword wound on his nose turned ulcerous and cancer began eating away at his face, leaving him in terrible pain and according to accounts of the time, forced to wear a silver nose, with maggots from the wound dropping into his mouth whenever he ate or drank. The Sikhs raised an army and rebelled in the Punjab, forcing him to return to India a fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth time, twice destroying the Sikh city of Amritsar in his anger but never really succeeding in defeating them. Other parts of his empire broke away, some declaring independence, while Murad Beg, the Emir of Bokhara, took others.

Despairing of the land he had created, in 1772 he died alone and in agony in the Suleyman Mountains east of Kandahar, aged only fifty. He left thirty-six children including twenty-three sons most of whom thought they should be his successor. From then on the Durranis lost Punjab, Sindh, Kashmir and much of Baluchistan as two Durrani branches, the Barakzai and Sadozai – and family members within – tussled for control. With no outsiders to unite against until the first British invasion in 1839, soon everyone was fighting and blinding everyone else for power in each region, fathers against sons, brother against brother, uncle against nephew and one wearer of the Koh-i-Noor after another met a violent death.² They even had a name for it – *badshahgardi*, which means ruler-turning.

But in his heyday Ahmad Shah had ruled an empire stretching

² The Koh-i-noor left Afghanistan when it was given by Shah Shuja to Ranjit Singh, the wily one-eyed ruler of Punjab, as payment for helping restore him to the Kabul throne in 1839, then was appropriated by the British after the defeat of the Sikhs and annexation of the Punjab in 1849. It was the prize exhibit in the Great Exhibition of 1851 and was then recut to the present 109 carats and worn in the crowns of Queen Victoria, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, but no kings for it is still considered unlucky for males.

from the Amu Darya or Oxus River in the north to the Arabian Sea, from Mashad in the west to Delhi in the east, as well as Kashmir, Sindh and most of what is now Baluchistan. One way or another the Durrani dynasty he founded was to rule Afghanistan till the Communist takeover in 1978 and most Afghans regard him as the father of the nation, referring to him as Ahmad Shah Baba.

There was another reason for wanting to go to Kandahar. In Peshawar I had met a direct descendant of Ahmad Shah Abdali, a Kandahari called Hamid Karzai. Educated at a private school in the Indian hill-station of Simla, followed by a master's in political science at Delhi University, he was about thirty and spoke the old-fashioned English of newspapers in the subcontinent, addressing women as 'ma'am' and using expressions such as 'turning turtle' and 'miscreants'.

Hamid was unlike anyone I had ever met. He wore a leather jacket and jeans, yet walked with the bearing of a king. In a city where men did not consider themselves dressed without rocket-propelled grenades or Kalashnikovs across their shoulders, he was polite and gentle and liked reading English classics such as George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. He had a beaked nose and a bald round head that cocked from side to side like a bird as he fixed deep brown eyes upon his listeners. With me he would talk about English music and literature, the feeling that he had lost his youth, and his hatred for Pakistan and his life there. But the greatest passion in his voice came when he spoke of Kandahar with its orchards and running streams, grapes which he said came in forty varieties, not just green and black as I had known in England, and deep-red pomegranates so sweet and luscious that Persian princesses dined on them and lovers wrote poetry about them. He told me too of great tribes and heroic clashes and had a sense of history and being part of it unlike anyone I had ever come across. His eyes would bulge with anger as he talked of centuries-old feuds between his tribe and another.

His tribe were the Popolzai, a Durrani clan that could trace their origins back to the fifteenth century and had given the king the land to build Kandahar as his capital. Once I asked him to tell me their story. 'It's too long,' he laughed, telling me only the part about an Abdali khan who was so old and weak he could no longer mount his horse and beseeched his four sons to help him. The first three all laughed and refused. But the youngest, whose name was Popol, put him on his back and carried him, so when the old man was dying, it was Popol he named as his heir.

Though Hamid was not the eldest of the seven sons of Abdul Ahad Karzai, leader of the Popolzai, he was the only one not to have gone into exile and thus regarded as the probable successor. His brothers all lived in America where they ran a chain of Afghan restaurants called Helmand in Chicago, San Francisco, Boston and Maryland.

He too had been planning to move abroad but after the Soviets took over and imprisoned his father, he abandoned his studies in India to travel to Pakistan and visited a refugee camp near Quetta where he found himself surrounded by hundreds of Popolzai. 'They thought I could help them just because of who I was,' he said. 'But I was who I was only because of them. They were such brave people, it made me feel humble and guilty about my privileged life and I became determined to be the man they thought I was.'

His house in Peshawar bustled with tribal elders, large men with complicated turbans, sitting cross-legged on floor cushions in various rooms, drinking green tea from a pot constantly replenished by a small boy, and unwrapping small silver-foil Hershey Kisses sent by Hamid's brothers. Some of his visitors looked wild and unwashed and seemed from another century entirely to Hamid, but he listened to them with great respect and gave them food and shelter, while he himself lived very simply, using any money he acquired to help his tribesmen.

'I've always had this drive. It's something in me, this great love for the tribe,' he said. Yet growing up he had hated what he called the 'tribal

thing' and had been eager to escape Kandahar and go abroad. Had the Russians not invaded, his dream had been to become a diplomat, perhaps even Foreign Minister one day, but the war had changed everything. His skill was with words rather than guns so he became spokesman for the National Liberation Front of Professor Sibghatullah Mojaddidi, a royalist from a prominent Sufi family and one of the most moderate – and thus worst funded – of the seven leaders.

This was the job he was doing when I first met him in 1988 but by then he was disillusioned with the mujaheddin leadership. It should have been a time of jubilation – the defeated Russians had agreed to leave and their troops would soon be heading back across the Oxus River in a humiliation that would help trigger the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the cost had been enormous – 1.5 million Afghans had lost their lives and more than 4 million become refugees – and the mujaheddin had failed to agree on any credible government to replace the Soviet-backed regime. As far as Hamid was concerned the seven leaders were not interested in the future of their country and had all become corrupt and power-grabbing, people who would have been nothing in the traditional tribal set-up but now lived in palatial houses in Peshawar with fleets of Pajero jeeps and dollar accounts overseas.

Mostly he blamed ISI, in particular General Hamid Gul, the agency's manipulative director who initiated the policy of bringing Arabs to fight in Afghanistan and made no secret of his desire to see his protégé Hekmatyar installed in Kabul running a 'truly Islamic state'. Because US support for the mujaheddin to fight the Russians was a covert CIA operation, ISI had been in charge of distributing all the arms and money as well as providing the Americans with intelligence. The agency was in effect controlling Afghan policy. It was ISI that had created the seven mutually hostile parties back in 1980, following the well-tried British divide-and-rule policy, and it was made clear to refugees that a membership card for Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami was a fast track for obtaining flour and cooking oil

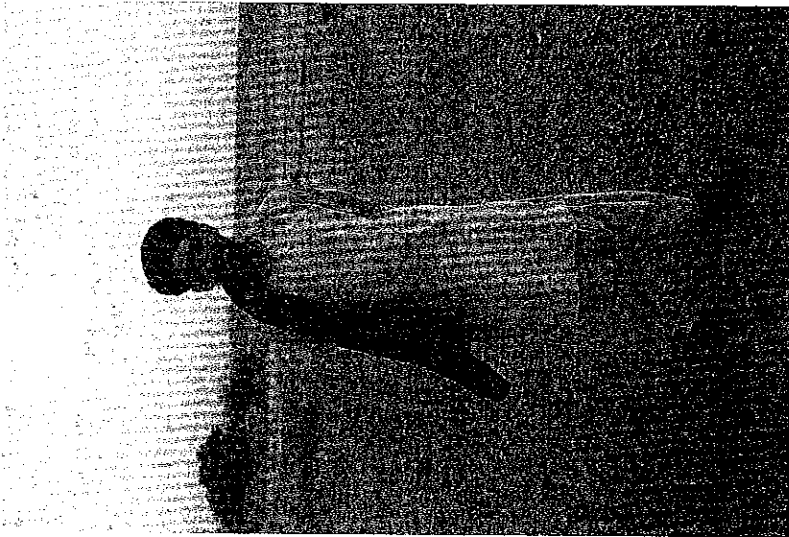
while joining the royalists meant a long wait. ISI was mistrustful of anyone from Kandahar, remembering how the Durranis had once controlled a large part of what was now Pakistan, and refused to recognise Pashtun nationalist organisations. Instead, they diverted the lion's share of aid and weapons to fundamentalists such as Hekmatyar who received half of the US\$6bn provided by the US and Saudi Arabia, telling the Americans quite erroneously that his men were more effective on the battleground.

'The Russians may have destroyed our territory but the Pakistanis have destroyed our liberal culture,' Hamid complained. 'I can never get married in this country because I don't want to subject my wife to this kind of life.' Saddened that the jihad was ending in disarray and he had sacrificed his youth and studies for 'nothing', he often talked about giving it all up and moving to Europe. Instead, increasingly he began to believe that the future of Afghanistan lay with some of the leading commanders and the tribes, the same view I was hearing from Abdul Haq, the young Kabul commander who lived a couple of streets away from me in Peshawar's University Town and where I would often drop in to persuade him to send me with his fighters to Kabul.

'You're just a girl,' Abdul Haq would always say, laughing at my irritation, and then moving on to politics. 'We commanders did our job fighting and expected the leaders to do theirs. Now it seems we might have to do that too,' he grumbled, painfully shifting the artificial foot which he had to wear since stepping on a mine in 1987. 'We have been loyal and are still loyal but if the leaders cannot come together we cannot just sit by and let the country be destroyed.'

One day Hamid told me of an independent group known as the Mullahs Front fighting around Kandahar. He was going to visit and offered to take me with him. 'You must go to Kandahar. That's the real Afghanistan,' he said in his emphatic way, a tic vibrating in his cheek.

* * *



Hamid Karzai in Kandahar, 1988.

Our journey began in Quetta, a small lawless town centred round a bazaar of small shacks from which moneychangers somehow sent money all round the world, merchants displayed sacks of cumin and saffron, and reams of bright silks, and where men wore shirts embroidered with tiny mirrors and jewelled sandals with high heels. It seemed on the very edge of the earth, surrounded by the rifts and caramel-coloured escarpments of the Baluchistan desert, and at the time the only hotel was the New Lourdes. A colonial place in the cantonment with a lush lawn that looked as if it should have peacocks,

its rooms did not appear to have seen a duster since Pakistan's creation in 1947 and were heated by complicated Heath Robinson-style boilers of brass pipes and tin funnels that emitted periodic roaring noises sending the whole contraption rattling. Flushing the toilet flooded the room and the only light came from a lamp with no plug, just bare wires twisted straight into sockets.

My fair hair, green eyes and pale skin made it very hard for me to disguise myself as an Afghan guerrilla and on previous trips across the border, I had travelled as a woman refugee, my face and body hidden by a burqa, and sometimes provided with a small child to hold my hand for authenticity. But the Mullahs Front would apparently be a laughing stock in Kandahar if a woman was seen amongst them so this time I went dressed the same as the fighters I was travelling with, in shalwar kamiz, loose pyjama trousers made of many yards of cotton which hang in folds from the hips tied with pyjama cord and a long shirt, and heavily turbaned, with a grey embroidered Kandahari shawl thrown carelessly over the shoulder.

As always with Afghanistan, the journey, which had been delayed for days, finally started in a great hurry in the dawn hours then involved endless waiting, changing vehicles five times. I began to sympathise with Frank Martin, an Englishman who worked from 1895-1903 as Engineer-in-Chief to king Abdur Rahman then his son Habibullah, and whose account of his travels into the country in the party of an Afghan prince I had been reading. 'It is not in the habit of the people to rush things,' he wrote. 'Their custom is instead to put off all they can until tomorrow, or the day after that for preference.' Unlike the exasperated Mr Martin, we did not have to wait for a man with a drum to go out in front of us, nor another carrying a huge gold embroidered umbrella as sunshade to protect princely skin. Even so the sun was setting by the time we ended up in a Pajero jeep heading out of town, the desert-mountains rising smudged and Sphinx-like in perfect Turner colours either side of us. Apart from Hamid, my travel companions were Abdul Razzak, one of Kandahar's

leading commanders known as the Airport Killer for his daring raids on the airport, and Ratmullah, a chubby sub-commander with an impressively twisted turban, a loud belly laugh, twinkling black eyes and bushy black beard.

Deep into the night, we climbed the Khojak pass, passing trucks gaudily painted with mountain scenes or Pathan beauties and inlaid with intricate metalwork which hid secret compartments. We were in tribal territory and the only industry in these barren lands was smuggling – and abduction. For most of the way the road intertwined with the British-built railway as it twisted in and out of the mountains. According to local legend, the chief engineer committed suicide because he had made a bet with his colleague leading the drilling team from the other side that they would meet in the middle on a certain date. When they did not he thought he had miscalculated and their two tunnels had failed to join up. The day after his death the tunnels met and the 3.2-mile-long Khojak tunnel, the longest in South Asia, now graces Pakistan's five-rupee note.

It was almost midnight by the time we crossed the border to be greeted by the red flares of the heavy guns from nearby Spin Boldak, which the mujaheddin were trying to capture. The blurred face of Yunus Khalis beamed down from a calendar on the wall of the compound where we stopped for the night. One of the fundamentalist leaders, Khalis was a ferocious henna-bearded seventy-year-old with a sixteen-year-old wife, and virulently anti-royalist. Yet Hamid was welcomed with great enthusiasm, everyone coming to pay respects. As we squatted on the floor for dinner with a group of large men after the usual long guttural exchange of Pashto greetings, Abdul Razzak, who was himself a member of Khalis, explained, 'parties mean nothing here. We just go with whoever gives us arms. None of the Peshawar leaders would dare come here.'

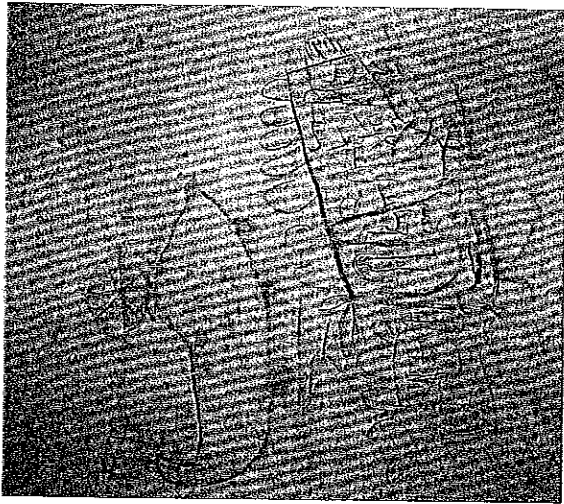
The men laid their Kalashnikovs down by their sides as boys too young to fight brought a pitcher of water and grubby hand-towel for us to wash, going round the room in order of seniority, serving me

last. The only sound was the smack of lips and tongues as we scooped greasy goat stew out of an aluminium bowl with stretchy Afghan bread, washing it down with curd in iced water. On the dried-earth walls our silhouettes flickered in the light of the oil lamp.

It didn't seem very long after we had gone to sleep, huddled on flea-ridden cushions under quilted coverlets in shiny pink and red material, when we were woken by wailing. It was prayer time. Outside, where the daystar had not yet faded from the sky, the men were laying down their shawls on the ground and prostrating themselves, shawls flapping in the wind and rockets thundering in the dust not far away as they held their palms in front of their faces and mouthed the words '*Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*', in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

The boys brought breakfast – a pot of green tea thick with sugar, which they poured into small glasses, boiled sweets from Iran, and a tray of hard bread left from dinner, as well as dry lentils, which the commanders cracked noisily between their teeth. I went outside to brush my teeth in water left from the previous night's hand-washing. Abdul Razzak and some of his mujaheddin were crouched in the early sun, brushing their teeth with twigs or clipping facial hair, using their small round silver snuffboxes as mirrors.

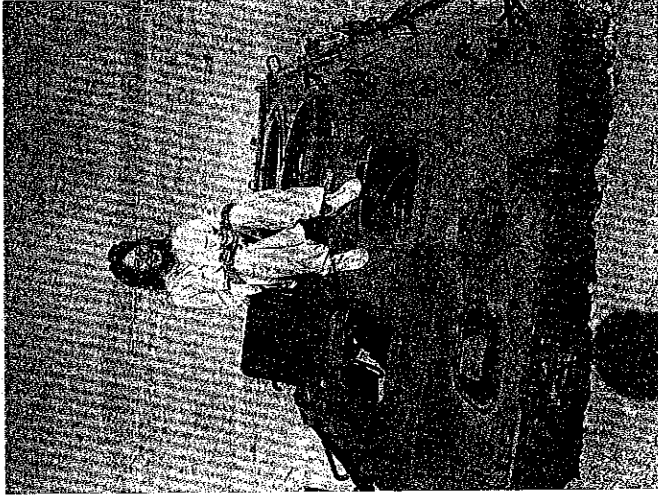
We set off through the desert, not the majestic sands of T.E. Lawrence or Wilfred Thesiger, but endless grey plains which absorbed and amplified the beating sun and abandoned villages that had been turned into battlefields scattered with spent ammunition. In one village we got out and wandered around, identifying the bombed-out remains of the clinic, the prison and the school, one wall covered with children's charcoal drawings of Soviet helicopters shooting down stick people. The mujaheddin leapt onto the burnt-out hull of a tank for me to photograph them, striking poses with their Kalashnikovs and rocket-launchers. Two ragged children suddenly emerged from one of the ruins, hand-in-hand, their faces and eyelashes grey with dust, the only survivors, begging for food. I could not imagine what



they were living on and they fell upon my packet of emergency digestive biscuits, stuffing them into their mouths.

We were supposed to follow in each other's footprints because of land-mines but the dust kept blowing them away. There was dust everywhere, coating my clothes, in my hair, my ears, my fingernails and mouth, the wind lifting it up in columns so that sometimes it was difficult to see, and giving everything a gritty feel. It was at least 40°C, and my thirst made my head ache, but instead of water Ratmul-lah appeared clutching marigolds which he shyly presented me for my hair and laughed when I tucked them behind my ears. Like many mujaheddin, I often saw him walking around casually clutching a flower, sometimes hand-in-hand with a friend. Later, when I got to know him better, I asked him why they loved flowers so much and he replied; 'because they are peace and beauty and everything we have lost'.

* * *



The author on a destroyed Soviet tank, near Kandahar, 1988.

Our destination was Abdul Razzak's secret training camp cum *madrasa* or religious school in an area called Khunderab, inside a narrow gorge hidden by overhanging mountains, the entrance blasted out of the rock with dynamite. A guard sat at a table, an old black telephone in front of him. Abdul Razzak explained it was part of a wireless phone system captured from the Russians, and enabled camp-guards to call a military post on top of the mountains where they had men stationed with anti-aircraft guns if an enemy approached.

The camp, which acted as a training and rest camp for fighters for the Mullahs Front, had existed for about a year, moving there after the previous site was bombed by Soviet Mig 17s for seventy-four hours continuously, destroying all their weapons and killing fifty men. 'There were forty planes dropping 3000 bombs,' said one man



with what I presumed was the usual Afghan exaggeration of multiplying everything by ten, 'it was the only day we couldn't pray.'

Prayer was an important feature of camp-life. The camp was home to eighty men and forty-two students aged from eight to eighteen and Abdul Razzak took me to see the school where children studied the Koran and Arabic. We watched a recitation lesson, boys rocking back and forth as they intoned the words of the Koran, and Abdul Razzak gave some religious books he had brought from Quetta to the white-bearded teacher. Hamid told me that for boys educated in *madrasas*, the rocking becomes such a habit that later in life they cannot read without it. Had we but known it, we were seeing the incipient Taliban. In my diary I wrote: 'Mohammad Jan is eight. After Koranic lessons he learns how to load a BM12.'

Next we saw the boys' dormitory - camouflaged from above with a roof of tree branches and hay that allowed air to circulate, keeping it cool inside. A small boy sat in the doorway cleaning a pile of Kalashnikovs. There seemed to be weaponry everywhere. 'We have thirty-five RPG7, forty-two RR82mm recoil rifles, seven anti-aircraft

guns,' said Razzak. They also had two Stinger missiles left of an initial six which they received in November 1987, kept under twenty-four-hour guard, though they happily took them out to pose for photographs. Nine hundred of these heat-seeking missiles had been provided by the Americans to the resistance in 1986-7 along with British Blowpipes and were thought to have turned the tide of the war by countering the threat of Soviet air superiority though many were instead sold on to Iran, forcing the CIA to launch a buyback programme which did not stop them later turning up everywhere from Angola to Algeria.

The camp was run by Abdul Razzak's friend Khadi Mohammad Gul who said he was twenty-eight but looked at least ten years older. He told me he had wanted to be a mullah, a village priest, but had joined the resistance and in 1983 been captured by the Soviets and sent to Pul-i-Charki, the notorious prison on the outskirts of Kabul. Run by KHAD, the East-German trained Afghan secret police, it held around 10,000 political dissidents. He was there for four years until he was released in a prisoner swap when Razzak captured a top commander from the Afghan regime.

Survivors of Pul-i-Charki were rare and I asked him about life there. 'We knew whenever the Soviets had suffered heavy casualties because they would take a whole lot of prisoners, remove their blood for transfusions then shoot them,' he said. He also told of awful tortures. 'Sometimes it would be electric shocks to the nose, ears, teeth and genitals, so many that now I am impotent. Other times they tied us to trees with our feet on broken glass and left us for several days until the wounds went rotten and there were maggots inside. Another punishment was to give us food with laxative or something bad in to cause diarrhoea then leave us in a room one meter square so we would have to live in our own excreta for days. Sometimes at night they would call someone's name and we would know he was being shot but we would say "bye!" as if he was going for a trip but we knew he'd never come back.'

The words hung heavily in the air and we sat there for a while in silence. Then I asked to see the rest of the camp. There was a clinic with a few lint bandages and a box of aspirins where a doctor was cleaning a horrible suppurating wound on the thigh of a fighter who sat silently despite the agonising treatment, and a bakery where young boys were slapping flat wide oblongs of dough onto the wall of a large clay pot buried in the ground with hot coals in the bottom to make *nani*, the traditional unleavened bread. Some other boys were scrubbing clothes in the small river and it was hard not to notice the red staining the water. A few goats and sheep were grazing and there was a small plantation of okra or ladyfingers as well as several apple trees so the camp was more or less self-sufficient.



The camp had strict rules, one of which was 'men must be taught religious teachings as much as possible'. Everyone was checked at the gate and there were heavy penalties for sneaking out weapons or ammunition.³ 'You see we are not like those other groups which steal

³ 'Salah furush', or weapons seller, had become a term of abuse in Afghanistan as many commanders enriched themselves by selling off arms or signing false receipts to the ISI for more arms than they actually received, getting a kickback in return.

the money and sell the arms to the Iranians,' said Gul. 'This is what jihad is meant to be.' He pointed out that many villagers used the clinic, which was the only medical facility for perhaps fifty miles, and all wanted their boys to be accepted to study at the school as free board was provided.

It was the first time I had seen a mujaheddin group making an effort to provide facilities to civilians. At the main gate as we were leaving, an exhausted ten-year-old boy named Safa Mohammed had just arrived 'to join the resistance' after a fourteen-hour walk through the mountains. 'My father was killed by the Russians and I ran away from my mother,' he said. 'First I want to study but when I grow up I will carry a gun and kill Soviets.'

It was evening as we drove away, bumping across rutted mountain tracks, headlights off to avoid being spotted by a Russian plane. The area was heavily mined so two brave men walked in front of the wheels of the jeeps, testing the ground as we followed slowly behind. Of all the many ways to die or be injured in Afghanistan, mines were the scariest. The Soviets had scattered them everywhere, including what the mujaheddin called jumping mines, designed to bounce up and explode in the genitals, and even some disguised as pens and dolls to entice children. Most were butterfly mines dropped from the air, which maimed rather than killed and thus took out more resistance firepower as men would be needed to carry the victim. No one knew how many mines there were – the latest figure from the US State Department was more than ten million – nor their whereabouts, for contrary to all rules of warfare the Soviets had not kept maps.

I had seen far too many victims in the hospitals of Peshawar with legs or arms blown off, eyes missing or guts hanging out, as well as all the people in the bazaars and refugee camps with stumps for limbs and had taken to identifying interviewees in my notebooks as 'man

with beard and *two eyes*. My head throbbed from concentrating as I scoured the land in front for mines and scanned the skies, for somewhere among the many stars there might be a Soviet Mig.

It was 2.30 a.m. when we arrived at our destination of Arghandab, a valley of orchards about ten miles west of Kandahar which Alexander the Great had used as a camp for his army of 30,000 men and elephants and was now an important base of the resistance. Mujaheddin love gadgets and someone turned on flashing fairy lights to herald our arrival after all our efforts to be invisible. The rumble of guns was not far off but I fell asleep to the soothing sound of running water from a river.

As we breakfasted the next morning on salted pomegranate pips, I saw that the whole area was pitted with holes from bombs, in between which were clusters of mujaheddin graves made from little piles of stones with small tattered green flags stuck on top. The shelling was relentless, sometimes so near that dust sprayed over us, but none of the mujaheddin sitting around seemed to pay any attention to it. Hamid told me that when he was growing up this had been a favourite picnic spot with its orchards of apricots, pomegranates, peaches, figs and mulberry trees but that was hard to imagine. The crop had all been destroyed in the fighting or rotted because there was no labour for picking and the Russians had destroyed the *karez*, or irrigation channels to stop the mujaheddin using them for cover. As we talked a delegation of Popolzai arrived, led by Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, overall commander of the Mullahs Front, all of whom seemed overjoyed to see Hamid, embracing him to the right, to the left and right again in the traditional way, then shaking his hand.

I began to realise the importance of his visit and the risk he was taking. He had told me the previous day that he was high up on the Soviet hit list and I wondered whether the fact that we were bombed everywhere we stopped was really a coincidence. I wished he wouldn't keep radioing everyone to say we had arrived. That morning as we sat

under a tent of camouflage material, he told me, 'The first casualties in Kandahar were forty from my family. The four most important were taken to the Governor's house, laid on a big rug and huge rocks thrown on them from above to smash their skulls. Afterwards the carpets had to be taken to Bawalpur to be washed.'

There was a roar of engines and several turbaned men on motorbikes shot into the orchard. It was incongruous seeing these medieval bearded figures on their Yamaha motors and I started to laugh, but Hamid got up to greet the heaviest one. I recognised Ratmullah, who had left us the previous day and was now back with some of his fellow-fighters.

'The bikes are the best way to get around quickly and not to be seen,' he explained as he dismounted. 'Anything bigger gets picked out and shot.' When there was a lull in the shelling, we set off on the motorbikes, bumping across plains which looked like the set of a war movie crisscrossed with muddy trenches, something I had never seen before in Afghanistan. I held on to the back of Ratmullah's bike, shouting 'you're Allah's Angels!' which he didn't understand but we both laughed, my turban unravelling all round my face as we hurtled along.

Passing a tall concrete silo for storing wheat, we were suddenly riding along a paved highway, the Herat-Kandahar road. The stretch we were on was controlled by mujaheddin and just in front of a blue-domed tomb which had somehow survived intact and that housed a mujaheddin camp, they had built a wall along the road consisting of tanks and armoured personnel vehicles turned on their sides, moving each one into place after it had been destroyed. I counted eighty-two. It felt very exposed particularly as we came to a bend in the road beyond which we could not see. 'Is this safe?' I shouted to Hamid but his words were lost in the wind and I only caught what sounded like helicopter. Later he told me he had said we were fine as long as no helicopters came in which case we were dead.

It was a relief when we turned off the road and rode through some



Motorbikes were less likely to be spotted by Soviet planes.

orchards of rotting pomegranates. In the distance we could see plumes of thick black smoke. Finally we came to Malajat, an area that had seen so much fighting that all its inhabitants had fled, leaving just the resistance. The mujaheddin post where we were to stay was the homeliest I had seen, the usual earthen-walled house but with a garden decorated with pots of pink and red geraniums and a small shed which turned out to be an improvised shower-room where one stood under an upside-down water bucket full of holes.

The commander of the post was Bor Jan, a squat man with a shaved head who looked like a friar in his black robes and served us green tea and boiled sweets using a Russian parachute as a tablecloth. He had been an officer in the Afghan army but at the time of the Communist takeover went into a *madrassa* where he joined forces with fellow religious students Abdul Razzak and Mullah Mohammed Rabbani. 'Of the original ninety persons there are only eight of us left,' he said. 'I cannot describe the suffering.'

'We went to join Hiarakat of Maulvi Mohammed Nabbi Moham-

medi because at the beginning that was the most powerful group militarily. To start with we just had a few guns from the gun-shops at Darra [a Pakistani tribal town famous for copying guns] but we captured more and slowly spread. We were the first mujaheddin to do conventional fighting – trench warfare – because the terrain here is not suitable for guerrilla methods. In 1982 we left Harakat and joined Khalis to get better arms.

'The Front was started by Abdul Razzak and he sent sub-commanders to various districts whom he had recruited directly and pays all their expenses. Now we have two thousand people in three areas – Argandab, Malajat and Zabul.'

I asked about the command structure and Bor Jan explained; 'We communicate by letter because we don't have radios and even if we did maybe they wouldn't be safe. Usually we carry out joint operations where each sub-commander brings five or ten men and then the spoils are divided. Disputes are resolved through local systems of elders or religious scholars but if that fails they go to a special Islamic court where a man called Maulvi Pasani decides.'

All of them were very bitter about Pakistan and the Peshawar leaders. 'For every one rupee aid given to the resistance, we get one *paisa*. We only have two clinics for our wounded in Quetta which is two days away while there are hundreds in Peshawar.'

Although Bor Jan claimed to be helped by the civilians inside the town, he said his men often went hungry. 'Once during heavy Soviet bombing we had no food for twenty-five days and we lived on grapes. Now we keep leftover bread in bags and store it for hard times.' He pulled out a sack to show us and I felt a piece of the bread. It was rock hard. 'Last winter we lived on this for one hundred and eighty-two days,' he said.

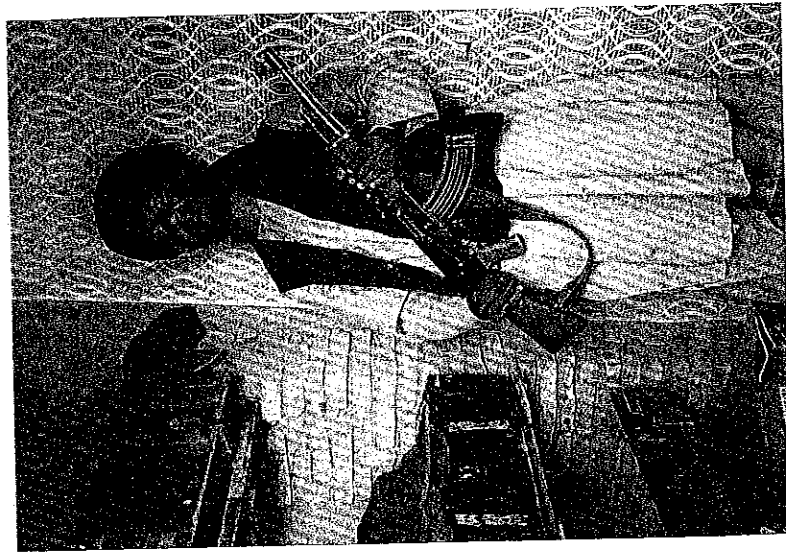
We stayed at Bor Jan's post for about a week. I was not allowed to venture outside the post as it was made clear that it would look extremely bad for the Mullahs Front if it got out to anyone, particularly other mujaheddin, that they were harbouring a Western woman.

They seemed far more worried about this than about being attacked by the Russians. I grew to hate my turban, which was hot and heavy in the boiling desert sun, my hair damp and sweaty underneath, but I was never allowed to remove it. 'Remember, you are a Kandahari boy,' they said to me, something I discovered had hazards of its own in a region where men are known for their liking of young male flesh.

One afternoon another motorbike roared up and we were joined by Ehsanullah Ehsan Khan, another Popalzai, whom everyone called Khan Aga or Uncle Khan. Frowning at me, he said he was the son of Saleh Mohammed Khan who initiated the 1954 insurgency against the liberation of women and burnt the movie hall and girls' school. 'The Communists took him to the Governor's house and dropped a stone on his head,' he added.

There was not much to do. Once we went on a crazy night-time raid on a government defence post in the centre of the city which involved us leaving the motorbikes in a flour-mill, tiptoeing past a Communist post so close that we could hear the radio inside, then hiding in the woodcutters' bazaar until a signal was given at which everyone fired their weapons then fled back through the empty streets and along the ridges between irrigation canals.

Mostly we did nothing. I became accustomed to sitting in Bor Jan's garden writing my diary with bullets whizzing one side and rockets the other, and chatting to his men. When they were not cleaning their guns, clipping their nose-hairs or tending their beloved flowers, those that were literate would read the Koran. There was none of the hashish smoking I had encountered on previous trips though plenty of chewing – and spitting – of tobacco. I was provided with a Kalashnikov-wielding bodyguard, a solemn-faced nineteen-year-old called Abdul Wasei to stand in front of the door while I washed off my coating of dust in the bucket-shower, which after a week without washing, felt like a five-star bath. They even made me a bed, which was wonderful until I realised that I was sleeping on boxes of ammunition.



Abdul Wasei, a nineteen-year-old former raisin cleaner who was my bodyguard.

Ratmullah had found a little sparrow, which he tied by string to a multi-barrel rocket-launcher and it would jump around squawking. Some of the fighters amused themselves by firing their Kalashnikovs near it and betting how high it would jump.

One day Bor Jan told us we were going to attack the airport. The plan was to depart at dawn but we left in the late morning, about twenty of us, all on motorbikes. I sat behind Ratmullah, trying to



Ratmullah.

balance without touching his body so as not to offend him and consequently almost falling off. It felt good finally to be outside the post until in a field of green corn we passed an abandoned tractor, the driver's body hanging awkwardly over the side. His brains had been blown out.

We hid the bikes in a branch-covered hole in a mulberry wood and, passing under a Koran held up by Ratmullah, we ran through the trees and down into one of the trenches that the mujaheddin had dug around the city. In the distance were some hills, beyond which

was the airport. Some of the men took up position behind the trench in a tower used to dry grapes and began firing rockets at the airport, hoping to blow up a plane or an oil-tanker, though it seemed to me much too far away.

A shout went up and I just caught the fleeting panic on Ratmullah's usually serene face before he pulled me to the ground under his huge weight. Two Russian tanks had appeared on the crest of the hill and were rolling down towards us. There was a dull thud as one of them fired and the grape tower behind us went up in smoke. As hot dust and rubble rained down on us Abdul Wasei dragged me into a shelter dug into the side of the trench. We could hear the cries and whimpers of the wounded but there was nothing we could do. If we emerged from the trench, we would be shot.

For two days we stayed there trapped while the tanks resolutely refused to go away. The cries behind us stopped and the silence was almost worse. We had nothing to eat or drink and my tongue felt thick in my mouth. There was a pool of muddy water in the trench and the others scooped it up with their hands and drank. Dead mosquitoes were floating on top but in the end I gulped down the dusty-tasting water, wryly remembering the British diplomat in Islamabad who had advised me 'whatever you do, take your own cup to Afghanistan to avoid catching anything'. Ratmullah suddenly jabbered excitedly in Pashto, holding something up in his chubby hands. It was a mud-crab. I watched in horror as he bit into it, making noises of delight. Soon everyone was looking for mud-crabs and chewing them happily.

Finally on the second day the tanks retreated back up the hill, presumably deciding we must all be dead. We ran crouching along the trench then out and back into the mulberry woods where our bikes were still where we had left them. When we got back to the post and were sitting drinking green tea, I put on my radio. After the usual crackle and static, I found BBC World Service and the



Eating mud crabs in the trenches.

unmistakable gravelly voice of Louis Armstrong singing *What a Wonderful World*. It was one of those moments you know you will never forget. Exhilarated at still being alive, I asked Abdul Wasei if he was ever scared. He shook his head. 'That would bring dishonour on my family. A coward running away will not be buried in Muslim rites. Instead he becomes a ghost so will never reach Paradise.'

That night as it was our last dinner before leaving, we had rice with little bits of meat and bone, eaten scooped up in our hands.

The next day, on the way back to Pakistan, I realised that the sparrow had disappeared.

The more times I went into Afghanistan to cover the war the more I realised that there were many realities and the best I could hope for was a few fragments, never the big picture. But always within a few days of returning 'outside' to the comfort of Peshawar and the luxury of plentiful food and clean clothes, there would come an aching hollowness and I would spend all my time trying to get back inside. War was an addiction and I was badly hooked.

'No foreign editor is worth dying for,' said someone older and wiser who saw what was happening to me but I laughed, downed shots of the smuggled vodka we referred to as 'Gorbachev' and went swimming at midnight in the Pearl Continental pool to the outrage of the hotel management. The ragtag mujaheddin of the mountains with their plastic sandals and Lee Enfield rifles were defeating the powerful Red Army with all their tanks and helicopter gunships and these were glory days.

That was before Jalalabad.

Jalalabad was different. By then it was March 1989 and the Russians had finished withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan. After years of guerrilla warfare the pressure was on the mujaheddin to show that they could capture and control a town. 'It's time to fish or cut bait,' said an American diplomat with a southern twang at the weekly 'Sitrep' and we knew it was battle on. Kabul was the ultimate prize, but snug in its nest of tall mountains, the city presented too difficult a target. So the royal winter capital of Jalalabad was chosen as it was only fifty-eight miles from the Pakistan border and thus logistically easy. There were no secrets in Peshawar though plenty of misinformation and rumour. Everyone knew that the Pakistani military advisors were working on a plan. We all wanted to be the first one there.

One evening when I was in Islamabad the phone-call came. 'It's starting.' Quickly I dressed in my mujaheddin gear of shalwar kamiz, rubbed permanganate powder mixed with earth into my skin to darken it, tucked my hair into a flat wool *pakol* cap, and wrapped a woollen shawl around my shoulders. By then, as a fully paid-up member of the War Junkies Club I also had a mud-spattered US army jacket. I grabbed my small rucksack and jumped into my little Suzuki car weaving my way through the camels and arms trucks up the Grand Trunk Road to Peshawar to meet with the group of guerrillas I was planning to travel with. They had bad news. The border had been closed by ISI and no journalists were to be allowed across.

The commander was a friend and willing to take the risk so we left immediately, crammed in the back of a jeep, up the Khyber Pass, a twenty-five-mile journey through narrow gaps in craggy mountains decorated with pennants of the Khyber Rifles and other frontier forces familiar from British history. The mountains were barren and not spectacularly high but it was always a thrilling drive, recalling the various British misadventures starting in 1839 when British troops marched up here on the way to the First Afghan War which ended in disaster in 1842, and back again in 1878 for the Second when they were again forced to withdraw. Each time hundreds of men had been killed just getting through this pass, controlled then as now by the murderous Afridi tribe famous for smuggling and complete untrustworthiness. Many of these men were buried near the Masjid mosque at the top of the pass. Nearby, at the Torkham border post, ISI were out in large numbers. An officer jumped in the back and shone his torch on our faces. I had my head down, my shawl covering me as much as possible.

'You're not a mujahid!' he spat, hauling me out, 'you're a Britisher!' As my mujaheddin friends zigzagged across the border towards battle, I was unceremoniously taken back to Peshawar in the back of a police van. I was furious, crazed and desperate to get to Jalalabad. It was little comfort to find that none of the journalists were getting in. Famous war correspondents were pacing about hotel lobbies, shout-

ing at their fixers and interpreters and waving wads of dollars. ISI had told the mujaheddin that they would be fined \$2000 if a journalist was found with them so most were refusing even to try.

That night I visited all my friends and contacts, pleading to be taken across the border. Speed was of the essence and the usual ways of going by foot or donkey along smugglers' paths over the mountains would take too long. Then my friend Azim came up with an idea. He had a fleet of ambulances that were going back and forth to ferry the wounded and I could hide under the floor. He lifted up one of the floor cushions and I curled in the space while he piled blankets and medicines on top of me. It was perfect.

We left before daybreak, last in a convoy of three ambulances. It took us about two hours back up the Khyber Pass to reach Torkham. I held my breath as I heard the doors being opened but we were waved straight across with only a cursory glance into the back of the ambulance. The blankets under which I lay were saturated with disinfectant so by the time we got into Afghanistan and I could emerge into daylight I was high on the fumes.

The men driving the ambulances were delighted by the success of the plan, laughing at how we had fooled the Pakistanis. The air always seemed lighter and cleaner the moment one crossed the border and the scent of the pines and spruces of the Spinghar Mountains began to clear my head.

In the first ambulance was a boy called Naem with the stubbly beginnings of a beard who picked a pink flower, which he shyly offered to me. 'It must be orange blossom season in Jalalabad,' he said as we sat on the ground looking down across the vast plain. 'My mother told me that before the war every year at this time poets from all over the country would gather here to read poems dedicated to the beauty of the orange blossoms.'

He told me that he was working as a medic rather than a fighter because his father and elder brothers had been made *shahed* in the war and so he was looking after his mother and sisters, but he really

wanted to fight. It didn't seem odd to me. It was too far away to smell the oranges but in the distance I could just make out the green trees of Afghanistan's garden city and remembered the famous oil painting of Dr William Brydon arriving slumped over his exhausted horse at the gates of the garrison, the only survivor of 16,000 British fleeing from Kabul back in 1842 including women and children.⁴ He had been allowed to live by the Afghan forces in accordance with the orders of their commander Akbar Khan, son of the former ruler Dost Mohammad whom the British had unseated, to 'annihilate the whole army except one man who would reach Jalalabad to tell the tale'. The doctor's report recounted in chilling detail how his fellow officers and their families and orderlies had been mown down by gummen on mountaintops as they fled the ninety miles through narrow snowy passes. So many were killed that when the British Army of Retribution marched back this way a year later they wrote of their gun carriages crunching over the bones and skeletons. These plains had seen so much death, and sitting on that hilltop, listening to the far-off sounds of war, the hum of planes and pops and crashes of tank-fire and rockets followed by puffs of grey smoke on the horizon, I felt the familiar rush of adrenalin.

We stopped for a while at an earth-walled mujaheddin post in Ghaziabad, about twenty miles outside Jalalabad, for a glass of green tea drunk with boiled sweets in place of sugar. There were hundreds of men with Kalashnikovs milling around, eyes rimmed with black kohl for battle, many chewing *naswar*, opium-laced tobacco, which they then spat out noisily. The news from the front was not good. In the first few hours the previous day, the mujaheddin had captured several government outposts, southeast of the city, including

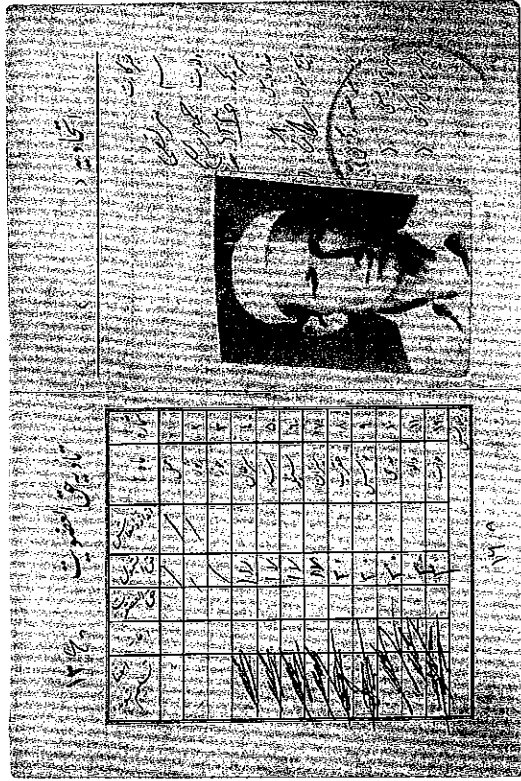
⁴ Although Dr Brydon is generally remembered as the only survivor, in fact a few hundred Indian soldiers and camp followers did stagger into Jalalabad or back to Kabul a few days later, while some of the British women and children and married officers were taken hostage on the fifth day by Akbar who took them to Bamayan where they were rescued by the Army of Retribution nine months later.

Samarkhel which was headquarters of the feared Eleventh Division, and it had been easier than expected. 'They just fled,' said one commander who had taken part. But as the fighting had progressed to the perimeter of Jalalabad airport, the regime had sent in reinforcements from Kabul. The Afghan airforce that the Americans had confidently pronounced useless now the Russian pilots had left was flying skilfully, and it was looking bad.

Ahead we could see columns of smoke rising and hear the dull rumble of bombing. Sher Ali, the medic in my ambulance picked up a clutch of bullets from the floor. 'See,' he grinned. 'That was last time.' He pointed to a string of holes along the rear door. He wasn't smiling for long. As we neared a small stone bridge over the Kabul River which flows through the centre of Jalalabad, the whine of aircraft suddenly grew louder and the sky darkened as a bomber-jet hummed low like an enormous grey moth over our heads. Our ambulance screeched to a halt off the road and we all jumped out and scrambled down the stony slope. For a moment everything seemed to stop. My heart was thudding so hard I could not hear anything outside, just a voice in my mind praying for survival. Then there was a loud explosion and scraps of dust and rubble flew all around us and the plane was gone. There was an eerie moment of complete silence then a stray dog started whining and cluster bombs were dropping sending up mushrooms of smoke and seeming to bounce towards us. Then I saw. Almost in slow motion on the road in front the first ambulance had been hit and exploded into orange flame. No one could have survived. Still tucked behind my ear was the pink flower that Naem had given me only an hour or so earlier.

I was horrified but not as much as I should have been. All I could think of was getting to the front. When the other ambulances decided to turn back, I was incredulous. 'It's too dangerous,' said Sher Ali, 'we have to look after you. Mr Azim would be very angry.'

'But you're ambulances!' I protested, 'you're supposed to go to dangerous places and pick up the wounded.'



There was no persuading them. We headed back toward Pakistan at high speed. In the end after furious arguments they let me off back at the mujaheddin post where I begged everyone coming through to take me to the front. Eventually a group of fighters arrived from Peshawar under the command of Rahim Wardak, whom I knew, so they agreed I could go with them.

At Samarkhel we stopped and walked around the captured government post, half-eaten meals testimony to the speed with which the forces of the regime had fled. There were dead bodies in a cornfield lying on their backs like broken puppets. A red food-ration book was lying by the side of one and I picked it up.

We were getting nearer to the noise of battle and close to the airport we came upon an exodus of people on donkeys and foot. There were hundreds, thousands of them. Mostly women with children, a few belongings bundled up in scarves. Many were bleeding and wounded or dragging half-dead people on carts behind them. It was clear what was happening. The 200,000 civilians of the former Moghul city that had once been a place of palaces and gardens were being

caught between the mujaheddin rockets coming into the city and the Afghan airforce bombing of the roads. It was what commanders like my friend Abdul Haq, who had been against the battle, had predicted would happen. In those few days 10,000 people were killed, the biggest single death toll of the whole war.

I was scribbling non-stop in my little notebook. I had a great story. But the refugees, seeing a western woman, presumed I was a doctor. I was surrounded by people, then dragged to one side of the road. A weeping woman was crouched over her young daughter laid out by a clump of witch's hair. Her eyes were open, a pale limpid green but there was a film over them and a waxiness to her face. I guessed she must have been about seven. The woman lifted up a cloth. The girl's insides were hanging out of a hole in her stomach.

'What happened?' I asked, pen poised, not looking too closely.

'She was hit by a rocket while fetching water. Please, you take her in your jeep to Peshawar. If she dies it is too much for my mind. Her father had been killed and her brothers have not come since the fighting began two days ago. Now it is just us. Please by the grace of Allah help us.'

I made notes then started to walk away. I had to get to where the action was. I wasn't getting the point that it was all around us.

The woman pulled at my sleeve. There was a heady perfume in the air, not from the orange blossom which was still only in bud, but from crimson and yellow narcissi growing nearby and often sold in the bazaar in Peshawar. The flowers were meant to signify hope and the coming of spring.

'Her name is Lela,' she said, 'please you can help us.'

'I'm sorry. I am not a doctor,' I said as I got back in the Pajero with the mujaheddin who had been signalling impatiently. We drove off leaving the woman staring disbelieving after us, her arms in the air in a gesture of supplication. It was a picture that would stay frozen in my mind and later sometimes come to me in the unlikelyst places, ice-skating under the Christmas tree of the Rockefeller Center and

seeing a young girl with head back and green eyes shining as her mother twirled her round and round.

It turned out there wasn't really a front, just a mess in which everyone was trying to survive and turning on each other, and for which later everyone would blame everyone else, the commanders saying they had never wanted to fight and were not equipped or trained for such a frontal assault. The previous year General Zia had promised Jalalabad as a Christmas present to Congressman Charlie Wilson, a frequent visitor to Peshawar and fervent supporter of the war against the Communist Russians. But Zia was dead now after an explosion brought down his plane, so you couldn't blame him.

The Soviet ambassador in Kabul, Yuli Vorontsov, told me a few months later that 'the amount of ammunition spent in Jalalabad was four times that spent in the battle of Stalingrad because unlike the German and Soviet armies the Afghans are getting it for free and so are not economical'.

In the midst of it all as we were crouching down trying not to get hit by bullets that may well have been from our side, I felt the man next to me stiffen. I followed his gaze and saw an ISI colonel we all recognised from Peshawar. Rahim Wardak, the commander, was furious and strode towards him, said something and walked back. The ISI man looked stunned so I asked Rahim what he had said. 'I asked him "How do you who have never won a war, dare try and order us who have never lost one?"' he replied. Later, much later, I read that Osama bin Laden was also there in that battle and was so shocked by the needless slaughter of both civilians and mujaheddin that he became convinced that it was part of a US conspiracy implemented through the Pakistanis to discredit and end the jihad.

Whatever your point of view you couldn't be part of Jalalabad and not be affected.

War wasn't beautiful at all. It was the ugliest thing I had ever seen and it made me do the ugliest thing I had ever done. The real story of war wasn't about the firing and the fighting, some *Boy's Own*

adventure of goodies and baddies. It wasn't about sitting around in bars making up songs about the mujaheddin we called 'The Gucci Muj' with their designer camouflage and pens made from AK47 bullets. It was about the people, the Naems and Lelas, the sons and daughters, the mothers and fathers. I had let someone die and I knew however far away I went there would be no forgetting.

I had never gone back to Afghanistan after that. The world had used and forgotten Afghanistan and it gave me an excuse to pretend I had forgotten too.