

BEYOND BULLETS



A PHOTO
JOURNAL OF
AFGHANISTAN

BY RAFAŁ GERSZAK WITH DAWN HUNTER

BEYOND BULLETS



A PHOTO
JOURNAL OF
AFGHANISTAN

BY RAFAŁ GERSZAK
WITH DAWN HUNTER



annick press
toronto + new york + vancouver



FOREWORD

"Ding!" It looks like such an inoffensive word. Four letters, one syllable, impossible to speak without a sing-song tone, an inflection point for a child's story. Amazing how our words capture so little of what happens in Afghanistan. "Ding" hardly describes the sound of a bullet fired from a Kalashnikov rifle narrowly missing you, striking metal with a high note so pure that it would seem musical in another context. "Ding! ding! ding! ding!" A terrifying succession of notes. Those are the words Rafal Gerszak uses to describe the sound of gunfire raking his vehicle during an ambush. For me, his writing evokes all the intensity of battle, because we have shared many of the same experiences. I've also listened to the ping of bullets off armour near my head, also heard a bullet smack a thick window in front of my nose, also leapt out of bed after the impact of a rocket nearby. Like him, too, I sense that language fails when we talk about war. We cannot tell you about the full experience, because nothing quite says it. "The smells, the sounds, the chaos—it's impossible to describe," he writes, and unfortunately he is correct. I've just finished writing a book of my own, about travels in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2009, and often felt despair at the inadequacy of my words.

Photography has always been a better medium for documenting war, and Rafal's powerful images convey things that do not fit comfortably into a paragraph. The man painting

a white bird onto the raw concrete bulk of a blast wall reminds me of all the times Afghans eked a little beauty out of their harsh surroundings: the rifles decorated with fake flowers, the trucks painted with garden scenes as they rumbled through empty desert. You do not need to feel the dry furnace of Afghan summer to appreciate how a boy yearns for water in the moment before he dives into a pool. You don't need a writer like me to tell you the story of a woman's survival—her suffering, her escapes—when you see the decades of worry on her face. Many other photographers have aimed their cameras at identical scenes; I've taken thousands of my own snapshots in similar places, but somehow none of my images show Afghanistan's magic. I'm not sure how he did it, but Rafal manages to distill some of that essence with his lens. His photos reveal a country in motion, off-balance, always reeling in aftermath or tense with anticipation of the next incident. My friends and relatives ask me what it's like in Afghanistan, and my summary is the same as Rafal's: "It's a mess." How can I elaborate? Maybe next time, I'll pull out a copy of this book and show them his photographs. They spell out the awful situation, with grace and simplicity.

Graeme Smith
The Globe and Mail
Istanbul, Feb. 2011





I am a photojournalist who has worked with news agencies, media outlets, magazines, newspapers, websites, and galleries. For a long time I specialized in covering various topics at home through my photography. Then, in 2008, I moved to Afghanistan. At first, I tried to go to Afghanistan with the Canadian military—journalists can be embedded with a military unit, which means we live and travel with them. I was put on a waiting list and told it would take more than a year.

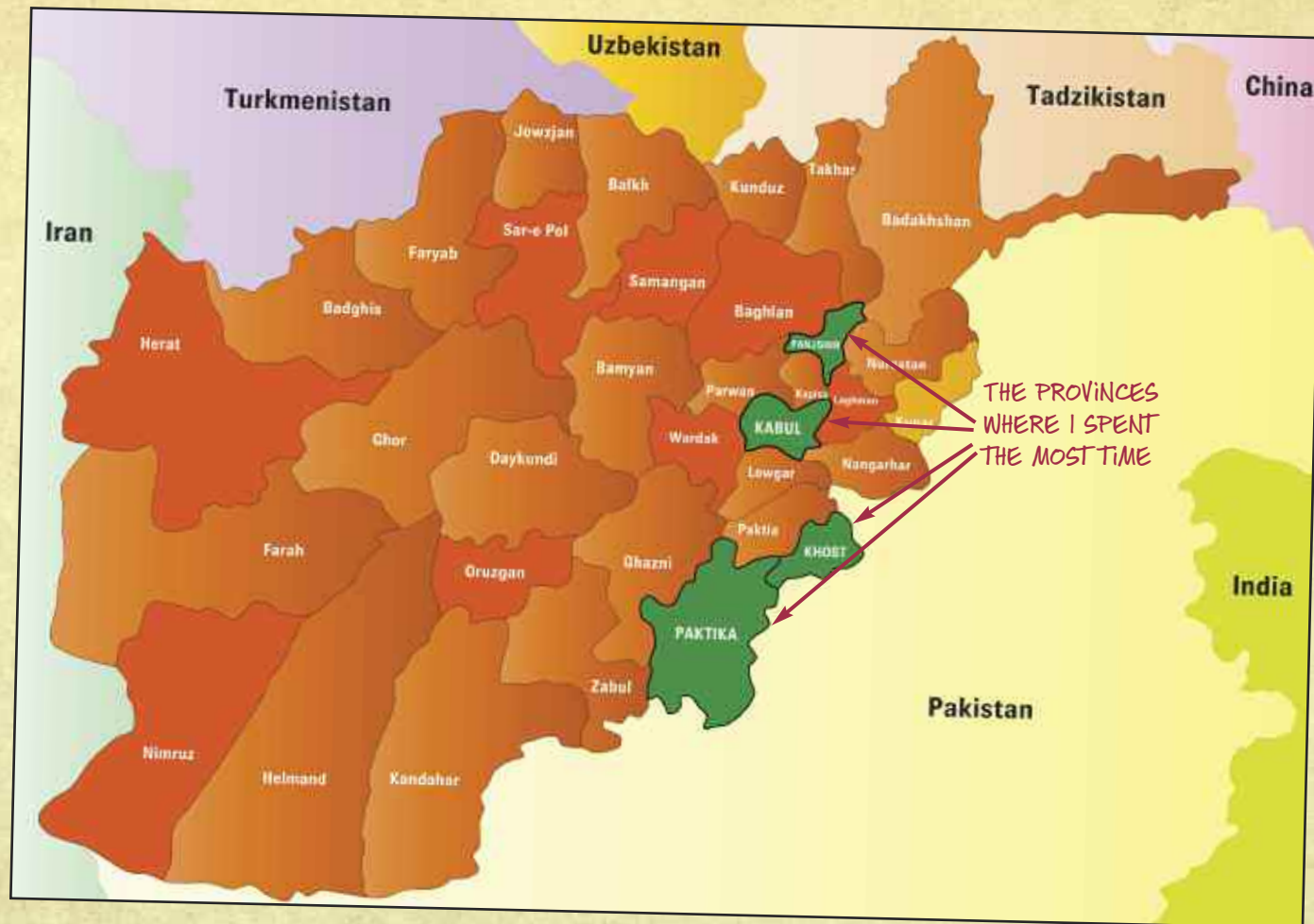
I got frustrated with waiting, so I looked for another way in. I'm Polish, so I thought about embedding with Polish troops, which at that time were under American command. I got in touch with the U.S. Army public affairs officer for Afghanistan. He sent me my paperwork, I applied, and three weeks later I received my approval letter.

Getting to Afghanistan, it turns out, was the easy part. The hard part was getting to the front lines. After weeks of being trapped on Bagram Air Base and Forward Operating Base Salerno, and hitting dead end after dead end, I went to the public affairs office again and begged them to get me out to where the combat operations were taking place. I couldn't take any more pictures of guys playing volleyball and barbecuing.

My persistence worked. I was sent out with an infantry platoon for a few weeks.

As soon as I got back to the base, I knew I wanted to extend my embed for several more months, so a few weeks later, I asked to spend a full deployment with these guys—the full fifteen months. They looked at me as though I were from another planet. “You want to spend fifteen months here? You know what that means, right? That’s a long time, and it’s even longer here.” I told them I understood, and finally, after mountains of paperwork, I was approved. A few months later, the deployment was cut to twelve months. In a way, I was relieved. Covering a war drains you.

Even after being embedded for a year, I couldn't help but feel that I



had still seen only one side of Afghanistan's story. Almost as soon as I got home, I decided to go back to cover the other side: civilian life.

And I keep going back. Afghanistan is a part of me now. I'll always find a way to return.



Whenever people learn that I am a photojournalist who spends most of his time in Afghanistan, they ask the same questions: Why do you keep going back? What are you trying to do there? Aren't you scared? How do you do it? Is it worth it? Most of the answers aren't straightforward, even to me.

I have different reasons each time I go back, but my friends there are a big part of why. Not just my friends, actually; it's everyone there. At the same time, I feel lucky to be able to come home to the safety of a place like Canada. The people of Afghanistan don't have that option; they can't just leave. I guess I keep going back because they need a voice. There are so many stories to be told.

I'm not in Afghanistan for political reasons. I'm not trying to find out why the coalition is there; that's an

impossible question to get answered. I'm there because I want people to see and feel what it's like to live every day with the war on your doorstep.

Sure, sometimes it's dangerous, and yes, absolutely, I get scared. But when the camera is in front of me, it's like looking through a window. As much as I'm in the situation, I'm somewhat separated from it, and from the fear. I've developed a sense of security by looking at things—no matter what things—from a distance. I know that what I'm seeing is real, but I'm not close enough to actually feel it. I can be hanging out of a helicopter and have no fear at all because, at that moment, I'm thinking like a photographer; I'm considering the composition of the shot, the way the light's falling, the angles in my frame. Take that camera away, though, and fear comes flooding in.

PART 1: EMBEDDED

SPERA DISTRICT, KHOST PROVINCE

I had a close call today. After nearly four months here—embedded with the 101st Airborne Division, 506th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Delta Company, 4th Platoon—it could have been my last day in Afghanistan.

We were heading back from a mission to the Pakistan border, five men crowded into each Humvee—an armored truck with a gun turret and bulletproof windows. The trucks look big, but we're crowded in there like sardines. Out on the open road, when the sun beats down on our metal box, it's like wearing full hockey gear and sitting in a sauna—times ten. The armor we wear doesn't breathe at all, plus we wear helmets and gloves (which

are fire retardant so that, in case of an explosion, we don't burn our hands; plastic gloves would melt to our skin).

It was a treacherous drive through rough, barren terrain, and the convoy had to move slowly, which made us very easy targets for the Taliban. It's pretty common to get a flat tire, but having to leave the truck to change one makes you vulnerable, so we're careful. If a Humvee breaks down it has to be towed back, and no one wants that.

There are no paved roads, so on the way out we had driven through a wadi—a riverbed that runs through a canyon. Going through a wadi is like whitewater rafting in an armored vehicle. At best we were driving over huge rocks, and at worst we were driving through water high enough to leak into the trucks.

THE TALIBAN—After the collapse of the Communist regime in Afghanistan in 1992, the resulting chaos and bloodshed led to public demands for law and order. In response, a little-known former resistance fighter and religious teacher, Mullah Mohammad Omar, and his taliban (religious students) led a brief but popular campaign to rid southern Afghanistan's Kandahar region of its warlords and bandits. The puritanical Islamist Taliban movement emerged in 1994 and, after a ruthless and effective military campaign, dominated the country from 1996 to 2001. Their victory led to the implementation of shari'a (Islamic law) and transformation of Afghanistan into a safe haven for international terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda.

On the way back, the lieutenant decided to take the mountain pass instead. It was a very narrow road, dug out of the side of the mountain for one-way traffic. There was no way to make a U-turn. One wrong swerve and you could drop 75 meters (250 feet) straight down.

I was in the lead truck, sitting in the back. It felt like a sandbox in there: every time we went over a bump, dust flew everywhere. It hung thick in the air, catching beams of sunlight.

We'd been out for the whole day, and I had fallen asleep. We were maybe an hour and a half away from the base when I woke up. It felt as if someone had tapped me on the shoulder. I opened my eyes and looked around. My gut was telling me something was wrong. Something bad was about to happen.

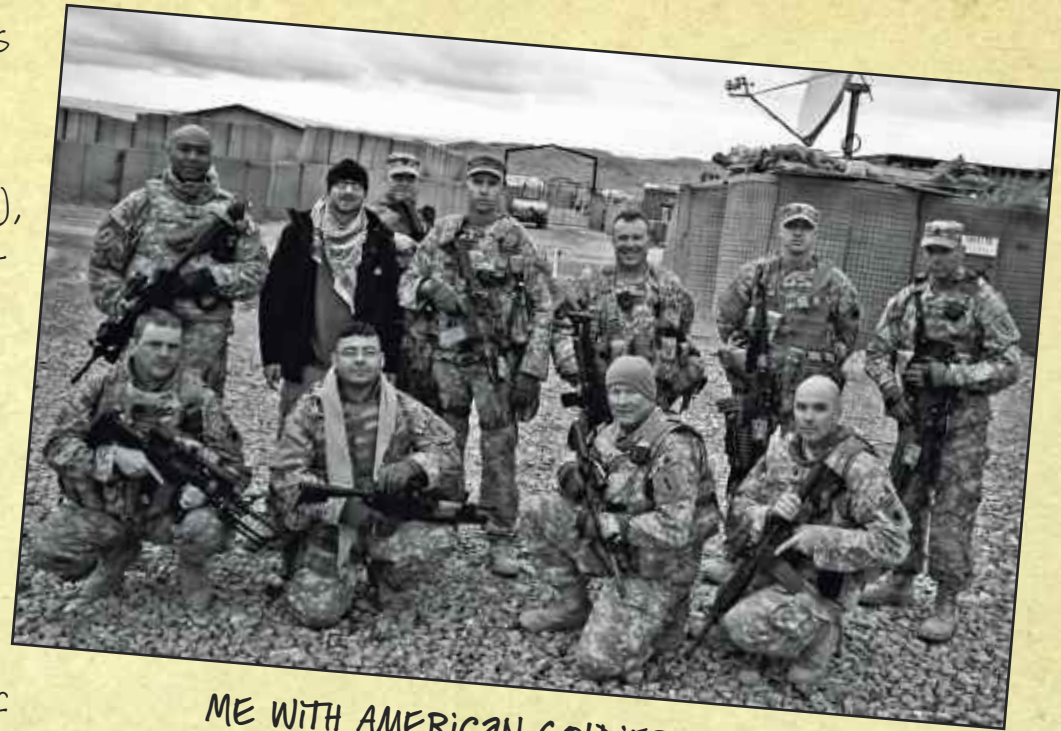
The interpreter, a civilian national hired to help the soldiers communicate with the locals, was sitting beside me, still asleep. The three American soldiers up front were quiet but wide awake. I squinted out through the front window, and ahead of us I saw a yellow bag—the kind Afghans use for carrying rice or beans or wheat. It was just plunked there, in the middle of the road, with no one near it.

My heart started beating a little faster as I thought, This isn't right. What's next? I tried to stay calm and focus on what was in front of us, looking around for any threats. Through the window I saw an elderly man standing a bit back from the bag. He looked right at us, then up at the mountain, then back at us.

That's when the gunfire started.

Insurgents were firing at us non-stop from the ridgelines on either side: heavy weapons, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), everything. An RPG passed just inches above our truck. We kept going. Up front, Gunner Sergeant Chris Nelson started firing back on both sides, swinging his turret from left to right. I looked to see where he was shooting. On the side of the mountain, I saw puffs of smoke, little clouds of dust—puff, puff, puff—everywhere. I could see where the bullets were hitting but I couldn't see who.

On this tiny little mountain pass, being attacked from both sides, it was like sitting in a tin can with someone throwing rocks at us. All I could hear was a rapid ding! ding! ding! ding! No one knew where the bullets were going to hit or what



ME WITH AMERICAN SOLDIERS WHO WERE PART OF THE EMBEDDED TRAINING TEAM THAT MENTORS THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY



was going to happen next—at least, I didn't. I wasn't trained for this.

The driver stepped on it, trying to get us out of there alive. As I was trying to see out through the haze of dust and smoke, a bullet hit the Humvee's window, inches from my face. I froze—that bulletproof window had just saved my life. But I had to push the thought aside and concentrate on what I was doing; I didn't have time for shock. I knew I wasn't injured, so I just kept photographing and recording audio.

Though it felt like hours, the ambush lasted for only about five minutes. We had no choice but to drive hard and keep moving through it. It took us close to two hours to get back to the compound. That was the longest two hours of my life—we had no way of knowing if there would be more insurgents, or more bombs, waiting on the road ahead.

We all got out okay—no casualties or injuries—but our vehicles were riddled with bullets. Back at the base, most of the soldiers tried to brush off the incident. We stood around joking, talking, and I kept taking photographs.

I noticed a soldier sitting at the Humvee alone. I think he was stunned: maybe he had suddenly realized what had just happened to him, to us, and how lucky we were. I took his photograph through the bullet-riddled glass.

On days like this, I try not to let my thoughts overwhelm me. If I did, I'd be too scared to do my job.

Postscript: Much later, I learned that this soldier, while he was home on leave, committed suicide.



SHAMAL DISTRICT, KHOST PROVINCE

In Shamal, searches of Afghan homes are conducted regularly in hopes of finding weapons, explosives, drugs, or money being smuggled by civilians or insurgents. Today I photographed these three obviously scared young boys as they watched a police officer search their home. I can't imagine how it would feel to have armed strangers—foreigners—walk into my home and search it while my father was kept outside, being questioned by police officers.

Sometimes American soldiers are forbidden to go inside on their own to conduct a search; they have to be accompanied by an Afghan police officer. And never are men—foreigners or unrelated Afghan males—allowed to see the women inside. So, during the searches the women are escorted by their husbands from room to room, and everybody is

Different Islamic interpretations of men's and women's roles account for some of the variation in the treatment of women across Muslim countries. Under the Taliban's interpretation, women were stripped of their rights, but in many other Muslim countries, women can have a great deal of power. The Quran says that men and women are equal before God and in their religious duties and that neither sex is superior, but it also makes men financially responsible for their wives.

The Quran instructs both male and female Muslims to dress modestly. The wearing of veils, known as hijab, or a conservative robe that covers the entire head but not the face, known as a chador, has been imposed on female Muslims in many countries. How much of themselves women should cover is open to interpretation, and the Afghan Taliban enforce the strictest interpretation possible. In private, in the company of their husbands and close family members, women can remove their headscarves.



supposed to turn their backs as they pass. It's astonishing to me. How do they know the women aren't smuggling things from place to place? Or that these aren't men disguised as women? After all, they're completely covered up.

Where the searches are conducted depends on the area, the village, and the information the NATO forces get. Sometimes it's a whole area, a large section marked off on a map, in which every house is gone through. Today it had been

THE ETHNIC GROUPS OF AFGHANISTAN

PASHTUNS

The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising around 42 percent of the population, is the Pashtuns. This cultural group has retained a tribal identity, with a social structure of tribal leader, elders (*spin giri*), and wealthy landowners (*khans*) who shape local communities by maintaining order and upholding a code of honor (*pashtunwali*). Pashtuns are well known for their strong desire for independence, pride, and dignity. They were the first ethnic group to unify the country, by establishing the independent kingdom of Afghanistan in 1747.

TAJIKS

Tajiks make up around 27 percent of the Afghan population. Known as *farsiwans*, or "Persian-speakers," Tajiks can usually be found in the plains areas of Herat (on Afghanistan's border with Iran), the central highlands near Bamyian, and around Kabul, where they engage in trading, skilled craft-making, and farming. In the mountainous areas of northeastern Afghanistan, they are village-dwelling farmers. Unlike other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, it is Tajik landowners, not tribal leaders, who have emerged as important village leaders.

UZBEKS

Uzbeks (around 9 percent of the Afghan population) are a Sunni Turkish-speaking group descended from nomadic tribal confederations from central Asia. Uzbeks in Afghanistan arrived sometime during the sixteenth century in a series of conquering waves, but most later settled in the northwest and became farmers.

HAZARAS

Making up around 9 percent of Afghanistan's population, Hazaras are Shi'a Muslims who operate small farms and produce and care for domestic animals. They speak a dialect of Persian but are thought to descend from the Mongol armies that once conquered Iran. They had their own independent mountain state (Hazarajat) until the Afghan king Abul Rahman conquered it, forcing many Hazara into slavery. Modern Pashtun Taliban forces brutalized the Hazara once more; many Hazara in northern Afghanistan allied themselves with Uzbek militias who battled against Taliban forces between 1996 and 2001.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Life in Afghanistan is not easy for many and it wasn't easy for me. Thank-you can't describe the appreciation I feel for all the people who supported me along the way and still do today. My family, friends, colleagues, and strangers all played a big role in the success of delivering messages from Afghanistan. Most of all the people in my images are the ones who deserve the credit. I am their messenger, but they are the ones with the message. My job would not be possible without the people who put themselves in harm's way just as I did to show the world both the humanity and horror of the war. My Afghan friends and strangers who don't get to escape this reality—you are in my thoughts every day.

Tashakur, Manana, thank-you.

Special thanks to 1st Lt. Nick A. Dewhirst, CPL. Peter Courcy, PVT. Toby Phillips, SGT. Barbara Ospina, Samsoor Momand, the staff at Hotel Mustafa, Carmine Marinelli, Jayson Taylor, and my trusty sidekick, friend, and driver, Barialie Abdul Ali.

There are still way too many folks to list, including all the staff at Annick Press and Sharon McKay for believing in this work. And I can't forget all my friends who let me couch surf on my trips back to Canada; my door is always open to you.