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Notes from a Journal

Afghanistan, 11 Sept 2003-7 Apr 2004

—for Lt. Col. Greg Vrentas, US Army
Hey, you. Thanks.

11 Sept. 2003: DUST

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan—The battle for Afghanistan after Sept. 11, 2001 was swift and decisive. The world and I watched as US military and coalition forces attacked and the Taliban government fell, after six years of oppressive rule.

So it seems entirely fitting that I step off the plane and onto the tarmac here on the second anniversary of a September event that redefined our present and our future and let us know we could never be complacent again.

I have had a three-hour flight from Kyrgyzstan to think about where I am going and why, questions that are too big for the rattle and hum of a C-130 with two dozen of us sardined into the belly.

We are Air Force, Army, Marine, Navy. Male and female. Private first-class and colonel. We are going to the same place for the same reason: to carry out our portion of the larger war versus terrorism.

In my brand-new brown camouflage uniform, I am curious. A little apprehensive. Possibly scared. But proud too, which stands by itself.

Thirty-two provinces make up this country that is roughly the size of Texas. I've seen breathtaking photographs of this place, but Bagram is only dusty flat, with the mountains in the distance. I am hopeful that six months here will give me some opportunities to see more than the inside of this fence.

Russia built this place during its decade-long occupation of the country—beginning with a 1978 invasion. Recent hurried construction and tents and ingenuity have made it into a fortress and home for those of us stationed here.

I get used to seeing Hesco barriers (wire crates lined with felt, filled with dirt and rock) and unrolled concertina everywhere, playing its deadly razorwire music. I get used to the inconvenience of carrying a weapon all the time.

I get used to the wind that whips through this land like blame, howling like thousands dead. At night, the tent flaps like a blanket pinned to a clothesline

in a hurricane, but the stakes hold tight to the ground. The morning sun seems somehow like absolution.

I get used to the dust, the wind's friendly sidekick, fine dust like talcum powder. It blows loosely around the streets and piles up wherever it finds a niche. When the wind is high, you can taste it in the air as you speak. The dust is smart enough to ground an aircraft. Our uniforms are three shades of brown, not—I think—so we can hide in the sand but so the dust won't show.

And the gravel. Much of the base is covered with it to help settle this dust. The stones—the size of ... oh, cat skulls maybe—make simple walking an adventure.

Hearing the bugled reveille at 0600 in the morning is not romantic. It's realistic, and it brings you back to this place from wherever your dreams might have let you wander in the night. But there's a day going on. Work to do.

The traditional war-fighting in Afghanistan ended quickly. Reconstruction after war, however, is the hardest part, taking the longest time and the most resources. So we are still here, partnered by many countries who believe that international terrorism is worth fighting. Worth defeating. This is Operation Enduring Freedom.

This place is a tinderbox. That's an old word for a metal box used to store firestarters. But this is an old place with a long history, and we're only a recent part of it. The situation remains volatile. What we're trying to do is give some hope to the people of Afghanistan, that a safe and secure future is possible.

Hope can't stand still. It has to move forward.

* * *

Bagram Air Base blacks out at night, a safety measure that reduces its chance of becoming a target. So we move across the gravel like ghosts with flashlights, filtered blue or red.

A flashlight in the dark is as much fun now as it was when I was a kid. In my cherry-colored beam, I make hand-shadows on barrier walls of birds and beasts. It is utterly absorbing, and I ignore the strange looks sent by others passing me in the night. Shadow animals?

A couple of nights ago, I forgot my flashlight. I had to make my way back to my tent in the dark. The risk of stumbling is traded against the greater risk of not moving forward at all.

There are different kinds of darkness, and not all of them have to do with absence of light. Ignorance is its own darkness. Lack of certainty can be a kind of darkness. So can fear. How do you navigate dark, whatever its source? How you must when there are no choices. On faith, that you're doing the right thing.

12 Oct. 2003: SPARKS

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan—Our lieutenant general, Army-size, wears on each side of his collar three stars. There are whole constellations with less than that.

He's luminous enough. No telescope necessary.

He's got a lot to throw his arms around, a whole world. Everything in Afghanistan. As commander of Combined Joint Task Force 180, he chases more than two dozen nations and so many moving parts that it's impossible to absorb every detail. He knows more than anyone here. He has to. And to fill in the gaps, his circle includes the subject-matter experts who can tell him what else he needs to know in language he understands.

He's practiced and sharp, this general. He asks hard questions, the kind that start with Why or How or sometimes When, but they're the right questions, and he asks from an honest corner: he needs the information. And, if the question is directed at you, a tip: be ready with a right answer.

We have, after all, a nation to rebuild. We promised. He's doing all he can, not just to hold it together but to push it forward.

Vines is his name. John R. Vines, from the 18th Airborne Corps out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. If anyone can squeeze the dark and produce sparks, you reckon it's him. He inspires confidence, mentoring without even being aware, because the best of that particular breed are illustration artists rather than storytellers: they show instead.

This one will look you in the eye and identify you by name, and when you get over that surprise, you find yourself grinning for more reasons than that. If you work for him, he knows what you do. You're on the team and expected to pull your oar. He says he finds his own inspiration in the brave soldiers and airmen who press the fight daily.

And do not underrate the importance of a sense of humor. Here, after all, is a man who says, "There's no such thing as a lie. On occasion, however, a statement may be no longer operative."

Well, God bless him, this man who claims that his dogtags are stamped "infidel" on the line reserved for religious preference. Everyone laughs when he announces this—to the coalition chaplain, no less—and I make up my mind to ask to see sometime before the general departs.

Which is sooner than I expect and much sooner than any of us want. A routine physical examination has identified an impatient tumor, and the general must return home to North Carolina to get it cut out. Serious business, but his chances of recovery are good; he says "don't ask for my knife or my truck yet."

On his day of departure, he sponsors a cookout behind the headquarters building. A last chance for some of us to say goodbye. And on this last day, I ask my question, and without hesitation, he fishes the dogtags out of his shirt

and hands them to me so I can verify that, under his name and blood type and branch of service, he is stamped as he said: infidel.

“You didn’t believe me?” he says. He is enjoying himself.

“Of course I did. I just wanted to see.”

“I want to remind myself of how they think of us,” he says. *They*. The terrorists. The enemies of Afghanistan, of progress, the future. “There are still a lot of people out there that need killing,” he says. “Never get complacent. Never forget.”

Someone shoots a photo of us and gives it to me later: himself scowling, his arm across my shoulder, and me grinning.

We lunch together, side-by-side on a stone wall in the sun, paper plates in hand. I ask him about him. He has, he tells me, a son in the Air Force Reserve, like me. He tells a story about a former soldier of his who called him at home at three o’clock one drunken morning just to talk, and the general invites me to do the same sometime if I find myself in a similar condition near Fort Bragg. I suspect he means it.

I like the way the South stretches across his words.

Before his departure, he tells us, “It’s been my highest honor to serve with you.” More importantly, he reminds us to remain focused: “You never know, on any given day, which piece of the puzzle will complete the picture. Maybe it’s the intelligence piece, or the communication piece, or the operations piece.” Even—and this is my spot—the public affairs piece. So he challenges us to remain vigilant, believe that what we’re doing is important and give it what is in us to give.

John R. Vines. Three stars on each side of his collar. And he is his own constellation, with all the attendant mythology worthy of any Pegasus, any Seven Sisters, any Orion hunting, any Perseus chasing after an evil Medusa.

28 Nov. 2003: SPIN

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan—Artificially-colored cardboard cut-out turkeys with sad cartoon eyes hang in the dining halls here—reminders of elementary school bulletin boards many Novembers ago, symbols of pilgrims progressing.

Far from America’s borders, what harvest can I find to celebrate in this hard, dusty land of want?

We lost a helicopter a couple of days ago, an air force MH-53 Pave Low that went down with perhaps two dozen people on board. It crashed in the night soon after taking off from here.

Five killed, Army passengers as well as Air Force crew. Seven wounded. The rest walked away, shaken, knowing it could have been worse. Initial reports—in error—suggested that enemy fire may have brought down the bird; “officials” in the states, quoted anonymously in the papers, have suggested that a mechanical problem may be blamed. The weary investigation will continue for weeks.

One recent midnight finds me doing laundry, a necessity every eight or nine days, inside a plywood hut lined with dingy washers and exhausted dryers. The plumbing provides only hard, cold water, so sorting whites and colors and permanent press (life-and-death business back home; just watch the commercials on TV) is pointless.

Usually I spend as little time as possible in the laundry room, stuffing things into two washers and then bolting for forty-five minutes. This night, as I measure soap powder and wait for the tubs to fill, a gentleman comes in—tall, lanky, generously mustached, with sad eyes the color of hazelnuts—with three bags of laundry. Small ones, with little in them.

He asks where he can get detergent around here. I hand him my box and watch, curious, as he dumps the laundry into three separate washers—odd, I think, as the few items of clothing would easily fit into one medium-sized load.

He wears a desert-tan flight suit, the two-piece kind, with no markings on it, identifying him by not identifying him as special-forces air crew. I introduce myself. He gives me a single name: Diz. I don't ask for more, not wanting to put him in a position of not wanting to say more.

His words colored with British, he says he is an MH-53 gunner. I extend my ignorant sympathies to him for the crash, and he shakes his head, disgusted.

"It was a re-supply mission," he says. "Not even a combat sortie." Had the crash occurred during a combat mission—even if the helicopter had been forced down by enemy fire—he would not be as troubled. One can make peace with such things under war. But such cost for an ordinary re-supply mission insults all who fly and fight.

Three colleagues lost. Friends, perhaps, at least brothers-in-arms. And somehow or other, the task has fallen to Diz of doing the laundry of these three, prior to sending their personal effects to their families. "Don't want to send them home dirty," he says.

I listen, since he seems to want someone to. He tells me a little about the deceased crew members. One was divorced, he says; one was a recent father and another had teenaged children. Through wash and rinse and spin and tumble dry, I stay with him, each of us sitting on the edge of a dryer, our feet hanging down. The air smells of fabric-softener sheets; the rhythmic click of buttons and the soft thud of damp clothes turning underneath us punctuate his story.

After he spends his quiet rage and grows silent, I ask some questions. I learn that his mother is English, that his dad served in the US Navy. Diz tells me he has remained single himself because it is easier. He has twenty-eight years in the air force and has grown tired, he says. He's assigned to a base in the southeastern US, and when his enlistment is up this time, he will get out.

And after retirement? He tells me he has bought himself a metal detector, the kind you see old guys using at the beach sometimes, looking for coins in the

sand. And Diz plans to spend his own time on the beach to see what he can find.

Carefully, he folds his three bags of clothing, mundane socks and undershirts, some gym shorts, uncommon only because they're forced to bear the weight of wasted potential, of the price extracted for freedom to endure. Courteously, gravely, we shake hands. I would like to meet him again, I tell him before he departs, and he says the same. But we will not (one of the less remarkable costs of deployment, though such things will empty one's pockets eventually).

And he goes.

Alone again, I fold. The water here contains enough cautionary bleach to kill the worst bacteria in it, but brown T-shirts turn pale purple and the desert-camouflage uniforms take on a salmon-pink tint over time. I count socks to make sure I have an even number.

In the cold dark of the early morning, I stumble through the empty compound, back to my tent, arms full of these clothes, baked hot and scented with boxed springtime.

Diz will find his treasure, buried. I am certain. He has earned his reward. And for my part, I will choose the important things and summon thanks.

5 Dec. 2004: NEED

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan—Around here, need is a “given.” It's how things are, perhaps how they have always been.

We are still working to eradicate the threat of the Taliban, no longer in power though its influence remains more than mere concern in some parts of the country. In the aftermath of war, we aim to promote long-term stability, to assist the Afghan people as they build some kind of normal life that isn't stripped naked, ashamed, by the needs of war.

For such stability to take hold, Afghans have to agree that such a future is worth having. But there are practical needs of living that must be met first.

The Air Force attempts to address a small portion of that need one or two Sundays a month with its “Adopt-a-Village” program, designed to share the generosity of Americans who send cartons of clothing, shoes, toys, school supplies, and other household items to the base for distribution to the local citizenry.

No one on the current rotation of the 455th Expeditionary Operations Group here knows exactly how long the program has been going on, but it will continue as long as the boxes keep coming, one or two or eight or ten at a time. And they arrive almost daily, thanks to the persistence of schools, churches, Scout groups, and military organizations across the US.

We have requested non-perishable food, of course, but now that winter is arrived, boots and gloves and blankets and caps and coats become the priority. School supplies come next, as many of the local schools—lacking any sort of

budget—refuse to allow children to attend unless they possess their own tablets and pencils. Toys are useful as well: balls, kites, dolls, little trucks and cars, for who can argue with play? But we take whatever we can get, recognizing that postage to Afghanistan from some parts of the US costs more than the contents of the boxes.

Currently, 455th EOG representatives make a field trip every two or three weeks, looking for suitable candidates to “adopt,” remote settlements in need of some assistance.

They are easy to find.

We choose villages that respond favorably to our coalition’s aims, of course, and once a location has been identified, we send an advance party to get the lay of the land, to explain to the leaders who we are and what the program is about. We hope that visiting some of these places and presenting gifts will earn us an ally or two, or at least reduce a threat. We want the people to know that we are here, and that we are trying.

There is a waiting list of airmen wanting to participate in an “Adopt-a-Village” mission. Everyone wants to see the Afghan people up close, perhaps to put a human face on our reason for being here, like bringing an image into sharp focus in the camera viewfinder.

I’m lucky enough to get a spot on today’s excursion. We meet in the Air Force compound early in the morning to load the trucks and review the route, as well as the safety precautions for traveling off the base. Security is an issue. Away from primary roads, travel is a gamble in more ways than one.

Arrival at the village—like this one, Qau’eh-ye Musa (that’s approximate)—equals something like pandemonium. Children whoop and run. The village elders wait sedately in the center of town. A large handmade wool rug, rich maroon and blue, has been set out in the dust, chairs, a table with flowers.

Our Air Force support-group commander meets the elders—who are mullahs, or religious leaders—and communicates with sign language and a broad smile, his ear to the mouth of the interpreter who is busy converting local words into English and back again, delivering the message.

Our own security forces patrol the area carefully. Youngsters and adults alike view our airmen—bulky in desert-camouflage uniforms, Kevlar helmets, and flak vests—with awe and a little apprehension: who (and what) are these strangers? The electric rainbow-hued clothing of the children seems out of key with their somber faces.

Our group unloads two truckloads of cardboard cartons as the leaders discuss and drink tea. The boxes make an imposing pile in front of the assembled villagers.

We have not examined the contents of these boxes. There are too many to sort through. We run on faith, trusting that no one would go to the trouble of

shipping crates of anything from Philadelphia or Des Moines or San Francisco that might communicate the wrong sort of message. We will let the mullahs sort them out after we go.

I would like to stick around, to watch the unpacking of the boxes. Perhaps I want only to see for myself that the contents of the boxes are—if not exactly life-changing—at least appropriate, useful, worthwhile, necessary. Because worthwhile charity must be judged not on intention but on result.

But perhaps I need to be less doubtful about the good intentions of those who sent the boxes and remember that people choose to be generous in this way because it is tangible. Eighty-seven billion tax dollars for war and reconstruction is an unfortunate (and frightening) abstraction, but a carton stuffed with sweatshirts and new socks and coloring books for a village to adopt is concrete.

At the conclusion of the brief visit, the elders deliver a handwritten letter to our commander explaining the greatest needs of the village. They are simple: water and a school.

Such field trips as this may serve the purpose of capturing hearts and minds. May serve another basic need for our airmen to explore, to get outside the wire now and then. But for me, I just want to see the faces: the elders, courtly and severe in their high standing; young children, holding tight to a father's hand; a baby in the arms of a boy barely big enough himself to carry such weight; a girl grinning as she tastes rainbow-colored candy; the handsome man and his nod of recognition as he realizes my camera eye has found him.

Were it not for these people assembled in the square, I might have thought this mud-and-stone town abandoned until looking closer. Is it true that we leave a little piece of our soul everywhere we rest?

19 Dec. 2003: WANT

KABUL, Afghanistan—I have reached the halfway point already, three months disappeared and three to go. The days grow shorter, colder, with Christmas imminent.

I'm now one week at a new location south of Bagram Air Base: Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, assigned to the headquarters for the new Combined Forces Command and part of the new three-star army general's command staff—currently as his deputy public affairs officer and speech-writer. A general, using my words. Imagine.

We're not a base, *per se*; our workplace/lodging is simply referred to as the Kabul Compound. It's a group of former private homes corralled inside Hesco barriers and concertina wire.

Everywhere there are signs of old, vibrant civilian life—tiled bathrooms, marble porches, a rose garden in the landscaped courtyard outside my office, a cou-

ple of sad, derelict swimming pools—evidence of a gracious way of life that hasn't existed around here for a quarter of a century. The new reality is this: inside, behind the curtains, you will find sandbags heaped on the windowsills.

I miss Bagram. Down here, there are few airmen (or sailors or marines); this joint environment seems to be almost exclusively army. Space is premium, with little privacy. We're expecting an influx of people to be part of the new command, and billeting is extremely tight. By the end of next week, there will be four people in my room (which fits three with minimum comfort) and fourteen on my floor with only one bathroom. Yes, I live in a building now, but I miss my tent.

We also lack central heating; the substitute appliance in my room glows like a small sun and warms us to a tropical 60 degrees when pushed to its limit. Ice on the sidewalks in the morning reminds us that worse is due, and I have gratefully unpacked my wool sweater and longjohns.

Still, it's interesting to be here at the hub of the wheel, though the workload will intensify accordingly. Two years after the overthrow of the Taliban government, our coalition force concentrates on rebuilding and stabilization. Condition-setting, if you want to look at it that way. What has to happen to establish an Afghanistan that offers a measure of security for its citizens? How can we help the process along, support the legal transitional government of Afghanistan, and gain the confidence of the Afghan people? They want the same as anyone for themselves and for their children: food, clean water, jobs, education, medical care.

They want a future; we have promised it to them, and we can't leave until—with their help—we lay the groundwork for it.

Reconstruction afterward is the hardest part of war but the most critical, because it impacts literally every person in this country. Part of the process is the rebuilding, but equally important is shifting the point-of-view of the people. They have to see the progress, but they also have to believe that their lives are changing for better and forever.

Consider our own Civil War. Reconstruction, one hundred forty years later, is still going on. We can't blame the Afghan people for being wary after twenty-five years of instability, and we can't become impatient ourselves when progress is slow. It's hindered in part by the reality that we must continue directed combat operations to rout the terrorists who don't want stability because it doesn't serve their cause—and thus continue to lob rockets at us and plant explosive devices in the roads to trap our vehicles.

We will disrupt the enemy and deny it sanctuary using the best intelligence we can glean, though there are tragic consequences sometimes, as you've surely read in the papers this week—the deaths of children in two separate incidents, as a result of our targeting operations.

The (other) big national news in country this week is the *loya jirga*, or grand assembly council meeting. Representatives from all thirty-two of Afghanistan's provinces are gathered here in Kabul to vote on the first-ever constitution for this country. Think about that for a minute.

A draft of the proposed document has been circulating for a couple of months as representatives struggle with devising a system of government that guarantees human rights for women as well as men yet remains true to the tenets and spirit of Islam. It's a fine line. Though our coalition is supportive, we can't create a constitution for the Afghan people. We can offer suggestions and even a model, but ultimately, they have to choose something they can live with, and they've never had to make such a thing before. Do the provincial representatives know that a curious world is watching?

The *loya jirga* will continue as long as necessary until its work is accomplished, and Kabul hums and buzzes, restless. We hold our breath, hopeful that no bombs or other violence will mar the occasion.

A couple of days ago, I had my first experience driving in this city. Afghans inherited the British tradition of right-hand-drive vehicles with everything reversed inside (try shifting with your left hand for a change, and see if you don't activate the windshield wipers every time you want to signal for a turn). However, the Afghans did *not* adopt the tradition of driving on the left side of the road. Traffic laws are generally ignored; other drivers seem to regard lights, signs, and lines on the road as mere suggestions. The roundabouts—traffic circles—are particularly harrowing.

The cracked, pockmarked roads are hazardous enough in the daytime and, after sundown, nearly impossible with no streetlights and the dusty air like fog. Even after dark, the streets are clogged with pedestrians, bikes, food vendors with carts, donkeys, and other cars. I could devise a particularly violent video game with these ingredients.

I'm doing all right, I guess. I map the big things, like constitutional conventions and combat operations, but it's the little things—a laundry bag slowly filling up, the moon waning again, a lieutenant colonel at the breakfast table unexpectedly becoming less of a stranger—that really prove the passage of time.

Last month, I marked the birthday of a close friend who died over the summer. Half a world away, I'm still angry with him for going, and still miss him. My own birthday followed his, and a dreadful Thanksgiving spent escorting a television celebrity.

Christmas, with its traditional carols and neon-colored lights and promises for peace on earth, seems far away in this dusty land where we are considered the infidel. But Christmas will come, and the New Year too, promising all the fear and anger and disappointment you can crush into 365 days. But if you can pour in some hope and a little faith and keep strong, the rest won't matter so much.

At night, for a few minutes before bed, I make time for some reading, a brief escape from this place. Right now, for no reason other than the fact that it was handy, my book is a Louis L'Amour western called *The Quick and the Dead*. The hero—dark, laconic, lean, smart—appeals to me. Sam Elliott's handsome cowboy is on the cover, advertising a movie made from the novel.

I can't remember, when I was a kid, what I wanted to be when I grew up. Certainly the military was never part of the picture. But, seventeen years of Air Force later, having reluctantly grown up, I can say now that I want to be a cowboy. The job would fit me, solitary, thin and hungry and hard, mustached like a whiskbroom (or Sam Elliott), burnt brown from sun, horsebacking the wilderness.

Well, my job here at Combined Forces Command is deputy, a title with a hint of old-west flavor. Perhaps I should wear a star, a tin one, to go with my gun. I'm building the right-sized mustache, at least until somebody notices how far I've strayed from the regulation. And I would gladly trade my shapeless brown cap, camouflage pattern, desert, Class 2 (3-color) for a Stetson if I could get away with such insolence.

If you travel into the Afghanistan territory, particularly the troublesome spots, you can find "wanted" posters hanging on the walls and in the public squares for the most notorious of the Taliban and al Qaida leaders. The posters—provided by our coalition—spell out the grim details of criminal activity in two of the most common languages here, Dari and Pashtu.

There are tabs at the bottom of the posters with a phone number on them. If you have information to share, you can pull off a tab, take it with you, and place a call. It carries risk, certainly, but it could be worth your while if you know the right secrets. The price for Osama bin Laden and his sidekick Mullah Omar is \$25 million.

The posters also spell out clearly that the money to be paid for these horrors is US dollars.

Here in Afghanistan, the search for these desperadoes continues. "The enemies of peace," we call them as we head for the new frontier. I lope through this dusty, desolate wilderness and wonder if this is not as close to cowboying as I will ever come.

1 Jan. 2004: RESOLVE

KABUL, Afghanistan—All is quiet. New Year's Day.

Only in the West do we celebrate the occasion on the first of January. In this culture, this community, the New Year begins sometime around our March.

I know nothing about their calendar. But then, so much of the culture here remains absolutely foreign to me.

We are the tourists.

We employ local Afghan men to work on our posts and camps. Hundreds every day, skilled (carpenters, masons, electricians) and unskilled. They work always under guard, a bored junior-ranked soldier or airman seated close by to keep an eye out for sedition. But there is none. The men need work and, in exchange, endure our ignorance.

Bearded black, swarthy, as thin and hard as want, their utter commonness in Afghanistan still seems exotic to me. They wear the traditional loose-fitting robe called a *khalat* and equally loose-fitting trousers that match; a rolled felt hat, a *pakol*; a patterned square scarf, and a fringed wool blanket that serves as cloak and protection from dust and winter's instructive cold.

I can't even speak to them beyond "salaam," which equals hello, and "tashakor," approximating thanks. The men will return my gaze but rarely my smile.

I watch them; they regard me with similar curiosity. Sometimes, guilty, I will show them my camera and raise my eyebrows, a mute question. May I? They shrug, nod. My greedy machine snaps the images with more clarity than I can decipher when I view the pictures later, each worth a thousand untranslatable words.

Their faces reflect the bewildering hard times they live in. They could be a hundred years old or a thousand, though many of those I see are probably younger than I. These are handsome men, dignified men, resigned to traveling a hard road. We have pledged something better. Schools, clinics, clean water, jobs, a stable and safe country, a viable national army that will protect it. The men mark the days—twenty-four hours by anyone's calendar—and wait for us to keep the promise.

No amount of book-learning will fill the chasm between what I understand about this place and what truly is.

Last night, the last of 2003, I had a long conversation with a brown-eyed Army-issue lieutenant colonel responsible for planning and building the medical capability for the whole Afghan National Army. His architecture is critical, of long-term consequence, and he describes it at length and with an urgency I have not often found here.

"A soldier who knows he's going to be cared for is willing to engage an enemy," he says. Effective combat medicine ensures that a wounded soldier will be treated—"fixed"—and returned to duty, he says, and if we can do that, we've earned a significant victory: an army capable of sustaining itself. He worries about funding. He worries about lack of resources. But he cares passionately about what he's doing and believes in it implicitly. Such concern is fuel for progress.

I have breakfasted with him quietly on several occasions and never guessed

he had so many words in him. His hopefulness is contagious; his commitment inspires me to strive for the same end: to make a difference because it needs to be made. I can think of no better way to begin a new year.

* * *

Late night, walking down the street in the cold dark, I pass a man whistling the “Dick Van Dyke Show” theme from—when? Thirty-five years ago? I don’t know if I am more startled by the tune or the fact that I can readily identify it. Either way, I have to stop for a second and remind myself that I am, in fact, still in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Unexpected snow comes down; I skim enough of it from the fire escape of my building to make a wet ball and wish there were someone friendly to hit with it. But perhaps I have battles enough to fight. Tomorrow I will skid on wet sidewalks, but tonight the snow seems a little like music, notes high and soft, a coda for the end of a year and a suitable overture for the start of another.

Come midnight, I wonder if I should call my mother and dad, nearly ten hours behind, and put their minds at ease a little. Tell them everything will be okay. I know, because I’m calling from the future, see. It’s already tomorrow on this side of the world. I could tell them, You’re going to make it—2004 will really come.

I may not remember most of the New Year’s Eves in my life; they will, most of them, blur one into the next, with little to distinguish any of them.

But I will always remember this one.

14 Feb. 2004: HEART

KABUL, Afghanistan—The calendar tells me it is Valentine’s Day back home.

Here, I take heart. Looking backward, I see how quickly five months passed. Now my replacement is due in four weeks and I will remain a fortnight beyond that to train her and then disappear, my adventure coming to an end.

As of early January, Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan has officially taken over command of the US-led coalition forces in Kabul. The activation of this new joint-service command signals a strategic change in our ongoing efforts to ensure a stable and secure future for Afghanistan—critical, if we are ever to go home. Nineteen different nations make up our coalition just now, and they share our goal.

Under Combined Forces Command, coalition military operations here will take on a new form, according to our commander, US Army Lt. Gen. David W. Barno. In his speech at the activation ceremony, the general said that the coalition’s primary focus will shift to reconstruction and setting conditions for long-term security.

He also said recently that we will capture Osama bin Laden this year, a tall

order. That means the combat operations will continue as necessary, because one of the conditions for enduring security is neutralization of the threat posed by the Taliban and al Qaida.

I remain busier than ever, working longer days to less effect, it seems. It can discourage. A friend here has said that we should ask ourselves this at the close of every day: “What have I done to make a difference for the people of Afghanistan?” Most nights, sadly, I don’t know how to answer the question.

Part of my work involves drafting what we refer to as “talking points,” concise comments and statistics related to various facets of our mission here. Built for speed and efficiency, these talking points are thumbtacked efficiently into speeches and news releases: sound bites.

The talking points are based on a variety of sources, including previous interviews given by the general, remarks made by the Secretary of Defense or the US Ambassador to Afghanistan, current events, casual conversation, common sense, luck, and imagination (a co-worker says “don’t forget the Magic 8 Ball and the Ouija Board”).

My complete document of talking points on a variety of topics—reconstruction, combat, Taliban threats, Osama bin Laden, opium poppy production, and more—runs dozens of pages at this point. It’s quite unwieldy, and when the general has an interview, I extract from the master document those topics that we think are likely to come up, a refresher for him as he prepares to engage the reporter.

Last week I spent a couple of days at my old home, Bagram, taking care of some business. The air base seems strange now. I recognize very few faces. And there is so much new construction, the smell of cut plywood and wet cement competing with the dust in the air.

I took advantage of my overnight at Bagram to run the perimeter road around the airfield, about seven miles altogether, and I set off around 5 p.m. specifically because the sun was beginning its set, which bathes the magnificent mountains with lavender-and-rose-colored optimism.

About six miles into my run, I was stopped by the flashing blue light of a military police “humvee.” Recent rain had washed away some of the dirt-and-gravel road, revealing a landmine right in the middle of the passage. The cops detonated it in place as I watched in the dim light.

After the all-clear, I continued running, a little shaken up. How many times had I—and hundreds of others—run along this road? How many vehicles had driven through the dusty gravel? The edges of the road are marked with barbed wire hung with trouble-orange triangles that warn “MINE!” (which makes these devices seem strangely possessive)—and common knowledge dictates that you remain faithful to the well-traveled road. Safe or not, we cross our fingers and run on.

Two suicide bombers got lucky last week here in Kabul on consecutive days.

One Canadian and one British soldier were killed, as well as several Afghan citizens. And an additional dozen wounded. Such things serve as reminders of where we are. There is progress all over the place. And people all over the place who want to stop progress.

Disappointingly, I have seen very little of the country in five months. Apart from numerous short spurts of local travel—from here to the Embassy, from here to the International Security Assistance Force Headquarters, from here to Camp Phoenix or the Afghan National Army Training Center at the village of Pol-e-Charki and occasionally Bagram—I am bound to this crowded cluster of walled-in houses, this urban fort.

Our little compound grows more crowded, an influx of new people every week as Combined Forces Command expands. I've shifted offices twice and living quarters twice. Privacy is still premium; I'm torn between wanting some time (and space) entirely for myself and some time to share with the handful of others I've met here whom I'd like to know, like to learn from.

We need both. Situation dictates settling for neither.

Our compound contains one stray dog, tuxedo-colored and friendly. I feed her the leftovers after my meals. And—too many to count—we have cats, the noisiest and most fretful I've ever heard, yowling under the nights and days.

Early this week, we had the biggest snowfall Kabul has seen in a decade, according to one of our local interpreters. Probably about seven or eight inches altogether over two days, and great fun while it lasted. I even skipped lunch one day to build a snowman.

Afghan snowflakes on your tongue taste remarkably like the homegrown kind.

By the third day, however, the temperature warmed up considerably, and the compound has turned into a swamp of mud and slush. It freezes overnight, only to thaw again and annoy the next day. I would characterize the weather as cranky right now. It suits my mood.

I begin to think ahead to my end of tour, about boxing up much of my gear and sending it back to 4th Air Force in California so that I don't have to drag it halfway around the world. It's still too early, though. I need to concentrate on what's here now, because there is still work to do before my departure.

My active-duty counterparts grumble about being extended as our military resources are stretched thinner and thinner across Iraq and Afghanistan and pockets elsewhere. Iraq—roughly the size of California—has 100,000 US troops. Afghanistan—roughly the size of Texas, about 100,000 square miles larger—has little more than one-tenth that amount.

Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl halftime show has gotten more news coverage lately than our mission here. We were, however, featured on *60 Minutes II* this week, and Tom Brokaw stayed with us for a couple of days, reporting for *NBC Nightly News*.

Operation Enduring Freedom continues. We're working with our international partners to remove the causes that enabled terrorism to take root in Afghanistan in the first place. We are committed to standing firm with the Afghan people against those working actively to prevent the establishment of security.

Afghanistan has been at war for nearly a quarter of a century. It's easier to destroy than rebuild. Such rebuilding must be done right, and doing things right takes time. Reconstruction is perhaps the most critical part of our mission because it impacts every citizen of the country. We're placing special emphasis on concrete, visible programs that will demonstrate conclusively to the Afghan people that their lives are improving.

The Taliban and al Qaida are enemies of progress, enemies of the future. The fact that they continue to go after soft targets—such as the recent suicide bombings in Kandahar City that killed innocent civilians, including women and children—indicates that they are either desperate or afraid to attack the coalition directly.

We will continue to engage in specifically targeted combat operations as necessary to destroy, disrupt, and deny sanctuary to the enemies of Afghanistan.

Okay, they're "talking points." But they explain a little of what we're trying to do here, in case you were wondering.

25 Feb. 2004: TITANIC

KABUL, Afghanistan—I am on guard, 0400 to 0800.

We augment the security forces here by pulling guard duty at night sometimes, in one of the posts on the edge of the compound. Your qualification for duty is nothing more than rank. If you don't have enough, you're added to the roster.

Unlike many of my co-workers, I do not view this task as penance. I look forward to it, in fact, and my favorite shift is the 4-to-8 because it bridges night and day. A little sleep beforehand and a cup of coffee, and I'm fueled and ready.

That's me one recent frigid night with my flak vest and helmet and mug, climbing the stairs to Outpost 7, a tin rectangular box with windows all around that give me a view of my portion of the compound and the unknown street outside. The windows are tinted; I can see out but others can't see in. The only light in the place wears a dark red cover, casting a shadowy tint over everything. I feel as if I am in a photographic darkroom.

There is more to the task of guarding than one might think. It is responsibility of a sort I am unaccustomed to here. I can look after myself, but now I am charged with looking out for everyone else.

A three-ring binder full of official-looking correspondence and maps spells out the directions, the first being to use common sense. Fine, and why not? But the rules after that are harder to follow. Defend yourself against hostile intent.

Use only that amount of force that is necessary and proportional to the threat. Treat all persons with dignity and respect.

Obeys the law of war.

There is an automatic rifle on the table as well; it's been years since I fired such a weapon, and I review the instructions and examine the diagram posted by it and hope that I will not be tested.

A thin slice of moon, maybe a dime's worth, hangs in a sky streaked deep blue. There are no streetlamps, but we have positioned mercury lights amid the concertina wire unrolled atop the Hesco barriers that mark our territory, lights harsh as cops asking questions of recalcitrant suspects, lights to antagonize the darkness and render it sullen.

I pace from one end of my box to the other and slide the windows open to lean out into the forbidden street. I know all about curiosity and cats, but I want to see, unfiltered.

Dim lights make distant windows glow. Who would be up and awake this late, and why? The only sound outside—and it keeps on, down the nights and days, white noise—is the hum of generators that power the camp's fierce electrical demands. An occasional vehicle passes below.

Otherwise, I have for companionship a little radio manufactured by the Grundig Company, its model FR-200, AM/FM/Shortwave World Band Receiver radio. Now, here is an ingenious piece of equipment. This little box—perhaps six inches square and two inches deep—has a built-in magneto and a small hand crank, and ninety seconds of vigorous rotation will win you about an hour's worth of power. (The radio also runs by batteries, but who would bother? That's no fun.) It's even got a flashlight built in, and a carrying handle.

Our coalition has its own radio station and its own transmitters. The broadcasts, however, are not intended for us but for the people of Afghanistan. "Peace Radio" goes out via shortwave, covering a large portion of the country, no small feat, considering the unfriendly terrain. And perhaps the content includes propaganda, but the persuasive messages—get along with each other, be careful of landmines, that sort of thing—are not intended to cause harm. They are broadcast in the local languages amid the music programming.

We have given out those Grundigs by the tens of thousands in this country. The people here do not read much, and few have electricity, let alone TV. So if you have a message, you'd better have a means of conveyance too, if you want anyone to tune in.

The Taliban banned all forms of non-religious music. Can you imagine a government that would deny music to its people? Imagine if the soundtrack for your life were a crime.

Now, even at 4 a.m., there are stations broadcasting in Kabul. In addition to several local outlets, the BBC also comes through loud and clear, clipped British

accents discussing the news. But I get enough news elsewhere and settle for one of the local stations instead.

I keep the radio on low. The music, for all its obvious foreignness, still sounds mostly comfortable to my western-trained ears. Pick out patterns, verses and choruses, and musical shapes emerge. Only the vocals sound truly exotic.

I reckon the songs are about love, what it feels like to give or get, or not give or get, because that's mostly what all pop songs are about, and the station plays one after another, without even a break in between to identify the artists.

Unexpectedly—inexplicably—amid all this, the station plays a lone American tune. I recognize it as the theme song for a movie that came out a few years back about the first and last voyage of a huge passenger ship. Virtually everyone in the universe saw the film except me, but even so, the song was inescapable.

It's a lament, a song about loss crosshatched with hope. For the first time, I listen to the lyrics all the way through. "I loved you," the song says. Now you are gone, for reasons left unclear. But "near, far, wherever you are, I believe that the heart will go on." And if it's so predictably maudlin, why do I feel such overwhelming sadness all of a sudden?

Indistinct stars fade and morning creeps in, unaware, like a stranger tapping you on the shoulder from behind, and—thus startled—you turn to look. The light reluctantly gives shape to the walls and buildings.

A city wakes up on a cold morning like a middle-aged man. Like me.

We stretch, cautious, so that nothing snaps, shivering a little. Days like these, you can see your breath in the air, proof of life. But the frigid air serves as a warning, too, as if breathing in too deeply will freeze your plumbing.

There is such honest potential in mornings, precisely at that moment before the day decides how it's going to be. It is the most hopeful time.

In this Islamic country, the call for prayer punctuates the day. The first comes at dawn, and when I hear it begin to echo from town, I turn off my Grundig to listen to the keening urgency of the call. It bounces from one mosque loudspeaker (for they all have bullhorns affixed to their towers) to another, as if the clocks are all slightly out of time—dueling voices from distant corners.

I have no idea what is being chanted and only know that it reminds the faithful to stop what they are doing for a minute and give thanks. Who could not use such a reminder?

More light lets the details of this world gradually come into view. A flock of black birds settles into a bare tree and then just as suddenly scatters, whisper to scream, and flies. Outside, I hear muffled voices, a dog, a door slamming shut. More cars. Pedestrians, moving briskly.

Soldiers from the Afghan National Army—a company, perhaps—run down the street, recognizable by their bright green berets and dark green camouflage uniforms (I wonder why ours are brown). Some look up and see me. "Salaam!" I

shout down. They wave and grin and shout back.

Gradually, the bicycles appear, some with two or three riders, all wrapped up in blankets against the cold. They are all men; some are in western dress, others in more traditional garb. Among the dozens who pass, I see no women at all.

A blue corrugated tin box across the street is not, as I had surmised, some kind of trash bin or storage container but a stop-and-go. Its shopkeep arrives, folds up the side and props it up, and he's open for business, offering cigarettes and soda and packaged food.

The street breathes to life quicker than the camp behind me, inside the fence. There are hints: the scent of frying bacon (more proof of our blundering infidel status: pork) blows from the dining hall's exhaust fan. A few people head for breakfast, though the compound—at least in my corner—remains mostly still.

Outside the wall, the locals ride or hike through their neighborhood, indifferent to our patchwork fort as if it is of no consequence. Perhaps, after a quarter century of fighting, they are inured to signs of war. The pockmarked wall across the street from me and the building protected by that wall both show evidence of bullets and shelling from years past. Two years ago? Thirty? Either could be the case.

One of these days, perhaps, they will mend the wall with some confidence that it will be the last time such repair is required.

No metaphor is quite large enough for the scale of what we're doing in Afghanistan. We can't afford complacency. Can't afford arrogance. We push on, navigating these treacherous, uncharted waters as best we can, anxiously scanning the horizons for such icebergs as may come.

Once my shift is over, I will have a little breakfast myself and then take up some work I am more suited for than this. I have that song running through my head.

There will be torches for you to carry through your life. Choose wisely and tend the important fires. Remain on guard. Heart will go on.

2 March 2004: SOLD

KABUL, Afghanistan—The war stops on alternate Fridays for the bazaar. Local vendors offer local products for sale to our captive audience of US service members.

Since we are forbidden from shopping in town—it's a force-protection concern, as are most issues related to privileges—we have little choice, and the bazaar is eagerly anticipated. Shopping, even in an exotic place such as this, reminds us a little of home, or at least of habits that we associate with home.

Cars clear Front Street on bazaar Fridays, and the vendors come early to claim choice spots to display their wares. The official starting time is 10 o'clock, but sales begin as soon as customers begin filing out of the compound,

intent, wallets fortified by recently cashed checks.

There are few rules. Apart from *caveat emptor*, the primary one is that, if you buy in quantity, you are a preferred customer. Every salesman has learned to say “for you, my friend, a special price,” but once a vendor knows you, he generally will give you a better deal.

The one vendor who knows me sells rugs: Zamir has been in business for twenty-two years. I am a repeat customer, having purchased his rugs to send home for my mother and sisters. I’ve also recommended him to my co-workers shopping for Afghan rugs, and he appreciates my endorsement. He and a partner own a shop in town, and they bring several hundred of their finest specimens to the bazaar on these alternate Fridays.

Zamir is not handsome but there is something electric-charged about him that is most persuasive, an ideal quality for a salesman. He is as bearded, brown-eyed, thin as chance and just as wiry, dressed in the traditional garb of the loose-fitting trousers and matching overgarment. I estimate his age in the middle fifties. And his English is not bad, another useful trait for a salesman here.

And, as I am his friend, he invites me to sit down with him this warm day. “Tea?” Yes. Thank you. He fills a clear glass mug with steaming golden liquid from a thermos. “Sugar?” I decline, but he insists and pours in far too much.

We sit in the shade of his well-stocked rug display. Piles of rugs, several hundred, neatly folded, various sizes, every one patterned differently, colors as rich as stained glass: burgundy, emerald, gold, indigo. Sheep’s wool. Camel’s wool. Silk. Silk and wool mixed. Rugs long or narrow, square, rectangular, folded and stacked.

Some shoppers know how to look at the back of the rug and see how tight the weave is. They can judge the technique and the quality, make an objective assessment of the value, and determine the size of the bargain based on the selling price.

But how many thousands of hours are represented in the knots that equal a rug? What history and traditions are betrayed or celebrated by the pattern? From what part of the country has it come? Who made this tapestry, and at what cost—personal or otherwise? But such questions do not concern our clientele. This market for buying and selling, and its central idea is getting the Best 4 Less.

The culture here demands dickering over cost, but it’s exasperating; I—and there are others like me—would prefer simply to get a fair price without haggling. But that won’t do here. And many customers at the bazaar believe inherently that the vendors’ primary aim is to shortchange unwitting Americans, so they employ rudeness and suspicion as negotiating tools.

(I recently watched a lieutenant colonel argue with a seller over an amount equal to thirty cents in US funds. How can an officer in the United States military have so little sense of proportion?)

Apologetically, Zamir leaves my side to dicker with a prospective customer whose size and bulk and tiny beard mark him as one of the numberless civilians here filling positions as private contractors or as employees in our dining halls or other offices.

This customer has his eye on a large, handmade silk rug. Zamir asks \$2,000 for it, but the customer insists that he had been quoted a price of \$1,800 that morning.

Zamir demurs. The customer, I think, knows the price is fair, but admitting as much simply won't do. Instead, he berates, curses, insults. ("You must be on f—ing crack if you think I'll pay that much.") He starts to swagger away, certain—I think—that Zamir will call him back and agree, docile, to the lower price. But Zamir does not, and the man stalks off.

It is a risk. Quite possibly, he has noted the identification number written on Zamir's hand with a marking pen. The man could go right to the military police and generate some unpleasantness, accusing Vendor #39 of trying to rip him off.

But inwardly I cheer Zamir's willingness to stand ground against the ugly man. I am glad he's not serving in our military, but I wonder if the citizens of Afghanistan make such distinctions. Perhaps they simply regard all of us generically as "Americans." All ugly.

Zamir sits by me again and we sip our tea. I apologize for the man's behavior. Zamir shrugs. "God grants us the gift of speaking good words to one another," he says (I paraphrase), but it's our choice to use this gift or not. Hearing good words is like receiving a million dollars, he says, a generous image.

Zamir tells me that he used to be a soldier in the Afghan army, fighting the Russians who occupied the country for more than a decade. He would have been a young man then. He prefers selling rugs. "Twenty-two years war," he says.

"But never again," I say.

He shrugs. He won't argue, but I know he's skeptical. However, it is too nice a day for such talk. "Sunny day," he says. "Smiling. Friends. Good conversation." He holds up one finger, making a point. "Sweet," he says, nodding. Like our tea.

Curious, I ask Zamir his age and am startled to hear that he is but forty-four, only a year older than I. He is married with eight children. Four boys, four girls, he says. "A big family, ten," he says. He realizes his luck, being able to make a living here.

He is startled that I remain unmarried at my age. Why not? he demands. Not met the right girl? That's as good an answer as any. He shakes his head. He wonders why I should be so particular.

He scoffs at all the soldiers who look at carpets, take photos, tell him "I have to ask my wife first." In Afghanistan, Zamir says, a man brings home a rug and puts it on the floor and there is no discussion.

I ask if he has registered to vote. "Three weeks ago," he says. He's looking at

the candidates, uncertain that he will support Hamid Karzai, who has run the transitional government since the emergency election held in 2001—and who is expected to be the only viable candidate by default, though others (including one brave woman) have formed political parties and declared their intent to run.

Zamir has seen little improvement in the two years since Karzai has been in power, he says. So, wisely, he will consider the candidates and make an informed choice.

I forget to ask Zamir if his wife has also registered to vote.

He happily poses for some photos for me. They look forced, unnatural. Later, when he's not looking at me, I will take a few others that capture a little of his hunger.

Elsewhere around the bazaar, children sell postcards of Afghanistan sights that I will never see and some that no longer exist, like the gigantic Buddhas of Bamian that were destroyed by the Taliban. The postcards are as aggressively, artificially cheerful as the boys who hawk them.

Bootleg digital video discs are extremely popular, and dueling vendors hawk them to our eager customers by the thousands; after all, copyright is of no consequence here. The lone woman vending this day offers lovely handmade lace, scarves, shawls, table runners—too beautiful for our crowd—and she sells but little.

All invite you to look. Costs nothing, they urge, hopeful. And perhaps you will buy. Marble chess sets or tea sets in startling colors that look as if they were jigsawed together, turn-of-the-century rifles and cavalry swords, garish velour blankets (very popular), hats, silks, varnished wooden chests, old coins and bills. Improbably, a tuba. Caricatures of traditional costumes for buyers who will not know the difference.

You want a western-style tailored suit? A couple minutes of measuring, then you choose a fabric, and it will be made to your specifications for \$60—\$50 if you bargain well, or buy more than one. There will even be extra buttons sewn on the inside of the coat in case you lose one. All the pockets will be functional too, not merely decorative.

If you can't find what you want in this dominion of buy and sell, ask, and one vendor or another can probably have it for you next time. Someone jokes that the whole country can be had for a nominal price. But dignity is not for sale, nor is the soul. And the US dollar will buy nearly anything these days but respect.

At the end of the day, I hope our dollars make a difference. I hope we are encouraging honest work, promoting commerce, feeding families.

Once home, these souvenirs—these rugs, these wooden chests, these blankets and leather jackets and postcards—will remind us that we served in Afghanistan. That we tried to make a difference.

2 April 2004: FLIGHT

BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan—On the back road this sunny afternoon, I am flying a kite.

I arrived a couple of days ago at my old home, Bagram, gone for good from Kabul, in the status referred to as “awaiting transportation”—a seat on a flight heading in the direction I want to go, which is homeward. In the meantime, I have a sunny, dusty afternoon free and a kite.

What would you do?

This kite came from the International Security Assistance Force, which operates in Kabul, separate from Operation Enduring Freedom.

We fight as necessary. ISAF is our opposite, a peacekeeping force, troops from approximately thirty nations serving as police. Earlier this year, ISAF began cautiously extending its influence beyond Kabul. How far it will spread into the other thirty-one provinces of Afghanistan is unknown. Many, many more troops will be needed from weary contributing nations (or from other, fresh participants) if this expansion is to happen.

But I am not thinking of such things on this sunny, dusty afternoon.

ISAF’s kites are trisected into black and green and red, the shades of Afghanistan’s flag. In the center of the kite, outlined in white, is a dove and (very small) the ISAF logo and a sentiment—I don’t know what—written in Dari. Two bright yellow streamers make the kite’s tail.

I’m accustomed to kites that are shaped like, well, kites, a paper diamond with crossed sticks and a long knotted-rag tail. But the ISAF kite is made of some kind of sturdy fabric-like plastic, I guess, and it’s more or less square. It has no sticks, but it has pockets built into each side of it that catch air. I’m skeptical but determined to try it anyway.

I run a couple of miles down the perimeter road, past the power lines (which, I recall, tempt kites) and out to a deserted stretch. I unfold the kite and tie the string to it and, without ceremony, offer it to the wind, and it goes up.

It is a good day for up.

Air Force pilots make much of slipping the surly bonds of earth. I am not a pilot, but attach your soul and imagination to a kite in the wind and blue sunny sky, and I believe you can accomplish the same result. A kite rising takes your spirit with it.

The wind—and it’s a good, strong wind with mischief on its mind—likes this kite, and I’m pleased and surprised at how easily it rises, tugging persistently and persuasively on the string as I unroll more and more.

Kite-flying is hardly an everyday occurrence at Bagram. I wonder if I am violating airspace by sending this one skyward. Three helicopters take off, and I suppose it is possible that a high-enough kite could pose some sort of hazard, but our birds steer clear of me—or I of them.

Runners, single or in pairs, trot past. Everyone notices what I'm doing; most offer a grin or a thumbs-up. I assume someone will come along at some point and tell me to stop, but I decide to continue at least until ordered otherwise.

The kite bobs and dips occasionally, but mostly it just aims higher. Sometimes it loops downward, catches itself and struggles back up, regaining lost lift. One time, however, it begins its dive and can't recover and continues downward to the ground. With no sticks, at least, the kite sustains no damage from its impact with the dirt.

I should say that the whole length of the road back here is fenced on both sides, barbed wire with ubiquitous red "minefield" triangles. Some of the land, of course, actually is mined. Some of it simply hasn't been cleared, so it's unknown whether there are explosive devices buried in it or not.

The Soviets mined the place years ago, and they thoughtfully put up posts, rows of them, in the ground to identify the path. The posts are distinctive, reminding me of giant erector-set girders shoved into the ground. Such a fence surely kept away anyone who might have attempted to infiltrate along its line. It's certainly kept us away. One would be ill-advised to trailblaze.

After the kite goes down, I carefully begin rewinding the string. It's snagged in the concertina wire, and the kite itself appears to be tangled in a bush. With some coaxing and gentle tugging, I get the kite into the breeze again and it flies itself out of the minefield. I'm relieved.

My kite soars over the rusted hull of a MIG fighter, over piles of twisted, corrugated iron, skeletons of trucks, scattered scrap and ghosts. Even years later, quietly rusting under the harmless sun and blue sky, these tons of scrap metal suggest the cost of war.

On the other side of the road are the remains of mud-brick structures that were surely houses in the not-distant past, though their current condition makes them look like the ruins of an ancient civilization.

There is, not far from our road, a whole settlement that appears abandoned, broken and empty windows and no color. I've run by it numerous times and seen no signs of life until this evening (it's around 5 p.m.). I can hear, quite distinctly, the call for prayer from within the settlement. I locate the bullhorn speaker atop its mosque.

As I continue my kite-flying, I also hear the voices of children playing. Their squealing and shrieking—only children can hit such pitches—carry across the coming dusk.

The Taliban outlawed kites. Too frivolous. Imagine. In town today, riding through Kabul, you can see children flying kites now because they can. We forget sometimes that genuine progress is measured in small increments.

Once the sun begins setting behind the mountains, I decide it's time to quit. The wind is reluctant to let go of my kite, but slowly, I rein it in and begin my

jog back to the main camp. I round the corner at the closest point to the settlement and spot two young boys waiting there, probably not more than five or six years old. They point excitedly and chatter. I don't have to guess why they're so interested. I guess they saw it in the air. Saw me holding on at the other end of the string.

Three coiled strands of concertina wire separate us. I fold the kite securely and toss it neatly over the barricade. The boys pounce, tussle; one of them triumphs and holds the prize aloft. They run off together and don't look back at me, but I suspect they had the thing in the air within a couple of minutes, riding the coat-tail of daylight.

Kites are for children after all. I hope the boys have as much luck as I did making it fly. Maybe they will know someone who can read the Dari message on the kite and derive some encouragement from it. But if the dove depicted on the kite stands for nothing more than two Afghan boys having some fun for a day or two, perhaps no other significance is necessary.

7 April 2004: STRAY

WASHINGTON DC—Thinking back, for all my anticipation of the last day in the Kabul compound, I met it cautiously.

On that last day, I breakfasted with a friend not given to much talk, my Army lieutenant-colonel medic. Afterward, we hiked to his office building and stood in the sun outside for a few minutes, quiet. I wanted to tell him that I'd met too few people like him here: hungry, obstinate, hard-working longshots who believed they could change a world.

I don't think I told him. And since—how could I let him know I would miss him?—I didn't tell him that, either.

I remember my final trip from Kabul to Bagram, four duffel bags and a backpack, thirty kilometers of road and me, trying to take everything in for one last time.

Did the other passengers in our little convoy notice that spring has begun its cautious descent into this land? Suddenly, against the beige and black of the landscape, there is green, the color of hope.

The nomad tribes have returned, another sign of spring. They winter in the warmer south (we do the same in the United States!) but—tent dwellers—theirs is an urge for survival rather than the luxury of mere comfort. Their homes are patchwork, faded, pieced together from canvas augmented with blankets.

Some of these tents wear "UNHCR" in faded letters—the United Nations High Commission for Refugees—and all sit low to the ground, pitched and staked in the lee of ledges, in gorges or in the shelter of a large rock formation. Protection from the wind whipping across flat land unencumbered by trees.

The nomads, old and young, tend their precious stock. Their very lives depend

on these sheep and rams, donkeys, goats, and camels scavenging in the scrub foliage, nibbling away the new green. I wonder about these nomads, whose lives are eaten up with survival from one day, one season, to the next. Do they perceive their days as long, their lot difficult? Their lives as something potentially malleable or unchangeable? Or is it just how things are?

After a couple of days' wait, I caught a Black Hawk helicopter flight out of Bagram for Kandahar in the south. En route, the sky wrote its own Eugene O'Neill play, full of drama and color and man-versus-nature. A furious dust storm finally enlivened a long day spent waiting at the terminal for a flight delayed, then canceled, and its follow-on that put me in Kyrgyzstan, one step closer.

At Manas Air Base, near Kyrgyzstan's capital city, Bishkek, I waited for the rotor flight home, four days (was it five?) in stasis, like suspension in chemical solution. The dreadful twenty-eight hours elapsed between Manas and the Baltimore-Washington airport are not worth detailing any more than these twenty-eight words it takes to mention.

And now I am home again with thousands of photographs that no one will ever ask to see. I am home looking for news of Operation Enduring Freedom in the newspaper, but there is none, because we remain very much the "other war." People still need to be reminded that we have troops and a commitment in Afghanistan.

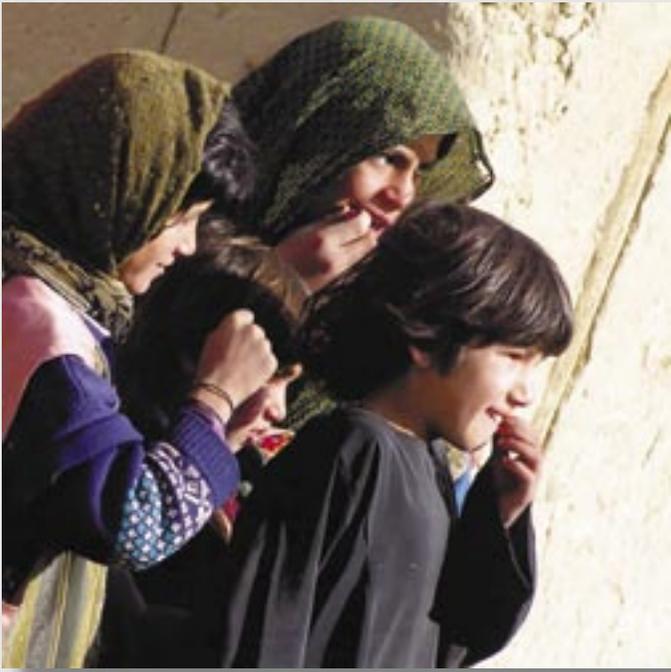
The end of a deployment always marks a change. Imagine driving a hundred miles an hour and then suddenly downshifting into first gear. For a reservist, assimilating into civilian life again is like that. I am expected, instantly, to pick up a mongrel life where I left it off: paying the electric bill and buying groceries and working from 9 to 5 with an hour for lunch and weekends off. No wonder I feel out-of-sync. (I do happily reacquaint myself with fresh milk, butter, and real cheese, however.)

People ask politely about my experience in Afghanistan and expect a concise answer. They have neither the time nor the frame of reference for an in-depth reply. I don't know what to say.

Stray, eagerly anticipated E-mails from a handful of friends still in Kabul remind me of the distance from there to here.

I realize I know more about Afghanistan than I will ever know.

Air Force Reserve Major Richard C. Sater was activated for a one-year tour of duty in support of the war on terrorism in May 2003. He was initially assigned to 4th Air Force, March Air Reserve Base, California. In September 2003, he deployed to Afghanistan for seven months in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, assigned first to Combined Joint Task Force 180 at Bagram Air Base; and later to Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, Kabul. He kept a journal during the deployment, from which the preceding is extracted. On the civilian side, he has been a college professor of English and the arts and a classical music announcer for a National Public Radio affiliate station. He currently resides in Millfield, Ohio.



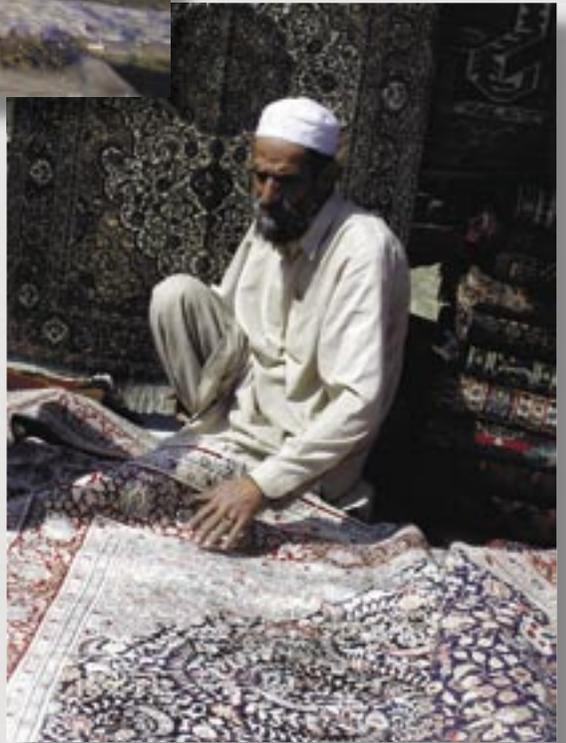
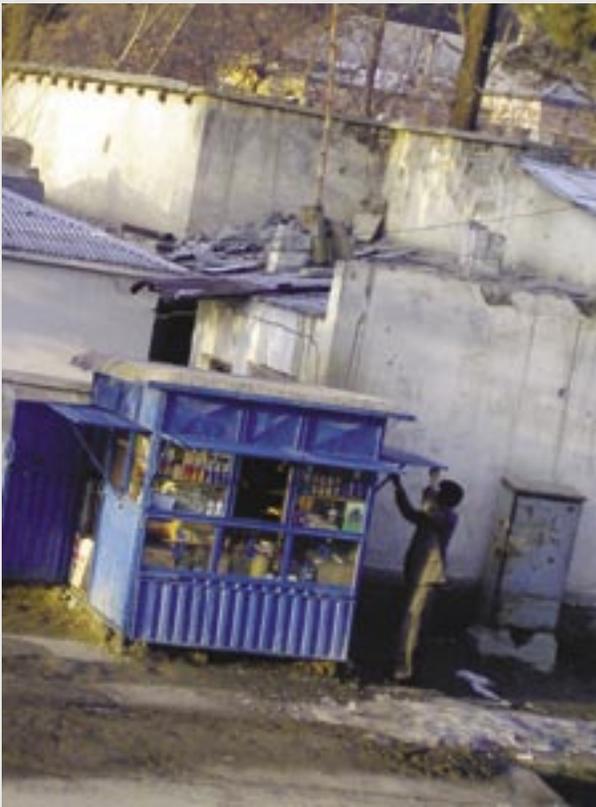


















Photographs courtesy of Major Richard C. Sater