In the spring of 2012, Westover Air Reserve base operations received a call saying that we were staging a DT—a dignified transfer. A young soldier had died in Afghanistan from an IED blast outside Kandahar. The contract jet carrying the coffin would return to Chicopee, the closest base to the widow’s hometown.

The family was due in at 8:30 a.m., and the USO, bless them, showed up at 6:30 a.m. bearing homemade blueberry muffins and strong coffee. Soon a graying Army one-star general arrived with his executive officer and aide-de-camp in tow. As chief of public affairs at Westover, I served as the base representative. We were gathered on the civilian side, at Westover Metropolitan Airport. On the road a few yards outside the airport gate, fifteen Patriot Guard riders sat on idling Harleys and Harley lookalikes, flying American flags on their bikes, ready to drown out protestors from Westboro Baptist Church if they came, as threatened. Westboro Baptists are the faithful from Topeka, Kansas, who consider it God’s will to show up at military funerals displaying signs that read, Thank God for Dead Soldiers and God hates fags or the sweeping, God hates you, which reads like a reversal of John 3:16—For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son....

The family arrived late—the haggard young wife, a daughter of seven or eight, a four-year-old boy, and the dead man’s parents. When the call came from base operations that the aircraft carrying the casket was inbound, we lined up on the tarmac. The Kalitta Airlines jet broke out of the clouds, landed smoothly and taxied slowly to a designated spot in front of the passenger terminal.

The jet engines whined lower and slower, then died. Sober contract pilots connected gray metal pipes to the hydraulic lift and loaded the coffin. They
rendered their sloppy civilian salutes while the mechanical lift carried the coffin to the concrete as the whir of the lift engines broke the crushing silence. I hated to hear the chunk of the metal hitting tarmac. The sound seemed so mechanical, so final.

The widow, mid-twenties, stared at the flag-draped gray metal casket and held her daughter’s hand. Then she walked alone to the coffin, held her gaze at the dark silver for a few seconds, then flung herself over the flag, sobbing. We were lined up on the side—the general, XO, Chicopee cop, airport manager, me. We stood behind the family, looking away and then back as the widow draped herself across the gunmetal gray coffin and wept long and loud, her tears staining the flag that would be her keepsake.

We five stood at attention, smelling jet exhaust and tarmac. Sweat rolled down my back and soaked my uniform blouse. One of the men wore strong aftershave. We thought that was all. But the widow must have told her daughter some adult euphemism, “We’re going to meet daddy’s plane,” and couldn’t pry loose the words coffin, dead. When the girl realized her daddy was inside the metal box, and he would be buried the next day, she sprinted away from her family, screaming. Her long legs took her across the concrete ramp, No! No! No! screaming You lied to me! again and again, flinging her words at all of us who had conspired to kill her daddy. When she ran out onto the taxiway, the Army XO, thinking practically, asked the airport manager, “Is she in danger?”

“No sir. There aren’t any other scheduled flights this morning.”

So we stood, doing nothing. We were used to the adult world. You pretended it didn’t hurt, tightened your jaw, followed rules. The girl finally returned on her own, but refused to hold her mother’s hand or get in the car to start the motorcade.

Waiting outside the airport gate, the Freedom Riders sat on their steel Harleys, ready to escort the hearse. Their deep, uneven idle sounded. The Army general did nothing. I did nothing. The mom, near the point of collapse with grief, said, Please baby, get in the car, in a low, resigned voice.

I’m never getting in. You lied to me. Scream words.

Then the bulky Chicopee cop gently plucked her up, her small fists beating wild on his arms and chest. He was used to close contact with people who didn’t want to be in close contact. He cooed, There, there, it’s ok, it’s ok. We saw hard kicks connect to his shins, but he just bent over and lightly put her in her car seat. It’s gonna be ok. Then the door closed and they pulled away, the hearse carrying the silver coffin first, then the family, the cops, and the Patriot Guard Riders last, flags fluttering.
At that moment of the family’s deepest grief, mingled with sorrow for the widow and her daughter, I promised myself, *I’ll never go to Afghanistan.*

That December, the deployment manager at Air Force Reserve Command headquarters, Robins Air Force Base, Georgia, emailed.

“Sir, have you ever deployed?”

I thought it odd, and thought little else. “I’ve backfilled for several deployments when I was teaching at the Air Force Academy,” I replied, “but I’ve never deployed.”

In eleven years of war, I hadn’t heard of any Reserve officer in public affairs being “non-vol’d”—non-voluntarily ordered to deploy. We saw frequent emails asking for volunteers. They read like bizarre travel ads:

- PAO needed for 179 days in Qatar. Must be Lt Col.
- PAO in Kandahar, 365 days. Capt. or Maj.

Perhaps the deployment manager had grown tired of asking for volunteer public affairs officers; even so, I knew deep in my bones that they don’t involuntarily deploy 53-year-old grandfathers.

“This morning, we’re going to practice shooting the enemy in the face,” Nick, our short, ripped, former Marine, former Blackwater contractor told us on training day 4. We were at Ft. Dix, N.J., attending Combat Airman Skills Training. The 11-day course was designed to make us ready to enter a combat zone, or at least raise our competency level a notch above screw-ups. Some of the young people there had already been on multiple deployments. Amanda, a tough, pretty captain, was leaving two young children with her husband and deploying with an Army Special Forces team. She could’ve taught each class. I wondered why she had to attend.

“People have died,” Nick said, “because they hesitate to shoot the enemy in the face at close range. “It’s an unnatural act, and you have to train yourself to shoot.”

His team propped up life-sized cutouts of bearded insurgents sporting red and white scarves. We grabbed our 9 mm handguns from a secured holster, clicked off the safety as we brought the barrel up, snapped back the slide to chamber a round, aimed at a bearded man’s face, and pulled the trigger. After a dozen times, the whole process took less than two seconds. Click, holster guard released. Click, safety off, showing the red dot. Snick-snack, a bullet housed in the chamber. Bang, bang, bang—or click, click, click—since we weren’t using ammo. A hundred times. Once, I bloodied my forefinger by grasping the chamber mechanism too low and pulling wrong, so the spring-action snapped the sharp metal on my skin. I never
pulled wrong again. This was the action needed if there was an insider attack. I stayed late to practice with a few others. Click, click, snick-snick. Bang, bang, bang.

On April 18, just before we crossed into Afghanistan airspace, the loadmaster came on the intercom and said in a serious voice that we are about to enter a war zone, so extinguish all lights, go to the bathroom now or hold it until we land. Minutes later, the cabin lights turned a blood red, and we saw shadows of each other, like a little corner of hell.

You chose this.

The crew’s voices and faces turned grim. Other passengers’ mouths turned down, eyes glanced around. Their nervousness was infectious. They were worried about SAMs, RPGs, and SMARM—hunks of metal ripping through the aircraft. I again considered sitting on my body armor but didn’t, not because it was a bad idea, but because no one else was.

Exhausted, we went through customs and welcome briefings. During one interminable briefing, I noticed a public service announcement on a TV behind the briefer list the various sirens and warnings that could come over the base giant voice system. One worth noting was “Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!” Upon hearing those unlucky words, immediately drop to the floor, since explosions mushrooms skyward and out in an inverted cone.

We dropped off bags in one unguarded barn with the warning, “Don’t leave anything you don’t want stolen.” I didn’t want anything stolen. I stacked my bags inconspicuously in the middle of the long wood planks and shoved them toward the back, feeling guilty because I was hoping that someone else’s luggage would be stolen instead. One pretty staff sergeant people called Kath was smiling and helping direct everyone. She’d been on the flight from Qatar but had clearly been here before. The heavy body armor didn’t bow her strong shoulders. She helped people find their weapons among the stacks of several hundred black cases. I admired her competence and—remarkably—something approaching joy.

I pulled out my weapons case, grateful that I’d wound ridiculous purple tape around the handles. Our future XO, Dawn, and I located her weapons, then we followed an escort to take us to the lodging line. We were surprised to learn that lieutenant colonels were considered DVs and got their own room with sheets. This was significant because we had a locked cabinet to store weapons and a locked room to keep out intruders. There were reports of rapes in the transient group tents. Later, I learned that Kath was assigned to an eight-person yurt and sent the others off to get food around 2300 while she watched their weapons.
We dragged weapons and 72-hour bag down a dirty sidewalk, past an open construction pit and what looked in the dark like condemned buildings and junk piles, to DV lodging -- a plywood shack with dirt-caked floors.

For five minutes, I tried to unlock the padlock on my room. I was tired to the point of sleepwalking, and berating myself for not being able to accomplish the simplest operation, especially when Kath could just smile through the gloom and lift up everyone around her. The walls to the room stopped halfway up the pitched roof, so I could’ve climbed over, but a friendly Army sergeant major came out from his room and said, “Let me give it a try, sir.” He was lean and leathery, tanned from doing secret missions under the Afghan sun. He glanced at my room assignment, oozing competence.

“Ah, the lock doesn’t work because you’ve got the wrong room.”

I groaned. The hallway was about twenty feet long, with plywood partitions to make four rooms. Feeling helpless and grateful, I watched over the SGM’s shoulder as he opened the padlock on his first try. At officer training school, thirty years earlier, we heard a joke: how does a lieutenant get himself and a master sergeant out of a slick-sided hole thirty feet deep with no rope or ladder? He turns to his companion and says, Master sergeant, get us out of this hole.

“Probably not the first incompetent officer you’ve rescued in your career,” I said.

“No problem, sir. Took me a few tries when I got here,” he lied. He was trying to catch a hop to Herat, out west. That’s how people got around the theater, it appeared. Show up and wait for an empty seat. It reconfirmed my notion that we’d have to rely on our own competence for survival. Ergo, I was in trouble.

The sergeant major told me he’d been waiting for a flight for three days, and was hoping to catch a 3 a.m. hop to Herat. He somehow managed to make the black Army PT shorts and t-shirt look tough. My door was open. I started unpacking but didn’t put anything on the floor. The plywood ceiling was stained with what I hoped was water. The bed smelled old, like your grandparents’ basement. The locker looked like a yard sale leftover.

A few minutes later, a recorded voice shouted, “Incoming, incoming, incoming!” My first response was disbelief.

“Do you think this is this a drill?” I asked the sergeant major.

“No sir, I believe this is the real thing,” he drawled, capturing the fine line between showing respect and implying, Don’t be a moron.

Two seconds later, a massive WHOOM! sizzled the air and seemed to zap my right eardrum. Our shack shook hard. I squatted, and the sergeant major surprised me by crouching. I remembered the PSA, but couldn’t bring myself to lie in the
rat piss and bacteria-laden floor. The interceptor guns rattled off what seemed like hundreds of rounds in a few seconds. I remember thinking the C-RAM guns sounded louder and uglier than the explosion.

A second rocket exploded. We learned later that one 107 mm rocket had landed nearby, damaging a C-130 aircraft but not killing anyone, and the C-RAM interceptors had blown up the second rocket before impact.

We were both crouched down, waiting for whatever the enemy threw at us. In those few seconds, at least, we were equals, since there’s no wrong way to get rocketed. After “all clear” sounded, I grabbed my helmet and heavy body armor and headed for the bunker, as required.

“You coming, sarn’t major?”

He tamped a pack of cigarettes on his arm. His hands shook just a little. “No sir. This ain’t my first rodeo.” And he stepped outside for a smoke.

I stepped outside—the air smelled faintly of diesel exhaust—and trotted to the nearest concrete bunker. I was surprised to see it nearly empty, even though there were dozens of rooms and temporary-lodging tents nearby. I crouched to enter the small shelter. It smelled like damp burlap from old sandbags stacked inside. Soon a young man came in.

“Man, I was sound asleep,” he announced.

Fear made him chatty. He was newly-arrived from Cleveland.

“I just got off a fourteen-hour shift at ten.”

“I thought shifts lasted twelve hours,” I said, panic rising up my spine. I doubted whether I had the stamina to do 12 hour shifts, much less 14, for six months.

“Not mine.”

“How often do you get rocketed?” I asked.

“Not sure. I’ve only been here three weeks and this is my second time.”

The few people in the bunker had all recently arrived. Everyone else rolled over and went back to sleep, knowing that by the time we felt the impact, the insurgents had scurried off.

The boy from Cleveland was not yet twenty years old—a decade younger than my daughter. I breathed the stale air and smelled the sweat of each other’s fear, my back against the moist concrete, and waited in silence, thinking, He shouldn’t be here.

In the morning, I stood in line under the hot sun for several hours, pushing my two massive roller bags, weapons case, and overnight bag incrementally through the dirt, up to the concrete floor of the terminal, and finally through the metal detectors in the terminal. After several more delays, we walked across the hot tarmac to board a C-130. I glanced around. Bagram was ringed with craggy snow-
capped mountains. They looked oddly similar to the Rocky Mountains I loved in Colorado. Sure, insurgents used those mountains to hide their rusty rocket launchers, but those mountains were beautiful, and oddly comforting.

*Maybe this won’t be so bad,* I thought, and boarded the plane.

During our fifteen-minute flight into Kabul, the pilot jinked up, down, left, right, in stomach-clutching evasive maneuvers. I love roller-coasters, so I smiled involuntarily. Across from me, an Asian woman I’d traveled with since Norfolk was looking worse and worse, and I wished hard for us all that she kept breakfast down. With hatch open, we had beautiful views in lurching succession: white-capped mountains. Azure sky. Gray city buildings. Dry earth. The glinting globe and spike of a mosque.

Then we landed at the Kabul International Airport. The foothills of the Hindu Kush Mountains rose to the heavens, snow-capped and jagged. The bus drove us past a few ugly buildings to an ugly military terminal. Wherever we’d spent the $800 billion here, it wasn’t in airport renovations.

A bored, slightly angry staff sergeant shouted, “Don’t leave your weapons unattended. Find your weapons case, then your bags, and go through customs. Be polite to the guard. Hand everything to him with your right hand.” He sounded like he suspected us of trying to hide booze in our luggage or sabotage foreign relations.

At a dozen checkpoints on our twenty-minute trip from Kabul Airport to our NATO headquarters at ISAF, we saw gray-blue clad Afghan police carrying rifles. A few Afghans glared with suspicion or hostility. Most ignored us. Still we were conspicuously foreigners. As my friend said, “They may as well paint a bullseye on the door of every white Land Cruiser.”

Then heavy gates opened and we rolled into the ISAF compound. Around the perimeter stood a beige, prison-like concrete blast T-wall, meant to save us from rocket and RPG attacks. Razor wire surrounded the camp, along with various compounds within the main camp. Gray dust settled on everything. America’s longest war had taken its toll. The concrete was crumbling, paint chipped, and metal rusted on the gate. Large gates clanked shut behind us. The guards stared. Inside the camp, rusty Conex boxes-turned-office space squeezed on top of each other. Tired civilians with big guns and tiny body armor walked in front of dented Land Cruisers. I don’t know why beauty matters so much, but it does. We parked at the motor pool and I saw no more of Kabul for three months.
Dawn and I were met by Rob, the XO that she’d be replacing. He was kind and welcoming, in a harried, efficient way.

“Hey, Jim? Dawn? I’m Rob. Welcome to ISAF. How was your trip?”

“Long. We started about six days ago from CAST.”

“Eight days ago,” Dawn corrected.

“That’s right...And we got rocketed in Bagram last night.”

“Oh yeah. I read that in the daily report.” Rob seemed less concerned about the attack than I was.

Rob brought me to the DCOS COMM building (Deputy Chief of Staff for Communication), where I met the person I’d replace: a petite, angry Lt Col from Alabama. Claire threw fistfuls of knowledge at me, and she seemed incredibly anxious to leave, which did nothing to tamp down my rising panic.

“Hey welcome here. Ok, I’ve already signed you onto the network, just verify with the Italians—they do the computers. And you’re already receiving Exovera, that’s our news clip service; you get about 60 stories a day. I mostly ignore them. One of your biggest time sinks is to do the Media Engagement Calendar on PowerPoint. It’s a pain in the ass, but you have to do it right or Colonel C goes apeshit.”

Claire explained the color code: green for confirmed media engagements, like the *Wall Street Journal* interviewing Gen Anderson Monday.”

“See on IJC’s calendar, you can tell Anderson is on a BFC.”

She looked at me. “You don’t know who Lt Gen Anderson is, do you?”

Each word in her torrent of information seemed to come slowly, glance off my brain and hurtle into outer space.

“No, sorry.”

“IJC Commander. Hotshot. He does a shitload of interviews.”

She turned back to the slides, and I wondered when we’d get to the real work of planning and executing the war. “...yellow for unconfirmed media engagements,” she was saying. She explained a half dozen more color combinations, along with dozens of acronyms.

“I’ve left a chart, because IJC uses a different color scheme and Frank” (she pronounced it Fronk) uses his own color scheme for Gen. Feldmann’s interviews.”

“You’ve got three computers. NIPR, SIPR, and ISAF Secret, use the switch to toggle between them. You can’t mix ‘em up.” Behind the three slim CPUs lay a snakepit of wires, covered in filth and dust a quarter inch thick. A month later, when our kind admin folks had to swap out computers, they wore gloves and surgical masks.
“Every Monday, you do the Quad chart, which has media engagements and DV visits and anything about the elections or CIVCAS. On Thursdays, you do the Strategic Leader Engagement slide…”

She left an example of each PowerPoint slide I had to produce. The notion crept—much too slowly—up the back of my head that this is what I’d be doing for the NEXT SIX MONTHS.

“I scheduled you to meet with Col. C in an hour.” She lowered her voice. “Watch out for her.”

“What do you mean?”

A tall, good-looking Army O-5 walked by, and Claire ignored my question.

Claire introduced me to a dozen people who were used to seeing military come and go. During introductions, person after person tore their gaze from a screen, greeted me with rushed sincerity, and returned to their pixels to see if they’d missed anything.

Col. C, the woman who ran the Media Ops Center, was a razor-tongue, wrinkled Army colonel. In my first interview, Col. C welcomed me into her office. I was jet-lagged. My right ear was buzzing on the inside and muffled on the outside from the twin rocket explosions. Claire was in a massive rush to put as much mileage as she could between herself and Kabul.

“Oh, so...welcome to DCOS COMM,” said Col. C. “Do you have a room?” She cast a weary glance at Claire. All her glances were weary, the skin beneath her eyes was cadaver-gray. I think Col. C slept four hours a night.

“Yes Ma’am,” she said.

“Oh, fine. I’ll talk to Jim and you can finish briefing him when we’re done.”

As Claire was leaving, Gregor, a diminutive Scot who worked downstairs in Strategic Plans, popped his head in.

“Ma’am, will Jim be at the MEC planning meeting?”

“No, God damn it, he will not be at that meeting,” the colonel snapped. “I want him to unpack.”

Good sign, I thought. A little touchy, but she cares about her troops. Maybe Claire’s just being sensitive.

Midway through our brief meeting, the colonel stopped to respond to another email. Not until then did I notice the wall to my left and behind me was filled—from near ceiling to waist-level, with posters of cats. Cute cats, sexy cats, lewd cats, fluffy cats. She had about 70 posters covering her wall. Some were cute, like the cat lying in a seductive pose across a velvet couch with the caption, Why do you want to
look at other cats on the internet? Others were vulgar, like the one that says, *Beware of the dog...and the cat is no one to f**k with either.*

Later, I’d see her taking breaks on the deck of our building, cuddling and speaking softly to the dirt-streaked strays—Scrappy, Scruffy, Sophie—with entire tufts of hair missing. Each time I saw her on the deck, I wondered how she could be so kind to the cats and so caustic to everyone else.

She turned tired, intense eyes back to me.

“Well, welcome to ISAF.” She sighed. Each of her sighs, I soon discovered, had its own personality and dimensions: exhale velocity, duration, timber. This was slow, with a blues tone.

“Go unpack and get some rest. You’re gonna need it.”

Mark, a British Lt Col, came up to the MOC for a rant. It was a delightful break, like afternoon tea. Today’s topic was the U.S. Army’s habit of ignoring truth or decency to suck up to the boss.

“In the British Army, a loyal troop would be expected to tell his commanding general if he thought an idea was idiotic,” Mark proclaimed. He had graduated from Eton and Cambridge, and each of his statements were proclamations. “Here, our insecure new commander is so intent on pleasing Gen. Dunford that he nods and says, ‘We’ll make it happen.’ And all the toadies under him strain their neck muscles nodding in agreement...Jim, you know what the motto of the British military is?”

“No.” I’m six feet tall in my combat boots, and Mark towered over me. I felt ignorant.

He glared down. “Be a force for good. Just that. Imagine if that were the Yanks’ credo.”

I laughed. “Here the motto seems to be, please the boss and any cost.”

“That’s right!” He jabbed a long finger at me. “And imagine how f**king damaging that is to the mission.”

I heard Mark. I heard the Army colonels. And I did not think, *This place is nuts.* I thought, *I’d better watch myself.*

At 11:30 Easter morning I walked down Milano Ave. toward headquarters. The tiny road became my favorite hundred meters at ISAF, Milano Avenue. To the left was the faded colonial headquarters house, the “Yellow Building,” where the ISAF commander, Gen. Joseph Dunford worked surrounded by his staff. Monir, one of our Afghan translators, grew up in Kabul. He played soccer on the front lawn in the days before this became a secure compound, before 30 years of war. Across from the
Yellow Building stands the lovely Destille Gardens, with a water fountain, actual green grass, a barbeque pit, and cigar aficionados launching smoke plumes into the air. Unlike the United States, no public place at ISAF is smoke-free. Behind me, roughly 6,607 miles away, my wife, daughter, and two grandchildren slept at home.

Every Sunday at 11:45 a.m., the ISAF commander held a memorial service to people who died in combat that week. A tall, fit man, Dunford’s shoulders hunched. His skin looked gray as he read off the names. All the dead were Afghans, as it was most weeks, I was surprised to learn. The ceremony was quick but honorable. Gen. Dunford was clearly not just going through the motions. Two Afghan National Army members were killed in a gun battle with the Taliban. Gen. Dunford read both names. He seemed to care about and mourn the dead Afghan fighters. I’m sorry I don’t remember their names, because they deserve that honor. In March, 2014, the month before I arrived, Rod Nordland from the New York Times wrote that 13,729 Afghan soldiers and police have been killed since the war began. Civilians also paid a disproportionately heavy role. The Afghan government reported that 12,336 civilians had been killed since 2001. As of this writing, U.S. and coalition forces lost 3,490 people since the war began. Numbers. But here was Gen. Dunford, interrupting his onslaught of meetings to mourn each human being.

After months of costly training, flying halfway around the world so I could understand the dizzying bureaucratic hierarchy that had formed from 13 years of war, I sucked at my job on my first full day because I didn’t know how to build a spiffy PowerPoint slide.

What does modern headquarters run on? Money and PowerPoint. This was my war: right click on the populated line, scroll down to insert line below. Click. Type in data, add stoplight colors, red, green, yellow. Ship one slide out to key leaders for approval and start the next slide.

On my second day, I calculated that everyone at ISAF drinks about 10 plastic bottles of Kinley water a day.

“If there’s 2,200 people on base, that’s about 22,000 plastic bottles going in the trash every day,” I said to Mike. “We could be recycling.”

He smiled and said in a voice that rattled windows, “Let’s get them to stop killing each other first, and then we can worry about recycling.”

Camp ISAF held a stark simplicity. Meals and laundry service were provided. All we had to do was work, seven days a week. At work, we had a meeting every morning on the MOC floor. Will gave a brief report of what was foremost on the media front. He radiated eloquent competence. He ended with, “And for your info,
today is national chocolate-covered cashew day.” Everyone laughed. Maybe this place wasn’t so bad.

Next it was my turn. I was nervous following Will. I gave a rundown of upcoming media engagements, proud to use “BFC” in a sentence and know what it meant. And on that day I started a tradition I kept the whole time: giving a tidbit of Afghan culture. “Proverbs and poetry are more important to the Afghans than to westerners, so here’s an Afghan proverb: ‘One flower doesn’t bring spring,’ meaning, it takes everyone’s help to do a job.” Silence. I had no idea whether I’d said something offensive, wise, or just unusual.

After the meeting, Pamir, a young Afghan cultural advisor, approached me. He was dressed in a brown suit and silk tie. He said in a deep, serious tone, “I have heard that same proverb spoken at government meetings.” That day began a collaboration with Pamir, and eventually all the Afghans, to come up with a piece of Afghan culture each morning—a folk saying, a line from the poet Rumi, an explanation of Ramadan. I loved that—and only that—about the morning meetings. The Afghans have wonderful, evocative and surprising sayings. He gave me some others:

\textit{Aasman duhr, dameen sakht}. “The sky is far; the earth hard,” meaning, there are no good options.

Another says, \textit{Maadar ba yak dost gahwaahara, wa ba dast-e degar jahaan-ra takaan may dehad}. “Mother shakes the cradle with one hand, and shakes the world with the other hand.” The saying surprised me in a place that by all reports seemed to denigrate women as a matter of habit and tradition. I’d stumbled onto a treasure of insight. Perhaps before dropping bombs on the next country, we should glance at their poets and proverbs.

After missing the first two mandatory Saturday newcomers’ briefing, I finally reported to the small theater in the Milano building on Saturday, May 3. I tried to sit in the back, but three seats were missing cushions or dangled broken. Things had decayed a bit since the war had been shiny and new. At least now, I thought, after enduring an unfriendly boss for two weeks, it was time for a proper welcome. Surely we’d receive briefings on the variety of gym classes being offered, restaurants on the compound, how to stay motivated. I don’t know why I expected that. This was Armyland.

The first speaker, a tired-looking major, stood in front of the podium speaking quickly. He sounded annoyed at us for being new.

After giving us a basic overview of the compound—2,400 people from 48 countries, 35 generals—he chided, “Never forget you’re in a war zone. You should be switched on every time you walk out of your room. Carry a tourniquet at all
times.” He told us Col. Ahmed Gul’s attack at the military-controlled portion of Kabul airport took 8 ½ seconds. The Afghan pilot had become radicalized in recent years, and told relatives he “wanted to kill Americans.” The relatives told no one. Among the nine Americans killed was my former colleague at the Air Force Academy, Maj. Phil Ambard. The April 27, 2011, attack was the deadliest since the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia in 1996.

On May 8, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahed announced on social media that its annual fighting season would begin on Monday, May 12, at 5:30 a.m. Afghanistan’s fighting season begins in April or May as snow melts off the Hindu Kush, making the mountain passes between Pakistan and Afghanistan accessible. This is an army that moves on the ground. Attacks during their coming fighting season, he Tweeted, would target U.S. military bases, foreign embassies and vehicle convoys, Afghan officials, politicians and translators. It was a joke around HQ: saber-rattling with a Tweet, and the apocalyptic threats. But we read their statement, knowing that many people on both sides, and many innocents on neither side, would die this year. The list of Taliban targets included “the foreign invaders and their backers,” including spies, military and civilian contractors, translators, administrators and logistics personnel.

Pajhwok news agency did a hasty translation of the Taliban’s long statement, “Empathy with translators.”

[You] the translator of infidel!
[I] saw you the other day in Kabul in front of the British embassy. You had aggrieved outcry. Your face was covered. Your eyes were so ashamed and full of baseness that you had to cover them with black glasses because you don’t have those eyes that could look into the camera of a reporter or into the eyes of your nation.

I heard your clamor that you were asking your fleeing British masters to not to leave you at the mercy of the Taliban and to take you with them to the UK and show some mercy... but the British embassy did not open its door for you at all and neither anyone heard your cry. No media reported the news of your protest and nobody listened to your crying outs...

**May 28**

We’d been making phone calls for two days, planning to pull the trigger on a press conference in which Gen. Dunford would announce a drastic troop reduction in Afghanistan to 9,800 by the end of 2014, soon after President Obama made the same announcement stateside. The next year, troop levels would be sliced in half, and in 2017 our military presence in Afghanistan would end, so the narrative went.
It felt good to be on the phone with Afghan and Western journalists. It felt good to be doing anything that didn’t resemble PowerPoint. On our walk to the gate that afternoon to meet the press, Timor told me the Afghan journalists appreciated it when Gen. Dunford shook everyone’s hands at the last press conference.

“Things like that matter here.”

“So that’s why Obama and Karzai not liking each other is more than just a personal problem?”

“Exactly.”

Short, dark, and handsome, Timor oozed intelligence. He would speak fluent German with Frank, then switch to flawless English with the Americans, and converse with Afghan journalists in Dari and Pashto. He had the ability to walk into a situation, lift his dark eyebrows for a moment, and take in both the big picture and the subtleties seemingly at a glance, which is why he’d travelled to London and Brussels to be an interpreter and advisor at NATO senior-leader meetings.

Timor and I wound through the narrow mazes of concrete blast walls, past four-foot deep and wide wire-mesh Hesco barriers filled with cigarette butts. Sand spilled out through rips in the decaying canvas liner. We walked through a rusty turnstile, and out onto the sidewalk in central Kabul. Freedom.

Two dozen journalists had gathered outside ISAF’s tall cement blast-wall. I enjoyed seeing something other than Connex box buildings covered with razor wire, and the same faded yellow buildings. But the street looked harsh, or maybe I was projecting my fears onto the scene. Children in dirty white clothes stood behind a jersey barrier.

In a shack twenty feet from us, a solitary Afghan guard eyed a small blue Corolla that pulled up quickly, dropped off a reporter and cameraman, and pulled an illegal U-turn to leave. Beyond the guard shack, the main road was rutted. The deep drainage ditch was dry and empty except for a layer of trash. A dented white Toyota SUV gunned his engine and rushed by in a wake of dust, their passengers glancing nervously at the crowd.

“Welcome to ISAF,” I told the group. “We’ll be going through security in a few minutes.” The New York Times reporter and a few others hadn’t arrived. It was 12:45 p.m. The press conference was due to start at 2:30 p.m.

Then I walked into the crowd and greeted each person, shaking hands with the men and Western women, and saying Salaam with my right hand over my heart to the Afghan women—even that was a breach of propriety. Western men did not speak to or even look at Afghan women they don’t know. But the Afghan women smiled at my gauche attempt at courtesy.
After five minutes, Jennifer, a Navy Lt. Cmdr., motioned me to the gate. “Don’t react to what I’m saying, ok?” She spoke fast. Her face, always a little nervous, looked creased and sweaty. “Intel just called and they think one of the journalists might be a suicide bomber.”

I closed my eyes and groaned, just a puff of breath to mourn something that hadn’t yet fled. Ten feet away, behind a cement shelter, a Macedonian guard sat on a bench and smoked a ragged cigarette. For a millisecond, I thought of just walking back inside. Then I prayed.

“If it’s true, they’re probably going for General Dunford,” she continued. “So just go back to what you were doing, but be on the lookout.” Jen stayed inside the gate, which was right. She had a five-year-old son who sent her Crayon drawings and short love letters. The only break in her ceaseless motion at the office occurred when she got the letters. Jen would read the letter aloud, wipe her eyes, shake her head, and turn back to work.

“Ok. Thanks Jen.” I looked at her for a second, trying to see anything else. “Sorry.”

Suddenly, details mattered more than they did a few seconds earlier. Even the brown Kabul air seemed threatening. I scanned the crowd and flashed what I hoped was a convincing smile. All but one of the journalists looked either bored or friendly. The western reporters, who were attuned to danger after the Serena hotel and Lebanese restaurant killings, didn’t look anxious. The Afghan children were still lounging on the cement barriers. The most street savvy, a skinny 10-year-old boy named Bashir, called out, “Hey G.I. How are you doing? Do you have anything for me?” in near perfect English.

“Sorry, I don’t today.”

“Next time bring something.”

The bomber could be anyone. The cameramen carried heavy black sacks; the photographers wore sloppy mesh vests. Some of the men wore perahan tunban, the traditional knee-length shirts and “pajama” pants. The women wore colorful hijab. One man looked agitated. I glanced long enough to take inventory. He was middle aged. Good. Glaring at me. Bad. Overweight so that his perahan tunban fit snugly and showed nothing other than belly. Good. Holding a briefcase. Bad. Briefcase seemed light. Good. I breathed deep and said another brief prayer. Six or seven long minutes later, I was cleared to take the first group to the scanner.

Outside the noisy X-ray room, one young journalist wearing jeans and a black collared shirt abruptly turned and left just before he had to step into the body scanners. In a thick accent, he told us, “My editor called and said he needs me to
work on a different story.” He hadn’t been talking on his phone, but no one stopped him. I think he might’ve been the bomber, but I’m very glad not to know.

When I apologized to the group for the wait, one smiling Afghan man wearing jeans said, “This is normal to arrive an hour early for inspections.”

As we waited for the bomb-snoffing dogs, a young Afghan reporter told me he wanted the Americans to stay.

“I know he’ll announce the drawdown, but I wish he wasn’t,” he said, which surprised me.

“Why?”

“Safety.”

It made sense. He’s in a risky, visible business, and journalists are infinitely safer with us than the Taliban.

Finally, the dog handler arrived with his scrappy brown mutt. The balding, tattooed handler wore multiple gold earrings. His bright orange hair was pulled into a thin ponytail. He wore shorts and combat boots. In a British accent, he told the male journalists to face the wall while he searched their bags. The female journalists had to wait longer for an ISAF female to search them.

It was a tense 10 minutes, but not a scary one. On that dirty ISAF sidewalk, again I prayed, and waited for the journalists to either get patted down or light us up.

At the next station, when the Afghan journalists—but not the Western ones—had to stare into a metal tube for a retina scan, the heavy man who had been agitated at the gate balked. Worse, the scan didn’t work the first two times he tried.

“Why are not the others going through?” Others meant Western journalists.

I didn’t respond. The severe-looking Macedonian guard in charge put her hands on her hips, stared him down, and said, “Again.”

The scan didn’t register, and he had to repeat the humbling process a third time.

“No,” he barked. “I will not. It hurts my eyes. You know who I am.”

“You can’t go unless you get scanned,” said the squat Macedonian guard.

We did know who he was, but ISAF had to collect biometric data on all Afghan journalists. By then, he was loudly proclaiming his discontent in a mishmash of Dari and English.

The guard said, “You must get scanned or you can’t come in.” She crossed her arms. Finally, he agreed to get scanned, “Once more. Not again.”

Five minutes before the press conference was scheduled to start, Brandi rushed up and said, “The New York Times reporter is at the gate. He just called.”

The new Press Desk director, Chris, said, “He’s an hour and a half too late.”

“I’d let him in,” I said.
“No. The press conference will be over before he gets through security. He knew what time everyone was supposed to come.”

“Ok,” Brandi said, and dialed his number.

The reporter was furious. “Are you seriously going to turn away the top news organization in the world?”

As politely as she could, Brandi said, “Yes.”

Gen. Dunford stood tall and sharp in his Marine Corps service Alpha uniform—flawless green coat, green trousers, with khaki long-sleeved shirt and tie. Optional scowl. The mic wasn’t working. Finally, Dunford said gravely, “I’m going to step into this back room and I’ll return in five minutes when the sound is working.” It was part order, part threat.

Thirty-five reporters filled the room. Steve and Ben, dripping sweat on the cords, re-wired the original mic, which worked perfectly. Dunford was articulate and charming. He had his personal public affairs officer, and they’d worked late into the night to make sure he was on-message. In all, the conference resulted in at least 524 stories worldwide. (Yeah, we counted).

After the press conference, I asked a BBC reporter if she felt safe living in Kabul.

“No lately, after the bombing,” she said. “We used to throw parties every week, but now we don’t meet together in the evenings, except when we have to attend events for work. It’s sad.”

Four months earlier, on Jan. 17, 2014, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the entrance to the Taverna du Liban, a Lebanese restaurant popular with Western journalists. After the explosion, two gunmen rushed in, laden with assault rifles and extra ammo. For two bloody hours they fired on diners, killing 21, including several of the reporter’s friends.

On August 5, 20 people were scheduled to attend an on-site briefing at the Marshal Fahim National Defense University in Kabul—Afghanistan’s West Point. The defense university is called “Sandhurst in the Sand” referring to Great Britain’s Royal Military Academy. On that August day, the tour was going to highlight the officer-training capabilities once construction was complete. As interest in the project grew, ultimately more than 90 U.S. and coalition troops present, “including Personal Security Detachments (PSD) and Close Protection Teams (CPT) from the United States, the UK, and Germany,” according to the redacted Army report, “AR 15-6 Investigation—Marshal Fahim National Defense University Incident—05 AUG 14,” dated November 18, 2014. The threat level for August 5 was assessed as low, even though when the holy month of Ramadan ended July 27, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar urged Afghan police and soldiers to “come and wage
jihad alongside your own people.” America seemed not to notice. We at ISAF hardly noticed. The last insider attack had occurred in October 2013.

The group descended to the underground tank, but found it was too dark and crowded to hold the briefing there. So they resituated to an unplanned site, an open area behind the military police barracks. Some 58 people were gathering to hear the briefer, which began at 11:40 a.m. A photo of the group 10 minutes before the shooting shows members gathered around a briefer in a tight horseshoe pattern. The briefer is wearing a brown suit and standing next to an easel.

Meanwhile, an Armed ANA military policeman named Rafiullah returned from a security patrol and reported to the Military Police Company Headquarters, adjacent to the group. “He was instructed to go into the barracks and wait for the delegation to depart,” according to the report. Rafiullah entered the barracks, which was now directly in line with the group gathering for the briefing.

He took his M16, and positioned himself in the bathroom. At around 11:55 a.m., he stuck the barrel out the window and fired 27-30 rounds into the crowd. In less than one minute, he shot 19 people, killing Maj. Gen. Greene from multiple gunshots in the head, neck, and pelvis. Coalition Force Soldiers returned fire—one had been shot in the arm, the bullet grazing his underarm. Amazingly, he still returned accurate fire that likely killed Rafiullah.

I knew half a dozen of the people there. One friend was shot through the thigh. Another was seriously injured and I never saw him again or heard about his status beyond the fact that he survived. My roommate took cover with the rest of the attendees. Within minutes, the wounded were taken to the Role 1 British medical facility at nearby Camp Qargha. In less than an hour, all five with life-threatening wounds were transported to Bagram. The sixth, Maj. Gen. Harold Greene, was dead.

Throughout the day, reports kept coming in. More injured, some seriously. A request dropped in from CSTC-A about compiling photos of Gen. Greene for a memorial for the family. The general had been scheduled to rotate back to the United States two days later for his mid-tour R&R leave, and to celebrate his wife’s 56th birthday. The night before Gen. Greene died, several people heard him on the post office roof telling his family how excited he was to be coming home and catch a Red Sox game at Fenway Park.

That evening, I went to the chapel to see how Chaplain Dunfee was doing. To my surprise, the Rock Chapel was packed, and a spontaneous prayer service was going on. The Chaplain and others prayed for Gen. Greene’s family and for the injured. We prayed for the ISAF “family,” for Afghanistan—that this wouldn’t set back the
work being done. A few people cried. I came back at the barracks around 2130, late for me. A half hour later, my roommate came in, which was early for him. I was at my computer, watching a comedy.

“I’m sure you heard about the shooting today,” I asked.

He stopped and looked at me, “Jim, I was there.”

The shooting changed the tone at ISAF. My roommate was understandably upset. One of his troops, a young Army major, had staunched the bleeding of a wounded colleague with her own hands, and had held the person’s bloody hand during the helo ride to the hospital in Bagram. The major is my daughter’s age. When he asked her if this is the first time she’d done something like this, she said no.

Two weeks later, drained to the bones from the aftermath of the Marshal Fahim shooting, I relished my four hours off Friday morning. I wrote for two blessed hours, then put my swim shorts under my PT gear and walked 15 minutes to the U.S. Embassy next door. The morning was stuffed full of grace. Even the walk to the Embassy dining hall is peaceful. Mural-sized posters of Americana line the sidewalks or hang off the side of tall buildings: Arches National Park, Lake Champlain shore from the wooded Vermont side, Blue Ridge Mountains, San Antonio Riverwalk, the Nubble Lighthouse in Maine.

I swam and envied the peaceful life of the Embassy crowd - lounging by the pool in bikinis and shorts, listening to music or playing volleyball. They have every single Friday off. Utterly off. On my way out, I stopped by a table to grab extra protein bars for Ben, who worked alone Friday mornings. He couldn’t leave the phones unattended to go to the DFAC.

“Hey Air Force,” a voice sounded from someone used to people stiffening to attention at the sound.

I ignored the voice, not knowing if it was for me, and if it was, the voice deserved being ignored.

Again, louder, “You in the PT gear.”

I saw an Air Force colonel sitting alone at a table situated perfectly to spy on the mound of protein bars, scowling. I felt a crack in my fragile calm. Not now.

“Yes?”

“How many bars did you take?” he said in the loud voice of the Righteous. “It looked like you took about six.”

My face and shoulders went stiff with rage -- an over-reaction I couldn’t prevent. I looked in my bag. My hand shook. I couldn’t see straight to count.

“That’s exactly right. I took six.” I’d taken four, I discovered later.

“You know how many bars you’re supposed to take?”
“No. There’s no sign.”
“Everyone knows you’re only supposed to take two.”
I was conscious of not saying sir.
“I don’t know that if there’s no sign.”
“It’s the same in every DFAC.”
He glared at me like I was supposed to take some action.
“Do you want me to take them out of my wet gym bag and put them back?” I reached in and held one up, deciding at the same time not to tell Ben why the bars were wet.
He didn’t answer. We glared at each other. Rather, he glared at me. I tried to convey an Are-we-done-yet mien. We weren’t.
“Why are you wearing PT gear? Are you allowed to wear PT gear at the ISAF DFAC?”
“No, we’re not.”
“Well, it’s the same thing here.”
“I don’t swim at ISAF either, so it’s not the same thing. There’s no sign saying you can’t wear PT gear here, like there is at ISAF.” I was conscious of stepping over a line of military courtesy. What was he going to do, send me to Afghanistan?
“Do you want me to put up a sign? It’s obvious.”
By now I had to breathe deep to keep my voice from shaking.
“I can’t read minds. If there’s no sign how would I know?” The line of professional courtesy disappeared completely behind me.
More glaring. He read my security badge, which was dangling sternum-level from a lanyard. I actually wondered if he was going to have me arrested. I was sure he intended to talk to my boss. Take a number. I read his security badge. Col. Kevin Wagner. U.S. Embassy.
“Did you sign in for your meal?” The unspoken accusation was that I snuck in the back without paying the required six dollars for breakfast.
“I bought a ticket. Let’s walk back and find my name on the sign-in sheet.”
He said nothing.
“Let’s go,” I taunted. At that moment, I hated Air Force Col. Kevin Wagner, U.S. Embassy, more than the Taliban, more than the Army leadership who stuck me with a gag order, more than the bastards who sent me to Kabul, and more—I’m sorry to say—than the mullah who raped the 10-year-old girl. I came to the Embassy for peace, and now the Air Force had invaded.
Back to glaring. He was clean-shaven, his OCP uniform neat but not pressed, mouth tight. His hair was in regs, off his ears and collar, but not high-and-tight
like the Army. A woman walked by in cutoff short shorts. The man with her laughed, slow and easy, because that’s what you did on the Embassy side. The Afghan national at the dessert bar sat down and stared out the window. At a clean table near the large-screen TV, a security guard in black pants and black t-shirt straining to cover bulging biceps shifted his black M-4 to the side of his chair. Boom. Boom. Free weights hit the gym floor above us. Sometimes they sounded like 107 mm rockets exploding in the distance.

“I’m just striking out with you today, aren’t I?” I said, by now consciously picking a fight.

He said nothing, so after another two beats, I walked away.

Around 150,000 tax dollars were allotted annually for this colonel to play cafeteria monitor and ensure that schmucks like me don’t cost Uncle Sam an extra four dollars in protein bar consumption.

I saw Col. Wagner two days later at the chapel. It turned out to be my last Sunday at the Rock, though I didn’t know it then. I thought about what I’d tell him after we finished playing the music, how I could maybe clear the air, maybe even shame him into apologizing, since I still believed there had been only one asshole in this exchange. But he rushed out while I was still unstrapping my six-string. If I’d known that would be my last service at the Rock, I would’ve said goodbye to my bandmates, and I would’ve chased down Col. Wagner.

So I’ll tell him now. Colonel Wagner, I’m sorry I took four protein bars. I’m sorry we were in a war zone. I’m sorry the enemy lobs 107 mm rockets, or slits our throats from behind at checkpoints, or blows themselves up in suicide attacks. I understand actions like that leave no one to fight, and you’ve trained hard to fight. If you can’t kill insurgents, I understand the urge to do battle with whoever’s available, even protein bar thieves. I’m sorry I hated you and baited you to fight that day. Let’s forgive, or at least I will, because I’m tired of war. Soon we will be at peace because this war has gone on too long, and already other wars are rising to take its place.

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**Lieutenant Colonel James Gleason Bishop** served at International Security Assistance Force Headquarters, Kabul, in 2014. His work has appeared in numerous journals. This story is excerpted from his work-in-progress, *The Long War.*