



AFGHAN DIARY

TIME

PAUL QUINN-JUDGE REPORTS ON SIX WEEKS SPENT NEAR THE FRONT LINES IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN WITH NORTHERN ALLIANCE TROOPS BATTLING THE TALIBAN

DAY ONE SEPTEMBER 22

Three (or four, I'm no longer sure) days of camping outside the Afghan Embassy, fighting with exotically convoluted bureaucracy and eating at Dushanbe's best restaurants ("the three where you don't usually get poisoned," as one Tajik specialist put it) came to a sudden halt today at noon, when I found myself on the list for the first helicopter out. We rushed to the military terminal, where our way was blocked by a Tajik soldier. "Entrance by military pass only," he said, holding out his hand. A dollar seemed to be the right answer. On a bare concrete expanse two Northern Alliance helicopters were parked. The border guards who checked our passports — Russian, as Moscow officially protects Tajikistan's borders — warned several of us that we would be detained if we came back to Tajikistan, as we only had single visas. We agreed: at that point we would have agreed to anything. Why should I care? My Russian visa expires at the end of the week.

We were 17 journalists plus a well-dressed man in cords, Lands End style jacket and wrap around sunglasses that made me think of

a character from Doonesbury. He was given the one real seat. Because of my chat with the border guards, I ended up standing, leaning against the fuel tank. There were two identical posters of Ahmed Shah Massoud on the front wall of the cabin. On them he stares in deep meditation somewhere far into the distance, over the photographer's shoulder. The man was a PR genius.

The flight was supposed to take two hours, but after 20 minutes we landed at a Tajik border post. The passenger of honor, who turns out to be one of Massoud's brothers, said that we will be putting down on the Afghan side of the frontier a few minutes from here: the weather in the Panjshir has taken a turn for the worse.

We lifted off from Parkhar and almost immediately dropped down again, in the densely beautiful colors of late afternoon, over a small belt of fertile land leading to a river. On the other side of the river, rising up on a gentle bluff, was a dun colored village set in a dun colored plain. To the left of the village, below the bluff, was a pathetic straggle of refugee tents. This is Khojabuddin. On first sight it looked like a miserable little backwater, but eventually I came

to realize it was one of the nerve centers of the Northern Alliance — the usual home of the Defense Ministry and several other ministries, and the place where just under two weeks earlier Ahmad Shah Massoud had been killed on the 44th attempt.

Jeeps met us, passports were collected, and we drove up the track on one side of the hill, through a Pasolini landscape: donkeys led by men in clothes the same color of the dust walls, the occasional dayglo flash of a woman's or child's clothes. We were taken to an official guest house already full of journalists, mainly a bored BBC team. I attempted to go for a walk but was stopped from leaving the compound by a guard — because Massoud was blown to pieces by two men posing as Arab reporters, journalists are looked on with suspicion here.

Finally we were trucked over to our sleeping quarters, a barren, monochrome compound at the other end of the settlement. One the way over we passed a lively market with a throng of waiting trucks that looked suspiciously like an R&R area for smugglers. Some locals drove around on small motorbikes with hand-woven camel or donkey bags on the back — the sort of things that

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE/AFP

cost a couple of hundred dollars at a carpet dealer in NYC. Zubair, the Foreign Ministry greeter, was considerably more nationalist in his tone than his colleagues in Dushanbe. There the mood had been one of burgeoning cooperation with the U.S. Zubair was much more skeptical. The U.S. is not our friend, they just want to get rid of terrorists, he told us. That's fine, but when they have done that they should go home. And if they really want to help, he said pointedly, they should close the border with Pakistan to prevent men and material getting to the Taliban.

At the dusk we went to refugee camp, with the first of a long series of unintelligible translators. I peeled off to wander and take photographs. The view was dream-like. There is something about the light, the drama of the scenery, the colors and the striking faces of people here that makes Afghanistan unique and at times almost hypnotic. Camels drinking in the moonlight, a young boy, the picture of happiness, galloping through the defile in the center of the camp, completely at home on his powerfully-built horse.

Decayed mud houses on the hill — built from mud, they eventually dissolve back into it — leave jagged shards of ruins that look like destroyed castles. Babies doze on the backs of their siblings, and slide slowly down towards the ground till a passer by hoists them up again. But the

dust is everywhere: it gets in your eyes, nose and lungs in seconds, the paper I am writing on. Life in the camp must be horrible.

DAY TWO SEPTEMBER 23

I was resigned to several days of enforced idleness here, and had resolved to eat nothing and drink as little as possible — this is obviously a great place to get something nasty. I was preparing to try to go to a front line an hour or so away, though I knew this was little more than a way of passing the time. One by one the four or five people in our room climbed up onto the flat roof to watch the sun rise through a thin curtain of dust. “Nice sunrise,” said a TV cameraman, “lots of goats and donkeys.” I couldn't tell whether he was joking. Then came one of those sudden changes of tempo that are always a part of these trips. The gate to our compound opened and officials came in, beckoning us urgently. They returned our passports and announced that helicopters were waiting to take off. We had to move fast, they said, as the weather in the passes changes by the hour.

We left at 8:20, flying first over the faintest hints of abandoned and dissolved villages, and the shallow indentations dug for trees — the sunken area holds the water from any rain. At first we kept low, a hundred or so feet above the ground, perhaps because of a report yesterday that the Taliban Stinger missile had

brought down an Alliance helicopter near Mazar-i-Sharif. Then we climbed and found ourselves flying between the mountains, not above them, with maybe 150 feet clearance for our rotors on each side. Now I began to understand why perfect weather was vital. We were high, too: the air became thin, and the helicopter's engines sounded clunky and labored. There was snow on the mountaintops above us and, at one point, just below.

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An hour and 20 minutes later we circled and landed on a small field in Astana, in the Panjshir Valley. The valley is narrower than I expected, just enough room for a river and a narrow road. We headed off, Owen Matthews lying in the back of car moaning pitifully. He had apparently poisoned himself the night before on Iranian coca-cola. It seems he now has Giardia-related diarrhea.

The rutted, unpaved road ran along the right side of the river, shallow but fast-running. Between the river and the track were the hulks of dozens of APC's, tanks, heavy trucks, some half way down to the river, some hanging off the edge of the bank, the remnant of some suicidal decision by a Soviet officer to seize the valley. This ambush had been more of a massacre than a battle: the mujahideen probably positioned themselves up on the

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE-AFP

hill or behind the high stone walls that bordered the road and picked them off at leisure. There are so many destroyed APCs that they have been incorporated into walls: tank tracks are embedded into roads at particularly steep points to give traction, in villages as speed bumps. The Valley is high-walled — on the top of one slope is Massoud's tomb — but fertile. There are narrow terraced fields, sheep and goats, and fruit trees, these set in small sunken enclosures so as to catch and hold any moisture.

Militarily, though, it is impregnable: the Soviets failed to subdue it in half a dozen or more campaigns, and the few symbolic garrisons they put in here were death traps. Further south the green gives way to barren rock; on our left just before the mouth of the valley is the area where Massoud blew away part of the mountain to block the entrance. Then we found ourselves on the rocky plain around Golbahar, a dirty, bustling bazaar.

Half an hour later we were in Jabal-us-Saraj. Jabal, the Mountain of Light, was probably once a retreat from Kabul for the capital's wealthier citizens. The smashed remains of a palace, now used by the military but retaining a broad alley of trees on one side, sits on a hill overlooking the Shemali plain. These days, though, it is another dusty, half destroyed Afghan town and the unofficial headquarters of the Northern Alliance. Our convoy

pulled up outside a high walled compound. This would be our billet, we were told. As we unloaded our stuff, an official came up to us: there is no room here, he said, we will take you elsewhere. Such statements are always bad news, and we responded accordingly, ignoring him and heading for the building. He insisted, and we sullenly got back in our car, wondering why we alone — Mark Franchetti (Sunday Times), Peter Baker (Washington Post), Owen Matthews (Newsweek) and I — were being victimized.

“The Talibs made a push last night,” the soldier says. “It’s dangerous to go forward.”

Our guide drove a few minutes, then turned by a large artificial pond, the remnant of a hydroelectric station built in the early 1900's by an American engineer. We stopped by a nondescript gate guarded by an elderly mute with an AK-47, and found ourselves in a lovely flower filled garden. A small clear stream — spring fed, we later discovered — ran along one side of the path. And at the end of the garden, looking like something out of a Sunday supplement, a small group of Westerners seated around a white plastic garden table were finishing lunch. These

were the four or so journalists who came for Massoud's funeral, just before September 11. One of our Moscow colleagues, Marcus Warren of the Daily Telegraph, rose to great us. We expressed our amazement at the place. “This is the good life,” said Warren with a cracked grin.

DAY THREE SEPTEMBER 24

It's 10:45 and we are stuck. Soldiers will not let us go any further. Just ahead are two containers that seem to mark the beginning of a combat zone. “The Talibs made a push last night,” the soldier says. “It is dangerous to go forward.” His argument is undermined by the brightly decorated horse carts, the local taxi service, that trot by us as we negotiate. As we sit there, more and more journalists arrive. The Talib push turned out to be bullshit. And the only rocket fired at enemy lines today was apparently at the instigation of a Deutsche Welle correspondent, whose hyper-energy earns him more enemies by the minute.

Kerim, our new and completely incomprehensible interpreter, is equally energetic, but speaks English from a parallel universe. In his hands, it turns into a language I feel I once knew but have forgotten. There are lots of words, but they never quite mean anything. At one point Kerim tried to assure us — I think — that he had good relations with most of the military commanders here. “I am recognized with all commanders,” he assured us. “No commander is a remainder with me.” There is also his disconcerting habit, when we ask him to translate something, of cheerfully replying, “Why not?”

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE-AFP

This came to a head later today, during an impromptu visit to the Bagram air base. General Babajan was not in, but three other generals found time to meet us [EM] the ratio of generals to other ranks in the Northern Alliance seems to be about 1:20. Fortunately this is the diplomatic stage of the Alliance's relationship with the West, and they say little more than U.S. involvement here is a "good idea." One of them, who has a reddish beard, is dressed in black, and sits wordless during the meeting, reminds me of a Khmer Rouge. During this meeting Kerim was particularly baffling. Whenever he offered an answer in his own English we stopped to consult, trying to reach consensus on meaning. At one point Mark Franchetti crawled across the floor to Kerim, desperate to clarify a question. The three generals found this amusing, and invited us back whenever we were in the area.

The good life turned out to be something of an exaggeration. We are seven to a room with an eighth on the way, and sleep on the floor — I have Washington Post feet in my face, and encroach on TF2 if forget. There is one long drop toilet for everyone — 30-40 people, perhaps. It is, though, spectacularly clean. And one dip bathroom. But there is the garden — flower-filled, with the small tree-lined pond at one side.

The next few days were spent

getting our bearings. Watching, with some dismay, at the town filled up with journalists — some macho and lusting for war, others dazed by the three day drive across the mountains. Like three days in a cement mixer, said one. Like being in the Zone, said another: you can't hold a thought for more than 15 seconds. During those days we made one wonderful trip up into the mountains of the Gorbhand Valley, in the direction of Bamiyan, and I as usual caught a cold there. We also made the

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acquaintance of Khademudin, the 26-year-old commander of NA troops in his home village of Sinjeddarah, in hills above the Shemali plain. He dropped by our guesthouse one day, obviously looking for journalists and a little publicity. Khademudin had studied in Pakistan, a country he hated, and spoke good English. He told the tallest tales imaginable, including a detailed description of how he saved 12000 Northern Alliance troops when they were surrounded by

the Taliban. (The NA does not have 12000 men in the Shemali valley). But he was surprisingly frank about the matter of fact brutality of this war. His brother used to be the commander, he said, but "he killed too many people" — not the enemy, but political rivals in the feuds that beset the mujahideen in the early nineties. "That time was a killing time." A childhood playmate is now the Taliban commander in the neighboring village, half or kilometer or so away. We stood on the roof watching the place: in the midday sun it looked totally deserted. After the Taliban killed Massoud, he said, he would no longer take any Taliban prisoners.

And, most importantly, Asadullah, who had studied in Leningrad for years, offered his services as an interpreter. He was a quantum leap in communications — good natured, incredibly well-informed, smart.

DAY NINE SEPTEMBER 30

A Saturday, apparently, We are becalmed, but only mildly aggrieved at the prospect. My mountain cold has improved, and my temperature has dropped. In the morning, after the usual abortive visit to Bismullah Khan — the general is in the Panjshir, we are told, though we are reassured in the same breath that nothing is going on there — Owen Matthews and I went shopping. We have decided to make the inmates dinner. Excitement mounted as we discovered okra and aubergines. I bought two soft, smaller head scarves to keep dust away; one is wrapped warmly around my neck as I write this evening.

After the vegetable shopping

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I bought some cloth for a shirt and followed Asadullah upstairs, along a grimy corridor to an 8'x4' tailor's shop staffed by two 10-year-olds and an adult man. I wanted to wash the one long sleeved shirt I had brought, and decided on a variation on the traditional shalwar kameez — something I could tuck in — and no Hugo Boss or Armani tags on the pocket. Come back at five, I was told. The total cost, including cloth: \$4. Owen, to my embarrassment, then purchased a burka (the robe and full face veil prescribed by Islamic convention on both sides of this war). I was overcome by the fear that he would try it on, and trigger a religious riot, and wondered faintly if this was the equivalent of a buying a bra in England circa 1960.

Then we bought cooking utensils and the local version of a pressure cooker for the stew. On the way back to house we picked up two legs of fresh mutton — killed that morning according to the butcher, and hung on hooks outside a hut, bare except for a cutting bench. Wasps swarmed all over the meat. Owen Matthews waxed eloquent: they keep the flies away, he claimed with an air of spurious authority, but I felt the wasps were not so much nibbling as having carnal knowledge.

Back to lunch, doze and cooking. The kitchen staff at first seemed slightly hurt at the idea we would cook our own food, but then found the sight so amusing

— three of us hacking at vegetables with very blunt knives — that they soon recovered. At one point someone started to reflect glumly on the missing element : wine. Patrick de Saint-Ex of Le Figaro added Pastis. Before supper I had a dip shower and changed into my new shirt. The first clean clothing for a week. Supper went well; some compliments, no casualties. After the meal I wrapped myself in my warm scarf and stood in the

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garden, admiring the near full moon that cast a pale light over the flowers, and watched the stars. Aziz, our foreign ministry handler called me over for a brief chat, reminiscing dreamily about his home in Kabul, then I returned to contemplating the night: listening the wind, the faint noises made by frogs as they surreptitiously slipped into the stream at my advances, a dog in the distance, a child's voice beyond the wall.

Earlier that day, as we bumped over a stone track that passed as a road, I began to reflect on a new Zen concept: the non-Road. Most roads here are faint lines in the rubble, constantly changing outlines in an expanse of stones and dust (my nose has been full of dust since arriving here, it coats my handkerchiefs in a yellow gray film). They only exist at all because drivers have, by some process of osmosis, agreed to view this particular part of the desert as The Road.

We were issued ID's today. \$30. In theory we have to show these at all checkpoints. So far, though, I have not noticed a checkpoint. (And never did).

The Taliban say they have Bin Laden in a safe place — not arrest, it seems, just for his protection. Yesterday Mullah Omar told the U.S. that if they were only less obstinate, he might talk to them. The man seems determined to go out in a blaze of martyr's glory. And the Islamic world will have a new hero.

DAY TEN OCTOBER 1

Oleg Nikishin, the photographer, arrived this morning along with Volodya Volkov, who seemed too frazzled to speak. The road trip had been really rough: at times so steep, Nikishin (a photographer, for Christ's sake) said that it was better not to look. It was like being in a helicopter. He promised to bring the booty (sat phone, etc.) later, but warned that he had eaten the cheese — there was nothing else to eat, he said.

News from Kapisa. A couple of photographers were given a special treat during a visit to the front line. A new prisoner. He had been captured ten days earlier,

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE-AFP

and not spoken a word. The photographers noted burns on his arms, so there had been obvious attempts to make him talk, and the soldier who pulled him out his place of confinement, a darkened room, did so by his testicles. People have tried various languages with him. Bruno the Belgian photographer felt that he understood Russian. He has green eyes and intelligent features, and the hands of someone who has not led a life of manual labor. (Later Alliance troops put out the word that he was retarded and had been captured while looking for grapes for his unit).

Today I caught the first sight of myself in a car mirror. Awful. Aftermath of the cold: blocked and bloody nose, sore throat. Vastly preferable to the salmonella or Giardia of the rest of the gang, though — not to mention malaria and mild derangement of Roland, the enigmatic freelancer.

The satphone did arrive — minus a battery and thus unusable. I despair. With my advance I plan to bribe Matthews, who has about four. The representative of one of the northern commanders, Haji something or other, was in the garden trawling for visitors. You can fly up there, he said (somewhere south of Mazar), then pop back to Khojabuddin and down here. He made it sound like a breeze. “Great idea,” someone said sarcastically, “fly through Taliban controlled

passes.” He may have a point.

DAY TWELVE OCTOBER 3

An evil mood hung over the room this morning. People lay in bed, quiet and wordless, and only acknowledged each other’s presence after a long pause. The Rumsfeld shuttle mission to Central Asia has dampened expectations of early action. Owen Matthews lay on his cushions and after his usual

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trumpets of dawn (the aftereffects of Giardia), muttered “Oh Christ”, and “fuck” repeatedly to himself. He later joined us for breakfast, a terrible sight in a mustard yellow shalwar kameez and a brown blanket, muttering darkly about leaving. The only gunfire came from a photo op laid on for journalists in which Alliance forces stormed a hill and came back with a prisoner, whom they pretended to kick for the cameras. Meanwhile the helicopter carrying the NOS (Dutch TV) team was forced down in the mountains yesterday by heavy winds and had to trek out. The same vicious winds

coated all our belongings with a layer of dust and threatened to rip the plastic in our windows.

We spent the day looking for the only confirmed Taliban defector in this part of Afghanistan. He was in the hands of a local commander in Regeravan, a Pashtun village on the Old Kabul Road. We had gone there several times to look for refugees coming out of Kabul — they usually arrive in the late afternoon, after leaving the capital in the early morning, and traveling part on foot and part by trucks. Along the way they are robbed by bandits — Alliance troops warn you not to go further than the village, but are disinclined to do anything about the situation. I saw one group arrive in a small pickup a few days ago, the exhausted kids in the back coated with a thick layer of dust like Kabuki actors. We inquired about the defector at a command post on the main road. The commander and his protege were at the front, we were told: the defector was calling on his former comrades in arms to join him. We then inquired in the commander’s compound. Men were playing volley ball in the front, and at the back was a vine-covered bower where we sat and exchanged pleasantries with soldiers and local villagers — the former distinguishable from the latter only by their AK-47s.

There an aide told that the commander and the defector had gone shopping in the bazaar at Golbahar. With twelve body guards. In a taxi. We picked up a surly local soldier who said he could recognize the commander and his bodyguards, and headed back towards Golbahar. We found them behind the market, in a sort of mechanic’s yard where a man

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE—AFP

was grooming horse in one corner and a goat waited to become supper in another. The defector turned out to be a market trader from Kunduz in the north who had been forcibly recruited by the Taliban and had slipped away after three months or so. He had that strange pallor under the tan that I associate with malaria or drugs. He was not very bright, yet acutely aware that his new feudal patron was in the room as we spoke. This made his comments on the Taliban all the more interesting. They were delighted to hear about the WTC/Pentagon bombings, he recalled — “at last we have fucked the Americans.” They had better food and weapons than this side. Their morale was good. Do they fight well, someone asked (probably me). He looked stunned at such stupidity. Obviously, he answered. At the end someone asked him what his plans were. In reply he gave a short speech, one that he had used before, I suspect. Our security escort, a marvelously venal secret policeman out of central casting, looked delighted at the answer and gave him a theatrical thumbs up. Asadullah translated his answer: I hope to find a weapon and be permitted to die fighting against the Taliban.

DAY THIRTEEN OCTOBER 4

Both generators in our house are now out, and the satphone battery

has been abruptly reclaimed by Owen Matthews. A Mig-25 or something like that, of the Taliban airforce today attacked Golbahar, just down the road. It supposedly dropped a couple of bombs, which missed any possible target, military or economic — no mean feat in a place that is littered with military and other installations. Most of us did not even hear the attack — given the noise made by our generators, a Taliban tank would have to come through the front gates before we realized we were under attack. In the first sign of any military preparations, 600 miners from emerald mines in the mountains have been called up.

DAY FOURTEEN OCTOBER 5

Another Abdullah press conference. A two-hour wait this time. “A little late,” he said with a smile, “but there were a lot of cattle on the road. So what’s new.” He had not heard that a detachment of the 10th Mountain Division was in Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, we hear confused-sounding reports that there will be no military action here by the U.S. for maybe a month. Our thoughts and conversations turn increasingly to exit strategies.

DAY FIFTEEN OCTOBER 6

Helicopters have not flown for 5 days, says a foreign ministry official as we wait for an interview with Abdullah in his strange office in the Panjshir

Valley — something that looks as if it was once a small road repair dept. Abdullah is his usual elegant and smooth self, but in the interview is much more passionate in his views. At one point a well-built, well-dressed man looking faintly like an Elizabethan general strode in the room, and sat on the floor next to Abdullah, determined yet slightly deferential. Abdullah exuded

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noblesse oblige, sitting comfortably cross legged, confident and very much in charge. The general was Bismullah Khan, overall commander of military operations here.

Abdullah made it clear that the West — read U.S. — still doesn’t understand Afghanistan, and are trying to impose a worldview based on superficial readings of 19th Century strategists of the Great Game. Asked if defense minister Fahim can inherit Massoud’s mantle, Abdullah looked surprised. Of course not. “He knows it, we know it.”

Back in the asylum more endless, circular, information-free debates about what will happen next. The answer is staggeringly obvious. We don’t know. When something does happen, all we can try to do is try to get as close to the action as possible and report. Until then we should save our breath. Today there are reports of a U.S. plane flying high

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE—AFP

over Kabul, drawing Taliban fire. It was an unmanned intelligence drone, we later heard.

Abdullah said today that the strikes will be very soon — presumably early next week. They will be massive, destroy Taliban command and control, and radically change the situation on the battlefield. He hopes everything will be over by Ramadan.

DAY SIXTEEN OCTOBER 7

Sunday. This morning, as I sat by the pond, gazing at the reflected trees, a dignified gentleman, exuding natural authority, walked up to me accompanied by a young aide. I don't know if he was an officer or an official, though he was not fat enough to be a military commander. He inquired in stiff but good English what I was thinking about, and where I was from. Then he continued a slow walk around the flower garden. The traditional dress — shalwar kameez, wool hat, even the photographer's vest that they have seamlessly incorporated into the ensemble — makes them look like characters from a Shakespeare play. Housekeeping notes: rumor has it that the Feyzabad — four days of profound discomfort across the Anjuman Pass — trip has now gone up from \$600 to \$2000 per car.

Later we went to

Khademudin to discuss plans — namely, whether we can join him if his unit is ordered to march on Kabul, and can we spend nights in his village while we wait. We sat quietly in his room as he had an intense conversation on his two radio. Elders and villagers sat around listening. "I have told my number two to prepare weapons, defenses and supplies," he said to us when the conversation ended,

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implying that this had been the subject discussed. I had, however, already asked Asadullah for a translation. "A girl from the village has had unlawful relations, and the elders are trying to arrange a compromise," he explained. Another urgent communication comes in later, which Asadullah again discreetly translated. It was Khademudin's second in command. We have the men ready, he asks, but where is the car.

Khademudin is not however, not a complete bullshitter: a nasty scar with about twelve large stitches up the side of one leg

comes from a shrapnel wound last year, 12 days in the Italian hospital, he says casually. Talking about who should lead Afghanistan in the future, said that he does not care who is it — young or old, Tajik or not. The leader should be an enemy of Pakistan — and should allow his people to avenge the death of Ahmed Shah Massoud. That is, kill those who ordered his assassination.

DAY SEVENTEEN OCTOBER 8

01:25 AM, Tob-Dara, overlooking the Shemali valley.

I am now sitting on a pile of stones in the corner of the roof of the village mosque. It's cold. We are about three kilometers from the air base at Bagram, and somewhat above it, in the mountains. There are regular salvos of outgoing rockets for multi-barreled rocket launchers, orange balls arcing elegantly through the sky. Also louder, separate crumps, followed soon by the smell of cordite, TV teams, particularly British ones, are at their crass best.

It all started, totally unexpectedly, at lunch time. After our visit to Khademudin we came back to the guesthouse and stretched out to catch the sun and a doze. I was vaguely aware of more imposing men than usual wandering through the garden, some of them with their bodyguards. Some seemed displeased when they had to step over me on the grass, I was told later.

Suddenly Asadullah, whom we had sent home for lunch, reappeared and somewhat embarrassedly relayed a message from Aziz: we were to be out of

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE-AFP

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here in half an hour. Bismullah Khan's orders. We behaved in the usual way, foot-dragging, snarls, protests, completely empty threats to stage a sit in (in a Defense Ministry compound, no less — good move). Eventually we looked at a few options, all shit. Aziz tried to jolly us along. "It'll only be for a couple of days," he said. Obviously they are expecting massive air strikes any time now, and expect to move on Kabul immediately afterwards.

The first place was horrible — foul smelling, fly filled rooms, peeling paint and in a couple of rooms with earth walls. It transpired that there were no other options. Asadullah as usual turned out to be our lifesaver. He is a construction engineer, and suggested getting some quick drying paint for the walls. We then passed a few Keystone Cop hours: collecting painters, buying paint and bedding in the bazaar, hurrying the painters along. At one point it in a surreal night it seemed that every room contained a painter — mixing, smoothing plaster on the walls with their hands, or wrapped in a blanket, sleeping. They were still there, in various stages of consciousness, when we came back from the bombing in the early hours of the morning. But by then, amazingly, several of the rooms already had dry paint.

The bombing started without any warning just after we had moved our belongings into the flea pit. For a quick break we

dropped in our new neighbor, Dr Abdullah — Abdullah, the warlord, not the diplomat. He has developed the Oriental potentate look to perfection. The usual imposing girth, cropped hair, a luxuriant, well tended beard, and the warm smile of someone who knows that his every request will be fulfilled, immediately. As we chatted — in an exciting deviation from the normal line, he announced that he would go to

It is now late morning. We have had something approaching a breakfast, and I am beginning to wonder seriously about hygiene

Kabul (the Taliban governor is occupying his house) whether the high command said so or not — we heard the first bangs. It was around 9 Dushanbe time. By 11 we were on the road to Charikar — the NA proved surprisingly accommodating, at least in our compound — perhaps because we have suborned two security men to work for us. We spent much of the night on the roof of the village mosque in Tob Dara.

It is now late morning, we have had something approaching a breakfast, and I am beginning to wonder seriously about hygiene.

This is the sort of place where epidemics are hatched. Our chiottes, a grade one Chechen type (bad, bad news). A chicken lives in it — it has been christened chicken shit, naturally. It looks to be at death's door, which is not surprising. Meanwhile I am trying to digest one surreal combination of words in today's news broadcasts: British Trident submarines attacked Kabul last night with cruise missiles. Join the navy and attack land-locked countries. Panjshir is closed because of the offensive. My sat-phone battery is somewhere there. Ugh.

Later That Day. Lazed in the sun, trying not to notice the jackhammer noise of the generator, then hung around the Defense Ministry guest house, waiting one and a half hours for the chronically tardy Dr Abdullah the foreign minister. Then, after interviewing a cook — formerly with Dr Abdullah the warlord (I wonder if he knows. I don't think I'll mention it), we headed back to the hills for the bombing. This time we decided to take Khademudin up on his invitation, and go back to Sinjedarra. Last time we visited him at his rear base, a fairly comfortable house in Charikar, he told us that he would be sleeping on the front line from now on. Well, we found him in Charikar about 9pm, slightly dozy, and probably preparing for bed. He took our request to go to the village in good humor, though without enthusiasm. "Tea?" he asked plaintively. No thanks, we said, we need to go. An aide wordlessly brought his ammunition belt, hat, gun, while he stood in the middle of the room like a knight preparing for

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE-AFP

battle. Shadowy figures waited for us at regular intervals along the track leading up to the village — he had radioed ahead to make sure that we didn't fall victim to friendly fire. He was very cautious as we drove along the track. We drove without headlights — by far the most dangerous part of the operation, and Khademudin even covered the luminous clock with his scarf. Then a moonlit walk through the village along a narrow Tuscan hill-town lane, (many of the mud houses are three story) to a house with the best views. We clambered up the mud stairs, and just before we reached the top Khademudin ordered "lamps out."

Along the way to the house there had been a couple of massive flashes and ground shaking crumps, followed by lazy bursts of anti-aircraft guns. Also a more prosaic sight — the headlights of light trucks heading out of Kabul, on full beam. "Taliban," Khademudin said. "They head for the front whenever there is a bombing raid. They feel safer there. The cars were about a kilometer away." The mood on the roof was languid. Our heavily armed escorts forgot about their weapons and engaged in the usual journalist-watching — it's sitting up, it's lying down, it's playing with a computer. Patrick Forestier of Paris-Match had a sudden, rare urge to do some work, became disoriented, and tried to interview

Franchetti, mistaking him in the dark for a mujahideen. There really are Taliban all around, I had to keep reminding myself, but no one seems to care.

Khademudin called up the Taliban frequency on his radio, then various members of his squad amused themselves by listening to their conversation, or swapping insults. There was no sign of Taliban disarray. They sounded confident and aggressive. Some of their obscene banter, untranslated by the coy

"I fought off an attack on this village led by bin laden," he said with a modest smile.

Asadullah (I beat some of it out of him later) caused bursts of delighted laughter. Finally Khademudin went back on the air for a more dignified and wordy exchange of insults. Again this was largely untranslated, though the Taliban commander, a local, did ask Khademudin why he was a servant of the Americans, and Khademudin hit back by asking why worked for terrorists. Then the Taliban commander called off. "We have a jihad to fight," he said by way of explanation.

In the course of the evening Khademudin's mythomania went into overdrive. "I fought off an attack on this village led by Bin Laden," he said with a modest

smile. (Last time he had told us about saving, almost single-handedly, 12000 Alliance troops who had been dumb enough to get stuck in a single village). Not even Osama bin Laden was able to capture Sinjeddarah, he said.

By midnight we had tired of the roof. Khademudin seemed relieved, and announced he would drive back with us. On the way back down, this time thank God with the headlights on, we caught a rabbit in our beams. Khdemudin moved unexpectedly fast, grabbing his AK 47 and bounding out of the minivan, gun cocked. I watched with interest, wondering how much would be left of a bunny shot at close range with an assault rifle. It escaped. At the other vantage point of Tob Dara, we were told later, ITN's Julian Manion proclaimed loudly to his editors that he was in serious danger broadcasting from the roof of the mosque. The biggest danger was the roof collapsing. And a radio correspondent who slipped into a local house to file reported getting half stoned on second hand fumes from marijuana being consumed by the residents. On the way back from Sinjeddarah our hopes of a relatively full night's sleep were dashed when the car broke down. We dozed fitfully until something picked us up.

DAY EIGHTEEN OCTOBER 9

A painfully harsh wind has blown for most of the day, embedding equipment and clothes with a thick layer of dust, and injecting grit into skin and scratches. It has not, however, deterred the hundreds of flies. I have half a dozen on me as I write. The wind

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE-AFP

is the first sign of winter, people here say. We need to be moving before the pass is closed by snow, or we are really screwed.

This morning, slightly deranged as a result of a warm dip bath and a sudden lull in the wind, I resolved to wash the lower part of my pants — I only have one pair, and have been wearing them for several weeks without a break. They feel infected. I dipped them in water, but lost enthusiasm when they went stiff, so draped them over a sort of concrete terrace to dry. Soon after a young boy started to sweep the terrace. I watched fascinated as he collected the dust into a large pile and carefully swept it in the direction of my pants. He paused just in front of them, probably mistaking them for discarded rags and with a final sweep coated the wet part. Then he realized what he had done, covered his mouth in a theatrical gesture of horror, and ran back to the kitchen. The pants are now rigid.

The other news of the day, Chickenshit the cloacal fowl is no more. It put up a good fight before going under, we were told, but made a serious strategic error by trying to hide in the kitchen. Assorted desultory bangs throughout the day — much less than Chechnya on a quiet afternoon.

We are now in a psychological and work trough that is as deep, if not deeper, than Khojabuddin and Dushanbe

combined, The story has stopped. The Alliance is blissfully unprepared, I have no communications and to the best of my knowledge no prospect thereof. And tonight our generator went the way of chickenshit. Is this the third one we have bought or hired so far? The only satisfaction to this turn of events is that it chose to die when a mechanic was explaining with some indignation that he had to have \$80 now, right now, for the complex repairs he had just carried out on the machine. The breakdown exhibited exactly the same symptoms it did before he repaired it, but he was hurt when we suggested he was conning us. We told him to stay till he fixed it, and he has now cheerfully joined the crowd scene in the courtyard. Right now he is eating a carrot, the generator is dead, and I am writing by flashlight.

DAY NINETEEN OCTOBER 10

The bombings continue, out of sight and earshot, and our only fights are with our digestive systems, generators and growing bureaucracy. The sumptuous dinner prepared last night — lots of vegetables, almost for the first time since we arrived — rated 2 on the immodium scale. I mentioned my plight to Owen Matthews — bodily functions are a hot topic round here — and he uttered one of those insane cackles that are becoming disturbingly all too frequent.

“That’s funny,” he said, “because I had my first solid movement in 3 weeks.”

Later in the evening we were presented with our new NA representative, Oras. He came escorted by two other officials, perhaps because I had kicked him out earlier in the day. He had told me with a silly grin that he was now in charge of the house. I

The bombings continue, out of sight and earshot, and our only fights are with our digestive systems, generators and growing bureaucracy

replied he was not, and asked him what ministry he came from. After he failed to answer this question on three attempts, I concluded he was from state security and told him to go away. Oras’ escorts, all smiles, explained the new system: he would of course get us all the authorizations we needed to go anywhere we like, etc. They are protesting too much. We all smell a rat.

DAY TWENTY OCTOBER 11

Allegedly the most intense night’s bombing yet. We heard nothing. First thing Oras said he could not get permission for Bagram, and I threw a moderate fit. Permission arrived at lunchtime. I suspect he is either too scared to buttonhole his boss to get the document we need (a handwritten note, often as not on

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a sheet of paper torn from one of our notebooks) or to lazy to look for the man. In the morning an exhausting drive through the back roads of Kapisa in search of Taliban prisoners. The drive, totally useless, was capped by a surreal conversation with a particularly dense deputy commander of a small unit. Yes, he does have some prisoners, captured a month ago. Yes we could talk to them. But he just needs to contact his commander. But his commander was in a meeting. Just wait a little while. Finally he announced he did not have any prisoners, would not tell us his name and suggested we move along. (Peter Baker went back the next morning with the appropriate piece of paper and prisoners turned out to be semi defectors — people press ganged into the Taliban army. They are now being held, it seems, to swap for locals captured by the other side — a particularly miserable fate).

After lunch we left for Charikar in search of a recently returned spy from Haji Almaz's group. This is the only war I know where you can drive round the countryside, asking commanders if any of their spies had come back from the other side and can we meet them, please. Haji Almaz received us. Welcoming and wily, he views journalists with a certain sardonic humor. He has been fighting for 23 years. Last time we met, a couple of weeks ago, the

conversation was protocol — what channels did he get on his TV set (incredibly rare) how is the offensive developing. (His answer: if I told you everything, what would be left for our superiors to talk about?). This time he was as equable as ever, sitting in a comfortable half lotus

This is the only war I know where you can drive round the countryside, asking commanders if any of their spies had come back from the other side and can we meet them, please.

and grinning ruefully when an aide unceremoniously plunked a hat on his bald head. But his view of the war was sour. No diplomacy this time. "The Americans are hitting the wrong targets," he said. "Instead of troops they are bombing empty buildings. The Taliban knew what installations would be attacked, and evacuated them." The U.S. should "establish links with our government and defense ministry," he said (a telling remark; he obviously does not feel the U.S. has done this.). "And they should not deploy ground troops. If they do, they

will receive the same welcome from our people as the Soviets did, and they will be fighting for 10-15 years." After that he went to pray.

Redvan the spy was a slight anti-climax. Pudgy, not very talkative, he had been in Kabul for the bombing and was unimpressed. His main job in Kabul was to make contact with mujahideen who had rallied to the Taliban, mostly in 1996. Almaz had made this clear, but when we asked Redvan, a dozy man wrapped in blanket who had sat quietly in the room like the dormouse, said a single word — no — and Redvan declined to answer.

On to Bagram, arriving as dusk was falling. We chatted with Babajan's brother, lost Asadullah (who had pigged out on Almaz's tea), then reached the base in pitch darkness. The sentries were unusually jumpy. Babajan was affable, but no longer polite. I had suspected him of being a time server, but was interested to find him as irritated with the Americans as Almaz. And, like Almaz, he pitched his annoyance as a purely personal opinion. The analysis of the bombing was the same, though. The generals have obviously been talking, and are unhappy.

Babajan handed us off to an escort and we wandered round the base. In the control tower the airbase commander announced that he could not take any questions, then proceeded to answer them for the next forty minutes, volunteering out of the blue that he had been in intelligence under Najibullah. (Babajan and the whole command of this front clearly moved over en masse). The whole time we

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were there we could see the headlights, full-beam, of Taliban vehicles moving up to the safety of the front line. The commander offered to fire on the front lines for us, but we declined. He did so any way, saying he had planned this all along. After a long delay his men fired off two rockets, causing no obvious damage — I rather suspect they were aimed well away from Taliban position. The Taliban are moving up closer, the commander said: 20 tanks and 50-60 Datsuns (average of 10 men each) had moved up to a position 3-4 km away, in a dry river bed. He was not sure whether they were planning to attack, or simply put their weaponry out of harm's way but locating it as close to the enemy as possible. "The Taliban have very sophisticated signals intelligence," he says, "much more modern than ours."

As we leave our escort tells us to hurry, the Taliban will be answering the rockets any minute. They never did. I am not even sure if we woke them up. As we ate supper back at the house, we heard apoplectic screams, punctuated by obscenities, coming from our room. Owen Matthews was filing, and claimed Oras would not leave him alone. This was only the beginning of Oras' problems. While Owen Matthews flitted campily around the house in a "I'm going home tomorrow" display, Oras tried to tell Mark Franchetti, rashly, that he could not go to Kapisa — a

short, easy and safe ride — tomorrow.

Oras' approach is to say everything is impossible, it seems. This time the trip was impossible because Friday is a rest day; you need to rest, he added injudiciously. At this point I was outside brushing my teeth

At this point there was a loud clang and I was struck a glancing blow by a cast iron bucket that flew out the kitchen door.

and admiring the night sky. Oras and Mark Franchetti were for some reason talking in the entry to our flypit kitchen. Mark Franchetti erupted. "I fucking am going, you have picked the wrong fucking man," he yelled. (The full speech was longer). At this point there was a loud clang and I was struck a glancing blow by a cast iron bucket that flew out the kitchen door. Mark Franchetti stormed out. I suggested that he might warn me the next time he threw a bucket. "I'll fucking knife him," Mark replied.

DAY TWENTY-ONE OCTOBER 12

Oras resigned this morning, and was seen later this morning walking North up the road. He

was going back to the Panjshir, he told Peter Baker. Aziz is back in charge.

DAY TWENTY-TWO OCTOBER 13

Filing. Did not leave the compound. Endless evening discussion with a cast of thousands who want to be paid for fictitious work, largely in the kitchen. (The owner of this house, for example, wants money for all the cleaning he did. He did none. The place has more dust than the Old Kabul Road. He also rips off food, Asadullah says). We are now a semi-autonomous commune, largely ignored by the foreign ministry, which still tries to charge us for various obscure services. We have privatized state security. Our main KGB man is now in charge of generator, boiled water and toilet, and seems very satisfied with his new position.

DAY TWENTY-THREE OCTOBER 14

A pair of pants I had made in the bazaar are providing abundant grounds for unoriginal jokes, but at least let me wash the other ones. Blissfully, there was no wind today, so the pants dried in a matter of hours. That evening we went to Bagram to sleep — sooner or later the US has to hit the Taliban front line, so it seemed worth a try. Babajan greeted us. An aide stood behind him in the darkness with a powerful two-way radio. He stood, distractedly answering our questions and scratching his crotch, one ear clamped on a short wave radio (these are usually tuned to BBC or VOA, but on this occasion I could not hear which). He no longer bothers to be polite about the Americans,

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taking instead the line “they helped create the Taliban, why should we trust these people.” What is happening now, he said, is like a dog (the Taliban) snapping at its owner (the U.S.). We climbed up to the windswept top floor of the control tower — all the glass has been shot out, and it was freezing. The booms started at 8:05 PM Dushanbe time, way in the distance, and continued intermittently till 10. A/A fire was feeble, as if they knew roughly where the planes were coming from, but could not get a fix on them. Then we shivered through the night, occasionally awakened by mujahideen from the floor below who wanted to have a chat and were undeterred by the lack of common language. The next

Jabal is crammed with troops: far more than I have seen since we have been here

morning we found they had consumed the food and tea we have brought for breakfast.

Earlier that day Abdullah the warlord had announced that an offensive on Kabul was “95 percent certain.” Abdullah the foreign minister had reinforced this impression. Jabal is crammed with troops: far more than I have seen since we have been here.

Abdullah warlord outlined the role to be played by the key commanders in the pocket — Said Khel, Almaz, Babajan. One slightly humorous note: Abdullah had Azimi striking east from his base in Kapisa. If he does that, he’ll find himself in Pakistan, not Kabul.

DAY TWENTY-FOUR OCTOBER 15

The now traditional visit to Bismullah Khan for an early morning brush off (we had been trying to interview the commander of this front for weeks). This time we could not even find his deputy at first. He had left the headquarters suddenly about 15 minutes earlier, we were told, in pursuit of a journalist, dressed only in his underwear, who had been seen wandering past. Instead we went looking for Said Khel, the 30-year-old commander for the Jabal area. He was polite, but did not try very hard to hide his frustration at the delays imposed by politicians on the military offensive. We expect some “small victories” in this area in the coming week, he said. (There were none).

The BBC, whose coverage has been wildly erratic and at times deceptive, today quoted Abdullah FM in retreat mode — no military operations for the foreseeable future. Given the BBC’s lamentable track record, this needs checking. They have ignored their one good

correspondent, Katherine Davies, our housemate. Instead they rely on authoritative sounding people well away from the front — they apparently consider this area too dangerous, though God knows why. This consists usually of a correspondent in Khojabauddin wrapping up military operations around here. He is described as being “north of Kabul,” almost as if he is within view. They fail to mention that the Hindu Kush is in the way. Despairing, a couple of us headed up the Panjshir to the strange dark turn in the road where government ministers hide. There we found Mohammed Yunus Kanuni, interior minister and, it would seem Abdullah’s rival. Kanuni is punctilious, courteous, but formal. Unlike Abdullah, who speaks excellent English and receives you sitting casually on cushions, Kanuni meets his guests flanked by a note taker, with an aide/bodyguard waiting by the door. And you sit on chairs, a delicious innovation. As we started to talk an elderly notable was shown in, sheaf of papers in hand. Kanuni excused himself, muttered a few words to the man, then examined the papers. An aide came forward with a pen. Kanuni read further, then stopped, said a few more words sotto voce, but more harshly, then ripped the paper with the pen. The petitioner sat rigid throughout our interview, a faint, distant smile on his face. Asadullah filled on the details. The man had brought a document that had already been signed by a deputy minister. Protocol dictates that the minister signs off on a document first, then refer it to a subordinate.

Kanuni offered the most elegant summary of Northern

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Alliance I have heard so far. It is, however, still very ambiguous. In essence, four points:

1) NA policy is opportunistic. If they suddenly see a chance, on this front or elsewhere, they will immediately take it.

2) Barring unexpected breakthroughs, they will try to roll up Taliban control of the north of the country before turning their attention to Kabul. The fall of Mazar is imminent, Kanuni said with a small smile. This should trigger a domino effect across the whole north, as demoralized Taliban abandoned positions all the way to Kunduz. (I really doubt this: the Taliban is not the South Vietnamese puppet army, these are people who want to die for the faith).

3) The NA may not take Kabul proper, but will try to surround it, and find ways to ensure law and order once Taliban control collapses.

4) The political process — creation of a consultative committee, etc. — is far enough advanced that it will not slow down any military operation.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE OCTOBER 16

I realized today that what I had thought was an improvised plant stall on the edge of Charikar — a single table surrounded by the tall, graceful and richly colored flowers that Afghans love — is in fact a military checkpoint. Two AK's were on the table today, and

the man I thought was the salesman, whom I often see tending to the flowers, was wearing an ammunition belt.

This morning, in something approaching desperation, Mark Franchetti and I went to Kapisa to look for the province's main commander, Azimi. As usual we just turned up, waited a little and were admitted. As usual Azimi took the line that he was just a simple soldier and would move as soon as the Defense Ministry told him to. With his thick beard and traditional dress, he looks the picture of a muj. In fact, it seems, he was a Najibullah man.

He was not in the least interested in talking to us. He yawned loudly while one question was being translated. At another point he looked out of the window and sighed. And he never made eye contact with us. Instead he addressed Asadullah, referring to us as "they." And he emphasized the NA's distance from the US. They have different war aims from us, he said; our foreign ministry and their state department have "direct but weak contacts," he said.

Back at the house we sat phoned the commander of military operations around Mazar i Sharif, Ustad Mohammed Atta. There was no sign of the lighting victory in the North that Kanuni had been predicting. The city would probably fall in 1-2 days, and the whole of the north "100 percent certain" to go in the next couple of weeks. I asked how

many Talibs were defending the city. Atta said he did not know, but "but everyone says they have concentrated the best fighters in the country here." Yesterday Kanuni said the same about the Kabul front.

In the afternoon we decided to go looking for a local commander in Rabat (near

"Incoming mortar," the escort said. A few bullets whistled past, close enough to hear but clearly losing velocity

Bagram) a lively piece of the front line. The commander in question is a former Hekmatyar man who fought in Grozny in 1994. We picked up an escort from Haji Almaz (it's his area of responsibility). The escort was tall, strangely verbose and totally random in his conversation. Cracked, Asadullah suggested. No one knew the commander, so we tootled along a back path until we found our way blocked by sandbags and a sort of blockhouse. "Looks like a front line," Asadullah remarked. There we got out and walked towards a container about 70 yards away. This marked either the first or the second defensive line: I could not get a straight answer. One indication came quite soon. There was a loud bang and a cloud of dust rose from an area just by the container.

"Incoming mortar," the escort said. A few bullets whistled past, close enough to hear but clearly losing velocity. The escorts got nervous at this point, complained

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that if guests were injured they would get into trouble. We climbed into a trench by the container, and the mujahideen

Asadullah became quite excited: the Americans are bombing this side of the mountains

assumed photogenic poses until it became obvious they were wasting their time. The nearest Talib position is about 500 meters away, in a walled garden away to our left. The explosion was no big deal, one soldier said: they always fire 82 mm mortars at this time of night. Just then a plane circled lazily overhead. Taliban anti-aircraft guns about 5 kms away, in Kara Bagh, opened up ineffectively as usual — they seemed to be guessing where the plane was, groping at it. The moron, who by now was threatening to fire on Taliban positions with an RPG, clambered out of the trench and pretended to aim at the plane. As he did there was a boom over to my left. I could not see any smoke, as the fool with RPG was in my way, but Asadullah became quite excited: the Americans are bombing this side of the mountains, he said. (Until now they had been hitting around Kabul, ignoring the Taliban positions opposition Bagram). A local commander rushed up and

ordered us out; we reluctantly headed back to a command post 100 meters or so away, convinced that we would miss more bombing. We did not. We hung around there, briefly dodging a burst of gunfire, and talking surreally with a young mujahideen who was about to head back to Kabul, with his family, to get married. “The Taliban don’t know my uncle is a NA commander,” he said.

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN OCTOBER 18

Phoned Atta, the NA commander around Mazar — much more accessible than Dostum. Not much fighting, he said, though U.S. had flown some air support. Part of the problem was that they are running low of ammunition. (Another problem, though he does not spell it out, is that there may be more defenders than attacking forces in the battle for Mazar). Then a bombshell: any sign of U.S. forces, I ask mechanically. Yes, some officers have made contact with Dostum in the Darisuf pass, south of Mazar. Then he had to go.

Later that day to the compound near Golbahar that is home to Haji Qadir, former governor of Nangahar, Pashtun warlord, and ruler of Jelalabad when Osama arrived there in 1994. Behind the metal gate is a pretty little flower garden that borders his new Toyota Landcruiser. Inside the house is

elegant, cool and dust-free. Qadir is immaculately dressed, wears an expensive watch, has two satphones set up and sits with a buzzer under his foot with which to summon a servant. He is vague about Osama — we never met, he says, I only found out that he was in the city 5 days after he arrived. He becomes, however, progressively more irritated with the questions, and flicks his worry beads like a lion flicks his tail.

These are not journalistic questions, he says, implying that we are spies. He reminds me of the elegant villain in the French connection — and he may well have been in the same line of business. He is also irritated at U.S. hypocrisy: “soon after Osama arrived in Afghanistan,” he said, “I told the U.S. Con-Gen in Peshawar that I would deliver Osama bound hand and foot if they wished. I got no answer. In those days you were not really worried about this man. And don’t forget how Osama got to Afghanistan in the first place — during the war against the Soviets, when the US was funding the muj. The Americans sent Osama to Afghanistan, and with Osama’s help the Taliban destroyed the whole of the country.” If the Americans send in ground forces, he said, they will end up like the Soviets. He claimed to have 15,000 men under his direct command — more than the whole NA. (These were not much help two weeks later when Abdul Haq, his brother, was tracked down and hanged by the Taliban).

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DAY TWENTY-EIGHT OCTOBER 19

Outside Mazar, Atta continues to revise his timetables. In today's call he says that many districts will be liberated in the next few days. At the start of the week the city was to have been liberated in a few days. How about Mazar? First we will surround the city. That could be finished in 10 days or so, they we will see. The U.S. officers in Darisuf seem to be intelligence, he says. One helicopter arrived with 8 of them four nights ago.

DAY TWENTY-NINE OCTOBER 20

This story is really slow. The grime and drudgery are once again getting to us. Doorstepped Kanuni in the Panjshir. He was unexcited, but courteous. U.S. officers are in Darisuf with our permission, he said carefully. We were informed in advance about last night's Ranger raid in the south, he said. Interesting distinction. The assault on Mazar had gone badly, he said, a military mistake: troops had advanced to far forward, their lines had become stretched, and had been forced back with losses. The Taliban positions there and in Tarikhar have been reinforced in the past few days by Pakistanis, he said. Reiterated the northern strategy, said NA was in "no hurry" to take Kabul. The winter is not really a problem in the plains till the beginning of the

year. We complain that Bisumallah Khan will not talk. I'm not surprised, he said with a small smile. Your questions are not very journalistic. (He seems to be a good friend of Haji Qadir).

LATER THAT DAY. After Kanuni's hint that skirmishing could go on through the new year, Mark Franchetti and I decided to go. Dropped by Haji Almaz one more time, to make sure that there were no sudden changes in the military plan. Almaz crapped all over the U.S. The world is laughing at the way the US wages war here, he said. The Pakistanis are using them like a toy. When the Russians bombed us, they send in waves of 30-40 planes. A couple of bombs is nothing. We were expecting massive U.S. bombing, but it did not happen. It turns out that the US was joking.

The new driver did not know the way to Panjshir – a stunning achievement, as there is only one road.

DAY THIRTY OCTOBER 21

Four hours up the Panjshir and back to sign up for a helicopter. Got there and found there were sixty people ahead of

us. There had been no helicopters for days. People were sleeping in the garden, and everywhere in the tiny guesthouse. Some were half crazed. We went back down and started looking for drivers. We'll be leaving in two jeeps, for safety. Mark Franchetti and I in one, Ian Traynor (Guardian) and Marcus Warren (Telegraph) in the other. We found two uaziki (Russian jeeps — indestructible), one belonging to a suspiciously ingratiating character who looks like a total rogue, the other to a quiet, low key gentleman. The rogue turned out to be the Newsday driver (and dope dealer). Newsday did not know he was leaving, and was understandably pissed. The driver went into a long explanation of how he wanted to get back North, to his family, before the passes closed. Matt of Newsday was resigned but unimpressed: he abandoned his family a couple of years ago, he said. They are in Taliban territory. Matt will take over Ikram. we leave at 4am. Cost: \$1600 per car to Khojabauddin. Down from \$2000 plus.

DAY THIRTY-ONE OCTOBER 22

4 am out. The solid citizen in the second uazik has been replaced by a wild-eyed man about 4ft 6 tall. Almost immediately our two cars got separated. The new driver did not know the way to the Panjshir — a stunning achievement, as there is only one road. Traynor and Warren finally stopped him when they realized they were heading south to Kabul. Soon after his cabin briefly caught fire. No problem, he said. Then they both wanted to smoke dope. No

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Photo: JOEL ROBINE/AFP

problem they said. No way, we said, and our driver stopped smiling for ever.

It took about eight hours to get out of the Panjshir, a distance of maybe 100 kilometers. The road got worse after that, and the rugged coziness of the valley, with its small orchards and narrow fields set along the river, suddenly gave to harsh, rocky highland scenery. Anjuman, said our driver Akhmadullah in a tone on apprehension. The Anjuman pass is 14000 feet. A day or so earlier, people coming the other way reported a small patch of snow, nothing to worry about. Soon, though, the pass could be closed. We had asked our drivers to bring chains, a request they considered proof we were wimps. The blue sky suddenly turned milky gray, the temperature dropped from the mid 20's Celsius to something much closer to freezing. And when we reached the Anjuman there was snow as far as you could see. We began to slide and swerve. Akhmadullah, who seemed to have a visceral fear of cold and snow, made every mistake possible, gunning the car and slowly digging it into the mud, ice and snow. Then came the blizzard and we knew we were in trouble. We wrapped ourselves in blankets, passed the scotch around and consulted. The options were limited: our two drivers were showing signs of panic. They had no chains. We could go back down to the nearest village in the valley — a couple

of hours away — and try to get chains. Or we could tough it out. I decided to walk ahead, to see how far the snow extended and how thick it was.

I set off at a brisk pace, trying to keep warm, and immediately felt short of breath and dizzy. I had forgotten about the altitude; thereafter I proceeded at a moon walk. The snow continued for further than I was prepared to trudge, but it was less deep and

“Sleep,” he snarled. He made it sound like an unpleasant proposition. It was.

the incline less challenging. It seemed worth a try. We all piled into one jeep, and the dwarf maneuvered us through. We then went back for Akhmadullah, who had slithered way off the track and seemed paralyzed with the cold. We stood on the front bumper as he tried to back out, we pushed, but he only got himself in deeper. Finally he hung himself up on a boulder and I was prepared to kiss the uazik goodbye. He pulled it off, though, and gradually, by pure luck, got the car up the slope. It had taken over two hours to go about 150 meters. The other side was a series of hairpins, mercifully with only a dusting of snow, but we walked much of the way, unsure of Akhmadullah's composure. We drove for another seven hours that

day. I was so tired that I managed to sleep, wrapped in a blanket, despite the fact we were driving over small boulders. We drove as usual along river beds, through fast moving water, across a Tolkien landscape — lowland and woods that seemed once to have been rich and fertile, now abandoned as a result of some nameless disaster.

Suddenly Akhmadullah yelled at me. “Squadir.” I looked up and saw lights high above us. Scuds, I thought foggily. They were the lights of a village, Squadir high up the side of a mountain valley. “Sleep,” he snarled.

He made it sound like an unpleasant proposition. It was. His hostility had come to the surface, and he seemed unwilling even to let us take our bags out of the car. Sleep, he kept on repeating in an angry voice. Our sleeping place turned out to be the most wretched, filthy, medieval shit-hole I have experienced in a couple of decades of shitty accommodation. A single foul room, maybe 15 by 10, lit by a paraffin lamp and the glow of a stove served as restaurant and motel. A dozen or so people slept there on the floor. A servant boy, dressed literally in rags, brought us filth encrusted tea glasses. We refused them and supper. Our drivers sat opposite us, eating, scowling and loudly discussing the Anjuman: they had obviously become the heroes of the day. Then they smoked hashish — probably the reason they had insisted on this place above all other options.

AFGHAN DIARY

BY PAUL QUINN-JUDGE

DAY THIRTY-TWO OCTOBER 23

7.30 am. I am so tired I can barely write. I was seriously bitten last night on the head and arms by some sort of bug, probably fleas, and one eye brow has swollen up like a boxer's. During my fitful sleep I could hear a small animal crunching a bone with powerful teeth. I sounded like a small dog eating a chicken bone. But no one had any chicken last night, and I can't see any dogs. This morning I went up to the man who seems to be in charge here, who was preparing kebab, massaging the meat with filthy hands, and waving a toll of toilet paper, and asked for directions to the toilet. He indicated a wall a few yards from where he was working, and graphically mimed his answer. We were due to leave early, but the drivers slept in. They say they can't go anywhere because they need to fix one of the jeeps they bought bum gasoline in the Panjshir and this has messed up a fuel pump. And now they say that a truck has broken down in the narrowest part of the valley road ahead. It will take hours to clear.

We got off eventually around ten, after a couple of rows with the drivers, and quickly climbed above the Kokcha river, deep blue, fast flowing and at times a white foam of rapids for hundreds of yards. First we were a hundred feet along the narrow path — no barriers of course. Akhmadullah drove confidently. At times too

confidently: at one point he decided to overtake an old pickup, at another some animals, and I was sure our outside tire had brushed the edge. Eventually we were about 600 feet up, and I really did feel like we were in a helicopter, watching the river far below. A stunning view. The road flattened out as we approached

At one point Akhmadullah lunged at Mark Franchetti, and Mark got in a few kicks while I tried to separate them

Feyzabad, and then turned into a well tended earth road where we could go into third gear for the first time in days. Feyzabad was locked up tight by the time we arrived, in early evening. We went to the Foreign Ministry guesthouse, the Club. Edible supper of the usual pilau, and a plan to leave at 2am, so as to make the ferry from Khojabauddin.

DAY THIRTY-THREE OCTOBER 24

I got up at 2 and went looking for the drivers. They were not there, though I mistakenly woke up another driver who was sleeping in a uazik like ours. It

started to rain, and the ceiling above my bed started to leak. The drivers turned up hours later, surly and unapologetic. They had been looking for fuel, they lied unconvincingly (gas vendors open at 8, we knew). Anyway, it had been raining. We paid them off, minus \$300 for the last leg. Then the trouble started. They refused. Wanted the whole amount. Screamed, yelled, complained loudly to guards and anyone else they could find. At 8 we found another car, and they moved in to stop us. At this point it became a little vague — chronic lack of sleep scrambled things. At one point Akhmadullah lunged at Mark Franchetti, and Mark got in a few kicks while I tried to separate them. At another point the dwarf was chased around his uazik by an official whom he had offended, probably with his intemperate language. Then an elderly gentleman, later described as the chief of police, turned up and mediated. We paid a symbolic extra amount, which the police chief took custody of, and were assured we could go on our way. There was no risk of the two of them following us and trying to force us off the road, the officials said. At that point Akhmadullah suddenly roared down the street. A young soldier chased and overtook him, Akhmadullah seemed to swerve at the soldier. Suddenly the elderly chief of police was there — I have no idea how he moved so fast — dragging Akhm out of the car, hitting him with his turban and then his hand. Akhm came back, there was more yelling — the argument was now between Afghans, and after one violent outburst Akhm was hit on the back, a satisfyingly loud

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BY PAUL QUINN-JUDGE

Photo: JOEL ROBINE/AFP

crunch, with the butt of an AK.

We all jammed into our new car, hired one of the young soldiers with an AK to ride shotgun, and headed for Khojabauddin.

But it was to be one of those days. Our new driver was refreshingly calm and friendly, but showed no interest in slowing down when he drove round the sharp turns in the latest set of ravines. (We went the river route, longer but less steep, for fear that rain had turned the shorter route to mush). This was worrying, as the driver admitted to a problem with brakes. After the river valley we went through semi-desert, where we had a flat. He changed it, we sat on a rock and then headed off. No problem. The driver seemed not to know where he was going: he kept asking for Khojabauddin, though he had led us to believe that he virtually lived there. Eventually, far in the distance across an wide expanse of sand we saw dun walls of the settlement. Then we had another flat. This time there was no spare. We forced him to get his rim on the upper side of a rut, to more or less balance the tire, and drove on. I occasionally hung out of the pickup waving donkeys out of the way. Just inside the settlement the driver refused to go any further. It was 4.30 pm and time was running out for the ferry. We found a beat up old taxi, threw out stuff in and showed the driver the address in Dari of where we wanted to go — the foreign

ministry, to get permission to leave. The driver shook his head; he couldn't read. We drove a short way and tried another man. He couldn't read either. A third gave us directions. We got the paper, got a car (Foreign Ministry recommended, \$100) and headed to ferry. We arrived at the ferry at around 6. It had closed at 5:30, a Russian-speaking official said.

In the meantime I wrapped myself in my Afghan blanket and slept sitting up on the riverside.

The border guards on the other side had picked up their table and left for the day. I quietly offered him \$100 to contact the Russians. We phoned our bureaus, asking them to intervene with the border guards — it was common practice to get them out at night in return for a hefty tip. In the meantime I wrapped myself in my Afghan blanket and slept sitting up on the riverside. A wonderful half-hour nap. By 9 it was clear that no one was coming. They are having some sort of binge, the disappointed Afghan said. (Border Guards Day, we discovered). So back to Khojabauddin, for extra payment of course, and to the BBC compound. There the BBC security man took one look at us and told Jonathan Charles that he

had to let us in. We did not realize we looked that bad. Jonathan was the perfect host, insisted on feeding us — MREs (U.S. military rations, “Meals Ready to Eat”), which were delicious, even Mark Franchetti shut up — and put us to sleep in a couple of tents in the compound. The next morning, after a few more screaming fits — remarkably effective in Afghanistan — and more crazy bureaucracy, we were across the Pyanj. Tajikistan, the failed state, never looked better.