BEYOND THE OUTPOST

An Army Cavalry Officer's War Diary on the Frontlines of Afghanistan, 2003–2007

ROSS A. BERKOFF

Unedited excerpt

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California

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Dedicated to the men of the 10th Mountain Division, 3-17 CAV and 3-71 CAV,
with whom I served during Operation Enduring Freedom,
and who are no longer with us today.

PFC Brian Bradbury

SPC Armer N. Burkart

SGT Matthew J. Chadbourne

LTC Joseph Fenty

SGT Daniel H. Granica

Captain Ben Keating

SSG Patrick Lybert

SFC Jared Monti

PFC Brian M. Moquin Jr.

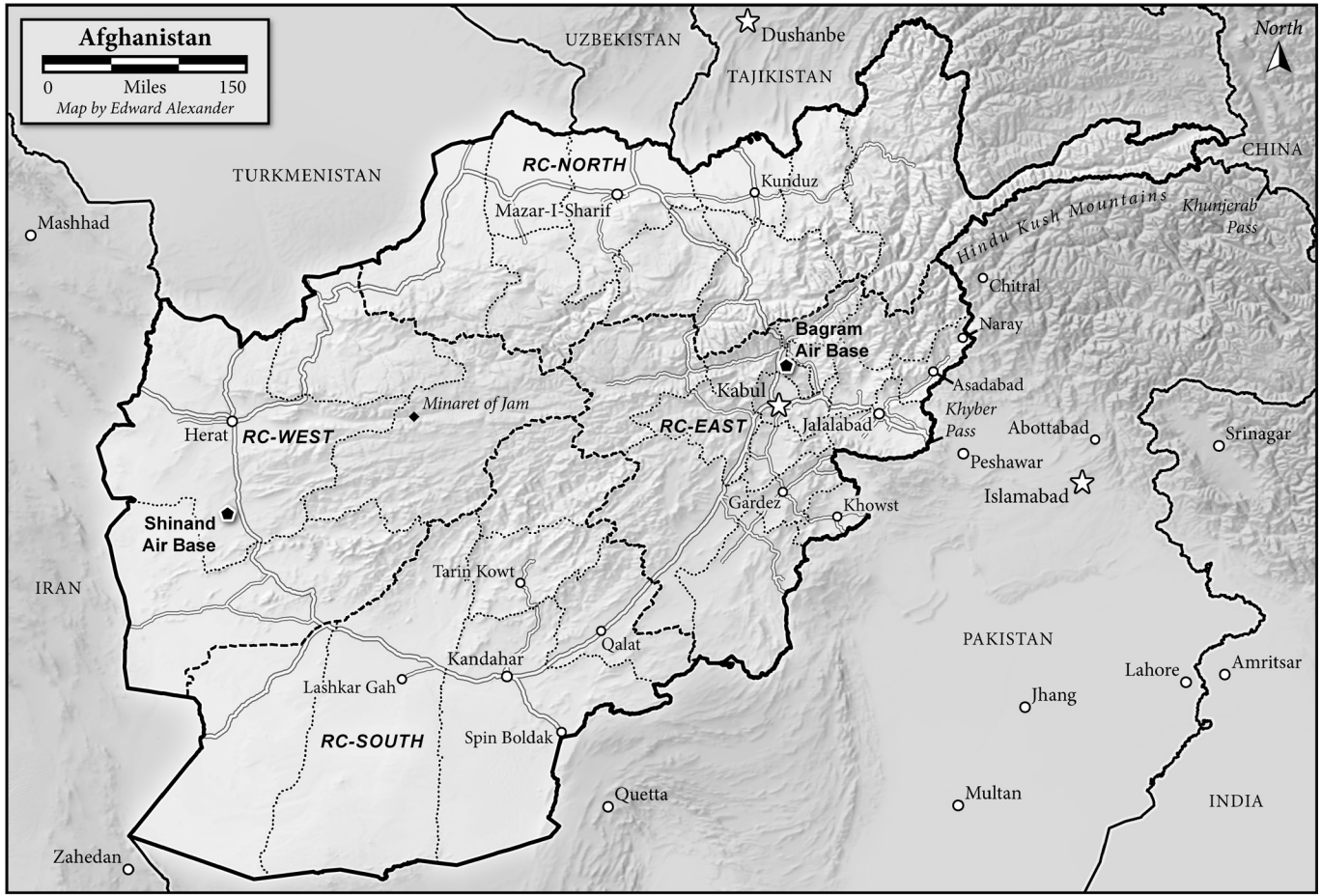
Major James D. Mullin

Specialist Justin L. O'Donohoe

Specialist Anthony "Nick" Pilozzi

1st Sgt. Billy J. Siercks

SPC David N. Timmons


Afghanistan
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Map by Edward Alexander
UZBEKISTAN
Dushanbe
TAJIKISTAN
North
CHINA
TURKMENISTAN
RC-NORTH
Kunduz
Mazar-I-Sharif
Mashhad
Hindu Kush Mountains
Khunjerab Pass
Chitral
Naray
Bagram Air Base
Kabul
Asadabad
Khyber Pass
Minaret of Jam
Herat
RC-WEST
RC-EAST
Jalalabad
Abottabad
Srinagar
Peshawar
Islamabad
Gardez
Khowst
Shinand Air Base
IRAN
Tarin Kowt
Qalat
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FOREWORD

I served alongside Captain Ross Berkoff in combat for 16 months in Afghanistan. He's an incredible officer with an important untold story, and he has done us all a great service by writing and sharing his combat diaries of two deployments to Afghanistan early in the war. While the young men and women who served there were all volunteers, in retrospect, they bore a disproportionate share of the burden of protecting our nation and the American people from another 9/11. While the vast majority of Americans are deeply grateful for their service, it's fair to say that most Americans don't fully understand what combat service entailed or the enduring impact on the lives of those who served.

Ross's diaries provide an unfiltered view into that world. His contemporaneous account of experience as a junior officer leading a cavalry scout platoon in Kandahar, the heartland of the Taliban, and again as the intelligence officer for a cavalry squadron fighting insurgents in the Hindu Kush Mountains, offers first-hand insights the reader won't find elsewhere. Ross's candor, strong character, faith, and values come through as he relates how he dealt with the challenges and emotions of combat: love of comrades developed through shared hardship and trust; the uncertainty and fear of the unknown; the deep shock of losing people who you love; the sense of futility when trying to console their families; frustration over higher level decisions which abruptly and significantly impact lives at the lowest level; and the satisfaction of doing one's duty juxtaposed with lifelong grief for those who didn't return.

And then . . . it's over, and he transitions to civilian life forever shaped by events and emotions to which few can relate.

I'm personally very familiar with Ross's story because it was my honor and privilege to be his Brigade Commander in the 3rd Brigade Combat Team "Spartans" of the 10th Mountain Division, both building the brigade and leading it in combat. Having served alongside Ross and his unit in action in Konar and Nuristan provinces, the scene of some of the heaviest fighting and incredible displays of valor by American Soldiers in this war, I can personally attest to the difficulty of the conditions under which the 3rd Squadron, 71st Cavalry fought. Ross's personal humility is on display throughout his narrative, but the reader should know that this was one the toughest missions given to any unit in Afghanistan during the entire war.

America's longest war was fought by the smallest percentage of our population of any major conflict in our nation's history. On 9/11, there were 480,000 soldiers in a 1.42 million active-duty force serving an American population of over 300 million. In 2004, Congress increased the size of the Army by 30,000 active-duty troops and added three BCTs, one of which was 3d Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division—"The Spartans" in which Ross served as S2 of 3-71 Cavalry on his second deployment. In May 2004, I was redirected from another assignment to Fort Drum, NY. The officer who sent my orders from the Department of the Army was named LTC Joe Fenty. A few weeks later, Joe himself was reassigned to Ft Drum to take command of 3-71 Cavalry. It was my honor to command the 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division, from July 2004 to June 2007. Together, with our exceptional team of NCOs and officers, which included CPT Ross Berkoff, we built the brigade in 18 months and deployed for 16 months.

In 2006 the disparity between the number of service members in Afghanistan versus Iraq was pronounced. Iraq had 130–140,000 U.S. service members, whereas Afghanistan had only 30–40,000 troops. Yet Afghanistan was physically larger and had roughly the same population as Iraq. The population in Iraq was concentrated around urban areas whereas the Afghan population was distributed across a vast and austere landscape from the high deserts of Kandahar to the 15,000-foot peaks of the Hindu Kush in Nuristan.

Over 20 years of war, a total of 775,000 U.S. personnel served in Afghanistan; 244,000 did multiple tours. 2,461 were killed and over 20,000 were wounded. The total number represents one quarter of one percent of the nation's population. A third of them served multiple deployments. For two decades, they prevented another 9/11. Churchill's quote comes to mind: "Never has so much been owed by so many to so few."

Policy decisions at the highest levels have a direct and enduring impact on the lives of soldiers and their families at the tip of the spear. Ross's account

relates the impact of those decisions, such as the unprecedented extension of our brigade's deployment from 12 to 16 months. The effect of the U.S. decision to focus on Iraq over Afghanistan, perhaps best articulated by Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen when he said, "In Iraq we do what we must, in Afghanistan we do what we can," comes through in Ross's account. Following the rapid collapse of the Taliban in 2001, the U.S. excluded them from the December 2001 Bonn Conference on Afghanistan which charted the reconstruction of Afghanistan. At this point, the Pakistanis had agreed to support the U.S. effort. However, 15 months later in March of 2003, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq began. The campaign in Iraq became the main effort, taking focus and resources away from Afghanistan. It also took pressure off the Taliban and caused Pakistan to doubt America's commitment to the theater. The Pakistanis feared a united Pashtun resistance to their rule and by backing a Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan they would "divide and conquer," fighting the Tehreki Taliban Pakistan (TTP) while supporting the Afghan Taliban.

Ross's 2003 nine-month deployment to Kandahar was very challenging but ended fortunately, as he put it: "I've led my platoon over 12,000 miles, conducted over 200 missions and everyone is coming home . . . truly remarkable." In retrospect, it reflected the calm before the storm which began in early 2006 when a resurgent Pakistan-backed Taliban intensified the fight in Afghanistan. Ross's second deployment in 2006/7 with 3-71 Cavalry and 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division, met that resurgent Taliban effort head on.

The U.S. decision to simultaneously fight two wars without significantly increasing the size of the U.S. Army meant extension of units for longer and longer tours. The Spartans of 3/10th Mountain Division were the first Brigade Combat Team in the Army to be extended from 12 to 16 months. That extension was ordered after they had begun their redeployment home, which had a significant impact on families back at Fort Drum. By mid-2007, all Army combat deployments were extended from 12 to 15 months. Other services retained unit deployments of a year or less. The Afghan war was fought on the backs of the 244,000 soldiers and their families who served two or more tours in Afghanistan. Units had 12 to 18 months to reset and retrain before deploying back to Iraq or Afghanistan.

The abrupt manner in which America withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021 contributed to the rapid defeat of the Afghan armed forces and imposed a horrendous cost on the Afghan people, many of whom were abandoned despite their long-time support of the United States. It also exacted a significant toll on those who fought in Afghanistan, as tragically illustrated by the suicide of 3-71 Cavalry Specialist Anthony "Nick" Pilozzi for whom the chaotic withdrawal

meant that he increasingly saw the sacrifices of his friends killed in Afghanistan as "meaningless." He joins a growing list of veterans who have taken their own lives.

Ross Berkoff was one of the few Americans who served multiple tours in Afghanistan. He has done us a great service by sharing his unfiltered experiences and emotions as a young leader in combat. In particular, several themes common to men and women undergoing the stresses of combat, and which are rarely made visible to those who do not serve, are apparent in his journal:

- *Love*: The human dimension of war includes the strong bonds that grow between soldiers and between leaders and led. These bonds are a form of love, *Philios* or brotherly love, as the Spartans of ancient Greece called it. Ross's love for his comrades and for his Squadron Commander, LTC Joe Fenty, come through in his words on the days immediately following their loss. What Ross leaves unstated is that he and his entire unit continued the mission despite the emotional shock to them as individuals and as a unit. This resiliency is a hallmark of a highly professional and well-trained unit, another legacy of Joe Fenty's outstanding leadership.
- *Loss, regret, and survivor's guilt*: Losing anyone in your charge is gut-wrenching but losing people whom you love means you will be grieving the rest of your life. Ross's grieving for his fellow soldiers such as Joe Fenty, Ben Keating, and Nick Pilozzi gives the reader an insight into what it means to be a combat veteran.
- *Elation and frustration*: The end of Ross's first tour in Kandahar ended with the satisfaction that they had accomplished all missions and were bringing everyone home alive. The end of his second deployment was quite different and intensely frustrating as his unit was extended with no warning and then continued to sustain casualties.
- *Lessons in training and combat effectiveness*: Ross also shares experiences of losing people through the dangerous conditions on the battlefield in the Hindu Kush where bad weather, poor roads, and uncertain conditions are as dangerous as a cunning enemy who can prepare in sanctuary across the nearby border before attacking. Leaders must be at the top of their game, they must know they did everything they possibly could for the success and survival of their soldiers because even when you do everything right, the enemy can still get lucky, a piece of equipment can fail, or bad weather can prevent an operation. This is why tough realistic training was so essential to 3-71 Cavalry's success in Nuristan. They were a highly trained and well-led

unit placed in the toughest conditions imaginable. And they accomplished their mission.

Ross Berkoff and a relatively small number of Americans in uniform with him made the honorable and selfless decision to step up and serve their country in our longest war, protecting America for 20 years from radical factions who enjoyed sanctuary in Afghanistan. By doing so, they've earned the eternal gratitude and respect of all Americans.

John W. Nicholson Jr.
General, U.S. Army, Retired
Four-Star Commander of the Afghanistan War, 2016-2018

CHAPTER 1

HERE IN RESPONSE

6 August 2003. 0200 hrs. Wheeler Sack Airfield, Fort Drum NY.

The waiting has begun. I thought the waiting around for "The Big Day" (our deployment date) was excruciating enough. This evening, we were bused from the Troop HQ and corralled into the RDF building for a weigh-in and chow. Each trooper needs to be weighed in carrying all of the equipment they intend to board with. We are now hearing that there is too much weight for the plane to carry. The men are asleep, side by side, on the cold cement floor, their rifles resting between their legs, and under their arms. It's a strange feeling to now be a "real soldier"—always attached to his gun. I signed for my M4 carbine tonight and made the pledge to keep it within arm's reach for what could be a yearlong deployment.

I've got so many new faces in my platoon. Only a small percentage of the men with me now actually trained with me and the rest of the platoon and I during the spring. Moreover, the soldiers in their current positions as gunners and truck commanders are being tested for their first time, not to mention in a combat zone. I'm no grizzled veteran but I know that I've also grown with the platoon over the past seven months. I'm very lucky to have the platoon sergeant that I have. SFC Jason White has made my job so easy. It's literally a bore most of the time. So, I have an untested platoon. Our greenness is balanced, however, with our excellent noncommissioned officers and seemingly well-disciplined and dedicated "Joes." Easy Company of the 506th PIR from World War II were also green and untested on June 6th. Look what they accomplished with good leaders and even better followers. We will do it right too. I'm still waiting here.

7 August 2003. 0700 hrs. Flying over Kazakhstan.

At approximately 0430 hrs., I led a chalk of 20 soldiers on the tarmac and boarded a B-777 Continental on route to central Asia. After a seven-hour flight, we landed in Milan, Italy and sat on the runway for two hours. We then took off again bound for Manas Air Force Base, near Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. As I am writing this in the plane, I'm looking out to a land of nothingness, a barren desert of cracks and rivers and dotted habitats, which is southern Kazakhstan for now. It was an eerie feeling to step off the airfield at Fort Drum, knowing that my feet will not touch American soil again for possibly a year. From space, the ground below looks so calm and undaunting. I know that's not the reality of the case however, and sooner rather than later, I will find out just how brutal this landscape can be. We are not really sure what the next few days has in store for us. I assume we will board a C-130 and move to Kandahar Airfield (KAF).

We're about to land in Kyrgyzstan.

8 August 2003. 1250 hrs. Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan.

Technically, the time is 0850 Zulu, but I am not sure how I feel about using the Zulu time system for this journal.[1] We are finally here. Yesterday morning, we landed at Manas International Airport, which is really nothing more than an old Soviet airbase near Bishkek. The airbase was converted for United States Air Force, Dutch, German, and Kyrgyzstani military forces. Our troop was bused into a hanger and told to wait for the next available C-130 transport to Kandahar. 14 hours later we were alerted to be ready. I spent most of the day sleeping on the hanger floor with my head resting on my flack vest. Just before we left, I walked behind the hanger to what I thought was an abandoned Russian villa. I was looking for a quiet place to shave, and a little exploration. After my shave under the villa porch, I walked around the building and found a Kyrgyzstani armed forces fire fighting unit, washing their fire truck. I introduced myself to a young soldier with a mouth full of gold teeth and overwhelming body odor. He showed me a few of the firetrucks. I thanked him, and I went on my way.

When I returned, 2nd Platoon was in "full battle rattle" and we left on a C-130 soon thereafter. The flight into Afghanistan was uneventful. We touched down around 0230 hours and we were brought into a tent for a welcome briefing. I made contact with 2-22 Infantry (Triple Deuce) personnel who escorted my

1 Zulu time, also known as Greenwich Mean Time, is the standard time used by global military units to aid in the synchronization of operations, regardless of time zones.

platoon to our living quarters. Two 10-man tents equipped with new cots, and an air-cooling fan system. I made my home in the rear corner of the first tent with the rest of 2nd Platoon's Alpha section. KAF is an unassuming place. It's flat and dusty with very few trees to offer escape from the scorching sun. Our tents are less than a kilometer from the very active airfield runway, and we're reminded of the Air Force's presence just about 24 hours a day.

Today I took a walk to the PX, which was surprisingly well stocked. I made a credit card call home and spoke to my mother very briefly. There are all sorts of soldiers walking around this place—Romanians, Germans, British, 82nd Airborne soldiers (outgoing), and Special Operations Soldiers, who are usually easy to identify with their uncropped beards and desert uniforms absent name tapes.

Today is the day to relax and recover from the 60-hour journey from Fort Drum. Tomorrow we will have our first formation with Triple Deuce. We still have no idea when our trucks will get here, and when containers will arrive with our equipment. We should be grateful that all our personnel and gear made it right to our tent without really breaking a sweat.

I can see a considerable amount of time passing without seeing any action. Idleness only leads to problems, and it makes a deployment feel much longer than it really is. I hope we will be busy or else it will definitely affect morale. The men are hydrating obsessively with nothing but bottled water, and we were told to drink nothing else. Even the shower water is not safe for drinking. The men are playing cards, listening to music, and sleeping. A guard roster was established to have at least one man in the tent, guarding our gear every hour of the day. This did not make the men happy but it's necessary because unfortunately we can't trust some of the soldiers around here from taking our supplies. There's a brand-new church built a few hundred yards from our camp. It seems very nice but according to the welcome brief, the church offers services for just about every religion here except for my own, including Mormons, Muslims, Roman orthodox and Protestants. I think I'll make an inquiry.

It's hard to know how to feel. I've only been here a day and I'm already getting the sense that this deployment is going to own me. It's going to rattle my unconscious yearning for routine and introduce a whole new concept of an Army "workday." I've quickly been plucked from my "cush life" of working at Fort Drum from 0600 to 1800; all relative of course, if you can call a 12-hour workday cush. Still though, my weekends at Fort Drum were normally spent traveling, barhopping, internet dating, and playing video games on the couch. Although my Army garrison job at Drum had its difficulties, it was just a day job for me. I could close the front door of my Watertown, NY studio apartment at

the end of the day and enjoy creature comforts and privacy. I now must leave all that behind me and accept a whole new way of life. Discomfort, inconvenience, stress will be daily hurdles for me here in Afghanistan. Combine all that with the anxiety that I'm always outnumbered by my soldiers, constantly being watched by them. Oh, and don't forget that I'm just one operations order away from getting dropped into a firefight.

Still though, I have to remember "the big picture" when I question what I'm doing here. Men have had these same wonders and feelings about soldiering for thousands of years . . . why should I be any different? September 11, 2001, is a day that will live in infamy and the fact that Afghanistan became a new place for U.S. soldiers to deploy is directly tied to that infamous day. Now, enter 2nd Platoon, Apache Troop, 3rd Squadron 17th Cavalry, LT Berkoff and SFC White. 23 months after the towers fell and the Pentagon burned, here we are. It's no coincidence, but rather a response. I have to keep thinking on that. I am here to respond. We're here in response. My country is sending me to kick down a few doors because ours were kicked down first. It's a lot of political and patriotic rhetoric perhaps. I also sometimes think I am here for an adventure. I kind of like that one better.

11 August 2003. 1830 hrs. Kandahar Airfield.

I'm starting to get into a routine now. 1200 wake up (Zulu time) which is 0400 local time and fall in for PT formation.[2] PT from 1230 to 0130. Not many places for running on this airfield except a foot trail which circles a huge pond of burning shit and fuel. Then chow and personal hygiene from 0200–0300, followed by whatever training is on the schedule for the day which takes priority. We spent the past few days getting settled in here.

On Saturday we were told to move a new set of tents about 100 feet of way. I was pretty content in my original set of quarters, but this new tent suits me fine. My men have been busy building a fine wooden door and entranceway to the tent. They laid out corduroy wooden planks in the entranceway to keep our boots out of the sand and occasional mud. They also nailed our platoon cavalry guidon on to my tent door.[3] They have also set up a camouflaged hooch over our Bravo Section tent and placed picnic tables underneath.

2 PT is "physical training."

3 The cavalry guidon, the military version of a team banner, is a small, swallow-tailed flag used by Army cavalry units to identify the unit.

I think I'll be comfortable here, but the heat is unbearable right now. It reached 115 degrees today. I also haven't been sleeping very regularly at night. During the hottest part of the late afternoons, we cease training and seek refuge in our cooled tents, and while sitting in our bunks there is little to do at that point except rack-out on the cot and nod off. That has made it more difficult for me to fall asleep later, and I also wake up in the middle the night.

On Sunday, August 10th, SGT Dave Stricker, one of my truck commanders, and I met up with the Triple Deuce dismounted scout platoon and we hiked about 2 km to a small bunker on the side of the airfield. Here we waited for a couple of hours in the ungodly, warm sun for the mortars to do their work—our training mission was to practice observing and adjusting fire. The mortars never fired a shot, something about safety reasons, and we had to walk back to the camp. I met a Fires NCO named SSG Sheaffer, who told me he's a Messianic Jew, and he liked to refer to himself as a Redneck Jew. I introduced myself and we talked about the Jewish people's resolve, their history and his experiences in the Army as a Jew. Apparently, they had Friday night Shabbat services here at KAF, and I'll look forward to attending.

Today, we went to the rifle range to confirm our zeros on our M4 carbines.[4] The rest of Apache Troop was there as well. I learned today that the rest of Apache Troop will be moving about 500km to the northeast, to a place called Firebase Salerno[5] and this will include our Troop HQ Section, our Mortars Section, and the entirety of 3rd Platoon. They will support 1-87 Infantry BN at that location. So, at least for now, it appears that Apache Troop will in fact be split up across the BCT, leaving my 2nd Platoon here in KAF with the bulk of 2-22 IN.

We're going to do a night fire at the range tonight. I'm very anxious about getting our vehicles and our weapons together to start missions. We've been training as dismounts for far too long, and we need to start focusing on being Cavalrymen, and that means vehicle movement drills, mounted crew serve weapons drills, and gunnery. And this all depends on the arrival of our containers and our vehicles.

I do confess that nothing scares me more than taking my platoon out for a reconnaissance mission, or a convoy operation, and getting trapped in an ambush from the hills by Al Qaeda, hiding in the cracks and caves. I feel like we're going up against guerrilla warfare out here. My job will be to protect the main effort and our supply convoys from the local bad guys. It's not too unlike

4 To confirm a "zero" on a rifle means to make sure it's accurately sighted, ensuring your aiming device is a match to where the bullets hit the target.

5 Located in Khowst Province along the Pakistani border.

the Army of the Potomac supply line in northern Virginia in Mosby's Raider country. Not a very desirable place to be.

All of the troops that we "replaced" here in Kandahar Province have appeared to have already re-deployed back to the States. I didn't meet any of them. No left-seat-right-seat, transition, or relief-in-place conducted, at least not from my perspective. No one around me, equal to or superior in rank, seems to know what exactly we're going to be doing. That scares me and my senior NCOs. We're the Cav. We're supposed to be Eyes and Ears for the main effort, for 1st BCT and Triple Deuce. How can we be any good at reconnaissance if we're this unfamiliar with the landscape (and the local population) around us? I feel burdened by this, by the wildness of this unmapped and untamed land. I feel the weight and strain of this notion that we are starting something really hard, from complete-fucking-scratch. Nevertheless, I would love to get a chance to kill some of these bastards. It's a tough game to balance, but good training will make us win.

15 August 2003. 0600 hrs. Kandahar Airfield.

We're still killing time here while we wait for our equipment and vehicles to arrive. Yesterday, I jumped in a truck convoy out to a place called Tarnak Farms, which is about 10 km south of Kandahar Airfield. We were escorted out by some Romanian soldiers, in their BTR-80s and DABs, since we don't even have enough of our own vehicles to protect ourselves. I'm told that Tarnak Farms was once Osama Bin Laden's family compound and an Al Qaeda training camp. It was a suspected chemical and biological warfare munitions camp according to the CIA. And it was targeted by the CIA in the 1990s and then destroyed between October and December 2001.

The land south of the airfield is flat and desolate with nothing on the horizon but dirt and sand. Tarnak Farms is nothing more than a collection of crumbling, sunbaked, mudbrick huts made of dirt and straw. It was recognizable from the post-911 footage on CNN of AQ terrorists training on monkey bars. The compound today is abandoned, and all that's left are the scars of battles, including mines, unexploded ordinance, shell fragments and bones. I was told even full human skeletons are still being found. Last year, we heard a bunch of Canadian soldiers were accidentally killed at Tarnak. Apparently, they were firing their rifles on the range just like we were—but an F-16 mistook them for bad guys and dropped a bomb. Pretty awful. Today, we used the area for a sniper rifle range and an AT-4 firing range. I observed from a Humvee for about two hours and then came back to Kandahar.

The platoon had some light indoor classes today for a few hours in the morning, and then had the afternoon off, followed by an afternoon PT session, then dinner and then sleep. Very little we can do but just repeat the same hip-pocket training until our vehicles get here. On a personal note, I've been here for two weeks, and I wouldn't say I miss my family much, but I do miss my luxuries like privacy, television, a couch, fast food, women, and beer. I suppose it's natural to long for these things under present conditions but if I were also missing a wife and children, I cannot imagine how hard that would be. There will be a Shabbat prayer service tonight at 1730 hrs and I'm curious who might attend.

I'm still working on some kinks in the relationship between my platoon sergeant and me. I think there will always be some strain and disagreement on how things are done. I've got some of my own opinions and he has his. This morning during the last stretch of a 4-mile PT run, I ran to the front of the formation, and I asked SFC White where he planned to stop the formation. His response to me was curt: "wherever I feel like it, sir." After PT, I said to him that "I respect that he runs the formation, but I'm at least entitled to a less sarcastic remark." He agreed that I was correct in that assumption. I think I need to continue to speak up with SFC White when he speaks to me like I'm an enlisted man. I think if I do so, respectfully, he will see that I am a good man and I've earned it.

17 August 2003. KAF.

Sundays, at least for now, are days off here. Not to say that we accomplish less on a Sunday than we do on another day since we are really getting all used up here without any of our equipment, but at least there's no scheduled training on Sundays, and no early morning formations. On Friday, I had a very unique Shabbat service in Afghanistan. I met up with three other participants in the congregation and we had a Shabbat prayer meeting like I've never had before. I've volunteered to lead the service which I did mostly in English. We said the Amida, Adona-Lom, La-Cha Dodi, and some other blessings over a zippo lighter. Two of those in attendance were Messianic Jews. The other soldier was a Blackhawk pilot named CW2 Levin. Afterwords, we all went to the DFAC for a Shabbat dinner of barbecue ribs.

So, I completed my first 10 days on KAF and it feels like it's been months. The weirdest thing is that I couldn't wait to leave Ft Drum, leave the Apache Troop monotony, and the formations, and the PT, but now I feel like, "holy shit, am I really here for six months . . . what the hell did I get in to?" Back at Drum, even though the work got monotonous, at least there was always something

tangible for me to look forward to . . . like seeing friends or family on weekends, or going out to dinner, or having some beers with my buddies, or just relaxing in my apartment with some Taco Bell and a movie. There were always those distractions to make me keep my sanity. But there are no distractions here. So far, the highlight of my day is eating a good meal in the DFAC. There's just too much time to ponder and read letters and count the days on the calendar. Of course, there is the looming expectation of a mission outside the wire any day now to break up the monotony and make the time go faster but then again, there is a catch there: people might be trying to kill us in the process, or there will be mines on the road to blow us up into small pieces. I guess I should feel lucky that I'm getting bored here in a tent when I could be in active combat. But isn't that why I came here . . . to be in combat? No, I didn't come here looking to get shot at. . . . I did come here to accomplish a mission and if I can do that without killing anyone or getting any of my men killed, then I feel like I've done my job, right. I just have to keep remembering the big picture and keep the long-term rewards on my mind for when I return.

This place is not so bad. It could be a lot worse. The first month of adjustment has got to be the hardest. Tomorrow, I'm going into Kandahar city with some Civil Affairs patrol and psychological operations unit. I am not exactly sure what I'm doing, but I'm excited to converse with the locals and see the city. I guess what it comes down to is that Army life is monotonous at times, and soldiers have complained about the dullness of camp life for hundreds of years. We will get through this together.

It was about one year ago today that I finished my tank gunnery training at Fort Knox. The hardest part of Armor OBC was behind me. It was a good time at Fort Knox, in retrospect. Strange . . . that I recall those days so fondly now. I guess maybe one day I'll reminisce fondly about my time in Afghanistan?

23 August 2003. 2000 hrs. Kandahar Airfield.

Another week has passed by here in Kandahar and rather quickly at that. I guess it's because I have been pretty busy lately. On Monday, I traveled out to a few villages south of Kandahar City with a team of civil affair patrols and psychological operations soldiers. The depravity and poor state of conditions in these villages are beyond anything I've ever seen in person. I listened as we used interpreters to help "win the hearts and minds" of the local villagers and village leadership.

On Wednesday morning I took a Blackhawk helicopter out to an Army Special Forces base near Spin Boldak along the Pakistani border. It was the first

time some of my NCOs got outside the wire, so I'm glad we all went. But it was really nothing more than a joyride yesterday and a chance to see the desert terrain. Yesterday, Bravo Section completed its first real mission, which was to provide security escort for a scout platoon and medics to a rifle range about 7 km away. Nothing eventful, but we had to beg for a Humvee to complete the mission, which was borrowed from an MP unit and an anti-tank platoon.

This morning I jumped in a Psychological Operations patrol Humvee and rode out in a convoy led by the Romanians in their BTRs, to set up a traffic control checkpoint between Highway 4 and Spin Boldak. It took us almost 3 hours to travel 30 miles, which was only one way. The novelty of seeing the countryside is beginning to wear off. But I still do enjoy conversing with the locals through my interpreters. I'm starting to get a sense of the utter duality of the common Afghan citizen: stuck once again, between a foreign army and a localized insurgency. I spoke to dozens of them at my traffic checkpoint today and most were agreeable and obliging, but I get a sense, when they go back into their cars and keep driving, that with just a small bit of persuasion they would turn violent against us without warning.

Things are picking up towards operations in the Sami Gowhr mountains, east of here and nearer the Pakistan border. Operation Mountain Viper is the big mission kicking off soon in early September. We're still not sure how they will use us as a cavalry platoon in the fight upcoming. And it's quite possible they will air assault our trucks into the AO rather than allow us to convoy in. At least we finally have some trucks. We just received three new up-armored Humvees. *Our* trucks that we trained on back at Fort Drum are still stuck in customs/processing somewhere in Qatar, but should be here any day. Those trucks, however, are all "light-skin" Humvees. We're now being told we need to get ready to fill the light-skin trucks with sandbags under our feet to withstand the blast of an IED. Why we can't get all up-armored trucks is another story. Probably all headed to Iraq right now which seems to be our country's focus at the moment.

I just passed my five-year anniversary since starting college and Army ROTC. It's been five years since I first donned the battle dress uniform, and now I practically live in it.

End of unedited excerpt