



# Afghanistan

Alone & Unafraid

Photographs by LtCol David A. Benhoff















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## Alone & Unafraid

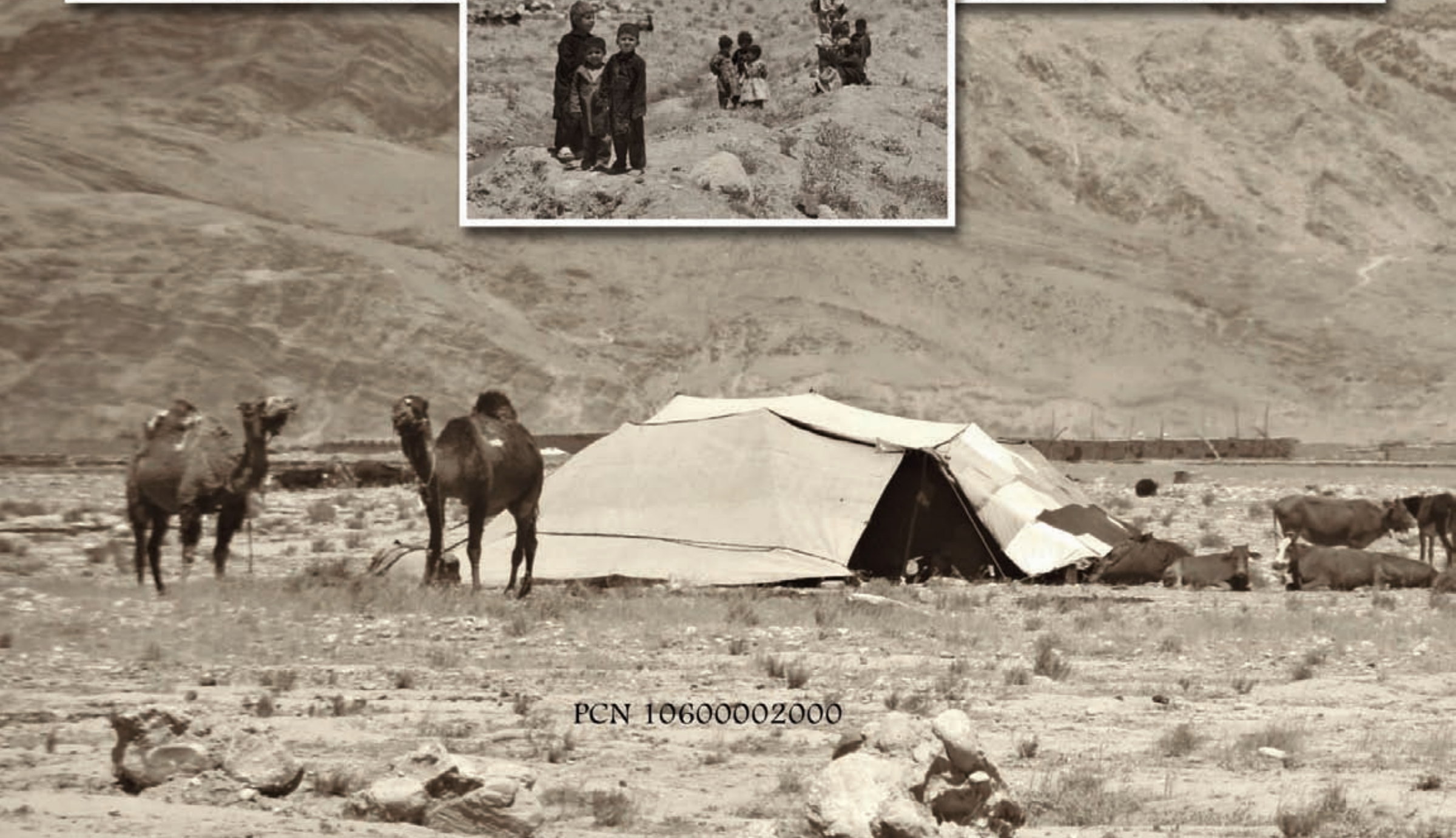


Photographs by  
Lieutenant Colonel David A. Benhoff

Layout & Design by  
Vincent J. Martinez

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# Foreword

It is clear from the first pages of *Alone and Unafraid* that Lieutenant Colonel David A. Benhoff uses a camera like an artist uses pastels. With this book on Afghanistan, he reprises the success he met with in the production of his previous work on Iraq, *Among the People*, published by Marine Corps University Press in 2008. The current book is not intended to cover all aspects of the conflict in Afghanistan. Instead, we had asked Lieutenant Colonel Benhoff to use his skill with the camera to capture the interaction of Marines with the Afghan people and the Afghan National Army (ANA). I am pleased to report that he responded brilliantly to this task.

This book vividly records the stark topography of Afghanistan. The land is both magnificent and forlornly threatening. The photographs show just how closely the land and the people of Afghanistan are to being one with each other. The images literally jump out at you and give the impression that the people of Afghanistan are long-suffering and stoic, but also cautiously optimistic about their future.

The book also touches on the interaction of U.S. Marines with the Afghan people and includes some focus on the Marine advisory mission to assist the Afghan National Army (ANA) in becoming a self-sufficient military force. As the photographs demonstrate, this particular mission continues to be a difficult task. Nonetheless, like their "cautiously optimistic" counterparts in the ANA, it is also evident that the Marines believe that their mission will ultimately succeed in Afghanistan and the day will eventually come when U.S. forces can leave the region and Afghanistan will be free from the terror of a violent enemy.

Lieutenant Colonel Benhoff is an intelligence officer and deployed to Afghanistan while serving with us as a field historian for the Marine Corps History Division. I commend his work on this project, and also that of Mr. Vincent J. Martinez, who presented the images to great effect in his design of the book.

*C.P. Neimeyer*

Dr. Charles P. Neimeyer  
Director of Marine Corps History









The background of the page is a photograph of a dry, rocky landscape. In the foreground on the left, the rear half of a dark-colored donkey with a red harness is visible. The ground is sandy and covered with small, light-colored rocks. The middle ground shows a vast, flat, arid plain with sparse, dry vegetation. In the far distance, a low, dark horizon line separates the land from a clear, pale blue sky.

# Preface

“Alone and unafraid” was a phrase heard numerous times while with the Marine advisors in Afghanistan—and what an apt description. While there has been much in the press regarding Marine combat units in Helmand Province and their mission in the south, little has been devoted to the Marines in this unique role as advisors in the northeast, along the Pakistan border. And unique is hardly an adequate descriptor. These Marines—spread thin over terrain difficult to describe in words for its raw, rugged, almost alien form—are operating not as members of units, but in groups as small as two, even one.

Their brothers-in-arms surrounding them—and on whom they depend—are not fellow Marines, but Afghans. Their living conditions are Spartan at best (as one young Marine described life on a remote observation post, “there weren’t many amenities there, such as a shower”). These living and operating conditions require Marines to exercise leadership normally far above their grade in a conventional environment. And contrary to what some might expect, who are unfamiliar with the warrior that is the United States Marine, they absolutely thrive upon it. They relish the opportunity to prove themselves—and to make a difference. As Lance Corporal Bandon J. Beardsley, who spent a few months as the sole Marine on a remote combat outpost with a small Afghan National Army (ANA) contingent put it, “This is probably the best experience in the Marine Corps, in my opinion, because you really feel like you are making a difference when you work with the ANA”.

What they experience is more than this, more than the hardship and danger, and more than simply training and mentoring the ANA. It is also the intangibles that come with living and operating alongside Afghan soldiers for extended periods of time and through adversity, including multiple periods of intense combat. It is the personal, human side of things: mutual respect, personal relationships, bonding—even deep and lasting friendships.

And it is seeing and interacting with the Afghan people, caught in the middle. The people, as relayed by many an interviewee, who are tired of fighting and want to be left to work their fields, tend their flocks, and raise their children.

This mission, and its many-faceted experience, is certainly worthy of acknowledgment, remembrance, and tribute. This volume attempts to do just that—to tell the story of this inimitable mission, and more importantly, the Marines that conducted it, alone and unafraid.



# Introduction

They come from a variety of fields—communications, artillery, counterintelligence, supply, and others. These are the Marines that make up the Embedded Training Teams (ETTs), advisors that live, train, advise, fight—and die—with Afghan military units. In the particular area of operations depicted in this book during 2009, teams were composed of U.S. Marines, U.S. Army National Guard, or coalition partners of French and Latvians (known as Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLTs), vice ETTs. Marine teams were composed of 21 personnel who had been through specialized training at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms and Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center at Bridgeport, California. Their command element within Afghanistan was the Regional Corps Advisory Command-Central (RCAC-C), headed by a Marine Corps colonel, located at Pol-e-Charki near Kabul with the headquarters of the 201st Corps, Afghan National Army—the unit to which it provided support. Its area of operations covered 11 provinces, extending from west of Kabul east to the Pakistan border, and included some incredibly rugged terrain and remote villages where Marines at times were thought to be Russians—the locals not having learned that the Soviets left decades before.

While their mission was not to take the lead, they did incur significant risk, as the teams spread their personnel throughout various, remote forward operating bases, combat outposts, and observation posts—and actively participated in combat operations. It is a dangerous mission, sadly exemplified by the loss of seven advisors, five U.S. Army National Guard and two Latvians, during the short two months the author was there.









While this is a photographic essay of Marine Embedded Training Teams in Afghanistan, the viewer will note rather quickly that there are few photographs of Marines. This is for two reasons: the ratio of Marines to Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers is very low, and, more importantly, the Marines' emphasis on allowing the ANA to take the lead while they remain in the background providing advice and mentoring when needed—the goal being the ANA become self-sufficient. Thus, when one does not see Marines in many of the photographs, that is as it should be, and illustrates that they are doing their job by allowing the ANA to do theirs.

Finally, the story is told in two ways—through images and through excerpts from oral interviews conducted during the same time frame. The photographs cover three types of activities: (1) humanitarian assistance activities with the local populace, (2) ANA training in garrison, and (3) an ANA brigade-level cordon and search operation initiated by an air assault. The excerpts give further detail on life as an ETT in their own words and provide a glimpse of many more activities and over a much longer span of time. Taking the two in conjunction, it is hoped the viewer will not only get a fairly comprehensive understanding of the unique mission—it is frustrations, dangers, and difficulties, as well as positives—but also “see” for themselves some of the terrain, culture, and, perhaps most importantly, the people of Afghanistan. At the end of the day, it is them for which this war is being fought—a battle for the very soul of Afghanistan.

Lieutenant Colonel David A. Benhoff  
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve











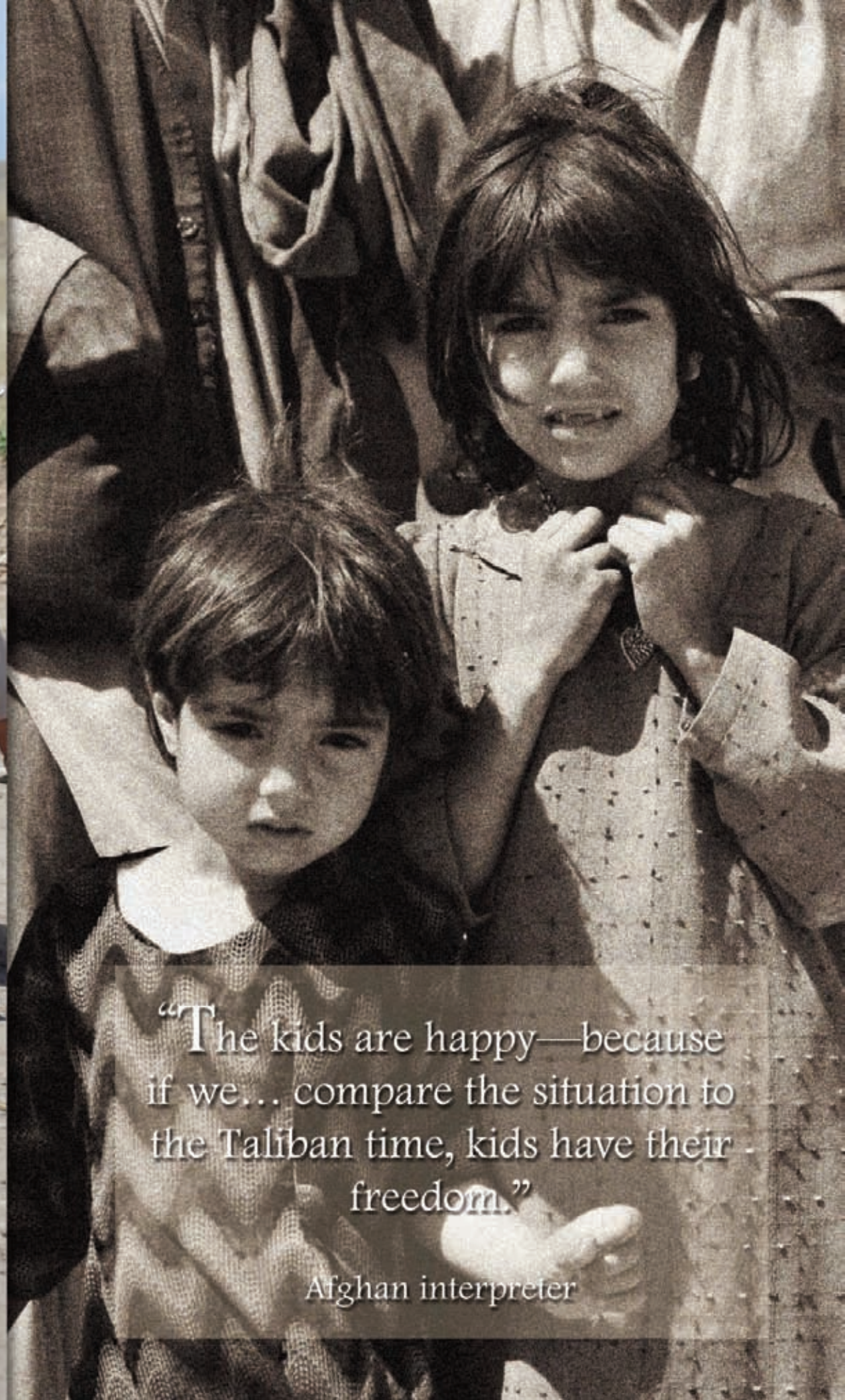












“The kids are happy—because if we... compare the situation to the Taliban time, kids have their freedom.”

Afghan interpreter









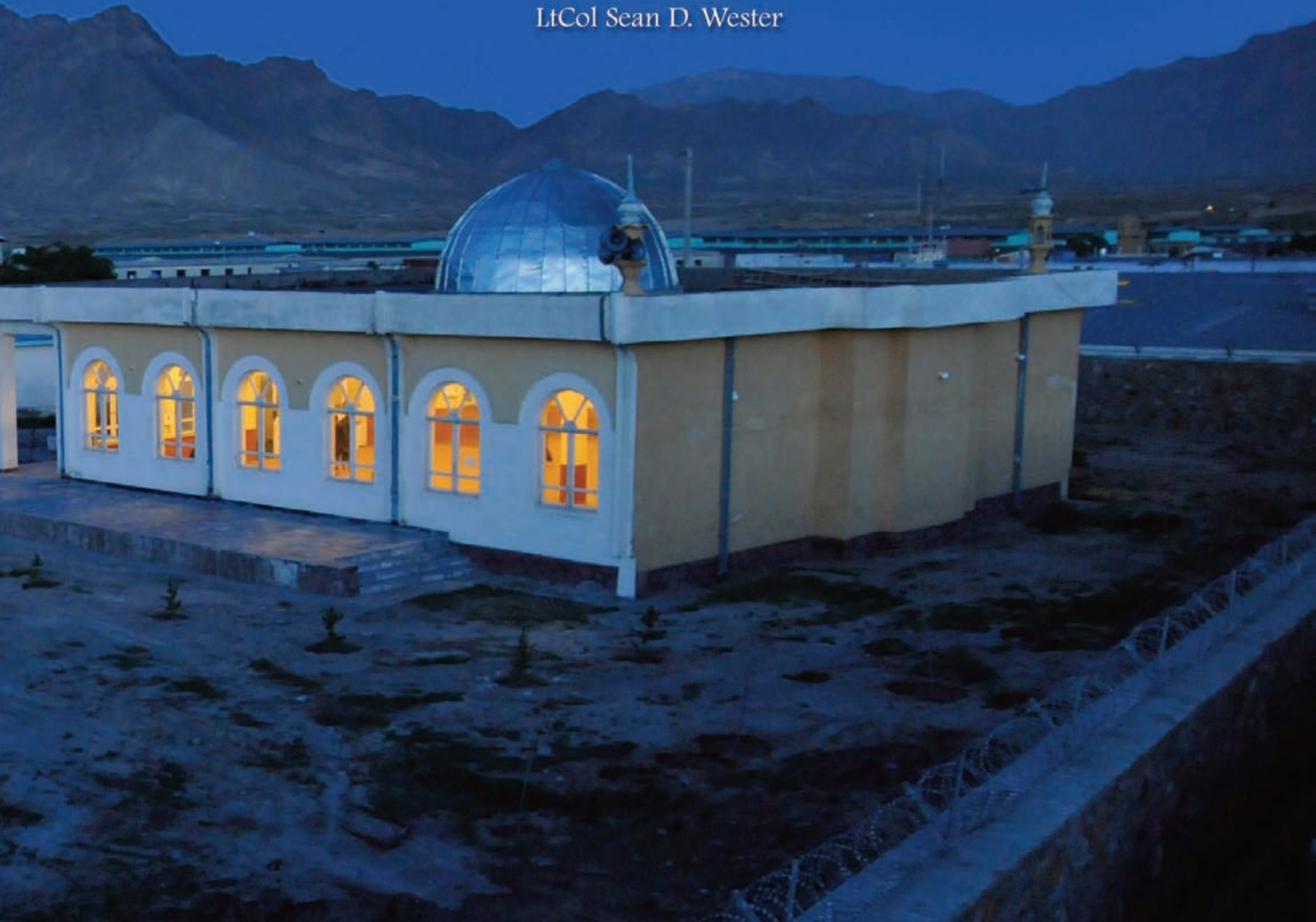






“What I’ve seen, these are people that are proud of their history, they’re proud of their culture. They know they have a place.”

LtCol Sean D. Wester











“I think earning the trust, making the people believers, we’re a long ways from that, because of the hardship that they’ve gone through the past 30 years. It’s going to take some time.”

LtCol Eleazar O. Sanchez





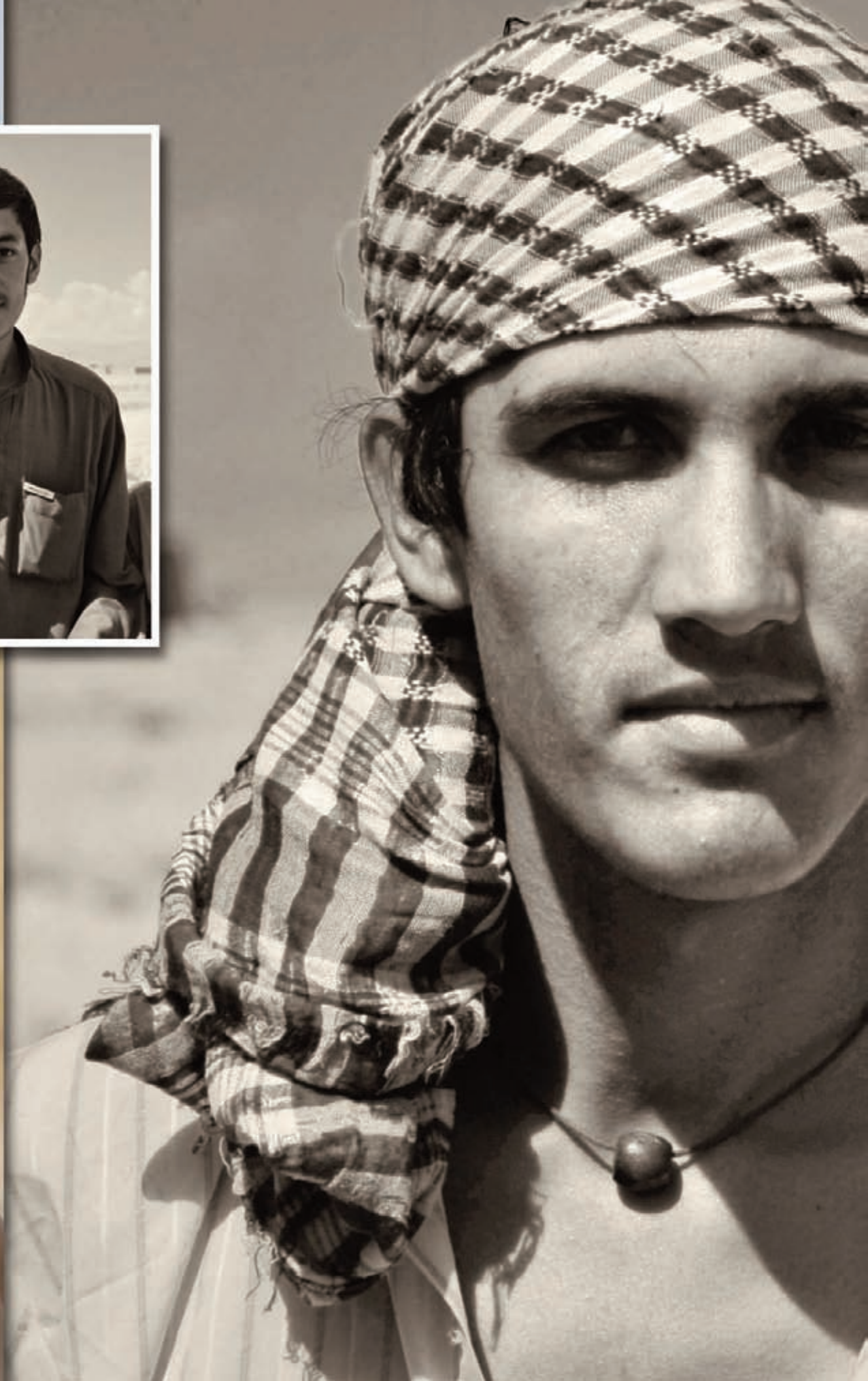
























4



4



3A



3



2A















*“You just walk through mountains forever and all of a sudden there’ll be a little village in the middle of nowhere—no roads, no nothing.”*

*SSgt Chris E. Unger*
















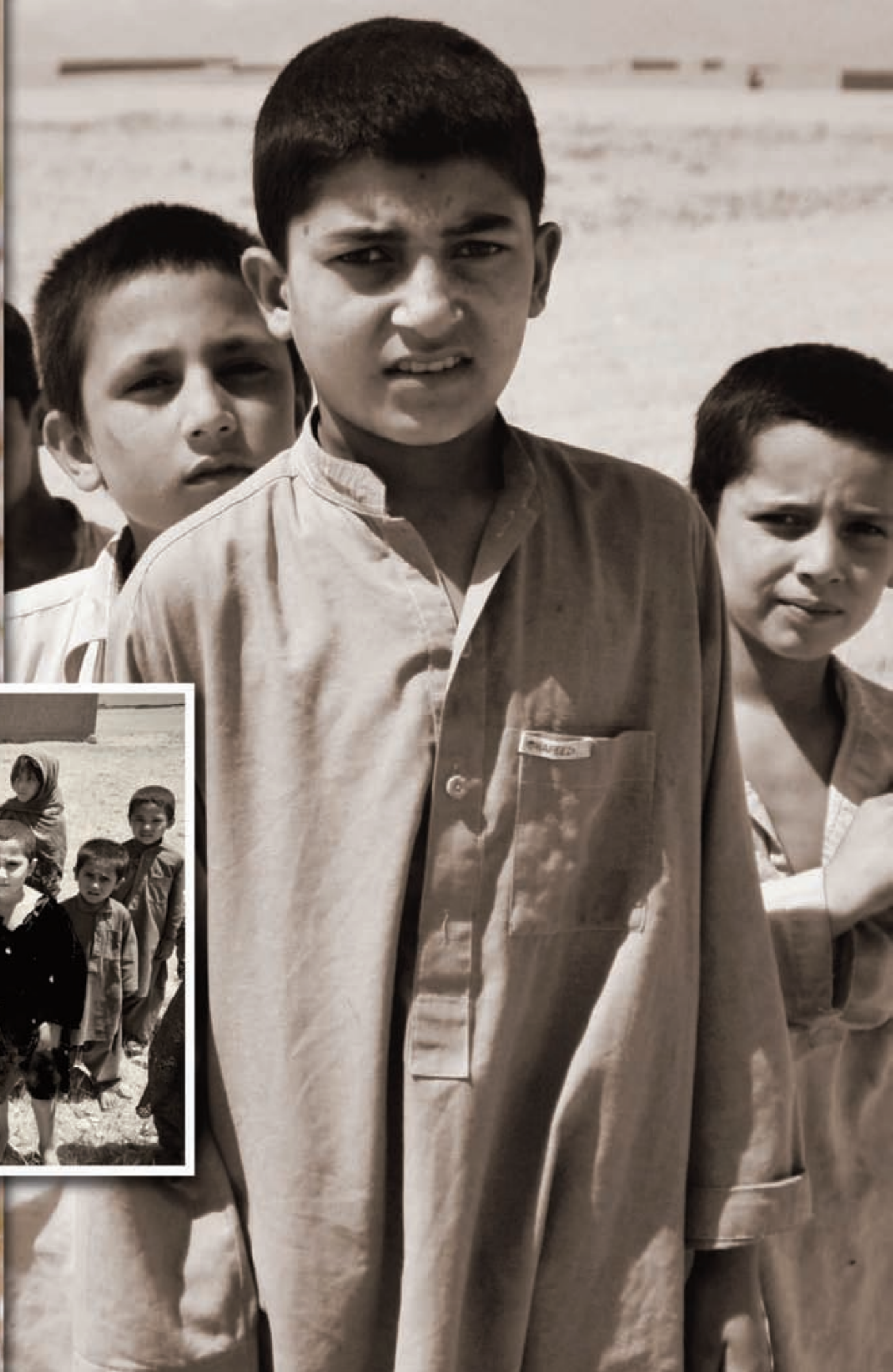


A photograph of three young women, likely of Afghan descent, wearing headscarves. The woman on the left wears a white headscarf and a light blue garment. The woman in the center wears a white headscarf and a white garment. The woman on the right wears a teal headscarf and a teal garment. They are all looking directly at the camera with serious expressions. The background is a blurred, dry, yellowish-brown landscape.

*“The people don’t really know peace, peace of mind, and freedom. You would like to think that once they get a taste of liberty and freedom that they won’t want to let go of it.”*

*LtCol Ted A. Adams*























“I have seen a lot of positive changes, but there is a lot to be done. The public wants jobs, they want security, and they want to be able to feed their children.”

Mirwais Yalda (Interpreter)
























“They want water, they want food, they want shelter and clothing, sort of Maslow’s hierarchy of basic needs. So when we talk about winning the hearts and minds of the people, we have to think about filling their stomachs first, because that’s what they care about.”

LT David Johnson, USN







“If I take anything from Afghanistan, it will be  
appreciate what you have.”

GySgt Micheal A. Harris














































“It’s been a really good experience. This is probably the best experience in the Marine Corps. You are making a difference when you work with the ANA, making them able to do their job, helping them out, because they are a new army—relatively new army.”

LCpl Brandon J. Beardsley


















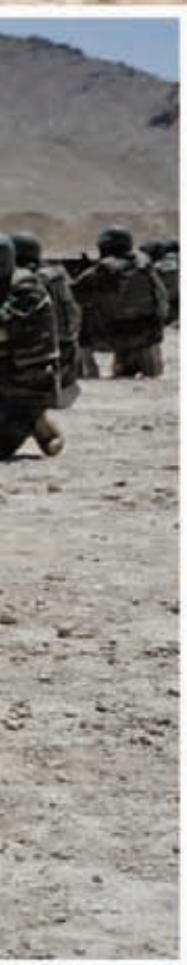
“We just got M16s in, and they (ANA) were all over it. Everybody wanted to break the weapon down. Everybody wanted to sight in with the weapon.”

GySgt Micheal A. Harris














“They’re very, very proud, so if I have a group of soldiers, like when I do the M16 training, I normally do it five at a time. I kind of use that to my advantage, because you get a better outcome. It’s because it’s a competition now.”

SSgt Chris E. Unger















“These guys have been fighting forever. I’m not gonna teach this guy how to pull a trigger. I’m not gonna teach him how to fight. Now, I can teach him patrols and teach him mission planning. Teach him how to get supplies, how to feed his guys, how to get ammunition and weapons.”

MSgt Thomas W. Hatcher













“The ANA are fearless fighters. They will fight. They are not afraid to fight. They’re not afraid to die.”

SSgt Chris E. Unger













“We’re not trying to make them  
Marines. We’re trying to get them  
to win the war.”

CWO2 Eric W. Hall


















“As long as you treat them with respect—talk to them, don’t talk to them like you’re better than them—just maintain a decent relationship... once you get that rapport, you can make progress in leaps and bounds.”

LCpl Brandon J. Beardsley





“My biggest hope would be that they’re [ANA] steadily learning so when we leave and the next ETT steps in, they’re just a little bit closer... where they’re running their kandak (battalion) on their own, without U.S. supervision.”

GySgt Micheal A. Harris














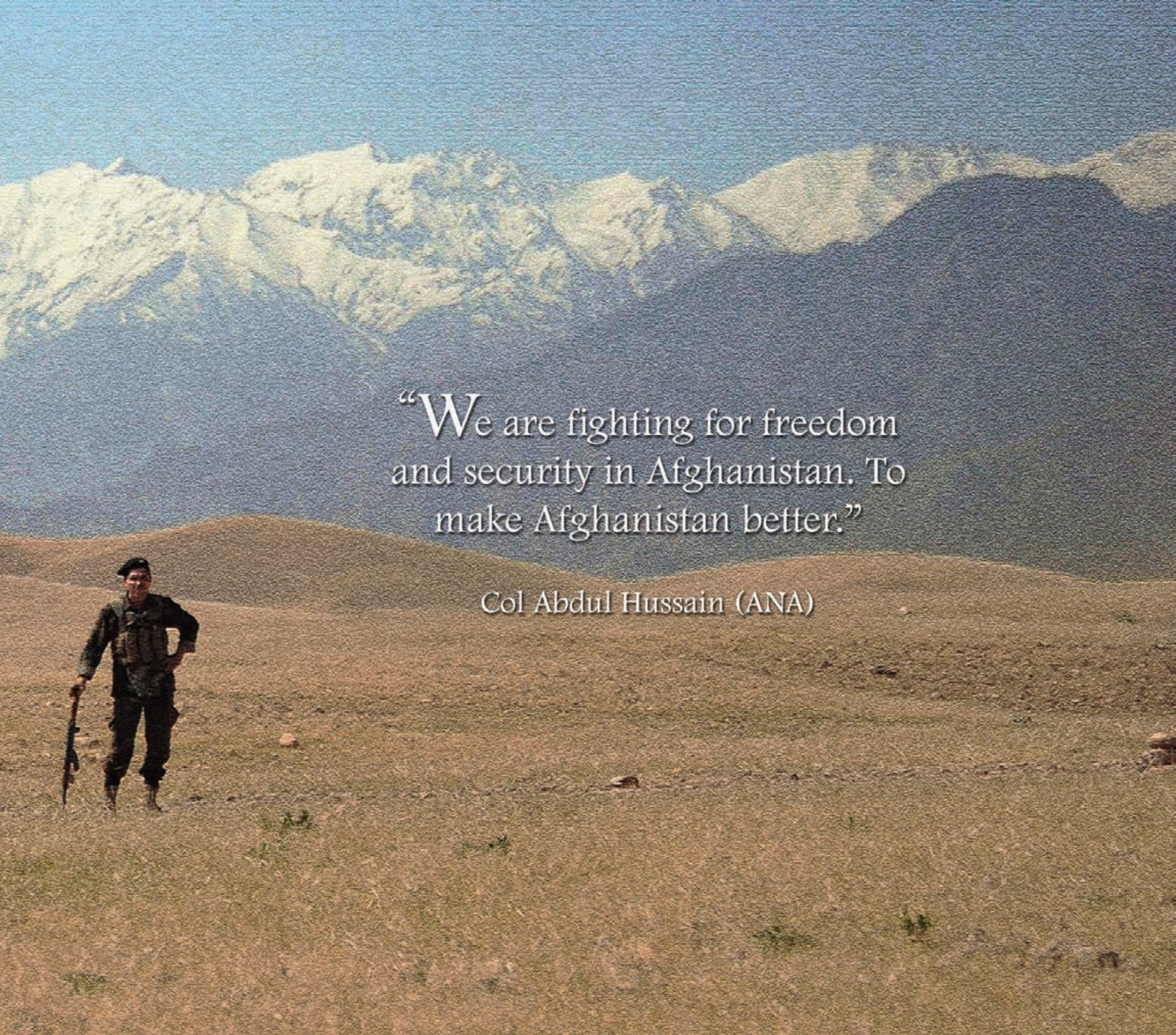
“When we got there [the village], they offered us chai, they gave us food, and stuff like that. The ANA sergeant in charge sat down, talked to the family, and let them know that they’re here to protect them, keep them safe. He’s there for the people.”

LCpl Brandon J. Beardsley








A full-page photograph of a soldier in a desert landscape. The soldier, wearing a beret and tactical gear, stands on the left side of the frame, holding a rifle. The background features rolling brown hills and a range of large, rugged mountains with significant snow cover under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“We are fighting for freedom  
and security in Afghanistan. To  
make Afghanistan better.”

Col Abdul Hussain (ANA)



A photograph of two soldiers in camouflage uniforms and helmets standing in a field of tall, dry grass. The soldier on the left is seen from the back, wearing a large backpack. The soldier on the right is facing forward, smiling, and holding a rifle. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky. Another soldier is visible in the distance on the right.

“What an incredibly diverse, phenomenal group of guys. I couldn’t lump enough praise on these guys, because they have stayed close through it all. They support each other. They would do anything for each other.”

LtCol Ted A. Adams









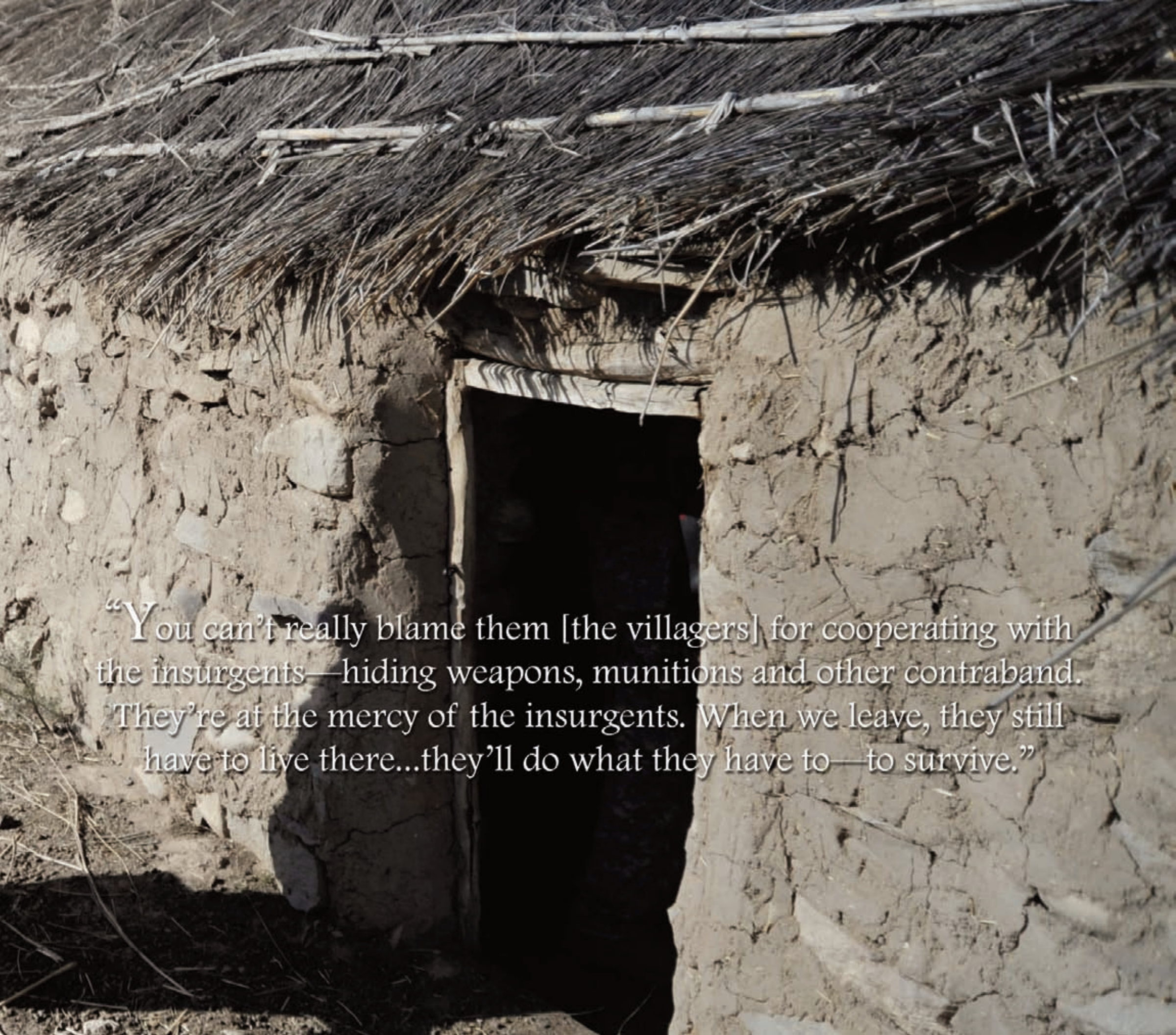












“You can’t really blame them [the villagers] for cooperating with the insurgents—hiding weapons, munitions and other contraband. They’re at the mercy of the insurgents. When we leave, they still have to live there...they’ll do what they have to—to survive.”





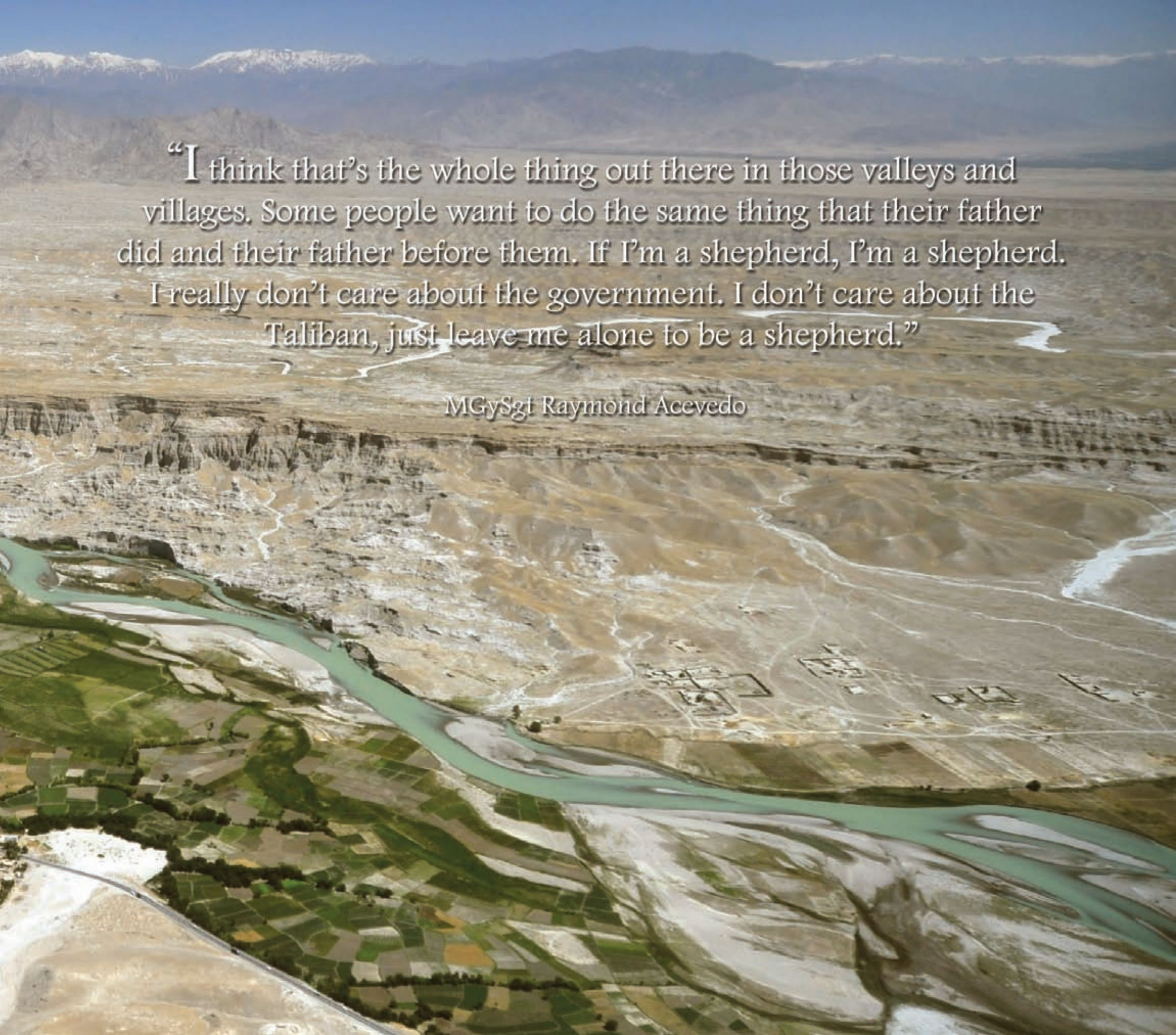










An aerial photograph of a wide, arid river valley. A large, winding river with a milky, sediment-laden appearance flows through the center of the frame. The valley floor is a mix of light brown sand and silt, with some patches of green vegetation and small, isolated buildings. In the background, a range of rugged mountains stretches across the horizon under a clear blue sky. The overall scene conveys a sense of vastness and isolation.

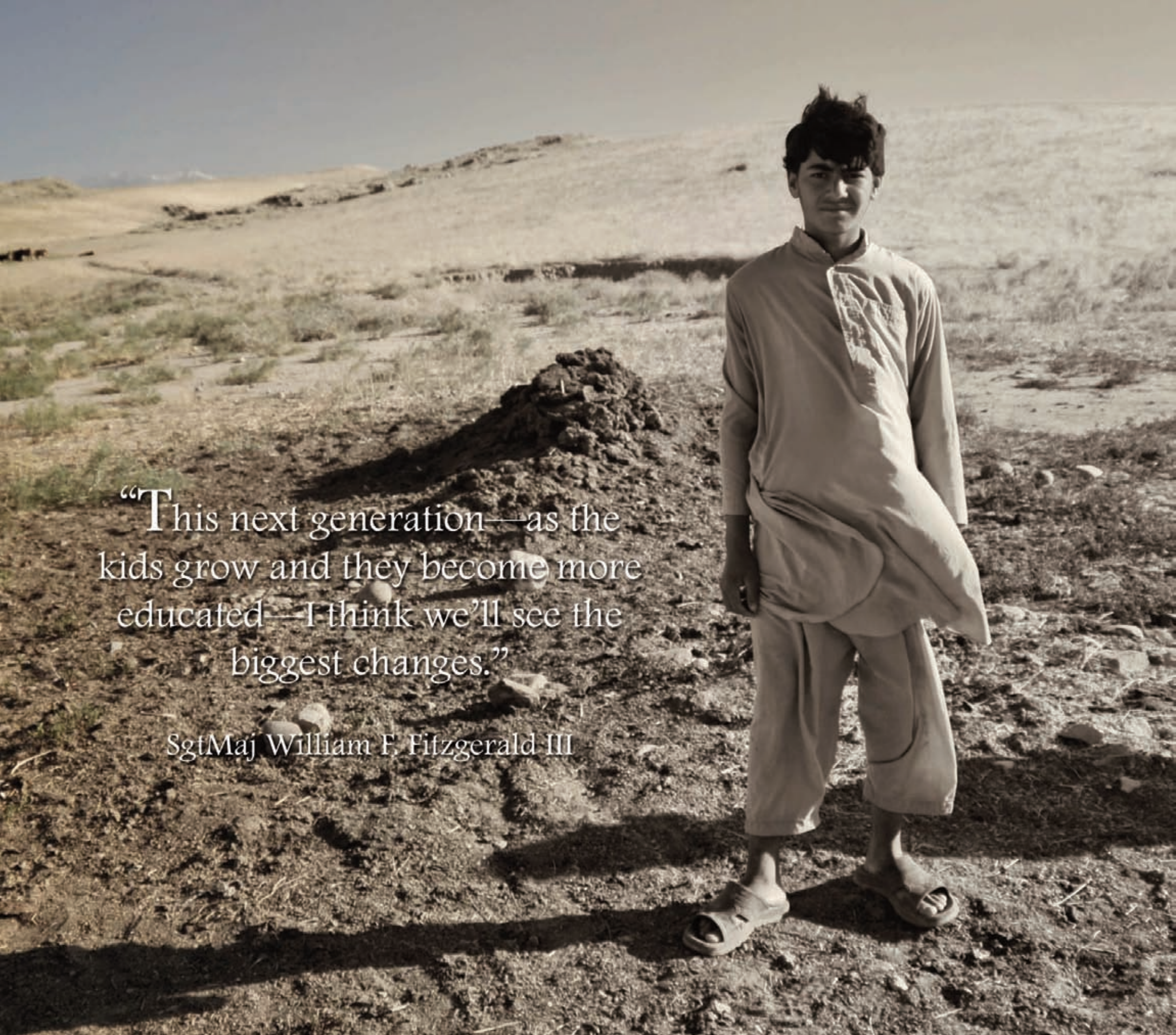
“I think that’s the whole thing out there in those valleys and villages. Some people want to do the same thing that their father did and their father before them. If I’m a shepherd, I’m a shepherd. I really don’t care about the government. I don’t care about the Taliban, just leave me alone to be a shepherd.”

MGySgt Raymond Acevedo









“This next generation—as the kids grow and they become more educated—I think we’ll see the biggest changes.”

SgtMaj William F. Fitzgerald III













“It was unusual to see women beyond adolescence out in public because of cultural restrictions and when you did, they were fully covered—often in bright, blue burkhas.”















“Over and over, I heard from elders and people—they’re tired of fighting. They are tired of it. They want something different. They don’t always know how to get that different, but they know that the fighting has gone on, that it’s continuation is no good for them, their children or their grandchildren.”

LtCol Sean D. Wester

















# About the Author

Lieutenant Colonel David A. Benhoff, United States Marine Corps Reserve, is a field historian with the Marine Corps History Division, Marine Corps University. In 2005, he deployed to Iraq to conduct and record oral history interviews with Marines, and collect historically relevant documents and artifacts. Drawing on his personal interest in photography, he also visually captured the experiences of both Marines and Iraqis as he traveled, and produced *Among the People: U.S. Marines in Iraq* upon his return. This volume, a photographic essay, was recognized by the *Library Journal* as one of the Best Notable Government Documents for 2008.

Following his deployment to Iraq he has held various billets within the Marine Corps History Division, while also continuing to fulfill the role as field historian—deploying to Africa and Asia to document Marine Corps activities. The fruits of his latest deployment, to Afghanistan in the spring of 2009, are contained herein. Once again, in addition to his digital recorder and laptop, he took along his own personal camera to visually document what he observed during his travels.

Lieutenant Colonel Benhoff holds a Masters of Education from Lynchburg College and a Bachelors of Arts in History from the Virginia Military Institute. He and his wife, Jennifer, live in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia.



This book is dedicated to the people of Afghanistan, who live with the harsh, treacherous, and dangerous environment of day-to-day living, especially the children.











