

BEYOND BULLETS



A PHOTO
JOURNAL OF
AFGHANISTAN

BY RAFAL GERSZAK
WITH DAWN HUNTER





FOREWORD

"Ding!" It looks like such an inoffensive word. Four letters, one syllable, impossible to speak without a sing-song tone, an inflection point for a child's story. Amazing how our words capture so little of what happens in Afghanistan. "Ding" hardly describes the sound of a bullet fired from a Kalashnikov rifle narrowly missing you, striking metal with a high note so pure that it would seem musical in another context. "Ding! ding! ding! ding!" A terrifying succession of notes. Those are the words Rafal Gerszak uses to describe the sound of gunfire raking his vehicle during an ambush. For me, his writing evokes all the intensity of battle, because we have shared many of the same experiences. I've also listened to the ping of bullets off armour near my head, also heard a bullet smack a thick window in front of my nose, also leapt out of bed after the impact of a rocket nearby. Like him, too, I sense that language fails when we talk about war. We cannot tell you about the full experience, because nothing quite says it. "The smells, the sounds, the chaos—it's impossible to describe," he writes, and unfortunately he is correct. I've just finished writing a book of my own, about travels in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2009, and often felt despair at the inadequacy of my words.

Photography has always been a better medium for documenting war, and Rafal's powerful images convey things that do not fit comfortably into a paragraph. The man painting

a white bird onto the raw concrete bulk of a blast wall reminds me of all the times Afghans eked a little beauty out of their harsh surroundings: the rifles decorated with fake flowers, the trucks painted with garden scenes as they rumbled through empty desert. You do not need to feel the dry furnace of Afghan summer to appreciate how a boy yearns for water in the moment before he dives into a pool. You don't need a writer like me to tell you the story of a woman's survival—her suffering, her escapes—when you see the decades of worry on her face. Many other photographers have aimed their cameras at identical scenes; I've taken thousands of my own snapshots in similar places, but somehow none of my images show Afghanistan's magic. I'm not sure how he did it, but Rafal manages to distill some of that essence with his lens. His photos reveal a country in motion, off-balance, always reeling in aftermath or tense with anticipation of the next incident. My friends and relatives ask me what it's like in Afghanistan, and my summary is the same as Rafal's: "It's a mess." How can I elaborate? Maybe next time, I'll pull out a copy of this book and show them his photographs. They spell out the awful situation, with grace and simplicity.

Graeme Smith
The Globe and Mail
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I am a photojournalist who has worked with news agencies, media outlets, magazines, newspapers, websites, and galleries. For a long time I specialized in covering various topics at home through my photography. Then, in 2008, I moved to Afghanistan. At first, I tried to go to Afghanistan with the Canadian military—journalists can be embedded with a military unit, which means we live and travel with them. I was put on a waiting list and told it would take more than a year.

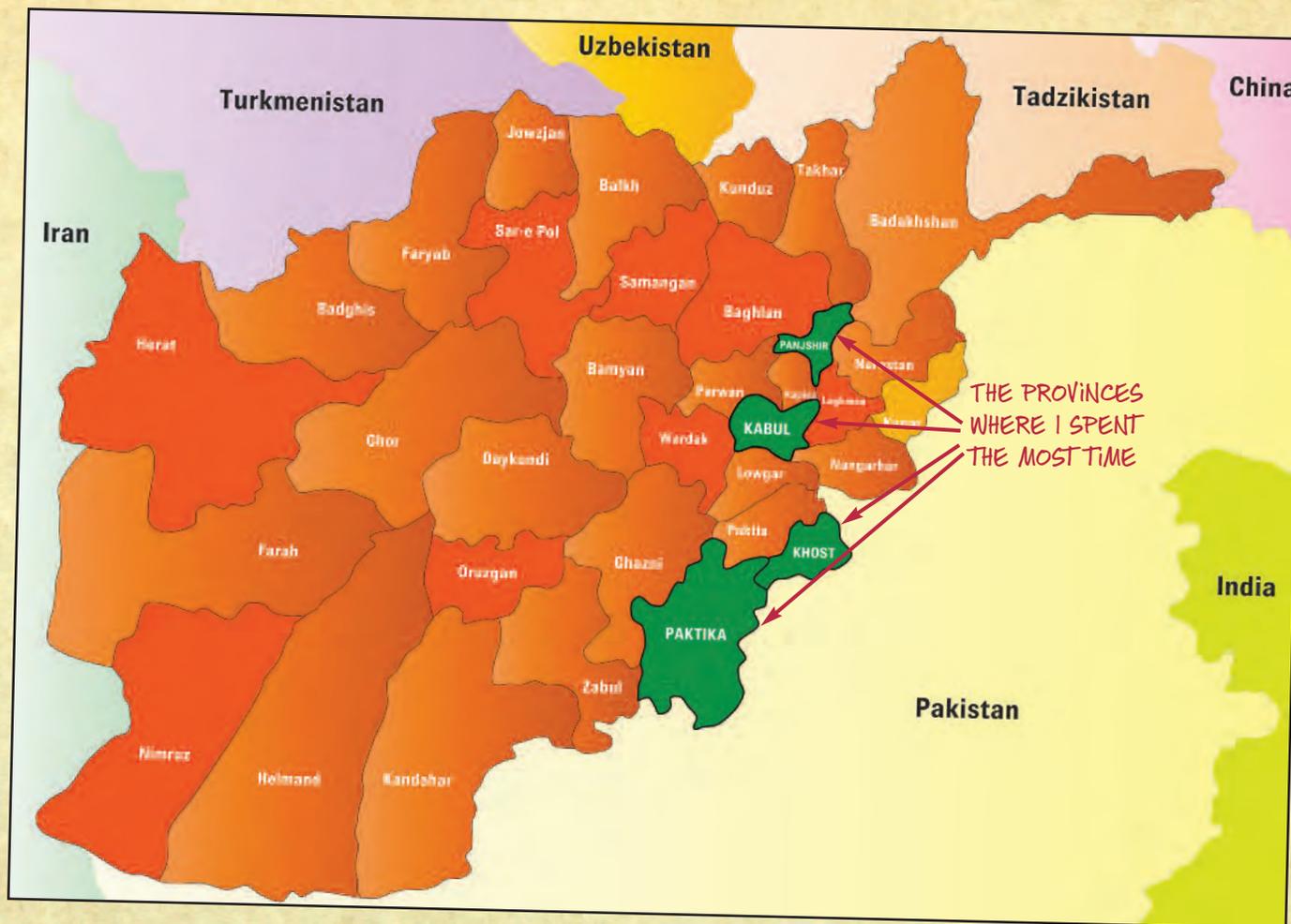
I got frustrated with waiting, so I looked for another way in. I'm Polish, so I thought about embedding with Polish troops, which at that time were under American command. I got in touch with the U.S. Army public affairs officer for Afghanistan. He sent me my paperwork, I applied, and three weeks later I received my approval letter.

Getting to Afghanistan, it turns out, was the easy part. The hard part was getting to the front lines. After weeks of being trapped on Bagram Air Base and Forward Operating Base Salerno, and hitting dead end after dead end, I went to the public affairs office again and begged them to get me out to where the combat operations were taking place. I couldn't take any more pictures of guys playing volleyball and barbecuing.

My persistence worked. I was sent out with an infantry platoon for a few weeks.

As soon as I got back to the base, I knew I wanted to extend my embed for several more months, so a few weeks later, I asked to spend a full deployment with these guys—the full fifteen months. They looked at me as though I were from another planet. “You want to spend fifteen months here? You know what that means, right? That’s a long time, and it’s even longer here.” I told them I understood, and finally, after mountains of paperwork, I was approved. A few months later, the deployment was cut to twelve months. In a way, I was relieved. Covering a war drains you.

Even after being embedded for a year, I couldn't help but feel that I



had still seen only one side of Afghanistan's story. Almost as soon as I got home, I decided to go back to cover the other side: civilian life.

And I keep going back. Afghanistan is a part of me now. I'll always find a way to return.

