



Ridin' Shotgun

Letter from
Afghanistan.
By Jeff Goodson

It's early December and I just realized that today is the deadline for the Spring 2007 edition of *RANGE* and, once again, I'm way behind the curve. As you know, I'm back in Afghanistan for a second tour and we've been, well, a little busy.

There's never any shortage of things to write about for *RANGE*. This time, though, while I started several pieces, my heart really wasn't into 'em. So instead I thought I'd give you and the *RANGE* readers back home a little picture of what's going on here with the war. Especially since a lot of the people over here are from the American West. I can tell you for a fact that they're thinking about their families and friends, and would like them to know a little more about the reality of life on the ground.

The war here is complicated. Two generals and an ambassador have told me in the last few weeks that it's as complex as any theater they've ever worked in. For starters, the terrain varies from the snowcapped peaks of the Hindu Kush to desert sand dunes as far as the eye can see. Many of the valleys and villages are virtually inaccessible, with no roads and no power. It's hard to describe just how remote some of these places are—as inaccessible as anything I've ever seen in Africa, Latin America, Asia or the Middle East.

The 25 million people who live here call themselves Afghans, but the country is really a polyglot of ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmenis, Pakistanis, Indians, Iranians, Turks and tribal warlords of every conceivable stripe. They're a medieval people, hardened by scratching a living from the terrain, and by centuries of war. They're also aggressive, audacious and experienced fighters, paid and equipped by religious fanatics from all over the Middle East.

Overlain on the crazy quilt of ethnic rivalry and religious war is a deep tradition of opium cultivation. Afghanistan produces 90 percent of the world's opium, and its sale fuels much of the Taliban insurgency that's now hammering the south and the east of the country. So in addition to fighting a complex ground war, we're also fighting a complex drug war that's

part of the traditional fabric of Afghan society.

The sons and daughters, husbands and wives, nephews and nieces of *RANGE* readers who are over here are doing a hell of a job. I've never seen a smarter, more dedicated, savvy, and harder-working bunch of people focused on a single objective. I spend a lot of time with a wide variety of Americans here—military and civilian, contractors and grantees, hard-core warriors and warm, fuzzy NGOs [non-governmental organizations]. The common denominator is their professionalism, their desire to be here, and their remarkably upbeat attitude. Oh yeah...and their ability to have fun, even under the most difficult circumstances. Think a 21st century version of M*A*S*H.

One of the biggest concerns over here—besides getting home in one piece—is the level of commitment for the war back home. Things were pretty subdued after last fall's U.S. elections. Most folks are here because they want to be, and there's a lot of concern that the new American Congress will starve the war effort for political or ideological reasons.

People are optimistic that we can drag Afghanistan into the 20th, if not the 21st, century, and neuter its ability to serve as a training ground and base of operations for our enemies. But you can't win a war on the cheap, especially this war. Realistically, it's going to take years of military and development assistance—roads, power, schools, clinics, business training, capacity building—to bring Afghanistan to the point where a boy who comes of age here wants to marry and raise a family, rather than blow himself up at the urging of his religious leaders.

Building that kid's future is our job. We need a sustained commitment from the American people, though, to do it.

CJ, that's it for now, except for one thing: we could use some copies of *RANGE* to spread around the facilities. There are a lot of folks over here from Texas and all over the American West, and I know they'd like to pick up a copy at the barbershop, or the coffeehouse, or just around camp. So if you've got some extra back issues—or, better, if some of your readers want to sponsor a subscription for the troops and civilians stationed here—please send them to me directly and I'll see that they get a good home.

Best as always, C.J. Keep up the good fight, and give all the *RANGE* readers over here something else to look forward to coming home to. ■

Jeff Goodson can have all the mags he wants.