



## Ridin' Shotgun

*No place for a cowboy.*

*By Jeff Goodson*

He didn't look like any rangeland expert that I'd ever met. He showed up a few years ago when I was working in Mongolia, wearing a suit and an Australian akubra hat. I knew right off that he wasn't Aussie; his accent was clearly upper Midwest.

He introduced himself with a big grin. "Hi. I'm Dan Miller." Said he was a range management specialist, and that he was there to help us.

We were designing a project at the time. The idea was to use forage maps to help nomadic herders survive the periodic droughts that rack Mongolia's Gobi region. It was pretty high-tech stuff. Historical rainfall data, satellite data, and soil and vegetation data are collected on a thousand ground sites and crunched together in a big computer model in College Station, Texas. When calibrated right, the computer would spit out color maps showing where the forage is going to be—30 to 60 days in the future. Needless to say, the Mongolian herders were keen on the idea.

The technology wasn't entirely new. We'd used it successfully in East Africa to predict where famine would break out, but we'd never applied it to forage forecasting and we had some serious questions to answer before financing the project. That's where Dan came in. I looked him over pretty carefully, and welcomed him aboard.

It turned out that Dan was indeed a rangeland guru—fact is, he'd been doing range work for 20 years in central Asia. The other team members who came over to help out were equally good. Dennis Sheehy, a World Bank range consultant, came in from Oregon. Jerry Stuth, the brains behind the technology, sent over a couple of his best field hands from Texas A&M. And we borrowed Sean Granville-Ross, a Kenyan expert on the business end of ranching, from an assignment in Kosovo.

The team went off to the Gobi and came back a few weeks later. By then they were convinced the project would work, and so were we.

I didn't see Dan Miller again for a few years. Then, last winter, I went to Afghanistan for a couple of months and found him living in a bunkered compound where the international development folks stay. Security was tighter than a tick. There wasn't much to do but work and at night—unless you wanted to risk getting kidnapped—you'd eat inside the compound at the Kabul Café and go home. "Home" was half of a 10-foot-by-40-foot shipping container with a cot, refrigerator, shower and TV.

Once a week on Thursday night, people would hang out at a bonfire, throw back a

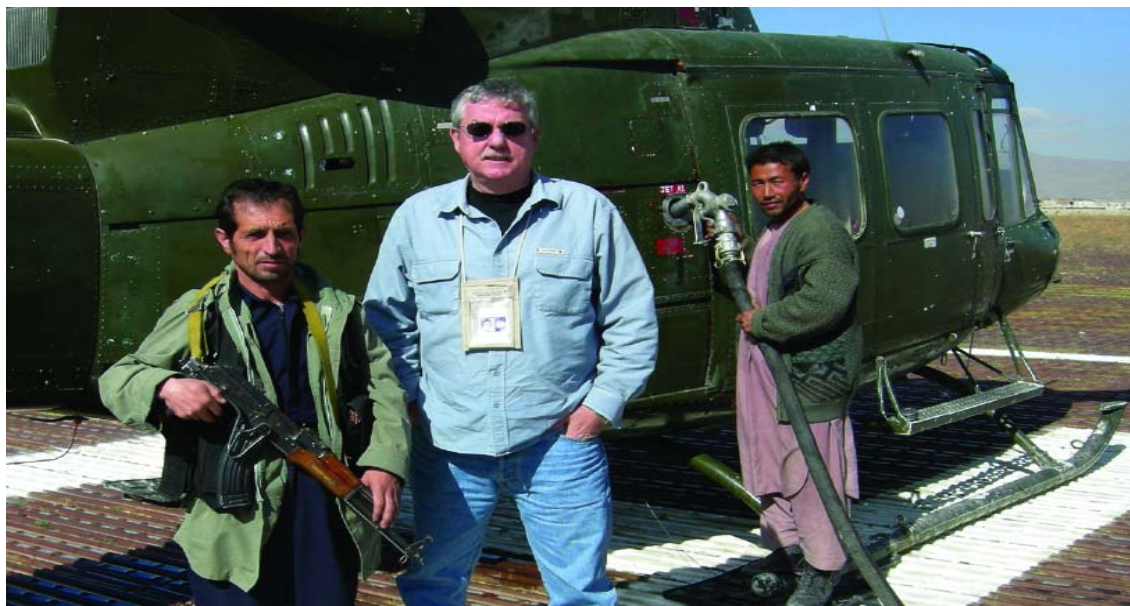
down towards the Wyoming border. He rode with cowboys from all over the country, a fair number of whom had worked those ranges since the 1940s. And he wrote about it in a way that made you feel like you were sleeping under the stars:

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"This is the kind of country that cowboys dream about: wide, open, rolling grasslands, that rise up out of the bluffs along the Bighorn River, and stretch across ponderosa pine-covered ridges to the Little Wolf Mountains in the east. It's some of the best grass country in North America. No wonder Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse

fought so hard to hang onto these hunting grounds as long as they could. It's country worth fighting over."

Life in Kabul compound wasn't all bad,



*Jeff Goodson, the big guy with the mustache, is flanked by Afghans, one with a Kalashnikov (an AK-47).*

few, and swap lies. It was a pretty interesting mix of folks to say the least, and around the campfire I learned a few things about Dan that I didn't know. I'd heard his stories about China and Tibet, of course; what I hadn't heard about was his cowboyin' days in the western United States.

Come to find out that Dan grew up on a dairy farm near Austin, Minn. He went off to Montana after high school to get an education in range management, and after college and a couple of years in Nepal he came back home to the big sky country. Most summers during the 1980s, he'd work cattle for the Padlock Ranch along Tullock Creek

but Dan had been there well over a year and living in a bunker is no place for a cowboy. Sometimes late at night, talk would turn to wide open spaces and Dan would get to reminiscing wistfully about his cowboyin' days back in Montana. The last time I saw him was in February, on his way out of Afghanistan for a little R&R. Said he was headin' for China, maybe southern Nepal. Wanted to do a little ridin', he said, before the snow melts and the range got slick. ■

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