

ON EDGE

Also by Albert Ashforth

The Rendition

For Review Purposes Only
Copyright 2016 Oceanview Publishing

ON EDGE

A NOVEL

ALBERT ASHFORTH

 **Oceanview Publishing**
Longboat Key, Florida

Copyright © 2016 Albert Ashforth

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, businesses, locales, or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-60809-200-0

Published in the United States of America by Oceanview Publishing
Longboat Key, Florida

www.oceanviewpub.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To M.A., C.A., and the three E.A.s

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In thanking the people who helped me with this book, I must begin with Patricia and Robert Gussin. I was the beneficiary of Pat and Bob's professionalism and encouragement at every stage of writing. I would like also to extend my thanks to the entire Oceanview team—Emily Baar, Lee Randall, Kirsten Barger and Lisa Daily for their assistance in answering my many questions and providing whatever help I needed.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to David Linzee, who provided help with an early version of this manuscript and always did so in an engaging and humorous manner. By keeping me up-to-date on the news, Maggie Emmons aided me enormously, particularly with my research into financial matters and the Kabul Bank. Patricia Allen through her detective work provided me with some invaluable information regarding life in Washington, D.C. At two critical points in the story, Bernard Whalen gave me the benefit of his professional expertise concerning police procedures. By assigning me to Kabul in Afghanistan, my boss, Paul Lovello, made it possible for me to write with authority about the particular topics covered in this book. Claudia Ashforth and I burned the midnight oil on a number of occasions, working on the manuscript and often on the chronology of events in the story.

A number of people provided helpful suggestions regarding particular events or insights into the book's characters. Thank you, Ruth Horn, Shelly Reuben, Chris Stothard and Elisabeth Ashforth.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Green on Blue

THERE IS NOTHING guaranteed to strike terror and fear in the heart of a soldier stationed in Afghanistan like the threat of a green-on-blue killing. Or as they are sometimes called, “insider attacks.”

A green-on-blue occurs when an Afghan soldier or policeman—in other words, someone who has gained the trust of the American military—turns his weapon on a NATO soldier.

Over a period of three years, from 2011 to 2014, there were over a hundred green-on-blues in Afghanistan. In one instance, two American advisers were shot in Afghanistan’s Ministry of the Interior, one of Kabul’s most heavily guarded buildings. In an especially unsettling instance, a killer got close enough to an American general visiting Kabul to kill the officer. The Taliban jubilantly took credit for this cowardly murder.

The difficulty in green-on-blue situations is that, short of reading the killer’s mind, there is no way to anticipate a green-on-blue. The perpetrators are usually Afghans who have worked closely with their victims, and there is no way to know in advance what they have in mind.

GLOSSARY

The following explanations might help to clarify situations and expressions in common use by military and civilian personnel stationed overseas.

ANA: Afghan National Army. The Army is divided into six combat corps, which are deployed throughout the country. The President of Afghanistan functions as Commander in Chief. The Army is subordinate to the Ministry of Defense.

ANP: Afghan National Police. The country's police force, which is subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior.

Ariana Hotel: in 2002, the CIA took over the Ariana, which is close to ISAF Headquarters and the presidential palace, and has since had various uses as a hotel for transient personnel, a military command post, and the CIA station in Kabul.

Askar: in Afghanistan, any Afghan, usually a soldier or policeman, who carries a weapon.

Billets: lodging designated for members of the military.

Bird Colonel or Full Bird: the insignia worn by a colonel is a silver eagle with a shield on its chest.

Burqa: a loose enveloping garment worn by many Muslim women in public. It covers the face and the body.

CID: the United States Army Criminal Investigation Command. The Command, which has investigative autonomy, investigates violations of military law within the U.S. Army.

Class A's: as of 2014, the Army's blue class A uniform replaced the traditional dress green.

CO: Commanding Officer.

COP: Combat Outpost. Small military installations established throughout Afghanistan as part of a campaign of counterinsurgency. COPs are often effective in dealing personally with the local population.

DI: a drill instructor.

FOB: Forward Operating Base. A military installation used to support tactical operations and usually secured by high walls, barbed wire, and towers. Most FOBs have airfields; some have dispensaries and other facilities.

Gator Alley: the main street of Camp Eggers, running north from the main gate, passing the PX and terminating at the Warrior Gym.

Green on Blue: insider attacks by Afghans, usually armed members of the Afghan military or the police, against coalition members. In many cases, the victims regarded their killers as friends and colleagues, and the attacks have often been carried out against people the killers have worked with. These attacks have led NATO to boost security measures by dismissing hundreds of ANA soldiers and ANP policemen and appointing so-called "guardian angels" to deter further attacks.

Haqqani Network: a terrorist group with close ties to the Taliban and headquartered in North Waziristan, from which it launches attacks on neighboring Afghanistan.

Hooch: in Vietnam a hooch was a hut with a thatched roof. In time, GIs began referring to their own quarters as "hooches." The term continues to be used, often to describe a soldier's billet.

Humvee: High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle. A vehicle designed originally to carry personnel and cargo behind the lines. After Somalia, enough armor was added to withstand small-arms fire. In Afghanistan, Humvees were effective for transportation, but after the insurgents began planting IEDs on roads, the vehicle was shown to be

vulnerable to rollovers, sometimes leaving occupants upside down and trapped inside the vehicle.

IED: an Improvised Explosive Device. These highly effective bombs are often made with easily available components such as fertilizer and diesel fuel. When vehicles pass over pressure plates, they close a circuit that triggers the explosion. Others can be set off remotely by a cell phone, which is connected to the power source, often a battery.

ISAF: the International Security Assistance Force was established by NATO with the aim of training Afghan security forces and assisting Afghanistan in rebuilding key government institutions.

Jarhead: a member of the United States Marine Corps. The term is based on the short haircuts worn by many Marines.

Kabul Bank: the bank, which was founded in 2004 to help pay government salaries, collapsed in 2010 with debts of 935 million dollars. About one-third of the lost money has been recovered. Twenty-two of the bank's officials have been found guilty of taking part in the fraud.

Leatherman: a versatile multi-tool favored by the military.

Leatherneck: a member of the United States Marine Corps. Until 1872, the Marine uniform had a high leather collar that distinguished Marines from the other service branches.

Light Colonel: lieutenant colonel. The term distinguishes a lieutenant colonel from a full colonel.

MI: commonly used phrase meaning Military Intelligence.

MP: Military Police.

MRE: Meal Ready to Eat. Rations for service members in combat or in other field conditions where food is unavailable. Each meal is contained in foil packaging and has roughly 1200 calories.

MRAP: Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle. MRAPs were rushed to Iraq and Afghanistan to replace Humvees, which were vulnerable to IEDs with heavy payloads. In 2007, Secretary of Defense Gates

announced that acquisition of MRAPs was the Department of Defense's highest priority. By 2012, the Pentagon had deployed 12,000 MRAPs for the two wars.

NCO: a noncommissioned officer, e.g., a sergeant.

NSC: National Security Council.

NVGs: Night Vision Goggles. Goggles that improve vision in the dark by using thermal imaging and other technology.

O Club: Officers' Club.

OCS: Officer Candidate School. Military academy in which college graduates are given the opportunity to become officers for Active or Army Reserve Duty.

One Star: a brigadier general. General officers are often referred to informally by the number of stars indicating their rank.

O-3: the numerical pay grade of an Army captain.

Predator: an unmanned aerial vehicle initially developed for reconnaissance. After 9/11, Predators were upgraded to carry two Hellfire missiles and have been used as offensive weapons, often against insurgent groups in North Waziristan.

Rendition: the practice of covertly sending a foreign terrorist suspect to be interrogated in a country with less rigorous regulations for the humane treatment of prisoners.

SAD: Special Activities Division. The division of the CIA responsible for covert operations.

SE: Soviet East European Division. Until 1989, the intelligence and counterintelligence division that operated against Russia and the East Bloc nations.

SOG: Special Operations Group. When the government does not wish to be publicly involved with a foreign operation, the "op" will often be assigned to one of the department's Special Officers, usually a former

Green Beret, Ranger, or SEAL who has had experience in the country in question.

Special Activities: a euphemism for a covert operation.

201 File: personal and military documents maintained by the U.S. government for members of the armed forces.

UCMJ: Uniform Code of Military Justice. The laws to which members of the military are subordinate.

VBIED: Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device. Car bombs that are either set off from a remote location or when a vehicle hits a bump and closes a circuit, which triggers the explosion. These bombs can do tremendous damage when pieces of the vehicle's metal fly through the air like shrapnel. Sometimes the vehicle's fuel causes further incendiary damage.

ON EDGE

PROLOGUE

SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 2013

AM I DOING the right thing? He'd asked himself the same question twenty times within the past half hour. Ever since he'd returned the telephone to its cradle, slipped on his jacket, retrieved the Sig Sauer automatic from the night table drawer, and left his Georgetown apartment.

Or was he on some goddamned fool's errand?

No, he was experienced enough to know he'd be a fool to ignore what the woman had told him on the telephone—and what it was she wanted him to do.

Who was she? From her voice he guessed that she was American. She spoke unaccented English. Not southern, not Midwestern. Her sentences were precise, her tone unemotional. She hadn't wasted words.

But what had snapped him to attention and caused him to sit up with serious concern was her immediate mention of the weekly code—the five-digit number provided to a handful of administration insiders and changed each week by a special assistant to the president. She'd followed that with the name of a government functionary, someone so highly placed and so powerful, you only had to whisper the name for people to go silent. Just the fact that she knew that name meant she knew how things now functioned inside the Beltway and that she had connections at the highest levels of the American government. The individual, whose name had never

appeared in a newspaper, had a reputation for being able to fix any situation or solve any problem and, with a phone call, to make or break the career of absolutely anyone in Washington, D.C. This was an individual in whom the president reposed complete trust and whom the president never second-guessed.

And like everyone else in the nation's capital, with the exception of the president, he now felt himself to be just a shade fearful. In his job, it was up or out, and he felt vulnerable now that he was being eyed for a promotion. He actually shuddered when he recalled his chance encounter last summer with a former congressional staffer stacking shelves at a Winn-Dixie in Tampa, a onetime hotshot whose career crashed and burned when he failed to show proper deference to the right people. Or was it that he showed proper deference to the wrong people?

Who could say?

"Peirce Mill," she'd said. "There are picnic tables in a wooded area just upstream from the mill. We'll talk there. This evening, ten o'clock."

Peirce Mill was in Rock Creek Park. He supposed it was as good a place to talk as any. It was certainly out of the way. But as far as he was concerned, any park bench would have served just as well. Surveillance these days was everywhere.

So here he was, nine thirty on a chilly Sunday evening in January, on his way to meet someone who had called him from out of the blue and said she "wanted to talk." She hadn't said about what. At least Tilden Street, the street leading into the park, had street lights. Now he was peering ahead into the darkness on a stretch of road over which hung a blanket of tree branches dense enough to shut out the moonlight. He also found it interesting that she had his name and private telephone number and knew the kind of work he did—or to be more accurate—the kind of work he occasionally did.

He'd jammed a magazine into the handle of the Sig Sauer he carried in a shoulder holster beneath his jacket, just in case. He doubted he'd be needing it. He didn't have the kind of high-profile job that would lead anyone to want to kill him, although these days you could never be sure about anything.

He made a left turn off the road and drove into the empty parking area. Patches of snow from last week's storm were scattered about. He was twenty minutes early. He sat in the car for maybe three minutes, then decided to get out and walk back across the highway and to the area upstream from the building. When he got there, sure enough, just as she'd said, there was a picnic table with benches on either side. He walked over, sat down, crossed his legs—and waited.

In moments like this, coffin nails used to come in handy. They were good for calming jangled nerves—and made you appear relaxed and in control even when your heart was pounding double-time. But like everyone else, he'd quit smoking years ago.

Two minutes later, at precisely thirteen minutes before ten o'clock, a woman dressed in a windbreaker and slacks came walking through the woods. She wore a ski cap pulled down over her ears, preventing him from getting a look at her hair. As she approached, he stood. He'd zippered his jacket down halfway and could have the weapon in his hand within two seconds, but he quickly decided that this wouldn't be necessary.

Without saying a word, she nodded, but didn't make any polite effort to put him at ease. He thought she might say "Good evening" or shake his hand. She did neither. Naturally, she didn't give her name.

She pointed at the bench on the opposite side of the table from her, and they both seated themselves. He was aware of a chilly gust of wind, which chose that moment to blow through the park. He felt himself shiver. The Weather Channel had predicted more snow. Back in North Dakota, in his hometown, they already had over two feet.

In a soft whisper she said, “Thank you for coming.” They both knew, of course, he had very little choice. He needed to see if this woman was for real—and if so, just how real. To do that he needed to meet her and find out what it was she wanted.

She was carrying a slim briefcase, which she laid on the table and from which she removed a three-day-old copy of the *Washington Post*.

“You’re aware of this news story?” The sentence could have been a statement of fact or a question. She removed a small flashlight from her jacket pocket.

Sure, he’d read the story, which had run on an inside page. A story about the incident had run in the *New York Times* as well.

The headline read AMERICAN OFFICER SHOT IN KABUL; ISAF HEADQUARTERS SCENE OF DEADLY ATTACK.

“I’ve read it, yes.” He didn’t mention that he’d met the officer on a couple of occasions many years ago. At a Pentagon Christmas party he’d also met the officer’s wife, a damned good-looking woman.

She said, “What I need is someone to investigate what happened there.” Her voice was cold, and again he noticed her fluent, unaccented English. He couldn’t put his finger on it precisely, but for some reason she didn’t sound exactly the way most Americans sound. “He has to be good, very good.”

“Good at what?”

“At handling himself, for one thing. He should be former military. He is either now a case officer or former case officer. That doesn’t matter. It wouldn’t hurt if he’d already spent some time here.” She pointed at the newspaper. “In Afghanistan.”

He could have told her that most of the case officers who’d spent time in Afghanistan had one thing in common: They didn’t want to go back. Even those who worked out of the Ariana in Kabul, which was the best duty over there, weren’t keen on repeat tours. It was

the same with SAD—Special Activities Division—officers down in Chapman. Tours there did something to people. If you weren't already nuts when you went to Afghanistan, you were definitely a little crazy when you got back.

“And something else. He should have some knowledge of . . . financial matters, banking, and so on.”

You're not asking for much, he thought, but didn't say.

She said, “It's my understanding that you've been doing this job for a while. Which is why I'm approaching you rather than someone else. I also understand that you, in your duties, are permitted a certain amount of discretion.” She paused. “And that your superiors have confidence in you.”

He nodded. That all was true enough. He had gained the confidence of his superiors over the years. People knew they could rely on his judgment. Although the job, by its nature, tended to attract cowboy types, he wasn't a cowboy. Far from it. People liked that.

“What do you mean by *discretion*?”

“That you might be able to handle this in a highly confidential manner—that is, you could assign a person without making a big fuss, without having to ask anyone else's permission, or call unnecessary attention to the operation.”

She was talking about a “black op.” She wanted him to set it in motion. He knew people in the Special Ops Group, so it wouldn't be a problem. This was something that he'd done before, on a few occasions, not many.

He was getting tired of nodding his head. What she'd said was all true enough. He did have a lot of discretion in planning ops. He also knew most of the country's special operators, the guys and gals who knew their way around foreign countries and who knew how to carry out sensitive and dangerous assignments, always kept a low profile, and never made a fuss. He knew which ones were burned

out—and which were still good to go. Unfortunately, these days the former far exceeded the latter. The last ten years had put a strain on the country's human resources, not to mention its material and financial resources.

“Now, my question is, can you find someone to handle this kind of assignment?”

He thought for a minute. “What will he be doing? Or she.”

“At the start he will want to familiarize himself with exactly what it is that happened. In other words, with the murder. If this was in fact a green-on-blue killing.”

Interesting, he thought. She seemed to be suggesting that maybe this murder wasn't a green-on-blue. How would she know that?

“Do you mean become familiar with the investigation?”

“Yes. But there will probably be more to it than that. Bribery, fraud, I'm not sure. No one can say exactly where things will lead.”

“Danger?”

She shrugged as if to indicate it was a silly question. “Dangerous? Yes, of course.” Afghanistan was a dangerous place. They both knew that.

He remained silent, trying to understand just what she was getting at and running the names of various agents through his mind.

“No,” he said finally.

When a “black op” goes off the rails, it's the agent who's left holding the bag, not the government, whose spokesmen invariably shrug their shoulders and fall back on “plausible denial.” All the people he might call would know that, and for that reason would be unavailable—and not eager to leave for a murky assignment in Afghanistan on such short notice. He almost had to laugh. Who could blame them? It would be beyond foolish to take a job and not know who you were working for.

When he shook his head, she said, “There has to be someone.”

“No,” he said. “I don't know anyone.”

He shone his own flashlight on the report in the *Washington Post*. As he reread the story, he asked himself about the officer who'd been gunned down. A bird colonel named Hansen.

Then he had a thought. Maybe there was someone he could ask. He said the name out loud. "Alex Klear."

"Is that his name? Would this person be good for this assignment?"

He remained silent. Whether Klear would be good or not, he couldn't say. "He's adaptable."

"That's all? You don't sound enthusiastic. Isn't there anyone else?"

After a second, he said, "I can't think of anyone, not anyone good, not offhand."

She was silent, obviously thinking things over. Finally, she said, "You say this man is competent? Would he understand financial matters? Banking? And so on?"

"I'm not sure about the financial stuff. But he's definitely competent enough." Also unpredictable, a loose cannon—a guy with an off-the-wall way of doing things. Also a guy who could drive you batty at times.

"I detect a note of reservation in your tone. He doesn't sound like the kind of person I'm interested in. Are you sure there's no one else?"

"Let me think." Finally, he said, "No one I can call on short notice. Klear may not want to take it."

"Why not?"

"I heard he's getting married."

After another period of silence, she said, "We need someone quickly. If there's no one else, I want you to send this man."

Then she started giving him orders as though he were some kind of wet-behind-the-ears second lieutenant. Her tone and manner left no doubt that she expected him to do what she said. Also that she was used to being in charge, and she was so goddamned self-confident she didn't care what he thought of her.

The first thing she said for him to do was to call the individual whose name she had mentioned on the telephone.

“Call within the hour. Here is her private line.”

My God! Not only did she know her name, she had her private number! A number no more than half-a-dozen people in the entire world would know! Unbelievable!

Who was this woman?

“She’ll expect your call,” the woman said matter-of-factly.

He took the paper on which she’d scrawled a number but not a name.

“Next, I want you to get in touch with the officer, this Klear. I want you to present this assignment to him in a manner that leaves him no recourse but to accept it. You can do that, I’m sure.”

He wasn’t sure, but he mumbled acquiescence to this command anyway.

“Tell him he is to investigate this murder to determine who committed it.” She paused. “I want him on his way by Tuesday, two days from now. And something else.” She removed an envelope from her briefcase. “Here. Give him this. They’re newspaper stories. I had to put this information together quickly, but it’ll be helpful. He should familiarize himself with what’s happened.”

She stood up, fixing him with a hard stare that caused him again to shudder involuntarily.

As she walked toward her vehicle, he had two questions: Who the hell did she think she was?—and who in hell was she anyway?

CHAPTER 1

MONDAY, JANUARY 28, 2013

THERE'S ONE SMALL detail they leave out when you make the decision to sign on for a career as an intelligence officer. They don't tell you it's a job from which you can never retire.

Ever!

It was a cloudy afternoon, and the point regarding no retirement for former case officers was about to be made yet again, for my benefit, by my sometime boss over the years, Jerry Shenlee. Jerry, who is now a National Security Council staffer, and I were seated opposite one another at the big dining room table in my home in Saranac, a quiet town in upstate New York. Although it was only a few minutes after three in the afternoon, outside it was already dark, and I'd just switched on a lamp. We were drinking tea, which Jerry prefers to coffee, and which I had brewed while he'd been spreading papers out all over the table.

As usual, Jerry had arrived unexpectedly, flying up from D.C. without any advance notice beyond a phone call saying he was on his way to Saranac. I knew why he was here. I also knew I was going to have to disappoint him.

Until now, we'd spent twenty minutes with small talk—local traffic, the weather, new car models, Jerry's golf game. Any topic was fine so long as we didn't touch on the real reason for his visit: He wanted to send me somewhere.

"Good tea," Jerry said as he took another sip, and maybe because

we hadn't seen one another in a while, he gazed at me searchingly over the rim of his cup. Before I could begin describing the blend and the spices I'd added to get the taste, Jerry was talking again—about how his putting had improved with his new set of clubs and how he couldn't wait for the warm weather to get back on the golf course.

Jerry Shenlee and I first got to know each other in Berlin back in the eighties, three years before the big Wall came tumbling down. At that time Jerry was a recent Annapolis graduate, a spiffy young guy with a windowless basement office in our intelligence section at Tempelhof. Although Jerry's come a long way since then, I couldn't help thinking that his appearance hadn't changed much over the years. Round face, ruddy complexion, reddish-blond hair cut short, in the military style. Jerry looks so good that I assume he's one of those people who thrives on the careerism and political infighting that's so much a part of life in our nation's capital. Something else about Jerry: He almost never smiles. On the plains of North Dakota, where he grew up, there maybe wasn't too much to smile about.

As he thumbed through his papers, I shook my head. I didn't need to be told that any minute he'd be shoving a contract in my direction and holding a pen.

I was ready with all my reasons to decline any and all assignments. This time I wasn't going anywhere.

"If you're thinking of me, Jerry, I have to disappoint you. I can't leave."

"Why the hell not?"

"I have a business to run. That's why. It's our busy season." I was referring to the ice business I own with my partner, Gary Lawson. We supply ice for restaurants and clubs in and around Saranac Lake. Gary is never happy when I leave, but, fortunately, we have a reliable worker we can call to fill in, a retired New York City cop named Ross.

What Jerry intended was for me to sign on to work for a construction firm, which would be some kind of a government front.

It's a ritual I've been through before—and one that, since 9/11, a lot of other men and women have gone through as well.

“You're saying your business is more important than our nation's security? Is that it?”

“Nothing like that, Jerry, but I have responsibilities. People depend on us.”

I had an idea Jerry wasn't overly impressed by either my ice business or by the social situation in Saranac. From the grapevine I know that when Jerry turns up at a Kennedy Center black-tie opening or the occasional high-profile cocktail party, he's always with snazzy female company. His most recent partner, I'm told, is a statuesque African-American opera singer who's a frequent performer at Lincoln Center.

“You also have responsibilities as a citizen, you know. One reason I decided on you, Alex, you've been to Afghanistan.” Before I could interrupt to say so have a few hundred thousand other people, Jerry said quietly, “I'll be honest. There's no one else I can ask on short notice.”

“I'm surprised you're asking me to go back to Afghanistan.” When Jerry frowned, I said, “I told you how the last time in Helmand an IED went off sixty feet from where we were working. I still have nightmares about that. The other time I was in a vehicle and—”

“Okay, okay. But this time you'll be in Kabul.”

“IEDs are going off in Kabul all the time.”

“You'll have a chance to get together with your colleagues at the Ariana.” Jerry was referring to the former Ariana Hotel, which is CIA headquarters, and is just down the road from ISAF, where the NATO nations are headquartered. “And I figure this job shouldn't last longer than a couple of weeks.”

Still hoping to come up with a reason for not going anywhere, I said, "There's something else, Jerry." When he mumbled, "What's that?" I said, "I'm getting married."

Jerry continued to go through his papers. "Congratulations. Is it that German babe?" Before I could answer, he said, "Postpone it. You can do that." He pushed a couple of news stories at me. "This should tell you what you need to know. How it happened."

Trying to demonstrate my lack of interest, I ignored what he was trying to show me. "No, Jerry. Like I say, this time I—"

My eyes dropped inadvertently to one of the news stories.

The headline read: AMERICAN OFFICER SHOT IN KABUL; ISAF HEADQUARTERS SCENE OF DEADLY ATTACK. The dateline read Kabul, Afghanistan. The date on the story was four days before.

When I recognized the name of the murdered officer, I felt like I'd been jolted with a couple of hundred volts of electricity.

Without comment, I slid the story closer. Maybe because the *Post* had buried the story on page 5, or because I hadn't watched the TV news for a couple of days, I hadn't known what happened. When Jerry saw me reading, he silently placed another story down for my inspection, this one from the *New York Times*.

Both stories were accounts of a so-called green-on-blue killing. An Afghan National Army soldier had calmly walked across the office in which he worked and placed his weapon against the head of an American officer and fired. And then he'd calmly walked out of ISAF headquarters and disappeared.

The officer was described as working in the Oversight and Accountability section of ISAF Headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan. He was identified as Colonel Peter Hansen.

Pete Hansen was an old friend. Pete and I had been stationed together at Fort Bragg some fifteen years before. I leafed through the pile of papers. There was an ongoing CID investigation.

When I'd finished reading, I remained silent.

I felt a sickening feeling beginning at the pit of my stomach. One thing I knew. This wasn't the way Pete should have died.

"Did you know Hansen, Alex?" When I nodded, Jerry said, "And his wife, Wanda. You knew her, too?"

"I knew both Pete and Wanda, Jerry. Fifteen years ago. As I recall, I introduced Pete and Wanda. Before I knew it, they were an item. We were all stationed at Bragg. My girlfriend, Kathy Ross, was an army nurse. The four of us never missed a Friday evening at the O Club."

"These green-on-blues have people shitting bricks. Everyone's worried they're going to be next. Hansen's killer's name is Nolda. Baram Nolda. An Askar. Sergeant in the ANA. Worked right in the same office. We're still looking for him."

The fact that I knew Pete Hansen changed everything. "They still haven't caught the guy?"

"Not yet. As one of Hansen's buddies, I'd think you'd want the opportunity to find the bastard. That's what this assignment is all about." Jerry's tone hardened. "Maybe pay him off personally. Take care of him yourself, just to make sure he doesn't get away with murder. You can't trust the Afghan courts to convict these guys, no matter what they do."

Having done a couple of tours in the country, I knew about the Afghan courts. In Afghanistan, bribery is a way of life, and everyone, from the president on down, is on the take. The thought of Pete's murderer buying his way out of a conviction set my teeth on edge.

"What do you say, Alex?"

Even at that, I hesitated. For a long moment, I thought about Pete, about his understated sense of humor, his sense of loyalty, his generosity, the great times we'd had. I felt the sick feeling moving from my stomach up to my chest. When I finally nodded, Jerry handed me the contract and pen, then an envelope. "Here's your

plane ticket, your orders, an ID card. Some other stuff you'll need. Homeland Security has your prints on file. I'll handle that end for you. Your passport is valid for two more years." When I seemed surprised, he said, "I checked. You leave tomorrow evening from JFK. A car will be waiting in Frankfurt and will take you over to Ramstein." I knew the drill. Ramstein is Air Force headquarters in Europe. From there I'd fly direct to Afghanistan.

All of a sudden, I couldn't wait. Couldn't wait until I had a chokehold on Sergeant Baram Nolda's traitorous neck. What kind of lowlife would do something like that? My heart was pounding double-time. I'd find this miserable creature, no question. And when I found him, I'd make him regret what it was he did to Pete.

After I'd signed and gazed through the papers, I said, "Aren't we forgetting something, Jerry?"

"What?"

"How do I contact you?"

"You don't contact me. Someone will contact you."

"Who's the 'someone'?"

"You'll know when you need to know." Jerry pulled out a large envelope filled with newspaper clippings, stuff that looked as if it had been put together quickly. "Oh, by the way. What do you know about banking, financial fraud, that kind of thing?"

"What's to know, Jerry? I have a bank account. Does that surprise you?"

"Ha ha. I'm asking for a reason." He handed me the envelope. "Read this stuff. It's important." He tapped a pencil on the table. "Oh, yeah. Something else you should know. Colonel Hansen's wife, Wanda, is flying over. She's already left. Help her out. She's never been to Afghanistan."

"I haven't seen Wanda Hansen in fifteen years." I was thinking these would be difficult circumstances under which to renew our friendship.

Jerry got to his feet, took a last sip of tea. “You know the guy who’s running the investigation. Stan Jones. He’ll be glad to see you.”

“Stan won’t be happy if I’m mainly there to look over people’s shoulders.” Actually, I knew Stan quite well. We’d served together in Bosnia, on a base out of which our government ran a couple of renditions, back in the days when an “extraordinary rendition” was still a song sung by Barbra Streisand.

“Put your wedding on hold.” Jerry took a quick glance at his watch, grabbed his windbreaker. “I’m serious about the financial stuff I gave you. Do a little reading.” After zipping up, he stuck out his hand. “They’re waiting for me back at the airport.” He smirked. “Buck up. It ain’t the end of the world.”

I resisted an urge to say, “No, but it’s probably the end of my engagement.” I’d made a firm promise to my fiancée that I wouldn’t be accepting any more assignments from the American government.

Before leaving, Jerry made some comment about the frigid weather in Saranac. I could have told him that’s what you get in the Adirondacks in January, but decided to let him have the last word.

Because of the time difference between the United States and Germany, I stayed up and made the call at a few minutes after midnight. Irmie answered on the second ring.

“Alex, darling! I’m so glad you called. We have so many things to talk about.”

Irmie is a police detective in Munich, and on occasion works irregular hours. I didn’t know how to break the news that I wouldn’t be coming over in two weeks so we could make our wedding plans.

“I hope I didn’t call at a bad moment.”

“You never call at a bad moment.” She giggled. “You won’t believe what I’m doing.”

“Putting on lipstick.” When she laughed, I said, “Putting on mascara.”

“I’m drinking coffee and thinking of you.”

“Which machine did you use to make the coffee?” I asked because when her old machine burned out, I gave her a new one for her birthday.

“Guess.”

“Does the new machine fit the color scheme of your kitchen?”

“It does, but more important, it makes great coffee.” Before I could comment, Irmie said, “I have *Bride* magazine and I found—”

“I called for a reason, Irmie.”

“I still haven’t picked out a dress.” When I again tried to interrupt, she said, “I’m leaning toward hand-beaded crystals—”

“Irmie, I have to tell you something. It’s important.”

“Something else I’ve been thinking about. You know Monopteros in the English Garden?”

“Yes, of course. The white building on the hill.”

“In the morning, before the actual wedding, I was thinking we could have a champagne breakfast there. The guests will all be dressed and—”

“Irmie, I have to tell you something—”

“Alex, what’s wrong?” When Irmie became silent, I knew she’d picked up the seriousness in my tone.

“We’re going to have to postpone my trip.”

“Alex, you’re supposed to arrive in two weeks. We have so many things to do. What’s so important?”

“I just had a visit from my old boss.”

Irmie remained silent.

“Jerry Shenlee. I may have mentioned him. He wants me to go to Afghanistan.”

“But, Alex, you promised . . .” Irmie was referring to the promise I’d made to stay retired from my job as case officer.

“I know. But this is . . . well, important.” After blurting it all out, I realized I should have handled this differently. Now it was too late.

“How important can it be? They can get someone else.” She paused. “Afghanistan? No, Alex, no. You can’t.”

“This is an . . . unusual situation, Irmie.”

“You should have spoken to me first. I don’t care how unusual it is. What’s so special about it?”

“It’s something . . . only I can handle. Someone was murdered. I knew him.” I was about to add that his wife was an old friend, but then thought better of it. “I think it’s best that I—”

“We’ve been engaged for nearly a year, and with you there and me here, we hardly ever see one another. This hasn’t been exactly an easy time for me. I want you to know that. And now that we have plans to see each other, spend time together, you’re telling me you can’t come.”

“When the assignment’s over, I’ll be there, first thing.”

“When will that be?” Before I could say I didn’t know, Irmie said, “I was so looking forward to us being together again, finally, after all this time apart. We have so many decisions to make. Just yesterday, I spoke with the manager of Käfer and . . .”

Irmie and I had been at Käfer a number of times. It was Munich’s best restaurant. We’d already spoken about holding our reception there.

“I can’t talk about this right now, Alex. I have to leave for work.” Her words just hung in the air.

“I’ll call.”

“Good-bye, Alex.” Before I could say my own good-bye, Irmie had hung up.

I remained sitting in the darkened room for a long time. With an awful suddenness, I realized I’d not only upset our wedding plans, but I’d upset Irmie’s entire life. As a police detective in Munich, she was holding down a job that often required her to juggle half-a-dozen cases simultaneously. As I thought about it, I found it easy

to understand her disappointment and her irritated response to my news. She'd been counting on me, and I'd let her down.

Although I would like to have been able to tell Jerry Shenlee that I couldn't go after all, I knew that was no longer possible. Irmie was the most important person in my life, and I now realized that no amount of excuses or explanations could set things right. I'd gone back on my promise.

She had no choice but to think that she wasn't as important as a military assignment to some distant place on the other side of the world.

When she'd said, "Afghanistan," I could hear her tone of disbelief.

I spent most of the night tossing and turning and was up before the alarm. Since Gary, my business partner, is an uncomplicated guy, we completed arrangements over breakfast at the Lakeview restaurant. I arranged for a neighbor to take care of my house and threw what I figured I'd need into my carry-on. When I checked my passport, I saw that Jerry was correct, that it was valid for two more years—just another reminder that the government knows as much about me as I know myself. I grabbed the Tuesday afternoon flight down to JFK.

As I waited for my flight to Frankfurt in the airport lounge, I recalled Jerry mentioning bribery and fraud. I know Jerry well enough to know that he made the comment for a reason. And then I remembered the envelope full of newspaper clippings he'd given me.

KABUL BANK SCANDAL was the first headline I read. FRAUD SCHEME CAUSES BANK TO GO BANKRUPT was the second. The newspaper accounts all dealt with the Kabul Bank and how hundreds of millions of dollars had disappeared. Another story reported that twenty-two bank officials were on trial in Kabul for having embezzled the money.

When I wondered how Pete's murder connected with a bank scandal, I got an uncomfortable feeling that I might be involved in something far bigger and far messier than an uncomplicated green-on-blue killing.

CHAPTER 2

THURSDAY, JANUARY 31, 2013

THE AFGHANISTAN SUN was weak, and the air was chilly. After an hour of standing in front of the Kabul International Airport military terminal, I decided I was in the mood for something to drink. I drifted over to a long, gray brick building where the cafeteria was located. Although a beer would have tasted good, it was only three in the afternoon. I settled for a Sprite, for which I paid with a couple of euros and began drinking while sitting at a long wooden table.

I gazed at a week-old copy of the *International New York Times*, which someone had thoughtfully left on the bench and from which I learned that the recent arrival in Pakistan of what the paper called “a fiery preacher” had shaken up the nation’s politics. I closed the paper, maybe because I’m from a nation with no shortage of “fiery preachers,” and the story sounded exaggerated.

Back outside with my cardboard cup, I watched a bunch of GIs, young men and women loaded down with backpacks and weapons, clamber on to an armor-plated military bus. A female sergeant was standing by and checking names on a clipboard. The wind was just piercing enough to make standing around uncomfortable.

Fifteen minutes passed, and the civilian crowd, a mixed bag of foreign nationals, military contractors, and special ops people, grew smaller as their rides showed up. I felt myself becoming impatient.

Just as I was tossing my cup into a trash container, I saw a dust-covered Humvee roll into the parking area, halt, and a soldier wearing fatigues climb out. Hands on his hips, he stood, looked around, and I wondered whether this was my ride. With my carry-on over my shoulder, I began walking in his direction.

“Mr. Klear?” His name tag said “Maxson.”

I told him I was Alex Klear and stuck out my hand. I tossed my gear in the back of the Humvee as I shouted a hello to the gunner on the roof.

After climbing in, I pushed aside some empty plastic MRE packages, noticed a haphazard pile of military equipment and clothing on the rear seat. On top of the pile were two assault weapons and a bunch of .30-caliber ammunition magazines.

“AR-10s, sir. I tossed them in. Just in case. You’ve fired them, right?”

I nodded. “At Grafenwoehr, Sergeant. Not that long ago.” Grafenwoehr is the military installation in Germany where the Army provides readiness training for soldiers and civilians headed to Afghanistan—and where, some time back, I spent six days qualifying with every weapon I could get my hands on, from the MP5 automatic pistol to the M9 Beretta automatic, with the M16 and AR-10 thrown in. I took a pass on the .50-caliber machine gun.

Sergeant Maxson waited while I clicked on my seat belt. He began talking as we drove slowly across the parking area toward the airport exit. “You’ve been here before, sir. Am I correct?”

I smiled. “Who told you, Sergeant?”

Maxson shrugged. “People here for the first time . . . Well, they’re a little nervous. You can tell.”

“I guess I was nervous the first time I was here. Weren’t you?”

“It was a while ago, sir. I’m on my third deployment.”

As we drove out of the parking area, Maxson said, “I’m sorry, sir,

about the delay. We would have come out in an MRAP, but they're all in the repair shop or in mission mode. I hope you don't mind the Humvee."

"Nothing to apologize for, Sergeant."

"I know you've been waiting for over—"

"I just got here, Sergeant."

"Thank you, sir."

Although my flight had arrived an hour and a half before, you can't be too fussy in Afghanistan, where all kinds of things can delay you or even permanently prevent you from going to wherever it is you're headed. I'd flown into Afghanistan from Ramstein, Germany, an uneventful eight-and-a-half-hour flight on a C-17 loaded down with cases of ammunition on which I was the only passenger. I'd been able to grab some shut-eye on the plane and wasn't particularly tired.

To our left as we drove out of the parking area was the big terminal building where I'd just been. The parking lot was half-filled, with most of the vehicles belonging to the American military. A few sported insignia and military plates from other nations. Some were civilian, the numbers and letters written in Arabic.

As we proceeded, I continued to check out the Kabul International Airport, which hadn't changed much since my last visit a year before. KIA is divided in two. On one side the civilian flights land. On the other the military flights land. There were maybe fifty or sixty people still milling around. Some were flying out and some, like me, were flying in—and waiting for a ride to take them wherever in Kabul they'd be staying.

"It's not a long ride, sir, only five miles."

I nodded. We were headed for Camp Eggers, where I could keep a low profile and where I'd arranged for a billet and a Toyota van. I had an appointment the following morning with Major Stanley Jones. Camp Eggers and nearby Camp Phoenix are two of half-a-dozen

military installations the United States maintains on the outskirts of Kabul. They're both close to the complex of buildings in which ISAF Headquarters is situated.

Stan Jones was an officer in the Criminal Investigation Command, or CID, in Kabul, and he told me on the phone he'd gotten the job of investigating green-on-blues tossed in his lap. He'd also mentioned the withdrawal of NATO from Afghanistan, which was scheduled for the end of 2014 and was affecting his ability to get his job done.

I couldn't shake the thought that Pete shouldn't have died in the way he did—an Afghan soldier with whom he worked walking over to his desk and calmly placing an M9 Beretta against his head and pulling the trigger. Nor could I shake the thought that this rash of premeditated killings may be the vilest and most upsetting development to emerge from a long and frustrating war.

Beyond the airport exit we drove around a bend before hitting a two-lane road surrounded on both sides by fields overgrown with weeds. On our right I could see what looked like a 767 taxiing on one of the airport's distant runways. We passed a heavily armored military bus headed toward the airport.

After a couple of miles we turned right onto Airport Road, a four-lane highway that I remembered from my two earlier visits. This street had traffic, mostly ancient cars and battered trucks. In the inside lane there were a few wagons being pulled by donkeys. Horns honked and clouds of exhaust from badly tuned engines hung over the pothole-scarred road. On both sides were rickety buildings, some mud and cement and some wood. Most housed shops advertising their wares with beat-up signs hand-painted in Arabic. A gentle breeze blew curtains out from windows without window panes. Some of the stores had stands in front, most containing food, others holding every kind of junk imaginable.

There was a wide dirt path, a kind of sidewalk, lining the highway. Except for a few veiled women carrying bags, the pedestrians were all males, many of them guys talking and standing around with their hands in their pockets.

“I figure this is about the way things must have looked five hundred years ago,” Sergeant Maxson said.

“They didn’t have cars back then,” I said. “Or concrete.”

“Well, sir, except for the highway and the cars, that’s what I figure.” As we slowed to allow a couple of guys to amble across, Maxson called up to our gunner, whose name was Rackley.

“I’m good,” the gunner called down.

“Over here,” Maxson said, “the guys stand around. The women do most of the work. But you hardly ever see them.”

I didn’t reply, but it was a good insight. In Afghanistan you notice things like that. Seeing these depressing sights again, I felt a sick feeling and couldn’t help thinking I never should have said yes to this mission. Whenever I recalled my telephone call with Irmie, I remembered how upset she’d been. I should have anticipated her reaction, but I hadn’t. Although she never complained, I knew Irmie’s job was not only demanding, it was dangerous. It was early afternoon now in Munich, and as we drove, I couldn’t help wondering what she was doing.

Two minutes later, we were bouncing along in the outside lane going about 30 mph when, without warning, a small truck coming from the opposite direction veered out of its lane and across the center line, its horn blasting, and headed straight toward us.

“Goddamn—”

Maxson had no choice. Reacting quickly, he spun the steering wheel, causing us to swerve toward the right. We rolled across the inside lane and onto the dirt path alongside the road and narrowly avoided going into a wide drainage ditch. Trying not to hit a couple

of startled pedestrians, Maxson was able to get the vehicle back onto the road.

But that was exactly where someone wanted us to be.

Suddenly, there was a deafening roar, and we weren't on the ground anymore. The Humvee went briefly into the air, hit the ground with a terrible crunching, hard thud, then pitched back onto the road. As it rolled over, I held on for dear life.

Thank God for seat belts!

The vehicle came to rest upside down. Rackley, the gunner who'd been perched over us, was now beneath us. I could hear cursing, so at least he was still alive.

I saw Maxson, who, like me, was strapped in but was also upside down. "You okay?"

Before he could answer, I heard the rat-a-tat of an automatic weapon. Someone was firing at us. Probably the guys who'd been in the truck who, when they saw the IED hadn't done its job, decided they were going to finish us off themselves. Fortunately, the armor on a Humvee is plenty thick, and except for a couple of rounds smashing the windshield, the first burst didn't do any damage. Whoever was shooting would need to get closer to hit us.

Then there was a second burst from outside, this one from a different direction, and it sounded closer.

Upside down in the Humvee we were sitting ducks.

I needed to get my door open. For what seemed like an eternity and while slugs slammed against the side of the vehicle, I pushed and pulled on the goddamned handle, trying to remember which direction I should be pushing it toward. But for some reason when you're upside down, right is no longer right, up is no longer up, and it's very much like being in a different world.

"Up, and out, sir," Maxson said. He kept saying it. "Up, sir. Now back. That's it. Now out."

After another fifteen seconds of fiddling and following Maxson's shouted directions, I had the door unlocked. Reaching into the back, I found the AR-10s, lying on the roof. I grabbed a couple of ammo magazines and tossed a weapon to Maxson, who was unclicking his own seat belt.

There was another burst from one of the shooters outside. I figured the other shooter would be closing in on the far side, Maxson's side. He had his door open.

With my door partially ajar, I'd be able to shoot back, but that meant the shooter would also be able to shoot in.

I waited for maybe half a minute before an individual with a white rag around his head stepped out from behind one of the huts on the near side of the road. He was 150 feet away, in a crouch, had his weapon at his shoulder, and he was close to getting me in his sights. I let go with a random burst in his direction, not expecting to hit him, only shake him up. I figured it worked because I couldn't see him anymore and for the next twenty seconds, he remained out of sight . . .

"For God's sakes!"

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. A youngster, maybe seven or eight years old and holding an apple, came wandering out from the dark inside of one of the shops. Curiosity was written all over his face. With all the other pedestrians having taken cover, he was now alone on the dirt sidewalk with no parent around and obviously curious about the noise and shouting in the street.

He was sixty or seventy feet from the Humvee and wandering directly into the line of fire.

When I waved and shouted "Beat it!" a broad grin lit up his face. "Beat it, dammit! Get away!"

He waved back and continued to walk toward me.

How do you say "Beat it!" in Pashto?

And then the shooter reappeared and sent another burst in my direction. Slugs kicked up dirt and ricocheted against the Humvee. When I sent back an answering burst, he fired again. He was getting closer now. Slugs chewed up the ground five feet in front of me. The bastard knew how to shoot. But aware I'd be firing back, he ducked again.

I heard bursts from somewhere, and I figured that was this guy's partner. I hoped Maxson could take care of that end of things.

Then a burst kicked up dust ten feet from the kid.

"Goddamn!"

Without thinking, I pushed open the vehicle door, jumped out. The youngster was closer, in real danger of being hit. As I took off in his direction, I heard voices and someone shooting, but my only thought was the boy. Still thinking he was in some sort of game, he shouted something and tried to scoot away. He didn't get far. Within a couple of seconds I was able to tackle him, and we hit the ground together. Immediately climbing to my feet, I scooped the kid up and ran like hell across the path and hit the dirt behind a stand piled high with fruit, a maneuver that brought us closer to the shooter behind the building. But when I bumped against one of its legs, the stand immediately toppled over, sending oranges and a dozen watermelons in every direction.

And then the shooter, not that far away now, was out in plain sight and firing in our direction, a couple of the slugs squishing into a watermelon two feet to my left. Although the boy was kicking and had begun crying, I continued to hold him down while trying to get my weapon sighted. Then I saw the guy again. Moving in a crouch, he'd been able to find cover behind a wagon adjacent to the road, and close enough for me to see the curl of his lips. I fired a short burst, then ducked.

He stood up and fired two long bursts. Prone and with the boy

beneath me, I fired back, emptying the magazine. I was feeling through my jacket pocket for another magazine when I saw the truck.

The shooter emerged from behind the wagon and, staying low, ran for a fruit stand that wasn't more than thirty feet away. He fired a long burst, but by this time I'd jammed the magazine into my own weapon and fired back.

The truck that had forced us off the road was now pulling up. The gunman took off at top speed for the road. A second later he was joined by his friend coming from the other direction. After they'd hopped aboard, they waved their weapons at us, and one saluted. The other was grinning. As I mumbled some profanity, the truck made a U-turn on the road and, brakes squealing, headed off toward downtown Kabul.

Good-bye and good riddance!

The child alongside me was crying. His blouse was ripped, his arm was smeared with blood, and I saw that he had an abrasion on his cheek, the result of hitting the ground hard. If that was all he had, he'd been very, very lucky.

As I climbed to my feet, a wild-eyed veiled woman came rushing at me shouting and waving her hands. She shook her fists at me, threw her arms around the boy, whispered something in his ear, then shoved him behind her. Almost immediately, she was joined by a bearded individual who could have been the owner of the fruit stand. He started shouting and pointing to the melons and oranges, which lay all over the ground.

And then he was in my face, waving and no doubt shouting Pashto curses, probably telling me I had to pay for his ruined produce. A few more people who may have been his friends joined the melee, gesticulating and shouting. I was breathing hard and had run out of patience. The loudmouth owner of the fruit stand followed me as I tried to move away, still yelling and waving his fist.

“Hey, buddy! Where were you when I needed you?”

Resisting the urge to belt this character, I turned, pushed my way past a couple more loudmouths, and headed back to the Humvee. Maxson had been able to drag Rackley out from beneath the vehicle and was now talking to someone on his cell phone.

“Ambulance’ll be here in a second, sir.”

People were all over now, pointing and shouting. I had the feeling that a bunch of them were talking about me. I definitely didn’t have the feeling we were among friends.

We only had to wait for a couple of minutes. An ambulance arrived, and then a van full of GIs, and within minutes I was talking to an African-American infantry captain named Johnson, telling him what had just happened.

“They all seem to be pointing at you for some reason, sir,” Johnson said. “They seem mad about something. What’d you do?”

I shrugged. “I shoved a kid out of the way. And knocked down the fruit stand.”

“Some of them are probably Taliban sympathizers. As I’m sure you know, Americans ain’t the most popular people in Kabul these days. Whatever you do for them, it ain’t right and ain’t never enough.”

When I told him how the truck suddenly came at us, he nodded. “That’s one of the Taliban’s tricks. They forced you over to the side of the road because that’s where they had the IED planted. They might have put it down within the last hour. When you were over it, someone touched the wires and closed the circuit. Half the people out here would have known it was there. The guys with the truck were waiting for an American vehicle.”

I said, “Sergeant Maxson did one helluva job steering us back onto the road. I have a feeling we didn’t go squarely over the bomb.”

The captain nodded. “If you had, sir, it would have been curtains.”

By this time, we were surrounded by vehicles and soldiers. I could see Sergeant Rackley being carried on a stretcher toward a waiting ambulance. As he went by, he gave me a thumbs-up and a grim smile. A tough kid. I had a feeling he'd be all right.

I waved back.

On the far side of the road was a massive crater, with clouds of smoke still billowing out. I wandered over and stared into it. The IED had contained enough explosives to destroy a couple of tanks.

A half-dozen vehicles were already on the scene, some of them belonging to ANP guys, the Afghan police, others to blue-uniformed Afghan soldiers. A van with "UN" printed on the side arrived and disgorged two men and two women. When I was approached by a pair of MPs, I began telling them my story. Captain Johnson, still carrying his clipboard, walked over and asked a few more questions.

After I'd given him information enough for his report, I asked if I could get a ride to Camp Eggers.

"No problem, Mr. Klear. And by the way"—he grinned broadly—"welcome to Afghanistan."