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THESIS

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

by

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THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

In 1888, Rudyard Kipling published *The Man Who Would Be King* while living in Allahabad in British India. The short story follows two former soldiers on their quest to become kings of Kafiristan, or modern-day Nuristan in Afghanistan. The story was turned into a movie in 1975 starring Sean Connery and Michael Caine and is used at the Naval Postgraduate School as a teaching tool in the Department of Defense Analysis Military Advisor course. How can counterinsurgency theory and hard-won lessons learned from the recent battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan be better captured and then conveyed in a narrative format that will appeal to a wide spectrum of military personnel—from the most junior enlisted to senior officers? This thesis reimagines Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* and sets it in the near future to test the premise that a fictional adventure story might effectively impart counterinsurgency theory and military advising best practices to otherwise busy and easily distracted service members.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1888, Rudyard Kipling published *The Man Who Would Be King* while living in Allahabad in British India.¹ The short story follows two former soldiers on their quest to become kings of Kafiristan, or modern-day Nuristan in Afghanistan. The story was turned into a movie in 1975 starring Sean Connery and Michael Caine and is used at the Naval Postgraduate School as a teaching tool in the Department of Defense Analysis Military Advisor course.² Over two hours and nine minutes, the film raises challenges that are still relevant to advising foreign militaries.

Movies solve a fundamental problem for many service members who are faced with too many books and too little time to read. Volumes about counterinsurgency theory continue to pile up, and mastery of the subject requires years of study, a luxury not afforded to most soldiers, Marines, or special operators in the throes of serial deployments. Worse, despite continuous fighting in Afghanistan for over sixteen years and counting, the U.S. military has managed to continue to misunderstand and misapply the fundamental principles of counterinsurgency.³

Historically, the U.S. military has a habit of forgetting counterinsurgency doctrine whenever it is between wars. From World War II to Korea to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, lessons have been systematically ignored or forgotten in the interwar years, leaving soldiers to have to relearn them on the ground. Ben Malcom highlights this frustration in his book *White Tigers*, when recounting and reflecting on his time as an advisor of North Korean partisans in 1952. He writes that, although unconventional warfare played a significant role in Allied strategy in World War II, “that knowledge was discarded or ignored after the war, so we came to Korea with virtually no institutional

¹ Rudyard Kipling, *The Phantom Rickshaw and Other Eerie Tales* (Allahabad: A. H. Wheeler & Co., 1888).

² *The Man Who Would Be King*, directed by John Huston (Los Angeles: Devon Co., 1975), iTunes.

³ For more, see: Hy Rothstein and John Arquilla, *Afghan Endgames* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012).

foundation for conducting such operations.”⁴ Excepting Special Forces, the same could be said for the U.S. Army in Afghanistan and Iraq. Given this trend, it is reasonable to assume that unless lessons can be better captured in a compelling format that will span generations, the U.S. military will similarly stumble in future conflicts.

How can counterinsurgency theory and hard-won lessons learned from the recent battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan be better captured and then conveyed in a narrative format that will appeal to a wide spectrum of military personnel—from the most junior enlisted to senior officers? This thesis reimagines Rudyard Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King* and sets it in the near future to test the premise that a fictional adventure story might effectively impart counterinsurgency theory and military advising best practices to otherwise busy and easily distracted service members.

While the storyline remains true to Kipling’s original work, the characters in this reimagined version act in a way consistent with aspects of current counterinsurgency theory and doctrine. For instance, while Field Manual 3-24 on counterinsurgency promotes a “clear, hold, and build” methodology, this thesis uses an alternative approach influenced by Leites and Wolf in *Rebellion and Authority*, a foundational text in the Department of Defense Analysis Guerrilla Warfare seminar.⁵ This approach is summarized in the story as “disrupt, isolate, clear, and control,” and is focused on limiting supply to the insurgency. It is an approach that stands in contrast to the conventional “hearts and minds” approach promoted in the counterinsurgency field manual, which seeks to increase popular support and address grievances.⁶

One of my premises in the story to follow is that the alternative, supply-focused approach adopted by Peachey and Billy Fish is also more understandable to the soldier, Marine, or special operator on the ground. Only by focusing on familiar military tasks with clear purpose are ground troops with limited counterinsurgency schooling likely to be able to execute an effective campaign. The difference between the “disrupt, isolate,

⁴ Ben Malcom, *White Tigers* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1996), 36.

⁵ Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr., *Rebellion and Authority* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1970); Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2007).

⁶ Leites and Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority*, 150.

clear, and control” approach and that advocated in the current field manual is clearly revealed in an exchange between a young Marine and the International Security Assistance Force Commanding General at a small fire base in Helmand Province in the movie *War Machine*.

General: Your mission is to protect the people, not kill them. We can't help them and kill them at the same time, it just ain't humanly possible. Do you understand me?

Lance Corporal: No, not really, sir. No.

General: What part are you struggling to comprehend, son?

Lance Corporal: I don't know, sir. It seems to me that we are all here with our guns and shit trying to convince these people that deep down we're actually really nice guys. And I don't know how to do that, sir, when every second one of them, or every third one of them, or every tenth one of them is trying to fucking kill me, sir! 'Cause I'm a Marine. 'Cause we're Marines. And now it seems like they're handing out medals for heroically not being a Marine, sir. I'm confused, is what I'm trying to say, sir.

General: Well, you're just gonna have to get yourself unconfused, son.⁷

An interview with a Marine captain in the HBO documentary *The Battle for Marjah* further highlights the internal struggle experienced by men on the ground as they attempt to win “hearts and minds” at gunpoint in what should otherwise be a fight for control; control they could effectively achieve by restricting resources from reaching the insurgents. As the captain puts it, “Clear the enemy out and let the people return. General McChrystal and every expert that talks about counterinsurgency ... we pretty clearly understand now that the key to winning any fight like this is to control the population. Not control them but, I don't want to use ‘win hearts and minds’ but that's basically it. To get the people on your side and let them understand that you're here for them.”⁸

⁷ *War Machine*, directed by David Michod (Los Angeles: Netflix, 2017).

⁸ *The Battle for Marjah*, directed by Anthony Wonke (United States: HBO Documentary Films, 2010).

A second topic addressed in this thesis is that of the outsider-as-advisor. Just as T. E. Lawrence was famously “the man with the gold” to the Arabs, and North Korean partisans relied on Ben Malcom for critical fire support as well as essential supplies, in a 21st century twist, Danny and Peachey bring lethal drones to the Nuristanis.⁹ With these they give the villagers they befriend an edge over the Taliban, and enable “their” villages to reclaim a tourmaline mine. In most instances, advisors should provide some sort of comparative advantage to their partnered force.¹⁰ This advantage can come in many forms, to include ammunition, money, or intelligence. Sometimes, however, simply remaining an outsider and providing objective analysis suffices.

To remain a privileged outsider, however, includes resisting the urge to “go native,” which is a third element highlighted in this thesis. For the purposes of this discussion, going native is not so much a function of dressing like the locals as it is adopting the locals’ cause and making it your own.¹¹ In the movie *Farewell to the King*, the colonel overseeing special operations in World War II-era Borneo warns his on-the-ground subordinate, “You’ve got to stay British ... You’ll never be one of them.”¹² Maintaining focus on U.S. objectives, not drifting toward local causes, remains a key point of performance for American advisors today.

In this thesis, Danny and Peachey make an effort in advance to remain incorruptible outsiders when they sign their contract, swearing off alcohol and women. However, when Danny breaks the contract, the results are disastrous. Despite his desire to marry into the village, he will never be accepted as a local in the valley.¹³

⁹ Karl Meyer and Shareen Brysac, *Kingmakers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 208; Malcolm, *White Tigers*, 69, 113.

¹⁰ Anna Simons, “Week Two: Imperial Encounters” (lecture, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, 2 October 2017).

¹¹ Simons, “Week Two: Imperial Encounters.”

¹² *Farewell to the King*, directed by John Milius, performed by Nick Nolte (United States: MGM, 1989).

¹³ Simons, “Week Two: Imperial Encounters.”

II. THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

A. CAST OF CHARACTERS

DANIEL DRAVOT, an adventurer in search of riches from a gemstone mine in Afghanistan. A tall, slender American man with a big red beard who opens a small medical clinic in Er-Heb village.

PEACHEY CARNEHAN, Daniel's companion. A large American man with dark eyebrows and advisor to the tribal protection force.

BILLY FISH, Peachey's native counterpart and interpreter from Bashkai village.

PIKKY KERGAN, an elder from Shu village.

OOTAH, the Taliban puppet from Shu village who controls the gemstone mine through force.

RK, the narrator and Lahore, Pakistan correspondent for *The Northern Star*.

The story takes place in an isolated valley of Nuristan—a remote province in northeastern Afghanistan along the border with Pakistan—in three villages: Er-Heb, Bashkai, and Shu.

B. GLOSSARY

Arbakai—Tribal protection force.

Atrozan—Ruling class in Nuristani social structure.

Bari—Craftsman class in Nuristani social structure.

Dustuk—The most influential village elder.

Du-wrai—Temporary tribal government organization convened for special circumstances and dispute resolution.

Mala-wrai—Standing tribal government organization that supervises agricultural affairs.

Mirab—Agricultural irrigation arbitrator.

C. THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

Better a strong dog in the yard than a strong king in the capital [sic].¹⁴

The beginning of everything was in an airplane from San Francisco to Lahore.¹⁵ The company was feeling the pinch from the congressional budget, which meant I was travelling coach, not first class, which is awful on a flight that far to that part of the world. The seat cushions were worn thin and the food was predictably mediocre so I bolstered myself with complimentary pillows and blankets, pulled out a pepperoni calzone I'd bought on the concourse, and scrolled through the in-flight movie selection.

*My row in Coach happened to be empty till I reached Dubai, when a big, black-browed gentleman in shirt-sleeves sat next to me. We began some idle chit chat and he told me about his service in Afghanistan, and I discovered that he had an educated taste for whiskey. Since he hadn't been back to the region in almost ten years, I filled him in on local sentiment from my view as a journalist at *The Northern Star*.¹⁶ As we talked, I noticed a Miraculous Medal around his neck.*

"If Afghanistan was filled with men like you and me, armed with some local knowledge and the will to get things done, Uncle Sam wouldn't be \$700 billion in debt

¹⁴ Tamim Ansary, *Games Without Rules* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012), 28.

¹⁵ Rudyard Kipling, *The Man Who Would Be King* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). This thesis is a modern reimagining and adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*. As such, and in order to retain the essence of the original, portions of sentences and paragraphs have either been paraphrased or intentionally kept intact. These sections are marked with italics in order to differentiate them from dialogue. Character names and the villages of Er-Heb, Bashkai, and Shu are from Kipling's original but will not appear in italics.

¹⁶ *The Man Who Would Be King*.

but \$900 billion richer!” he said, and as I looked at his decidedly determined chin, I was inclined to agree with him.¹⁷

We talked about Sacred Heart Cathedral and other Catholic heritage sites in Pakistan, and he asked to use my cell phone when we landed in Lahore. He was meeting a friend and needed to confirm his ride from the airport. “I don’t have a Pakistani cell phone, yet, and would like to save myself the roaming charges,” he said. I cautiously agreed, taking some small satisfaction in helping a fellow American and a fellow Catholic.

When we landed, I lent him my phone and overheard him say, “Hey, Danny. I just landed. Already? Okay, yeah, let’s go south right away, then. See you in a bit.” He hung up and returned my phone.

As we walked from the plane to baggage claim, he asked, “You know, there aren’t too many Americans likely to know as much as you about the region, and you seem to have a good pulse on what is going on across the border.¹⁸ Could my friend and I swing by to pick your brain?” Reluctantly, but because I was also distracted by a torrent of voice mails and text messages streaming into my phone, I accepted. *I told him that I had some business in Allahabad but would be back in my office in Lahore in ten days.*

By then, our bags had arrived and we walked out to the arrivals walkway. As I hailed a taxi, a faded blue Toyota Corolla with dented bumpers pulled up.¹⁹ A tall, slender man with a big red beard stepped out to grab Peachey’s (my seatmate), bags—this must be Danny, who wore on his right hand an antique ruby ring, which seemed out of place on such a rough-looking man.²⁰ *Peachey leaned in and whispered something in*

¹⁷ Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, RL33110 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 2; John Shroder, *Natural Resources in Afghanistan* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2014), 412.

¹⁸ For more, see: Ansary, *Games Without Rules*; Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010); Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2009).

¹⁹ Matt Trevithick and Daniel Seckman, “Heart of Darkness,” *The Daily Beast*, November 15, 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/heart-of-darkness-into-afghanistans-taliban-valley>.

²⁰ Ben Macintyre, *The Man Who Would Be King: The First American in Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan, 2004), 214.

Danny's ear and I could hear Danny say, "Does he expect me to give him anything? Cause I won't." Peachey looked at me and smiled, got in the car, and drove away.

In the taxi on my way home, I reckoned that two individuals like the ones I just met could not do any good if they aimlessly gallivanted around Pakistan or, worse, the recently independent Pashtunistan. So I sent a text message to a friend at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, describing them as accurately as I could. I figured it would be better for everyone if someone other than Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence kept an eye on them.

The following morning, it appeared that the bare minimum had been done by our new satellite editor so, before departing for Allahabad, I caught up on some work.

I report from the Lahore office of *The Northern Star*, where I cover events in Pakistan and distribute the paper to Company employees. After Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and FREEDOM'S SENTINEL, the United States facilitated the partition of Pashtunistan from Afghanistan and Pakistan. An American viceroy now led all U.S. and coalition personnel—including Indian security forces—and could independently budget, contract, and develop policy. The viceroy, called the U.S. Trustee to Afghanistan by the Americans, reported directly to the U.S. president.²¹ Besides a small special operations strike force, the Afghan advisory mission belonged to my employer—officially named the East Afghanistan Company—who managed the contracted advisors and their logistics and aviation support. These contracted soldiers lived with their Afghan counterparts on two-year deployments and my job was to keep them, in part, informed and entertained.²²

Once I was back in Lahore from Allahabad, I set to work on the weekly issue. Our custom was to post the issue on Saturday night, which is to say Sunday morning. The Indians and Pakistanis, in continuous conflict of one sort or another over the disputed territory of Kashmir, were at it again following a U.S. announcement recognizing the

²¹ Rosie Gray, "Erik Prince's Plan to Privatize the War in Afghanistan," *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/afghanistan-camp-david/537324/>.

²² Erik Prince, "The MacArthur Model for Afghanistan," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-macarthur-model-for-afghanistan-1496269058>.

Indian claim.²³ *That night, I was waiting alone for an update from my man on the ground and stepped outside for a cigarette. While a blast of hot wind from the west hit me, the hoot of the night-jars and the smell that precedes the rain almost made me forget the miserable heat for a second.*

No sooner had I settled back into my office chair than I was startled back to my senses when two men in white clothes burst through my door. The first one said, "It's him!" The second said, "It sure is!" And they both laughed as they mopped their foreheads. When they stepped into the light of my desk lamp, I recognized the eyebrows of the one and the beard of the other as the two men from the airport.

"We saw your light from across the road and I said to my friend here, 'The office is open. Let's go inside and speak to the guy who tried to throw us out of the country,'" said the one with the dark eyebrows.

How did they know I reported on them to anyone? "What do you want?" I asked.

"Half an hour of your time," said the red-bearded man with the ruby ring. "We'd like some drink—'The Contract' doesn't begin yet, Peachey—but what we really want is advice. We don't want money. We ask you as a favor, because we found out you tried to screw us."

I walked behind my desk and the red-haired man rubbed his hands while admiring the maps on the walls. "That's what I like to see," he said. "This was the right man to come to. Now, sir, let me introduce to you Petty Officer Peachey Carnehan, that's him, and Petty Officer Daniel Dravot, that's me, and the less said about our current professions the better, but he was a sniper and I was a medic while we were in uniform. Peachey is sober, and so am I. Pass me two cigars and watch us light up, to make sure. It will save you cutting into my talk."

I watched the test. The men were absolutely sober, so I gave them each a glass of whiskey.

²³ For more, see: Alex von Tunzelmann, *Indian Summer* (London: Picador, 2008); Husain Haqqani, *Magnificent Delusions* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013); Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

“That’s more like it,” said Peachey of the eyebrows, wiping the drink from his mustache. “Let me talk now, Danny. We made a go of it after we left the Navy and decided that the United States wasn’t big enough for us.”

They certainly were too big for the office. Danny’s beard seemed to fill half the room and Peachey’s shoulders the other half, as they sat on the big table. Peachey continued, “The United States squandered an opportunity to profit from Afghanistan’s mines but the Taliban aren’t—we heard they are partially funding their new country through gemstones mined in the eastern provinces of Nuristan and Badakhshan.²⁴ We know southern Afghanistan like the back of our hand—six deployments between the two of us—but never to those parts. So we came here to do our research, just like I asked at the airport. We figure there has to be some opportunity for us to profit as well. We are not little men, and there is nothing that we are afraid of except drink, and we will sign a contract on that.”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “You’ve been out in the sun, and it’s a very warm night. Why don’t you sleep on it and come back tomorrow?” I motioned toward the door with the intention that the next time they arrived I would have the proper authorities present.

“We have slept on it for six months and all we know is that no Americans have gone there (he gestured toward a spot on one of the maps on the wall) since the war ended. And the Nuristanis fight. In any place where they like to fight, a man who knows how to drill men can always be a big man. Oh, and we heard the women are beautiful,” said Danny with a grin.

“But that is provided against in ‘The Contract,’” said Peachey. “Neither woman nor liquor, Daniel.”

“You’ll be killed before you’re five miles across the Pashtunistan border,” I said.²⁵ “It’s one mass of mountains and peaks. The Taliban are brutal, and even if you reached a gemstone mine you couldn’t do anything.”²⁶

²⁴ For more, see: Ryan Hartwig, “A Resource Network Strategy for Afghanistan,” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2013).

²⁵ *The Man Who Would Be King.*

“That’s what we wanted to hear!” said Peachey. “Whenever someone calls you crazy, you know you’re onto something.” He turned to the bookcases. “A few maps to plan our route. We need to know something about the people, so how about some travelogues and ethnographies. It looks like you have some of those.”

“*Are you serious?*” I said.

“*A little,*” said Danny sweetly. “*Your biggest maps and any books you’ve got, please.*”

At this point, my curiosity as a reporter overcame my fear, so I fetched a large map of Afghanistan and Pakistan, two smaller maps—one of Nuristan and one marking all of the gemstone mines—and all the books written about Nuristan since *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush*. A thin stock, to be sure. The men dove into them.

“See here!” said Danny, his thumb on the map. “We will drive past Peshawar through the Khyber Pass and turn north at Jalalabad. *Then we get among the hills—fourteen thousand feet—fifteen thousand—it will be cold there, but it doesn’t look very far on the map.*”

I handed him *Men of Influence in Nuristan* by Schuyler Jones while Peachey already looked engrossed in *The Kafirs of the Hindu Kush* by George Robertson.

“The Nuristanis seem different than the Pashtuns,” said Danny, reading. “Says here, they have a caste system of landed elite called atrozans and craftsmen called bari. They handle most of their routine affairs through an agricultural council called the malawrai and convene temporary councils called du-wrai for special circumstances and dispute resolution.”²⁷

“But all the information about Nuristan is outdated,” I protested. “Despite the American occupation for twenty years, no one knows anything about it, really. Here’s *A Passage to Nuristan*. Read what Nicholas Barrington says.”

²⁶ For more, see: Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁷ Schuyler Jones, *Men of Influence in Nuristan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Academic Press, 1974), 40, 63.

I smoked and finished my column while the men paged through Nicholas Barrington's book and *Natural Resources in Afghanistan*. And they kept looking at the maps.

Then, as I was beginning to shut down my computer, Danny said, surprisingly politely, "It's about four o'clock now. We'll go so you can sleep. Could we borrow these books? We will come by next week to return them and say goodbye."

"You are two fools," I answered. "Sure, borrow them for as long as you like. You'll be turned back at the border anyway. Why don't you let me arrange an interview with The Company's Human Resources manager here next week? You two seem like perfect candidates to be Afghan army advisors."

"Next week we will be hard at work for ourselves, thank you," said Danny. "We will be back in Pakistan by winter and will swing by to show you our loot."

"Besides, would two lunatics make a contract like this?" said Peachey, with subdued pride, showing me a letter typed on a creased sheet of paper.

This contract between me and you persuing witnesseth in the name of God—Amen and so forth.

(One) That me and you will settle this matter together; i.e., to profit from a gemstone mine in Afghanistan.

(Two) That you and me will not, while this matter is being settled, look at any liquor, nor any woman black, white, or brown, so as to get mixed up with one or the other harmful.

(Three) That we conduct ourselves with dignity and discretion, and if one of us gets into trouble the other will stay by him.

Signed by you and me this day,

Peachey Taliaferro Carnehan

Daniel Dravot

Both Gentlemen at Large

“*There was no need for the last article,*” said Peachey, *blushing modestly.* “But it’s got a ring to it.”²⁸

Then the two ceremoniously downed their drinks and signed “The Contract.”

“Now you witness it, and it’s legal,” said Danny.²⁹ *So I made my initials—RK—under their signatures and scanned a copy, out of curiosity.*

“This is an idiotic adventure,” I said curtly. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

I saw them off, still poring over the books and maps by the light of their headlamps as they walked out into the night. “See you next week,” were their parting words.

The next week, I was closing the office when I overheard an argument between three local men wearing Chitrali caps across the street. One stormed away and I walked closer to gain a better view. Then, to my surprise, one addressed me in English. By the unmistakable ruby ring on his finger, I immediately recognized who it was.

“Well, we are doing it on our own, then!” said Danny. “*Peachey can’t talk their patter so I’ll be our tour guide. We’ll be in Peshawar by the end of the day. Put your hand under the bags in the trunk and tell me what you feel.*” So I walked around to the back of their blue sedan and worked my arm into the mess until I touched two boxes.

I felt the blades of something that felt like a small airplane. A drone. And another and another.

“*Twelve of ‘em,*” said Danny placidly.

“*Heaven help you if you are caught with those things!*” I whispered. “Guns are a dime a dozen, but a drone! *A drone is worth its weight in silver among the Pashtuns.*”

²⁸ *The Man Who Would Be King.*

²⁹ *The Man Who Would Be King.*

“Every rupee we could beg, borrow, or steal is invested in the trunk of this car. We won’t get caught—we’re just a couple of locals,” he said with a wink. *“Before I forget, here are your books.”*

Overcome with astonishment by their determination, and with a perfunctory, if not quite heartfelt, nod to protocol, I asked them if they needed anything else.

“Not yet, but we will soon. Goodbye,” said Danny, giving me his hand cautiously. *“Today is the last time we’ll shake hands with an American for a while. Shake hands with him, Peachey.”*

Peachey leaned across the hood and shook hands. I gave him the rosary from my pocket. *“For good luck,”* I said.

Two days later, a local correspondent in Pashtunistan, who was updating me on the latest news from Peshawar, wound up his email with: “I overheard two men at the American Club boasting about their plans to find a gemstone mine in Afghanistan. It is clear they don’t know the first thing about what they are getting themselves into.”

The two, I thought to myself, are beyond the border then. I would have prayed for them, but, that night, another military coup was brewing in Pakistan, and the democratically elected government demanded an obituary.

* * * * *

The wheel of the world continued to turn and, three years later, I still was working at the The Northern Star. I worked out of the same dilapidated one story building on the outskirts of the city—an artifact of British India—and, besides the trees in the courtyard garden growing a few feet taller, nothing much had changed. On one particularly hot night, I waited in my dimly lit office for the last bit of news to arrive from my man in Kashmir.

As I stood by an open window to catch the breeze since the air conditioner was broken, a sense of something disturbingly familiar came over me. *The blast of the hot wind from the west, the hoot of the nightjars, and the smell that precedes the rain tried to conjure up a memory, but it was three o’clock in the morning, and my mind was foggy.*

Then, a figure of a man—I guess you could describe it as a man—stood in the open front door of my small office building. He was bent forward, his head sunk between his shoulders, and he moved his feet one over the other like a bear. He addressed me by name—this rag-wrapped cripple—and asked for a drink. I went back to my desk, the man following with groans of pain, and poured him a glass of whiskey.

“Don’t you know me?” he gasped, dropping into a chair. Then he looked into the light with a bearded face framed by matted grey hair. I looked at him intently. Once before I had seen eyebrows that met over the nose in an inch-broad black band, but for the life of me I could not recall where.

“I don’t know you,” I said, handing him the whisky. “What can I do for you?” He took a gulp and, in spite of the suffocating heat, shivered.

“I’m back,” he said, and gingerly rested his glass on my desk. “We went through the mountains—those damn mountains!—to get rich. It was all settled right here in this office—remember? Danny and I signed ‘The Contract’ and you witnessed it. You sat there behind your desk and I stood here and Danny here. Remember? Look at me!”

Realizing who stood before me, a lump formed in my stomach as my mind tried to imagine what series of events would have left him in such a wretched state. “Carnehan! Of course,” I said, sitting back in my chair.³⁰

“Peachey Taliaferro Carnehan—the same and not the same—who met you on a flight to Lahore three summers and a thousand years ago,” he said.³¹ “We were like kings in that valley, me and Dravot. Poor Danny—oh, poor, poor Danny. That bastard would never take advice, even though I begged him!”

Out of habit, I hastily reached into my drawer for my digital voice recorder and then, not wanting to spook the poor man, cautiously laid it on my lap and pressed the red button. *I said, “Take another sip of whisky and tell me everything you can remember*

³⁰ John Huston and Gladys Hill, *The Man Who Would Be King* (Hollywood: Script City, 1974), 2.

³¹ Huston and Hill, *The Man Who Would Be King*, 2.

from beginning to end. Take your time. You crossed into Pashtunistan in your car, both dressed as locals.³² Do you remember that?"

"I ain't crazy—yet—but I will be soon. Of course I remember. Keep looking at me, or maybe my words will all go to pieces. Keep looking at me in my eyes and don't say anything."

I leaned forward and looked into his face as steadily as I could, although I couldn't help but stare at the hand that still held the glass. It was twisted like a bird's claw from frostbite.

"No, don't look there. Look at me," said Peachey, pulling his hand into his lap. "That comes afterwards, but for the Lord's sake don't distract me. We left for Peshawar in high spirits. We were going to be rich, and Danny was cracking jokes the entire way. We put up in a dingy little hotel..."

"And then crossed over the Khyber Pass to Jalalabad," I interrupted. "From there you turned north to Kunar and into Nuristan."

"No, we didn't. What are you talking about? We turned north for Chitral when we overheard at the American Club that the passes were open straight into Nuristan. The Afghanistan-Pashtunistan border dispute was hot at that time and we couldn't risk being caught.³³ We loaded our gear onto two horses and headed up the Dewanah Baba—the Old Madman's Pass.³⁴ The two horses were overladen and stopped moving before we reached the top. Just as a storm was rolling in, two men with four fresh horses came along. Danny spoke to them in Dari and said, 'Sell me your horses.' The first man said, 'If you are rich enough to buy, you are rich enough to rob.' But before the man could draw his rifle, I shot him dead, and the second man ran away. We loaded the gear onto the four horses and continued through those bitter cold mountains on winding rocky trails no wider than the back of your hand."

³² Trevithick and Seckman, "Heart of Darkness."

³³ Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefevre, and Frederic Lemercier, *The Photographer* (New York and London: First Second, 2009), 24–25.

³⁴ Guibert, Lefevre, and Lemercier, *The Photographer*, 37.

“Take some more whisky,” I said slowly. “What did you and Danny do when you entered Nuristan?”

Peachey finished his whiskey, drinking every last drop, and continued. “We finally made it into the first valley and stopped for breakfast at a teahouse; we had been traveling all night and were terribly hungry.³⁵ The first thing we noticed were the women working in the fields, carrying wooden pitchforks and conical woven baskets. On our deployments to Afghanistan, we rarely saw women in the villages, but here the women worked unveiled, wearing red and black dresses tied around the waist with a wide white sash, moccasins on their feet, and long hair in braids.³⁶ They were beautiful. We left that valley and continued over one high alpine mountain pass after another towards Badakhshan—we wanted to find a lapis lazuli mine there.³⁷ Then we came out of a great forest of pine, walnut, holly, and ash into a big, level valley that stretched like a carpet of rich green. From our perch at the foot of the mountain, we could see all kinds of flowers alongside a meandering river and, when the wind blew down the valley, we could smell wild herbs.³⁸ *Our horses were exhausted and so were we, so we sat on our two boxes of drones and played our favorite card game—cribbage—using the dirt for our board and loose ammunition for pegs.*

“Then we heard the report of automatic weapons echoing off the mountains like thunder and saw fifteen men dressed in white turbans running down the valley, chasing five men dressed in black robes.³⁹ The five men looked white—as white as you or me. We scrambled to load the horses. Danny said, shouldering his rifle, ‘This is the beginning of the business. We’ll fight for the five men,’ and with that he fired at the fifteen men, and dropped one of them at two hundred yards from the rock where he was sitting. We picked them off at all ranges—six in all—up and down the valley, until the last nine men in white

³⁵ Guibert, Lefevre, and Lemercier, *The Photographer*, 40.

³⁶ Nicholas Barrington, Joseph T. Kendrick, and Reinhard Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), 86.

³⁷ Barrington, Kendrick, and Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan*, 63.

³⁸ Barrington, Kendrick, and Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan*, 44, 48.

³⁹ Malcolm, *White Tigers*, 67.

turbans retreated. Then we walked down the hill towards the men dressed in black. When we approached them, I was amazed—some even had blonde hair and blue eyes.”

I interrupted, “Wait—tell me more about the battle.”

“What about it? It was like any other—that’s not important,” Peachey continued. “So Danny greeted them in Dari and they said to him, ‘You saved us. Those men in white turbans were Taliban who seized our gemstone mine. We are from Er-Heb and are trying to take it back.’ Danny asked what they mined and they described a translucent blue and green gemstone. I said to Danny, once he translated what they said, that it sounded like tourmaline. By then it was late so they invited us to dinner. We went with them to their village where we were served a simple meal of cheese, barley bread, and tea.⁴⁰ That was how we came to Er-Heb, just as though we had tumbled from the skies.”

“Take some more whiskey and go on,” I said. Expecting an all-nighter, I drew a second glass and poured myself some, too.

“During dinner we talked mostly about the valley, so Danny and I could confirm our route—our map didn’t show this village—to the lapis lazuli mines in Badakhshan. The men explained that Er-Heb was located on the east side of the valley, oriented on the south side of the mountains leading to the pass we had crossed.⁴¹ The Taliban we encountered had come from Shu, a village ten kilometers to the south on the west side of the valley, also oriented on the south side of the mountains leading to another pass. The Taliban were Pashto-speaking Pashtuns from Kunar, and it seemed their job was to defend the tourmaline mine from our hosts’ repeated attacks.

“The valley was about one kilometer wide. In between Er-Heb and Shu was a third village called Bashkai, situated along the river in the valley floor. Each village had about 300 households, and the residents all spoke local Nuristani languages.⁴² Our hosts

⁴⁰ Barrington, Kendrick, and Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan*, 60.

⁴¹ Jones, *Men of Influence in Nuristan*, 25.

⁴² Barrington, Kendrick, and Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan*, 36, 49–50.

looked like misplaced Nordic fishermen compared to the Pashtuns' darker complexions.⁴³

“They said the tourmaline mine was located next to Shu, on the face of the mountain on the south side of the pass. As Danny translated, I sketched a map of the valley in my notebook (Figure 1).⁴⁴ When everyone finished eating, one of the men, the mirab, offered to let us stay in a house that was empty and sat next to his.

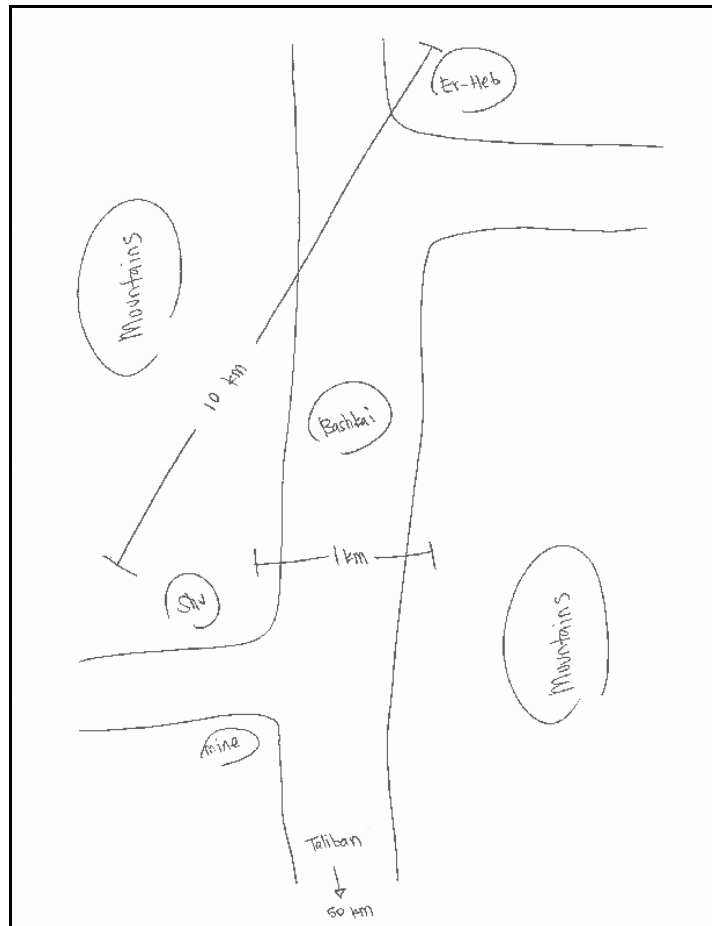


Figure 1. Peachey's Map

⁴³ Barrington, Kendrick, and Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan*, 82.

⁴⁴ David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

“They didn’t just feed you and then kick you out of the valley?” I interrupted. “I thought people there hated non-Muslims.”

“No, not at all. Their tribal code dictated that they host us, especially after what we did. Don’t forget—we saved their lives. But also, we made it very clear that we were Christians. I did, at least.⁴⁵ When the elders began thumbing their prayer beads, I did the same with your rosary. Then the mirab saw my necklace during dinner and it led to a conversation about Mary’s place in Islam. Did you know she is the only woman mentioned in the Qur’an?⁴⁶ Come to find out, we had more in common than I thought.

“Anyway, the next morning, Danny and I decided there wasn’t any rush to leave. So, we agreed to stay and hear more from them about the tourmaline mine. While drinking cups upon cups of tea—too many to remember—we learned more about life in the valley, too.⁴⁷

“Their economic system combined agriculture with herding. While the women tended to fields of millet, corn, barley, and wheat, the men left for weeks and months at a time to graze their goats, cattle, and sheep in the high alpine summer pastures.⁴⁸ A village government called the mala-wrai oversaw agricultural affairs, such as irrigation, harvest, and livestock grazing. They also imposed and collected fines—goats and cattle for serious infractions, cheese and grain for minor ones. The most influential elder, called the dustuk, presided over the mala-wrai, and new members were chosen every year at the vernal equinox at an open air meeting place.⁴⁹

“The men who weren’t busy tending to livestock carried butter over the passes to Chitral—the way we came—to trade for items they didn’t make in the valley; mostly caps.⁵⁰ The passes, and often the main road, were closed from October to March due to

⁴⁵ T. E. Lawrence, “Twenty-seven Articles,” *The Arab Bulletin*, August 20, 1917.

⁴⁶ Koran 19:16–34.

⁴⁷ Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, 1-22–1-23.

⁴⁸ Jones, *Men of Influence in Nuristan*, 26.

⁴⁹ Jones, *Men of Influence in Nuristan*, 40, 44, 46.

⁵⁰ Eric Newby, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (London: Picador, 1958), 216–217.

heavy snowfall, completely isolating the valley. That required disciplined storage of food and supplies. That's one reason the mala-wrai was important. And then, there was the tourmaline mine—known locally as 'The General.'⁵¹

“Previously, the 'The General' was controlled by a valleywide council, or du-wrai, consisting equally of members from Er-Heb, Bashkai, and Shu. The du-wrai oversaw rights to individual shafts and mediated disputes over conflicting claims. Tourmaline was mined using traditional methods—sledge hammers, hand drills, and pick-and-shovel—and then carried to Peshawar for sale and transport to China.⁵² Since farming and herding didn't provide much more than basic subsistence, the tourmaline mine was a coveted source of income.

“But once the Taliban got Pashtunistan, and it was separated from Afghanistan and Pakistan, some Taliban fighters from Kunar ran off the small guard force and seized 'The General.' These were some small clashes, like the one Danny and I stumbled on, but the villagers always lost. The Taliban backed a sympathetic elder from Shu named Ootah, who some people thought facilitated their arrival in the first place, and began collecting revenue. Ootah pocketed half of the revenue while the rest went to the Taliban representative posted at the tourmaline mine.

“Since men from Er-Heb or Bashkai no longer had access to their tourmaline shafts, Shu locals and some Pashtuns from Kunar connected to the Taliban did all of the mining. Ootah guarded the 'The General' with men from Shu and a larger Taliban force was poised at the mouth of the valley, about fifty kilometers to the south. They controlled the main road and levied additional taxes. Besides the two mountain passes outside of Er-Heb and Shu, the main road was the only way in and out of the valley. The villagers of Er-Heb, Bashkai, and Shu were still allowed to rule themselves in their traditional way, but the profits from the 'The General' were gone.

“Already, by our second afternoon staying in the mirab's spare house, Danny started what became an impromptu clinic in the living room of our house to treat small

⁵¹ Stephen Carter, “War in the Treasury of the People,” *Global Witness*, June 5, 2016, 1.

⁵² Shroder, *Natural Resources in Afghanistan*, 369; Carter, “War in the Treasury of the People,” 38.

ailments and injuries. It turned out, the mirab's daughter, named Roxanne, wanted to become a doctor. She translated for the non-Dari speaking villagers and helped treat female patients.

“Over the next couple of weeks, between Danny's conversations, my own probing treks around the valley with various men of Er-Heb, and endless cups of tea, we gained a pretty good local knowledge.

“One day, during one of these treks with the mirab, I passed through Bashkai so he could invite their mala-wrai to Er-Heb to discuss a small matter regarding the summer pastures. Danny sometimes came along to translate, but this time I was on my own with the mirab. As we approached the village, I heard a voice from between two buildings. ‘I say... are you American, please?’⁵³ I swung my head and saw a man walking towards me. I answered yes, and asked how he knew English. He responded that he had been an interpreter for a Special Forces A-Team in Wardak Province. Then he gave me his life story. He spoke fast, but what I picked up was that he was from the lower, craftsman class, or bari, and that he was a member of Bashkai's mala-wrai. He would be present for the meeting of the two villages.

“Two nights later, Danny and I attended the meeting between Er-Heb and Bashkai. We wore our uniforms since they were our cleanest clothes and we wanted to stand apart from the villagers. The elders arrived, wearing their Chitrali caps, embroidered jackets over cotton shirts, brown trousers over black leggings, moccasins, and with a dagger tucked into their wide belts.⁵⁴ They also carried ceremonial axes.⁵⁵ Danny elbowed me and said he wanted one for himself.

“After the matter regarding the summer pastures was settled, which didn't take long, the conversation turned to the tourmaline mine. One of the fighters who Danny and I had met on our first day made a lengthy case for retaking the ‘The General.’ I whispered to Danny that this might be our chance and he agreed. He then proclaimed that we could

⁵³ Huston and Hill, *The Man Who Would Be King*, 25.

⁵⁴ Barrington, Kendrick, and Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan*, 34, 84.

⁵⁵ Jones, *Men of Influence in Nuristan*, 182.

assist their cause and that we had special weapons in our kit. Danny described them as small rockets that we could control from the ground, and that we would use these ‘kamikaze’ drones in their service. All we asked in return was four horses’ worth of tourmaline when the job was done.

“Then the bari man, who was tending the fire, spoke up and said that, due to his credentials, he would assist Danny and me. He said that we should start by securing Er-Heb to serve as a staging area from which to operate.⁵⁶ Danny responded that I would be the bari man’s advisor—though it would turn out the other way around—and would support the villagers with the drones, kind of like Ben Malcom did for the North Korean partisans.⁵⁷ Danny said that he would continue to run the clinic. Both mala-wrais enthusiastically agreed and the bari man said he would move into our house.

“When the meeting ended, I walked with the bari man (who went by the nickname his Special Forces A-Team in Wardak gave him: Billy Fish) back to our house and asked him why he volunteered to help. He said, ‘During the war, I had an important job and did well as an interpreter. When I returned to Bashkai, I was only a bari and no one cared what I had done. Leading this army with you will give me a chance to make a name for myself and pull my family into the atrozan.’⁵⁸

“The next morning, Billy Fish returned with a rucksack, his rifle, and a worn book under his arm. I was surprised to see the book. He informed me it was a gift from his last team leader in Wardak. While he meticulously arranged his gear, I noticed the title, *Rebellion and Authority*, complete with a Naval Postgraduate School library call number on the spine.”⁵⁹

“Tell me more about this book,” I interrupted. “Did Billy arrive with a plan?”

“Oh yeah, he had it all figured out. We stayed up late that night discussing his plan and, frankly, I was surprised. I’d always been taught how important winning ‘hearts

⁵⁶ Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, 5-1.

⁵⁷ Malcom, *White Tigers*, 69.

⁵⁸ Jones, *Men of Influence in Nuristan*, 166.

⁵⁹ Leites and Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority*.

and minds' was. That was what was preached during my tours in Afghanistan. But Billy had a different approach, influenced by this book. So I started reading it that night, too. And from what I remember, Leites and Wolf said that since 'demand conditions,' or 'hearts and minds,' are less responsive than 'supply conditions,' like people and materiel, then it would be more efficient to focus on the supply side, especially if progress lacks behind promises.⁶⁰

"Billy knew that, in order to win, we didn't necessarily need the support, sympathy, or loyalty of the villagers.⁶¹ In fact, Ootah and the Taliban, although supported by a small portion of the population in Shu who benefited from their actions, enjoyed almost total control. Barging into a village and trying to win 'hearts and minds' at gunpoint was an uphill battle.

"So, instead of the usual 'clear, hold, and build,' which is what the counterinsurgency field manual promotes, our plan was to 'disrupt, isolate, clear, and control.'⁶² Disruption operations would put Ootah and the Taliban on the defensive, keeping them on the move. Then, we would isolate the village with observation posts manned by local police. That would be the equivalent of drying the river to catch the fish, to borrow a phrase from Mao.⁶³ And then we'd be able to clear the village. Control would be established through a series of measures—the equivalent of using beat cop patrols and curfews in Baltimore.

"By the end of the week, Billy had gathered twenty men nominated by the elders—the original five plus another fifteen from the village—who would form our tribal protection force, or arbakai. Then we embarked on a two-week training program: one week of rifle marksmanship and one week of policing skills. Billy did all of the teaching. I was around, but tried to keep a low profile and really only interacted with the arbakai chief."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Leites and Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority*, 29.

⁶¹ Leites and Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority*, 149.

⁶² Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, 5-18.

⁶³ Leites and Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority*, 76.

⁶⁴ Lawrence, "Twenty-seven Articles," *The Arab Bulletin*.

“Wait a second,” I said. “You mean to tell me you were going to do all of that—‘disrupt, isolate, clear, and control’—with one unit? Just twenty *arbakai*!”

“Well, you go to war with the army you have, to quote Secretary Rumsfeld.⁶⁵ Sure, in a perfect world we would have had multiple units in addition to the *arbakai*: Commandos, a Frontier Guard, and an intelligence collection unit. But the villages were relatively small and didn’t have a ton of guys to spare.⁶⁶ This was the simplest solution.

“Our first order of business was to build observation posts at the pass to the east of Er-Heb and along the valley road towards Bashkai. We convinced the *mala-wrai* to pay a small amount of cheese and grain to villagers who helped us with the construction, and we modeled the construction after their alpine huts.⁶⁷

“Once the observation posts were manned and Er-Heb effectively isolated, Billy and I then started to patrol with the *arbakai* through the village, especially at night. There were no Taliban, yet, but it was only a matter of time before they caught wind that the villages were up to something. Plus, they’d surely already heard about us.

“The *arbakai* operated in pairs, our basic unit of measure, and our general rule of thumb was to have about a third of them on patrol at any time, day or night, in separate parts of the village.⁶⁸ We especially wanted the *arbakai* who were on duty in the evening to stay out into the night—so-called blue-green patrolling—in an effort to reassure the population through constant and unpredictable activity.⁶⁹

“The last step in Er-Heb was to establish control through a curfew. Like I said, we had the *arbakai* out at night and were on the lookout for Taliban. The *mala-wrai* explained to the villagers that this would keep the Taliban from visiting them at night. If no one was moving around, no one could sneak into the village. The *mala-wrai* told the

⁶⁵ Eric Schmitt, “Iraq-Bound Troops Confront Rumsfeld Over Lack of Armor,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 2004.

⁶⁶ Jim Gant, *One Tribe at a Time* (Los Angeles: Nine Sisters Imports, Inc., 2009), 41.

⁶⁷ Newby, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, 189.

⁶⁸ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger Security International, 1964), 78; Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 39.

⁶⁹ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 39.

villagers that they would be fined grain and cheese if they violated the curfew.⁷⁰ Of course, we weren't so hardcore that villagers could never go out or socialize at night—they just had to clear it with the mala-wrai.”

“What about a census and issuing identification cards?” I asked, since those are common control measures, too. “Why didn't you use them?”

“Those might be fine control measures in built-up areas—I remember reading about them, too, in the field manual. But in our valley, those tactics weren't necessary since the villagers all knew each other. Every area is different and a curfew was sufficient for us. As it turned out, the curfew helped increase the legitimacy of the village government by demonstrating a capacity for control.”⁷¹

Before Peachey continued, I remembered thinking it was remarkable that they had adapted bits and pieces of dense theory to their specific situation.

“After about two weeks, we felt that our staging area in Er-Heb was sufficiently developed and the arbakai were able to operate on their own. I know that doesn't seem like much time, but, coming from a place where almost every man owned a rifle, they were already good shots and they were very enthusiastic.⁷² They really wanted to take back their tourmaline mine.

“Billy went to the elders and asked them to call Bashkai's mala-wrai to discuss expanding from Er-Heb to Bashkai.

“So, a few days later, Bashkai's mala-wrai arrived and, once again, we found ourselves sitting around the fire in the open air meeting place as the men grasped their ceremonial axes. A feast was prepared and Danny, Billy, and I ate from tripod tables. These tables had legs fashioned to form horns. It took fifteen iron bars for ours, a sign of prestige. Billy was beside himself with satisfaction since the highest ranking men eat from tables built with eighteen iron bars, and it is rare for a bari to be included at all.

⁷⁰ Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, 5-21.

⁷¹ John Glubb, *A Soldier with the Arabs* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1957), 409–410; Leites and Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority*, 137.

⁷² Newby, *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, 215.

“I didn’t care either way—I was just hungry. Then we were served local wine from a large silver chalice, which we declined according to ‘The Contract.’⁷³ After dinner, the Er-Heb elders proclaimed their pride in their new arbakai and their desire to restore mining rights to the valley. The Bashkai elders listened, but were somewhat hesitant—they feared Taliban reprisals, claiming that they lived closer to Shu and Ootah’s goons.

“Billy interjected and said that, if the elders nominated twenty men, we would train them in Er-Heb and then move in force to Bashkai. Billy and I would stay with the arbakai to show our commitment until it was time to expand to Shu. Only after our reassurances and a few glasses of wine did the elders agree and said they would find an empty house for us to move into when we arrived.

“A week went by before our twenty recruits arrived from Bashkai. We began our training course, much like we had with the Er-Heb arbakai, but this time we added an extra week to teach observation post procedures and battle drills. That went well, and then, when they were ready, we departed Er-Heb for Bashkai, leaving Danny in the clinic.

“We marched straight from Er-Heb and set a blocking position on the valley road to the south of Bashkai towards Shu. The Taliban didn’t try to stop us, which was surprising since this was when we were most vulnerable. That actually made me nervous so I made sure I had the drones ready to fly.

“Just as before, we arranged through the mala-wrai to pay villagers grain and cheese to help build an observation post at the blocking position, using the same template of an alpine hut.

“The day after construction was completed, a few of Ootah’s men attacked the observation post. Billy and I had just sat down to lunch in the village when we heard gunfire to the south. We found some of the other arbakai and, after about ten minutes of continuous fighting, realized that they were at a stalemate, evenly matched in firepower. I ran back to our house, launched a drone and struck a group of the enemy fighters grouped

⁷³ Jones, *Men of Influence in Nuristan*, 182, 170.

behind a boulder alongside the river. This broke the enemy's fire long enough for our arbakai to maneuver, just like we taught them in their third week of training. Within twenty minutes, the arbakai had routed the enemy from their positions along the river and forced their retreat back to Shu. We had our first victory.

“My slow response with the strike, though, made it clear that we needed a way to talk to the observation posts. So Billy arranged for some villagers who were traveling to Jalalabad that week to purchase some push-to-talk radios. When the radios arrived, we issued two per observation post so they could call Billy during an attack. We agreed that Billy would tell me if we needed to launch a drone.

“Our arbakai in Bashkai used the same patrol tactics that we used in Er-Heb, but this time the Taliban didn't stay away. A week after our victory at the observation post, a pair of arbakai on a blue-green patrol came across some Taliban, who they scared away. Over the next three weeks, the Taliban delivered a few night letters—mainly threats of reprisals if we expanded towards ‘The General’—but our unpredictable, deterrent tactics prevented any major influx. Around the same time, we instituted a curfew with the same fines of grain and cheese.

“After about a month, we were well established in Er-Heb and Bashkai. The arbakai were also operating well on their own. The villages were secure. One way we knew we were doing well is that the Taliban, fearing the worst, began to send fighters up from the mouth of the valley, and our observation posts repelled numerous attacks. The attacks came mostly in the evening, about thirty minutes before sunset. We could tell whenever the Taliban were trying to overrun an observation post by the volume of fire and aggressive tactics. When an attack began, the arbakai would radio Billy who, if necessary, would request a drone—I ended up conducting three strikes. The confidence of our arbakai increased with every attack they repelled.

“By now, Billy's and my house was a happening spot—villagers from Bashkai and Er-Heb would regularly show up unannounced to chat. We would, of course, make tea and hear them out, sometimes over several hours, many cups of tea, and late into the night. After a while, I remembered the ‘coffee klatsches’ that Edward Lansdale hosted for

Filipino government officials during the Huk Rebellion.⁷⁴ So, once a week we would invite the arbakai and elders from the mala-wrai to tea for informal discussions about whatever was on their minds—usually ‘The General.’ It also turned out to be a great way for me to recommend slight adjustments to the arbakai or provide an objective opinion to a village dispute. The ‘tea klatsch’ sessions also allowed Billy and me to expand our informal influence among the villages, especially regarding the reformation of the valleywide council to manage the tourmaline mine.

“One of the better ideas from our ‘tea klatsch’ sessions was a slogan proposed by one of the Bashkai arbakai: ‘Our Valley, Our Tourmaline, Our Pride.’⁷⁵ The idea was to reinforce to the villagers that the arbakai were there for them, to remove the Taliban puppet Ootah, restore tourmaline mining rights to the entire valley, and ensure nothing like this ever happened again. This sounds obvious but, in a valley where arbakai did not exist previously, it was important to reinforce this message. So, we hired a local bari craftsman to create small signs and posted them around Bashkai and Er-Heb. We even were able to sneak a few into Shu, although those didn’t last long.

“Late one evening, not long after the attacks tailed off, Billy and I received a knock on our door from two of the arbakai. They said an elder from Shu was waiting in the open air meeting place with some of the elders from Bashkai. By this time, it was September and the air was cold, so I pulled my heaviest down jacket close as we huddled near the fire. The elder from Shu, who I called Pikky Kergan after a guy he resembled in my first platoon, was requesting arbakai and said he already had a house picked out for us. He told us that a few of his villagers still mined some of the smaller shafts, but they were being taxed so heavily by Ootah that the profits were hardly worth the effort. He said that more and more Pashtuns from Kunar affiliated with the Taliban were also coming in to mine, and they were using dynamite, which damaged the tourmaline much more than traditional methods.

⁷⁴ Edward Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 47.

⁷⁵ Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 69.

“Billy and I told Pikky that we would consider his offer. Of course, we didn’t really think about it, but we needed to test his commitment to see whether he’d come back to ask us again. When he did, we asked him to send us twenty men who we would train in Bashkai. We also told him to, slyly, pass to Ootah this message: ‘Abandon the tourmaline mine. Arbakai will soon arrive with the intention of returning the mine to the three villages and will remain in the area.’⁷⁶ Pikky agreed to both requests and, sure enough, two days later twenty men arrived in Bashkai as promised.

“While Billy trained the arbakai, I embarked on a heavy disruption campaign of drone strikes. I could afford to use the drones more liberally now that we had trustworthy villagers and arbakai. Anytime we got word of a Taliban checkpoint at the mouth of the valley, a massing of guards at ‘The General,’ or a night patrol towards one of our observation posts from our expanding local intelligence network, I would launch a drone for a strike—as I recall five in total. By the time the Shu arbakai were ready, the Taliban and Ootah’s militia were on the defensive.

“Before we left for Shu, I made one last trip to Er-Heb to see Danny and ask him to join us to retake ‘The General.’ It turns out, Danny hadn’t just been busy treating the villagers and the occasional wounded arbakai, but he’d also been helping the mirab adjudicate some local water disputes. The villagers loved him, and he himself wasn’t in any rush to leave. Even so, he agreed.

“Danny followed me to Bashkai the next night wearing his body armor over local garb. All of us then departed early the following morning for Shu. Two pairs of arbakai pushed past Shu and established a blocking position along the road toward the south. Another two pairs turned straight up the pass to block an incursion from the west. With the remaining twelve arbakai, Billy, Danny, and I crept up on ‘The General’ and, at first light, began our assault. Danny led half of the arbakai towards the small administrative building at the base of the mountain while Billy and I accompanied the remainder to an elevated position near the shafts. Once we were set, Danny and his arbakai moved on the building and seized it—no one was inside.

⁷⁶ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, 77.

“We had captured ‘The General.’

“While Billy and I poked around the shafts to make sure they were well and truly clear, I heard gunfire erupt from the valley floor—word must have traveled quickly. As I rushed to the mouth of the mine shaft, I saw a rocket propelled grenade slam into the side of the building, kicking up a cloud of rocks and dust. Our arbakai opened fire and I quickly sent up a drone, routing the attackers in short order.

“Leaving the arbakai on the high ground, I made my way down to the building. Danny came out to meet me, his beard covered in dust and his rifle slung across his chest. He was holding the rocket’s tail fin like a scepter. Blood soaked his left sleeve and I noticed a small piece of metal sticking through a tear in his shirt. ‘I’m okay,’ he said. ‘I’ll go back to Er-Heb to take care of this. You need to get to Shu.’

“So, leaving two pairs of arbakai at ‘The General,’ Billy and I took the rest to Shu, where we asked Pikky to gather the mala-wrai. We told the mala-wrai that we needed to pay the villagers in grain and cheese to build observation posts in the valley road and at the pass. Then, following the same manner as at Er-Heb and Bashkai, we placed the arbakai on a patrol rotation and instituted a curfew in the village.

“After a few weeks, things settled down considerably in Shu. It turns out that there really had been very few Taliban in Shu itself and they were not well liked. Two villagers who had quietly supported them were fined one goat each. Even though the arbakai searched every square inch of Shu, Ootah eluded us. His capture was the final link we needed to ensure the valley’s security.

“The Taliban, obviously upset about the loss of their tourmaline mine, attempted to enter the village on two consecutive nights one week after we secured it. But our observation posts at the passes and on the valley floor, with the help of two well placed drone strikes, turned them away. With firm control over the villages by the arbakai, we began to attract defectors from Ootah’s opportunistic lieutenants who were coaxed with

rewards of goats and tired of their hard life since we brought arbakai to the valley.⁷⁷ A good thing, because I was out of drones.

“With control established, Billy and I called the three villages together and suggested that the valleywide du-wrai be reestablished so that mining could continue in the spring. They agreed and said that, over the winter, each village would nominate members to sit on the council. Once they did that, the next step would be to divide the shafts and re-initiate trade via their traditional routes over the mountains to Peshawar.

“The last order of business was Ootah, who was still at large. The Shu villagers, now feeling safe from reprisals, reported to the arbakai on his location at an alpine hut south of ‘The General.’ Shu’s mala-wrai talked to his relatives and summoned him back to the village. After about a week, he returned and was imprisoned for a short time while a specially convened du-wrai deliberated on his punishment. Ultimately, a hefty fine of goats was levied on Ootah and he and his sons were banned from sitting on the mala-wrai, his social prestige effectively ruined.

“With all of the action in Shu, I hadn’t seen Danny in weeks. So, once the matter with Ootah was decided, I made the trip to Er-Heb. When I arrived, I was a bit startled. Danny was wearing a white woolen coat with red and blue squares embroidered on the sleeve—a garment typically reserved for dustuks—and he had turned the rocket tailfin into a scepter and was carrying it around like one of their ceremonial axes.⁷⁸

“‘I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something,’ said Danny when I arrived. He was weighing his scepter in his hand so I knew something was on his mind. ‘Roxanne and I have been spending a lot of time together at the clinic. Winter is coming and I am going to ask her to be my wife.’

“*‘For God’s sake, leave the women alone!’ I said. ‘We came here to get rich. Remember ‘The Contract’: keep clear of women.’*

⁷⁷ Leites and Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority*, 80, 82.

⁷⁸ Barrington, Kendrick, and Schlagintweit, *A Passage to Nuristan*, 52.

“‘*The Contract*’ only lasted until we made a profit and we did that—‘*The General*’ is open so we can collect our payment,’ said Danny.

“‘Exactly!’ I said. ‘Let’s cash in for our gemstones and get back to Pakistan before the snow falls. *If you’re determined to break ‘The Contract,’ at least let it be with alcohol. I’ll see if Billy can run in some liquor from an abandoned Agency post. But no women.*’

“‘Who’s talking about a woman?’ said Danny. ‘I said wife—a Nuristani woman to breed an atrozan bloodline. I’m not going back to Pakistan, Peachey.’

“‘For the last time, drop it,’ I said. ‘What happened to ‘plan your dive, dive your plan?’’

“‘I will marry Roxanne,’ said Danny, and he stormed away through the pine trees looking like a big red devil, the sun reflecting off his Chitralli cap and beard.

“*But marrying Roxanne was not as easy as Danny thought.*

“*That night, I joined him while he put the idea to the mala-wrai. They were not the least bit receptive and Danny damned them all around.* Before we left, I furtively told the mala-wrai, using the few local words I knew, that I would be collecting my gemstones and heading back to Pakistan. The next day I returned to Shu by way of Bashkai, telling both groups of elders my plans. When I arrived in Shu, Billy told me word of the incident had already spread through the valley.

“‘*It would be better for all of us if you could make Danny drop all this nonsense about marriage,*’ Billy said. ‘You are good men, but even a good man with good intentions can cause a lot of trouble if he doesn’t understand what he is doing. I’ll go with you to Er-Heb to sort this out.’

“Back in Shu, I led two horses to ‘The General’ with a pair of arbakai and filled their packs. The next morning, we left for Er-Heb. When we arrived at Danny’s house, I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was drugged—probably opiates, still self-medicating after his injury. Billy explained to Danny that, besides the fact that Roxanne’s father already had another suitor in mind, the other villages feared an undue influence of

Er-Heb if an American married into their village. The last thing they wanted was a repeat of the events in Shu.

“But Danny wouldn’t have any of it and pulled on his body armor and helmet. Then he grabbed his rifle and stormed out to go find Roxanne, whose father had prevented her from working at the clinic ever since the incident before the mala-wrai. While he was gone, a large crowd of elders and arbakai had gathered around his house. *A little snow had fallen in the night, and everything was white except the greasy fat clouds that blew down and down from the north.*

“About an hour later, Billy and I walked outside and saw the arbakai to our left, while Danny and Roxanne approached a growing crowd around the house. *‘Call up all the elders and let’s begin the ceremony,’ Danny shouted.*

“There was no need to call anyone. They were all there leaning on their guns. Billy Fish sauntered around and got as close to Danny as he could, and behind him stood the twenty arbakai with rifles. I ducked back inside the house to grab my body armor, helmet, and rifle.

“Then the dustuk walked up to Danny and, pointing a finger at his face, shouted something in their lingo. Danny responded by grasping Roxanne’s hand and, when he did, a man from the crowd, who I presumed was her would-be husband, stepped out and began to raise his rifle. Before he could level his weapon, I shouldered my rifle and dropped him where he stood. Then all hell broke loose.

“‘Run!’ said Billy Fish. ‘We’ll break for the summer pastures if we can.’

“I tried to give some sort of orders to the arbakai but it was no use, so I fired into the mass of them with my carbine and drilled three in a line. The valley filled with the crack of rifles and screams of villagers.

“‘Hurry!’ said Billy Fish. ‘Make a run for it up the valley! The whole place is against us.’ So we started up the valley with the arbakai firing on our heels and Danny crying out that he was betrayed. The three of us covered each other’s movement until we reached the base of the summer pastures, and the arbakai stopped shooting.

“Drop your plates,’ said Billy Fish. ‘We must hurry past the observation post over the pass. We are done for if the runners get there before us.’

“Danny refused and began swearing as I tried my best to calm him.

“I’m sorry, Danny,’ I said, ‘but there’s no accounting for the locals. Maybe we’ll make something out of this mess, but not until we make it out of the valley.’

“Let’s go, then,’ said Danny, ‘but, I will come back here and sweep the valley so there isn’t a living soul left!’

“As the sun set we approached the alpine hut that served as the observation post and saw the arbakai we had trained waiting outside with their rifles.

“The runners have been quick,’ said Billy Fish, with a little bit of a laugh. ‘They are waiting for us.’

“Three or four men began to fire from the alpine hut, and a round hit Danny in the leg. That brought him to his senses. We crouched behind a rock and I wished for a drone.

“We’re done,’ he said. ‘This is all my fault. Get back, Billy Fish—you’ve done what you could. Now cut for it. Peachey,’ he said, ‘shake hands with me and go along with Billy. Maybe they won’t kill you. I’ll go and meet them alone. It’s me that did it.’

“Go?’ I said. ‘Go to hell, Danny! I’m here with you. Billy Fish, you clear out, and we will continue alone.’

“I fought alongside the Americans for years in Wardak and they were always good to me,’ said Billy Fish, quietly. ‘I will stay with you.’ So Danny and Billy Fish and I aimed our rifles at the hut. It was cold. I can still feel it now.”

By this time, the sun was up and the perspiration poured down my face and splashed on the desk as I leaned forward. Peachey was shivering, and I feared that his mind might go. I wiped my face, took a fresh grip of his hands, and said, “What happened after that?”

“Billy was hit first as the three of us maneuvered up the mountain pass. Danny and I continued and, as we approached the crest, he stopped.

“‘There’s no way we’re both going to make it,’ he said. ‘This was quite an adventure, Peachey. I’ll draw their fire. You go on.’ Before I could respond, he put this in my hand and took off singing the ‘Star-Spangled Banner.’”

Then Peachey put an antique ruby ring on my desk—I shuddered when I recognized it. *Peachey rose to go and I attempted to stop him—he was not fit to walk alone. “Let me take the whiskey, and give me a little money,” he gasped. “I’ll go to the Embassy and ask to be put up until I recover. No, thank you, I can’t wait until you call a taxi for me. I’ve got urgent business—in the west—at Peshawar.”*

He shambled out of the office and departed in the direction of the Embassy. That day at noon I went into the city and, on the way, saw a crooked man with his hat in his hand, begging on the roadside. There wasn’t another person in sight and he was out of earshot of the houses. And he sang through his nose, turning his head from left to right:

When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plains

And the women come out to cut up what remains

Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains

And go to your God like a soldier.⁷⁹

I put the poor man in my car and drove him to the nearest missionary. He repeated the hymn twice while he was with me, whom he did not in the least recognize, and I left him there.

Two days later, I asked the Mother Superior how he was doing.

“He died early yesterday morning,” said the Mother Superior. “Is it true that he was in Afghanistan?”

“Yes,” I said. “Did he have anything on him when he died?”

“Just this,” said the Mother Superior, dangling my rosary.

And there the matter rests.

⁷⁹ Macintyre, *The Man Who Would Be King*, 262.

III. CONCLUSION

While this thesis has aimed to reimagine *The Man Who Would Be King* for the 21st century in order to impart counterinsurgency theory and military advising best practices, an even more effective approach would be to adapt the story to film. As mentioned in the introduction, movies solve a fundamental time management problem for busy service members who spend months at a time deployed. In order to capture and portray hard-won lessons learned from the recent battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, it would be ideal if the Naval Postgraduate School or some other Department of Defense entity could leverage resident expertise to adapt this story into a screenplay and engage the appropriate entities in Hollywood for production.

Why a movie? Film is the medium of choice for most deployed service members in their free time. While deployments mimic monastic isolation in some regards, which in theory should make them ideal for reading and study, the reality is that, to unwind, many service members spend their free time binge-watching television series, embarking on epic movie marathons, or playing video games.

But watching movies and television series is not all indulgence. New York University encourages the use of video when teaching novice students a new subject, citing research by Robert Reiser and John Dempsey.⁸⁰ In my case, my SEAL platoon received a last-minute change of deployment orders from a direct action-focused mission in Iraq to a grassroots counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan, known at the time as Village Stability Operations. A film would have provided an easy, not to mention entertaining, way to introduce a complex subject like counterinsurgency theory to a group of special operators otherwise unfamiliar with the subject.

In addition to the two movies shown in the Department of Defense Analysis Military Advisor course, *The Man Who Would Be King* and *Farewell to the King*, there are a number of other popular movies that illustrate counterinsurgency theory and

⁸⁰ “Guidelines for Video in Teaching and Learning,” New York University, November 15, 2017, <https://www.nyu.edu/faculty/teaching-and-learning-resources/strategies-for-teaching-with-tech/video-teaching-and-learning/guidelines-for-video.html>.

military advisor best practices. Although of questionable historical accuracy, *Lawrence of Arabia* provides a view into the life of one of history's most famous insurgents. In the "Twenty-eight Articles" section of his book *Counterinsurgency*, David Kilcullen specifically mentions the movies *Black Hawk Down* and *The Battle of Algiers* as must-see predeployment movies for soldiers.⁸¹ Todd Greentree recommends *Chinatown*, *The Godfather Part II*, and *Groundhog Day* to anyone trying to understand America's current situation in Afghanistan.⁸² *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last Samurai*, and *Apocalypse Now* come to mind when considering the perils of "going native." The list goes on and on.

All of these movies offer lessons into various aspects of counterinsurgency theory and military advisor best practices and, collectively, could be pieced together by a knowledgeable instructor for predeployment study. However, as often happens, this is rarely possible. None of these films has been tailor-made for the purpose of imparting specific, well-researched lessons to busy and easily distracted viewers.

Learning from film also makes sense given the "stickiness" of video content. For example, consider advertisers who increasingly turn to video over print to reach potential customers. According to *Entrepreneur*, target audiences are more likely to interact with video content through sharing, a comment, or a "like" than if the same message were delivered via print.⁸³ Additionally, popular social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter, which began with photo and text sharing, have begun to allow video content in order to keep up with this trend.

In fact, YouTube, the preeminent video sharing site, has one billion users who watch one billion hours of video each day.⁸⁴ While much of this content is frivolous, some is educational, and channels like the history-focused Crash Course have millions of

⁸¹ Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency*, 29.

⁸² Todd Greentree, "Triple Feature: A Letter from Kandahar," *The American Interest*, May 1, 2011, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2011/05/01/triple-feature-a-letter-from-kandahar/>.

⁸³ Liraz Margalit, "Did Video Kill Text Content Marketing?" November 15, 2017, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/245003>.

⁸⁴ "YouTube by the numbers," YouTube, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/press/>.

subscribers. Crash Course alone has over six million.⁸⁵ Well-executed educational video channels have proven both entertaining and accessible to novice students.

In addition to its “stickiness,” video can also convey information more efficiently than print. According to *Forbes*, the average adult reads at a rate of 300 words per minute.⁸⁶ Using *Writer’s Digest’s* figure of 80,000 words for a novel (its minimum recommended length), it takes an average adult just under four and a half hours to read a novel.⁸⁷ Data from the Internet Movie Database suggests that, if our nominal 80,000 word-long novel were made into a movie, it would run about two hours, yielding a more than 50% increase in efficiency.⁸⁸

Again, in my case, the last-minute change in our deployment did not leave adequate time for training or study by any member of my platoon. Watching a movie, followed by a series of discussions, would have provided a certain baseline of knowledge from which to expand, offering visual examples of key pieces of counterinsurgency theory and military advisor best practices.

None of this is to say that academic literature on the subject of counterinsurgency theory and military advisor best practices is not available to soldiers, Marines, and special operators. In the Department of Defense Analysis Guerrilla Warfare Seminar and Conflict in the Information Age, students read dozens of studies that use quantitative methods, among others, to present counterinsurgency theory. However, even if the readership of the publications in which these studies were published numbered in the thousands, it would still be far less than the millions who watch movies. True, most moviegoers are not service members, but, as discussed, soldiers watch movies as much as

⁸⁵ “Crash Course,” YouTube, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/user/crashcourse?feature=watch>.

⁸⁶ Brett Nelson, “Do You Read Fast Enough To Be Successful?,” *Forbes*, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettnelson/2012/06/04/do-you-read-fast-enough-to-be-successful/#3a90573e462e>.

⁸⁷ Chuck Sambuchino, “Word Count for Novels and Children’s Books,” *Writer’s Digest*, accessed November 15, 2017, <http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/word-count-for-novels-and-childrens-books-the-definitive-post>.

⁸⁸ Randal Olson, “Movies Aren’t Actually Much Longer Than They Used to Be,” *Randal S. Olson* (blog), January 25, 2014, <http://www.randalolson.com/2014/01/25/movies-arent-actually-much-longer-than-they-used-to-be/>.

any other demographic. There may be a general officer or a lance corporal who subscribes to *Third World Quarterly*, *International Security*, or *The American Political Science Review*, all of which have published articles on counterterrorism, counterinsurgency and related subjects, but I have never met him downrange. In *A Bell for Adano*, John Hersey says, “No plan...can guarantee anything. Only men can guarantee. Only the behavior of men under pressure.”⁸⁹ Unfortunately, no amount of research will change the actions of the soldier patrolling the mean streets and unforgiving mountains of a foreign country unless it is presented in an accessible and memorable way.

Ideally, an educational movie, like the one that could be made from this thesis, would not only offer a “stickier” and more efficient method of imparting counterinsurgency theory and doctrine, but its entertainment value would also make it more enticing to deployed soldiers, Marines, and special operators.

So, may the shooting—but a very different kind of shooting than most of us experienced in Afghanistan—begin.

John Hersey, *A Bell for Adano*, Audiobook, Recorded Books, narrated by David Green, recorded 1989.⁸⁹

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