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## An Afghan Story

Michael Yon



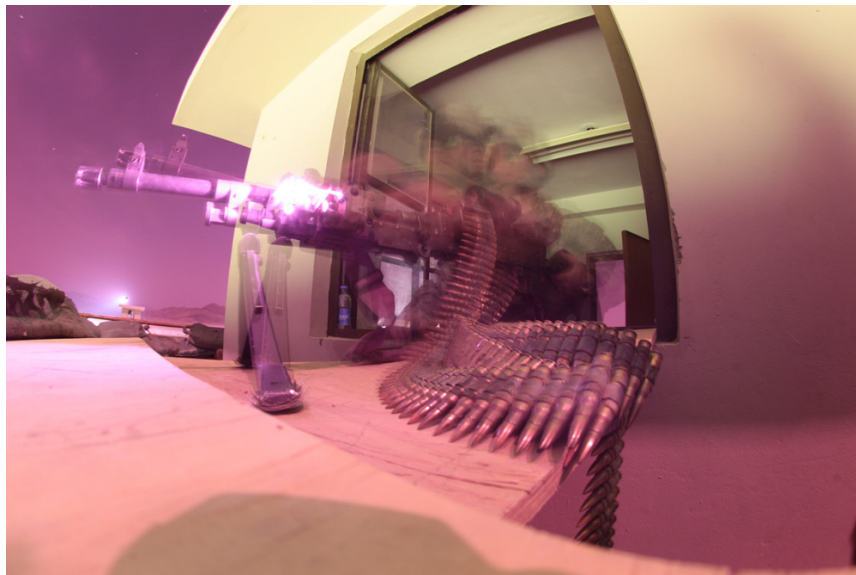
District Governor Haji Obidullah Populzai before going on mission with 1-17<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

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If normal life were a river, most days would likely be a slow-moving, meandering passage. But when a life squeezes into the gorge of war, there can be a deafening whitewater, falls and yet bigger falls, slams against stones, falls again and underwater no air and over the falls again and time stretches and compresses and seems to defy normal experience and over the falls again and you drown or don't. Some people come out the other side exhilarated and want to do it again and again, while others are terrified, and yet others will just do what needs to be done. The persistence of the memories wrought would seem to leave clocks drooped over limbs or floating away.

From wars grow countless wild stories, many of which are true. Even a single witness will hear thousands over the years. Back at home, the retellings can seem vague, distant, and as soulful as a sole-less boot. But when you are in a war zone with civilians or combat troops, some stories might start like, "Be careful here. This is where Jimmy got blown up," and there is still a crater and all the branches are blown off a nearby tree. Later in the day, "Be careful here, bullets sometimes come through that window," and there are pocks on the walls inside the room. The retellings are not secondhand, not ancient, but immediate and pressing. In the wars, stories are road signs to the here and now, and so you seek out stories not for entertainment. They are not entertaining anyway. Few people likely would be entertained by the story of their own death. "This is where the suicide bomber hit," and you are standing there, knowing lightning makes habits.

Captain Max Hanlin of Charlie Company 1-17<sup>th</sup> Infantry was living with his soldiers at the Shah Wali Kot District Center in northern Kandahar Province, and he said to me from across the tent that the District Governor for Shah Wali Kot district had some interesting stories that should be told. We walked out to the perimeter under the watchful eye of a machine gunner in his guard-post, and around the corner to see the District Governor so that something useful could get out.



**On the way from the tent, we walked under this guard post.**

Along with translator, Captain Hanlin and I walked into the District Governor's office, and we sat down to tea and a story began.

This comes through translation.

The Shah Wali Kot District Governor is Haji Obidullah Populzai from Nish District. In Afghanistan, the last name is often the tribe, and so Haji was from the Populzai tribe. His wife is from Barakzai tribe. He had five brothers. Two were killed nearby. One brother was killed about thirty feet away from where we sat and the other was killed by a roadside bomb. Captain Hanlin said that the blown-out hulk of the vehicle used to sit where our mess tent is now erected.

Haji said one brother had been District Governor in Khakrez District. One day he was ambushed and lost thirteen bodyguards but they had killed four Taliban. "Why did Taliban attack your brother?" I asked. Haji said they attacked because his brother was working with government. "Did the Taliban threaten in advance?" They did not threaten in advance, Haji answered. "When was this?" Six years ago in fall time, Haji answered. "Where were the Taliban from?" Two were from Arghandab, one from Khakrez and one from Thari, Urozgan. He didn't know where the others were from. "Were any captured?" Haji said they captured one wounded Taliban and handed him over to NDS at Kandahar City. "What happened to him?" Haji said he didn't know.

The NDS is the rough equivalent of our FBI. Their methods are reputed to be rough. I've asked British and American officers about the reliability of the NDS information. Most have said NDS is usually spot on. The NDS have an office about one minute's walk from here.

The brother who had been ambushed in Khakrez was killed in a roadside bombing, Haji said, just near here. Nine family members were also killed, and that was the hulk that used to be located where the current chow tent is located.

And so that was Haji's retelling of his first killed brother.

"How was your second brother killed?" I asked. A suicide bomber, in this building. There was no bombing damage so this was curious but I decided to save that. "Why was he killed?"

Revenge.

"Why the revenge?"

Haji answered that the Taliban Commander Abdul Hadi, who is Kuchi, attacked this district center one night about four years ago. They were fighting all night, for hours and hours, and they killed twelve Taliban. "Were you fighting too?" Haji said of course he was firing too. "Was anyone in the District Center hurt?" Nobody was hurt. The checkpoint just outside the wire was taken. "Did you get the Taliban bodies?" No. Taliban took the bodies. "How do you know you killed twelve?" Some weapons and much blood was left behind and villagers saw them. "And so they killed your brother in revenge for losing twelve in this attack?" Yes.



**Rising moon: observation post just outside the Shah Wali Kot district center.**

About three months later revenge came in the form of a young man disguised as a beggar. He had a prosthetic leg and it was filled with explosives. Haji's brother was about thirty feet from where we now were sitting. Haji was down in Kandahar City, he said, and called a friend who was standing just here in this room, talking to Haji on the phone. The friend's AK-47 was up against the wall just outside this room. The assassin was already in the building. Just after Haji hung up the phone, the assassin picked up the AK-47, walked the few steps around the corner and shot his brother in the head. Six bullets were fired. A guard jumped on the suicide bomber and his leg broke off and they found the explosives. Wires ran from the leg up his side but they tore away.

I asked many questions about the assassin. He was Kuchi from Sulimankhail subtribe of the Khilji Tribe. Through the translator, Haji said they beat him for three days, and the assassin admitted that the target actually was the District Governor who was in Kandahar City so he shot Haji's brother instead. "What did you find on him?" The assassin had nothing in pockets. During the torture he admitted he did those things for money, and admitted that the Taliban commander was paying him only to commit revenge and this was his first time. The translations were getting confused. At first the translator said that after the interrogation Haji slit the assassin's throat. So I asked, "You slit his throat. Did you cut off his head?" The translator looked a little nervous and said no, and that the assassin was killed on the first day and was killed by the police before Haji arrived back from Kandahar City.

“Where is the body?” Haji said they left his body outside for two days so the family would come get it but the family was afraid so a third party came and took the body. Meanwhile, Haji took his brother’s body to Nish District for burial.

“What kind of explosives were in the leg?” He didn’t know.

“Where is the leg bomb?” The police gave the leg to Canadians.

“How were the Canadians?” Haji said he worked with the Canadians and they were supportive. The Canadians were very good. I asked if he remembered some Canadian names and he did not remember. He said there were different groups of Canadians and so there was no permanent group to work with, but they brought various sorts of work and were helpful.

“How much was the assassin paid?” One million Pakistani Rupees and this was in revenge for the twelve who were killed during the attack. “But why would a suicide bomber do it for money? Was the bomb just the back up plan?” Maybe, Haji answered, I don’t know. “Can we go see the bullet holes?” The bullet holes have been repaired. “What was his name?” The assassin’s name was Mohammad Sadiq and was about 23 years old. He was Kuchi and so wasn’t from anywhere in particular. His father was living in Suznai Village near Arghandab District but still in Shah Wali Kot. After family found out the son was involved, they moved to Pakistan.

“Is Taliban getting stronger or weaker?” Haji said the Taliban are 95% weaker since 1-17<sup>th</sup> got here because 1-17<sup>th</sup> came when Taliban were in Pakistan for winter. (This much was told to me by military intelligence, and so Haji added to confirmation that MI were correct.) And so this is causing Taliban to react to us, Haji said. He continued that there used to be a lot of ambushes on ISAF, but now the Taliban cannot hang around in large groups, like 25 guys, because Americans will kill them. They are afraid of the helicopters, Haji said. He said they plan to strike mostly with mines and suicide attackers, but have not hit with suicide attackers here yet. They want to hit us again at this district center. (The U.S. had said the same, possibly with a car bomb.)

“Where do the suicide attackers come from?” Pakistan, he said. “Some come from Afghanistan,” I said. Haji said two suicide attackers had come from his own Nish District. They were brothers. “What were their names?” One was Adam Khan. Adam blew up in Helmand. Adam had gone to Peshawar. His brother Mohammad Jan is still a policeman, Haji said. Adam’s whole family is in government. But Adam went to Pakistan when he was 12 and blew up in Helmand when was 17. Adam’s father is a good man, Haji said. Mohammad Jan, the policeman, is very sad that his brother became a suicide attacker.

“Do you have children?” Haji brightened up when talking about his girls. He said he had three daughters and they are 2, 4 and 6. The 4- and 6-year-olds are going to school but no school yet for the baby. Haji said he had 18 children in the house. The two brothers who were killed had 9 children so he took them, so with Haji’s three that made a dozen. “That’s only 12 children, where did the other 6 come from?” I asked many more questions and the summary answer was that in Nish District, he has grapes, pomegranates, black and white cumin, wheat fields, 12 goats, 8 sheep, and a brother has a horse. His three surviving brothers run the family farm, and he



houses their kids so they can go to school. The oldest of the 18 kids is 15, and the youngest is the 2-year-old girl. Haji also has the two widows of his dead brothers and Haji said he is the sole breadwinner. He liked talking about the kids and said they have a dish (satellite receiver for television) and the kids want to watch television but he only allows them to watch it for a short time, and then only sports. Never the news.

“How do you like having all those kids around?” I like it, he said, and smiled brightly.

“How is their health?” The kids are of normal health.

We had to go so the story ended there.

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(Happy Mother’s Day!)

*Michael Yon is a former Green Beret who has been reporting from Iraq and Afghanistan since December 2004. No other reporter has spent as much time with combat troops in these two wars. Michael’s dispatches from the frontlines have earned him the reputation as the premier independent combat journalist of his generation.*

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