



(Inset left) Taliban prisoners are still held in Dostum's fortress-jail complex in Sheberghan. The red line on the map shows Professor Williams' route from Kabul through the Hindu Kush Mountains to General Dostum's stronghold.

Professor Brian Glyn Williams, who teaches courses on Middle Eastern topics, traveled through Afghanistan this summer to interview the Northern Alliance warlord, General Dostum. (Above) An Afghan child sells ripe tomatoes in a village bazaar north of Kabul, on Shomali Plain.

Traveling beyond the blackboard

By Brian Glyn Williams,
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As I walked into the secretary's office for the check to fund my summer field research, she asked, innocuously, where I was headed. "Um, I hope to make my way to a lawless northern province of Afghanistan to interview a warlord who is a notorious Taliban-killer. I actually hope to be the first outsider to access this Northern Alliance warlord since a Newsweek reporter accused him of human rights abuses, such as slaughtering too many captured Taliban fighters back in 2001."

"Afghanistan?" she replied with an arched brow. "Well, try not to get yourself killed in the process...and remember your receipts for the reimbursement committee."

August 2003— Kabul, Afghanistan

As my flight from Baku, Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic north of Iran, descended down a pass in the mountains that surround Afghanistan's (comparatively) safe capital, the enormity of my undertaking dawned on me. Somewhat belatedly, I began to question the impulses driving me to a theater of operations where over 9,000 US soldiers were combating the remnants of the down-but-not-out Taliban. I was entering a land that was synonymous with war. Be it the Soviet meat-grinder of the 1980s, or the recent US-led operation, this country had seen more suffering than any other in Eurasia.

My doubts were dispelled by the sights and sounds as I made my way to the Turkish Embassy from Kabul International (yes, there is a functioning international airport, although the twisted wreckage of Taliban and Soviet MIG jet fighters scattered along the runway shatters the initial illusion of normalcy). Driving through bustling Kabul, I was constantly reminded that less than two years ago, this had been the capital of the fundamentalist Taliban pariah state.

Whizzing past camels laden with goods, and taxis with riders on the roofs and bumpers, I noticed the street lamps festooned with ribbons of music tapes and the innards of TV sets ritualistically 'executed' by the Taliban's dreaded religious police as 'satanic technological devices.'

Most women still wore the all-encompassing burqa, while armed Afghan soldiers loitered on every corner, because of the growing threat of neo-Taliban urban bombers.

Yet despite such disquieting images, Kabul was as good as it got in Afghanistan that bloody August—dozens of Afghan civilians and several US soldiers were killed in the provinces outside Kabul during my stay. This city was the showcase of the Bush administration's ambitious effort to bring peace and stability to a land that has known only war for almost a quarter of a century.



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In Kabul, at least I felt reassured by the ubiquitous, heavily armed International Security and Assistance Forces patrolling in armor-plated personnel carriers.

But I had not traveled here to remain in this comparative ‘safety bubble.’ Some-how, I had to cross landmine-saturated Shomali Plain and pass through the Hindu Kush Mountains of central Afghanistan to the steppes of the northern provinces, where I intended to interview the master of northern Afghanistan, General Dostum.

“But,” my Turkish hosts explained patiently, “you can’t get to the lands of Dostum’s Uzbek fighters. The mountains are filled with bandit ‘check points,’ and no one has interviewed Dostum since his Northern Alliance horsemen shattered the Taliban with American forces in 2001.

“Dostum is a bonafide warlord, who has carved his lands off from the rest of Afghanistan. You can’t just stroll in and say ‘Hi, I’m here to interview you.’ Besides, you have no bodyguards.

“And you look like an idiot without a gun. Someone will be tempted to shoot your fool head off.”

The Domain of General Dostum

Two days later, \$900 less in my wallet (\$250 for one fully automatic AK 47 Kalishnikov machine gun, \$50 for ammunition clips, and \$600 for two Toyota Land-Cruiser pickups with armed tribesmen), I and my 20 Uzbek bodyguards began our trek out of the treacherous Hindu Kush (Hindu Killer) Mountains to Dostum’s inaccessible northern realm.

I was thrilled to be entering the lands of the ethnic Uzbeks, descendents of Genghis Khan’s Turkic-Mongol hordes.

In the ultimate of historical and technical juxtapositions, Dostum’s turbaned horsemen, on \$60 horses, had united with \$1.2 billion US Stealth ‘Spirit’ bombers to shatter the mighty Taliban occupation army. Among the most memorable images of the war on terror was that of Dostum’s horsemen riding directly into Taliban tank fire shooting their anti-tank grenades.

Approaching Mazar-i Sharif, I thought: “If I manage to carry out a rare interview with this larger-than-life warlord who captured the vast majority of the Taliban prisoners now at Guantanamo Bay (including Johnny Walker Lindh), it will be the coup of a lifetime.”

General Dostum’s Compound— Mazar-i Sharif

Having traced Dostum to the wedding of one of his generals, I,

(Preceding page) General Dostum's horsemen, the direct descendants of Ghendis Khan's nomadic hordes are the unsung heroes in the War on Terror. Professor Williams shows off his \$250 AK 47 machine gun. (Below) General Dostum gives commands to his field commanders in the Hindu Kish Mountains.



like approximately 3,000 Uzbeks, awaited his arrival. Suddenly this consummate warrior arrived in the wedding hall. All talk ceased as the gray-haired Dostum, flanked by armed guards, confidently strolled into the hall. In the excitement, I managed to slip past the bodyguards and introduce myself to a surprised Dostum.

As the bodyguards reflexively moved forward, he sized me up. I recalled that the last Americans he had met had been Green Beret members of an A-Team and CIA SOF (Special Operations Force) paramilitaries. These fighters had been inserted into his rugged lands to help his horsemen obliterate the Taliban's powerful tank and artillery brigades.

Surely, I did not resemble a Green Beret. And as time stood still while he considered my request for an interview, I again wondered what had driven me from my safe home to the middle of Central Asia.

After the longest seconds of my life passed, a perplexed General Dostum replied with the simple Uzbek word "tamam"—roughly, "Sure, let's do it." The aftermath is a whirlwind of memories that hardly seems real now.

What was intended to be a five-minute conversation became a two-week interview. I had the extraordinary fortune of having the most extensive interview ever conducted with this legendary fighter from another era. In the process I had the unique opportunity to travel through the Uzbek lands with an actual warlord who seemed to like showing off his realm to a foreigner—a foreigner from the very country that helped his riders destroy the Taliban with state-of-the-art laser-guided missiles, JDAMs, and everyone's favorite in northern Afghanistan, the awe-inspiring "beeping joe doo" ("B-52 Bomber" in Uzbek-Dari). As a cherished American ally, northern Afghanistan was mine to tour with the man who claimed it as his own.

As I discovered, the Uzbeks were not a nation of terrorists (none of the 9/11 hijackers was actually an Afghan, or Afghan Uzbek—a subtle nuance lost to many American ultra-patriots), but a proud and welcoming people who hated the Arab Al Qaeda more than we do.

In the simple mud villages, I encountered genuine hospitality of a sort I had not met in more "advanced" countries of the West.

For example, impoverished peasants, as was their custom, slaughtered their only sheep for me when I arrived unannounced for dinner. Laughing children invited me to swim with them in the muddy rivers pouring from the mountains. Villagers told me to send their hellos to Americans. These were simple shepherds whose lives had been terribly scarred by something unimaginable to most Americans—namely 25 years of war fought not in a distant land (the case with US warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bosnia, and elsewhere), but in their own towns, streets, and homes.

My most powerful memory is of a proud Afghan woman who looked me in the eyes without flinching, and told me that her husband had been killed by the Taliban and two of her three children slain by an errant US bomb.

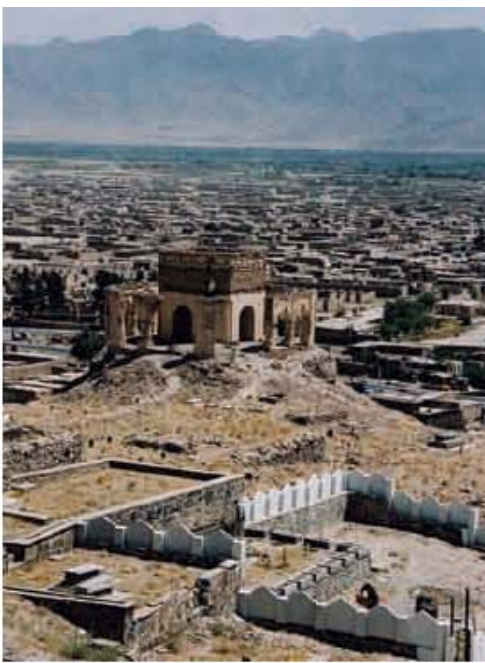
To my question of "Do you seek revenge on the Taliban or compensation from the wealthy Americans?" she responded with a simple "no."

Smiling, she pointed to her remaining daughter, an emaciated, brown-eyed 4-year-old. "I want her to grow up in a land where there is no more war. That's all I want."

I turned away quickly, lest this young Uzbek woman see the pity in my eyes—the odds of her daughter experiencing such a miracle in this war-torn land were slim.

I also paid a pilgrimage to the infamous Qala-i Jengi, the 'Fortress of a War,' a mud-walled castle looming menacingly on the outskirts of Mazar-i Sharif. This war-blackened site seemed haunted by ghosts; here hundreds of Taliban fighters captured by Dostum's Uzbek horsemen had been slaughtered during a desperate uprising in November, 2001. Tragically, America suffered its first casualty here when CIA agent Michael Spann was brutally slain by the Taliban prisoners.

I was touched to see that Dostum's grateful Uzbeks had built a memorial to the slain American, thanking him for his sacrifice in



(Clockwise from the left) The destruction of Kabul rises against a backdrop of the Hindu Kush Mountains; Professor Williams stands before the remains of Presidential Palace, Kabul; Mazar-i Sharif, the Tomb of the prophet Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet Muhammed is Afghanistan's holiest shrine; and Northern Alliance fighter's pose with RPG-7s (rocket-propelled grenades.)

I thought of Spann's sacrifice as I recalled my interviews with dozens of fanatical Taliban prisoners still held by Dostum in one of his fortress-prisons. For Spann, and dozens like him who ventured to distant lands to protect America, this strangely beautiful land was a place that called him; it was here that the enemy who threatened his homeland was to be found. Reflecting on the fury in the faces of many of the Taliban prisoners at any mention of America, I felt truly grateful that heroes like Spann left their homes to defend our world from those out there who want to destroy it.

As the sun set over Spann's grave, turning his monument a reddish color, a rare cool wind blew dust over me and Spann's memorial. I shuddered—whether from the chill or from the solitude of being with someone whose life was lost on the spot where I stood, I couldn't tell.

Suddenly I felt terribly exposed and lonely in this distant corner of the globe, in a place my fellow Americans could hardly imagine. Standing on the spot where one of my countrymen had been killed, perhaps by some of the very Taliban prisoners I had just interviewed, I felt it was time for me to return to my own world. I said a prayer for one American hero who had no such luxury, and walked towards General Dostum who had respectfully allowed me to pay my respects. "Shimdi yurduma donme zamani...It's time for me to return to my own homeland," I said.

Only later as I flew out of Kabul for the long journey back to Boston did I begin to grasp the enormity of all I had experienced. I tried to make sense of the violent but beautiful land I was leaving, and the surreal, safe, modern world that I would re-enter. Attempting to balance these two vastly different realities, I recalled the warm people I had encountered in the lands of Dostum's Uzbeks. I realized the largest obstacle facing me on my return would involve explaining Afghanistan and her colorful people to my fellow Americans.

The Uzbeks who had shared meals with me, who slept outside my door at night to protect me, and who had died fighting against Taliban were not abstract figures who deserved to be irradiated by horrible American nuclear weapons, as many Americans had demanded after 9/11.

On the contrary, the Uzbeks were—like us—a people who want their children to grow up in a world of no wars.

Pondering these notions I began to relax and reflect upon the new hurdles facing me. Only then did I remember the secretary's words said a lifetime ago, and a worrisome thought struck. I began to

anticipate trouble in trying to explain the impossibility of collecting receipts from my illiterate Uzbek bodyguards for everything from gas for our convoy, to one fully automatic AK-47 machine gun.

And as I began to brace for the bureaucratic battles ahead, a small part of me actually became nostalgic for that rough and tumble world of tribal militias and warlords where problems were solved with the wave of a machine gun...or a simple 'tamam.'

Dr. Brian Glyn Williams' research has taken him to the squatter camps of Ukraine and the war zones of the Balkans. He is the author of The Crimean Tatars and a former lecturer at the University of London. His new book will assess the links between Al Qaeda and the Chechens. For more pictures of his travels to Islamic Eurasia visit: brianglynwilliams.com/

Note: Alumni will receive a mailing about a special video presentation of his Eurasian travels by Professor Williams this spring.