



October 2002

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Recommended Citation

MacQuarrie, Brian (2002) "On Terror's Trail: A Boston Globe reporter searches for answers in the wake of September 11," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 91 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol91/iss4/5>

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On Terror's Trail

*A Boston Globe reporter searches
for answers in the wake of September 11*

By Brian MacQuarrie '74

Veteran *Boston Globe* reporter Brian MacQuarrie '74 often is dispatched to scenes of tragedy, catastrophe or simple human drama. When Gianni Versace was murdered, it was MacQuarrie who was sent to Miami. When a man went on a shooting rampage in Colebrook, N.H., MacQuarrie was writing from the stunned community within hours. When a Swiss jet crashed in Nova Scotia in 1998, killing 229 people, MacQuarrie flew to Bangor, rented a car and drove the rest of the night to Halifax.

He worked all that day, filing stories that night for the *Globe*.

"I think it's prepared me to go in cold," MacQuarrie said. "You have only a few facts. You just have to think on your feet and think of the best way to file, who to see, how to arrange your interviews."

And if your assignment is particularly farflung, you hope to hire a good "fixer."

MacQuarrie did just that in Islamabad, Pakistan, where he found himself with the same driver who had ferried *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl through the city in the days before his death. What follows is MacQuarrie's account of his weeks in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where he tried both to report on the day's news and to divine the motives of friend, foe and those who fell mysteriously in between.

Half a world away from New England, at 11 a.m. on March 17, my first working day as *The Boston Globe* correspondent in Pakistan began with an explosion that catapulted me headlong into the maelstrom that had become the U.S. "war on terror." A suicide bomber had struck a Protestant church less than two miles from the Islamabad hotel where I was staying. My translator rushed in with the horrific news, abruptly canceled our get-acquainted session and hurried me into a waiting car for a frenzied drive to the scene.

There, only a few yards from the U.S. Embassy in the heavily guarded diplomatic quarter, shattered glass and a cordon of Pakistani troops ringed the outside of a small white church. Inside, pools of blood and pieces of flesh, some blasted onto the ceiling 60 feet above the sanctuary, gave sickening testimony of the carnage that ripped apart a quiet Sunday service only a half-hour before.

Five dead, including two Americans.

Dozens injured. Welcome to Pakistan.

That church bombing provided a no-waiting cultural and professional transition from the streets of Boston to a shifting, covert war zone and the deadly realities

of the aftermath of September 11. In the nine weeks that followed, in cities and villages from the plains of Pakistan to the mountains of Afghanistan, the demands of a reporter's job also provided me with an



Above, Brian MacQuarrie in Kabul, with Afghan boys newly arrived from refugee camps in Pakistan. They were among thousands of Afghans who returned to their country after the fall of the Taliban. In the background are buses used to transport families from the camps. At right, Afghan fighters scramble as a sniper shoots at them near the front line in Milawa.



eyeball-to-eyeball look at the complicated roots and troubling future of a confrontation that none of the simple, fiery rhetoric from Washington and elsewhere seems able to capture adequately.

Iraised my hand for this assignment, hungry for a chance to balance the three weeks I had spent in New York City after the World Trade Center attack with a stint in the cauldron of Islamic fundamentalism that had nurtured Al Qaeda and spawned the killers of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl.

First stop, Islamabad, the modern, built-from-scratch Pakistani capital, where the Muslim country's tiny elite governs a nation of 144 million people sprawling from the foothills of the Himalayas to the teeming port of Karachi. My job: to report the news of the day, which after March

17 became a daily update on the hunt for the church bombers, the infiltration of Al Qaeda into Pakistani society and the day-to-day life of a complex, overpopulated and impoverished nation that is little understood by Americans.

As a general-assignment reporter for the *Globe*, my work is concentrated in New England but also has taken me across the country to cover breaking news—often involving the immediate drama of high-profile trials, plane crashes, sensational killings and natural calamities such as wildfires and hurricanes. Nothing, however, had prepared me for the visceral culture shock of Pakistan and Afghanistan, where information was scarce, my Western appearance made me inherently suspect to bureaucrats and ordinary people and each day was an adrenaline-pumping succession of long hours filled with palpable, low-level tension.

Thanks to my translator, a respected Pakistani journalist named Absar Alam, the task of finding and reporting the news became easier in a country where truth is often obscured by official denial and media manipulation. It was Alam who arranged for prompt interviews with top military and government leaders who otherwise might have kept an American newspaper reporter waiting for days or weeks. And it was he who gave me insight into the lives of anonymous Pakistanis, accompanying me on assignments to a leper clinic in Rawalpindi, a sewage ditch called home by dozens of hopeless heroin addicts, a frontier bazaar in Peshawar near the Khyber Pass, the crowded corkscrew alleys of Lahore's old city and even the hardscrabble cricket fields of Islamabad.

Alam, who covers foreign affairs for an English-language daily, not only served as

Below, men congregate outside a Muslim shrine in Kabul. The doorway frames the entrance to a cave believed to be a sacred place. At right Afghan soldiers from the eastern province of Shaura hold their position on the front line in Milawa.



translator—parsing my English questions into the Urdu tongue used by most Pakistanis—but also as advisor, guide and boon companion on lengthy trips along dusty, twisting roads into a countryside that sometimes seemed frozen in biblical times. Together, we broke a story about a U.S.-Pakistani raid that uncovered Al Qaeda operatives, reported the arrests of suspect Yemeni students at a flight school near Afghanistan and tracked the painstakingly slow accumulation of leads into the still-unsolved bombing of the Islamabad church.

Writing the stories late into the night was a familiar routine I had honed over a 25-year career. But outside the western-style room in Islamabad, past the armed guards who kept 24-hour watch at the hotel, on streets crowded with Pakistanis in traditional clothing, past the stares and the outstretched hands, an education into South Asian customs and attitudes was incessant and illuminating.

I found a people for whom Islam and family dictate daily life. The Pakistanis' devotion to their religion touched me deeply, as bureaucrats and beggars alike dutifully pray toward Mecca as many as five times a day—often by the side of the road as the chaotic Pakistani traffic whizzes by, choking the senses with exhaust and noise. Their affection for children was similarly touching, even if hundreds of thousands of these children are malnourished, barefoot and poorly clothed. The women, however, play a shrouded, second-class role.

The United States is an enigma to them, a military and material power far beyond their comprehension. To the average Pakistani, the United States is a country of scandalously loose morals, a hypocritical giant that changes allies according to the geopolitical winds and an enemy of Islam. Merely being a Westerner in Pakistan is an invitation for long, sullen looks that convey the deep resentment of the hopelessly disenfranchised.

I found the daily task of reporting the news exhausting and exhilarating, and the few hours of down time were enlivened by oases of various foreign social clubs scattered about Islamabad. The United Nations Club, in particular, offered relief from the droning tension that permeated the city for Westerners. In a wooden, English-style pub that served



PHOTOS: ABOVE, BRIAN MACQUARRIE '74; RIGHT, DOMINIC CHAVEZ/BOSTON GLOBE





At left, an Afghan trucker recovers from injuries sustained when American troops bombed the truck he was driving. At right, a nomad in the Nabhre-Saraj desert, where a drought has added to the hardship of the war. At far right, a street scene in Murree, Pakistan, east of Islamabad. Murree was the scene of a terrorist attack on a western school a few days after this photo was taken.

the forbidden fruit of alcohol in a staunchly Muslim nation, expatriates gathered nightly in a real-life cousin to Rick's Cafe Americain from *Casablanca*. Here, German oil executives, British mine-clearing specialists, Irish humanitarian workers and even Saudi diplomats laughed and lingered over a beer or a whisky—and exhaled.

Still, there were jitters. One British executive said he planned to send his wife and children home. Another man, a 50-something Northern Irish veteran of the British Army who helped supervise mine-clearing in Afghanistan, shrugged at the danger. "I'm not a saint; it's just my job," he said. Outside, private security guards with automatic rifles kept watch over his car.

After five weeks, the decision was made to send me to Kabul, the Afghan capital, because my planned replacement was dispatched to Jerusalem to fill in for a *Globe* reporter who had been shot and wounded by Israeli troops in the West Bank. The new assignment was exciting, nerve-wracking and even more unpredictable than my stint in Pakistan.

Flying into Kabul via a U.N. humanitarian charter gave me a blunt introduction to a country that has been fought over by imperial powers since the time of Alexan-

der the Great. Below the plane carrying aid workers, bureaucrats and reporters were vast arid tracts of high desert, largely unpopulated except for small clusters of mud-brick homes that cling to the narrow, arable sides of mountain-fed streams. At Kabul Airport, ringed by snow-capped peaks, the ruined carcasses of planes, tanks and artillery lay near the runway that provided the bombed-out capital with its most important lifeline.

Unlike Pakistan, the ravages of war were everywhere in Afghanistan. Two decades of unrelenting hostilities against the Russians, then a savage civil war followed by the bloody ouster of the Taliban had left their evidence in every corner of the country's historic capital and in every village through which I passed. Kabul's streets were obstacle courses pockmarked by years of shelling; block after block of simple homes had been reduced to clay ruins; 20,000 returning refugees poured into the devastated city every day from crowded camps in Pakistan; and packs of fierce Afghan soldiers, armed with Kalashnikov rifles, patrolled chaotic streets where law and order were concepts in name only.

I stayed in a rented home, which the *Globe* shared with the *Financial Times* of London, in what had once been the most

fashionable section of Kabul. Behind a 10-foot-high wall and a steel gate topped with metal spikes we typed our stories onto laptop computers that fed the copy to our newspapers via satellite phones. We had a 24-hour Afghan guard who lived in small quarters beside the house, a cook who left after preparing dinner, plus two drivers and translators who arrived early every morning, accompanied us wherever we needed to go and stayed late into the evening until the day's work was finished.

After a 10 p.m. curfew every night, from behind a second-story window that looked across Kabul's rooftops to the nearby mountains, the news from Afghanistan flowed to the *Globe*. The silence of the quiet room was broken only by the patter of a keyboard. Although I worked alone, I have rarely felt as fulfilled.

Unlike the guerilla war in Pakistan, war news in Afghanistan was achingly visible. The international military coalition held a daily press briefing at 9:30 a.m. That briefing was followed by a U.N. news conference that invariably unveiled new information on the humanitarian disaster that had become Afghanistan: drought, earthquakes, refugees, infant mortality, prisoner abuses, locusts. There were so many stories, so much suffering, so much hope. But only so much time



to write and report. In nine weeks, I counted only two complete days to myself.

My translator in Kabul was Dr. Ebadullah Ebadi, a 30-year-old physician who had taken medical exams in a Kabul bus that moved around the capital to avoid shelling during the civil war. He had dodged bullets in his short life, jumped into ditches to avoid rockets, seen death in the streets where he grew up and had never left Afghanistan. He wore a constant smile.

Our most memorable excursion was to Mazar-i-Sharif, a wild city in northern Afghanistan near Uzbekistan and the scene of ferocious fighting during the campaign against the Taliban. The journey to Mazar took an entire day, across the Hindu Kush mountains and through the Russian-built Salang Tunnel, the world's highest. Along the route, we saw shattered tanks beside the road, warnings for landmines only 10 feet from the highway and some of the most beautiful mountain scenery I have ever seen.

Camels trudged slowly across the desert to Mazar in a tableau unchanged for centuries. Locusts, billions of them, fluttered

across the former breadbasket of Afghanistan in a no-quarter feeding frenzy that ravaged what had promised to be a bumper crop.

After leaving Mazar, following interviews with warlords from feuding factions of Uzbeks and Tajiks, our entourage of four—myself, driver, translator and photographer—stayed in an unlocked hostel in Taliban-friendly Pul-i-Chumri, only 50 yards from a checkpoint on the country's major north-south highway. Screams of beaten or tortured men emanated from that checkpoint every hour or two through the night. There was nowhere to go. I resigned myself to the situation and, to my own surprise, managed to sleep during the gaps between the cries.

That bizarre and troubling night aside, and despite logistical planning that literally involved questions about the probability of our lives or deaths, I felt more comfortable in Afghanistan than I had in Pakistan. Although scarred by war, the Afghans seemed more open and friendly than their neighbors to the south. Everyone I interviewed in Afghanistan, from tough military

commanders to wounded teenagers with prosthetic legs, expressed what seemed to be a sincere desire for peace.

Being a Westerner still attracted enormous amounts of attention, especially in places where foreigners rarely ventured such as the crowded bazaar in Kabul or a village street in the shadow of the Hindu Kush. But rather than resentment, I sensed genuine curiosity among these people. Their faces were open, and surprisingly bright, despite the wrenching poverty that cloaked Afghanistan like a blanket.

After I'd worked a month in Afghanistan, the *Globe* called me home. Walking across the war-scarred tarmac to my plane at Kabul Airport, I looked forward to a rest, but with mixed feelings. Many of the sights I had seen over nine weeks in Asia had been horrific, but the experience had been a profound testament for life itself.