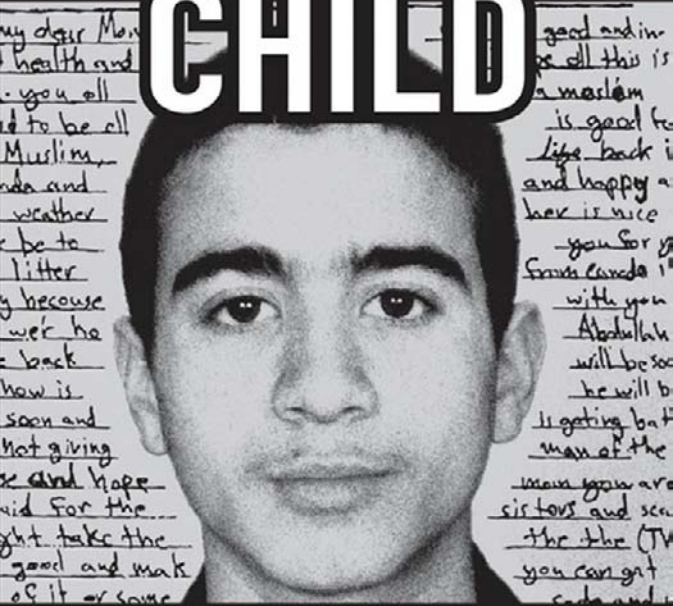


THE UNTOLD STORY OF OMAR KHADR

# GUANTANAMO'S CHILD



MICHELLE SHEPHARD

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John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.

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## *Introduction*

The Khadr family lives in east end Toronto in the suburb of Scarborough, crammed into a second-floor apartment where posters of Saudi Arabian mosques cover the walls and the youngest son controls an army of video-game commandos from his wheelchair. Every so often, a slight, grey-and-white cat named Princess will wander into the living room, trying to avoid her brother, Slim Shady. Most days the cats seem to be the only ones who will venture close to the family who has been vilified in Canada. Most days the Khadr family don't seem to care what other people think.

The apartment is a reflection of the life the Khadr family has lived, shuttled between East and West, the children brought up memorizing the Quran and *Green Eggs and Ham*. It is a dizzying clash of culture and it is often hard to fathom that this family, who named a pet after an Eminem rap, once counted Osama bin Laden a friend.

On leaving their apartment you don't know whether to laugh or cry. The Khadr family is endlessly fascinating, infuriating, belligerent, simple, and yet complicated, sometimes naïve, sometimes savvy. While some Canadians believe the Khadr family have been victimized, persecuted for their opinions and for crimes that have never been proven in court, the majority thinks they are dangerous and wants them kicked out of the country.

The Khadr family defy traditional description. Which is okay, because this isn't a book about them.

This is the story of only one Khadr, Omar. He is the soft-spoken, dutiful, second youngest son of the Khadr clan who has spent a quarter of his life in the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay. Omar was fifteen when he sat with heavily armed and bearded men in a mud house in a small village in Afghanistan on July 27, 2002. Someone in that compound had shot dead two Afghan soldiers who had demanded they put down their weapons and



surrender. That sparked a long battle with U.S. Special Forces soldiers who eventually called in air support and reduced the compound to rubble.

Somehow Omar survived. The Pentagon alleges that the soldiers approached the rubble, believing everyone dead, and that Omar emerged and threw a grenade that killed Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Speer. Speer, a twenty-eight-year-old Delta Force soldier, had two young children in North Carolina waiting for him to come home. He wanted to become a doctor and was trained as a military medic. This was his first time at war.

Omar was shot at least twice before he collapsed and was captured. He had two massive holes in his chest and a wound that caused near-blindness in his left eye. The Toronto-born teenager was interrogated and held in the U.S. prison at Bagram air base in Afghanistan before being transferred to Guantanamo Bay in October 2002.

The U.S. administration is determined to try him for war crimes before a military commission, despite numerous court setbacks and a restive worldwide public that has grown weary of President George W. Bush's assurances that justice can be carried out at Guantanamo. If the case proceeds, it will be the first U.S. war crimes trial since the prosecution of Nazi commanders in Nuremberg. The world is immeasurably different from what it was in 1945, but it is hard to believe that history will equate a fifteen-year-old Canadian alleged to have killed a soldier with concentration camp commandants who exterminated thousands of innocent civilians.

I was introduced to terrorism, and eventually to the Khadr story, the same day most of the Western world first heard of Osama bin Laden. About twelve hours after the World Trade Center collapsed, a dusty rain of the building's pulverized parts still fell at Ground Zero and coated my arms. The image of an exhausted firefighter slumped on the curb, framed by that gruesome mountain of paper, twisted metal and wires, is seared into my memory.

New York City turned into a wounded small town in the weeks after 9/11. In a scene that now seems plucked from a melodramatic B movie, I remember watching a blur of faces and ribbons of light stream past my taxi window. Hundreds of people had lit candles and stood silently in front of shops, apartment buildings, parks and stores, remembering the victims of 9/11. Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind" came on the taxi radio and I began to cry. There was no way to imagine during those first weeks that five years later, sympathy for the United States would turn to blame, tens of thousands of civilians would be dead in a country with no connection

to the 9/11 attacks, and one afternoon I would be sitting on a military jet over southeastern Cuba about to land in Guantanamo Bay.

The first of the half a dozen trips I have taken to Guantanamo to report on Omar's case was in January 2006. Like the journalists who came before me, I was initially struck by the beauty of the terrain. There's always something incongruous about bad things happening amid natural splendor, which is why murders just aren't supposed to take place on quiet, tree-lined streets.

But I would quickly learn that the notorious jail's pristine Caribbean real estate was one of many jarring contradictions at Guantanamo. There were undefined, evolving rules as to what constituted the torture of detainees, yet the regulation regarding the care of the island's other inhabitants—the iguanas—was crystal clear. If a soldier hit one of the lounge lizards that sunned in the middle of the road, he faced a \$10,000 fine and a possible jail sentence.

There were inconsistencies in how the Geneva Conventions—the international treaties that govern the treatment of prisoners of war—were applied. The Bush administration declared that since detainees were “enemy combatants” and not PoWs, the conventions weren't binding. But the officials cited the conventions when convenient, such as the rule that no detainees could have their faces photographed or be interviewed by journalists. The Pentagon argued to do so would violate the convention that PoWs were not to be exploited. They would not relent even after some detainees signed waivers saying they wanted to tell their stories.

As with the experience in the Khadr family apartment, Guantanamo could be both tragic and comical. On my second trip to Guantanamo in 2006, our group of about twenty reporters was under the supervision of a public affairs military unit from Hawaii. Daniel Byer, a captain with a shy smile and round brown eyes, and wound tighter than a drill sergeant, was our chief guide. To be fair, journalists and soldiers are usually a bad combination. The military trains its soldiers to follow the rules and not question authority. Life trains journalists to do the opposite. Byer grew more tense and terse as the week progressed. *He'll figure it out*, I thought. *Growing pains*.

A year later, I was back and Byer was near the end of his tour. I was with a clever and soft-spoken *Daily Telegraph* journalist who bore an uncanny resemblance to Harry Potter. On our first morning, the British journalist had the misfortune of asking one of the workers in a mess hall where he

could find milk for his coffee. Byer went ballistic. "Did I not tell you to not talk to anybody but me? I'll tell you where the milk is." I was stunned. In a manner that perhaps was too cheeky, I asked Byer if it was okay that I get a yogurt. It was half in jest, but I also worried he might yell again if I just wandered off. Byer's face grew red. He scolded me as if I were a petulant teenager. As I walked away, I heard him say that if I kept up that attitude I would be sent to my room and not let out. I referred to the incident thereafter as the "dairy meltdown."

Byer did apologize, but his aggressive manner continued for the rest of the week. Inside the prison, we watched a detainee, who was wearing goggles and earphones, taken into a portable. I asked where he was going and Byer took great offence, barking finally, "Why don't you ask him yourself?" One of his underlings explained quietly it was a "need-to-know situation." Apparently, I didn't need to know.

Byer's frayed nerves were emblematic of just how Guantanamo could challenge one's sanity. Most Military Police hate being posted there, and taking command of Gitmo, as it is known, is a thankless job. But soldiers usually don't spend more than a year on the island, unlike the prisoners, some of whom have been there for six years without a trial. No one really knows what effect such indefinite detention has on the prisoners. Four have committed suicide and others have tried. Some continue lengthy hunger strikes but are force-fed. Those are the adults. What about Omar, who has been alone for his teenage years, locked up beneath the glare of fluorescent lights often for twenty-four hours a day?

Before Omar's first appearance at the military commission on January 11, 2006, his only public image was a photograph his family had given the media. It shows him at age twelve or thirteen, staring impassively at the camera. His hair is short and there is the fine fuzz of a pubescent mustache.

The tall, thin nineteen-year-old who walked into the Guantanamo courtroom in 2006 looked very different, stuck between youth and manhood. His attempt at a beard consisted of scraggly wisps of hair on his chin and bare patches around the corner of his mouth. My eyes were drawn to his feet which were covered in massive, glaringly white running shoes his lawyers had brought for him. They seemed too big, and he looked like an awkward puppy whose body hadn't caught up with its paws.

Guantanamo's chief prosecutor, the always-quotable Col. Moe Davis, had chided the media for portraying Omar as a fresh-faced teenager,

calling the coverage “nauseating.” “You’ll see evidence when we get into the courtroom of the smiling face of Omar Khadr as he builds bombs to kill Americans,” he told us. “When these guys went to camp, they weren’t making s’mores and learning how to tie knots.”

But Omar did seem like a teenager. As the proceedings unfolded around him, Omar remained transfixed by the television before him that carried the hearing live. When I later watched his younger brother Kareem glued to his computer playing video games in the Khadr apartment, he reminded me of Omar.

In June 2006, the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed the military commission process as unconstitutional, throwing Omar back into legal limbo. Early the next year, he was again facing trial, this time as one of only three detainees charged under the new Congress-endorsed military commissions that Bush had signed into law.

In June 2007, a very different Omar Khadr returned to the courtroom. He was wearing pyjama-like khaki prison garb and flip-flops. He had filled out, grown up, and his beard and hair were shaggy. Some reporters described him as defiant. I thought he looked despondent. Just before the hearing—that would end with his charges again dismissed and the case thrown back for appeals—Omar’s Canadian lawyer, Dennis Edney, came up to me. He had just met Omar for the first time but had spent four years fighting for him in Canada. “I think he’s lost. I’m not sure I can pull him back,” he said. Edney, an Edmonton lawyer with a Scottish brogue, is a scrapper and likes nothing more than a good legal battle. But on that day, Edney looked more tired than angry.

The public has rarely been sympathetic to Omar or taken much interest in his case, largely because of the outrageous comments made by his family and revelations about their connections to al Qaeda. Thus, although this is a book about Omar, the story of how he grew up and the actions of his family are important.

Over the years, almost every development in Omar’s case that should have sparked debate has been diminished by news stories about the other Khadr family members. A year after Omar was transferred to Guantanamo, his brother Abdurahman returned to Canada and was profiled in a documentary by Canada’s public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), where he talked about his “al Qaeda family.” The Khadr family thereafter became known as “Canada’s First Family of Terrorism.” Omar’s mother appeared in the documentary saying she would rather raise her kids in

Pakistan than Canada where they could become drug addicts or homosexuals. A few months later, she returned to Toronto so her fourteen-year-old son Kareem could get free medical care. (He had been paralyzed after a battle with Pakistani forces in 2003 during which his father was killed.)

There's no doubt many Canadians view the Khadr family as Canadians of convenience, accepting subsidized housing and health care with outstretched hands, while wagging fingers at Canada's morally corrupt society. "The Khadr family is like a rugby team at an all-you-can-eat buffet," Canada's former top spy, Jack Hooper, told me in describing the Khadr's use of social services.

Canadians have grown weary of the Khadr family. Even at my newspaper with its century-old tradition as defender of the underdog, editors sometimes receive my story suggestions with rolled eyes as if to say, *Why can't the Khadr stories just go away?*

I understand the fatigue, and how the public gets tugged in one direction, only to be yanked in another. That happened to me when I met Tabitha Speer in her North Carolina hometown and her story broke my heart. Her soldier husband was an Elvis fan, a romantic who left her love notes around the house and a dad who wanted nothing more than to watch his little daughter and son grow up happy.

In Utah, I was graciously welcomed into the home of Layne and Leisl Morris. Layne had been blinded in one eye by shrapnel from the July 2002 battle, forcing his retirement from the army. He has a beautiful family and four children whose lives would be so different today if he hadn't come home. Scotty Hansen, a Vietnam vet not prone to long emotional discussions, talked to me in detail about the battle while sitting on his living-room couch, his granddaughter snuggled on one side and a grey teacup poodle on the other. The Bronze Star that he was awarded for his bravery in recovering the bodies of the two dead Afghan soldiers was displayed on the mantle.

The soldiers all want justice, which they too have been denied. Locking up a fifteen-year-old and holding him for more than five years without trial isn't justice. It's retribution. Omar has become a victim, too.

And that's why understanding Omar's case is so important. It speaks to Canada's relationship with the United States. The fact that the Canadian federal government and the public have never been able to separate Omar from his family has left Canada standing virtually alone in its support of Guantanamo Bay, while other Western governments have condemned the prison and managed to bring their citizens home. The silence also means a Canadian teenager has been interrogated, abused and jailed in conditions

worse than those afforded convicted rapists and murderers. Canada has lost the moral high ground we once enjoyed.

The case also reveals the fundamental problem with the Bush administration's post-9/11 policies. By flouting traditional law cherished by democratic governments, the United States has managed to turn its enemies into symbols of oppression. Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo are gifts for al Qaeda propagandists. Intelligence experts now believe terrorism is a greater problem for the West today than it was on September 10, 2001.

For me, Omar's age has always been the greatest factor. He was indoctrinated into his father's war, like a child soldier forced to fight for a corrupt government or guerilla organization. But Omar has always been treated as an adult. Canada is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international treaty that protects children under the age of eighteen, yet Canadian politicians deliberately steered the public away from that issue in Omar's case. An e-mail sent by a high-ranking Canadian Foreign Affairs official soon after Omar's capture warned her political bosses to "claw back" on public comments that reinforced that Omar was a minor.

At the Guantanamo press conference, I asked Col. Davis about the fact that Omar was only fifteen when he was captured. He answered, "He's nineteen now." I thought the reply was outrageous, but Ottawa gave the standard government response that amounted to little more than "no comment."

Now he's twenty-one, and it's hard to know who Omar has become. His childish letters say little more than "pray for me." Edney promised Omar that once he is released, he would take him to his lakeside retreat in Western Canada. Edney told him that to give him hope. Privately, he said it was part of a plan to re-humanize him after years of being detainee No. 766.

Former detainee and British citizen Moazzam Begg was held in a cell in Bagram with Omar in 2002. He remains haunted by the last conversation they had as Omar was taken from his cell to board a plane to Guantanamo. Omar told Begg he was lucky. "You know you're fortunate because there are people who actually are concerned about you," he said. "I don't have anyone."

Toronto,  
January 2008

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## *Author's Note*

The world of national security and terrorism is murky. Skilled terrorists can be skilled propagandists. Intelligence is sometimes deceiving or simply wrong. Politicians have lied and lawyers can distort.

All this makes writing a narrative about a controversial prisoner in a controversial prison difficult. In trying to get at the truth I have attempted to rely only on government and intelligence reports that could be independently verified. Where there are allegations or statements that could not be substantiated, I have included them only if the details seemed plausible based on supporting documents.

Using unnamed sources can create doubt in the mind of the reader so I have tried to quote everyone by name, although I have relied on the expertise of a handful of people not mentioned in the book.

In writing dialogue, I have relied on court transcripts or my own taped interviews. In other cases where there is no record, I approached the interview subjects more than once to ensure their recollection was the same each time.

Even with these precautions, however, there are the unavoidable pitfalls when writing a non-fiction narrative. Memories can sometimes fade or be revised and therefore will be disputed. Many of the government's records remain censored under claims that releasing the information would jeopardize national security.

And finally, this story cannot fully be told until the Pentagon allows access to Omar Khadr and until his fate is determined.

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# 1

## *“Shoot Me”*

THE GRENADES CAME down in a shower burst in the early morning heat, falling one after another with sickening thuds. The U.S. Special Operations Forces under attack couldn't believe how many were being thrown, seemingly tossed by a company of soldiers, not the five or six men housed in the compound built of mud, straw and stones.

Sgt. Layne Morris took cover behind a house with his unit's executive officer, Capt. Mike Silver. The men had known each other in Utah, their friendship strengthened during the past few weeks by the bond that forms between soldiers in places such as Afghanistan.

Amid the thunder of explosions, Silver crouched over Morris's left shoulder and explained where he wanted him to shoot. It wasn't an easy target, but a shot over the wall and into the front of the house would trap the suspects inside and maybe stop the onslaught. The soldiers needed time to regroup, settle down and plan their assault.

In the fields around them, the rest of the team was taking cover behind buildings, in ditches, careful not to get caught in the crossfire. For Morris and Silver, though, their focus was narrow. *Hit the front porch. Keep the suspects trapped inside.*

They didn't see the grenade when it landed at their feet.

The force of the blast sent Morris flying backwards, landing in Silver's lap. A black curtain closed over Morris's right eye and it took him a few minutes to realize his eyelid was still open; he just couldn't see anything. Both men were momentarily dazed and stared at Morris's M4 rifle lying in the dirt, thinking it had somehow misfired. Morris was more confused than in pain. "What's wrong with my eye? Why can't I see?"

But Silver wasn't worried about the eye; instead he was pressing a bandage hard against the gash on Morris's nose. He yelled into his radio,



"We've been hit, we're hit." They crouched lower to the ground. The firing continued.

Sgt. Scotty Hansen hadn't heard the call and came running around the corner, almost tripping over Morris and Silver as he took cover. A Vietnam vet, Hansen had killed and seen others kill, but that seemed a lifetime ago. Now, as he slumped down and leaned against the wall clutching his gun, everything was different. He was a grandfather of five, nearing retirement, and beside him was Morris, a friend of two decades wounded with a bloody rag held to his face.

Morris needed to be moved out of there. Hansen offered to take him to the "combat casualty point," a sheltered area about 200 yards from the fighting that was designated for medical triage. With Morris secured at his side, Hansen lurched forward and kept low, as Silver and the other soldiers laid down cover fire.

There was no question the soldiers outnumbered those inside the compound. In addition to Morris, Silver, Hansen and another dozen soldiers from Utah's 19th Special Forces, there were at least ten soldiers with the 82nd Airborne Division and a half-dozen local Afghan fighters with experience in guerrilla warfare and a lifetime of fighting behind them. There was also a handful of fighters from the elite Delta Force, the best counterterrorist troops the U.S. Army has to offer. Just days earlier, a Delta Force medic had saved the lives of two Afghan children. Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Speer had run into a minefield to grab the children who had been injured by one of the explosives. He treated them until he flagged down a passing ambulance and then stayed with the children after one hospital refused to admit them. By the time he left them at a hospital run by Spanish doctors, he was optimistic they would live.

Speer wanted to be a doctor some day but on this morning as he crouched with the others surrounding the compound, he was a soldier, and Delta Force were trained to kill with stunning precision. Although he had been with the army for eight years, this was the first time the twenty-eight-year-old Speer had seen battle.

DESPITE THEIR NUMBER and skill, the soldiers weren't gaining much ground. They had to move quickly. News of the battle would spread, and if those inside were connected to al Qaeda or the Taliban, there was a good chance reinforcements were on the way. The soldiers had called for ground

support but their base was more than an hour's drive away. Who would arrive first?

Too many men were dropping. Morris was hit the worst, but others were being dragged to medical care. Silver and another commander with the Utah soldiers made a call. They couldn't wait for ground support. They wanted the area leveled. Air support was summoned.

Minutes later, the sky began to thump with the drumbeat of heavily armed Apache attack helicopters. The hulking flying tanks hit the target, then retreated. But the walls of the house, about three feet thick near the base, were remarkably resilient, and Silver, lying nearby, could hear shouting. "They're still firing," Silver yelled into his radio.

As the smoke cleared, the next wave of air support was called. Two A-10 Warthog fighter jets whistled low, pockmarking the dusty ground. Morris, unable to move, watched warily as the Warthogs approached, firing as they came. They looked like massive hunched-back birds precariously rocking back and forth. "One gust of wind," he thought, "and I'm dead." With remarkable accuracy, though, the fighter jets fired on the walled-in compound.

Still, the grenades came and Silver could hear shouts. In the end, it took two F-18s and their 500-pound bombs to finally destroy the compound, save for a couple of stubborn walls. Who could have survived that onslaught?

Everything went quiet. The only sound was the whop-whop-whopping of the Medevac helicopters. Through swirling clouds of dust, the wounded at the casualty staging area were loaded on to stretchers destined for the Bagram base. Morris's last view was of the smoldering compound. *Good, we got them.*

The soldiers slowly emerged to survey the remains. Mike Silver joined Chris Speer and a small group of Delta Force and 82nd Airborne soldiers, and they moved cautiously toward the compound. One by one, with weapons drawn, they gingerly stepped through a hole that had been blown in a wall. Silver went right, following the path of the first Delta Force soldier. Speer went straight, covering the two in front of him. Debris from the collapsed house provided a low wall of cover. Then someone from a nearby alley began to shoot at the soldiers, sending dust flying into the air.

*Pop.* Silver heard a faint noise. The two soldiers in front ducked, either realizing that the sound was the crackle of a grenade when first lit or because they saw something move.

Speer didn't see the grenade coming, or if he did, he didn't have time to react. It landed, the explosion sending searing chunks of shrapnel into his torso and skull. One of the commandos heard moaning from the back of the compound. When the dust cleared, he saw a man lying on his right side, with an AK-47 beside him, and began shooting with his own M4 rifle.

The soldiers had killed three men now buried among the debris. They looked to be in their thirties or maybe even their forties, but it was difficult to judge since they were covered in blood and dust. One man had a scraggly mustache and beard, his open mouth revealing a prominent overbite and big gaps between his teeth. Another looked older, his mustache and beard trim, caked dirt sealing his eyes shut, giving him a peaceful look in death. Blood covered half of another's narrow, prominent nose and pooled in his matted mop of long hair and unruly beard.

There was another body behind a wall, breathing and conscious, despite two golf-ball sized holes in his chest. Lying on his side covered in a thick layer of dust, his eyes closed, was a fifteen-year-old Canadian named Omar Khadr.

FOUR WEEKS AFTER THE SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, terror attacks on New York and Washington, the U.S. military launched Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. B-52 bombers began the assault, followed by fighter jets and Tomahawk cruise missiles dispatched from U.S. and British ships and submarines. The first ground troops were Special Operation Forces, soldiers trained in unconventional warfare and skilled at aligning themselves with local opposition forces. Although their mission was supposed to be covert, pictures soon emerged of American soldiers on horseback fighting alongside the anti-Taliban forces of the Northern Alliance.

In New York, Ground Zero still smoldered and throughout the city pictures of hundreds of the dead remained taped to walls and lamp posts. Each day in Washington, the men and women making military decisions had to walk past the charred entrance of the Pentagon. U.S. president George W. Bush made it clear that al Qaeda's leaders and their hosts, the Taliban, would pay.

On October 7, news of the first bombs scrolled across the ticker tape of New York's Times Square. The ABC News feed read simply: "The United

States has launched massive military strikes in Afghanistan.” New Yorker Lucille Ferbel stopped and stared at the words as she pulled her scarf tight against her shoulders and began to cry. “I hate the idea that we’re going into a war, but what could we do? Look what they did to my city. It’s my city. I’m heartbroken.” So too was much of the world.

Taliban leaders at first offered to negotiate the handover of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden if the United States would stop bombing, but the offers were met with angry rebukes. “There is nothing to negotiate. They are harboring a terrorist. They need to hand him over,” Bush told reporters.

Within one month and two days of Operation Enduring Freedom’s launch, Mazar-e-sharif became the first Afghan city liberated from the Taliban’s rule. Others soon followed, and by November 14 both Kabul and Jalalabad were under the control of the Northern Alliance, with the substantial help of U.S. and NATO forces.

On December 22, Hamid Karzai was sworn in as the prime minister of the interim government, becoming the face of a post-Taliban Afghanistan. Karzai was a man who had been born into privilege and politics, and his elegance in manner and eloquence in speech were greatly admired in the West. Gucci fashion designer Tom Ford called Karzai “the most chic man in the world.”

By the spring of 2002, the U.S. forces were deep in Afghanistan’s mountains, targeting al Qaeda’s labyrinthine cave hideouts in an offensive known as Operation Anaconda. “In the end, it took U.S. army infantrymen—inching up rocky mountainsides, crunching through snow patches, and blasting the enemy out of caves and rock piles—to pull off Operation Anaconda, which began March 1. It took army helicopter aircrews, flying through ground fire and sleet with rocket-propelled grenades exploding around them and sometimes bouncing off the fuselages. It wasn’t technology that finally pried hundreds of Taliban and al Qaeda fighters from their stronghold—it was the tenacity and bravery of individual American soldiers,” *Army Magazine* reported in April 2002.

The soldiers lived up to the operation’s code name. They squeezed out the enemy by sheer force. The military announced hundreds of al Qaeda and Taliban supporters had been killed and their hideouts all but destroyed. Yet al Qaeda’s leaders, rumored to be hiding in the mountains along Afghanistan’s border with Pakistan, remained elusive. This lawless tribal region had a history of resisting outsiders and harbored a generation of youth who had grown up with war. Across the mountains lay Pakistan’s

Federally Administered Tribal Area, where Pashtun tribes had autonomy from Pakistan's government; the barren badlands are known as Ilaqa Ghair, the land without laws.

In early 2002, the military established a base camp about ninety miles south of Kabul in the Paktia Province near Pakistan's border. These soldiers were responsible for hunting down the remaining al Qaeda leaders hiding in this dangerous and highly unpredictable terrain. It was here that a group of Delta Force soldiers landed in July 2002. It was here that Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Speer first went to war.

THE U.S. ARMY WON'T DISCUSS, or even acknowledge, the existence of Delta Force, the elite counterterrorism unit that operates out of Fort Bragg in North Carolina. But since its creation in 1977, the mystique of Delta Force has whetted the appetite of countless journalists, Hollywood producers and even video-game manufacturers, making the name of the covert unit one of the army's most recognized. Secrecy seemed especially ludicrous after army Col. Charlie Beckwith, Delta Force founder, wrote a memoir that described in detail how the counterterrorism unit defined itself. Beckwith, who died in 1994, wrote that his unit had a simple goal: "Put two head shots in each terrorist."

"They do not serve warrants and they do not make arrests," one former Delta Force soldier told the *New York Times*. "Their job is to kill people we want killed."

The Special Operations Forces has more than 30,000 soldiers on active duty and includes the Army Rangers, Green Berets and other units trained in guerrilla warfare. Only the Delta Force and the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, better known by their former name of Seal Team Six, are trained specifically to combat terrorism. Estimates vary on Delta Force members but most believe there are no more than 2,000.

Delta Force's failed missions are better known than the unit's successes. In 1980, the mission to free fifty-three American hostages held by Iranian Islamic revolutionaries at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran ended in disaster. Malfunctioning helicopters and a collision with a plane while refueling in the Iranian desert claimed the lives of eight soldiers and only bolstered the hostage taker's confidence.

In 1993, Delta Force embarked on the ill-fated mission to apprehend Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid. The joint operation with the

U.S. Army Rangers ended with two downed Black Hawk helicopters and the deaths of eighteen U.S. servicemen and hundreds of Somalis. Mark Bowden's bestseller *Black Hawk Down* brought to life this devastating mission in painful detail.

But the successes have not received equal attention. Operation Just Cause involved Delta Force soldiers helping to capture Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in 1989 and three years later, during the Persian Gulf War, Delta Force was credited with demolishing scud missile launchers. There could be many more missions but even the families of the soldiers involved don't know about them. The words "Delta Force" are never uttered by the unit's soldiers and wives are forbidden to acknowledge its existence.

While Delta Force were developing into a highly skilled international force, Chris Speer, the youngest of three boys born to Betty and Richard Speer of Denver, Colorado, was finding his way into the military. Unlike his rambunctious older brothers, Speer was a shy, observant child whose mother held him back from kindergarten for a year because she didn't think he was ready. While Speer was in grade school, his family moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where his father opened an antique furniture refurbishing shop. When tiny hands were needed to fit in an especially tight corner, Speer was his dad's eager assistant.

Speer grew into a well-rounded teenager, both athletic and artistic, which helped him fit easily into high school cliques. However one passion overshadowed all others—his love of Elvis. Even as a little boy, he would run gobs of Vaseline through his hair to imitate his favorite singer. (After he was married, his wife Tabitha was mortified to see a matted and framed poster of Elvis being carried into their first home. "Tabitha, you have to let him have this," a wise aunt told her and the poster was hung without debate.)

By the time he finished high school at eighteen, Speer knew he wanted to join the military. His eldest brother Todd had enlisted but it wasn't sibling hero worship that took Speer to the recruiting offices. Speer wanted to be a doctor and by enlisting he would get basic medical training and have his education paid for. After training in San Antonio, New Mexico, he moved to a base in Pennsylvania and then to Fort Bragg, where he signed up for the Special Operations Forces. He underwent eighteen months of training, which for him included advanced first aid, scuba diving and French, since all Special Forces are required to speak more than one language.

In many ways, Speer was a paradox. He was the quiet Elvis impersonator, the six-foot-one athlete who liked to sketch, the soldier who joined the

most lethal army unit to learn how to heal. With all his quirks, he is, however, a man well remembered and admired. His roommate at the Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania's Army War College named his first son Christopher after Speer, whom he describes as "tall, strong and honest," always "full of love and hope."

At Fort Bragg, Speer and the other soldiers often spent their free time by unwinding in nearby towns that looked like backdrops in a Norman Rockwell painting. Speer especially liked Southern Pines, with its clapboard train station in the center of downtown, fudge stores and barber shops marked by the red-and-white poles. In 1996, Brooks Bar was the place to go on Saturday night.

One December evening, Speer found himself bellied up to the bar when Tabitha Hansen walked in. Speer was twenty-three and scheduled for tours in Africa the following year. He wasn't looking to settle down or even to meet anyone, but when the twenty-seven-year-old curvy cosmetician with jet black hair and nearly translucent blue-green eyes introduced herself, Speer couldn't see anything beyond her. By the end of the night, Speer had his arm around Tabitha and her phone number in his pocket. By the end of the week, they were dating, by the end of the year, in love. Nine months later, they were engaged. He would later tell people that he knew that first night he had found the woman he would marry.

Tabitha became Speer's priority and partner but the military remained his mistress. Throughout their engagement, he was often abroad, helping train local forces in Uganda and Kenya. Tabitha didn't like his job but she respected it because he was so passionate. When he found out he would be sent abroad in May 1998, the month they were supposed to get married, they decided not to wait. They set a date and, within four weeks, Tabitha's mother had planned everything back home in Michigan, contacting a Baptist minister friend to perform the ceremony, reserving a spot at a new resort that could take a booking on short notice, selecting the cake and making sure there was champagne for toasts. There wasn't time to buy a wedding dress, so she bought Tabitha a black evening gown. Even Tabitha's great-grandmother, who was horrified by the non-traditional garb, said the romance of the ceremony overshadowed the details.

Speer continued his missions abroad. When he returned from Portugal soon after they were married, Tabitha met him at the airport with a gift bag. Inside were two baby bibs. One said, "My daddy loves me." The



other: “If you think I’m cute, you should see my daddy.” Eight months later, their daughter, Taryn, was born and Speer was smitten.

Speer climbed quickly through the military’s ranks. By the time he was twenty-eight, he had become one of the youngest members of Fort Bragg’s Delta Force unit. When the attacks happened on September 11, 2001, every Delta Force soldier knew he would be called to duty soon and Speer was looking forward to finally putting his skills to the test. But Tabitha was just a month away from giving birth to their second child, son Tanner, and they were devastated when they learned Speer would be among the first to depart for Afghanistan. Knowing his predicament, his friend J.K., Robert J. Kennedy Jr., offered to take his place. Tabitha was relieved, not realizing that it would be J.K. who would again bring her a small measure of comfort during a devastating time.

The next July when Tanner was nine months old, Speer got his chance to fight. As he did before all his lengthy deployments, Speer left love notes all over the house for his wife and children, some of which remained hidden for more than five years. When he told his three-year-old daughter Taryn he was going to the desert, she exclaimed excitedly: “You’ll be riding camels!”

On July 12, he took his children to the hair salon where Tabitha worked so Tanner could get his first haircut. Speer videotaped the milestone. A picture from that day shows Speer in front of his house hugging Tanner with Taryn leaning close to the camera beaming, her face slightly out of focus. Speer, tanned, with a trim goatee, wearing a white tank top that shows off his tight biceps, looked the picture of health. But his expression is somber, unlike many of the pictures in the family photo album where he is grinning broadly with his arms draped around his wife and kids. “There’s something in his eyes. It’s like he knows,” Tabitha’s father later said.

The evening before his flight to Afghanistan, he gave his children a bath and as they sat in their pyjamas, he spoke to them quietly. “I love you more than anything, please remember that,” he said. “But I have to go away to work and I might not return.”

FOR MANY AMERICAN SOLDIERS, their first experiences outside of American borders come in times of war, when they are sent to fight for their country.

But Layne Morris had been traveling since he was born. His father was an agricultural engineer with the U.S. State Department, which meant



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