

# ***Afghanistan & Pakistan: A War Story***

By: Gene S. Bartlow, MPA, MS, CAE  
Colonel, USAF-Retired

This is a war story<sup>1</sup> with a rather unique history, one that is indirectly relevant to America's "911 Wakeup Call" (on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001) and the terrorists who were harbored in Afghanistan by the Taliban. This is a short wartime adventure story with an Afghan desert and Pakistani mountain connection. This story begins for me when I enlisted in the US Air Force after earlier working as a high school teacher in Kansas. I never expected to be sent to a Southwest Asian desert, let alone so soon, after my commissioning in July 1964.<sup>2</sup>

During the Cold War and the 1965-66 India-Pakistani War, the US maintained a "USAF military listening post" monitoring the Soviet Union and China based in Peshawar, northern Pakistan. The CIA, NSA, the USAF, and others used U-2 aircraft to fly over parts of Russia and China from a classified base in Peshawar through out the 1960's and they used large satellite dishes and other methods to collect photos

and electronic and telecommunications information. The data, images, and tapes developed from this listening post were vital to US national security and the US and NATO diplomatic and intelligence communities. At the time (1964-67), I was the Operations Officer in Charge of the Frankfurt Courier Transfer Station (then West Germany).<sup>3</sup> I was responsible for scheduling and dispatching 15 US Courier Officers through out Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia.<sup>4</sup> Our US military courier service network was organized in conjunction with the US State Department's Diplomatic Courier Service, which we were associated. We maintained a regular courier route, in support of this military mission, from Frankfurt, Germany *via* Istanbul, Turkey, and Beirut, Lebanon, and to Karachi and then on up to Peshawar, Pakistan.

In mid-1965, Pakistan sent guerrilla forces into the Indian part of Kashmir in the hope of stirring up a rebellion that would either oust the Indians or at least force the issue back onto the international agenda.<sup>5</sup> Pakistani forces did not find as much support among the Kashmiri population as they had hoped, but fighting spread

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was first published (without photos) in the *Journal of Electronic Defense*, Volume 26, Number 3, pages 82 and 37, February 2003.

<sup>2</sup> By way of introduction, I am a Colonel, USAF-Retired. I am a Vietnam Veteran and I worked as a staff officer in the Pentagon, 1984-87 (as a senior logistician and systems acquisition officer). I have lived in Springfield, Virginia since 1984. I retired in 1990 with 27+ year's service as the Dean of Administration and Resources and Chief of Staff of the Air Force Chair at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), Ft. McNair, DC. I am a Certified Association Executive (CAE) through the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

---

<sup>3</sup> The Frankfurt Courier Transfer Station (CTS) was the largest within the USAF Postal Courier Service, and was located adjacent to the Frankfurt International Airport, West Germany.

<sup>4</sup> I ended up traveling to 29 countries throughout my career.

<sup>5</sup> Pakistan was created by the "Partition of British India" in 1947, and Kashmir was left "unassigned".

by August, and a process of escalation culminated in a full-scale Indian offensive toward Lahore on September 6<sup>th</sup>. Fighting, frequently very bitter, continued until an UN-sponsored cease-fire took hold on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. Both sides had tacitly agreed not to let the war spread to the East Wing of Pakistan.



The war was militarily inconclusive; each side held prisoners and some territory belonging to the other. Losses were relatively heavy—on the Pakistani side, twenty aircraft, 200 tanks, and 3,800 troops; this war resulted in the largest land tank battle since WWII, which is before Desert Storm.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan's army had been able to withstand Indian pressure, but a continuation of the fighting would only have led to further losses and ultimate defeat for Pakistan.

I made 12 courier trips in all from Frankfurt *via* Pan American Airlines (PAA) to Karachi and then *via* Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) to Peshawar in order to deliver and

---

<sup>6</sup> India and Pakistan have fought three wars since 1947, principally over the Kashmir issue.

retrieve highly classified courier and diplomatic materials and bring them to Frankfurt for transshipment to the Pentagon.<sup>7</sup>

During this relatively brief India-Pakistani War, our courier route and regular communications were disrupted because all borders and airport facilities were closed for security purposes. It was vital that we continued to collect this highly classified material twice a week, especially during this military conflict.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, because of my operational and regional experience, I was one of two US Couriers selected to plan and develop a new alternative courier route. The other US Courier, a very close friend of mine who jointly pioneered and traveled this route at the same

time, was Larry L. Henry (now Major General, USAF-Retired). Senior officers initially considered this an impossible task because we knew the Pakistani military border guards were instructed to deter any entry, but there was no other viable alternative at the time. We were also armed US Couriers, dressed in civilian cloths, and I carried a small-concealed 32-caliber automatic

---

<sup>7</sup> These flights, *via* Pan American Airways (PAA) Boeing 707s, were 12-to-14 hours in length from Frankfurt through Vienna, Austria, Istanbul, Turkey, Beirut, Lebanon, Tehran, Iran, and on to Karachi, Pakistan. We often had the pleasure of an overnight layover in the Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel in Beirut, Lebanon, after first leaving our classified material at the nearby American Embassy.

<sup>8</sup> The US military and intelligence mission at Peshawar was only fulfilled when the data and materials they produced were delivered to the Pentagon, therefore, the re-establishment of a courier route was considered mission essential.

pistol. I took a flight to Kabul, Afghanistan, and drove a US Embassy 4x4 pickup truck (with a trusted Afghan driver-interpreter) from Kabul east through the Khyber Pass and the Torkham Khyber Gate (a six-hour trip) into Peshawar, Pakistan and returned *via* the same route. Peshawar is about 45 miles from the border of Afghanistan and the Khyber Pass. When I arrived at the Peshawar Air Base, on my first trip, officials were quite surprised and pleased to see me asking how in the world I got there. The security courier materials were sealed in 60-pound diplomatic courier bags and we brought them back *via* Tehran, Iran, and Istanbul to Frankfurt. Interestingly, we did experience some initial difficulties, and it was necessary for us to diplomatically negotiate our passage with the Pakistani border guards (actually bribe them) with a bottle of Johnny Walker Scotch and a carton of Kools-brand cigarettes each time in both directions to smooth and facilitate our travels because the borders were technically closed to all traffic. We were decorated for establishing this unique courier route and successfully completing this critical mission during the India-Pakistani War.<sup>9</sup> Pakistan was rudely shocked by the

reaction of the United States to the war. Judging the matter to be largely Pakistan's fault, the United States not only refused to come to Pakistan's aid under the terms of the Agreement of Cooperation, but also issued a statement declaring its neutrality while also cutting off military supplies. The Pakistanis were embittered at what they considered a friend's betrayal, and the experience taught them to avoid relying on any single source of support. For its part, the United States was disillusioned by a war in which both sides used United States-supplied equipment.



*The photo above is of the Khyber Pass entrance at dawn on a morning drive*

---

<sup>9</sup> I was later transferred and became the Chief (Officer in Charge) of the Frankfurt Aerial Mail Terminal (AMT), located on the flight line of the Frankfurt International Airport, which had 115 personnel and operated 24 hours *per* day, seven days a week, transshipping over 1,000,000 pounds of US APO mail *per* month *via* truck, rail, and plane to military destinations throughout NATO Europe (it was the largest military AMT in the world at that time).

The war brought other repercussions for the security relationship as well. The United States withdrew its military assistance advisory group in July 1967. In response to these events, Pakistan declined to renew

the lease on the Peshawar military facility, which ended in 1969.

I made five courier trips (each a unique experience) through Kabul and overland east to the Khyber Pass to Peshawar in support of this important mission.<sup>10</sup> I still have my old passport with the border stamps, visas, and several 35mm photographs of my Afghan and Southwest Asia trips. The overland trips were long and arduous on unimproved desert-and-mountain roads passing mud-hut villages with little vegetation; people were literally in rags leading goats and donkeys with wooden carts, with virtually no cars and only a few trucks. Almost every man I saw was armed with a rifle, usually an antique. During one of my trips through the Khyber Pass, I purchased two 150-year-old flintlock Khyber rifles (each in working order and date stamped in the mid-1800s) from local Afghan tribesmen near the Khyber Pass for only US\$7 each, which I now have mounted on one wall of my home office. I also bought two intricately engraved brass tables in Peshawar, and I bought an engraved Iranian copper table and an antique Russian Samovar in Tehran, which I also still have.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> On October 28, 1965, December 12, 1965, April 18, 1966, August 5, 1966, and September 21, 1966.

<sup>11</sup> A Samovar is a metal urn (13”-to-15” high, made of polished brass or copper) with a spigot, used to boil water for tea and traditionally having an internal chimney, topped with a matching tea pot, and heated by hot coals. The Russian Samovar was a feature of home comfort, a

The Khyber Pass is a 53-kilometer (33-mile) passage through the Hindu



Kush mountain range. It connects the northern frontier of Pakistan with Afghanistan. On the north side of the Khyber Pass rise the towering, snow-covered mountains of the Hindu Kush. The topography is dry desert, rock roads, and mountains. Also, Frontier Scouts in gray shalwar kameezes (traditional tunics and loose pants) patrol this lonely station of the legendary Khyber Rifles, the militia force that has been guarding the border with Afghanistan since the nineteenth century, first for British India and then for Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> The

symbol of Russian hospitality, and a sign of good circumstances. Among the folk artifacts, Samovars occupy a special place. Samovars were domestic utensils, but also could be considered works of art.

<sup>12</sup> The famous British author Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) included several stories about the "Khyber Rifles" in his many books about Southwest Asia and India; he was awarded the

*“Afghanistan & Pakistan: A War Story”*  
By: Gene S. Bartlow, Colonel, USAF-Retired

Khyber Pass remains one of the most famous mountain passes in the World and is one of the most important transportation routes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Khyber Pass was also a major trade route for centuries.

Through out history conquering armies have used the Khyber Pass as an entry point for their invasions. The history of the Khyber Pass as a strategic gateway dates from 326 B.C., when Alexander the Great and his army marched through the Khyber Pass to reach the plains of India. Alexander the Great sent his supply trains through the Khyber Pass, then skirted northward with his army to the Konar Valley. There, he encountered fierce resistance and, struck by an Afghan archer's arrow, barely made it to the Indus River with his life. Genghis Khan and the great Mughal emperors began passing through the Khyber Pass a millennium later and ultimately established a great empire—but only after reaching painful accommodations with the Afghans. From Michni Point, which offers a spectacular view of the Khyber Pass, a trained eye can still see the ruins of the Mughal signal towers used to relay complex torchlight messages 1,500 miles from Calcutta to Bukhara in less than an hour.

In the nineteenth century, the Khyber Pass became the fulcrum of the Great Game, the contest between

---

Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907. An action/adventure movie was also made about this subject in 1953, set in the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, and starred Tyrone Powers and Terry Moore, titled: *“King of the Khyber Rifles”*.

the United Kingdom and Russia for control of Central Asia and India. The first Afghan War (1839-42) began when British commanders sent a huge army of British and Indian troops into Afghanistan to secure it against Russian incursions, replacing the ruling emir with a British protégé.



*Photo of road sign to Khyber Pass in Peshawar, Pakistan, 1964.*

Facing Afghan opposition, by January 1842, the British were forced to withdraw from Kabul with a column of 16,500 soldiers and civilians, heading east to the garrison at Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 110 miles away. Only a single survivor of that group ever made it to Jalalabad safely, though the British forces did recover some prisoners many months later.

Many have invaded Afghanistan, and most recently, in 1979, the Soviet Union's Red Army attempted to conquer Afghanistan all to no avail (withdrawing in 1989). The phenomenal military success

*“Afghanistan & Pakistan: A War Story”*  
*By: Gene S. Bartlow, Colonel, USAF-Retired*

orchestrated through airpower and a relatively small cadre of US forces in Afghanistan in 2001-02 was why this action was such a surprise to the Taliban and others in the Southwest Asian community, especially considering Afghanistan’s history.

Unfortunately, the Afghan people you see on television today appear to be dressed and function almost exactly the same as what I encountered 38 years ago; abject poverty, illiteracy, and religious and cultural repression were the norm then and it has not changed very much since. Living conditions are still harsh for many Afghans, and episodic violence continues. For many reasons, the Afghanistan people have made virtually zero progress in their economy, their infrastructure, their culture, and regrettably their thinking.

*Photo of 1964 Peshawar, Pakistan.*



Fortunately, however, the international community is beginning to come together to fight terrorism and engage those rogue states that

harbor terrorists; and the stage is set in Afghanistan for much greater progress over the next few years.

I recognize that this war story may be somewhat more than you really wanted to know about Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, it was my objective to provide a “*First Person Singular*” perspective on and some geopolitical and historical context to the unfolding events in Afghanistan and Pakistan today.

The “911” tragedy will be a day to be remembered forever in US history—a tragedy that will long be compared to Pearl Harbor, “a day that will live in infamy”. The World saw the true core of American character in the many heroes’ that memorable day in New York City and the Pentagon. The World continues to see heroes among our American-service members who are defending freedom today in Afghanistan and around the World.

God Bless America.

Word count: 1,928