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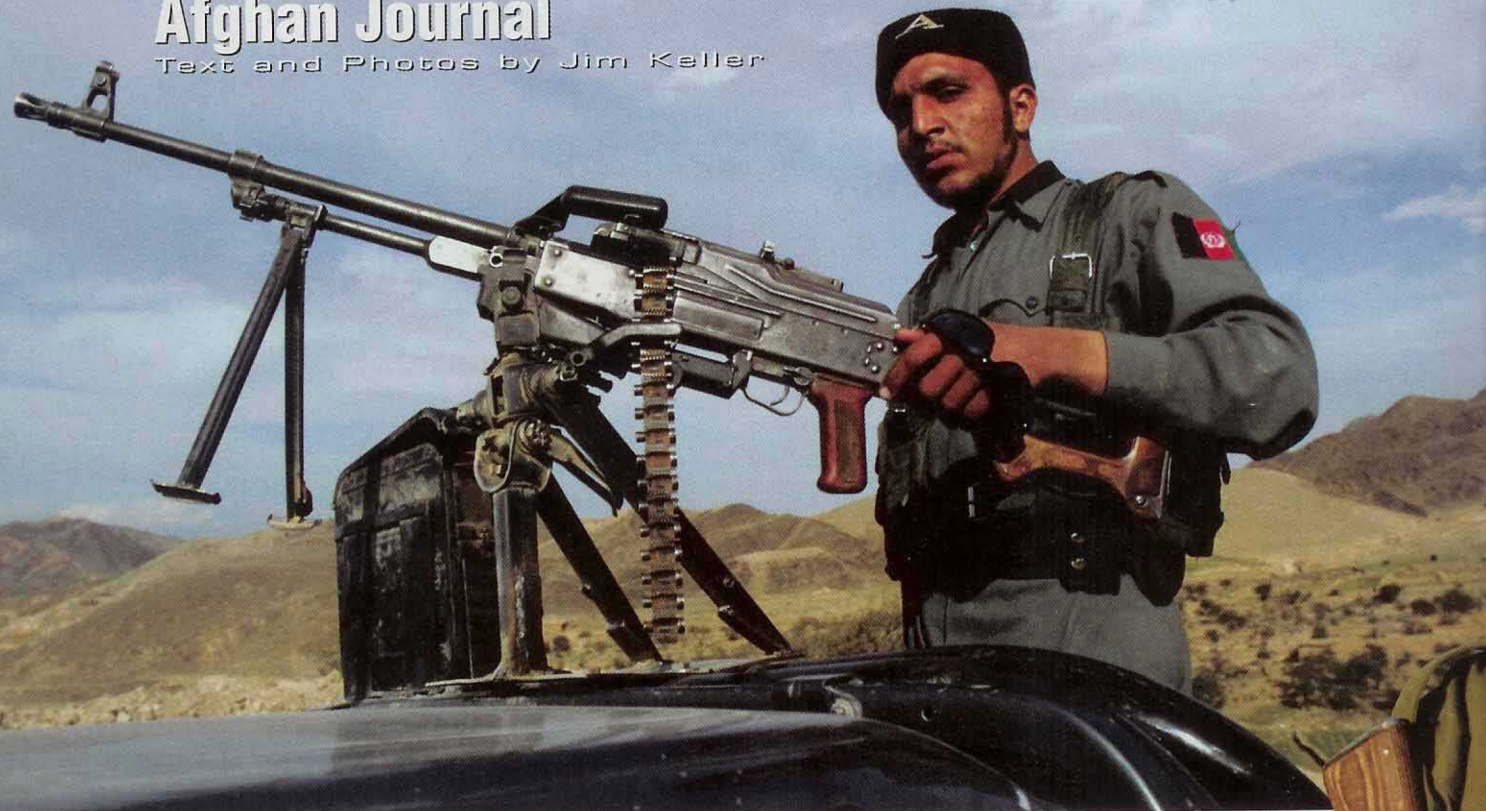
Article written under pseudonym
Jim Keller, because Paul Avallone
was working as a civilian
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Poppies 'R' Us

Afghan Journal

Text and Photos by Jim Keller



During the Soviet occupation, journalists were very hard to find in Afghanistan — unless they were working for SOF, with a camera in one hand and a rifle in the other. The boots-on-the-ground combat reports filed by varied and intrepid journalists risking all to get their information first-hand became the hallmark of an SOF story, and SOF the go-to guys for the scoop on what was happening in-country — and in some instances even the go-to guys when intelligence agencies wanted samples of new Soviet ordnance. We are pleased now to have Jim Keller, the nom-de-plume of a freelance writer and former Special Forces captain in 5th Group, once again on the ground for SOF in Afghanistan. Keller will be filing monthly reports — hopefully.

(above) Border Police soldier mans PKM 7.62 machine gun mounted on a Toyota truck — the vehicle of choice in rural Afghanistan. (top right) A village elder in Ghani Khel, where the local crop is poppies.

Forget about the Taliban and al Qaeda, they're working out of Pakistan, everyone knows that, and this is Afghanistan. The only way to get up close and personal with them and get on the inside is to trudge up a trail toward the border, waving a big American flag, unarmed of course, announcing you're looking for the real story, the inside scoop. After your kidnapping and subsequent beheading, it'll be one helluva story all right, but the byline won't be yours. Family and friends, and your life insurance carrier, will like it better if you stick with poppies.

That's what Afghanistan is, isn't it, poppies and heroin? The way the United States, Britain and the rest of the Coalition Forces (CF) here would have you think, it's the little Afghan farmer who is supplying, what, eighty or ninety percent of the world's supply of heroin? And that's just plain got to stop. Yeah, S-T-O-P! Junkies, beware:

Without Afghanistan you would not have become junkies. And when the Coalition Forces stop the poppy production here, you won't be junkies anymore.

Anyone with half a brain knows that's a crock, but that's still not stopping the powers that be from throwing millions—no, wait, make that billions—of dollars/Euros into turning the Afghan poppy fields into fields of wheat, corn, cotton, saffron and just plain plowed dirt. Every foreign government entity here seems to have a drug department, be it Counter-Narcotics (CN), Counter-Poppy (CP)

or Poppy Eradication Program (PEP). They might as well hang shingles outside their doors—"Poppies R Us." With each of those departments and programs comes, of course, large staffs and big bags of money.

That's not to take anything away from the guys here doing the job for their foreign governments. Some, like the CN head of one of the bigger embassies, (sorry, no names, to protect jobs, incomes and careers), admitted to me that everyone knows that stopping poppy production in Afghanistan will only move it elsewhere, like Mexico and Bolivia. According to this person, the reason for stopping it here is, plain and simple, to take the power away from the local warlords, thereby strengthening the central government.

Warlords and poppies, that's like hotdogs and mustard, sure, so the guy has a point. No one thinks the warlords are going to go away peacefully, which probably best ex-

plains the Brits' commitment to send over 3,000 troops to Helmand Province alone. Helmand wasn't always such a huge poppy producer, until some semi-successful CN programs in world-famous-producer Nangarhar Province actually cut way down the kilos coming out of there. Junkies being junkies, the world demand didn't fall; production just switched to Helmand and elsewhere in Afghanistan. Gee, what's a CN director to do? Why, as a start, send the troops to Helmand.

Where the troops go, so go most of the big-name correspondents, so there's little chance of a fresh story there. I, instead, headed to Nangarhar, hitching a ride with a couple of intelligence guys working CN for one of the CFs, (again, sorry, no names). Experienced operators from way back, these guys have no illusions. It's a job, a paycheck, and more than anything, I think, they just wanted to get out of the office in Kabul, kit up in magazines and body armor, toting their M4's and 9mm Glockes, hoping like hell to see a little action. My kind of guys. They've got the body armor, I'll keep them in front.

Nangarhar is east of Kabul, with mountain ranges on its east and south (including the Khyber Pass) bordering Pakistan. The Kabul River runs smack through Nangarhar, making it a fertile place, and the snowmelt from the mountain ranges make the valleys running up them some prime poppy-growing real estate. Asphalt is virtually non-existent in the province, except for its capital, the boomtown city of Jalalabad, so those poppy-growing valleys are reached by hours of jarring, shocks-flattening riding on rutted, pockmarked, cratered dirt roads.



(left) Border Police soldier shows young poppy sprout from February field. By April, (above) these were knee-high plants in full bloom.



With 175 men and more than a hundred miles of mountainous border with Pakistan to patrol, Commander Naqib is a busy man. Manned and paid by the central government in Kabul, Naqib shows his loyalty with the Afghan flag on his desk and a photograph of President Kharsi on the wall.

These were intel guys I was with, so they knew where the poppies were being grown: They wanted some first-hand information and opinions from the farmers themselves. Even in Nangarhar, where poppy production is down, you can swing a dead cat and hit a valley where it's being planted. We went into the Ghana Khel district, south, heading up into the foothills of the Tora Bora. A courtesy, introductory call upon the area's Border Patrol chief, Commander Naqib, was mandatory to avoid getting scarfed up or shot at one of his checkpoints. Naqib's got just one hundred seventy-five men to patrol more than a hundred miles of some of the roughest borders in the world, so he can't be blamed that it's a smuggler's

paradise. Just look at the sieve that's the U.S. border with Mexico, and that's flatland, not mountains, and our military/police forces are the best trained and outfitted in the world. Naqib does the best he can with what he has.

Commander Naqib forced a couple of trucks full of his guys onto us as security, then it was poppy field a-hopping we went. The worst thing about the security was that, upon our arrival, the farmers would think we were coming to destroy their fields. Just a month or so old, as this was mid-February, the fields were mostly sparse sprouts of young sprigs, which, I knew from past experience, by April would be knee-high plants topped with a rainbow of lovely blooms.

Informed that we weren't part of the PEP and were there only to hear them out, the farmers turned from hostile to accommodating. And talk, talk, talk, they love to tell their story. And in the middle of discussion, in the middle of the field, out of nowhere always appears a large woven mat as a ground cloth table, and a pot of chai, glass cups and plastic dishes of almonds, raisins, and wrapped caramel candies. Say what one will of the country, and it can be one filthy, violent, miserable place, but the Afghans are nothing if not downright hospitable.

And what do the farmers say about the poppies? Oh, sure, they'd love to grow something else, but even though the warlords and strongmen make the most profit from the harvests, the farmers them-

selves make far more than they would with other crops. And they'd love to get off the farm and get their kids off the farm, if only there were other jobs. Factories, they ask that America brings them factories. Factories for them to work in, so they would not have to produce poppies. As if you could just set down a factory in the middle of Nangarhar and, boom, they're going to be making semi-conductors or soda cans or even something as crude as rebar and steel fencing.

As for the last couple of years' drop in Nangarhar's poppy production and now a replanting of once barren fields with poppies, the farmers are as frustrated as they are angry, because they once believed the CN campaign's promise of a certain dollar-amount to be paid per acre not to grow poppy. They didn't grow it, they were then paid just a portion of the original promise or nothing, as the foreign government agencies gave the money to the local warlords, strongmen or mullahs to distribute, and golly gee whiz, it ain't hard to figure where that money ended up. Once bitten twice shy, even an illiterate far-valley farmer isn't going to buy that cash-not-to-grow line a second time.

As for that other successful method of killing the poppy production—using Afghan troops to plow the fields under just prior to harvest—it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what it eliminates in poppies it increases in new Taliban recruits.

The intel guys had a line on a place in north Nangarhar where the production had ceased completely, non-violently, with the farmers switching to other crops. Sure enough, a four-hour, kidney-punch-

ing, intestine-shifting ride later and we were a mile high in altitude in a valley of terraced fields of nothing but young wheat. Come to find out, over chai, almonds and sweets with the farmers, it was wheat this year, but it was saffron last year and they lost their shirts on that.

If the wheat fails this year, who knows what they'll try next year, but it probably won't be a return to poppy, because, (and here's why I don't reveal the location's name), this happens to be the hometown valley of a fellow who was once one of the prime Nangarhar warlords and is now a member of Parliament. With him now being such a distinguished part of the central Afghan government, it would not look good if poppy once again was king in his own back yard. Or so goes the theory, of why the CN success of this area.

As the intel guys were heading back to Kabul—three days in the “danger” of “hostile” rural Afghanistan had their office-bound bosses in a fret—I suggested they formally recommend that the ultimate and cheapest CN policy might be to make all the warlords and poppy kingpins members of Parliament and call it a day.

Me? I'm going to stick around here in Nangarhar a little while longer. Previous experience here reminds me that there are upper valleys south in the recesses of the Tora Bora where the marijuana grows as high and bushy as a ten-foot Christmas spruce. And, as a stringer correspondent for SOF, it's my duty to seek out the big stories... ✕

A poppy farmer explains the difficulty of surviving when growing crops other than poppy. Terraced fields of wheat (inset) grow in a high valley in north Nangarhar where, by the influence of a native-son warlord, now a member of Parliament, the farmers have switched crops.

