

Article written under pseudonym Jim Keller, because Paul Avallone was working as a civilian contractor in country then.



You Say You Want

Afghan Journal #4

Afghan Poppies "Die" in Bad Theater Scripted by Lewis Carroll

Text and Photos by Jim Keller

I'm sitting in the backseat of a battered four-door Toyota diesel pickup, bouncing down a dirt road, most of the time blinded by the billowing dust of the half-dozen trucks and SUVs in front. This is the Border Police I'm with. In the front seat, filming the soldier driving us in short takes is my companion Michael, a freelance news producer working on a counter-narcotics TV spot he hopes to sell to ISAF (shorthand for the NATO forces). We're heading out to a valley of poppies to document some eradication.

This area is familiar:

It was my backyard three years ago when my Special Forces team operated out of here. Then it was Toyota Ta-

comas, and on roads like these many times, on the way out to a hit, we'd have music blasting from the pickups' CD player.

tion, and "well, you know, we all wanna change the world," blasting out to no one and everyone in this Godforsaken country, is sung in my brain.

And that's what I'm



Freelance news producer Michael films the morning's eradication. There is a symbiotic relationship between the media and the government as regards to PEP. The actual, although token, physical eradication always makes interesting, colorful footage, and the broadcast of it (in particular, to U.S. and NATO governments) makes the Afghan government, which is dependent upon billions of dollars aid that is tied to opium reduction, appear as if they are seriously doing something. Here Michael interviews Provincial Minister after the morning's poppy-eradication theater.



Swinging switches, Afghan National Police (ANP) walk through poppy field, cutting off the buds, blooms and seedpods just days prior to the first of five to seven harvestings of the opium-containing sap. More practical and effective methods of poppy eradication would be aerial spraying of chemical herbicides or plowing the fields under with tractors -- if the goal were to actually destroy as much acreage as possible.

E-rad-i-ca-tion?

thinking now, singing to myself, "You say you want e-rad-i-ca-tion." The "you" is the United States and European NATO countries pouring troops and money into this place on a drunken binge to make up for their perceived neglect during the civil war, then Taliban 1990s. In return, the U.S. and NATO are asking very little of the Afghans, besides the formation of a so-called democratic government. Except for one big thing: They expect the Afghans to actively deal with the reality that this country grows the poppies that ultimately become 90% of the world's heroin.

Of Course

That surely is not an unreasonable request. First, for political reasons the western governments have to show their voting citizens that



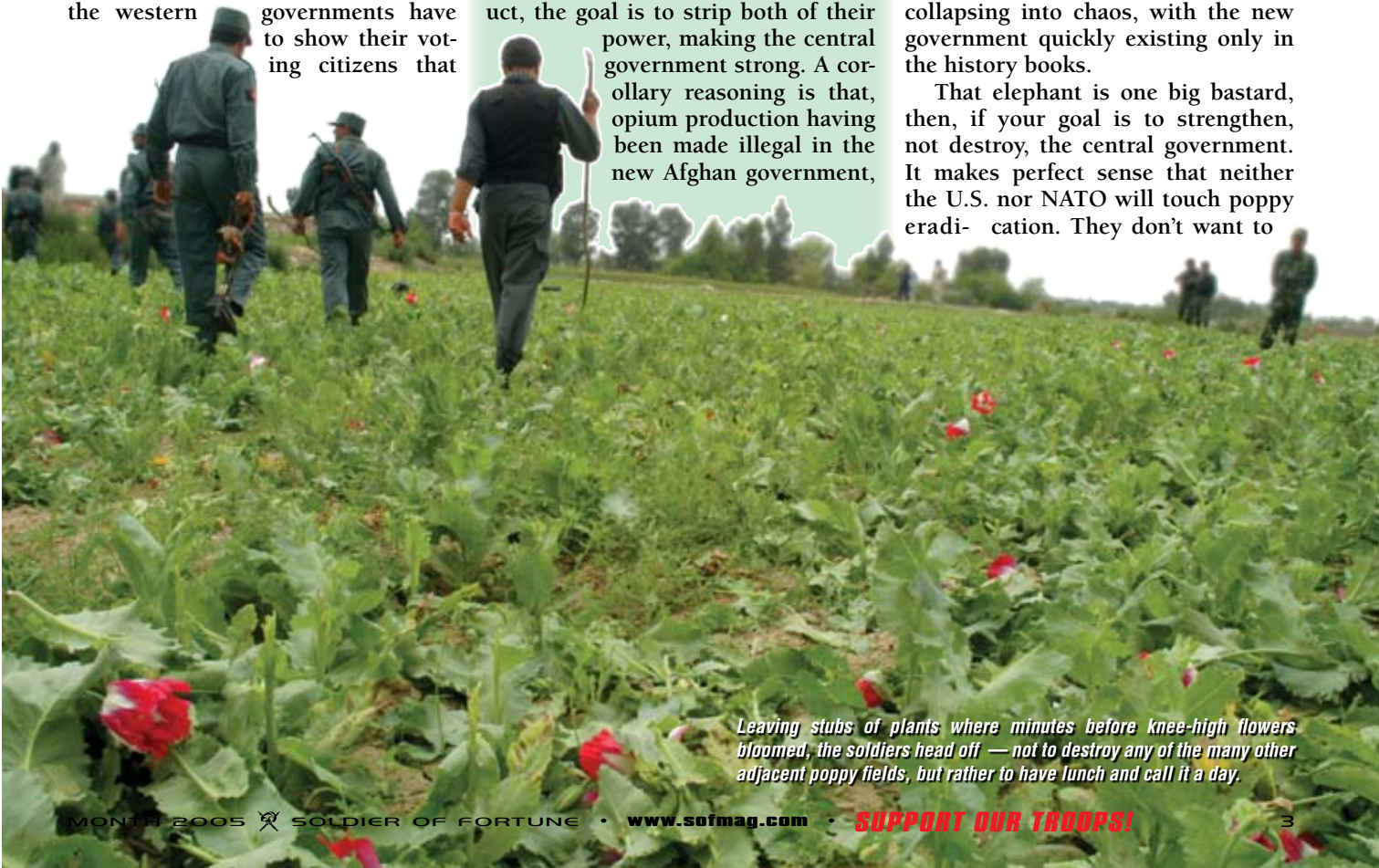
The sap from the seedpod which, after drying into raw opium and processing and transport, will be the heroin on the streets of Europe or America — as 90% of the world's heroin now comes from Afghanistan. Harvesting the sap is labor-intensive, as the farmers have to individually slit each flower and scrape the juice. Depending on the weather and health of the crop, a field can be harvested between five and seven times in a season.

they are serious about dealing with drugs. Second, though they know that decreasing opium production in Afghanistan will simply move it elsewhere in the world, since the warlords and the Taliban sustain themselves with the riches from the product, the goal is to strip both of their power, making the central government strong. A corollary reasoning is that, opium production having been made illegal in the new Afghan government,

a government that cannot enforce its own laws is a weak government, and a weak government, disrespected by its citizens, is easily preyed upon or overthrown by warlords or the Taliban.

The reasoning is airtight. Get rid of poppies and you weaken and ultimately destroy the warlords and Taliban, while pleasing your western benefactors and making your central government strong and respected. It all makes perfect sense. Except for that big elephant sitting there right in the middle of the room: Poppies and opium production are estimated to make up \$2.9 billion of this year's near-\$6-billion gross domestic product. Get rid of all poppies, and whammo, you've just cut the economy in half. Talk about a country collapsing into chaos, with the new government quickly existing only in the history books.

That elephant is one big bastard, then, if your goal is to strengthen, not destroy, the central government. It makes perfect sense that neither the U.S. nor NATO will touch poppy eradication. They don't want to



Leaving stubs of plants where minutes before knee-high flowers bloomed, the soldiers head off — not to destroy any of the many other adjacent poppy fields, but rather to have lunch and call it a day.

be seen first-hand as the ones destroying peasant farmers' livelihood and obliterating the economy. It's hands-off. One-hundred percent. The Coalition Forces are not even to be seen near a poppy field, let alone trampling or bulldozing one. It's all on the Afghans.

Which brings Michael and me to be with these Border Police squads, heading to a day of eradication. For us there's not much that is more colorfully photographic than a sea of blooming poppies from here to the horizon. Add to that the action shots of bulldozers plowing through and perhaps irate farmers striking back in a shootout. When a couple of days ago a Border Police high commander friend invited us on this mission, we jumped at the opportunity, even knowing his motives to be purely selfish. He just wanted some good media. A DEA buddy of mine working here in country had already told me that the commander was high on their list of big-time opium smugglers, and the commander was looking for a gold star for good behavior by his name on that list. Not that it should really matter. Everyone already knows that three-fourths of the government ministers and members



Why is the man in the middle smiling so broadly? Because they are his fields that are being destroyed. It only makes sense when you realize that in the entire smoke-and-mirrors that is the PEP dog-and-pony show, he has most likely been well compensated for allowing these small fields to be made worthless.

of parliament are in the opium trade chain, and the joke is, the others are desperately looking for a way in.

"E" Day

The morning began in typical Afghan fashion. The "6:00am" departure turned into well after 8:00. The commander did not show, sending instead the provincial district minister, who would get the actual photo op, but the reflected credit for complying with the government (i.e., U.S./NATO-prompted) eradication would still go to the commander.

So here we are, with poppy fields

along the edge of a poppy field. Closer, I see that the soldiers belong to the Afghan National Police, and however long they've been here already, not a poppy plant has been destroyed. It's obvious, they've been waiting for our arrival -- not our Border Police companions, but us, Michael and me, the guys with the cameras.

And where the hell are the bulldozers?! These soldiers are each carrying a switch, and with our cameras now here, they set about in line swinging at the poppy flowers, cutting them down. Whack, swish, whack, swish, they make their way down a half-acre field, with local men and boys watching along the edge. No muss, no fuss, the only ones with guns are



This Border Police soldier stands at the edge of a field just destroyed. Behind him is a field of poppies left standing. Why? According to the district official on hand running the eradication, in a classic case of "1984" doublespeak, "Because we cannot destroy poppies that belong to a man who is not here."



Convoy of vehicles sits photogenically on military crest, as Border Police soldier stands guard around the perimeter of the eradication. The new and up-to-date uniform and equipment are all part of the U.S./NATO provisions in standing up, equipping and maintaining the Afghan security forces, be they Army, National Police or Border Police.

the soldiers. I'm pointed out the man among the locals who is the owner of these fields, and he's laughing, as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

One field cut down, the soldiers continue on, whacking and swishing the next with their switches. Twenty

minutes later, that half-acre flattened, and everyone stops. Okay, on to the next, the adjacent poppy field, right? No? Something's getting lost in the translation, but apparently this is it -- two fields, an acre all totaled at the most, maybe 40 minutes work -- the

end of the day's eradication. Quickly, trying to salvage something of a story from this, Michael insists on interviews, right here in the trampled, flattened field. How can the provincial minister resist? This is the positive PR the day is meant for.

Why Film Bad Theater?

I stick around for about two minutes of the minister's interview, then wander off to try and get photos of the kids. What does it for me is one of Michael's first questions, asking why with the adjacent field and all the poppy fields around, they had quit after doing so little. The minister's answer is something along the skewed line that they could not destroy the poppy fields of a farmer who was not there. Huh? Yeah, if the farmer is not present, they cannot eradicate his crop. Next obvious question: So, these other fields, they belong to farmers who aren't here right now?

Do you blame me for stepping away? I don't even care to hear the through-the-looking-glass answer. Under these rules, if I'm a poppy farmer and I see the eradicators coming, I'm going to suddenly disappear, and my fields

are safe. Wait, it gets better: When the interviews wrap, Michael and I are suddenly being led, following the mass of locals and soldiers, heading for the mud-walled compound beside the fields. Inside the compound is a feast of lunch spread out on plastic mats on the ground. And the soldiers and locals, (men only, after all, this is Afghanistan, and there are no women within sight), sit down and dig in. The lunch provided by -- taa-dah -- the very same man whose fields have been destroyed. The thing is so otherworldly, so insane, I'm too distracted to think about taking a photo. Everyone's having a gay time -- farmers, soldiers, the minister, the landowner --you'd think this was a picnic in the park.

Later, heading away in the pickup, it's even more clear now how applicable the Beatles' *Revolution* is. The song was tongue-in-cheek. It was a scornful mockery of those crying for re-vo-l-u-tion. It fits for Afghanistan today. You say you want e-rad-i-cation? Yeah, right...

Postscript One. A week later, when Michael went to ISAF to attempt to sell his footage, they told him, "No, no, no," they could not be seen as having anything to do with eradication, not even a simple TV spot promoting it. Anything with poppies, get out of their sight.

Postscript Two. About the same time afterwards, I was with a high deputy at the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, pitching my own work, and upon sight of the first photos of the actual eradication (seen on these pages), he said, "So, when you put the cameras down, did they stop work and leave?" It wasn't a question; he knows. That to me is the one bright spot: they at the top of the CN game aren't even pretending to act as if they don't know what a sham the poppy eradication really is. I suppose, just as long as the U.S. State Department can keep the sham hidden and have made public photos like these and video footage like Michael's of real poppies being destroyed, the American public will be happy to know that something's being done about that massive flow of heroin from poor Afghanistan. "Well, you know, we all wanna change the world." ☞

Jim Keller is the nom-de-plum of a freelance writer who was a Special Forces captain in 5th Group, and now is a regular contributor to SOF.