

# END OF A WAR?

“OUT OF AFGHANISTAN IN JULY 2011.”

THESE WERE BARACK OBAMA’S FAMOUS

WORDS 18 MONTHS AGO. PHOTOJOURNALIST MARIELLE

VAN UITERT WENT TO AFGHANISTAN TO SEE WHETHER

IT WAS READY FOR AN AMERICAN PULLOUT...

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARIELLE VAN UITERT WORDS: IRENE DE KRUIF



## YOUR EXPERT



**Marielle van Uiter** is a freelance photographer whose work focuses on human struggle and adversity. As well as Afghanistan, she's reported in Iraq, the West Bank, Kenya, Tanzania, Egypt, Israel, Nepal, Rwanda, Ghana and Sri Lanka. Her work has been published in *The Guardian*, various Dutch and Belgian newspapers and numerous specialist journals and magazines.

» See more of Marielle's work at [www.paralleluniversum.nl](http://www.paralleluniversum.nl)

## SEARCH FOR WEAPONS

The Paktika province is a remote mountainous region of Afghanistan that has suffered at the hands of the Taliban, who use the mountains to launch attacks on American helicopters. This dramatic silhouette depicts the US Army's 101st Airborne Division taking part in a huge search for hidden explosives and weapons in an effort to limit the Taliban's munitions supply. None were found.

» Turn over to join Marielle on patrol with the US Army...



### ON PATROL

The US Army search every vehicle and question every civilian while on patrol and at checkpoints. Marielle joined a patrol from Niamatabad to the Pakistan border while the army searched for a way across a wadi (a dry riverbed or seasonal stream) for a route into Pakistan.

### BEDOUIN BOY

American soldiers head for a bazaar where Taliban have been spotted, and en route question a group of Bedouins who travel with their camels from Pakistan to Afghanistan. This young nomad is travelling with his father to help sell merchandise, but wasn't overly enamoured with all the weapons.



DUTCH JOURNALIST  
IRENE DE KRUIFF  
ACCOMPANIED

MARIELLE IN AFGHANISTAN.  
HERE'S HER FASCINATING  
FRONTLINE REPORT...

For the men of the 101st Airborne Division in the Paktika province, the countdown is ever-present. They're heading home. But lying back and taking it easy isn't an option. The last months of their mission are devoted to Operation: Dragoon, and setting up a checkpoint and compound for the Afghan border police. But in order to do that, they first have to actively hunt down the Taliban.

Geographically, the centre of Operation: Dragoon is Niamatabad, an impoverished bazaar near the Pakistani border. The bazaar consists of 20 shops, four petrol stations, two restaurants and two hotels, all spread out along a single dirt road. Some shops have roofs, others don't. Some shopkeepers are aiding and abetting Taliban, others are neutral.

Niamatabad may be a mud-hut village, but it holds great strategic importance for the Americans. In spring, the area saw substantial numbers of Wazaris (nomads who often work as mercenaries for the Taliban) infiltrate the Pakistani border to fight. Niamatabad, with its four petrol stations, is essential for the Taliban and their war effort.

The operation is a textbook example of the 'shape, clear, hold and build' strategy introduced by General Stanley McChrystal two years ago, before he retired from the post of Commander of the US Forces in Afghanistan. While the infantry hunts Taliban with the Afghan border police, American engineers build a compound and a checkpoint. Top brass drink tea with the locals to win hearts and minds.

Whiskey Company is in charge of hunting Taliban. With 60 American soldiers and the same number of Afghan border police, they go on daily patrols. "We don't catch many Taliban," one soldier says proudly. "Mostly we just shoot them."

There are two prisoners lying on a bench at the company's base. They've been waiting for five days to be taken to a larger military base for questioning, their hands cuffed with cable ties and their heads »

### THE MISSING

This Afghan elder's son was killed by the Taliban during an attack on the remote city of Organ. Here he shows Marielle a photo of his son in a poignant reminder of the cost of war.

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### SHOPKEEPER

This elder owns a shop in the Niamatabad bazaar, which was once a notorious Taliban stronghold. Now that the US Army has taken control of his village and plan to establish an Afghan police post there, he's worried that he'll lose his income and risk the wrath of the Taliban once the army leaves.



### CAPTURED TALIBAN

A Taliban soldier caught while deploying an improvised explosive device is imprisoned at a US Army camp. He awaits transportation to another camp where he'll face questioning. Taliban prisoners are typically held in custody with their hands and eyes bound.

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covered with bandages. "They're Talibs," says an American soldier, "caught red-handed placing an improvised explosive device."

Tracking down Taliban isn't easy for the American troops, traversing the narrow mountain passageways in large, cumbersome trucks. Taliban, familiar with the mountainous terrain, are constantly one step ahead of the troops. Then there are the locals - two-thirds of them sympathise with the Taliban.

"Showing that we're here is sometimes effective enough," tells Lieutenant Yost. "We prefer to shoot Taliban. But now they're afraid of us and stay out of our sight." The column of Afghan Humvees and American IED-proof trucks is impressive. "It's muscle talk," says Yost. "We're the bosses here right now."

But the aim is for the Afghan border police to be the boss in and around Niamatabad, and that's a difficult task. They don't have the capacity that the American army has, they can't rely on American air support, and the locals don't trust Afghan troops. Not so surprising - according to a study from the UN, 90% of Afghan soldiers are illiterate, one-third have a drug addiction and a quarter desert the army every year.

In Niamatabad Captain Rasscher needs to advance the Afghan border police. "Let me do the hearts-and-minds thing," he says. With a loaded gun and a bulletproof vest he drinks tea with Idak, one of Niamatabad's elders. Idak was involved in the building of a checkpoint from the start. But he decided he wanted out after learning that it would be manned by Afghan troops instead of Americans.

"When Americans guard the checkpoint it means all kinds of government money for the villagers," explains Rasscher. "So of course they want us to be here. But that's not how you build a country." Foreign interference in the Afghan economy is a tricky affair. According to the World Bank, foreign military expenses and donor money account for 97% of the Afghan gross domestic product.

In this respect Niamatabad is a typical example. The bazaar sprang up in 2001, parallel to the establishment of a nearby American compound. When the base was shut down in 2005, the Taliban returned. All of a sudden they became the main source of income for Niamatabad's shopkeepers.

Meanwhile, infantry are searching for Taliban. Informants say that about 200 Taliban fighters are planning an attack on the construction site in »




## VILLAGE CHIEF

The US Army try to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan population. Here the Niamatabad village chief shakes hands with soldiers who've helped build a new compound, which it's hoped will bring much-needed stability to the region and its economy. This is a less-documented side to the Afghan war.

Niamatabad. The soldiers and border police go on patrol together. The soldiers examine the shoes and hands of the men they stop for questioning. "Worker hands are okay," says a soldier, "these people make their money in the field. But soft hands are suspicious - they can study inside the whole day." American soldiers scan irises and fingerprints. If they find a fingerprint on a bomb, they may be able to trace it.

Suddenly, during a patrol 20km from Niamatabad, three Afghans with army jackets run away. Afghan border police officers run after them until they're caught. "These are Taliban scouts, for sure," declares Lieutenant Yost.

This worries Idak, the village elder. "What should we do when the Americans are gone?" he asks an American scout. "Can the Afghan border police handle 200 Talibs?" "I hope so," answers the scout, "otherwise we just built a very expensive compound for nothing. You guys have to make it work." 



## YOUNG GIRL

While her father and family are questioned by the US Army on suspicion of being Taliban insurgents, this young girl hides in her father's storeroom. Media tends to focus on the sensational news stories when it come to the Afghan conflict, often overlooking the devastating effects on children, who are the future of this war-torn country.