Cancian on Darling, 'Taliban Safari: One Day in the Surkhagan Valley'

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We have to face a painful truth: memoirs by Americans about Afghanistan are now stories about soldiers fighting for a lost cause. Instead of having inherent value in informing readers about an ongoing conflict, books about Afghanistan have to stand on their timeless observations about war. In *Taliban Safari: One Day in the Surkhagan Valley*, author Paul Darling easily meets this raised bar while chronicling a one-day mission in eastern Afghanistan in 2009. This is an important book for people to understand what “small wars” actually looks like outside the wire; I particularly hope that Darling’s account will be read by individuals who believe that they understand Afghanistan based on time spent solely in Kabul. But even for veterans with experiences similar to the author’s, this book offers an opportunity to reflect on the nature of war and to take solace in shared experiences.

The day to be chronicled (June 7, 2009) begins with the author marshaling his forces, both fellow Americans and the Afghan National Police, whom they are advising. He has created a plan to catch a group of Taliban who have been detected by a long-duration drone. He has not briefed the Afghan police on this plan because of fears that someone would leak the information to the Taliban, yet they dutifully provide a contingent of policemen when he shows up to their compound at four in the morning. Thus, he assembles his team and sets out on a “Taliban safari.”

Darling spreads anecdotes from other days and broader analyses as sidebars throughout the book. While there is a tension between focusing on the details of the one day and connecting them to the broader context, for the most part Darling manages this expertly. The book’s early chapters contain more sidebars than later chapters, possibly reflecting an author with a lot to get off of his chest and therefore seizing the first opportunities to do so. However, these deviations from the chronicle land with the reader, whether Darling is drawing an analogy between the motley assortment of characters in Afghanistan and the denizens of Jabba the Hutt’s palace in *Star Wars* or relaying more earthly stories like looking for corpses after a firefight.

While Darling never enumerates themes or lessons for his book, several emerge in the early chapters. There are the corrupt dealings of our partners, such as the Afghan logistics officer who moonlights as a contractor. The alienness of Afghan culture, where women are “married at ten, consummated at twelve, pregnant by fourteen, dead by forty” (p. 14). There is also our lack of toughness toward the Afghans, in whose culture leaders who beat men for disrespect are often the most effective. The lack of seriousness of the American bureaucracy toward the war, where the State Department official
posted to Zabul is laughed at by the cocktail set who stay behind in Kabul. And finally, there is the inability of the Americans to figure out “who’s who in the zoo,” as it was put to me during my Marine Corps training. Darling is told that one police officer is definitely Taliban, only to have that same officer lead him to the highest-ranking Taliban ever killed in Zabul the next week. Throughout the book Darling expands on these themes with additional observations while maintaining the flow of the day’s narrative.

Following their departure from base, the patrol wends its way through rural Zabul and conducts a dismounted foot patrol through a village. The people are cool to Americans, because “the penalty for working with the government is less severe than the punishment for not working with the Taliban” (p. 43). The failure of Americans to win “hearts and minds” is less important to this day, however, because the Americans are on the hunt. At this point, Darling leads his column off of the beaten path to pincer the Taliban under drone observation between his forces and a force of Apache helicopters.

Darling relates the chaos of combat over the next few chapters, first pursuing a group of Taliban and then engaging them on foot. The account is very self-aware about the frustrations and emotions of combat, along with the moral ambiguities it creates. At one point during the pursuit, Darling fires a three-round burst into a berm in frustration; this is a major lapse in temper that the author deserves credit for owning up to. After catching up to the Taliban, Darling candidly recounts shooting at two men dashing in front of him and killing one of them, despite their being unarmed (which he did not realize in the heat of the moment). Darling then puts himself between the Afghan police and a Taliban prisoner whom they want to execute; while he saves the prisoner in the moment, his Afghan partners execute the prisoner later. These experiences form the basis of another important theme of the book, the ethics of combat and the limitations imposed by our legalistic thinking thereon. These chapters alone have great merit as teaching tools for the stresses and moral dilemmas created by combat, and the author deserves praise for not flinching from describing them in detail.

Unfortunately, the return home is marred by an Afghan police truck hitting an improvised explosive device that kills two of them and wounds several others. However, given the breakneck pace of the preceding chapters’ combat, this feels as much part of the denouement as the subsequent Afghan-led celebration over the success of the mission back at base and the author’s tending to responsibilities before he can finally sleep and end the day’s marathon.

_Taliban Safari: One Day in the Surkhagan Valley_ is an exemplar of how military memoirs should be: it’s useful to both the layman and the veteran, and its broader analyses don’t bog down a well-written narrative. My only criticism is that the author should have added more caution to the layman that this is an unusual day; like all soldiers, Darling spent most of his days bored rather than running and gunning. However, this is only a minor reservation that does little to detract from the book’s importance. Although this particular war has been lost, Darling’s timeless observations on war ensure that _Taliban Safari_ should be on everyone’s bookshelves.


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