



Source: Mark Mazzetti, 'Terrorism worse since Iraq war, US spies say', *New York Times*, AFP, *LA Times* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 25/09/06.

Tags: Afghanistan, travel, war, security

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"Of course, history is only written by the winners', our high school history teacher informed us—somewhat cheerfully—as he turned to page 462 of *The Balkan Wars*.

I would have understood better if it'd been our English teacher who'd told us that—his lip maybe curling into a sneer—for it was he, after all, who was a jealous rival of the history teacher—they were both competing for the PE teacher's affections.

But for the history teacher to let us know that he was, quite happily, teaching us untruths, half-truths, and distorted facts from the pages of dusty tomes, I found not only ironic, but also deeply disappointing.

Years later, when I'd decided to become a journalist, I vowed to set things straight—as well as I could—and honestly represent people and events.

Although I wasn't quite so naive to believe that journalists' reports were any more objective than those of the writers of history—and I knew that in opinion polls where the public rated occupations and ethical behaviour, journalists were stuck down the end of the list, wedged between real-estate agents and used-car salesmen—I thought I could be one of the exceptions to the rule, and maybe make a little bit of difference.

But then I met this Afghani woman—a doctor—who now lives in Australia, and who I was to write a profile on.

When we first met she asked me if I knew anything of Afghanistan, or of the Afghani people? I replied I only 'knew' as much as had been reported in the newspapers or on the television—and raised my eyebrow in what I thought was an ironic fashion. After all, we don't believe everything we read and hear. 'And, oh yes,' I remembered, 'I know a little of the Afghani traders, who lived in Australia many years ago, and criss-crossed the interior—the desert—on camelback, plying their trade.' In turn, the doctor raised her eyebrow—but not ironically, more with interest—and nodded.

Then she told me her story.

At the end of the 1980s, dodging bombs dropped by planes overhead and landmines concealed in the ground, she and her family escaped from Afghanistan over the mountains to Pakistan in a bid for a safer life.

Afghanistan had descended into civil war—the Russian-backed government battling the resistance fighters, the mujahideen—buildings were destroyed, and people were dying everywhere.

The doctor had just completed her one-year internship at the hospital in Kabul, but life was too unsafe in the city and country she loved, and so she and her family decided to leave, with few possessions, in the early hours of one morning. They took four days to cross the mountains, travelling part by car, part by walking, stopping along the way at private homes, which the owners had turned into small motels, taking advantage of the exodus.

The doctor's voice was soft, her manner calm and matter-of-fact. She related her escape to me like she was explaining how to get back onto the freeway to drive home. It wasn't til later, when I looked at my notes, that I

felt overwhelmed by her tale.

While safe, and working as a doctor in Pakistan, she said Afghanistan met with an even worse fate. In the mid-1990s, the extreme political and religious group, the Taliban, took control—women were expelled from universities and the workforce, girls were banished from schools, and females were virtually placed under house arrest—only allowed to leave their home if accompanied by a close male relative.

'The Taliban are absolutely crazy,' the doctor told me, 'they would kill a person for no reason,' she said.

The doctor then told me how she came to Australia. Her husband had been a neighbour in Kabul and the brother of one of her classmates. He had immigrated to this country after he'd done his engineering degree in Kabul, but had travelled to Pakistan to marry her, and bring her over.

When she arrived in Australia she spoke no English, only Persian, but after the birth of her third child, she wanted to return to the medical workforce, and set about teaching herself English. She learnt by watching children's television shows, she said, then graduated to the news, and finally to movies. 'I find movies the most difficult,' she laughed.

'I'm not surprised,' I replied. 'Recently, a film director was asked to explain his latest movie, and he said he didn't understand it either—he had only just recently understood what his first movie was about!'

I asked the doctor if she'd ever returned to Afghanistan. She hadn't, although she regularly spoke to friends living there.

'There is still fighting, and the Taliban are still around, but it's not as bad as it was,' she said.

As I was leaving her, she asked me if she could see my story before it was published. Although it wasn't company policy to do so, I wanted her to trust me. I didn't want her to think she might be misrepresented or exploited in any way. So I agreed.

After writing the story I sent it to the doctor, and she rang me a short time later. 'Please take out the bit about the Taliban,' she said, 'the bit about them being crazy and killing people. If I ever go back to Afghanistan I don't want it to be bad for me.'

I certainly didn't want her to feel unsafe, but I also didn't want to remove that quote.

But in her quiet and gentle way, she was adamant that I did so. I suddenly realised she was a winner. Not only had she had the money and the education to enable her to flee her war-torn country and forge a safe and comfortable life elsewhere, but she was, through omission, rewriting history. She allowed the bombs, landmines and people dying everywhere to remain in the documentation of her life, but the crazy, murderous Taliban had to be deleted.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by anonymous.*