

***Foxtrot in Kandahar: A Memoir of a CIA Officer in Afghanistan at the Inception of America's Longest War***

by Duane Evans (Savas Beatie, 2017), 172 pp., maps, photographs.

***Reviewed by J. R. Seeger***

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Current published material on Afghanistan generally falls into one of three categories: memoirs from senior US government officers, discussing strategic issues post-9/11; memoirs from Special Operations officers detailing combat operations in Afghanistan; or detailed reporting by journalists assigned either to Kabul or to another capitol in Southwest Asia. These stories offer critically important context for a public struggling to understand what is happening today in Afghanistan—why the United States still has troops deployed in the country and why we devote considerable time and money to keep the central government in Kabul functioning. However, these stories provide little background on the US involvement in Afghanistan either right before or in the immediate aftermath of the al-Qa'ida attacks of 11 September 2001.

Sixteen years after 9/11, Duane Evans provides a detailed account of his role in CIA's effort to take on the Taliban and al-Qa'ida, offering a clear understanding—from the intelligence foot soldier's perspective—on why we became involved there in the fall of 2001. I was the leader for another team in Afghanistan at the same time and have known Duane Evans for more than 20 years. I can say from personal experience that Evans's book resonated for me in a way no other book on post-9/11 Afghanistan has since I read Gary Schroen's *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terrorism in Afghanistan* (Presidio Press, 2005).

Unfortunately, while Afghanistan has borders, a flag, and a seat at the United Nations, it is not a nation—though most Americans (including policymakers) tend to view it as such, seeing it through the lens of the modern concept of “nation state.” Focusing our attention on defeating the Taliban insurgency, stamping out al-Qa'ida and Daesh, and building a strong government and national army, we expect our efforts in Kabul to expand outward, from there to other parts of the Afghan “nation”—and to result in a peaceful solution to the current conflict. But Afghanistan is a 19th century amalgamation of multiple tribes, ethnic groups, and religions, where at least two major languages—and three other, less commonly spoken languages—are used by groups that are further separated

from one other by the region's rugged terrain, including the Hindu Kush—a mountain range that divides the country in half. Adding to this complexity is the fact that one of the major ethnic groups—the Pashtuns—are further divided into two major tribes, which are further segmented into multiple clans that have been hostile to each other (and to any central government) for at least the last century. The efforts to create an Afghan “nation” that began in 1974 have only resulted, outside Kabul, in a simmering civil war among ethnic and religious groups and between rural and urban dwellers.

When al-Qa'ida attacked the US homeland on 9/11, CIA's network of tribal and ethnic leadership contacts, dating back to 1979, was intact. In December of that year, CIA had established clandestine relations with commanders who were then conducting operations against occupying Soviet forces and against the proxy government in Kabul that was supported by the Soviet Union. These relationships comprised a network that was entirely separate from the US government's formal political and military support relationships with the seven Afghan resistance parties in exile in Peshawar, and separate from the combined military support relationships CIA, Pakistan, and other allies were providing to the resistance fighters there.

As part of the Soviet forces' agreement to leave Afghanistan in 1988, the United States agreed to end military support to the resistance; however, it was support from regional CIA stations that provided the resources that the DCI Counterterrorism Center/Special Operations (CTC/SO) used in developing the post-9/11 plan of attack.

Readers who have no ties to the agency will be surprised at how much leeway CIA Headquarters allowed Evans and other CTC/SO team leaders in designing and implementing operations. The normal bureaucratic hurdles so common in discussions related to any foreign policy decision simply evaporated, once CTC received the order from the president and the CIA director to take the fight to the enemy in Afghanistan. Evans outlines in

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great detail the complex effort that was required to get into Afghanistan and set to work, recalling that, by way of guidance, team members received but a brief few sentences from CTC/SO seniors on what the military would call “commander’s intent”:

*Gentlemen, things are moving along in northern Afghanistan, but we’ve got nothing going in the South. The Taliban and AQ are still in control. We need you two to get out to Pakistan and work with Station to get things going in the South. Any questions?* (40)

Beneath this simple set of instructions was the understanding that the team would leverage established, local contacts inside Afghanistan; enlist US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) manpower and communications resources; and use Islamabad station assistance to get a small team of CIA officers, USSOCOM operators, and a contingent from a US Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) into Kandahar—and into the fight. But this effort was neither simple nor direct: challenges associated with Afghan tribal politics, US matters of state, limited resources, and weather were numerous, and Evans describes them all in detail. Evans arrived in Islamabad in late October, arriving in Afghanistan via helicopter on 19 November, quickly moving from boarding a plane at Dulles International Airport in Washington, DC, to leading Operation Foxtrot in fewer than three weeks.

The second half of the book addresses the complex game of working through local surrogates in Kandahar—in this case, a Kandahari tribal chief and regional warlord named Mohammed Shafiq Barakzai (more commonly known by his “war name,” Gul Agha Shirzai). Adding to this complexity was Evans’s partnership with US Special Forces and their interest in conducting combat operations “by, with, and through” Shirzai’s fighters. Shirzai was an established contact with Islamabad station and Evans’s team included Shirzai’s case officer. But Shirzai’s tribesmen were not organized like a standard military force, and much of Team Foxtrot’s intelligence and paramilitary work required them and their Special Forces partners in ODA 583 to work in primitive conditions as they tried to influence Shirzai to remain focused on destroying the Taliban and occupying Kandahar City. Evans’s book makes it clear that, whether he knew it or not at the time, he was following the tenets of T. E. Lawrence in the Great Arab Revolt in 1916:

*Your ideal position is when you are present and not noticed. Do not be too intimate, too prominent, or too earnest. Avoid being identified too long or too often with any tribal sheikh, even if CO of the expedition. To do your work, you must be above jealousies, and you lose prestige when you are associated with a tribe or clan, and its inevitable feuds. . . .*

*Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them.<sup>a</sup>*

CIA officers will be well served by Evans’s discussions on the leadership challenges a CIA officer faces conducting operations in the field. This was particularly true once Kandahar City had fallen and Shirzai, ODA 583, and Team Foxtrot arrived from the South when Hamid Karzai, ODA 578, and Team Echo arrived from the North. Suddenly, both team leaders had to coordinate operations and persuade their respective Afghan leaders to cooperate. This was no small feat given the longstanding tribal feuding between Shirzai’s Barakzai and Karzai’s Popolazai tribes. One critical insight Evans offers is that CIA officers can often become so tied to their own tribal contexts that they can—and often do—fail to see the larger, strategic picture or the shortcomings of their local Afghan leader. This is another leadership lesson that could also be found in memoirs of OSS officers working with the French or Yugoslav resistance, or CIA officers during the Cold War.

*Foxtrot in Kandahar* is an excellent read. A book of modest size, it is worth reading more than once—as a simple adventure story, as a story of the people of the CIA in Afghanistan immediately after 9/11, as a description “from the trenches” of how to work with tribal leaders and their followers, and as a leadership textbook on how to lead teams of CIA officers team in a combat zone. Evans’s book belongs on the intelligence professional’s shelf, beside the very few unclassified memoirs that emerged from this period in CIA history.

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a. T. E. Lawrence, *T. E. Lawrence in War and Peace: An Anthology of the Military Writings of Lawrence of Arabia*, ed. Malcolm Brown (Frontline Books, 2006), 143–145.



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