

First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

By Gary C. Schroen. New York: Ballantine Books, 2005. 379 pages.

Reviewed by J. Daniel Moore

There have been a number of illuminating accounts of the CIA's involvement in Afghanistan in the period 1980–2001, most of them critical. Such well-regarded studies as the *9/11 Commission Report*, Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars*, Daniel Benjamin and Steve Simon's *The Age of Sacred Terror*, and Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban* detail US missteps in South Asia and foreshadow the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. In contrast, retired CIA officer Gary Schroen's *First In* is a "good news" story for the Agency, recounting the brief, successful, CIA-led operation to assist the Afghan opposition in overthrowing the Islamist Taliban regime in the fall of 2001.

Schroen's memoir is mostly a straightforward account of his role leading the Northern Afghanistan Liaison Team (NALT) from mid-September to the end of October 2001. He opens with the gripping story of the al-Qa'ida-orchestrated murder of legendary ethnic-Tajik commander Ahmed Shah

orchestrated murder of legendary ethnic-Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Masood on 9 September 2001 by two Arab assassins posing as journalists. Schroen had met Masood several times during earlier assignments in the region, meetings arranged by Masood's close friend and political aide, Masood Khalili. It is Khalili who is Schroen's chief source for the horrifying account of Masood's assassination through a suicide bombing that almost killed Khalili, as well.

Al-Qa'ida and its Taliban ally surely anticipated that Masood's death would lead to the rapid military collapse of the Tajik-led Northern Alliance, which had been holding out against the stronger Taliban for nearly five years. Instead, the terrorist attacks in the United States two days later sparked the Bush administration's worldwide war against terrorism. The NALT deployed nine days after the 9/11 attacks, joining the Northern Alliance forces north of Kabul. The subsequent CIA-led military operation resulted in the destruction of the Taliban regime by early December, although Usama Bin Ladin and other top al-Qa'ida leaders escaped.

Readers should find of special interest Schroen's account of how the NALT materialized in the days following the attacks. His reaction to the horror of 9/11 is honest and personal. He describes how his colleagues in the Near East Division responded to the televised coverage and details how he received a call at home two days later requesting him to meet the following morning with the chief of the Counterterrorist Center, Cofer Black. When Black asked Schroen to take a small team into Afghanistan, link up with the Northern Alliance, and obtain its cooperation to go after Bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida, he accepted without hesitation. He was, after all, highly qualified for the job: He had had three tours in Islamabad working the radical Islamic target, including a last assignment as chief of station; he spoke Farsi; and he already knew many of the senior people in the Northern Alliance.

The speed at which the NALT came together—reaching the Panjshir Valley by 26 September—speaks eloquently of the CIA's flexibility and ability to react in a crisis. Schroen and his deputy assembled the team in short order, with each officer identifying a trusted colleague who brought special skills to the endeavor. Schroen chose a young, talented, Farsi-speaking operations officer with whom he had served in Islamabad. His deputy selected a fellow Special Activities Division officer, a paramilitary expert and former Marine who spoke Russian and wore a corduroy sport coat in meetings with Northern Alliance officials. Three additional specialists joined the team: a former SEAL whose strong organizational skills and high energy got the team kick started and packed up for Afghanistan; a retired

energy got the team kick started and packed up for Afghanistan; a retired Agency officer and Vietnam veteran who served as field medic and more; and a communications genius who kept equipment working in a difficult environment.

The CIA's agility in responding to the 9/11 attacks stood in stark contrast to the difficulties US military special forces encountered in getting "boots on the ground" in Afghanistan. Schroen documents his team's efforts while still in Washington to coordinate planning with special operations officers, who were preoccupied with chains of command and uncertain of their mission and status relative to the CIA. Ultimately, the NALT left for Afghanistan without the special forces representative they had hoped to include. The first special forces team reached the Panjshir Valley on 17 October, nearly a month after the NALT's arrival. More special forces units soon followed, joining other CIA teams already in country. The joint CIA-special forces teams made short work of the Taliban. Agency officers provided the cultural and language expertise, while the military personnel coordinated air and ground fire-support assets. These working relationships remained excellent through the crumbling of Taliban resistance on 6 December.

Schroen played a crucial role in leading the NALT's sometimes painful early negotiations with the Northern Alliance leadership and in interfacing with CIA headquarters. He deftly walked the tightrope between a demanding Tajik-led alliance that sought to promote its own political interests over those of other tribal groups, and a US national security community that seemed to lean too much, in Schroen's view, in the direction of placating Pakistan, once the Taliban's backer and now an advocate of a non-Tajik post-Taliban government. Schroen left the NALT in early November 2001, before the fall of Mazar-e Sharif, Kabul, and Kandahar. His successor, who presided over the final stage of the battle for the capital, appears to have provided the author with colorful details of that phase of the campaign. Leaders of other Agency teams also furnished Schroen with firsthand accounts.

While certain aspects of the Afghan campaign remain classified, *First In* does a good job getting much of the story out to the American public. One marvels at how much detail, some of it politically sensitive, made it into print—so much, in fact, that it raises a disturbing question about whether the publicity might have negative repercussions for the Afghan officials who cooperated with Schroen and the CIA during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.

First In describes a gung-ho success story for the Bush administration and the CIA. Still, Schroen speaks out in the book's Afterword against what he attests is the administration's relative loss of interest in Afghanistan. With the National Security Council's increasing preoccupation with Iraq after mid-2002, Afghanistan took a back seat in the allocation of financial and personnel resources, he argues, and the possibility of the capture of Bin Ladin and defeat of al-Qa'ida receded.

Schroen is on firm ground when he describes what he personally experienced. When he records events learned second-hand, he relies on anecdotes. When he discusses US policy in the Islamic world, he is merely voicing an opinion. Schroen's foray into the policy realm at the conclusion of *First In* struck this reviewer as a stretch—perhaps the result of a publisher who thought that criticism of the Bush administration by a CIA veteran might sell well. That aside, overall, the action story is an important and compelling one, and Schroen tells it well.

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