

Dan Terry: Hostage in Silk Road Country

Travels in Silk Road country come with hazards even in the best of times. When Dan Terry ('65), his wife Seija and family moved to northern Afghanistan they owned both its rugged beauty and its perils. Wild country, wild times. Crossing Balkh province solo one day, his jeep trailing a plume of dust, Dan found himself at a roadblock manned by gunmen of a local warlord. By this time Dan was a veteran of such encounters, but none of his savvy could stave off the grim upshot: he was taken hostage to the warlord's base where the commander set about to turn his captive into a windfall.

Dan assured the commander that neither he nor his threadbare service organization, the International Assistance Mission, possessed anything of great value. They traded in no Silk Road riches, had no Swiss bank accounts. This the commander seriously doubted. But in the course of time, he came to realize that Dan was, indeed, that bane of desert lands – a dry well. But by then a strange dynamic had taken hold of those within the barbed wire perimeter. Dan had become part of this armed-to-the-teeth community. He cheerfully inquired after their families, talked about their hometowns, mused with them around the evening fires, shared their gritty fare at mealtime. In time, the commander reckoned with the truth that this odd hostage had become – well, a poor friend - but a friend none-the-less.

The day came when the warlord realized there was no further point in holding Dan. He called for a goat to be slaughtered and their friendship was sealed in a kebab meal and by embraces. With that he set Dan free wondering no doubt at his misfortune that no windfall had resulted from this caper, but glad of having made an unlikely, 'infidel' friend.

Months later, Dan was traveling with colleagues in remote country, his jeep trailed by that plume of dust. From the opposite direction came an open truck bristling with turbaned gunmen swathed in bandoliers. As the vehicles met, the drivers had a flash of mutual recognition. They slid to a halt as dust engulfed the scene. And before any explanations were made, Dan and his erstwhile friend, the warlord, danced with shouts into each other's arms on a gritty Silk Road track as Dan's colleagues looked on aghast at this encounter with a dreaded warrior.

Dan's reflection on this experience left his peers in speechless disbelief. He said to them, *"Hostage-taking is just another form of hospitality."*

Jonathan Larson (jonathanlarsonblog.com)

-from 'Making Friends Among the Taliban', Herald Press, 2012.