

ANDREAS MEYER

YOU COULD DIE ANY DAY

BEING DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN
AS A SOLDIER OF THE
GERMAN ARMY



tredition®

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who had to experience painfully what war in a foreign land means and those at home who did not know what the soldiers had to face in the field.

In particular, I dedicate the book to my son Marco, who had to make do without a lot as a little boy because of my absence. In his mind he was with me all the time.

In memory of all comrades who have fallen in action, in particular:

Sergeant Christian S., Panzer Grenadier Battalion 332, fallen in an attack at Rustak on 25. June 2005 and

Lieutenant Colonel Armin-Harry F., Reservist, who fell in a suicide attack in Kabul on 14.

November 2005.

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Pretext:

These words are mine, a report from a staff sergeant of the reserve, who retired from active service in the German Army in 1990, but after a six-year break decided to live a life in uniform again and volunteered as a reservist for three missions in Afghanistan.

Previously, I had been soldier for eight years, but what I had learned those days was nothing to put into practice at that time, because back then there was no mandate for foreign missions for the Bundeswehr.

Then, after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, USA, on September 11, 2001, the circumstances changed.

From this point on, the Bundeswehr also participated in the foreign missions of the NATO troops. In December 2014, the ISAF mission ended in Afghanistan and a new advisory and training mission began.

During the period from 2001 to the end of 2014, a total of 3,687 soldiers, including 54 German soldiers, lost their lives. All were comrades, some of them were my friends.

This is my - and their - story.

Prologue

September 11 2001 I sat at a desk of a logistics company I was employed at as fire warden and coordinator for medical assistance since I left the Bundeswehr from active duty. I was responsible for the preventive fire security and all related aspects within the company. I liked my job. Being the one responsible for the security of my colleagues and having the possibility to be proactive always gave me a good feeling. Since I am a challenge loving person I was really satisfied with my tasks.

This morning though, my whole well settled life was about change in a dramatic way. A change that effected many more people around the globe.

A colleague of mine shouted over to me, I should open the website of CNN. Something about a plane had hit a sky scraper. Moments later I was following the live broadcast from the accident site staring at the horrific inferno of what once used to be the World Trade Center. I could not beliving my own eyes when the second jet flew into the other tower of the WTC.

In the first moment everything looked so staged. Like it was just not real. Like a really really bad movie. But it was real. And the consequences of this new reality were about to affect not only the world in general but also my very own personal life. I was about to face the terror from eye to eye. Not in the states but in Afghanistan.

I rejoined the Bundeswehr and became a soldier once again.



Map of Afghanistan

1 January 2005

10th of January 2005 I received a call from the company sergeant ("Spieß") of my former unit, the 294th Mechanized Infantry Brigade. He was looking for a logistics assistant for the upcoming overseas mission. The destination: KUNDUZ, Afghanistan. I was quite surprised. But being a member of the reserve with still valid certification for this kind of position I had no doubt that I was going to support and accompany any battalion they would assign me to. At that time, I had a good job. I had responsibilities. But nothing could stop me from going with them. It's one of these things you become a soldier for. Yes, of course I had been in the Army for 8 long years already. But it was nothing compared to what was about to come. Those years we've only been to countless exercises. All with the same scenarios. All about the same enemy. The enemy those days: "The East". In that past, counterterrorism and asymmetric warfare, at least in Germany, were not even close to become a term the army would focus on. You had 2 nations or blocks in conflict. Blue and red. Blue = good. Red = evil. After 9/11 the whole role of the Bundeswehr and its enemies had changed rapidly.

After the phone conversation with my "Spieß" I went straight to my boss asking him for approval to join the Bundeswehr for active duty to go on mission. He was far away from being amazed by my idea, but after a long discussion about a man's values and appealing to his idealism he finally agreed. After taking care of all administrative things with my employer and covering all needed aspects with my family I confirmed my participation in the upcoming mission. The preparations for my first mission began.

Those days I felt like I would finally do something meaningful for those people who had known only three things in the last year: war, suffering and oppression, caused by the same inhuman creatures who attacked the way of life of the western world. There are so many thoughts running through your head while preparing for a mission. You need some time to get their true meaning. To realize what is coming up to you. I was married at that time and my son had just turned 7. It was a hard battle to convince my wife. But like many times before my will won over her concerns.

During the time of my active duty in the past I learned the true meaning of comradeship. What it means to have true fellow soldiers. This understanding already began with my first day in basic training. 12 completely different characters put into a tiny room in a lousy barrack forced to come along with each other for months. Back then, a lot of the guys were away from home for the very first time in their life which led to the funny picture of a crazy long cue in front of the only phone cell on our military base every single evening. Fortunately, I was spared that kind of homesickness since I had left my home early to be trained as a cook prior to joining the military. But these new dogmas of order and obedience left a strange taste inside my mouth and stomach.

Coming back to camaraderie, I witnessed that we were capable of achieving anything as long we stood together. Within the group as well as with the platoon. You help each other no matter what. Being it the seemingly endless marches, the combat and survival exercises or our final military exam. You carry the backpack of someone who is close to collapse. You turn around and grab a guy whose legs refuse to keep on running. You do all this because you can be sure that they would do all this for you as well once you faced your limits. It was a uniquely good feeling to know this each time we managed an exercise or task. This feeling stayed throughout all my courses and later in the everyday military life. The things I learned and the role models I was led by created the credo I used through

my military career as a Sergeant leading young people myself. "I, as a squad leader won't expect or force anyone to do anything that I am not capable of doing myself." Just like Alexandre Dumas wrote in "The three musketeers" One for all and all for one! Those years in the army really brought me forward as a human being in many aspects. In Germany of the 1980s the relationship between the civilian population and its countries' forces and the picture the people had of its soldiers was a much better one than nowadays. You could see it specially during the large exercises like 1984 "Flinker Igel" or 1987 "Kecker Spatz". Farmers would let you rest and sleep in their barn and when you had to make a tactical stop in front of a gymnasium of a school, kids would gather around and watch you curiously. Often, people would bring you fresh bread, eggs, bacon and refreshments. Sometimes civilians were even directly involved in the exercise by helping out or give a hand to set up our infrastructure. As the field cook, I always had more than enough work to do. Being responsible for the food supply kept me busy every single minute, especially when I had to care about groups being deployed on very short notice.

In these cases, I was happy to have my little helpers around. Meaning, whenever we had a bunch of guys having to deploy within minutes I just placed crates with the different goods on cued tables, positioned my helpers behind the crates and let them pack the food packages, then passing them on to the next helper in the chain like in a little factory.

These little helpers were kids from the nearby villages who were always happy to be a part in this.

Remembering this time as a young Sergeant and field cook, there is another episode coming to my mind which was positive as well and which should convince me one more time of how small the world is. I was preparing the dough for an apple pie that was planned as a special treat for the next morning's breakfast for the company when

a high-ranking officer suddenly opened the door and appeared right in front of me. Normally you would jump into attention immediately and do a military salute but I was kind of confused by this surprising visit. I guess that was obvious to him and with an expression in his eyes that I have never forgot since then he just said: "no report needed soldier.

What tasty treat is it you have there? " And with these words he came closer and put his finger right into the dough. I was just saying: "So what do you think?" He just laughed and said that it is a shame that he won't be there to try it tomorrow morning because he loves apple pie so much. I almost ...in my pants. I had never met such a high-ranking officer before and this guy was a Colonel. This Colonel, this episode of camaraderie made a very strong impression on me although I had no clue who he was. Years later we met again. Not in Germany but in Afghanistan. That time I of course knew who he was. Brigade General and Commander of the 8th German mission contingent to ISAF, General A.

During the time of my first enlistment to the army I came to know another very impressive man, Colonel B. Back then he was a Major and became my company commander in NAGOLD in 1987. Later, after 41 years of service, he served as the commander of the airborne and air transportation school in ALTENSTADT. These 2 men had a very strong influence on me and my military career through all the years which I am very grateful for.

2. Preparations

The preparations for my very first deployment began with the standard medical checks and countless vaccinations. Tetanus, Hepatitis A and B, rabies and so on... I got it all. All was documented meticulously via a timeline checklist according to an individually specified vaccination scheme for the deployment region. There is a scheme for every different region.

Once I got the approval by the medics I was sent on the mission specified basics training (ESGA) in STETTEN AM KALTEN MARKT followed by the centralized combat troops training (ZENTRA) in HAMMELBURG at the Training Centre of Infantry. The training was very accurate. From mine and improvised explosives device (IED) detection to a very realistic scenario of being captured and held hostage, we trained every possible situation we could get into during the mission. Another important part of the training was the cultural education with insights into afghan population, habits and social structure as well as a basics language training of the most important phrases. We got a bunch of handbooks and vocabularies German - Paschtu and German - Dari, the two main languages that are officially used in Afghanistan.

There is a picture in one of the handbooks showing an Afghan building an IED made of fertilizer. That one remained in my mind till today. He was using a yellow canister. The officer who conducted the lesson told us to always pay attention to these canisters if we see them. A nice advise that some time later unfortunately showed to be absolutely useless, but we will return to this topic.

After the described preparation training followed the preparation for the individual tasks in the battalion (BN) in the ALBKASERNE in

STETTEN. Lots of meetings and briefings with the Chief of logistics (J4 officer) and the BN commander were to be hold. Everything related to personnel and material was planned to the smallest detail. That time I also had to join all kind of individual mission task related trainings like Peace Support Operations PSO or workshops for logistics personnel and specialists of the Mission Contingent of the ISAF mission.

In advance of the actual deployment I additionally had to join a reconnaissance mission to AFG to the place of our responsibility at the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) at KUNDUZ. Our team consisted of 4 officers and 2 sergeants including me, who were given the task to evaluate the situation on ground in and around the operational base and to verify the information we had received till then. Although we were provided with quite a lot of data we wanted to be sure that they were still up to date and reliable. Next time I would arrive here as the BNs TVB responsible for the supply and provision of our soldiers, not only in the camp and nearby areas, but also for the ones on missions and at the forward operation bases (FOB) deep in enemy territory. This is completely different from doing this job back home. In mission country you cannot just drive over to the next garage to get spare parts for your combat vehicle. No, in combat areas the lines of supply are much more complicated and way longer.



sunset in the Camp

Structure wise, I was assigned to the Staff and Supply Company. Due to that I also was responsible for the support with personnel and material of the Staff with its 7 sections as well as the Base Security / Defense Company and the military police. One who has never been in the Bundeswehr may imagine the SSCOY as a huge company with its different departments. In our case for example , there was a canteen with its responsibilities, the “Nachschubzug”, which is a supply platoon taking care of pickup and transportation of the supplies arriving at the airport, the “Materialgruppe”, a supply group distributing all material and ordering or sending spare parts and damaged parts from and to Germany, the “Instandsetzungsgruppe”, mechanics responsible to keep all vehicles operational and the “Luftumschlagszug”, an air logistics platoon offloading air transportation and taking care of distributing

the mail and material to the areas of operation. As you see there was a lot of personnel and effort needed to keep this machine PRT KUNDUZ running.

3. March 2005

On the 15th of March we started at 12: 30 from the military section of the airport of Cologne/Bonn in an Airbus of the Luftwaffe (German Airforce) to our layover in Termez, Uzbekistan (ترمز / اوزبیکستان).

At 21: 30 we landed on its airport. Whoever thought he could finally get off the plane was immediately disappointed. The door opened and an Usbek official came in. Accompanied by one of the German Airforce ground crew guys he collected all our military IDs, saying this was a regular procedure to check if the incoming personnel matches with the reported list and that we would get our IDs back when we proceed to our flight on the following morning. One of the guys being deployed for the second time turned over to me, smiled and said that they going to copy them now and forward the data to the Russians. I laughed and said:

"You´re joking, right?"

He laughed back and said:

"No!"

Actually, that was a well-known fact.

Once they had all our IDs, we were allowed to leave the plane and walk over to the so called transit camp which was located only 200 meters away from the runway. It was dark and humid. We were led to the tent area where we could buy a Coke and a more or less warm sausage for dinner. Then we went to our declared tents. Thank god they had air-conditioning, so that we were able to get some rest for

at least a few hours. According to local time it was 0100 when we laid down. So it was a short night, because at 0430 we had already boarded again, this time a C-160 Transall on a direct flight to KUNDUZ (کندوز). We had to start that early because later in the morning the temperatures would rise to an unbearable degree. Too hot for the Airforce to fly.

It is 0500 local afghan time at KUNDUZ airport or what those people call to be an airport. The main building was a ruin and the tower looked everything but stable. The first thing drawing my attention were the rays of sun right above the tower and the remains of two destroyed combat helicopters left by the Russians when they withdrew 1989.

We were picked up with some jeeps and Mungos (an ugly tiny military transportation vehicle which was actually conceived as a street cleaning vehicle) and brought to the main base. My first impressions of the country were overwhelming. I sat next to the driver of the Mungo and watched how the life in and around KUNDUZ began the day.

Then suddenly I was hit by a negative feeling. I saw all those children with their small barrows carrying those yellow canisters. Immediately the words of that officer came to my mind when he warned us about these canisters. Could these little children really be assassins? Those with their yellow canisters? But not only they had those canisters. There were yellow canisters everywhere! In each corner. In front of every store. Beside every single road.

The next thing I recognized where all those children working on the fields along the road. Considering that awful crazy heat it was hard to watch. Later I found out that almost all children have to get up very early in the morning to work on the fields together with their parents. Afterwards they go to school and return to the fields in the evening to work again. Like in Germany back then children had to help their parents with their work to assure the families survival, but