

Gary Barker & Michael Kaufman

# The Afghan Vampires Book Club

World Editions

Published in Great Britain in 2015 by World Editions Ltd., London

[www.worldeditions.org](http://www.worldeditions.org)

Copyright © Gary Barker & Michael Kaufman, 2015

Cover design Multitude

Image credit © Ed Drew, courtesy Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted in accordance  
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available on request from  
the British Library

ISBN 978 94 6238 049 3

Typeset in Minion Pro and Calibri

Distribution Europe (except the Netherlands and Belgium):

Turnaround Publishers Services, London

Distribution the Netherlands and Belgium: Centraal Boekhuis,

Culemborg, the Netherlands

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any  
form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording  
or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Phone: +31 (0)76 523 3533. Email: [info@worldeditions.org](mailto:info@worldeditions.org).

# The Captain

February 27, 2025

The captain's room is at the end of the wing, dark but for light seeping from the bathroom. The room, larger than most, has six beds, all empty except the one by the window where he lies. Cold midnight air pushes through the slightly opened window, briefly lifting the thin green curtain and then releasing it.

The squeaking of a nurse's shoes recedes down the hallway and then is gone. All is quiet again. For nearly two months, his ears have been his only link to the outside world. From other rooms he has heard ragged breathing, and midnight crying kept at bay during the day, and shouts as a roadside bomb explodes in a fellow soldier's sleep. He knows this terror. Terror burrowed into the folds of the men's brains so deeply they no longer remember what life was like before. Before the Second Afghan War.

He takes his mind away from all that to the vision of a woman he has loved and lost and swears he will find again.

Medics found him in the mountains, half-buried in snow. At first speechless, unresponsive, almost depleted of life.

He heard shouts. Orders. Jostling him onto the stretcher. Deep thumping of helicopter blades. He shouted and thrashed and begged them to forget about him and save *her*. 'Save *her*!' he had yelled over and over until they drugged him back to sleep.

He ended up here in Germany at the Landsfuhl Hospital near the Ramstein base, where he has remained since, alone in this large, empty room.

But before they will send him home, they want to know what he remembers—what happened that day in that remote corner of Afghanistan. And what happened to all the others who were killed.

He opens his eyes and stares at the ceiling, imagining patterns and shapes in the faint light. They will return in the morning with more questions. Again, he will pretend to be disoriented. And the next day, and the next one, until they are convinced.

Each day, there is a man who stands in the corner. Short, in a civilian suit, always listening, never asking questions. A few days earlier, as he was feigning sleep, the captain heard the man in the suit speak. *If he remembers a single thing, make sure he'll never say a word.*

He closes his eyes, thinks he hears a sound, a rustling of silk, opens his eyes and, as much as the restraints allow, turns back and forth to stare into the darkened room.

He forces his breathing to slow down. He forces his eyes to close.

He knows he is close to convincing them he remembers nothing. That he's just another vet whose memories have been charred by war and scrambled by the meds he was fed to keep him in battle. He believes, he hopes, he prays, they will leave him alone, that they'll think he'll be one more soldier huddling on a street corner or hiding in his bed. One more who will not ask questions and who knows that if there were truth to be found, it was long ago buried in some forgotten place.

He cannot sleep, has barely slept for nights on end. He knows he won't truly sleep until he is far from this hospital and can finally tell what happened that day.

## The Journal of John Murakami Fox

**April 9, London**

It had been Alistair's idea to start the club—almost two years ago. We were already well into the Second Afghan War, the one that came after the Obama withdrawal and the short-lived Russian occupation that followed. I thought the club was folly, really, a desperate act of frustration over this recycled war. But I humoured him.

Alistair Thomason-Thorpe, seventy-one years old, two decades older than I, but determined to live the life of an English gentleman from before he was born, fragrant pipe tobacco, 'old boys', and all.

Our conversation that night had drifted pleasantly to the theatre season, updates on various acquaintances, and then back again to the latest reports from our current wars.

After discussing one particularly heart-wrenching item from the States, Alistair said, 'I can no longer tell which stories are true and which are pure fiction, my dear John.'

Alistair subscribed to more than twenty papers and magazines, from *The Times* to *Tatler*, *The Times Literary Supplement* to *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, as if he were on a one-man crusade to keep print journalism alive. Even one of the tabloids landed on his doorstep each day.

He had read me a story about a group of vets who formed an armed gang, invaded a casino on a reservation in Wisconsin, threatened to spill a 'swimming pool of blood', refused to surrender and were gunned down by a SWAT team, along

with many other poor souls gambling their wages away. Thirty-three dead.

‘According to this in-depth journalism’—with two fingers he held up one of the local tabloids as if he were holding someone’s used underwear—‘the veterans said they hoped to cleanse themselves of all the barbarism they saw, or committed, in Afghanistan.’ He had taken a thoughtful puff on his pipe and then said, ‘I never did understand this notion of self-cleansing violence, do you, old boy?’ Alastair didn’t wait for an answer. ‘I do love this headline, though: *Vampire Vets Meet Bloody End*.’ He looked up at me and then said, ‘Do any of you actually report anymore or do you simply re-post what you find online?’

‘Why bother searching online?’ I said. ‘We simply run the press releases.’

‘I’m serious,’ he said. ‘We should start a society. A club perhaps.’

‘Of...?’

He took a moment before he said, ‘To collect all these terrible, barbaric, and unbelievable stories.’

As he said this, I glanced at the picture of his son, mounted in an art deco frame and sitting alone in the middle of a dark oak bookshelf.

‘No thanks,’ I said.

‘But why not?’

‘I already do that for my day job. Collect all those stories.’

Two days later I received a handwritten letter. Alistair was perfectly capable of turning on his tablet and sending an email but he relished old-school style.

The letter was headed: ‘The Afghan Vampires Book Club: An Invitation.’

He had sent the same letter to five others: a fellow amateur historian, two journalists, a short story writer of some renown, and his favourite antiquarian book dealer.

We were to gather the most improbable, disturbing, unbelievable, and absurd stories—fiction and non-fiction—that were coming out of the two-and-a-half decades of the start-and-stop Afghan War, as well as the ongoing Syrian-Lebanese-Turkish war, the Venezuelan campaign, and the new counter-insurgency efforts in Indonesia and Argentina, and post them on a website. It was, he conceded, more of a storytellers' club, but he preferred the sound of 'book club', just as he preferred books, especially leather-bound, to any other medium. I think he tossed 'vampire' into the name as a nod to the bloodletting threats of those casino-invading veterans, although perhaps it was merely acknowledging the absurdity of the whole exercise.

He wrote that once a year we would meet at his country home near Oxford, where he would announce the winner. The prize would be a case from his wine cellar, a coveted prize ever since most of the Northern Hemisphere's grape production had gone awry.

'The goal, my dear friends, is to figure out if the story is true or pure invention.

'Only then,' his message continued, 'will the winner take home the wine.'

I had phoned Alistair. I'm certain he would have preferred a letter but I wouldn't have known where to buy a stamp. Again I said no.

The next evening I was having an almost peaceful dinner with Sandra, who, at the time, hadn't yet started her A levels. I shouldn't have been surprised to learn that she already knew



about Alistair's idea since he was her godfather and one of her sources of after-school employment. 'He asked me to register a domain and set up a website for him.' There have been years when she sees more of him than of me. I believe that would be every year since she was born.

My wonderful daughter—she would not use the same adjective for me, I know—heading, she hopes, for medical school after her gap year, that is if I can somehow save enough money working as a serious journalist to help her. This mutual desire is perhaps the one thing Sandra and I have agreed on in many years.

A few days later I had flown off again, to Delhi. But it wasn't long before I received Sandra's note: 'Hi John. [www.Afghan-VampiresBookClub.com](http://www.Afghan-VampiresBookClub.com) Check it out!'

I could not say *no* to my oldest friend. And I would do just about anything to reduce my daughter's animosity toward me. Who knows, she might even start calling me 'Father'.

In the first year of the competition, the winning story was about a French aid worker who fell in love with an Afghan woman from a Taliban family and convinced her to flee the country with him. Anyone who knew anything about Afghanistan knew that couldn't end well. On the way to the airport, they disappeared. Their car was found more than 200 kilometres away with the suitcases still in the boot but no blood and no sign of gunshots or struggle. Months went by before anyone heard anything else of the story. The French government sent investigators, US inspectors poked around, but nothing turned up. Nearly six months later, a package arrived at the French Embassy, addressed to the French ambassador from 'the people of Afghanistan'. Inside was a small box with a note that read: 'After your men look at our beautiful

women, they'll never have eyes for another.'

You can imagine what was in the small box.

It was easy to figure out the truth versus fiction question on that one. Not even a crazy Frenchman would try to date an Afghan woman in Afghanistan.

By the second year, as the challenges of making a living as a journalist increased, even for one who has books, prizes, and more than a few scars from his war reporting, I started using the site to find story ideas. It had become an open (if anonymous) website with postings from one and all. The challenge was sifting through the imaginative conspiracy theories, the pedestrian conspiracy theories, the absurd rumours, paranoid fantasies, and stoned jokes concocted late at night in a barracks, in hopes of finding the hint of a real story.

In its first two years, I hadn't even posted a story on the site let alone won the competition, though of course this didn't bother me. It was merely a pastime for an old friend and a small source of income for my daughter.

Both Alistair and Sandra were as persistent as biting insects, intent as they were that I take this year's competition more seriously. The hook for me came from a posting by a US veteran who claimed to have the real story behind the Vod Am massacre, which had been a scoop for me just a few months before.

Cody was his name. I wrote to him. He ignored me. I wrote again and asked if I could meet him. He said 'Maybe', and three days later wrote to me again to say, yes, if I could come to Baltimore.

If an idea is hot, I can get expenses paid by Judith in Brooklyn. Though Judith's business is thriving as one of the more successful agent-editor-management-epub houses, the en-