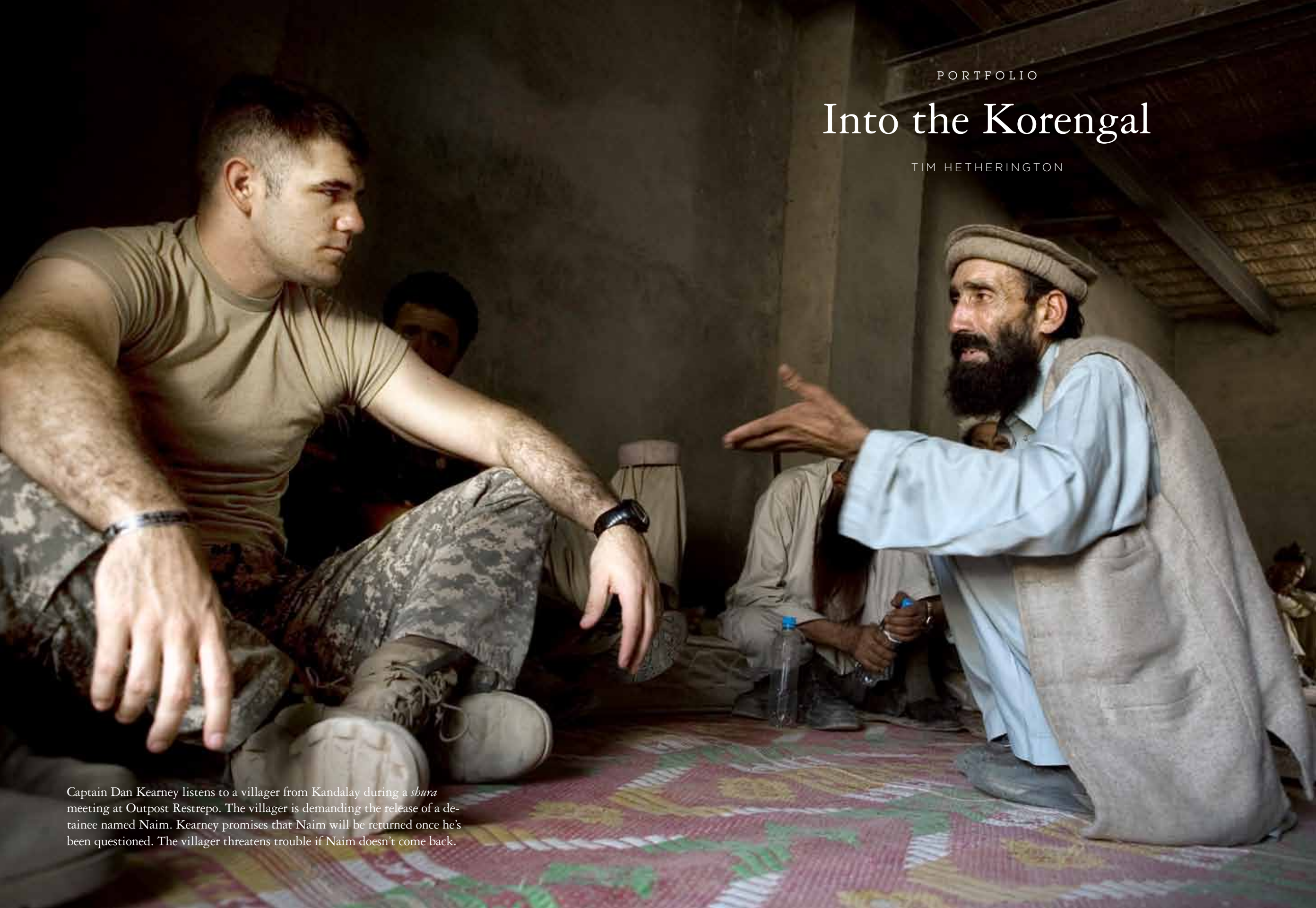


PORTFOLIO

Into the Korengal

TIM HETHERINGTON



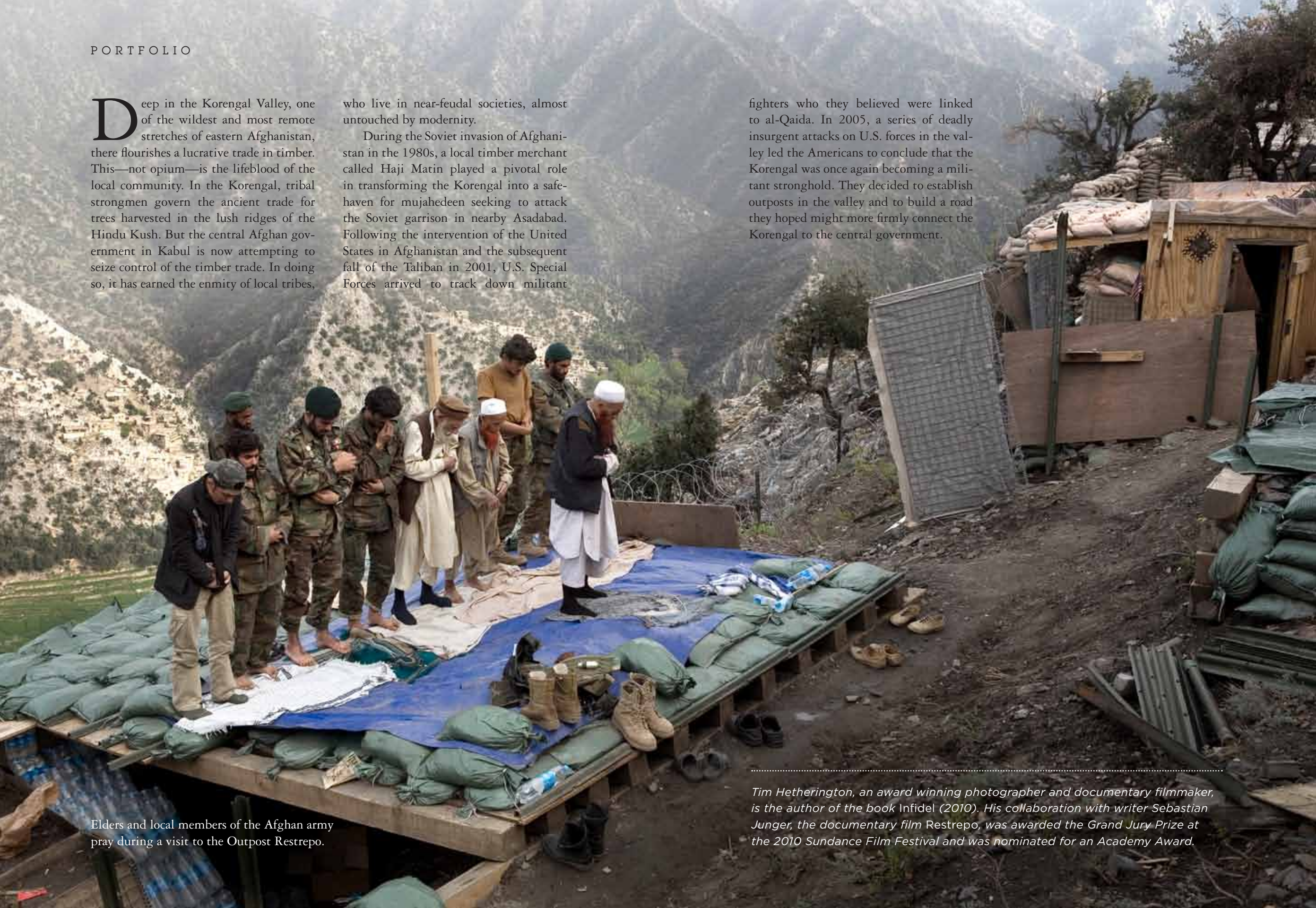
Captain Dan Kearney listens to a villager from Kandalay during a *shura* meeting at Outpost Restrepo. The villager is demanding the release of a detainee named Naim. Kearney promises that Naim will be returned once he's been questioned. The villager threatens trouble if Naim doesn't come back.

Deep in the Korengal Valley, one of the wildest and most remote stretches of eastern Afghanistan, there flourishes a lucrative trade in timber. This—not opium—is the lifeblood of the local community. In the Korengal, tribal strongmen govern the ancient trade for trees harvested in the lush ridges of the Hindu Kush. But the central Afghan government in Kabul is now attempting to seize control of the timber trade. In doing so, it has earned the enmity of local tribes,

who live in near-feudal societies, almost untouched by modernity.

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, a local timber merchant called Haji Matin played a pivotal role in transforming the Korengal into a safe-haven for mujahedeen seeking to attack the Soviet garrison in nearby Asadabad. Following the intervention of the United States in Afghanistan and the subsequent fall of the Taliban in 2001, U.S. Special Forces arrived to track down militant

fighters who they believed were linked to al-Qaida. In 2005, a series of deadly insurgent attacks on U.S. forces in the valley led the Americans to conclude that the Korengal was once again becoming a militant stronghold. They decided to establish outposts in the valley and to build a road they hoped might more firmly connect the Korengal to the central government.



Elders and local members of the Afghan army pray during a visit to the Outpost Restrepo.

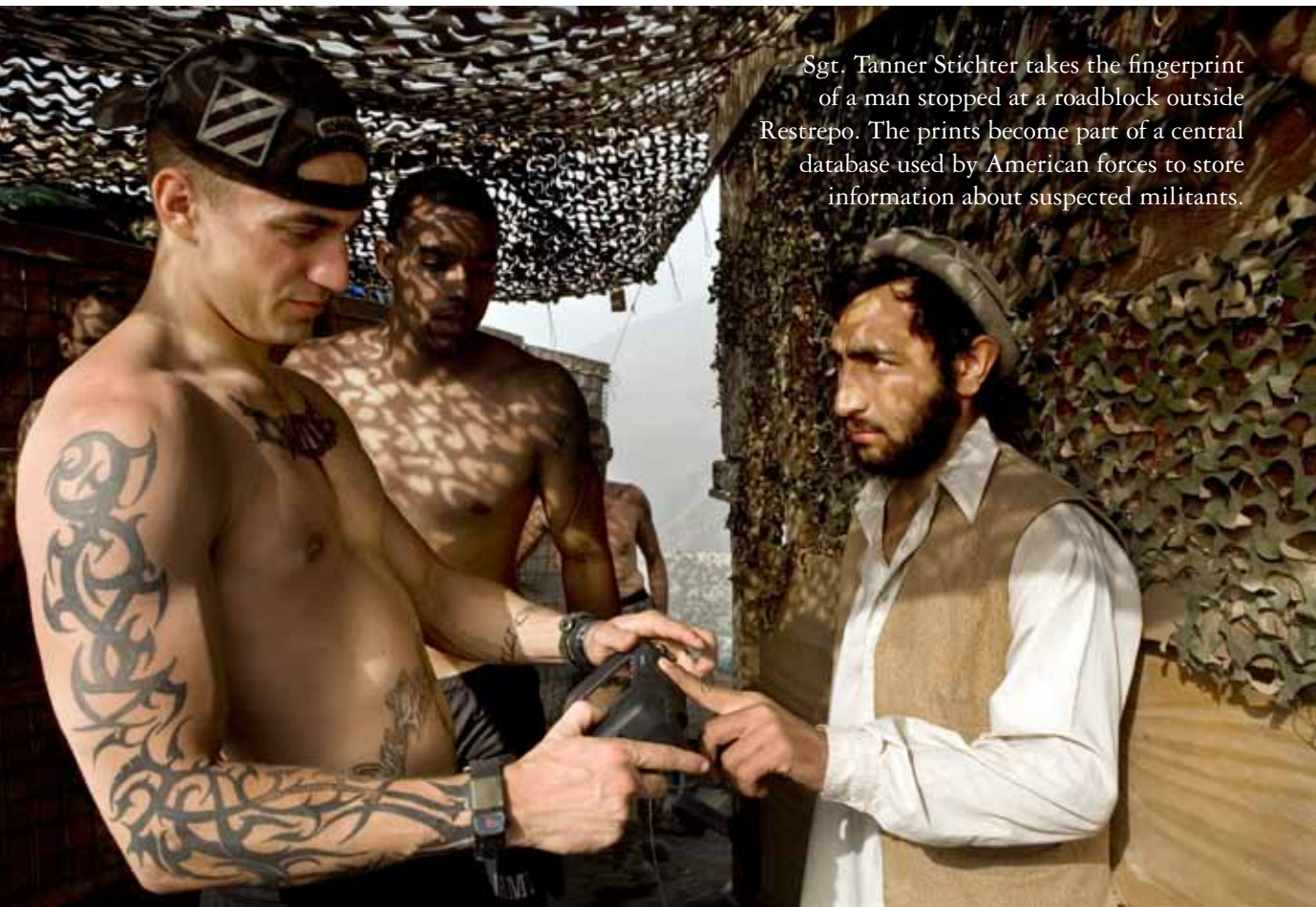
*Tim Hetherington, an award winning photographer and documentary filmmaker, is the author of the book *Infidel* (2010). His collaboration with writer Sebastian Junger, the documentary film *Restrepo*, was awarded the Grand Jury Prize at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award.*

The outposts were presented as a way to bring security and rule-of-law to the Korengal. But the Americans also hoped that taking the fight into the Korengal would draw Taliban militants and al-Qaida fighters away from the nearby Pech Valley. The Pech links northeastern Afghanistan with the wild and violent Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan—an area of insurgent activity widely considered to be a possible base for Osama bin Laden and the remnants of al-Qaida. The Americans were hoping to induce the militants to divert resources from the Pech to the Korengal, giving U.S. forces a chance take control of the Pech and staunch the flow of arms and money that allows the insurgency to flourish in northwest Pakistan.

As a particularly isolated and independent tribe, the Korengalis weren't used to having outsiders in their valley. They speak their own particular dialect of Pashto and had managed to keep both the Taliban and the Soviets out. The tribe had adopted a strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Time and again, American actions caused offense to a culture that cherishes modesty and honor. With the timber trade halted and foreign troops enforcing the policies of a distant government in Kabul, the Korengalis felt their traditional way of life was under threat. Meanwhile, their valley had effectively become a free-fire zone—for both sides. Fighters from the militant group Hizb-i-Islami entered the fight, and foreign jihadis from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia began



Supplies, delivered by local truckers, are unloaded at Outpost Restrepo.



Sgt. Tanner Stichter takes the fingerprint of a man stopped at a roadblock outside Restrepo. The prints become part of a central database used by American forces to store information about suspected militants.

using the valley as a training ground. Everyone—including journalists—knew that they'd see combat in the Korengal.

The rules of engagement on the American side were simple—if you saw someone with a weapon or a radio handset, you could kill him. But the difficulty of distinguishing an insurgent from a farmer became quickly apparent to the U.S. soldiers. Local men could earn \$5 by agreeing to fire a weapon against U.S. forces, and by the time the Americans had become fully settled, there was a noticeable absence of young men of fighting age in the village. Most had either joined the insurgents or fled to a camp in Pakistan to sit out the war.

Other villagers were caught in the middle of the fight. Insurgents threatened anyone who collaborated with the Americans, so the locals refused to supply workers. One father and son, lured out of the main American outpost to buy a goat, were seized and beheaded.

After insurgents fired from a home, women and children were often hustled to the rooftop. All too often, they would become victims when an American Apache helicopter was called in to respond.

In April 2010, concluding this was a fight they could not win, the Americans pulled out of the Korengal. The road was never built. A year later, the Americans pulled out of the Pech Valley, as well.

American forces use white phosphorus to bomb insurgent positions in the Korengal Valley.



At left: After a U.S. Apache helicopter attacks a house believed to be sheltering insurgents, a villager carries an injured child out of the building. Five people died and nine were wounded in the attack, including women and children. American authorities later evacuated the injured for treatment at the hospital at Bagram airbase.

Below: U.S. medic Joel Dean treats an Afghan child wounded by the Apache helicopter bombing.



In the shadow of a grenade launcher, young boys gather outside a school in Aliabad during a medical clinic run by American forces.

