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THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KHAN

A new breed of American soldier—call him the soldier-diplomat—has come into being since the end of the Cold War. Meet the colonel who was our man in Mongolia, an officer who probably wielded more local influence than many Mongol rulers of yore

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

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In the early spring of 2003, as U.S. troops in Iraq were consolidating their hold over Baghdad, few people had their eyes on Mongolia. And yet what was happening at the time in that country—90 percent of whose foreign military training and assistance now comes from the United States—was critical to the extension of America's global liberal influence. "Mongolia is a vast country completely surrounded by two anti-American empires, Russia and China," S. Galsanjamts, a member of Mongolia's national-security council, told me recently. "It is therefore a symbol of the kind of independence America wants to encourage in the world." Today, more often than not, the United States is encouraging that sort of independence not by intervening militarily on a grand scale but, rather, by placing a few quietly effective officers in key locations around the globe.

Last year I traveled to Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia, to meet Colonel Tom Wilhelm, one of the best of this new breed of American soldier-diplomats. Wilhelm's official roles at the time of my visit included serving at the U.S. embassy as the defense attaché, as the security-assistance officer, and as the liaison for the military's Pacific Command (PACOM). The embassy is a small building and somewhat less imposing than other posts, befitting the low "threat assessment" assigned to Mongolia. The country lived under virtual Soviet domination for seventy years, a generation longer than the satellite states of Eastern Europe, and public opinion is staunchly pro-American. At the time of the Iraq crisis the Mongolians staged no anti-war demonstrations. Indeed, they deployed a contingent of 175 soldiers to Baghdad last year, to help with policing efforts—a move that marked the first entry of Mongol troops into Mesopotamia since 1258, when Hulagu Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan's, arrived and exterminated most of the population of Baghdad.

The morning I arrived at the American embassy in Ulan Bator, Wilhelm, newly promoted to colonel, greeted me wearing a gray suit, a white shirt, a tie, and suspenders. Born in 1959, raised in Orlando, Florida, and given formative military training at West Point and the Army Ranger school, in Fort Benning, Georgia, Wilhelm had risen through the ranks of the military as the Cold War order was falling apart. On the ground in several theaters of military operation, he had witnessed the messy collapse of communism in Eurasia. Known to warlords in Bosnia as "Mean Mr. Tom," and to colleagues in Tajikistan as "Aga Tom," he became the ultimate area expert on the former Soviet empire and its shadow zones, from Yugoslavia all the way to Mongolia.

Wilhelm's plans for the morning I arrived were typical in their variety: he had to deliver personal thanks to the parents of a Mongolian-born U.S. Marine fighting in Basra, Iraq; he had to plan for a visit of the chief of the Mongolian military, Major General Tsevegsuren Togoo, to Washington; and he had to make arrangements for a visit by fourteen American brigadier generals. Also due to arrive was Lieutenant General Wallace Gregson, then the commander of the Third Marine Expeditionary Force ("III MEF" as it's written, and "Three MEF" as it's spoken). That last visit was the most important: if there were ever a land war in Asia—on the Korean Peninsula, for example—III MEF would play a role just as prominent as that played during the invasion of Iraq by I MEF, which marched from Kuwait to Baghdad.

In his office at the embassy Wilhelm kept two saddles and a tent. He likes to hunt and fish. He owns a World War II-vintage motorcycle with a sidecar. On his travels in Mongolia he took with him a bottle of Tabasco sauce, which he used liberally. I once saw him popping hot green peppers into his mouth at a Mongolian border post, while talking up the benefits of the Harris Falcon-II Series tactical hand-held radio to a Mongolian colonel.

Of average height, with a sturdy, fireplug build, Wilhelm is an explosive, energetic man. He has a maniacal laugh. His forceful and enthusiastic manner communicates *Ready, aim, fire!* with each sentence. He walks fast, and his trains of thought move faster still; on foot and in conversation I found it hard to keep up with him. He can quote from memory Robert Service's poetry of adventure and wanderlust. In e-mails he sent me before I arrived, he wrote about Central Asian history and the medieval traveler William of Rubruquis before closing with "GO ARMY, BEAT NAVY! CHEERS FROM THE STEPPE, TOM."

Wilhelm's assignment to Ulan Bator occurred against the following backdrop: Mongolia, with one of the world's lowest population densities, is being threatened demographically by the latest of Eurasia's great historical migrations—an urban Chinese civilization is determined to move north. China—which ruled much of Mongolia from the end of the seventeenth century until the early twentieth century, during the Manchu period—covets the oil, coal, uranium, and empty grasslands of its former possession. Given that a resurgent China has already absorbed Tibet, Macao, and Hong Kong, reabsorbing Mongolia—a country that on the map looks like a big piece of territory bitten away from China—seems almost irresistibly a part of China's geopolitical intentions.

Only three full-time defense attachés serve in Ulan Bator—representing Russia, the United States, and China, the three countries with past or future imperial interests in Mongolia. Americans, of course, are uncomfortable with the idea of having or running a global empire, but that responsibility is being thrust upon them nevertheless in Mongolia as elsewhere. And unconventional men like Tom Wilhelm, largely out of sight, are the ones carrying the load and transforming the world order. I went to Mongolia to see him in action.

Ulan Bator is a composite of any number of ex-communist capitals I have seen in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, with an additional bone-chilling bleakness. The city is dominated by gray cement and brown dirt, with barely a tree in sight. Soviet-era apartment blocks abound, and resemble penitentiaries. The stench of lignite for heating buildings lasts deep into spring. Yaks feed on weeds in garbage-strewn lots on the city's outskirts, where people inhabit traditional circular felt-lined tents, known in Mongolia as *gers* (and in Turkic countries as yurts). Underground utility pipes house the homeless, and shipping containers function as kiosks. When I was there, people went around with white masks over their mouths and noses, because of the SARS epidemic, and this added a strange, futuristic element to the cityscape.

There is romance, too. Ulan Bator was once the Sacred City of the Living Buddha. The Buddhist lamaseries of Gandantegchinlen Khiid and Dashchoilon Khiid, revived since the fall of communism, are cavernous, dusky-red, gilded worlds of chanting saffron-robed monks and hammered-brass prayer wheels. Sculptures of frightening deities sit in dilapidated wooden cases sanctified by dust, reminiscent of faded black-and-white photos in an antiquarian's library. An eighty-foot-tall gilded statue of the Buddha at Gandantegchinlen Khiid, which was built to replace one destroyed by the Communists, is a gaudy spirit of beauty and wonderment. It is a welcome contrast to the austere surroundings, dotted still with statues of local Communist bosses that, curiously, have not been torn down, and that people pass in silence.

When Wilhelm arrived in Mongolia, in 2001, U.S.-Mongolian defense relations had no focus. All that existed was a hodgepodge of unrelated aid and training programs that had not been staffed out in detail in Washington or in Ulan Bator. Mongolia's post-communist military had no realistic vision of its future. It wanted a modern air force but wasn't sure what such an air force would do, or how it would be sustained, or its aircraft maintained. Wilhelm, with the active support of Ambassador John Dinger, quickly provided

a sense of purpose. He and Dinger developed a "three pillars" strategy for the country and persuaded the Mongolian military to sign on. The three pillars are:

1) Securing Mongolia's borders not against a conventional military threat from China (such security would be impossible) but against illegal border incursions, criminal activities to finance terrorism, and transnational terrorism itself, particularly by the Uighur separatists of western China. Aided by the Chechens and the broad militant Islamic network, Uighur extremists represent the future of terrorism in Central Asia.

2) Preparing the Mongolian military to play an active role in international peacekeeping, in order to raise its profile in global forums and thus provide Mongolia with diplomatic protection from its large, rapacious neighbors. The dispatch of Mongolian troops to post-Saddam Iraq elicited shrill cries of annoyance from Russia and China, but it was the first building block of this pillar.

3) Improving Mongolia's capacity to respond to natural disasters, most notably drought.

Wherever he is, the mission is everything for Tom Wilhelm. In his eyes, to avoid taking bureaucratic risks, or to shade the truth for the sake of a diplomatic advantage, is unmanly, the worst of offenses. "I'm the guy who gutted the [Department of Defense] environmental program for Mongolia, because it was unimplementable, and I didn't see what DOD was getting out of it," he told me almost as soon as we had met. One of Wilhelm's early moves in Ulan Bator was to scrap many existing military-assistance programs and replace them with new ones—including a humanitarian dental project in a key Mongolian-Chinese border area—that would support the three-pillars strategy. "I chose to come here and not to work at the JSTAFF [Joint Staff] at the Pentagon, because in Mongolia I knew that I could make a difference," Wilhelm told me. Even as a military officer he was a policymaker by another name.

I arranged to accompany Wilhelm on a nine-day trip along the Mongolian-Chinese border. On the day we left for the train station, Wilhelm wore a baseball cap, suspenders, and cargo pants. He had slipped Oriental prayer beads into one of his pockets for good luck, and had stuffed a battle dress uniform (or BDU, for "battle-dress utility") into his Army kit bag, for use at our upcoming meetings with Mongolian officers at the border.

The train station in Ulan Bator is a poured-concrete, neoclassical pile that for a Third World installation is surprisingly quiet and well organized. Our Russian-built train reeked of lignite; a female conductor, wearing a white mask against SARS, had a stove going for tea. Joining us in the compartment was our interpreter, Major Dabarch Altankhuu ("Golden Sun"). Altankhuu, dressed in jeans and a work shirt, was a young, stocky, clean-cut officer who had learned English at the Defense Language Institute in San Antonio, Texas.

As the train slipped out of Ulan Bator, Wilhelm took from his rucksack some black Russian caviar, hard-boiled eggs, cheese, pickles, and a bottle of red wine, and we had ourselves a feast. He then proceeded to pump Altankhuu for information on the up-and-comers in the Mongolian military. Looking out the window as we left the last of the city's scrap-metal junkyards behind us, I saw in the distance bark-brown and tungsten-hued ridges streaked with snow.

Mongolia is a spectacular emptiness. Two and a quarter times the size of Texas, the country is home to only 2.7 million people—and nearly a million of them live in the capital. Here geology matters more than civilization. Mongolia is dominated by a basinlike plateau, much of which lies from 3,000 to 5,000 feet above sea level. Looming to the north are the Khangai Nuruu and Altai mountain ranges, with peaks rising to 14,000 feet. The climate is one of the world's most extreme: in Ulan Bator temperatures range from 100° in summer to -40° in winter.

Today's Mongolia, the former Outer Mongolia, has the elongated shape of a sheepskin. We were headed southeast—and downhill—from Ulan Bator, near the center of the country, into the warmer lowlands of the Gobi Desert, to Zamyn-Uud, on the Chinese border, close to where Marco Polo passed in the

thirteenth century, en route to China.

Soon not a tree or even a scrap of scrub was in sight—and no sign of habitation, not even a *ger*. But then, at sunset, we saw a signature image of Mongolia's nomadic spirit. Galloping across the hard-baked steppe was a lone horseman, who for a time kept up with our train. He stood upright in an unpadded wooden saddle, and wore a pointed fur cap. "It's like the Great Plains a hundred and fifty years ago!" Wilhelm exclaimed. Repeatedly during my time with him Wilhelm would refer to Mongolia as "Injun country"—an analogy that in fact goes far in Mongolia. The Plains Indians are descended from the peoples who migrated from this part of north-central Asia, across the Bering Strait and down into North America. The Mongolian "long song" is echoed in the chants of the Sioux and the Apaches. Helping matters are the cowboy hats that Mongolians wear along with their traditional robes. "Injun Country" was a term I heard not only from Wilhelm but from U.S. Army officers in Yemen, Colombia, the Philippines, and Afghanistan over the past few months, describing the ungovernable parts of those nations. The choice of words was not accidental: whereas American civilians tend to hark back to the struggles against slavery and fascism, in the Civil War and World War II, to find patriotic glory, the Army itself harks back to the Indian wars for its defining moments, especially now that it is engaged in the war on terrorism—a classic counter-insurgency against small clusters of combatants, as in the Wild West.

Later, when darkness reduced the world to the rumbling sound of the train, Wilhelm began to tell me his life story. As a young Army Ranger, in 1981, he was appointed platoon leader of an air-assault infantry unit in the 101st Airborne Division, stationed in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. These were the final days of the old Vietnam War Army. Robbery and drugs were still rife in the barracks. Disciplining soldiers was a big part of Wilhelm's job. In 1983 he was sent to helicopter flight school, at Fort Rucker, Alabama, and afterward served as a pilot and commanded an Arctic infantry company in the 172nd Infantry Brigade, based in Fairbanks, Alaska.

During his time in Alaska, Wilhelm patrolled the Aleutian Islands with Eskimo scouts, occasionally spotting signs of SPETSNAZ (Soviet special forces) units that infiltrated remote parts of Alaska—a little-known aspect of the Cold War. The Arctic demanded a unique set of infantry skills. "When the temperature is forty below," Wilhelm said, "you can't afford to break a sweat, because once you stop sweating, you'll turn into a Popsicle. You've got to stay dry, even when you're pulling a sled loaded down with gear. Therefore, everything has to be planned and carried out far more methodically than in temperate climates. It was the best job of my life." Wilhelm describes all of the jobs he's had in the Army that way.

In 1985 Wilhelm was sent to study at the Canadian Land Force Command and Staff College, in Kingston, Ontario—a bastion of British colonial tradition, where one wore a tie after six and was given a personal napkin ring for use at mess. "There was a lot of esprit," he told me. "Everything was deliberate, meticulous, with a fierce sense of a warrior ethic, despite the lack of opportunities Canada had to prove it. I get angry whenever someone belittles the Canadian military."

About this time Wilhelm decided to become an Army foreign-area officer for the Soviet Union and its environs. He took a Special Operations course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, underwent total immersion in Russian at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, and got a graduate degree in Eastern European studies at the University of Kansas. Then, on his own initiative and with his own money (and with only a wink and a nod from the U.S. Army), Wilhelm applied and got accepted to Leningrad State University, where in the mid-1980s he slept in the dorms with Soviet students, and queued at neighborhood buffets for sticky rice, black bread, and sour milk.

Still not yet thirty, Wilhelm was acquiring a battery of specific skills—the Russian language, Arctic survival, helicopter piloting. And there was no letup.

By the time the Berlin Wall came down, in 1989, Wilhelm was an Army captain stationed in Germany. The fall of communism changed his life. For the next decade he spent his time deployed in the former Eastern bloc and in war-torn Tajikistan, Macedonia, and Bosnia, where he developed experience, in

active combat and in nonmilitary operations, that he never could have developed during the Cold War.

I went to sleep in the dark and rattling train compartment. When I awoke, to a full moon, it was dawn, and snow was glinting on the desert's wrinkles. Now we were in the real Gobi (Mongolian for "gravel-covered plain"). A Bactrian camel, hairy from the long winter, stood silhouetted at a lonely station platform. Wilhelm, playing with his prayer beads and adjusting his ball cap after a few hours of sleep, said, "Now, where would you rather be? Here, or stuck in traffic, staring at the car ahead on I-395, going to work at the Pentagon?"

Eventually we pulled into Zamyn-Uud. The station building was new, and sat like a stage prop against the gravel flatland. Waiting for us at the foot of the platform in the freezing morning were three Mongolian officers wearing dress greens, leather coats down to their ankles, and ridiculously large Soviet-style service caps, often known as "satellite dishes." The officers shunted us into a Russian-made jeep called a UAZ (pronounced *wahz*), an acronym for its Russian name.

Our hotel was two hundred yards farther along the railroad tracks, a poured-concrete blockhouse with hard beds, hideous furniture, and cracked windows. Wilhelm quickly changed into his BDU, adorned with Ranger and paratrooper insignia, and put on his new U.S. Army black beret. We all gathered in Wilhelm's room. Colonel D. Battsengel, the leader of the Mongolian delegation, ordered breakfast brought up: *buuz*, or mutton-ball dumplings in goulash; fatty cold cuts; and salty camel's-milk tea. We cleaned our plates.

"The American military will eat anything, anywhere, anytime," Wilhelm announced to our hosts. Major Altankhuu translated. (Though Wilhelm's Russian is fluent, his Mongolian is more rudimentary.) Everybody laughed. After asking the name of a Mongolian officer a second time, Wilhelm, apologizing, said, "I always ask for a name twice. When I remembered a woman's name the first time, I knew she would be my wife." Laughter again. Wilhelm's friendly banter and broad smile never faltered.

After small talk about wrestling and martial arts, Colonel Battsengel told us he was from northeastern Mongolia, where Genghis Khan was born and probably is buried. Formally welcoming us to East Gobi Province, Battsengel said that the tempo of development there was about to pick up dramatically, with the establishment of an economic free-trade zone, manufacturing plants, and a Chinese casino on the border. The population of Zamyn-Uud, he said, would soon increase from 10,000 to 30,000. The Chinese were pushing hard to establish casino gambling in Mongolia, an enterprise that favored their business acumen and organizational skills.

The Chinese had other plans, too. They had their sights on the mineral deposits in the Gobi Desert. They also wanted to start large-scale animal-husbandry operations elsewhere in southern and eastern Mongolia, which would have the unintended effect of ruining the earth's last great uninhabited steppe. And they wanted to build a modern road network from Inner Mongolia into the Gobi. Meanwhile, northern Mongolia was being deforested. Every other freight train we saw was filled with logs headed for China.

Despite seven decades of virtual Soviet occupation, Mongolians are less afraid of the Russians than of the Chinese. Russia's empire is disintegrating; China's is rising. The Chinese are migrating in large numbers into adjacent Russian Siberia. We could see the Chinese border post from our hotel: a brightly lit, well-engineered arc, symbolizing the Sino-industrial encroachment on Zamyn-Uud's sprawl of felt tents and scrap-iron huts.

"In my blood I don't like the Chinese," a high-ranking Mongolian official declared in an interview I conducted in Ulan Bator. "China is not interested in developing Mongolia's economy, but in exploiting our natural resources. The Russians dominated our politics for seven decades but did not incorporate us into the Soviet Union. The Chinese have the possibility to utterly absorb us."

Greater than the fear of a strong and expansionist China, however, is the fear of an internally weak China, or even a fragmented China. A weakened China, along with continued instability in the neighboring,

formerly Soviet Turkic republics and in the North Caucasus, would spell trouble for Mongolia. It conjures up the prospect of Central Asian terrorism and drug trafficking, spearheaded by Uighur and Chechen militants and organized criminals.

Colonel Battsengel drove us beyond the last border checkpoint. Here, in no-man's-land, only a post marked the frontier. A Chinese officer a few feet on the other side of the post watched silently as Colonel Wilhelm, in his BDU and black beret, went right up to it, careful not to step beyond for fear of provoking a diplomatic incident. Cameras clicked at our party from a window on the Chinese side.

It was a border that mattered, and soon will matter more. If we look beyond the present conflagrations in the Middle East, China looms as the greatest challenge to American power.

We returned to Zamyn-Uud. In a nondescript house we found a long line of Mongolians in traditional robes, waiting in a hallway. Many were children accompanied by their parents, who wore hopeful expressions. In an adjacent room U.S. Air Force Technical Sergeant Dan Elliot, of Huntington Beach, California, greeted us. He was the chief of a four-person dental mission dispatched to this part of the Mongolian-Chinese border by PACOM. By treating an average of a hundred patients daily in this and nearby border towns, Elliot and his colleagues were demonstrating the local benefits of American self-interest.

Sergeant Elliot briefed Colonel Wilhelm. "The goal here, sir," he said, "is load-light, low-tech, small footprint." He meant that here in the Gobi more good could be done by traveling with minimal equipment; using the most basic technology, which is least compromised by power outages; and keeping the mission as unobtrusive as possible. "We stay low-key and crank out patients, sir," he added, pointing out the cheap hardware lamps for illuminating patients' mouths, and the locally bought gas burners for hot-water sterilization. The dental chairs came from nearby shops and offices. The team had advertised its services to the community on the local radio station. All the equipment fit into six small trunks, including presents for the kids treated along the way. It was like battlefield surgery.

The impressive thing about the high-tech American military is that it knows when to be low-tech, and how to be good at it, the same way that guerrilla fighters do. Each war, each training mission, each deployment, brings with it new lessons that have little to do with technology. And because America under all its post-Cold War Presidents has been militarily active overseas, its armed services are improving tactically with every passing day.

Wilhelm complimented Elliot and the rest of the team—members of America's superb cadre of noncommissioned officers—on their good work. As we were leaving, Wilhelm said, "Noncoms are the secret of the American military's success, and it can be openly acknowledged, because few can copy it. It's a reflection of America's relative social equality."

Later, after a lunch of camel's milk, greasy mutton, and horsemeat in Colonel Battsengel's office, we piled into our UAZ and continued along the border, inside no-man's-land. The terrain was flat, featureless, gravel-strewn, and utterly disorienting. It all looked the same—and yet it was here that I got my first intimation of the abundance of wildlife in the Gobi. We saw swarms of finches, ruddy drakes, and black-tailed gazelles, the latter of which we chased down, barely catching them at 45 miles per hour. On a one-foot rise not far from us—the highest point in this flat emptiness—we saw a golden eagle about two feet tall. Next we came upon herds of goats, horses, and Bactrian camels, guarded by a few Mongolian border police. The goats, enclosed in a corral made of piled sheep dung, were a source of food; the horses and camels were used for patrolling.

Near the corral was a *ger* inhabited by a family of nomads, who invited us inside for camel's milk and homemade vodka. We were careful not to step on the door sill as we entered; doing so is said to bring bad luck, and was a crime punishable by death in Genghis Khan's time. Continuing with the prescribed etiquette, we walked to the left, or clockwise, around the side of the tent to the back, the place for honored guests. This made sense, because the kitchen—a few pots on a stove fueled by dried dung—lay

off to the right of the door. From the center of the roof, which was partly open to the sky, hung a ceremonial blue scarf. Spokes radiated from the center of the roof frame, representing the wheel of life. An altar behind us, fragrant with juniper incense, included a small carpet with a portrait of Genghis.

"I'm culturally at home," Wilhelm announced to the gathering. He sprinkled vodka in the air three times, in Mongolian fashion, before swallowing a small glassful. "I'm in the Gobi, among Mongolians, and among soldiers." The statement, like so many others he made, endeared him to our hosts.

The next morning, back in Zamyn-Uud, we woke to rain and freezing cold. The day before, we had driven on well-worn desert tracks made by other UAZs. Now, headed on a lengthier excursion along the border, we left them behind. Here the Gobi was a vast ocean of stubble fields so bumpy that my head was constantly banging against the roof. After an hour we came to a Mongolian border fort, or *zastaf*: a few single-story barracks with distempered white walls and lead-green roofs.

A young soldier wearing a fur hat and a greatcoat, with signs of frostbite on his cheeks, saluted smartly as we entered. Then came the dress parade, with a dozen or so soldiers, a few officers and their wives and children, and the post dog all standing at attention for review. It was like a frontier fort of the Old West. This was not merely a military base but a small community in the wilderness. Protecting a remote borderland is seen in Mongolia as a vocation, a way of life. Such an outpost would not be considered complete without at least some women and children.

In a bare and icy room the officers' wives served us tea mixed with salt, mutton fat, and camel's milk. Wilhelm took notes as the officers complained about how the cold weather shortened battery life for their Kenwood walkie-talkies, about the shortages of spare parts and diesel fuel, and about how their solar panels didn't work in bad weather. Wilhelm said he would try to get them new radios. In place of solar panels he suggested wind generators.

The barracks were lined with maps and shamanistic designs. The border guards used old-model Kalashnikovs, with wooden stocks rather than collapsible metal ones. Outside, about eighty horses stood stoically in the sleet; the afternoon desert sky was dark and dreary. A network of concrete trenches and pillboxes indicated the closeness of the Chinese border. In Ulan Bator, Major General Purev Dash, the chief of staff and deputy commander of the border forces, had told me that his men used camels and horses for patrols "not because we are poor and primitive but because such animals offer the surest means to scout the desert." Wilhelm's plan for policing the border was a mobile force that would mix fast ponies and Bactrian camels with light, high-tech communications gear.

Driving back to Zamyn-Uud, Wilhelm talked about his experiences in northeastern Macedonia, in 1995, when U.S. and various Nordic units were patrolling the border with Serbia.

"I was a major; my bosses called me an 'iron major,'" he said, referring to the middle managers so crucial to the U.S. military's operations in the post-Cold War world. "I had a damn great job. I was the second-in-command on the ground of what was the Super Bowl of American military operations at that time. 'We're in a war zone'—what all soldiers live for. There were American generals saying the Balkans were a waste of time, that we should have been doing Bradley-combat-vehicle exercises in Germany instead. What a bunch of crap! Finally, we're actually using our training, and these Cold War dinosaur generals want us to train for a war that would never happen. I'll bet you the re-enlistment rate for the soldiers who served in the Balkans was greater than that of those who stayed in Germany. The Balkan deployments were the best thing for the morale of U.S. soldiers at the time. And they paved the way for how we fight now."

Wilhelm's men monitored the smuggling of fuel across the unmarked Serbian-Macedonian border. They tracked Serb patrols. They learned to integrate themselves with the Finns, who were part of the Nordic battalion but not part of NATO. They patrolled in full kit several times a day. "We were defining real peacekeeping," Wilhelm said, "which is like war-making, since you monopolize the use of force in a given area. It was paradise after Germany. Somalia was over. Bosnia for us hadn't started yet. Macedonia

was the only game in town. Majors and master sergeants were defining national policy at the fingertip level."

The full flowering of the middle ranks had its roots in the social transformation of the American military, which, according to Wilhelm (a liberal who voted for Al Gore in 2000), had taken place a decade earlier, when the rise of Christian evangelicalism had helped stop the indiscipline of the Vietnam-era Army. "This zeal reformed behavior, empowered junior leaders, and demanded better recruits," he said. "For one thing, drinking stopped, and that killed off the officers' clubs, which, in turn, broke down more barriers between officers and noncoms, giving the noncoms the confidence to do what majors and colonels in other armies do. The Christian fundamentalism was the hidden hand that changed the military for the better. Though you try to get someone to admit it! We never could have pulled off Macedonia or Bosnia with the old Vietnam Army."

On December 14, 1995, Wilhelm, who hadn't seen his family for the better part of a year, was on leave in Peoria, Illinois. He had just finished cutting down a Christmas tree with his father-in-law when he saw on television that the Dayton Peace Accord had been signed. He was summoned the next day to the Balkans by Major General William Nash, who was about to assume command of Task Force Eagle, with responsibility for the northeast sector of Bosnia.

"Bosnia was a cold, muddy place," he said, "and the people were cold and muddy too. There wasn't much brotherly love. They had just shot the hell out of each other, and were living in the rubble they made for themselves. They seemed tired, though. Their morale was low. And that was all good news. Those were things we could exploit."

Wilhelm got wind that the diplomats had worked out a deal for the Russians to join the peacekeeping force. The Russians would be subordinate to Major General Nash, who assigned Wilhelm the role of integrating them with the NATO peacekeepers. "The reason you're here, corporal," Nash told Wilhelm (then a major), "is to keep the Russians out of trouble." Nash had meant the word "corporal" as a generic term for all lower- and middle-ranking officers. "Nash had given me a one-sentence mission," Wilhelm told me, "which implied that he trusted me to figure the rest out. He knew that I knew that the Russians were professional and well disciplined, and would work well within the brigade. My job was to incorporate them into this complex, fast-moving machine of ours, and to protect them from our own media, which were constantly looking for mistakes."

The next morning, in Zamyn-Uud, Colonel Battsengel introduced us to Colonel Ranjinnyam, a bearish, scruffy, and friendly-looking man who would be our guide on a northeasterly journey along the Chinese border, into an area where Mongolia sticks out into Manchuria. Ranjinnyam's UAZ followed ours until we had driven a few miles beyond Zamyn-Uud. Then we got out and, in the middle of the desert, toasted farewell to Battsengel with a few glasses of Absolut—the only good vodka we had on the trip. We then piled into Ranjinnyam's UAZ and set out over a tableland of sagebrush and tumbleweed. The landscape kept shifting. We drove past small glaciers and glinting streams; past horizonless uplands of igneous rock; past vast dirt expanses that gradually shed their green stubble. By dusk we could see nothing but sand.

We stopped for the night at Ulan Uul (Red Rock), a regiment-size encampment for the border force. Wilhelm and I shared a small, icy room, where he continued his reminiscences of Bosnia.

"The Russians were in Uglevik, Republika Srpska," he said, "to patrol their sector for the U.S.-led division. They had American brigades on either side of them. Again, there was no doctrine for this. Daily patrols were the guts of the Dayton agreement, and I went on a lot of patrols with the Russians, enduring their combat rations of tinned fish and buckwheat.

"We went to one village where the church had been destroyed and the Serbs had their headquarters on the wrong side of the street. They had had twenty days to move it to the right side of the street, as stipulated by Dayton, and they hadn't. I took out the copy of Dayton that I carried around with me, and read it out

loud. The Russian lieutenant with me repeated it to the Serbs. I told the Serbs we would bomb their headquarters with an Apache if they didn't move it. I called in an Apache to do a flyover. The Serbs were in disbelief that they couldn't drive a wedge between us and the Russians. 'Let's go now,' my Russian companion told me. 'Let's give them their own space to absorb the bad news.' An American would have stayed and drunk tea with the Serbs. But the Russians live more in an ambiguous world of negotiations without rules, especially because of their experience with civil wars in the Caucasus and Central Asia. They have a better sense of these things.

"My Russian lieutenant and I seized weapons that were hidden in haystacks. We destroyed anti-aircraft guns mounted on trucks. We called in Apache missions. The Serbs began calling me 'Mean Mr. Tom' because I kept threatening them with Apaches if they didn't abide by Dayton, by disarming and dismantling their checkpoints. I've logged more hours in a Russian ACV [armored combat vehicle] than in an American one over my lifetime. I was taken in and accepted by a brotherhood that had seen exceptional combat in Chechnya and Afghanistan, and listened to them bitch about lousy chains of command and problems in Russia.

"Many national armies in Europe wouldn't fight when push comes to shove. I've seen them corrupted by too much UN work and not enough real combat. But hell, the Russians would fight! Nothing about the American military in Bosnia impressed the Russians so much as our sergeants' whipping out GPS [Global Positioning System] devices—which the Russians didn't have—and calling in Apache strikes. Through us, the Russians learned the real power of technology, not the false power of it."

The real power of technology, Wilhelm went on to explain, is that it provides an objectivity that even an enemy trusts. It has a calming effect. Because of the GPS devices the Americans were using in Bosnia, for example, there were no arguments about whether this or that outpost was on the wrong side of the cease-fire line.

The false power of technology, Wilhelm believes, was exemplified in the Cold War nuclear chains of command, which were elaborate theoretical constructs never intended to be put into actual use. "The Cold War wrought a whole bureaucratic culture that had no battlefield reality," he said. "The Cold War armies were not great armies, because all the decisions were made by generals and politicians. In great armies the job of generals is to back up their sergeants. That's just my opinion, but I know I'm right."

In the Russian military calling in an air strike is a decision that no one below a colonel can make. Yet in Wilhelm's opinion, the Russians have mid-level officers almost as good as those in the U.S. military: the result of combat experience in complex environments like Transdniestria, Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Tajikistan. And because their empire is collapsing, the Russian military today frequently finds itself in combat situations that encourage reform at the lower and middle levels. "I would have followed Colonel [Alexander] Lentsov into combat anywhere," Wilhelm said, referring to his Russian commander in Bosnia. "On a tactical level we have more in common with the Russians than with a lot of our allies." And yet the general staff in Moscow remains locked in a Cold War mindset.

In the spring of 1996 Wilhelm left Bosnia. By the fall he was in Tajikistan.

The day after leaving Zamyn-Uud we entered a landscape of perfectly rolling hills speckled with scree and yellow stubble. Between the blackest shadows, grazing in an ethereal light, was a herd of exceedingly rare bighorn argali, or "Marco Polo" sheep. They were almost as large as horses. Wilhelm was ecstatic. "All we need now is to see a snow leopard," he said. In our UAZ we followed the sheep to the edge of a range of clay hills, where below us the great Mongolian plain fell away into the sky.

That day Wilhelm and I had to endure large meals at six *zastafs*, with vodka toasts at every one. This was in addition to drinking the blood of a black-tailed gazelle that Colonel Ranjinnyam had shot with his Makarov pistol from the UAZ. Having swallowed a glass of blood and eaten the animal's testicles and eyeballs, Wilhelm turned to me. "Like I said," he announced, "this is better than rush-hour traffic on 395

en route to the Pentagon." He never tired, never stopped laughing and slapping his fellow officers on the back. Major Altankhuu confided to me at one point, "Colonel Wilhelm is a great man. He makes us like America so much."

Later I asked Wilhelm to tell me more about his past, this time about his posting to Tajikistan. It began in October of 1996, when he became America's first defense attaché to the country, which was then a newly independent post-Soviet republic in which a four-year civil war was finally beginning to wind down. In neighboring Afghanistan the ethnic-Pashtun Taliban had just captured Kabul. Central Asian leaders, not to mention Russia and the Shiite clergy of Iran, were fearful that the Taliban, aided by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, would now try to spread their brand of Sunni fundamentalism throughout the region. They were therefore trying to negotiate an end to the civil war, because Tajikistan was now needed as a rear base to help the ethnic-Tajik guerrilla leader Ahmad Shah Massoud recapture Afghanistan.

Wilhelm spent much of his time in Tajikistan keeping up with the activities of a colorful cast of warlords: Rakhmon "Hitler" Sanginov, Jagga "the Sweeper" Mirzoyiev, Mahmoud "the Black Robin Hood" Khudoberdiev, Abdumalik "the Shark" Abdullojonov, Khurshed "Tyson" Abdu-shukurov, and Yakub Salimov, who played the theme song from *The Godfather* whenever he received guests at his home. Wilhelm did see combat, however. Three times he attended the "final" fall of the town of Tursunzade, near the border with Uzbekistan, once lying in a ditch during a vicious firefight. The victorious army had a handful of T-72 tanks with stereo speakers blasting Jimmy Buffett's "Last Mango in Paris." That, Wilhelm told me, was "postmodern war, or whatever you want to call it."

Wilhelm's wife, Cheri, and their two young children, Parker and Daley Alice, had come with him to Tajikistan. "I had been separated from them for so long," he said, "because of the deployment in Bosnia and other assignments. We were all finally together in a war zone. There was no electricity, no heating; it was so cold we all slept together in the same bed to keep warm. The tap water was the color of Coca-Cola. We shared a toilet with our armed guards. I went boar hunting occasionally. It was the greatest time of our lives."

As the war ended, a spree of Western-hostage taking began. The Wilhelms were evacuated two times. During one of the evacuations Wilhelm was sent to Tampa, Florida, the headquarters of Central Command, which was about to incorporate the formerly Soviet Central Asian republics into its domain. Wilhelm was summoned to meet the CENTCOM commander-in-chief, Marine General Anthony Zinni.

"I found Zinni in the weight room," he said, "pumping iron. *A typical Marine general*, I thought. He had only one question for me: the big one. Given that I was a force-protection risk (after all, my family and I had to be evacuated), what was I doing in Tajikistan in the first place that made me so necessary there? I told him that I was mapping out the personalities of the Northern Alliance, next door in Afghanistan, and that I was the only observer on the ground in a major civil war transforming the Russian military. 'Fine,' he told me. 'Go back to Tajikistan then.' That's a good general. If he gets the right answer to the right question, he's finished with you. He trusts you to figure out the rest."

Colonel Ranjinnyam accompanied us in his UAZ for the long drive to the town of Choir, in central Mongolia, southeast of Ulan Bator. Outside Choir was a deserted Soviet air base that Wilhelm wanted to inspect, with an eye toward its future use by the United States.

The air base was home to a two-mile runway that needed only modest repairs and could handle any kind of fixed-wing aircraft in the U.S. arsenal. Beside it was a long line of hardened aircraft shelters: reinforced-concrete bunkers in the shape of semi-pyramids, designed to protect fighter jets from aerial bombardment. A gigantic sign proclaimed, PRAISE TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY CENTRAL COMMITTEE. The base had been built in the 1970s, a consequence of the Sino-Soviet split a few years earlier. It constituted a forward front for the Soviet Union in a possible conflict with China. Choir itself was nothing but a series of skull-like concrete tenements surrounded by steppe. A building complex that once housed 1,850 members of the Soviet military and their families—and had once included a theater and shops—had been stripped of all its windows, window frames, and heating pipes. "It used to be so

lively," Altankhuu said. "It was the place where all Mongols wanted to go in the evening."

One might wonder why the United States would ever need an air base in Mongolia. In the 1990s Wilhelm wondered the same thing about Tajikistan. Then came September 11, 2001, and suddenly back-of-beyond Tajikistan, with its southern border facing Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, became a crucial staging area for American operations. "That's when I learned never to say 'never,'" he told me. With Mongolia's eastern border only 500 miles from North Korea, and with the strategic environment unpredictable and fast-changing, an air base here could be an important asset.

Nobody was thinking of transforming Choir into an American base, the way it had once been a Soviet one. Rather, for a relatively small amount of money the runway and a building or two might be repaired and kept up, so that American planes and Air Force personnel could use them at any time. Given the political instability throughout Central Asia, the Pentagon was intrigued by a Eurasian "footprint" strategy, in which the U.S. would have basing options everywhere without a significant troop and hardware presence anywhere.

Overlooking a field of broken glass, where the last tenement block met the flat and empty Gobi, was a gargantuan concrete statue of a generic Soviet commissar, fashioned in the sneering, aggressive image of Lenin. The statue had begun to flake and crumble, but its size and substance meant that it might well be around forever, like the abandoned statue in Shelley's "Ozymandias." It brought to mind ideas not just of brutality and domination but also of cheapness. "Everything the Soviets built looks like it was constructed by a high school shop class," Wilhelm said, laughing.

"We should be careful of our own ambitions," I said. "We don't want to end up like the Soviets."

"There is nothing we need to build here," he answered, "except relationships."

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