



© Johan van Gurp



World Rights
Publishing House De Geus
Contact: Esther Bruls
P.O. Box 1878
4801 BW Breda
The Netherlands
Phone: (31) 76 522 8151
Fax: (31) 76 522 2599
Email: e.bruls@degeus.nl

DE GEUS www.degeus.nl

Joanie de Rijke

In the Hands of the Taliban

The amazing Story of a kidnapped Journalist

Original title:

In handen van de taliban. Het onthullende verhaal van een gegijzelde journalist

NON – FICTION

What did it take to survive?

A Dutch-Flemish female journalist who was taken hostage in November 2008 by Taliban warriors talks openly about her kidnapping

How did she experience the frightening days in the mountains, far away from Kabul, hardly any contact with the outside world?

With saillant details on the hostage takers, the negotiators, and the role of the Flemish and Dutch ministries.

About the book

‘I took a risk and it went wrong. But I’m still alive.’

When, in August 2008, ten French paracommandos are lured into an ambush by a Taliban group and killed, journalist Joanie de Rijke wants to know the story behind the perpetrators. From her very first visit to Afghanistan, De Rijke was fascinated by the Taliban fighters and the ease with which the Western media painted them as monsters. After trying for weeks to make contact with the group, on the first of November 2008 she finally succeeds. However, the meeting turns into a nightmare. The commandant accuses her and her interpreter of spying for the French. For six days she is dragged through the mountains by the group. She lives in constant fear of her life, afraid of ending up as an internet video film. At the same time, strangely enough, she is getting exactly what she came for: a look into the soul of the Taliban.

A deeply human story about the bond between hostage takers and hostages, unbridgeable cultural gaps and the vulnerability of all involved.

www.joaniederijke.nl



About the author

Joanie de Rijke (Netherlands) is a freelance journalist and works for *P magazine* and *Revu*, among others. In her book *In handen van de taliban*, De Rijke makes remarkable revelations for the first time. About the first contacts with the Taliban group, the accusation, the tense six days, the release, the role of the Belgian and Dutch governments in this, and the question of whether or not ransom money was paid.

[Joanie de Rijke, *In handen van de taliban. Het onthullende verhaal van een gegijzelde journalist*](#)

ISBN 978 90 445 1496 4

Paperback, 256 p., with photos (rights not included)

The press on 'In the Hands of the Taliban':

'Afghanistan showed me the very essence of life. Because during that kidnapping, it was really a matter of life and death. But besides that, life for people there is all about survival. It is existence at its most pure, and that appeals to me.' (from an interview in *Libelle*)

'Reads like a thrilling account of her terror.' – *de Journalist*

'Her account is not devoid of self-criticism, the threat of kidnapping by rival Taliban groups is suspenseful reading.' – *Elsevier*

'De Rijke pens her story unvarnished, and the book reads as an exciting novel full of adventures.' – *De leeswolf*

World Rights

Sold to Mehta Publishing House in India for an English edition for the territories India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Interview

'I taught him to sing a Dutch nursery rhyme'

by Deedee Derksen

Published on 8 November 2008 in *de Volkskrant*

'Give me a call when you're back in Belgium', says Taliban commandant Ghazi (33) that Friday morning to Joanie de Rijke (43), while shaking her hand. He gives her his telephone number. She is asked to repeat a verse from the Koran. Then she is free. Released after six days of captivity.

A couple of hours later, she is able to talk about the scene within the bombproof walls of the Dutch embassy in Kabul. 'He's barking mad.'

Mad or not, in August, Ghazi (probably a pseudonym) had contrived a complicated ambush for a French patrol at Sorobi – fifty kilometres to the east of Kabul. Ten of them were killed. The Dutch freelance journalist, Joanie de Rijke, intended to tell this sensational story from the side of the Taliban. Since French journalists had made a successful visit, De Rijke thought she could manage the same.

Things went wrong after an hour. 'The commandant willingly escorted us around and showed us his bullet wounds', says De Rijke. 'Suddenly everything changed. They said that my interpreter and I were spies. Our contact within this Taliban group had possibly crossed them at some time. They took my bag from me and took the money out of it. My interpreter began to tremble and started reciting verses from the Koran.'

The strongest memories of the next six days rise to the surface bit by bit.

The mullah who asks her to convert to Islam. Because if so, De Rijke will be able to die a Muslim – and allowed a kinder death than she would be as a heathen. ‘I took this as a sign that they intended to kill me.’

The Koran verses that she learned by heart in order to make contact with her kidnapers. ‘I taught them to sing the Dutch nursery rhyme “Berend Botje”.’

She saw the little chain belonging to the French female soldier whom Ghazi and his men had killed during the ambush. ‘It was a little heart.’

And the knife with which commandant Ghazi cut the fruit. ‘He said that he had used it to cut off the heads of four people. I did not doubt it.’

The commandant wanted De Rijke to pay ransom money, otherwise he would kill her. ‘The worst fear is that you might be decapitated. But I put that thought aside. Instead I started to negotiate.’

De Rijke says that in the end no ransom was paid – a controversial point in kidnappings. The position that The Netherlands take, for example, is that it pays no ransom money to hostage takers.

Concerning the Dutch involvement in resolving the situation, she is unable to speak.

De Rijke, unmarried mother of two children (20 and 22 years old), was staying with the Scottish security adviser, Dave Williams, during this visit to Afghanistan. She had made four previous visits to the country and written accounts for the Belgian *P-magazine* from Kabul and Kandahar.

She also accompanied a unit of Nepalese Ghurkhas. In autumn this year she returned to Afghanistan, this time for *Revu*. ‘I wanted to tell the story from the other side, for a change.’

The Taliban fighters took Joanie de Rijke into the mountains, to the north of Sorobi. That is where she spent the large part of her kidnapping. ‘We slept one time along the edge of an abyss. They gave me hot food and blankets. I took that as a positive sign. But then they suddenly repeated that they might kill me.’

Around twelve Taliban fighters were with her all the time. When after two days De Rijke had learned Koran verses, their attitude changed. ‘They were very suspicious at first, but later I saw signs of something that might even have been pity. But there was no doubt that they were prepared to kill me.’

De Rijke experienced some bizarre situations. ‘We were together day and night, and sometimes we joked together. They’d put one of those Mujahedin hats [a *pakol*, a flat woollen cap] on my head and I’d teach them songs. And they asked why westerners had such lovely skin. Because we eat dairy products, I said. So they went down to the village and brought me some cheese.’

Taliban commandant Ghazi, who is characterised by De Rijke as a disturbed personality, came from the area. ‘He and his men knew every inch of the terrain. They were true mountain goats. Some of the villagers were helping them. But when the Taliban fighters transported me through the village, it was all done secretly.’

On the eve of her release, De Rijke was brought to the village of Uzbin at the foot of the mountains. They hid her in a cubby hole in the Taliban commandant’s house. ‘When the commandant took me inside, you could see his mother thinking: what’s this he’s brought home now?’

This weekend, De Rijke is flying back to Belgium, where she has lived for twelve years (she was born in Dordrecht, The Netherlands). She will be reunited with her sons. ‘I can’t wait to see them again. I took a risk and it went wrong. But I’m still alive.’

(Due to safety reasons, some names in this article have been changed)

Fragment from the book

On the same day in August 2008 when ten French paracommandos were lured into an ambush and killed following fierce fighting in Uzbin (on the border between the provinces of Kabul and Laghman), I received a message from one of my Afghan sources, whom I'd met during previous trips. This was someone who had many contacts with the Taliban, and he was asking whether I'd like to talk to the commandant of the rebel group. They were so proud of their fighting exploits that they felt they deserved some publicity. Naturally, the commandant hadn't said this in so many words, but that was the idea. Propaganda for the Taliban – yes, why not? The reason they asked this of a journalist in Belgium and not one nearer to hand was that my contact knew I was coming to Afghanistan for a couple of weeks. And now he had a scoop for me.

The battle in which the ten French troops died was the most costly ground conflict the coalition troops in Afghanistan had fought since the war against the Taliban in 2001. Although, according to Qazi Suliman, police chief of the Sorobi district, the Taliban had also lost thirteen men, this victory was the high point on the list of achievements of Ghazi, who claimed credit for the death of the ten soldiers. There had been many battles and minor uprisings in Uzbin, but this complex ambush was the most successful of the terrorist actions. The prospect of interviewing the men who had defeated the French in this way was tempting. Following my embedded reporting with the Ghurkhas and the British, it seemed a good idea to approach the other side of the Afghan conflict. There are Taliban of all types, although many in the West lump them all together under one name. I wondered whether I should grasp this opportunity to find out more about the Taliban. Who were those men, anyway? What did they really want? If I could get to the bottom of that and not just be given a propaganda speech by the commandant, I would be very interested. But I'd either have to go immediately while events were taking place, or later, and write a more comprehensive report. After a lot of communicating back and forth – I didn't trust them an inch, and it was mutual – I decided to risk it. I was able to stay with a good friend in Kabul, the Scottish adventurer, ex-marine and current security adviser, Dave Williams, whom I'd met two years earlier during a wild New Year party at Kaia, Kabul's military airport.

[...]

There was room to spare, and so I was welcome to stay. In the meantime, a French journalist and photographer had made a lightning visit to Ghazi. It was dangerous and they had taken a big risk, but they came back with material that caused uproar – especially the photographs. The meeting with the commandant had only lasted a few minutes, according to the journalist, and he had said that he would not stop until he'd got rid of all the French in Afghanistan. But the photos had shocked the French population. Two of Ghazi's men had shown off, posing in a French army coat. They denied that these were the clothes of the dead troops, but they were photographed wearing them, and that incensed the French.

The exclusivity of my story was gone, but that wouldn't matter, if I could get more than the French journalists, who had been in Kabul for over a year. Via Sher Mohammed, the commandant had let it be known that I could get the longer story I was after. Of course I wondered why they were allowing another journalist to come after the French reporters had already been. According to Mohammed, they wished to exhibit their deeds more clearly to the

western world. This was not difficult to believe, and so we agreed to meet with Mohammed in the third week of my stay in Kabul. On a Wednesday morning, I strolled together with my interpreter, Z., to a little Afghan eating house where they served delicious fruit shakes, near where Dave lived. Z. was nervous. We had been working on the report for weeks and this would be the first time I would meet Z.'s Taliban contact face to face.

We took our seats in the back, while Z. looked around edgily. He warned me above all not to mention the word Taliban. Then Sher Mohammed got in. He introduced himself as 'Ghurghust', or something similar. I only heard later that he was called Sher Mohammed. He seemed an extremely likeable man, in his thirties and with a nice face. He looked me straight in the eyes with a friendly gaze and smiled.

'At last, you're here! We have waited a long time for you.'

[...]

We saw him again a week later.

'I told the commandant that you impressed me. He was pleased to hear that, but he's still worried that something will go wrong. Information often leaks via tapped telephones. And sometimes soldiers secretly follow journalists on their way to meetings with terrorists. The commandant is very distrustful. He knows he is being sought by various people and organisations, and he has to be very careful.'

Z. assured him that we had said nothing over the telephone and the commandant should not worry. Only Z. and I would come – no one else. Z. would act both as interpreter and photographer. He had done similar work before with a journalist in Kandahar and I had seen the results. They were excellent photographs, perfectly suitable for publication. Therefore an additional photographer was not necessary, and it was all the better for Z., who would earn some extra income this way. In any case, Sher Mohammed let it be known that no one else would be allowed to come. It was pointed out that from the beginning, the agreement was with Z. and me only; therefore we had to keep our word. Mohammed called Ghazi again. He was so absorbed in the negotiations that he completely forgot about his banana shake. We drank ours to the last drop while Mohammed carried out a long conversation with the commandant. It was finally agreed that we would go the following week, leaving in the early morning and returning in the evening or the next day. But I first wanted to know about our security in the area itself.

Dave had advised me not to go, because of the latest attack by ISAF, which the Taliban attributed to the two French reporters. He thought it very possible that they would be out for revenge on us. He told me this when I was already in Kabul and so far advanced with the negotiations that I didn't want to drop the plan. After all, it was my reason for being here, even though there were plenty of other stories to find. I had set my mind on going, so why give up now? We had naturally asked Sher Mohammed if there was any chance of us being used simply as a form of revenge. He said he was certain that that wasn't the case. The commandant had already agreed that I could come before he had made the deal with the French reporters. He wanted attention, a personal contact, nothing more.

[...]

‘As soon as you’re in the commandant’s territory, you’re safe. He will take care of your protection, you should not worry about that’, Mohammed had answered while he had the commandant on the line. I heard Ghazi shout something.

‘As soon as you’re in his territory, you can have as many protectors as you wish. If you want fifty, you will have fifty.’

He smiled: ‘The commandant says that you may act as commandant. You may lead his men, for they must take care of your safety.’

It was typical of Ghazi humour, as I found out later.

[...]

‘Because of the attacks by the French. We will drive through the village, but we will not stop there. We will take you into the mountains first.’

The commandant pointed into the distance, to a small white building with a solitary Afghan flag on the roof.

‘That is the police station. They also obey me. Tell your readers that. Afghanistan is a patchwork quilt. It is made up of little pieces, each with its own culture, own rules and own leaders. That’s how it has always been and will always be. Foreigners don’t understand that. That is why they will never win. No one has ever won a war against Afghanistan. So you would be better to leave.’

We drove over the bad road surface, not far from Ghazi’s village. I heard him sigh.

‘We need money. To build a good road, so that we can send our children to school in Sorobi if they want to continue their education. Write that, too. And we want to build a new school in our valley.’

‘For girls as well?’ I couldn’t help asking.

The answer was as firm as I’d heard it months before in Kandahar: ‘No! Girls must not go to school. Only boys.’

We drove through Ghazi’s village, which appeared to be deserted. Just earthen houses with no windows and with old dark-brown wooden doors. I wanted to know where the women and children were.

‘Indoors’, Ghazi answered. ‘You can visit them, but later.’

Beyond the village, the drive came to an end. We got out; the silence of the valley was all around us. I heard the call of a bird in the distance and looked up at the mountain tops. Dave had just called and asked how it was going.

‘So far, so good. We’ve driven to the end of the world, and now we’re continuing on foot, into the mountains. We’ve no idea what awaits us there.’

Less than half an hour later, we were taken hostage and the world was reduced to the question of life or death.