



# Dateline Afghanistan

**Atia Abawi, Virginia Tech - KΘ, sat crouched in a military helicopter filled with U.S. Marines, which was flying to a destination in Marjah, Afghanistan. But this was no routine military mission. The soldiers had been briefed that they would be landing in the largest minefield in NATO’s history facing Taliban fire.**

**T**here was complete silence except for the whirring sound of the helicopter blades,” Atia recalls. “There was worry on the Marines’ faces. They were thinking about their families – those they had left at home. It reminds you in that moment that these are people’s sons, husbands and fathers. Then I thought, ‘Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this to my parents?’”

Atia is not a soldier. She is an international correspondent with one of the largest broadcast news networks in the world. And she was flying into the face of mortal danger to tell the world the Marines’ story.

“That was the hardest two-and-a-half weeks of my life,” Atia says today of her time embedded with the U.S. Marines as they fought

Taliban insurgents. “The threat of coming face to face with the insurgency – and later, of actually stepping on an IED (improvised explosive device) that luckily didn’t go off.”

Atia Abawi remembers her hunger to tell news stories. As the child of first-generation Afghans, she observed her parents watching the news to stay connected with their country. “I always knew I wanted to be a journalist,” she says. “From grade school on, I would follow news stories as a child. I took journalism classes in high school and communication and international studies in college. That made my dream more real.”

A profound influence on her ambition to find and tell the truth behind the news was the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “On 9/11, every American was affected,” Atia says. “That morning, I was running out of the Delta Zeta house [on the Virginia Tech

campus] with my sorority sister Noelle, heading to a 9:00 a.m. class. One of our sorority sisters called out and told us what had happened. It took away any naiveté I had prior to that. As I watched those images on television, I thought, ‘What could have gone wrong?’ I think when we found out it was a terrorist attack, it stole innocence from a lot of people. That day reinforced my resolution – I had to go out and tell the stories behind the news. It made me realize that there is a world out there that we don’t know. I wanted to see it with my own eyes – to know that what I was seeing was real, and communicate that truth.”

## Big Dreams, Difficult Journey

Atia’s journey from a little girl with big dreams to a staff correspondent who, today, produces and provides on-air reports for NBC News from Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East, has its roots in an all-American story. “My parents are true heroes,” Atia says. “They came to this country after fleeing Afghanistan during the Soviet War. My mother was eight months pregnant with me and my brother was two years old. They came with very little money and worked hard when they came to this country.”

Today Atia’s parents live in Virginia and teach the Afghan language. “Mom teaches State Department employees and my father just came back from teaching U.S. Marines in Camp LeJeune, North Carolina. It is a way to help their adopted country.”

As a collegian, Atia worked for the student-run television station. “My sorority sisters joke that they never thought I would actually be a reporter,” Atia says, laughing. Upon graduation, she began working, but not as a paid journalist. “I did volunteer reporting before turning freelance and wasn’t fulfilled,” she recalls.

Disheartened and almost ready to give up on her dream, Atia finally obtained an entry-level job with CNN. “I worked my way up to becoming a researcher, assignment editor, producer, and then went back to reporting,” she says.

Atia credits her Delta Zeta experience with being a powerful drive to help her become a journalist. “Delta Zeta helped shape who I am today,” she says. “I learned a lot from Delta Zeta as a collegian. The experience definitely teaches you how to get along with different people. You learn how to make lasting friendships and how important friendship is. You need those friends. When I was in Afghanistan, before I met my husband Conor, I would call Susan, my sorority sister and college roommate, when I was feeling sad or depressed. She would always pick up the phone and listen — she was always there. I am very lucky to have friends like that!” She also uses social media to stay in touch. “I love Facebook. It keeps me connected to my sisters.”

Atia’s news stories are balanced with the perspective of the native peoples in the countries she covers. She believes it is fundamentally important for Americans to understand those points of view in order to fully understand the conflicts in the Middle East and around the world. “It’s important because the world is getting smaller,” she says with passion in her voice. “We need to



Atia with Hamid Karzai, current President of Afghanistan.

understand what is happening to other people in other countries, and understand those countries to make the world a better place. It is vital to living in a peaceful world. People can hate each other without ever having met. There are two sides to every war, and each one is right – at least in their own minds. It doesn’t register with a lot of people that there is humanity behind this war. There are families hurting on both sides.”

## Connecting Hearts

Atia has come to know that humanity firsthand. “The troops I’ve met have *chosen* to come over here,” she says. “They believe in the American way of life and in democracy and in defending it. They are so young – men and women, risking their lives. We need to think about them.”

And their families, too, who are left behind. Atia continues, “People who go to war zones can be terribly lonely — they miss their families. Those who are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan have sacrificed so much.”

In Helmand province in Afghanistan, where Atia was embedded with the U.S. Marines, she came to understand an important aspect of her reporting. She provided live video reports and wrote for CNN’s website and her public Facebook page about the Marjah offensive, and posted updates on the troops who bravely stood their ground. “As a reporter, you get to know the troops and you form relationships,” she said. She kept military families at home informed about their loved ones in Afghanistan. “When I finally had a chance to get back to the Internet,” she says, “I broke down in tears reading the comments from the Marines’ families. They were so grateful to get a glimpse of their sons through my reporting. It made me happy, but I was also sad because they have to be separated from their families.”

(cont’d. on page 41)

## Embedded with the Marines: Atia's Posts

From Atia's Facebook page:

**February 26, 2010:**

*"The comments and messages I'm receiving from the families of the Marines are such a joy to read. .... They make me smile and some bring tears to my eyes – you guys even made my mom cry. Prayers to all ... xo"*

**February 24, 2010:**

*"I left them yesterday and it was like saying bye to my little brothers. Very kind and amazingly sweet young men and great and genuine commanders. They miss you a lot ..."*



Atia says the concern for safety has taken on a different dimension since her marriage. "When it's just you, you're fine. You don't worry as much," she says. "But when you start worrying about someone else, it's so much harder. Now Conor is the Mideast correspondent for Fox News. He goes to Libya and other volatile countries, and is in more dangerous situations."

With their fast-paced careers and the chaos they encounter as journalists, how do they find time for each other? "We make our relationship a priority," Atia says. "We talk. We've seen people put their careers before their relationships, and we don't want to do that. We have an apartment in Jerusalem, which is now our home. NBC has been very supportive. They understand when I need to take a break from Afghanistan." As we spoke to Atia, however, she was preparing to travel to Cairo the next day to report on former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's trial.

## Dateline Afghanistan (cont'd. from page 37)

Like the troops, Atia and her team of journalists are often thrust in the midst of danger when reporting overseas. One of her most vivid experiences was while she and her crew were filming an angry mob of Afghan people who were protesting the 2012 Koran burning at Bagram Airfield. "We were filming the crowd from a distance," Atia says. "They looked as if they were far away. We turned around to go back to our vehicle, and looking around again, saw that the mob was very close. Suddenly, there was a man standing in front of me with a wooden baton in the air, ready to strike me for being a Western journalist. I spoke to my producer in the local language and he turned away, assuming I was just a local girl caught in the crowds." Atia says that it was the second most frightening moment in her life, next to landing in the line of insurgent fire with the Marines.

"You know it's not the safest place," she says. "Security measures are taken. You learn how to act and dress in the situations you are placed in. You're running on adrenaline. If you stop to think about the danger you are in, that is when you could get in trouble. Recently, a young woman from the U.S. Embassy with whom I worked closely was killed by a suicide bomber. It is a sad reminder and can be very depressing."

## Love Among the Ruins

In the unlikely arena of war, Atia found love. She met her husband, Conor Powell, in 2009 in Afghanistan when he arrived there as a freelance reporter. They discovered that they had both grown up in the same area of Northern Virginia. They began dating, and covered some of the same news stories together. Time together and away from Afghanistan became precious. They married in 2012.

## "Never Give Up!"

Atia's advice for collegiate Delta Zetas interested in broadcast journalism can also be applied to everyone who aspires to their dreams. "Helen Thomas [the former United Press news service reporter and member of the White House Press Corps] gave me some advice that is so basic, but so true. She said, 'Never give up.' She was right. I pushed and pushed, even when I wanted to stop. I kept trying," says Atia with a smile.

"My mother said, 'Always ask. If you don't ask, you won't get,'" she continues. "I would go into meetings with my bosses and ask, 'Can I go here?' The worst thing they could say is 'no.'"

But Atia's true inspiration came from a high school journalism teacher in the most unlikely way. "He asked all of his students separately about our future and what we wanted to do. When I told him I wanted to be a foreign correspondent, he said, 'You're never going to make it. Don't even try.' People can discourage you, but you can't let that stop you," Atia adds.

So the next time you watch the evening news, or see breaking news from the Middle East, look closely. Atia Abawi could be reporting it to you with her trademark immediacy. "It's funny," she says, "that I keep going back to the country from which my family fled!"



**Atia Abawi is Publishing a Novel in 2014**

**Watch for Atia's first novel from Penguin books in the summer of 2014. A novel for young adults, it is a teenage love story set in Afghanistan, entitled "The Secret Sky."**