

HELD BY THE TALIBAN

A Rope and a Prayer

From Page A1

for permission. If the guards remained asleep, Tahir would follow. Twenty feet away, on a shelf outside the kitchen, was a car towrope we planned to use to lower ourselves down a 15-foot wall ringing the compound. I had found it two weeks earlier and hidden it beneath a pile of old clothes.

Several minutes went by, but Tahir did not come out of the room. I stared intently at the entrance to the living room where we slept side by side with the guards — roughly 15 feet away and directly across the courtyard from the bathroom — and waited for Tahir to emerge. I had pulled his foot to rouse him before I crept out of the room. He had groaned and, I assumed, awakened.

As the minutes passed, I wasn't sure what to do. I stood in the darkened bathroom and wondered if Tahir had changed his mind. If the guards caught us, they might kill me, but they would definitely kill Tahir. Part of me thought it was wrong even to have agreed to do this. After seven months in captivity, I wondered if we were capable of making rational decisions.

Even if we made it over the wall, we would have to walk through Miram Shah to get to a nearby Pakistani base. The town teemed with Afghan, Pakistani and foreign militants. Whoever caught us might be far less merciful than our current guards. Once on the base, we might encounter Pakistani military intelligence officials or tribal militia members who were sympathetic to the Taliban and would hand us back to the Haqqanis.

Yet I desperately longed to see my wife and family again. And I hated our captors so vehemently that I wanted them to get nothing in exchange for me. I pushed ahead.

Following a backup plan that Tahir and I had discussed that afternoon, I stepped out of the bathroom and picked up a five-foot-long bamboo pole leaning against the adjacent wall. I walked to the living room window and peered inside to make sure the guards were still asleep.

Beside me, the swamp cooler covered up the noise I made. Inside the room, a ceiling fan hummed. I opened the window, pointed the pole at Tahir's side and poked him. I quickly walked back to the bathroom, leaned the pole against the wall and stepped inside.

Still, Tahir did not appear. I was convinced that he had changed his mind. It wasn't fair of me, I thought, to have expected a man with seven children to risk his life.

Then, like an apparition, Tahir's leg emerged from the window. His upper body and head followed and, finally, his second leg. As he stood up, I rushed out of the bathroom to meet him and kicked a small plastic jug used for ablutions. It skidded across the ground, and I motioned to Tahir to freeze, fearing that the noise would wake the guards.

Tahir and I stared at each other in the darkness. No guards appeared from the living room. Taking a few steps forward, I whispered in Tahir's ear. "We don't have to go," I said. "We can wait." "Go get the rope," he said.

INSIDE the living room, Asad Mangal, the young driver who had been taken hostage with Tahir and me, was sound asleep with the guards.

Several weeks earlier, we decided we could no longer trust Asad, who had begun cooperating with the guards and carrying an assault rifle they had given him. That afternoon, Tahir and I made a gut-wrenching decision to leave without him, fearing that he would tell the guards of our escape plans — as he had before.

Our rupture with Asad had become the darkest aspect of an already bleak captivity. Over the many months, the solidarity the three of us shared immediately after the kidnapping on Nov. 10 frayed under the threat of execution and indefinite imprisonment.

In December, Tahir and Asad expressed fury at me for exaggerating what our captors could receive for us in ransom. After being told that crews were on their way to film our beheadings, I had blurted out that our captors could receive prisoners and millions of dollars if we were kept alive.

I repeatedly apologized to Tahir and Asad, saying I had been trying to save us. But they called me a fool.

Over the course of the spring, Tahir said Asad told the guards that Tahir once had encouraged him to escape on his own. He said Asad told the guards that I was an American spy.

Finally, Tahir said he had whispered to Asad "we should escape" one night two weeks earlier. Asad did not respond. Days later, a guard announced that he had heard that Tahir was trying to escape.

Yet I also knew that Asad was under enormous pressure. As the driver, he would probably be the first one killed by the Taliban. He could be cooperating with the guards in order to survive.

Still, I did not trust him. If Tahir and I spoke with Asad about escaping for a second time, he could once more inform the guards. At the very least, we would squander an opportunity we might never have again. At worst, Tahir and I would be killed.

Held by the Taliban

This is the last in a series of five articles that offer a first-person account by David Rohde of his seven months as a captive of the Taliban in Pakistan. Mr. Rohde, a New York Times reporter, was kidnapped with an Afghan journalist, Tahir Luddin, and their driver, Asad Mangal, on Nov. 10, 2008, as they traveled to an interview with a Taliban commander outside Kabul, Afghanistan.

The articles are based on Mr. Rohde's recollections and, where possible, records kept by his family and colleagues. For safety reasons, certain names and details have been withheld.

ONLINE: Video reports, maps and diagrams provide background on Mr. Rohde's captivity. Readers may submit questions for Mr. Rohde at:

nytimes.com/world



ABDULLAH NOOR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A HAVEN AT THE END OF THE ROAD

Members of the Pakistani Frontier Corps, left, on duty outside their base last month in Miram Shah, Pakistan. After escaping from their Taliban captors on June 20, David Rohde and Tahir Luddin made their way to the safety of the base.

WE had arrived at the Miram Shah compound the first week of June. It was our ninth location in the tribal areas; we had been shuttled by our captors among homes in North and South Waziristan.

As I had done when we arrived in each new place, I swept floors and picked up trash to create a sense of order. It was then that I found the car towrope beside some wrenches and motor oil. The discovery, I thought, was the first stroke of good luck in our seven months in captivity. Thinking we might be able to use the rope during an escape, I hid it under an old shirt and pants.

In the days that followed, I tried to think of ways we could flee. When the guards let us sit on the roof with them at dusk, I noticed that it was surrounded by a five-foot-high wall. If we could hoist ourselves over it, I thought, we could use the rope to lower ourselves to the street.

At the same time, Tahir surveyed the area around the house when the guards took him with them to buy food and watch cricket games once or twice a week. He determined that the compound was closer to Miram Shah's main Pakistani militia base than any other house we had been held in.

Tahir and I kept our conversations brief about how we could escape, worrying that the guards or Asad would overhear us.

On the afternoon of June 19, electricity returned to Miram Shah for the first time since fighting nearby cut power lines a week earlier. It was a fortuitous development. Electricity meant the swamp cooler and ceiling fan would help conceal any noise we made when we fled.

Already angry at new lies the guards had told us that morning about the negotiations, we agreed to try to escape that night. Tahir would keep the guards up late playing checkah, a Pakistani version of Parcheesi. If they were tired, they would sleep more soundly. Our plans for how to get over the wall were in place. Unfortunately, we disagreed about what to do after that.

Tahir said the Pakistani militiamen who guarded the military base would shoot us if we approached them at night. He said we should hike 15 miles to the Afghan border. I responded that we would never make it that far without being caught. Going to the Pakistani base was a risk we had to take. If we could surrender to an army officer, I said, he would protect us.

As we continued to argue, the guards returned to the room, and Tahir and I had to stop speaking. For the rest of the evening, we were never alone again. Our plan had no ending.

TAHIR kept the guards up late as we had discussed. By roughly 11 p.m., everyone was in bed. I lay awake, trying to listen to the guards' breathing to figure out whether they had fallen asleep.

I blinked over and over in the darkness but saw no difference when my eyes were open or closed. It was as if I were blind. I turned around at times to look at the orange light on the swamp cooler to make sure I could still see.

Anxious, I tried to calm myself by praying. In February, a Talibani commander who had been pressing me to convert to Islam told me that if I said "forgive me, God" 1,000 times each day our captivity might end. I had done as he had suggested, with no results. But I did not care.

The prayers soothed me and passed the time. Each day, I would stare at the ceiling and say "forgive me, God" 1,000 times while the guards took naps. Counting on my fingers, it took me roughly 60 minutes to reach 1,000.

That night, waiting to make sure the guards were sound asleep, I asked God to forgive me 2,000 times.

In truth, I expected the escape attempt to fail quickly. I thought a guard would wake up as soon as I tried to leave the room. I would say I was going to the bathroom, walk to the toilet, return a few minutes later and go back to sleep. I would feel better the next morning for at least having tried.

Instead, to my amazement, our plan was actually working. After Tahir and I made it to the courtyard, I retrieved the rope and we crept up a flight of stairs leading to the roof.

For the first time that night, it occurred to me that we might actually succeed. Escape — an ending I never dreamed of — might be our salvation.

Tahir tied the rope to the wall surrounding the roof. Placing his toe between two bricks, he climbed to the top and peered at the street below.

"The rope is too short," he whispered after stepping down.

I shifted the knot on the rope to give it more length, pulled myself up on the wall and looked down at the 15-foot drop. The rope did not reach the ground, but it appeared close.

I glanced back at the stairs, fearing that the guards would emerge at any moment.

"We don't have to go," I repeated to Tahir. "It's up to you."

I got down on my hands and knees, Tahir stepped on my back and lifted himself over the wall. I heard his clothes scrape against the bricks, looked up and realized he was gone.

I grabbed his sandals, which he had left behind, and stuffed them down my pants. I climbed over, momentarily snagged a power line with my foot, slid down the wall and landed in a small sewage ditch. I looked up and saw Tahir striding down the street in his bare feet. I ran after him.

FOR the first time in seven months, I walked freely down a street. Glancing over my shoulder, I didn't see any guards emerge from our house, which looked smaller than I had expected.

We headed down a narrow dirt lane with primitive mud-brick walls on either side of us. Make-shift electrical wires snaked overhead in what looked like a densely populated neighborhood.

We walked into a dry riverbed and turned right. I kept slipping on the large sand-covered stones and felt punch-drunk. I caught up to Tahir and handed him his sandals.

"My ankle is very painful," Tahir said, as he slipped them on and continued walking. "I can't walk far."

A large dark stain covered his lower left pant leg. I worried that he had ripped open his calf on his way down the wall. At the same time, my left hand stung. I noticed that the rope had made a large cut across two of my fingers.

"Where are we going?" I asked Tahir as we quickly made our way down the riverbed, afraid someone would see or hear us.

"There is a militia base over there," Tahir said, gesturing to his left. "I don't trust them."

Neither did I. Earlier, Tahir had told me there was a checkpoint maintained by a Pakistani government militia near the house. Turning ourselves in there would be a gamble, I thought. I still believed that our best chance was to surrender to a military officer on the Pakistani base in Miram Shah.

"We have to go to the main base," I said. "Impossible," Tahir said, continuing down the riverbed. "The guards said that Arabs and Chechens watch the main gate 24 hours a day."

The Taliban would recapture us, Tahir believed, before we got to the base. I started to panic. We had made it over the wall but did not know where we were going.

Despite his ankle, Tahir seemed determined to hike 15 miles to the Afghan border. As we walked, we argued over which way to go.

"We have to go to the Pakistani base," I told Tahir.

Striding ahead, he didn't respond. Dogs began barking from one of the walled compounds to our right.

"We can't make it to the border," I said. "We have to go to the base."

Tahir continued walking, but after a few minutes he complained about his ankle.

"There is too much pain," he said. We stopped and I pulled up his pant leg. His calf had not been cut. The dark stain on his pants was from the sewage ditch we had both landed in outside our compound.

"There is another gate," Tahir said, changing his mind. "Come."

I waited for Taliban fighters to emerge from the darkness, but none did. Tahir told me to put a scarf I was carrying over my head.

"If anyone stops us, your name is Akbar and my name is Timor Shah," he said. "Act like a Muslim."

MY sense of time was distorted, but it seemed as though we had been walking in the darkness for 5 to 10 minutes. I did not feel free. If anything, I was more frightened. I worried that an even more brutal militant group would capture us.

We left the riverbed and walked down an alleyway between compounds for about 50 yards. We arrived at a two-lane paved street.

"This is the main road in Miram Shah," Tahir whispered.

To our left was a vacant stretch. To our right stood a gas station with four pumps and several shops. Dim light bulbs hung outside and illuminated the area. I silently questioned why Tahir was leading us down the center of the road where we could be easily spotted.

Suddenly, shouts erupted to our left and I heard a Kalashnikov being loaded. Tahir raised his hands and said something in Pashto. A man shouted commands in Pashto. I raised my hands as my heart sank. The Taliban had recaptured us.

In the faint light, I saw a figure with a Kalashnikov standing on the roof of a dilapidated one-story building. Beside the building was a mosque with freshly painted white walls. The building and mosque had concertina wire and earthen berms in front of them.

"If you move," Tahir said, "they will shoot us." Then, Tahir said words I could scarcely believe.

"This is the base."

We had made it to the Pakistanis. I held my hands high in the air and dared not move an inch. A nervous Pakistani guard could shoot us dead as we stood in the street. With my long beard, scarf and clothes I looked like a foreign suicide bomber, not a foreign journalist.

Another voice came from inside the building. It sounded as if the guard was waking up his comrades. One or two more figures appeared on the roof and aimed more gun barrels at us.

The Pakistani guard on the roof intermittently spoke in Pashto with Tahir. I heard Tahir say the words for "journalist," "Afghan" and "American."

My arms began to burn, and I struggled to slow my breathing. I desperately tried not to move my hands.

"Tell them we will take off our shirts," I told Tahir, thinking the Pakistani guards might fear that we were suicide bombers who wore vests packed with explosives.

Tahir said something in Pashto, and the man responded.

"Lift up your shirt," Tahir said. I immediately obliged.

The guard spoke again.

"He is asking if you are American," Tahir said. "I am an American journalist," I said in English, surprised at the sound of my own voice in the open air. "Please help us. Please help us."

I kept talking, hoping they would recognize that I was a native English speaker. "We were kidnapped by the Taliban seven months ago," I said. "We were kidnapped outside Kabul and brought here."

"Do you speak English?" I said, hoping one of the Pakistani guards on the roof understood. "Do you speak English?"

The guard said something to Tahir. "They are radioing their commander," Tahir said. "They are asking for permission to bring us inside."

Tahir pleaded with the guards to protect us