

5-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Hall, Stephanie (2006) "Little Afghan Girl," *Forces*: Vol. 2006 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/forces/vol2006/iss1/4>

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Little Afghan Girl

Stephanie Hall

Private Ryan Miller, or simply Miller to the military world, sat down on a stiff metallic folding chair, which felt surprisingly comfortable. The young soldier had been on his feet for an eternity. At 19 years old, Miller was

the youngest soldier working at a U.S. Army blood clinic in Afghanistan,

but he felt like an 80-year-old man. He dropped his head to look at his watch.

Time to head to the mess hall. At that thought, his stomach let out a loud grumbling noise reminding him he hadn't eaten since that morning. Miller threw on the top half of his tan army fatigues and began buttoning it up. His fingers ached from the rigorous chores of that day. As he was ready to leave, he heard a shuffle of feet and voices out past the door. Then it was silent, almost peaceful, but Miller felt a storm building up. The curiosity to find out what was going on was not strong enough to overpower his desire to eat. With a twinge of guilt, he began planning his escape to the mess hall. Miller was average looking. He was average height with fair skin and blue eyes, and he believed this was why no one ever really noticed him and why it was usually easy for him to escape.

"Private Miller," said Sergeant Richard Garcia. "Get me those reports that have the blood types from everyone who works here." Then the white double-hinged doors swooshed closed behind the big Dominican man.

Man, I didn't even hear him coming, thought Miller as he went to locate the reports. He wondered why the sergeant needed them; military personnel weren't allowed to give blood in the field. He heard the sirens of an ambulance approaching the hospital. Not another one, he thought with disgust. Miller had concluded soon after arriving at Bagram Air Base that the mission there was a lost

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cause. He'd lost count of all the local Afghan people going through his hospital. There seemed no end to the ailments and injuries the country dealt to its people. What made it worse was that they all seemed so damn ungrateful for the U.S. military's help. Miller often passed by groups of them while they sat in a line around the outside of the tent walls of the field hospital waiting to be seen by an army doctor for minor pains, and he often felt their vacant gazes follow him. They always seemed to be plotting something. *We shouldn't be here. No one wants us here. Not us, and not them.* These thoughts always stayed just beyond his conscious mind waiting for him to dwell on them. He often had to push them back to remind himself he was a part of a "noble cause," as his commanding officer often declared. *Noble cause, my ass.* Miller would think to himself whenever he heard his commander utter those words.

Miller was a medic, and he was assigned to the blood clinic, which meant he stayed in a clean, white lab for most of the day. Unlike many of his colleagues, he didn't go out to the smaller outposts, but that didn't mean he was shielded from the ugliness of war. His hospital had more than its share of wartime casualties, and the worst of them all were the landmine victims. The country had been plagued with the unseen killers for decades, and while military engineers destroyed dozens of landmines a day, more just seemed to grow right back in their places.

"Miller, do you have those reports for me?" asked Garcia urgently, interrupting Miller from his thoughts. Miller handed the tall, stocky sergeant the manila folder with the blood type of the hospital staff.

"Can I go to the chow hall now, sarge?" Miller asked hopefully.

The sergeant just looked at him, shook his head, dug in his pocket and produced a protein bar. He tossed the bar to Miller. "This should tide you over for another hour or so," said Garcia. "You're O-positive right?" Miller nodded and

started to ask why, but Garcia was already leaving. Over his shoulder he called to Miller, "I might need you in a minute. Eat up and help yourself to another one in my desk." The sergeant left Miller still wondering what was going on.

Noises in the distance perked Miller's curiosity, so he stepped past the double doors and walked down the well-lit hallway towards the receiving bay where patients go before they are taken to one of the three operating rooms. All hospital personnel were allowed in the receiving bay because that was where a lot of medical supplies were kept. The thick smell of blood became stronger as he approached that bay. The scene Miller walked in upon knocked him back a step. A girl, no more than 10 years old, lay on a gurney. Her skin was white, and her lips were blue. *She's in shock.* The phrase popped into Miller's mind immediately. The color of her lips was a definite sign of shock. The medic in Miller took over control so as to spare him from nausea as he quickly scanned her injuries. *Another landmine victim,* thought Miller. This one was different somehow. Her frail little body should not have been able to sustain the incredible damage inflicted on her from the landmine. Her body was limp, but God help him if her little hands weren't fisted in determination.

"She's a fighter," whispered Garcia from behind Miller.

Dammit! How does he walk around without making a sound? Miller thought for the hundredth time. Garcia continued. "She needs blood, but we don't have enough of her blood type," he explained. The day before five Afghan men bent on killing one another with AK-47s all needed blood transfusions. They used up the last of the clinic's monthly supply of blood, and it was too risky to wait for a re-supply.

"Typical," said Miller. "This innocent girl is going to die because of those dumbasses." Garcia couldn't do anything else but smile.

"We have to amputate it," said the doctor with his back to Miller. This brought Miller's attention back to the girl. The doctor began loosening what looked

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like a wire from around the girl's upper right thigh. "They wrapped it too high," he continued. "This leg could have been saved, but it's too late for that now."

"Her right leg was swollen and had a sick purple-black hue to it. The color reminded him of how, when he as a kid, he would wrap a string around his fingers to watch it turn purple and feel it turn cold. She must be cold. Thoughts of his own little sister snuck into his thoughts uninvited. Stop it, he ordered himself before the image of his sister lying on that table could form. He continued examining the girl from a distance. Her left leg was completely gone. In its place was charred black skin that looked like a piece of rag torn down the middle. The remaining shards had blood slowly oozing out onto the white gurney.

A nurse, winded from rushing to the bay, called out to the doctors. "The second OR is ready." The doctors wheeled the girl out of the receiving bay past another set of double doors into the operating room where Miller could not follow. He felt completely pissed off for a second because he wouldn't find out until later if the girl made it. *She's not going to make it.* Miller told himself.

"We need one more volunteer," said Garcia after the doctors were out of sight.

"Volunteer?" asked Miller. *He wants me to donate my blood.* His initial reaction was to say "no." After all, that little girl had no chance. *Even if she does live, she's fated to become a burden on her family.* Then he thought of her little fists. *She wants to live.* "Sure thing Sarge," said Miller weakly. "Sign me up."

An hour later, Garcia was wrapping gauze around Miller's arm to keep the needle puncture from bleeding. "Are you all right, soldier?" asked Garcia.

"Yeah, sarge," replied Miller. It was a lie. Miller felt lightheaded as he stood up. His vision blurred, and he lost his balance.

"Damn it, soldier," Garcia said as he pulled the uneaten protein bar from Miller's pocket. He shook his head and said, "Let's get going. Dinner's on me. Just don't faint, okay?" Miller simply nodded.

"Why did we just do that, Sarge?" Miller asked once they were finished eating their food at the mess hall. Garcia looked up at Miller, so he continued. "We all know that if that girl lives, she is going right back out there where she could end up in a similar or worse situation. There is no point to this all. Why are we here when we aren't making any headway with the people here?" Miller's voice became more anguished as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" asked Garcia.

"Take those five men who we treated the other day," said Miller. "They're not going to change their ways. Once they're well enough to pull a trigger, they're just going to go right back to killing each other." Miller's voice quivered with anger. "They don't want us here. I hate it here!" Miller's fists struck the table and sent his fork flying to the floor.

"You got it all wrong Miller," said Garcia with more than a little impatience. "We aren't here for those SOBs. They don't appreciate life because they don't even value their own. It's true," he continued. "We're making huge sacrifices being here, but I'll tell you what. If we can change the minds of the younger generation here, the generation that hasn't been corrupted by all of that Islamic fanatic bullshit, then these people, people just like that little girl, will have a future worth appreciating and preserving."

Miller let Garcia's words sink in, and his initial anger abated somewhat. After they left the mess hall, Garcia and Miller headed back to the hospital. They walked together in silence, but Garcia's words were whizzing through Miller's head. His words began grinding through Miller's guts. *What a jerk for making me feel this way.* Miller thought with an inward cringe.

When they arrived back at the hospital, they found the hospital abuzz about the little Afghan girl. "It's a miracle," Miller heard over and over. *She made it?*

"She's in intensive care, but she's still alive," Miller overheard a doctor

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telling Garcia. "She's on some powerful painkillers, so she hasn't woken up yet. She's alive, but there's a pretty good chance she's going to have severe brain damage. She lost a lot of blood."

It couldn't just be all good news. Miller thought with disappointment.

The interpreter
and the young girl
looked up at Miller
at the same time.
Her eyes pierced
right through
his shield of anger
and frustration.
He wondered what
she had said.

During the following days, Miller made it a habit of leaving a cup of ice cream he had stolen from the mess hall at the little girl's bedside while she slept. One afternoon, a couple of weeks later, the girl was awake when Miller visited. She seemed to recognize him. Even while liquid painkillers dripped through her I.V. needle into her blood stream, her eyes seemed alive and vibrant. Miller asked her nervously how she was doing as if she understood. Her interpreter began relaying what Miller said, but Miller's words were broken and jumbled. The young girl sensed his uneasiness, so she uttered a simple word. Miller knew from the handful of Dari he had to learn while in that country that she said, "Stop." She looked up at her interpreter, and she said a few words. The interpreter and the young girl looked up at Miller at the same time. Her eyes pierced right through his shield of anger and frustration. He wondered what she had said. The Afghans sitting around the tent walls often uttered similar phrases. *Did she say that we should leave? Did she say that we are not welcomed?*

"She said, "Thank you." The interpreter continued in a shushed voice. "She said, thank you for her life," conveyed the interpreter. "And she said to thank you for the ice cream as well."