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Unlikely Tutor Giving Military Afghan Advice

By **ELISABETH BUMILLER**

WASHINGTON — In the frantic last hours of Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#)'s command in Afghanistan, when the world wondered what was racing through the general's mind, he reached out to an unlikely corner of his life: the author of the book "Three Cups of Tea," [Greg Mortenson](#).

"Will move through this and if I'm not involved in the years ahead, will take tremendous comfort in knowing people like you are helping Afghans build a future," General McChrystal wrote to Mr. Mortenson in an e-mail message, as he traveled from Kabul to Washington. The note landed in Mr. Mortenson's inbox shortly after 1 a.m. Eastern time on June 23. Nine hours later, the general walked into the Oval Office to be fired by [President Obama](#).

The e-mail message was in response to a note of support from Mr. Mortenson. It reflected his broad and deepening relationship with the United States military, whose leaders have increasingly turned to Mr. Mortenson, once a shaggy mountaineer, to help translate the theory of counterinsurgency into tribal realities on the ground.

In the past year, Mr. Mortenson and his [Central Asia Institute](#), responsible for the construction of more than 130 schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan, mostly for girls, have set up some three dozen meetings between General McChrystal or his senior staff members and village elders across Afghanistan.

The collaboration, which grew in part out of the popularity of "Three Cups of Tea" among military wives who told their husbands to read it, extends to the office of Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), the chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#). Last summer, Admiral Mullen [attended the opening](#) of one of Mr. Mortenson's schools in Pushghar, a remote village in Afghanistan's Hindu Kush mountains.

Mr. Mortenson — who for a time lived out of his car in Berkeley, Calif. — has also spoken at dozens of military bases, seen his book go on required reading lists for senior American military commanders and had lunch with Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), General McChrystal's replacement. On Friday he was in Tampa to meet with Adm. Eric T. Olson, the officer in charge of the [United States Special Operations Command](#).

Mr. Mortenson, 52, thinks there is no military solution in Afghanistan — he says the education of girls is the real long-term fix — so he has been startled by the Defense Department's embrace.

"I never, ever expected it," Mr. Mortenson, a former Army medic, said in a telephone interview last week from Florida, where he had paused between military briefings, book talks for a sequel, "Stones into Schools," and fund-raising appearances for his institute.

Mr. Mortenson, who said he had accepted no money from the military and had no contractual relationship with the Defense Department, was initially critical of the armed forces in the days after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks as "laptop warriors" who appeared, he said, indifferent to the civilian casualties inflicted by the American bombardment of Afghanistan.

In its early days "Three Cups of Tea," the story of Mr. Mortenson's efforts to build schools in Pakistan, was largely ignored by the military, and for that matter by most everyone else. Written with a journalist, [David Oliver Relin](#), and published in hardcover by Viking in March 2006, the book had only modest sales. Most major newspapers, including this

one, did not review it.

But the book's message of the importance of girls' education caught on when women's book clubs, church groups and high schools began snapping up the less expensive paperback published in January 2007.

Sales to date are at four million copies in 41 countries, and the book's yarn is well known: disoriented after a 1993 failed attempt on Pakistan's K2, the second-highest mountain in the world, Mr. Mortenson took a wrong turn into the village of Korphe, was nursed back to health by the villagers and, in gratitude, vowed to build them a school.

He returned to Pakistan a year later with a \$12,000 donation from a Silicon Valley benefactor and spent most of it on school construction materials in the city of Rawalpindi — only to be told he could not get his cargo to Korphe without first building a bridge.

The story of that bridge, Mr. Mortenson's relationships with Pakistanis, and the schools that followed appealed so much to one military spouse that in the fall of 2007 she sent the book to her husband, Christopher D. Kolenda, at that time a lieutenant colonel commanding 700 American soldiers on the Pakistan border.

Colonel Kolenda knew well the instructions about building relationships with elders that were in the Army and Marine Corps' new counterinsurgency manual, which had been released in late 2006. But "Three Cups of Tea" brought the lessons to life.

"It was practical, and it told real stories of real people," said Colonel Kolenda, now a top adviser at the Kabul headquarters for the International Security Assistance Force, in an interview at the Pentagon last week.

Colonel Kolenda was among the first in the military to reach out to Mr. Mortenson, and by June 2008 the Central Asia Institute had built a school near Colonel Kolenda's base. By the summer of 2009, Mr. Mortenson was in meetings in Kabul with Colonel Kolenda, village elders and at times President Obama's new commander, General McChrystal. (By then at least two more military wives — Deborah Mullen and Holly Petraeus — had told their husbands to read "Three Cups of Tea.")

As Colonel Kolenda tells it, Mr. Mortenson and his Afghan partner on the ground, Wakil Karimi, were the American high command's primary conduits for reaching out to elders outside the "Kabul bubble."

As Mr. Mortenson tells it, the Afghan elders were often blunt with General McChrystal, as in a meeting last October when one of them said that he had traveled all the way from his province because he needed weapons, not conversation.

"He said, 'Are you going to give them to me or am I going to sit here and listen to you talk?'" Mr. Mortenson recalled. The high command replied, Mr. Mortenson said, that they were making an assessment of what he needed. "And he said, 'Well, you've already been here eight years,'" Mr. Mortenson recalled.

Despite the rough edges, Colonel Kolenda said the meetings helped the American high command settle on central parts of its strategy — the imperative to avoid civilian casualties, in particular, which the elders consistently and angrily denounced during the sessions — and also smoothed relations between the elders and commanders.

For Mr. Mortenson's part, his growing relationship with the military convinced him that it had learned the importance of understanding Afghan culture and of developing ties with elders across the country, and was willing to admit past mistakes.

At the end of this month, Mr. Mortenson, who lives in Bozeman, Mont., with his wife, Tara Bishop, and two children, is going back for the rest of the summer to Afghanistan, where to maintain credibility he now has to make it clear to Afghans and a number of aid organizations that he has no formal connection to the American military.

Mr. Mortenson acknowledges that his solution in Afghanistan, girls' education, will take a generation and more. "But Al Qaeda and the Taliban are looking at it long range over generations," he said. "And we're looking at it in terms of annual fiscal cycles and presidential elections."