



What would British and US defence officials want with a retired insurance manager from West Sussex? Frank Leeson is the last surviving British officer to have served in North Waziristan, the border region of Pakistan which has become a frontline in Washington's "war on terror". Zubeida Malik reports on his remarkable story.

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BBC NEWS

Waziristan's last soldier

By Zubeida Malik
Today programme

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The smart, West Sussex home with a manicured lawn - and a rose archway over the garden gate - is a long way from the Afghan-Pakistan border.

But in it is a man who spent two years commanding 1,000 Khassadars - Waziri soldiers - between 1946 and 1948.

Today, Waziristan has become the new frontline in the so-called war on terror and is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world.

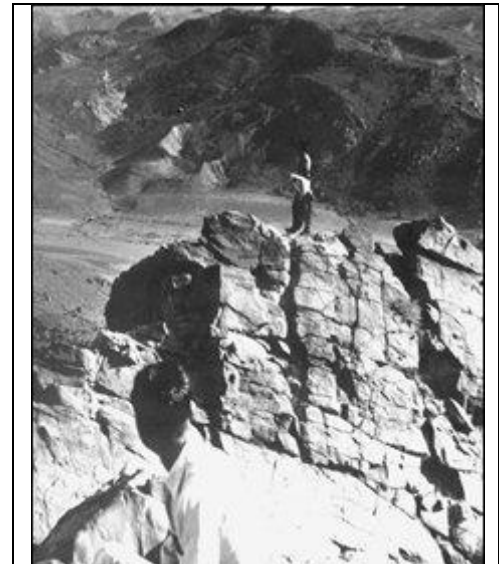
Cross-border US strikes in Waziristan, most by missile-firing pilotless drone aircraft, in the tribal areas - the area between Pakistan and Afghanistan - are causing unrest in Pakistan.

And deteriorating Afghan security has led to more aggressive US action against militant hideouts in Pakistan with about 15 missile strikes and one ground assault since the beginning of last month.

Frank Leeson, 82, living in quiet retirement, has been watching events unfold with great interest. He is the last surviving British officer to have served in North Waziristan.

During his time there Mr Leeson kept diaries and took hundreds of photos, which he has donated to the National Army Museum.

Now his knowledge of the area is being sought out by British and US defence officials.



The frontier hills "are difficult of access and easy to defend".

Mr Leeson was called up in 1944 and sent to India, becoming a lieutenant in the Sikh regiment. In 1946 - at the age of 19 - he volunteered for a special mission in Waziristan. He was put in charge of a 1,000 Khassadars, or Waziri soldiers. He got to know them and the region well, learning Pashtu, the local customs and clan systems.

He wrote in his book and diary that it was "not easy to like the Wazir".

"He takes a lot of knowing. If he is young he wears a flower behind his ear- though his country is a desert, and coryllium in his eyes - yet he is by no means effeminate.

"He loves fighting but hates to be a soldier; loves music but has a profound contempt for the professional musician."

"The Fakir of Ipi, a religious militant who had called for jihad, killed thousands of villagers and 1,000 troops, but was never caught."

While based in Waziristan, Mr Leeson had to deal with an insurgency led by the Fakir of Ipi, a religious militant who had called for jihad.

More than 40,000 troops and £1.5m were spent in one year alone trying to track him down. He killed thousands of villagers and 1,000 troops, but was never caught.

Mr Leeson says the parallels with Osama Bin Laden are there, although the Fakir of Ipi's jihad was not an international one and he never killed anyone outside Pakistan or Afghanistan.

He says the Fakir had a strong spy network, was surrounded by loyal bodyguards and was always on the move, using the rough terrain to his advantage, with its caves, gorges and mountains as hiding places and escape routes.

Mr Leeson says that the terrain was on the Fakir's side. "These frontier hills are difficult of access and easy to defend," he wrote.

"When one speaks of them as hills, rolling downs on which tanks and cavalry can operate are not meant, but the worst mountain-warfare country imaginable - steep precipices, narrow winding valleys every vantage point commanded by another, and innumerable refuges and routes of escape."

In 1938, the British offered the Fakir of Ipi a free pardon, but it was rejected.

The men who live in the tribal areas are famous for being good fighters, says Mr Leeson.

While he was based there, the fighting was usually between the various tribes and what he calls 'blood feuds' where even the smallest slight had to be avenged and where grudges would be held for years.

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In pictures: Waziristan



Frank Leeson is the last surviving British officer to have served in North Waziristan. He spent two years commanding 1,000 Khassadars - Waziri soldiers - between 1946 and 1948.

In pictures: Waziristan



Waziristan is located on the border of Afghanistan, and is a mountainous region covering over 10,000 sq km. It is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world.



Mr Leeson had to deal with an insurgency led by the Fakir of Ipi, a religious militant who had called for jihad. In one year alone, more than 40,000 troops were used trying to track him down.

In pictures: Waziristan



Thal Fort at the entrance to the Kurram Valley was besieged by the Afghan Army during the third Afghan War. Mr Leeson says that it was the worst mountain-warfare terrain imaginable.



The Datta Khel Fort was the post nearest to the Faqir of Ipi's headquarters at Gorwekht. It sustained many sieges in the course of its history.

In pictures: Waziristan



There are lots of different tribes in Waziristan. The Ghilzais, meaning either "Son of Mountain" or "swordsman", often returned to Afghanistan with money and fine clothes.



Tribes are governed by male village elders who meet in a tribal jirga. This Madda Khel jirga took place in March 1947.