

War and peace

Kiwi Marianne Elliott has documented her human rights work in strife-torn Afghanistan. She talks to **Sarah Lang**.

IN MAY 2006, Marianne Elliott was in fear for her life. She was working as an adviser to a human rights network in Kabul, Afghanistan, when a US military truck crashed into 12 cars, killing five civilians and injuring many more. When an angry crowd surrounded the truck, soldiers reportedly fired warning shots that killed several people, including a seven-year-old boy. Anti-foreigner riots erupted. Afghan civilians began attacking places where Westerners lived or worked.

Marianne and her then-boyfriend Joel, a human rights researcher, holed up in a friend's house for two days, listening to gunfire and watching buildings burn. Eventually, a mob started pounding at their gate. Afghan neighbours intervened, saying there were no foreigners there, and the mob moved on. "It was absolutely terrifying," Marianne recalls. Five years later, after Marianne had left Afghanistan, seven UN staff including a woman were murdered by rioters. "I was very, very affected by that. I could easily imagine myself in that woman's place."

Marianne's sharing her story over a soy latte in Wellington. At 40, she's girlishly pretty, radiating serenity and confidence as her memoir of two years in Afghanistan, *Zen Under Fire*, hits bookstores. It's a story of war, love and personal discovery.

The story begins in December 2005, when the lawyer-turned-human-rights-consultant left Wellington to work for a human rights network in Afghanistan. Before long, she'd landed her dream job with the United Nations. A specialist in the rights of women and children in conflicts, Marianne hoped to make a meaningful contribution to a country where more than 100,000 NATO soldiers were fighting the Taliban for control.

Don't expect the book to investigate the issues or address whether the West should be in Afghanistan. Leaving that to

more qualified commentators, Marianne trusts readers to know this is just one woman's perspective. Her goal? To provide a more nuanced picture of Afghanistan and its people. "It really bothers me that the Western media often portray Afghanistan as an alien planet, filled with ruthless terrorists, corrupt leaders and helpless victims." Yes, there are violent men, abused women, criminal warlords and corrupt officials, but they're the minority, she says. "I fell in love with

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the extraordinarily courageous people standing up for basic human rights and committed to building a civil society. I wanted to tell their stories, but felt I had to be willing to tell my own first."

That's why it's such a personal book. Marianne's particularly frank about her relationship with Joel, their problems and break-up. "I wanted to be honest about the profound effect of this work. So many couples' relationships fall apart. I wanted to debunk the myth that people who go to places like Afghanistan are different, braver, stronger. We mess up and fall to bits too."

You can see why. Marianne lived with the constant threat of rocket attacks, bombs and kidnapping. Once, a missile just missed her bedroom. Then there was the emotional toll of documenting cases such as the woman whose husband threw her, then a grenade, down a well, and a girl so badly beaten for trying to run away with her boyfriend she burnt herself alive. She also felt guilty about her powerlessness to help Afghans and for being so sensitive.

Usually a self-assured woman, she was bursting into tears, sleeping badly and constantly anxious. "It was like trying to move through a fog, everything was really slow and heavy." Marianne now

believes she was clinically depressed and experiencing a chronic-stress condition.

Marianne began confronting and processing her feelings through yoga, meditation, writing and walking. She recognised that her work didn't need to directly save lives to be worthwhile. Her achievements in Afghanistan are impressive: helping calm a crisis situation of reprisal attacks, collating a report documenting violence against women and setting up training workshops on women's rights.

After two years, knowing it was time to leave, Marianne returned to Wellington to study psychology and yoga, and to work through her experiences with therapy, meditation and spiritual retreats. This month she's returning to Afghanistan for a consulting contract and to see friends, including former colleague Fahim. When she left, she felt she was abandoning him, but he told her she needed to go. "Do what you can in your country to help people understand what is really happening here. Help them see that our problems are their problems." She promised to do her best. ■

Zen Under Fire by Marianne Elliott, Penguin, RRP \$34.99.

