

Intelligence in Public Media

Afghan Napoleon: The Life of Ahmad Shah Massoud, Sandy Gall (Haus Publishing, Ltd., 2021), 345 pages, photos.

Swords of Lightning, Mark Nutsch, Bob Pennington, and Jim DeFelice (Permuted Press, LLC, 2021), 334 pages, photos.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

Revolutions and civil wars often produce charismatic figures whose power and influence stretch far beyond their country and, for that matter, their lifespan. Ahmad Shah Massoud was one such figure. He burst onto the scene in the early 1980s as a tactical wizard using a small number of fighters from the Panjshir Valley in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet army to a standstill. This was the legend of the “Lion of the Panjshir,” or as Sandy Gall puts it in his recent biography, the *Afghan Napoleon*.

Only part of Massoud’s success was due to terrain. The Panjshir River cuts through a narrow valley in the Hindu Kush and empties into the Kabul River near the town of Sorubi. Soviet invading forces in 1980 found the single track through the valley narrow and filled with perfect ambush locations. The narrow valley also meant that Soviet helicopters and close-air-support aircraft faced a daunting navigational challenge. Any Soviet motorized rifle commander could expect to take heavy casualties in the Panjshir no matter who commanded the Panjshir Tajiks.

But it wasn’t just anyone who commanded the Panjshiris. It was a young, college-educated man who was a student of 20th century military and political history. Massoud was also a multi-lingual, charismatic leader who created a disciplined militia of Tajiks who would take the fight to the Soviets using classic guerrilla tactics. Soon, the Soviets realized that the Panjshir was a killing zone and that Massoud was the master of the Panjshir. It would be so until the Soviets departed across the Termez bridge in 1989. And, with each year of Soviet occupation and Panjshiri resistance, the influence of Massoud among Tajiks throughout Afghanistan grew.

Massoud was the son of an Afghan army colonel and received a Western education at the lycée in Kabul, then attended Kabul Polytechnic in the mid 1970s. Although his primary school education was in a French-sponsored school, Kabul Polytechnic was a Soviet-sponsored

engineering and architecture school with a heavy dose of communist ideology as part of the program. Massoud entered university just as Afghanistan was transitioning from a relatively stable parliamentary monarchy to a period of instability with warring factions of communists, the Parcham (Flag) party and the Khalq (People’s) faction. Few students in Kabul universities at the time focused on their formal studies. Instead, they concentrated their attention on political issues siding with one of the two communist factions, or factional groups associated with different aspects of political Islam and a conservative movement of pro-monarchists. These individuals who would change the course of Afghan history for the next 40 years would be involved in the Kabul’s whirlpool of political conflict. Massoud was one of many.

What made Massoud different was his understanding of the strategic, geopolitical nature of the conflict. While many in the same year group such as Gulbuddin Hikmatyar focused exclusively on building personal power and influence, Massoud focused on creating political power taking the long view well past the time of Soviet occupation. He expanded his influence first through the political faction known as Jamiat Islami, which was primarily managed by ethnic Tajiks. Eventually, Massoud’s personal influence would expand well beyond the boundaries of ethnicity in Afghanistan.

In fact, until the day he died, Massoud was probably the most “Afghan” of the political leaders of his generation. Other political leaders established their political power through ethnicity and locale. They were first and foremost Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, or Turkmen. Massoud focused on issues that would be very familiar to any Western leader: security for the entire Afghan population, education for the entire Afghan population, and building an economy for the entire Afghan population. He was a voracious reader, even during the worst years of the Afghan war. He believed in training his fighters and even focused on making sure his soldiers were well fed. He

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was a father and a devout Muslim. To a Westerner, it was hard not to be captured by this man who offered a romantic image of the ideal resistance leader.

Gall's *Afghan Napoleon* reflects the charismatic power of Massoud. Gall first met him after a long trek from the Pakistan border into the Panjshir in the summer of 1982. Massoud charmed Gall with his understanding of the West and his skills as a resistance leader. Gall met him several times during the Soviet occupation, each time traveling into Afghanistan at great risk to his own life. Gall remains the consummate war correspondent who understands the complexities of war and does his best to translate those complexities into stories that any reader can understand. However, the real power of this book is the fact that Gall was given access to Massoud's personal diaries. This means that the reader is given insight into the mind of one of the greatest resistance leaders of the 20th century. For this reason alone, *Afghan Napoleon* book is essential reading to any intelligence professional regardless of whether they have any interest in Afghanistan.

One shortfall in the book is Gall's complete acceptance of one of the more annoying bits of misinformation that has survived the story of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan: The US government (and specifically the CIA) was said to be unwilling to support Massoud. Time and again, Gall accepts the standard story that Massoud's fighters received little or no assistance from the CIA program because the CIA was either blind to the Pakistani manipulation of the supplies or complicit in this effort. According to this story, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar was the favorite of Pakistan's Interservice Intelligence Directorate (ISID) and he received most, if not all, the advanced weapon systems.

This was accepted wisdom by the journalists and some of the diplomats in Pakistan in the 1980s. That accepted wisdom was enhanced by the fact that the Reagan administration prevented any US government official, and most especially a CIA officer, from traveling into Afghanistan. The White House was determined to avoid any opportunity for the Soviets to capture an American and use that capture for propaganda purposes. The policy did prevent "eyes on" reporting that might have further demonstrated to the nay-sayers that the United States was blind to Pakistan's ambitions.

In fact, Massoud was well known for complaining to virtually any Western media contact that his fighters received little assistance from the West. At the same time, Massoud had to know that he was receiving substantial support from the CIA because his closest advisers were the focal points for receiving that support. A careful reading of earlier works like *Ghost Wars* (Steve Coll, 2005) or *First In* (Gary Schroen, 2005) demonstrates that Massoud's complaints were simply not true. What was true was ISID's interest in picking the winner among the Afghan resistance; they wanted that winner to be Hikmatyar. What is not true is the claim that the CIA blindly supported ISID and shortchanged Massoud or any other of the resistance fighters in Afghanistan. Gall conflates the two issues but, in his defense, he probably heard the complaint directly from Massoud, who used every tool to increase Western support to his own fighters, including misinforming journalists about his resources.

It is hard to imagine what a post-9/11 Afghanistan would have been like if Massoud had survived the al-Qa'ida suicide bombing that killed him on September 9, 2001. Even in a Taliban-controlled country, Massoud's influence had spread throughout northern Afghanistan with resistance figures as diverse as Abdul Rashid Dostum in Jowzjan and Sar-e-Pul, Mohammed Atta in Mazar-e-Sharif, Ismail Khan in Herat, and all of the Hazara leadership in Bamian accepting his nominal leadership.

Of course, even at his peak during the early 1990s, Massoud suffered from Pashtun prejudices about who were true Afghans. It was one of the reasons why Gulbuddin Hikmatyar felt he was justified in leveling large portions of Kabul in the rocket and artillery duels during the civil war that followed the Soviet departure. Would Massoud have been able to mobilize the entire Afghan nation? We will never know, but certainly that was precisely why Mullah Omar and Usama bin Ladin decided to kill this charismatic leader on the eve of 9/11.



Swords of Lightning

For many, including members of the military and the Intelligence Community of a certain age, the chaotic scenes in Kabul in August 2021 after 20 years of success and failure recalled the arc of the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia during 1954–75. While that may

not be the best context reviewing a book about US operations in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11, it is important for intelligence professionals to understand why the most honorable and successful operations can end up as strategic failures. As with the Vietnam War, historians will argue for decades over why it ended so badly. For now, *Swords of Lightning* offers a chance to consider how it started and what enabled the early successes.

From Indochina...

The CIA role in Southeast Asia had its antecedents in the actions of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during World War II. After several years of wrangling with their Republic of China counterparts who demanded control over OSS special operations, OSS officers eventually started working with the highland tribes in Thailand, the Free Thai forces operating in and around Bangkok and the Viet Minh forces in rural French Indo-China. CIA collaboration with the Thai government expanded as the post-war world began to bifurcate into pro-Soviet and pro-Western blocs. By 1954, the same Viet Minh forces the OSS supported in driving the Japanese out of Indochina were victorious over French colonial forces.

In 1960 and 61, President Eisenhower and then President Kennedy focused attention on the Kingdom of Laos and dispatched CIA officers to prevent yet another “domino” from joining a pro-Soviet bloc. The Kennedy administration also agreed to send CIA officers to South Vietnam to build support for President Diem’s regime and to begin a program with US Special Forces called the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG).

As its name suggests, CIDG was a series of local programs using local fighters to combat Viet Minh raiders determined to undermine Saigon government authority through terror tactics. By 1964, the US military command in Saigon required the CIA to cede control of these small forces to the larger, centralized command. The focus in Saigon was in creating capability to defeat the Viet Minh (by then known as the Viet Cong) and their supporters in the People’s Army of Vietnam. A small program of partnership between CIA and Special Forces became a very large program focused on campaign success rather than local, tactical goals.

... To Afghanistan

In the wake of 9/11, US resolve to strike back at Usama bin Ladin, al-Qa’ida, and the Taliban regime

would confront some hard military realities. Although the United States had operational plans for nearly every country in Central Command, the plans for a response to the 9/11 attacks were based in part on the coalition response to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990: build a strong conventional force, invade the target country, defeat the enemy. For Afghanistan, the only organization that had any near term, realistic option was the Counterterrorism Center (CTC) inside CIA.

That plan involved leveraging established contacts with Afghan resistance leaders and link those resistance leaders with US Special Forces detachments that could direct air strikes. Operations would be highly dispersed and the units would have to operate on their own with little command influence or, for that matter, logistic support. CIA Director George Tenet presented the plan to President George W. Bush, who gave the go-ahead. By late September 2001, the first CIA team was in the Panjshir valley working with the Northern Alliance leadership. By October, CIA teams were inserted behind Taliban lines to work with the resistance and to serve as the pathfinders for Special Forces operational detachments. The plan was classic unconventional warfare.

Swords of Lightning provides a clear description of the earliest US operations in north-central Afghanistan. Two of the authors, Mark Nutsch and Bob Pennington, were leaders in the Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha 595 (ODA 595). The third, Jim DeFelice, is a well-regarded writer of thrillers as well as non-fiction works focused on modern warfare, particularly special operations. The book follows much of the same history detailed in Doug Stanton’s *Horse Soldiers* (2009) and Toby Harnden’s *First Casualty* (2021). As with those excellent books, the reader gets an opportunity to understand what it is like to be in combat where a small number of Americans are fighting side by side with Afghan resistance forces against the established, Islamic extremist government of the Taliban.

These operations required the Americans to use techniques that would have been familiar to historical figures like British officer T.E. Lawrence in World War I, OSS Detachment 101 commander Colonel Carl Eifler in World War II, or CIA paramilitary officer Anthony Poshepny (aka Tony Poe) in Laos in the 1960s. They needed to balance the operational objectives of the US against the

capabilities and personal objectives of the Afghan resistance leaders. As T.E. Lawrence wrote in *27 Articles*, his short pamphlet on irregular warfare, “Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are there to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is.”

In brief, the Special Operations command TF Dagger deployed ODA 595 into central Afghanistan on October 19, 2001. The ODA linked up with the CIA Alpha Team that inserted in the early hours of 16 October and with the Afghan resistance leader Abdul Rashid Dostum. This combination of Afghan resistance, Special Forces combat capability, and CIA local expertise turned the tide. Alpha Team split into sections supporting Dostum, the Shia force under the command of Mohammed Mohaqeq, and the Tajik leader Mohammed Atta.

The distances and terrain required the CIA team to split into two (Alpha and Bravo) and working with TF Dagger leadership, another Special Forces team (ODA 534) was added to support Atta. At the same time, TF Dagger dispatched a battalion command team with USAF members from the Special Tactics Squadron providing enhanced close air support capability. During a series of fast advances, the resistance fighters defeated the Taliban in northern Samangan and southern Balkh provinces and on November 10, 2001, the Afghan resistance forces, US Special Forces and the CIA entered Mazar-e-Sharif as the Taliban and their al-Qa'ida allies retreated east. In late November, both teams traveled to Konduz for a final battle with the Taliban. Although ODA 595 was not in Mazar-e-Sharif during the battle at Qalai Jangi that resulted in the death of CIA officer Mike Spann, they were involved in the handling of prisoners taken from the fight, and it was ODA 595 that identified John Walker Lindh, the so-called “Afghan Taliban,” as one of those fighters captured in Qalai Jangi.

As stated above, the story has been well documented. That said, in irregular warfare, nearly every individual involved in combat will have a different perspective and that perspective is well worth understanding. In this case, almost immediately on arrival, the 12-man team was forced to break into smaller teams operating far apart with little or no communication other than satellite voice

communications. In many war stories, the officers and non-commissioned officers involved in combat share the same events as their soldiers. This was not the case with ODA 595. At any given time in their first month of deployment, the detachment was split into as many as three different teams spread over 50-plus miles of mountainous terrain. *Swords of Lightning* does an excellent job of capturing the insights from each of those teams, even though 20 years of war resulted in several deaths of team members.

A lot of the fighting in late October and early November 2001 sounds very similar in summary: we saw targets, we called in air support, and the targets were blown up. Heavy enemy concentrations were destroyed, and the militia moved in to finish off the survivors. In truth, most of them blur together now. Living in the moment, though, each attack had its own nuance, its own slightly different shade. There were constant reminders of the danger we were in, whether it was a shelling or a minefield or a machinegunner who happened to open up as we attempted to move. If our victory seems preordained now, it surely did not seem that way then.

There are moments in *Swords of Lightning* where command tensions that existed in 2001 return. ODA 595 and ODA 534 were perfectly capable of conducting their tactical operations with little assistance from TF Dagger. The authors remain convinced that the arrival of the battalion headquarters component, the Special Operations Command and Control Element (SOCCE) and, eventually, the arrival of the Special Operations Commander for Central Command were political rather than tactical considerations. That might be true, but the addition of both command elements allowed for more combat power and more resources as the fight changed from a simply tactical battle along the Balkh River to a battle that involved multiple provinces and a far greater adversary force.

While not precisely outlined in *Swords of Lightning*, there is no doubt that the fact that the SOCCE in Konduz was able to call in AC-130 gunships and save the day when the only friendly force comprised 30 Americans and fewer than 100 Afghans. By late November 2001, the war had already changed beyond the scope of the two Special Forces teams commanded by two captains. The tension was certainly real, but in the end it was also the logical consequence of the transition from a small, irregular war to a larger campaign.

The stories of both Special Forces and CIA intrepidity in 2001 serve as a prologue to a larger and longer commitment to Afghanistan. Just as the CIDG partnership between the CIA and Special Forces in the early 1960s transformed into a more conventional war managed by senior officers in Saigon and in Washington, the CIA paramilitary and US Special Operations Forces experience in 2001–2002 changed dramatically as US and allied conventional forces arrived. There were still opportunities for success and certainly opportunities for exceptional

bravery, but there was little chance of turning back to a smaller US footprint working in partnership with regional Afghan leaders. It is unfair to draw direct parallels between the US operations in Vietnam and Afghanistan, but at the very least, it is useful for intelligence professionals to see that in both cases small unit operations and CIA-Special Forces partnerships delivered tactical and, perhaps, even operational (campaign) success when they are given clear direction and authority to do what needs to be done.



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