

This article was downloaded by: [Williams, Brian Glyn]

On: 8 December 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 930876956]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Small Wars & Insurgencies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713636778>

### General Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: new light on the role of Northern Alliance warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom

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Online publication date: 08 December 2010

**To cite this Article** Williams, Brian Glyn(2010) 'General Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: new light on the role of Northern Alliance warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 21: 4, 610 – 632

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2010.518863

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2010.518863>

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## REPORT FROM THE FIELD

### General Dostum and the Mazar i Sharif Campaign: new light on the role of Northern Alliance warlords in Operation Enduring Freedom

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This report sheds new light on the CIA and US Special Forces' covert campaign alongside Afghan Northern Alliance leader General Dostum's horse-mounted Uzbeks during 2001's Operation Enduring Freedom. In 2003 and 2005 the author traveled over the Hindu Kush Mountains to the plains of Northern Afghanistan and lived with the legendary Northern Alliance opposition leader General Dostum. His aim was to recreate Dostum's campaign alongside the CIA and Special Forces to seize the holy city of Mazar i Sharif from the Taliban in November 2001. Based on interviews with Dostum and his Uzbek commanders, this article recreates this proxy offensive that saw the Northern Alliance opposition break out of the mountains, seize this shrine town and bring the Taliban house of cards falling down in a matter of weeks. Up until now the indigenous Afghan Uzbeks, who played a crucial role as a 'boots on the ground' fighting force for Centcom, have been cast as a mere backdrop for American heroics. Now their side of the story and their links to the mysterious shrine of Mazar i Sharif are for the first time revealed.

**Keywords:** CIA Special Activities Division; Green Berets; Uzbeks; Mazar i Sharif; Northern Alliance; Massoud; Dostum; ODA 595; Captain Mark Nutsch; B-52s; Air force ground controllers

#### A 'Light Foot Print' Campaign in the Hindu Kush Mountains

While 2003's Operation Iraqi Freedom involved a 'heavy footprint' of over 100,000 troops, 2001's Operation Enduring Freedom by contrast achieved its goal of toppling the Taliban regime with no more than 350 US 'boots on the ground' in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The secret to the success of the Afghan campaign was US Central Command's use of anti-Taliban proxy fighters belonging to Afghanistan's Northern Alliance opposition. In 2001, thousands of these indigenous Afghan forces moved against the Taliban in conjunction with the US Air Force and a handful of Green Berets and CIA Special Activities Division operators to topple the Taliban Islamic Amirate in less than two months. It was

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these native forces that provided Centcom with an army on the ground that was required to flush Taliban forces out of their positions and seize and hold territory. The few intrepid Western journalists in the country at the time reported remarkable scenes including one wherein Northern Alliance Uzbeks, the direct descendents of the Mongol Golden Horde, charged on horseback against the Taliban as the US air force supported them with JDAMs and laser guided bombs.<sup>2</sup> Through many such offensives the Americans were able to effect a regime change in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan, long known as the 'Graveyard of Empires', with fewer than a half a dozen US soldiers killed in action.

But for all of its importance in helping Centcom achieve an unprecedented military success in the killing mountains of Afghanistan, Western military historians have made little effort to understand the Northern Alliance or its contribution to the campaign. Instead, the few works on the subject have focused almost exclusively on the heroics of the small bands of US special operators who operated in the country in the months after 9/11.<sup>3</sup> While the skill and bravery of the Green Berets, Air Force close air support controllers and CIA operatives who liaised with the Northern Alliance fighters is indisputable, the American-centric accounts of the war have failed to take into account the crucial role of the Northern Alliance ground forces in helping the US and its NATO allies achieve their objectives. Rather, the Northern Alliance has been cast as a colorful Afghan backdrop for American bravery. This has led to hubristic accounts of the role of Americans in the war that overlook the vital role of the Northern Alliance ground forces in seizing territory against the Taliban from November to December 2001.<sup>4</sup>

This article aims to explore this largely unexamined chapter in the history of Operation Enduring Freedom by examining the contributions of one of the more dynamic Northern Alliance *jang salars* (warlords), the Uzbek commander General Abdul Rashid Dostum. In so doing, it will shed new light not only on the important role of America's indigenous Afghan allies in the campaign, but will illuminate the history of one of Afghanistan's most legendary war leaders known to most of his countrymen as the *Pasha* (Commander).

### **Dostum and the struggle for Afghanistan: piecing together the pre-history of Operation Enduring Freedom**

One of the biggest complaints that Afghans have about American involvement in their country is the Americans' lack of knowledge of pre-9/11 Afghanistan, especially the history of its various races and ethnic groups. A mastery of this complex ethnic history is crucial to understanding the success of Operation Enduring Freedom. In order to piece together the oft overlooked indigenous Afghan role in this operation, I did what few outsiders have done and traveled to Afghanistan to live with General Dostum and learn this history. As the most militarily aggressive of all the Northern Alliance commanders, Dostum is a living

history of the campaign and was able to provide the missing half of the story of Operation Enduring Freedom from the local Afghan perspective.

To reach Dostum's Massachusetts-sized unofficial realm in the steppes of northern Afghanistan, I traveled from Kabul over the Hindu Kush Mountains and down to a shrine town known as Mazar i Sharif. There I managed to meet the notoriously inaccessible warlord whose horse-mounted Uzbek troops played a decisive role in Operation Enduring Freedom. While Dostum had a deep distrust of Western journalists who have given him bad coverage in the media, he allowed me to live with him for the summer of 2003. I returned to live with him for the summer of 2005 and subsequently traced some of the battlefields of northern Afghanistan in 2007 and 2009.<sup>5</sup>

In the process I came to understand the importance of the Afghan word *qawm*, which is usually translated as 'ethnic group'. As an ethnic Uzbek, Dostum made it clear that the real roots of his power and one of the primary reasons he and other Northern Alliance leaders fought against the Taliban was ethnicity. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 few outsiders had a mastery of Afghanistan's complex ethnic mosaic and many continue to lump this multi ethnic people together under the label of 'Afghanis' (the Afghani is actually the Afghan currency and calling this country's diverse ethnic groups 'Afghanis' is akin to calling the eclectic races of Europe 'Euros'). Understanding the diversity of ethnic groups in Afghanistan is key to understanding the battle order and objectives of the Northern Alliance and Taliban before and during Operation Enduring Freedom.

As Dostum explained to me, the Taliban were primarily made up of Pashtuns (40% of Afghanistan), an Indo-European or 'Aryan' ethnic group that has historically been concentrated in the south and east of Afghanistan in the so-called Pashtun belt. The Pashtuns, who are also known by the name Afghans, created the state of Afghanistan by definitively conquering surrounding ethnic groups in the 1880s. Those groups who were subdued included the Tajiks (25% of Afghanistan) who are Sunni Persians living predominantly in Afghanistan's northeast, Hazaras (10%) who are Persian-speaking Shi'ite Mongols who live in the central mountains of the country, and the Uzbeks (10%) who are Turko-Mongols descended from the Golden Horde living in the northern plains.<sup>6</sup>

The Sunni Pashtuns, who gave Afghanistan its kings and presidents, were the dominant race in Afghanistan and persecuted the Hazaras who were known as Shi'ite Mongol 'flat nose heretics' and to a lesser degree the Uzbeks who were Turko-Mongol *ghulams* (a derogatory word meaning 'slave warriors'), but not the Persian (or Dari) speaking Tajiks who played a major role in the state.<sup>7</sup>

When the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and became involved in a nine-year counterinsurgency against the mujahideen Islamic rebels, it sought to exploit Afghanistan's ethnic cleavages in much the same way it had in the Soviet Central Asian republics. As part of their divide and rule policy, the Soviets were able to win over many disgruntled Uzbeks and Hazaras to help them fight against Pashtun and Tajik mujahideen rebels. In return, the Soviets and their local

Afghan Communist allies gave several Hazara and Uzbek pro-government militias funds, autonomy, and weapons to use against their traditional enemies, the Pashtuns, and to a lesser extent against the Tajiks.

The most effective pro-Communist government militia was an Uzbek force of 40,000 known as the 53rd Infantry Division. The 53rd Division or Jowzjani Militia was formed by one Abdul Rashid 'Dostum' in the town of Sheberghan, which lies west of Mazar i Sharif.<sup>8</sup> Under Dostum's influence, Sheberghan became known as 'Little Moscow' and was a center of Communist influence. In fact Dostum and his militiamen became so effective at flushing the mujahideen out of their home province of Jowzjan that they were deployed to the south to fight the Pashtun mujahideen in an area extending from Kabul to Kandahar. There they earned the title of *gilamjans* (those who steal carpets) for plundering their enemies. In the south they fought against such Islamist fighters as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a fanatical Pashtun mujahideen leader who is currently fighting alongside the Taliban, and Osama Bin Laden and his Arab jihadi volunteers. They also fought in the north against the most famous of all the mujahideen, the moderate Tajik leader, Massoud the Lion of Panjsher.

While Dostum, who was an ethnic opportunist, fought to gain power for himself and his people, he and his Uzbek followers were also secularists who disliked the increasing fundamentalism of the Pashtun and Tajik mujahideen. They were more than willing to work as a rapid reaction force for the secular Afghan Communist government led by President Mohammad Najibullah (a Pashtun) if they could acquire wealth, power, and autonomy and were not subject to *shari'ah*-Islamic law. This *modus vivendi* between the Pashtun-dominated Communist Party and their Uzbek praetorian guards lasted as long as Najibullah could pay off Dostum.

For three years after the Soviets pulled out of Afghanistan in February 1989, Dostum and his hard fighting Uzbeks propped up Najibullah's Afghan Communist regime against the Islamist mujahideen. But when the Soviet Union, which had bankrolled President Najibullah, fell apart in December 1991, the funds dried up and the writing was on the wall. As his funds were cut off, Najibullah was convinced by Pashtun members of the Communist Party to disarm Dostum and his Uzbek *ghulams* lest they break away from their historic Pashtun masters. President Najibullah subsequently tried having Dostum and his commanders killed, but Dostum was warned in advance by an unlikely source, Massoud the Lion of Panjsher.<sup>9</sup> Massoud the legendary Tajik mujahideen commander suggested that he and Dostum, as fellow northerners, put aside their differences and join forces in the impending battle for the future of Afghanistan. As the fanatical Pashtun mujahideen leader Hekmatyar marched on Kabul to take it from the crumbling Communist government, Dostum and Massoud raced south and defeated him.

This seizure of power by northern ethnic upstarts inaugurated the Afghan Civil War of 1992 to 1996. During this war Dostum carved out an autonomous zone in the north based upon the holy shrine town of Mazar i Sharif. There he and his ex-Communist Uzbek forces ran a secular mini-state where women could

freely attend university, alcohol was openly sold, and strict Islamic law was not enforced.<sup>10</sup> Dostum was by now a warlord, i.e. a leader whose autonomous sub-state regime was based on military power.<sup>11</sup> While he was beloved by the people of the north for maintaining a stable, secular, multiethnic mini-state based in Mazar i Sharif, Dostum involved himself in Afghanistan's civil war and once bombarded Kabul as part of a coup d'état attempt against the mujahideen government.

The Afghan Civil War ended when a new force appeared on the scene, the Taliban (in Pashto the 'Students'). The Taliban maximalists declared war on the competing mujahideen and ex-Communist factions in Afghanistan and launched a campaign of conquest in 1995. The Taliban, who were Pashtun fundamentalists from the southern region of Kandahar, then swept across the country enforcing an unprecedented form of Islamic puritanism on the conquered peoples. In 1996 they captured Kabul and declared war on Dostum for his secularism and threat to Pashtun dominance. In response Dostum once again joined with Massoud the Lion of Panjsher as well as the Hazaras in creating the Northern Alliance opposition. Dostum was the most powerful component of this alliance until he was betrayed by a subordinate's fighting force in 1997 and finally defeated by the Taliban in 1998.<sup>12</sup>

In the spring of 1998 Dostum fled to Turkey and his secular realm was overrun by the Taliban. In Dostum's absence, the Pashtun Taliban banned ancient Sufi ceremonies at the holy shrine of Mazar i Sharif, forbade women from attending university, slaughtered Uzbeks and Hazaras, and executed women for such crimes as adultery.<sup>13</sup> With the subsequent fall of the Hazara region in the Hindu Kush Mountains, the only free Northern Alliance enclave remaining was the Tajik lands based on the Panjsher Valley in the north east. There in this fragile sanctuary, Massoud, the last man standing in the opposition, carried on a lonely struggle against the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies.<sup>14</sup>

As the pressure on Massoud mounted in 2001, he made a desperate plea to Dostum and other exiled anti-Taliban leaders such as Ismail Khan, a Tajik commander from the western town of Herat, to return to join the struggle. In April 2001, Dostum said goodbye to his wife and children in Ankara, Turkey and flew back to Massoud's enclave on what his family felt was a one-way mission that would end in his death.<sup>15</sup> Once back in Afghanistan, Dostum was inserted by a Northern Alliance Mil-8 helicopter into the high Hindu Kush Mountains to a rebel Uzbek sanctuary known as the Dar y Suf (River of Caves) Valley. There Dostum rallied about 2,000 Uzbek *cheriks* (horse-mounted guerillas) to begin a hit and run war on the Taliban occupying the plains of the north. The *cheriks*' main goal was to divert Taliban resources from the summer campaign against Massoud's hard pressed lines in the northeast and in this they succeeded admirably. Dostum survived several Taliban Mig-21 bombing attacks on his remote base and succeeded in diverting as many as 5,000 desperately needed Taliban from the front lines against Massoud to suppress his rebellion.

But time was clearly not on Dostum's side in the late summer of 2001. The Taliban army, which consisted of 55,000 fighters, was able to launch a blockade of the mountains and send larger formations to crush his raiders when they seized territory. To compound matters, on 9 September 2001, Massoud, the real mastermind and overlord of the Northern Alliance, was killed by an al-Qaeda suicide bomber. When Dostum's liaison in the Panjsher Valley relayed the news to him that evening, Dostum realized that he had just been elevated to the unenviable status of highest profile Northern Alliance opposition leader. Undeterred, Dostum and his commanders held a council meeting on 10 September and decided to continue their struggle to its bitter end.

But subsequent events in distant North America were soon to propel the Northern Alliance Uzbeks' lonely struggle in the forgotten Cold War battlefield of Afghanistan onto the world stage.

### **Enter the Americans**

On the morning of 12 September Dostum's agents in Uzbekistan called him in the Hindu Kush Mountains on his satellite phone to tell him about the shocking events in Washington, Pennsylvania, and New York the day before. Dostum had actually been to New York working on an oil deal in 1995 and had seen the World Trade Center for himself. He knew what its destruction meant and predicted that the Americans would respond with force. Recalling the Afghan adage that the 'enemy of my enemy is my friend,' Dostum saw an opportunity to ally himself with the world's most powerful military force in fighting his sworn enemies. He quickly got into contact with an American expat working for Unocal in Uzbekistan and through him contacted the CIA's Counterterrorism Center in Tysons Corner, Virginia.

Introducing himself as a 'son of Afghanistan, named Abdul Rashid Dostum', the Uzbek commander claimed he was willing to wage a lightning war against America's Taliban enemies.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, he offered to strike from his remote base in the Dar y Suf Valley of the Hindu Kush Mountains towards the city of Mazar i Sharif, the holiest city in Afghanistan. If his fighters could capture the shrine of Ali in Mazar i Sharif, he claimed they would fulfill a prophecy going back to the time of medieval Uzbek ruler named Shaybani Khan. According to Dostum, this symbolic act would prove to the Afghans that the wheels of fate had turned against the Taliban, and their tribal army would quickly break up and defect to the Northern Alliance.<sup>17</sup> With one symbolic stroke, the US and its Afghan ally could seize the mandate to rule Afghanistan and decapitate the Taliban regime. America could thus avoid the fate of the Soviets and the nineteenth-century British who had suffered thousands of losses in the unforgiving mountains of Afghanistan after launching ill-conceived frontal invasions.

It did not take the CIA long to understand the importance of Dostum's electrifying message from the Hindu Kush. Here was an indigenous, anti-Taliban

*Muslim* leader who knew the local terrain. He also claimed to have knowledge of a prophecy surrounding a desert shrine that might facilitate the toppling of the Taliban regime. While Centcom had not made contingency plans for an invasion of land-locked Afghanistan, one far-sighted US official had already drawn up an outline for an intelligence-driven war against the Taliban driven by the Northern Alliance that dovetailed with Dostum's plan. Eight months prior to 9/11, counterterrorism chief, Richard Clarke, had provided the CIA with a plan known as the Blue Sky Memo, which called for arming the Northern Alliance and using it to attack al-Qaeda.<sup>18</sup> This memo, which was shelved until 9/11, called for, 'Massive support to anti-Taliban groups such as the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud', as well as winning over Pakistani support and the targeted killings of al-Qaeda leaders using Predator aerial drones.<sup>19</sup> As this secret memo makes clear, it was the CIA that initiated the plan for linking up of US Special Forces with the Northern Alliance opposition, not the military.<sup>20</sup>

The CIA's Counterterrorism Center offered a plan that would allow the US to have 'boots on the ground' without leaving a 'heavy footprint' in this land dominated by xenophobic Pashtun tribesmen. Fully aware of the importance of Dostum as a Muslim indigenous ally, the CIA took the lead in the campaign to develop a way to use his proxy forces to move against the Taliban. As the CIA and Special Forces began to synchronize their plans, CIA head George Tenet sent a secret memo to President George Bush which said:

We need to go in fast, hard and light. Everyone, including al-Qaida and the Taliban, are expecting us to invade Afghanistan the same way the Soviets did in the 1980s. Bin Laden and his followers expect a massive invasion. They believe we will withdraw in the face of casualties and never engage them in hand-to-hand combat. They are going to get the surprise of their lives.<sup>21</sup>

Having been given the go ahead to spearhead the light 'invasion' of Afghanistan, the CIA's CTC then selected two Special Activities Division operatives to be inserted into the Hindu Kush Mountains to liaise with Dostum and make preparations for the arrival of an ODA Team (Operational Detachment Alpha, a.k.a. a Green Beret A-Team). The CIA chose two experienced field hands who knew the region well. These were Dave Tyson, an ex-military specialist who had learned Uzbek at Indiana University, and 'R.J.', a professorial-looking Tajik-Persian speaker who had cut his teeth in the 1980s covertly arming the mujahideen 'freedom fighters' for *jihad* against the Soviets.<sup>22</sup> On the night of 16 October R.J. and Dave Tyson boarded an MH-47 twin-prop Chinook helicopter flown by the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment and were flown from the US airbase at Karshi-Khanabad in neighboring Uzbekistan to Dostum's mountain base at Dar y Sof. The helicopter flew at night and deposited the agents at a designated landing zone marked out by bonfires.

Over the next couple of days the two agents worked closely with Dostum and his men to lay the foundations for the arrival of a 12-man Green Beret A-Team to be known as Tiger 02. With the CIA agents' help, the A-Team would act as a 'force magnifier' and help call in air strikes on the Taliban.

But Centcom did not have high expectations for Tiger 02 and two other A-Teams deployed to the Tajik areas around the Panjsher Valley. Many US commanders were pessimistic. They expected that it would take many months of preparation before the Northern Alliance could mount a major offensive in the spring. They felt Kabul might not fall for at least a year. 'They thought they'd let the Special Forces go in and play around for a few months,' recalled one officer assigned to Central Command, 'and then the real fight would occur when the 101st and the 82nd Airborne arrived.'<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the expectations, three nights later word came that Tiger 02 was ready to deploy. On the night of 19–20 October, a message came from the US base at Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan that the Green Berets were *en route*. Once again Dostum's men lit up a designated landing zone between the villages of Darya Kamach and Dehi high in the Dar y Suf Valley and waited with excitement for their American allies. When they finally reached their destination at 2 a.m. on 20 October, the members of Tiger 02 were 'locked and loaded' just in case they were attacked by the mysterious Uzbeks. Two members of the team recalled what then happened as follows:

We came out of the helicopter through the dust and clouds. You saw the Afghans coming out to lead us. It was a tense time and very eerie, because they wore robes with AK 47s coming out of them . . . It was like Sand People from Star Wars coming at you. Of course you can't see their faces because its dark. And you're just looking up. And they've got their weapons. But they're greeting you.<sup>24</sup>

The Americans were carrying heavy packs, and their equipment 'seemed to float from the landing site under a procession of brown blankets and turbans'.<sup>25</sup> Dostum himself was not at the landing zone at the time of Tiger 02's arrival but he rode up the next morning at 9 a.m. to warmly greet his American allies. When he first arrived he met a nervous team of 12 US soldiers dressed in light tan fatigues wearing black wool jackets and woolen caps. Their nervousness was understandable, as US reporter Bob Woodward put it, 'The CIA and Special Forces teams were out in some pretty tough places alone. They could be attacked, run over, slaughtered or kidnapped and held for hostage.'<sup>26</sup> For his part, Dostum was ecstatic to see the American team. Finally someone from the outside world had come to his aid in the lonely battle against the Taliban.<sup>27</sup>

Despite their misgivings, the members of Tiger 02 were warmly greeted by the mysterious Uzbek leader they had erroneously been told was frail, had diabetes, was 83 years old, was missing an arm, and had a fierce hatred for Americans.<sup>28</sup> An eyewitness account given by a member of Tiger 02 provides a valuable account of this historic first meeting:

Mid-morning the next day, General Dostum arrived at the compound. The compound was on the edge of a clearing. First, about 20 horsemen came galloping up. They're armed to the teeth, looking pretty rough. And, the heavy beards, RPGs. Your typical Soviet small arms is what they possessed – light machine guns, AK-47s, RPGs. And they come galloping up on horseback. And about ten minutes behind them, another 30 horsemen arrived with General Dostum. This was his main

body of his personal bodyguards, coming there to meet us. He jumped off the horse. He shook our hands. Thanked us for coming. Led us into his little base camp, and grabbed Mark (the team leader) and I, went up to this little hill, threw out a map, said, 'This is what I want to do today.'<sup>29</sup>

Far from being a one-armed, frail anti-American, the members of Tiger 02 noted that Dostum was 'healthy as an ox', had a 'firm welcome handshake', and made a point of grinning and patting the Americans on the back to reassure them.<sup>30</sup> Having won over his nervous American comrades with his infectious grin, Dostum quickly got to work with his US allies. It was now time to see what the Americans could do to help him fulfill his dream of breaking out of the mountains and moving down on the plains to liberate the holy shrine of Mazar i Sharif and free his people.

### **Dostum, Tiger 02, and the seizure of Mazar i Sharif**

Within hours of arriving in the Hindu Kush Mountains, Captain Mark Nutsch, Tiger 02's leader, had split his 12-man team in two. The two components known as Alpha and Bravo then mounted the local horses and rode off along perilous mountain paths to separate overwatches to spy on the Taliban. Only Mark Nutsch, a Kansan who had been raised on a farm, had experience with horse riding, but the rest of the team gradually learned how to ride the Uzbeks' Qataghani steppe ponies.<sup>31</sup>

For the Americans who had been in the US only days before, the transition to riding on horses with turbaned Uzbek raiders from another era in the high mountains of Afghanistan was profound. As they rode past staring villagers who had never dreamed of meeting an American before, they realized that they had truly entered another world. While the Americans had lost 3,000 of their people to the Taliban on 9/11, this isolated people had lost tens of thousands to the fanatics and had seen their homeland occupied by them for over three years. When word came that Americans were riding through their villages, the locals poured out to greet them and stare in awe. Commenting on the natives' primitive conditions, one member of Tiger 02 claimed, 'it was like riding through Biblical Jerusalem.'<sup>32</sup> The barren, sand-dune like mountain plateau above the Dar y Suf Valley only added to the exoticness of the 6,500-foot setting.

Finally, after a long day's ride, the two sections of the A-team looked down on two Taliban positions blocking the upper reaches of the Dar y Suf Valley. Through the mountain haze, the Americans noted that the Taliban had old Soviet T-55 and T-62 tanks, artillery, as well as hundreds of fanatical Arab foot soldiers who belonged to Osama Bin Laden's 055 International Brigade in their ranks.<sup>33</sup> Dostum's lightly armed horsemen clearly needed some heavy fire power to level the playing field and enable them to break out of the Dar y Suf Valley and onto the plains of the north. Mark Nutsch aimed to do just that, providing Dostum and his horse-mounted rebels with close air support that would in effect act as airborne artillery. Nutsch began by radioing CAOC (Combined Air Operations Center) and calling for a B-52 airstrike. Soon a venerable B-52 Stratofortress

appeared as a dot in the sky and began doing circles over the Taliban's positions. With each pass it dropped a bomb on the coordinates provided to it by Nutsch while Dostum and his men cheered wildly. After months of being mocked by the Taliban on their radios for having no Migs, tanks, or artillery, the Uzbek horsemen now had the firepower of the world's most powerful nation on their side.<sup>34</sup>

But it soon became obvious that the bombs were missing their targets. After one errant bomb went off, Dostum watched through his binoculars as the curious Taliban even came out of their trenches to inspect a bomb crater on a nearby hill.<sup>35</sup>

That evening Dostum and his American allies rode back to their base camp, which had been nicknamed the Alamo, and reported their lack of success back to Centcom. To improve the precision of the bombing, Centcom decided to insert a team of Air Force Close Air Support specialists. These forward air controllers were members of the elite 23rd Special Tactics Squadron based at Hurlburt Airfield in Florida. This unit was trained to use SOFLAMs (laser target designators) and direct coordinates to rain in GPS-guided JDAM bombs and laser guided bombs on their targets. Their specialty was in the words of Master Sergeant Bart Decker, one of the team's air controllers, 'putting metal on target'.<sup>36</sup> When Bart Decker and his team arrived, Dostum and his men put them directly into action and they quickly made an impact on the battlefield. As the bombings became more precise, the Uzbeks and their horse-mounted Green Beret allies went on the offensive. Several Taliban-occupied villages such as Bishqab, Cobaki, Chaptal, and Oimetan, were overrun and the small American-Uzbek force began to develop the most important ingredient for success in Afghan warfare: momentum.<sup>37</sup>

But back in the US, President George Bush and his people were growing impatient and did not see the capture of a few mountain villages as a noteworthy success. The campaign had been going on for nearly a month and there was still no sign of progress in the war against the stubborn Taliban. To compound matters, Dostum's small force was the only Northern Alliance faction on the move. The Tajiks, who had a much larger force of 15,000 in their enclave to the northeast, seemed to be in disarray under Massoud's lackluster successor, General Fahim Khan. As this stateside frustration trickled down to the men on the ground who were risking their lives, Tiger 02's leader Captain Mark Nutsch sent back a telegram to Central Command in Tampa, Florida which explained his team's remarkable progress:

In regards to your question about us and the Northern Alliance just sitting around and doing nothing let me explain some realities on the ground.<sup>38</sup>

I am advising a man on how to best employ light infantry and horse cavalry in the attack against Taliban T-55s and mortars, artillery, personnel carriers and machine guns – a tactic which I think became outdated with the introduction of the Gatling (machine) gun. (The Uzbek Mujahadeen) have done this every day we have been on the ground. They have attacked with 10 round AK's per man, with PK gunners

having less than 100 rounds, little water and less food. I have observed a PK gunner who walked 10-plus miles to get to the fight, who was proud to show me his artificial right leg from the knee down.

We have witnessed the horse cavalry bounding over watch from spur to spur to attack Taliban strong points – the last several kilometers under mortar, artillery and PK fire. There is little medical care if injured, only a donkey ride to the aid station, which is a dirt hut. I think (the Uzbek Mujahadeen) are doing very well with what they have. They have killed over 125 Taliban while losing only eight.

We couldn't do what we are (doing) without the close air support. Everywhere I go the civilians and Mujahadeen soldiers are always telling me they are glad the USA has come. They all speak of their hopes for a better Afghanistan once the Taliban are gone. Better go. (The local commander, Dostum) is finishing his phone call with (someone back in the States).<sup>39</sup>

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz subsequently declassified the after-action report and read it to the press to let the Americans know that US Special Forces were indeed on the ground making progress. When classified photographs of horse-mounted American Special Force Air Controller Bart Decker and Uzbeks were subsequently beamed back to Washington, one stateside analyst forwarded them to the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld promptly declassified them and displayed them to the US press corps.<sup>40</sup> To a reporter's tongue-in-cheek question about what role horsemen would play in his grand scheme for building a 'lighter', more 'agile' military of the future, Rumsfeld replied, 'It's all part of our transformation plan!'<sup>41</sup>

Remarkably, against all odds, things did finally seem to be going according to plan in the Dar y Suf Valley. As the horse-mounted Green Berets, Uzbeks, and Air Force colluded to strike at the Taliban, they began to develop a certain synergy. In the most unlikely of juxtapositions, Dostum's horsemen seemed to work well with laser guided bombs often delivered from F-15s, F-16s, and F-18s based on carriers in the Indian Ocean or B-52s and B-1s based on the distant British island of Diego Garcia.<sup>42</sup> It was an odd combination of medieval-style cavalry charges delivered by the Uzbek descendants of Genghis Khan supported by state-of-the art twenty-first century aerial killing technology.

One eyewitness account of the campaign described the remarkable scene of one of Dostum's cavalry charges as follows:

Commander Lahl Mohammad, one of Dostum's cavalry commanders, had 250 men moving to an assault position, preparing to attack the enemy at full speed. The Taliban they were facing were fully dug in with interlocking machine-gun fire and scores of rocket-propelled grenades. While TIGER 02 was waiting for aircraft and bombers to arrive on station, Commander Mohammed was supposed to hold in place until ordered to attack. Mohammad jumped the gun and took off early without permission.

The cavalry was in full view of the enemy, 1,500 meters away and closing fast. TIGER 02 radioed the close air support pilot that they had on a string to 'step on the gas.' They only had minutes before the 250-horse cavalry would hit the Taliban positions. As soon as the CAS (Close Air Support) was over the target, TIGER 02 gave release authority. The bombs would take one minute to target impact.

It was almost dark and, as the bombs closed, the Green Berets could see Taliban

machine guns tearing into the formation as Dostum's horses began to fall. The TIGER 02 team was certain that the cavalry charge was too close to the enemy trench line.

When Dostum's cavalry charged over the last outcropping just short of the Taliban trenches, adrenaline and anxiety were at a peak. Commander Mohammad and his men were only 250 meters from the enemy, riding at full tilt, with bombs in the air. TIGER 02 would either inflict serious damage on the Taliban or wipe out their allies – seconds would tell.

Three bombs landed directly in front of the assaulting line and in the center of the enemy defense, stunning the Taliban. Al-Qaida and Taliban soldiers were sent flying in a dozen directions; the shock wave smashed their skulls, bursting their eardrums and exploding the capillaries in their retinas. The cavalry flew into the disoriented enemy just seconds after they were hit by the shock of the concussion and blast, and annihilated the remaining Taliban with what they later named 'U.S. Cavalry Close Quarter Combat.'

'I can see our horses blasting through them in the dust clouds!' Sergeant Will Summers radioed back.

The horses were charging right through the clouds of dust and body parts thrown into the air by the bombs. The assault was an incredible success and demonstrated perfect, split-second timing. Lady luck in this case, got the credit.<sup>43</sup>

A few days later the CIA agent 'R.J.' joined Dostum in several of his cavalry charges and left another invaluable eyewitness account of Uzbek horsemen in action against the Taliban. 'R.J.' vividly brings to life Dostum's character as follows;

General Dostum was standing in a small group of his senior officers. He was of medium height, stocky but powerful built, and was dressed in brown khaki pants, boots, and heavy black wool coat cut like a military jacket. He was wearing a turban-like dark blue head covering, with a long piece of material hanging down to serve as a scarf. He moved with a strength and confidence that commanded attention and respect.

Dostum stepped out of the circle of his officers as the group rode to a halt and dismounted. He smiled at the difficulty the Americans had in getting down. 'Welcome, welcome my friends,' he said in Dari, extending his hand to R.J. and his men. Although R.J. spoke excellent Dari, Major Akram translated for the benefit of the other team members.

'In just a few minutes we will start the attack.' Dostum motioned them toward the battlefield. 'The Taliban have not had enough time to be strongly dug in. That is good for us. We have beaten them in battle on each of the last three days. That is also good for us. But the terrain favors them in that we have a long ride across the open plain to reach them.' He paused and looked across the field.

'If we had more ammunition for our artillery and our tanks, we could bombard them heavily. That would weaken them, because they are not accustomed to being under heavy, sustained artillery fire. Even better would be to have those U.S. aircraft you have promised bombing their positions before we move.' He raised his hand to forestall a response from R.J.

'No, my friend, I do not complain. All that will come as Allah wills. So we deal with what we have. Today, losses will be heavy, but we will sweep the enemy from the field.'

Dostum turned to his officers. 'Colonel Nizamudin, please give the signal for the artillery to fire.' Then he turned to the team. 'Now let us mount our horses and move forward to watch the attack begin.'

Two columns of cavalry moved out from behind the hill line, quickly forming into a line abreast, the classic formation of a charge. R.J. was fascinated at the discipline with which the men moved. The first hundred-man group came on line and, without much more than a pause of a few seconds, stepped out and slowly headed toward the Taliban lines. The second hundred moved into position and stepped off with the same precision . . .

As the first line of cavalry reached the infantry line, an officer in the middle of the line stood in his stirrups and raised a sword in the air. A shouted command could be heard above the firing, and the line of horsemen surged forward almost as one. Within a few steps the horses were moving at a gallop. A shudder of excitement swept through R.J. as he watched the riders bend low over the necks of their mounts, urging them on. The second line of riders reached the jump-off point, formed, corrected the line, and then broke into charge . . .

Dostum turned his horse towards them, raising his arm and motioning in a broad sweep toward the battle. 'Come, friends, let's follow the attack. We can see nothing from here.' And with that he turned and kicked his horse's flanks, riding straight into the fight raging before them.

'Shit I knew he was going to say that,' Bob let out as he nudged his horse forward. R.J. and Frank moved with him, gaining speed to keep up with the general . . .

Frank was riding next to R.J. now, riding four to five feet out on his right. One of the fleeing Taliban fighters stopped and spun around to face them, raising his AK-47. Frank fired at him. R.J. saw the rounds hit the man high in the chest and head, his forehead exploding in a spray of blood and bone, turban flipping off as his body fell toward the grey brown earth.

R.J. could see that Dostum had pulled to a halt and was trying to rally some of his fighters. Ahead of them, on the slope that overlooked the battlefield, was a ZSU-23, and Dostum was trying to organize an attack on the position. He dismounted and grabbed an AK-47 from one of his men, accepting two spare magazines for the weapon and stuffing them inside his heavy coat. R.J. could not hear what Dostum was saying, but it was clear that he was going to lead the attack. Men rallied to him, and when Dostum turned to start the climb he was accompanied by more than twenty men, including a number of his senior officers. They spread out into a loose line and started up the hill.<sup>44</sup>

Clearly Dostum and his men who had been bottled up in the mountains since April were galvanized by the American assistance. As the US guided bombs began to fall on Taliban positions, Dostum began to describe the American special forces to his men as *malaks* (angels).<sup>45</sup> Harkening back to a sixteenth-century battle that his ancestors had won against great odds (reportedly with the help of sword-bearing angels), Dostum called on his superstitious men to charge into battle and re-create history.<sup>46</sup> For the illiterate Uzbeks who could not imagine lasers, satellites, or planes operating from aircraft carriers in distant seas, Dostum's explanation that angels were on their side made perfect sense. Dostum also made a point of tormenting the Taliban by warning them that the Americans had brought Azrail the Death Angel and laser death rays with them. According to one account:

Dostum loved the Death Ray. He loved even more calling the Taliban commanders on their radios and talking to them.

'I have the Americans with me here today,' Dostum would say in Dari.

'We don't believe you, send them in, we want to fight the Americans we do not want to fight you,' the Taliban would reply.

'Let me prove they are here.' Dostum would hand the radio to Vince Makela, the

senior commo (communication) chief, Pete Walther, Will Summers, Andy Marchel, or one of the other sergeants on the team. Pete was rough and ready, and rarely without his chewing tobacco, and Andy one of the weapons sergeants, loved carrying his grenade launcher, mostly because it ‘carried more bang for the buck.’ ...

‘Send us the Americans to fight us,’ the Taliban demanded.

‘*Hoop*, I will send them to you now,’ Dostum would reply. *Hoop* meant ‘good’ and Dostum was always happy when the Taliban accepted his invitation to meet the Americans and their Death Ray.’

A short time later, Taliban bodies were flying through the air once again.<sup>47</sup>

As the reports of Dostum and Tiger 02’s activities began to arrive at Centcom, General Tommy Franks who was in charge of the campaign began to see the Uzbek general as his best hope for getting the ground campaign moving. Franks described Dostum as ‘the best we’ve got’.<sup>48</sup> The Americans believed that, ‘Dostum on horseback was aggressive, a General Patton’ who ‘rides 10 to 15 miles a day in windstorms and snowstorms with guys lacking a leg. They go blow up a Taliban outpost and take casualties knowing they have no medical assistance.’<sup>49</sup> Rumsfeld subsequently shared the following account of one of Dostum’s charges to the press:

On the appointed day, one of their (US Special Forces) teams slipped in and hid well behind the lines, ready to call in air strikes, and the bomb blasts would be the signal for others to charge. When the moment came, they signaled their targets to the coalition aircraft and looked at their watches. Two minutes and 15 seconds, 10 seconds – and then, out of nowhere, precision-guided bombs began to land on Taliban and al-Qaeda positions. The explosions were deafening, and the timing so precise that, as the soldiers described it, hundreds of Afghan horsemen literally came riding out of the smoke, coming down on the enemy in clouds of dust and flying shrapnel. A few carried RPGs. Some had as little as 10 rounds for their weapons. And they rode boldly – Americans, Afghans, towards the Taliban and al Qaeda fighters. It was the first cavalry attack of the 21st century.<sup>50</sup>

While the ground campaign was stalled elsewhere, Dostum and his special force allies broke through one Taliban line after another moving down the Dar y Suf Valley.<sup>51</sup> One account based on interviews with Tiger 02 captures the fluid combat as follows:

Dostum’s cavalry liked to charge at full gallop, firing rifles on horseback. Ideally, they would close with the enemy so fast the enemy couldn’t react, and the horsemen would mow them down with their AK-47s.

Over the next days, Tiger 02 would ride with the *muj*, and ride hard. They developed an effective method of warfare with Dostum’s love of cavalry charges. One part of the team would stay on the ridges, lazing targets and sending in the bombs, and as soon as they detonated, the rest of the team would charge with Dostum, guns blazing. The Taliban and AQ (al-Qaeda) would still have their heads down when Dostum and the boys overran the enemy positions jumping over AQ bodies and galloping through the bomb debris.<sup>52</sup>

Over time the Americans came to have a deep appreciation for Dostum’s leadership qualities. Several members of Tiger 02 described the close working relationship that developed with Dostum at this time. According to one account:

Over the next few weeks and months, as our relationship grew, the guy (Dostum) was phenomenal. He was working 20-hour-plus days, hardly sleeping. He was just always on the go, always talking to someone, always trying to coordinate actions of the Northern Alliance forces to make it happen . . . .

Gen. Dostum was upfront and honest with me, and any member of the detachment, in any dealings that we may have had. And we were truthful and honest with him in the operations that we were going to conduct, and how we were going to go about accomplishing those objectives, like capturing Mazar-e-Sharif. We were just honest with him. And he was honest with us . . . .

Somehow, we were able to find this common bond in capturing Mazar-e-Sharif, and the common bond of bringing all these different ethnic factions together to join with Gen. Dostum, and mount a coordinated attack through the Dar-e-Suff Valley and into Mazar-e-Sharif . . . .

Gen. Dostum always referred to every one of my men either by first name, which is all he needed to know, or by commander, 'Commander Bill,' 'Commander Pete.' Every one of my men was referred to as a commander, and held in the highest regard as an Afghan warrior. We're all now part of that inner circle of the military commanders there.

So much did he trust us and respect us, that he said that, if we ever go to war in another country, that he would gladly send his men with us to fight.<sup>53</sup>

For his part, Dostum could not praise his American comrades highly enough. He claimed 'I asked for a few Americans. They brought with them the courage of a whole Army.'<sup>54</sup>

According to all accounts, Dostum seemed to be a man obsessed as he lead his men on horseback and on 7 November he broke out of the Dar y Suf Valley and into the neighboring Balkh Valley. The Balkh Valley led directly down to Mazar i Sharif and Dostum, and his hard riding force were now halfway to their objective. At this juncture a small Tajik force led by Northern Alliance Commander Ustad Atta and a force of Hazaras led by Karim Khalili rode down from the mountains and joined him. The Afghan snowball effect was finally kicking into gear as word spread that Dostum and his American killer angels were on the offensive.

Together, the combined force charged down the Balkh Valley with Dostum directing the Americans where to strike. As the joint US–Northern Alliance force surged northward towards Mazar i Sharif, the Taliban frantically rushed reinforcements to the region to prevent a breakout. Hundreds of Taliban Toyota Hilux pickup trucks with guns mounted in their backs known as *ahis* (deer) rushed up the valley's main road to interdict the allies. But in so doing, the Taliban incautiously exposed themselves to the Americans in the sky. As the Taliban reinforcements drove up the valley's main rode they were spotted by US aircraft and strafed and bombed. It was a massacre, and the entire relief column was destroyed.<sup>55</sup>

Having destroyed the Taliban reinforcements, there was only one obstacle remaining, the Tangi Gap. The Tangi Gap was a narrow mountain pass that led out of the Balkh Valley and onto the northern plains around Mazar i Sharif. The Taliban had dug in their troops and cannons on two hills dominating the sides of the valley. There they planned to make their last stand. While the Americans

pounded the hills with their aircraft, the Taliban were too dug in and could not be forced out from the air. Not even the use of two Daisy Cutters, the largest bomb in the US arsenal, could dislodge them. Someone on the ground would have to flush them out.

Not surprisingly, it was Dostum who led the dismounted allies in storming the Tangi Gap. Moving methodically up the hill, Dostum and his men fought the stubborn Taliban throughout the day of 8 November. While Dostum's charge may have seemed suicidal, he had one advantage. Whenever he and his men were blocked by tenacious Taliban resistance, the US air controllers with him used their lasers to pin point the enemy positions and call in air strikes. By now the Uzbeks and the Americans had honed their skills, and Dostum's fighters knew how to calibrate their ground movements with the incoming bombs. Time and again, Dostum and his American allies were pinned down and appeared to be close to being overrun when US fighter bombers roared overhead and rained bombs down on the Taliban. In some cases, known in military terms as 'Danger Close', the Taliban was so close that the combat air controllers were almost calling bombs down on their own positions. In these cases, they were often showered with rubble and Taliban body parts from nearby bomb strikes. By all accounts the fighting was hellacious, and it took everything Dostum had to get his men to keep moving forward into the face of enemy fire.

But move they did, and by day's end Dostum and his Uzbeks had reached the top of the Tangi Gap on both sides and captured the high ground. As the sun set on the remains of the battle, word reached air specialist Bart Decker that a long column of vehicles had been spotted by predator drones leaving the city of Mazar i Sharif on the plains. Dostum radioed his spies in the city and was told that it was the Taliban fleeing the city going west towards the city of Kunduz. Bart Decker subsequently gave loitering US fighter bombers the order that they were 'cleared hot' to attack the column, and it was destroyed.

On the following day, Dostum and his US and Northern Alliance allies poured out of the mountains onto the plains south of Mazar i Sharif. A *Time* magazine article vividly captured the scene as follows:

In the dead of night, horses poured from the hills. They came charging down from the craggy ridges in groups of 10, their riders dressed in flowing shalwar kameez and armed with AK-47s and grenade launchers. In the Kishindi Valley below, 35 miles south of the prized northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, the few Taliban tanks in the area not destroyed by American bombs took aim at the Northern Alliance cavalry galloping toward them. But the 600 horsemen had been ordered to charge directly into the line of fire. 'If you ride fast enough, you can get to them,' an Alliance spokesman later explained. 'You ride straight at them. The tank will only have time to get off one or two rounds before you get there.'

The rebels were told to leap on top of the tanks, pull the Taliban gunners out through the open hatches and kill them. The first land battle in the century's first war began with a showdown from a distant age: fearless men on horseback against modern artillery. America's money was on the ponies.<sup>56</sup>

When a Taliban force bolstered by Pakistani fanatics made an unexpected defense south of Mazar i Sharif in an exposed position, Dostum's forward air controllers called in a heavy B-52 bombardment. The defenders didn't stand a chance, and Dostum rushed through the smoldering remains of the enemies' former positions to fight the last Taliban defending Mazar i Sharif.

Not to be outdone by his master, Commander Lahl, Dostum's second in command, led the Uzbek cavalry clattering ahead and crossed the Pul i Imam Bukhri Bridge and took Mazar i Sharif's civilian airport on the southern outskirts of the city. From there Lahl and his men rode into Mazar i Sharif's southern suburbs for the first time in over three years. Dostum was not far behind them.<sup>57</sup>

On the evening of 9 November 2001, Dostum and his American comrades who had not shaved or showered in weeks, rode on horseback or in captured Taliban pickup trucks into the crowded streets of Mazar i Sharif. The Taliban were nowhere to be found.

For the dazed Americans, the warm reception they received from the cheering townsmen was surreal. Thousands of Mazar i Sharif's inhabitants came out to greet their liberators and chant Dostum's name. Dostum, riding at the head of hundreds of armed Uzbeks wearing his famous green *chapan* (riding coat), pulled the turban back from his face and waved to the throngs on either side of the main road. The members of Tiger 02 compared their joyous reception to the arrival of Allied forces in Paris after the defeat of the Nazis. Seeing the tears of joy in the inhabitants' eyes, the Americans finally understood that they were more than avengers, they were liberators.

Once in the city, the Americans fulfilled an important task. They symbolically buried several small pieces of the World Trade Center given to them a seeming lifetime ago back in the USA and said prayers for their countrymen who had died in the carnage of 9/11. They had done as they promised when they swore to bury the blackened symbols of their nation's suffering in the soil where their enemy was defeated.

As the locals began to sacrifice sheep to celebrate their liberation, Dostum turned to his American comrades and publicly hugged them. The *Pasha* wanted the people of the city to know that he had achieved his victory only with their help. Then, through his interpreters, he told them that he had one important promise of his own to fulfill. With a somber look on his face, Dostum left his American friends in a compound and led a group of soldiers to the blue domed shrine of Mazar i Sharif. As Dostum descended from his horse Surkun and strolled into the shrine, the throngs rushed into to see the great man make his historic pilgrimage. Unbidden, tears of grief and joy came to Dostum's face as he opened his hands to the heavens in Muslim fashion to pray in thanks and for the souls of those he had lost along the way to make this day possible. Raising his wet face from his hands, Dostum looked at the crowds and quietly spoke four simple words that were his attempt to capture his shock at having survived his suicidal return to Afghanistan. As a cameraman filmed his sobbing face, Dostum looked

at the camera with tears in his eyes and mouthed four simple words. 'Thank God its over.'

### Aftermath

The word of the Northern Alliance's seizure of Mazar i Sharif spread across the globe after Dostum phoned *CNN Turkey* and triumphantly gave them the good news. In the process many came to know the name of the Uzbek commander who had seemingly done the impossible. *Time* magazine reported, 'The Taliban spent three years fighting for Mazar-i-Sharif, precisely because its capture would confirm them as masters of all Afghanistan. And that they are no longer.'<sup>58</sup> Britain's *Independent* reported:

The fall of the biggest city in northern Afghanistan would deliver a crucial propaganda victory to the coalition . . . Now, at last, the coalition may show a result. Until now, the Taliban has been able to give a convincing impression of unity and unbroken morale, but the loss of Mazar cannot be presented as anything but a disaster. Once the first crack appears in the regime's facade, things could change very fast.<sup>59</sup>

The cracks in the Taliban regime did not take long to appear. As Dostum had predicted, the fall of the holy city of Mazar i Sharif brought down the Taliban house of cards. The unexpected fall of the symbolic shrine town finally galvanized Fahim Khan's lethargic Tajiks. As Dostum's small force marched eastward from Mazar i Sharif to the town of Kunduz, Fahim's larger Tajik army began to attack Taliban lines north of Kabul. With US bombs covering their thrust, Fahim Khan and his men moved on Bagram Air Base then surged across the Shomali Plain towards the capital.

Having heard of the loss of Mazar i Sharif, the Taliban did not offer much of a fight. On 12 November the Taliban, who had always been viewed in the predominately Tajik-speaking city of Kabul as an occupying force, began to withdraw to the south. On 13 November, Fahim Khan's victorious troops moved into the city they had lost in 1996. In less than a week, both the capital of Afghanistan and its holiest city had fallen to the US-backed opposition. It was nothing short of miraculous.

In the mountainous heartland, the Hazaras rose up when they heard news of the fall of Mazar i Sharif and attacked the Taliban in the strategic town of Bamiyan. With the Hazaras pouring out of the mountains, the dispirited Taliban withdrew after burning scores of local villages. By mid-November the Hazarajat highlands were free of the Taliban.

In the west, Ismail Khan, a Northern Alliance Tajik leader from the western town of Herat, joined the rout by moving out of the mountains to retake his former capital of Herat. Once again the Taliban put up a limited fight then withdrew.

The Northern Alliance now controlled a vast swath of land stretching from Herat through the Hazarajat to Kabul and on to Jalalabad on the Pakistani border.

It was a stunning development for a Taliban government that had been gloating that it would outlast America's ineffectual aerial bombardments just a week before. In a matter of days, the stalemate in Afghanistan had been broken and the Taliban had been mercilessly pushed out of Northern Alliance territory. Half of Afghanistan now belonged to the US-backed opposition.

As the stunned Americans tried to keep up with pace of events on the ground, they finally began to understand the symbolic importance that Dostum had always attached to the seizure of Mazar i Sharif. For those who had anticipated a long winter campaign followed by a full US invasion of 60,000 US troops the sudden collapse of the Taliban was a Godsend. None could doubt that American lives had been saved by the unexpected fall of Mazar i Sharif and for that Central Command was grateful to Dostum.

It was now up to a newly created 'Southern Alliance' made up of Pashtun tribes who were tired of strict Taliban rule to defeat the remnants of Mullah Omar's Talib forces in their southern homeland. The anti-Taliban Pashtuns were led by a relatively unknown Pashtun chieftain named Hamid Karzai. After a fierce battle at Tarin Kowt in which US airpower was used to wipe out a column of Taliban pickup trucks, Karzai and his allies marched into the southern city of Kandahar and routed the disheartened Taliban. By the end of December, the Taliban were in full retreat across the border to Pakistan and Karzai had been chosen the interim president. The Taliban had been toppled in less than three months at a cost of less than a dozen American lives.

In recognition of his contributions to making the new post-Taliban Afghanistan possible Dostum was named Deputy Minister of Defense and later Chief of Staff of the Afghan army. But his relationship with the new Karzai administration remained rocky. Karzai aimed to centralize power in the government's hands while Dostum sought to defend his ethnic constituency, the Uzbeks, vis-à-vis the Pashtun-Tajik-dominated central government. On several occasions Afghan and NATO troops raided storage facilities where Dostum and his commanders had secreted away weapons and ammunition for future conflicts.

To compound matters, in 2002 *Newsweek* published an article entitled 'The Death Convoy of Afghanistan', which made the unsubstantiated claim that hundreds of Taliban prisoners of war captured by Dostum in 2001 died in his custody while being transferred to his headquarters.<sup>60</sup> As a result, Dostum, arguably the most secular warlord in Afghanistan and a key ally of the Americans, came to be depicted in stereotypical terms as a threatening warlord. This despite the fact that in his territory he made a point of building girl's schools, providing scholarships for Uzbeks to study abroad (mainly in Turkey), and setting up Afghanistan's first television channel known as Aina TV.

By the time I visited Dostum in 2003 and 2005, he had become disillusioned with the Karzai administration's corruption and disenfranchisement of ethnic Uzbeks. He complained to me of the government's lack of appreciation for his men's sacrifices in defeating the Taliban and of his depiction in the American media as a stereotypical warlord. He warned of dire consequences should he be

forced to release the thousands of Taliban troops he still held in a fortress prison in his home base of Sheberghan to the west of Mazar i Sharif. 'The Americans are obsessed with Iraq, but it is here that the Taliban and al-Qaeda operate. The Taliban are only biding their time, they will be back now that the Americans are focused elsewhere. In America they call Afghanistan the forgotten war but the Taliban have never forgotten it' he predicted to me in 2003.

As the regrouping Taliban began to sweep through the south in 2004 and 2005, Dostum grew increasingly impatient with the Karzai government's inability to wage an effective counter-insurgency. 'Give me 20,000 Uzbeks and we will crush the Taliban in a year just as we did the mujahideen in the 1980s,' he pleaded. But the Pashtun-dominated Karzai government was not about to rearm Uzbeks to fight fellow Pashtuns, even if they were Taliban. On the contrary, in 2008 Dostum was exiled to Turkey for beating up a rival who had betrayed him and his offer to use his horsemen to flush out the Taliban insurgents was rejected.<sup>61</sup>

However, in the summer of 2009 Dostum was allowed to return to Afghanistan after promising President Karzai the Uzbek votes in the August elections of that year. True to his word, Dostum, who was greeted at the Kabul airport by thousands of cheering Uzbek followers, delivered hundreds of thousands of Uzbek votes to Karzai in the summer election.<sup>62</sup> In return, he was reinstated as Chief of Staff by Karzai.

As of the summer of 2010, Dostum is restless and has begun to speak in dire terms about the reinfiltration of Taliban forces into his northern bailiwick. Clearly as a man of action he resents being sidelined while an enemy that stands for everything he despises inexorably continues to retake territory it lost to him in 2001.

In my final days with Dostum, he took me to his stables and showed me Surkun his famous white horse that he rode in the mountains with Tiger 02 back in 2001. He also showed me the horse that had been ridden by Commander Mark Nutsch, the head of Tiger 02. With a look of undisguised nostalgia in his eyes, Dostum said 'Commander Mark and his men fought like lions. One day if America has need of my services again it would be an honor to fight alongside those brave men again.' With the Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Tajiks of the former Northern Alliance growing increasingly leery of Karzai's outreach to the Taliban, Dostum may one day have his chance to fight the Taliban again. As Dostum told me in a recent telephone interview, 'History has come full circle and the Taliban are now back where they were in 1995. When the time comes me and my men will be ready to fight them again.'

## Notes

1. See the account by CIA leader 'Hank' Crumpton who led the CIA operations in Afghanistan in 2001 for more. Henry Crumpton. 'Intelligence and War. Afghanistan 2001–2002', in Jennifer Sims et al., eds., *Transforming US Intelligence*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005, 162–79.

2. See, for example, the riveting account of the charge found here: Romash Ratnesar, 'The Afghan Way of War', *Time*, 11 November 2001.
3. See, for example, Eric Blehm, *The Only Thing Worth Dying For: How Eleven Green Berets Forged a New Afghanistan*, New York: Harper Collins, 2010; Doug Stanton, *Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of US Soldiers who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan*, New York: Scribners, 2008; Gary Schroen, *First in: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2005; Gary Bernstein, *Jawbreaker. The Attack on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA's Key Field Commander*, New York: Crown Publishers, 2005.
4. See Central Command head General Tommy Frank's account, for example, wherein he states 'Facing determined enemy resistance, terrible weather, and mounting casualties among their indigenous troops, these (12) Green Berets used maneuver and air power to destroy a (Taliban) army the Soviets had failed to dislodge with more than half a million men.' Tommy Franks, *American Soldier*, New York: Regan Books, 2005, 217.
5. For photographs from these expeditions to visit Dostum, see <http://www.brianglynwilliams.com> under 'Field Research' Afghanistan 2003 and 2005.
6. The remainder of Afghanistan's population is made up of small ethnic groups like the Turkmen, Nuristanis, Balush, Pashai, and Aimaq.
7. For an insightful account of the Pashtuns' brutal conquest of the Uzbeks see: J.L. Lee, *The Ancient Supremacy: Bukhara, Afghanistan and the Battle for Balkh, 1731–1901*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996.
8. Dostum is a *nom de guerre* which means 'my friend' in Uzbek.
9. Yavuz Selim, *Dostum ve Afganistan*, Ankara: Grafika, 2004 (in Turkish).
10. For a fascinating video report on Dostum's realm at this time, see 'Dostum the Kingmaker'. Available at <http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=9054>
11. While the word 'warlord' is a relatively recent addition to the English language, probably based on the German word *Kriegsherr*, the concept itself is not new See Antonio Giustozzi, 'The Debate on the Importance of Military Legitimacy', *Crisis States Research Centre*, Discussion Paper no. 13, October 2005
12. For the best account of these events, see Ahmed Rashid, *The Taliban*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.
13. For more on Dostum's struggles, see Brian Glyn Williams, 'Writing the Dostumname. Field Research With an Uzbek Warlord in Afghan Turkistan', *Central Eurasian Studies Review* 6, no. 1/2 (Fall 2007), 2–8. Available at [http://www.cesr-cess.org/pdf/CESR\\_06\\_12.pdf](http://www.cesr-cess.org/pdf/CESR_06_12.pdf)
14. While most people focus on the al-Qaeda sleeper cells like the Hamburg Cell, which attacked the US on 9/11, al-Qaeda also fielded a conventional fighting force of several thousand fighters known as the 055 Brigade.
15. Interview with Batur Dostum, General Dostum's son, Sheberghan, Afghanistan, July 2005.
16. Interview with General Dostum in his compound in Sheberghan, Afghanistan, August 2003.
17. Dostum's claim was to a degree based upon the Afghan 'snow-ball' effect that would come from his seizure of the shrine of Mazar i Sharif. When Afghan fighters believe that the 'mandate of power' has passed to their opponents, they typically defect *en masse*.
18. George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Life at the CIA*, New York: Harper, 186.

19. See the actual suggestion made by Richard Clarke in the recently declassified memo 'A Comprehensive Strategy to Fight Al-Qaeda?' *National Security Archive*, 9. Available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB147/index.htm>
20. Hy Rosenthein, *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, Annapolis; Naval Institute Press, 2006, 176.
21. Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, 207.
22. For extraordinary video footage of Dave Tyson that made it on a *CNN Presents* 'House of War. Uprising at Mazar e Sharif'. Available at <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/presents/index.house.of.war.html>
23. Max Boot, 'Special Forces and Horses', *Air Force Journal* (November 2006). Available at <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/11/2146103/>
24. 'Interview. US Special Forces. ODA 595', *Frontline*, Public Broadcasting Service. Available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/campaign/interviews/595.html>
25. Robert Young Pelton, 'The Legend of Heavy D and the Boys', in Nate Hardcastle, ed., *American Soldier Stories of Special Forces from Iraq to Afghanistan*, New York; Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002, 2.
26. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002, 274.
27. Interview with General Dostum, Mazar i Sharif, Afghanistan, July 2005.
28. Robin Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*. New York: Random House, 2003, 65. 'Interview. US Special Forces. ODA 595'.
29. Ibid.
30. Charles Briscoe et al. *Weapon of Choice: ARSOF in Afghanistan*. Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2003, 123.
31. I was told by several Uzbeks who rode with the Americans in the campaign that they good naturedly made fun of the American soldiers who had a hard time fitting into the Uzbeks' wooden saddles. Interviews carried out in northern Afghanistan in 2003 and 2005.
32. Briscoe, *Weapon of Choice*, 125; And 'Interview. US Special Forces. ODA 595'.
33. The Taliban were far from being a group of tribal thugs. They had a small air force, the best artillery in Afghanistan, and approximately 100 tanks and 250 armored fighting vehicles, For an analysis of the Taliban army's fighting strength, see, 'The Taliban's Military Strength Prior to Hostilities', *Jane's Intelligence Review*. Available at [http://www.janes.com/defence/news/misc/jwa011008\\_2\\_n.shtml](http://www.janes.com/defence/news/misc/jwa011008_2_n.shtml). For more on the 055 Brigade, see Brian Glyn Williams, 'The Al Qaeda we don't Know. The 055 Brigade', *World Policy Review* (January–February 2009). Available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/19784878/The-AlQuaida-We-Dont-Know>
34. Story relayed by Lal Mohammad, General Dostum's second in command, Sheberghan, Afghanistan. July 2005.
35. Briscoe, *Weapon of Choice*, 127.
36. Interview with Bart Decker, a US Air Force Specialist from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron that fought alongside Dostum and provided close air support for him and his forces, Hurlburt Air Field, FL, December 2008.
37. Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare. Implications for Army and Defense Policy*, Strategic Studies Institute, 2002, 10.
38. This first paragraph was not released to the press but appears in Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, 71.
39. Jim Garamone, 'Wolfowitz Shares Special Forces' Afghanistan Dispatches', *American Forces Press Service*, 15 November 2001. Available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=44448>

40. The pictures Rumsfeld showed of US Air Force ground controller named Bart Decker can be found at <http://www.defenselink.mil/photos/newsphoto.aspx?newsphotoid=3741>
41. 'Remarks by Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, New York Stock Exchange, Wednesday, February 12, 2003.' *U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)*. Available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=328>
42. For more on the aerial role in the campaign, see Benjamin Lambeth, *Airpower Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand. 2005.
43. Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, 76–7.
44. Schroen, *First In*, 249–55.
45. Interview with General Dostum, Sheberghan, Afghanistan, July 2005.
46. The battle Dostum was referring to was eerily similar to Dostum's modern day campaign. In both battles a small group of Uzbeks moved against much larger enemies with 'divine' protection. This battle known as the Battle of Kul i Malik, 1512, pitted 3,000 Uzbeks against 40,000 Timurid troops. Dostum reckoned he had 2,000 versus 50,000 Taliban. For more on the battle of Kul i Malik, see Muhammad Dughlat, *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia; Being the Tarikh-i-Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar, Dughlát*, translated by E. Denison Ross. London: Curzon Press, 1893, 260, n.2.
47. Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, 77–8.
48. Woodward, *Bush at War*, 291.
49. *Ibid.*, 292.
50. 'Secretary Rumsfeld Speaks on "21st Century Transformation" of U.S. Armed Forces', Speech given at Fort McNair, Washington, DC, Thursday, 31 January 2002. Available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=183>
51. For rare combat footage of this campaign, see my video at <http://www.youtube.com/dostum2008>
52. Moore, *The Hunt for Bin Laden*, 69.
53. 'Interview. US Special Forces. ODA 595'.
54. 'Legislature Honors Kansas Warrior', *Capital Journal* (12 April 2002).
55. US Air Force close air support specialist Bart Decker who served with Dostum in the campaign showed me photographs taken of the destroyed column a few days after the attack. The images were of dozens of destroyed pickup trucks, many of them burned and twisted beyond recognition. Interview with Bart Decker, a US Air Force Specialist from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, Hurlburt Air Field, FL, December 2008.
56. Ratnesar, 'The Afghan Way of War'.
57. In our interviews Dostum grumbled that Atta had broken their agreement and entered Mazar i Sharif first in an attempt to claim it for himself.
58. Tony Karon, 'Rebels: Mazar-i-Sharif is Ours', *Time* (9 November 2001).
59. Raymond Whitaker, 'Fall of Strategic City Would Alter Course of Conflict War on Terrorism', *Independent* (UK) (10 November 2001).
60. 'The Death Convoy of Afghanistan', *Newsweek* (25 August 2002). For more on Dostum's depiction as ogre in the Western media, see Williams, 'Writing the Dostumname'.
61. Brian Glyn Williams, 'Dostum. Afghanistan's Embattled Warlord', *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 8 (17 April 2008), 1–4.
62. Brian Glyn Williams, 'The Return of the Kingmaker. Afghanistan's General Dostum Returns from Exile', *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 26 (20 August 2009), 9–11.