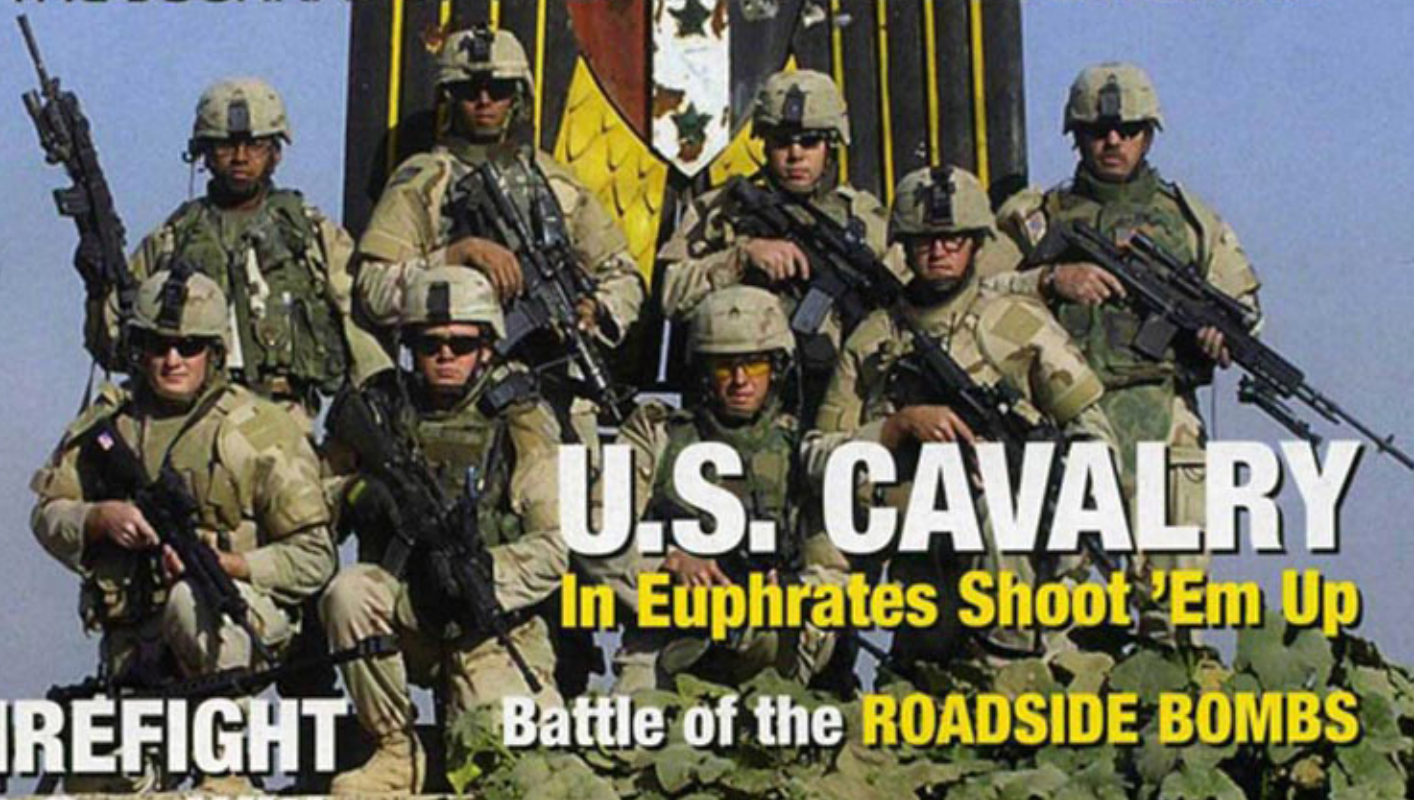


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EVERYBODY LOVES MASSOUD

Afghan Journal #3

Text and Photos
by Jim Keller

What a guy, that Massoud. Remember him? No first names necessary, he's just Massoud. He's everywhere in Afghanistan; at least his likeness is. Photos, posters, banners, calendars, you name it. What, the name doesn't ring a bell? Massoud who? Sorry, this country's getting under my skin and I must be assuming the world revolves around it, when, really, there's no good reason anyone outside of here would have much reason to remember the dead warrior now lauded here as "The Hero of Afghanistan."

Massoud was the Northern Alliance leader (or, warlord, but let's not let anyone hear us call him that, it's not polite) who was assassinated the

day before 9-11 by two al-Qaeda posing as journalists, who blew up their video camera/bomb when granted an interview with him. Side note: Assume al-Qaeda are stupid or cowardly at your own risk. Massoud, having survived as a Mujahadin commander during the Russian occupation and post-Russian battle against the Afghan commie government, then in battle against the other Muj warlords, then finally against the Taliban, was no fool; he had the two "journalists" cool their feet for a couple of days, supposedly vetting them before allowing them into his tent for the fatal "interview."

"The Lion of the Panjshir" was

Massoud's nickname because of his fierceness in defending his homeland, the Panjshir Valley, which is north of Kabul. Even when the Taliban finally managed to run him out of the valley, he picked and pecked at them as any good guerrilla general would. And that lion was obviously considered dangerous enough to warrant the assassination. Perhaps Osama bin Laden anticipated George Bush's ultimate response to 9-11 and didn't want the warrior lion Massoud around to help the Americans run him out of Dodge. Any way you cut it, Massoud's martyrdom has raised him to hero status, and by appearances, a trip around this country makes one think that everybody loves him.

The first thing welcoming one to Afghanistan, draped outside the terminal building of the Kabul Airport is a huge banner of Massoud – it's got to be three stories tall. Granted, it's flanked by an equal banner of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, but one can't help feel the shared billing is a slap to Karzai's face. Not that Karzai would object. Heck, remember, everybody loves Massoud. The city itself is dotted with banners and posters and billboards, and even woven carpets, in honor of Massoud. There is even a landmark roundabout called "Massoud Circle," though the statue there is just some pointy pyramid-type obelisk shape that has no symbolism to Massoud that I can figure out.

It doesn't end with the big-billing stuff. On the crowded streets, kids and teen boys, men even, hawk from car window to car window 8 x 10 color photos of the hero. And you find those photos displayed on car dashboards and rear windows, on bus windows, on shop windows – the guy's everywhere. The only problem so far is, there are too many different photo

poses of him. I'm just waiting for everyone to settle on the one definitive shot – call it the Che Guevara silhouette – and then it can go universal. On book covers, on broadsheet movie posters, on T-shirts, on sweatshirts, on ball caps, on neckties, on lapel buttons, on hand-painted sheet banners hanging fifty-foot tall from European university dormitory windows. Copyright the thing, and you can become a millionaire.

This Massoud phenomena isn't restricted to Kabul, either. Go to the provinces, and he's there too. Go to the farthest villages, and he's there. Little Toyota Corolla taxis, bouncing in the ruts and billowing up dirt and dust in clouds out where you'd think only camels trod – and there's a Massoud photo on the dash or taped to a window. On the windows and dashes of Afghan National Army pickups, and likewise on Afghan National Police pickups. On the dashes and windows of pickups and dark-tinted-windowed SUVs of the troops of rival warlords. You name it. And again, we're not just talking Kabul and Tajik country; we're talking Pashto land and Hazara and Uzbek land too.

Tajik, Pashto, Hazara, Uzbek? "Whoa, buddy, wait a minute," you're saying, "you've lost me." Did I fail to mention? Those are the four major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Pashto are the majority by far and rule the east and south, basically all of the lands that border Pakistan, and, interestingly enough, they are a huge ethnic group in Pakistan itself, split down the middle when the English randomly said "This here on this side is Afghanistan, on this side it's India," later to become Pakistan.

Second in population are the Tajiks, and for whatever reason not immediately evident to a visitor they like to consider themselves the rightful rulers of Afghanistan. Third, and

long considered the (insert the N-word here – sorry, there's no better way to put it) of Afghanistan, are the Hazara, the descendants of Genghis Khan. (See Khaled Hosseini's bestselling novel *The Kite Runner* for a pretty good sense of the Hazara's place in society from the 1960s to the present.)

Fourth are the Uzbeks, from up north, and SOF readers would know them as the army of the warlord Dostum, with whom those 5th Special Forces guys rode into battle on horseback. What SOF readers most likely don't remember is that that same Dostum is famous for slaughtering his hated Hazara neighbors by the semi truck-trailerful, but that's best left for the history books, as this post-Taliban era is blessed with a "can't-we-all-just-get-along" attitude. At least, that's what the U.S. and Coalition Forces want.

That's not a dig at the U.S. or CF. Most Afghans want the same attitude to prevail. Because it is an attitude that brings relative peace. Peace brings stability. Stability, prosperity. Prosperity, full stomachs. Massoud was a Tajik, and on the surface everyone seems willing to forget that and, as the billboards and banners announce, they are happy to make him the hero of "Afghanistan," all of it. Not just a Tajik hero, an Afghan hero.

The problem is, the four major ethnic groups really don't like each other. It's been bad blood for too many centuries. The Pashto don't even speak the same language, Dari (which is a form of Farsi), as the rest. Theirs is Pashtun. And here's the rub: A large portion of the Pashto also speak Dari, but do the others know Pashto? Don't hire a Tajik (Kabul) terp and expect to make it in Eastern and Southern Afghanistan, that's for sure. You'll be forcing the Pashtos there to speak Dari to him because, you guessed it, he won't speak any Pashtun, and

you'll have more doors closed on you than even partway open.

And that's where the hero-worship of Massoud fits in. It's easy, he's dead. He died a martyr. Whatever his ethnicity, who can speak badly of him? But ask a Pashto in private, in a whisper, what he really thinks of Massoud – even if he has his photo displayed, faded, on his Toyota's dash – and you'll get a shrug, followed by a shake of the head and an admission that, yeah, Massoud fought the commies and the Taliban and was a good man, but...but..."he is Tajik." Enough said. And you realize that if Massoud were alive today, there wouldn't be those billboards and banners and photos and woven carpets; he'd just be another warlord politician fighting for his share of the spoils pot. Sure, there is a possibility he might have been voted in as President, but then surely he'd be as hated as loved – such is the lot of a president, who has to try to bring everyone together and has to deal with the real, everyday, international problems of a country, not just wage war – but actually run a government.

There may be huge banners hung of President Karsai, but they are government produced and displayed banners. His framed photo hangs in government offices, but it sure isn't on car dashboards or rear windows. There are no woven carpets with Karsai's face on them that I've come across.

But there is one thing I've found about Karsai. Everybody seems to be willing to admit that he is trying to be fair in his government, sharing ministry positions with all the ethnic groups. Karsai is Pashto, did I mention that? And for those other ethnicities to admit that he is not abusing his position to establish the Pashto as the dominate group, well, if the future of Afghanistan proves to be peaceful and prosperous, then Karsai, as the president who guided it through these tough first years, may one day be considered a "Hero of Afghanistan." And he may get that woven carpet portrait.

And it's my own private hope, though I've never met the man, because I am rooting for this country, that it doesn't take his assassination to make him that hero. ☒

Jim Keller is the nom-de-plum of a freelance writer who was a Special Forces captain in 5th Group.

