
Soby, J. & Ch. de Ponfilly: A Valley Against an Empire, S. 132-147
A Valley Against an Empire

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(“A Valley Against an Empire” is the film-script from the film of the same name by the French makers Jérôme Bony and Christophe de Ponfilly. We believe that even without visual support the film-script is an interesting and poignant document. “A Valley Against An Empire” has been bought by the BBC and will be released in the near future. We would be pleased to forward inquiries about the film to the film-makers. - Editor)

AFGHANISTAN 1981

The Koran is our law
The Holy War is our life
Martyrdom in the name of God is our wish
Death to the Soviets!
Death to Stalin!
Death to Brezhnev!
Long live Islam
Long live the warriors

Interview with Homayoun, an Afghan student in Paris, 1981.

I learned of the invasion of Afghanistan from the Soviet soldiers. Obviously the invasion of one’s country and people by a foreign power provokes a reaction. And I think the French people understand this . . . quite well, because they were invaded and occupied by Hitler’s army. Therefore they can easily imagine the problems this invasion and occupation present to the conscience. It is true that Afghanistan was a country and I think the only one in the world which needed a revolution because the social gaps among the classes were so enormous.

But you, before the Soviet intervention in 1979, weren’t you communist?

Communist . . . the term needs to be defined. Rather I had so-called progressive ideas but they are ideas like others, probably.
Anyway when I say ideas like any others I say this today because I have realized that when one speaks of progress or communism or socialism, these are words totally deprived of any meaning in any case as far as Afghanistan is concerned right now.

Will you be able to go home someday?

I will go home and into the ranks of the resistance against the Soviet army.

In the foothills of the Hindu Kush, which extend the Himalayas into Afghanistan, the roads of contraband have become the paths of resistance.

We entered Afghanistan clandestinely with a caravan led by Aragoul. Since his liberation after two years of imprisonment and torture at the Pauli-Charki prison in the suburbs of Kabul, Aragoul has become a specialist in clandestine convoys.

He is responsible for the caravan, consisting of 50 horses and 60 people: the mujahidin, that is the soldiers of the faith, a blacksmith, a baker, precious-stone merchants and also a team of doctors belonging to the French association International Medical Aid, carrying 300 kg (600 pounds) of medicine from private donations.

Compared to the tremendous airlift operation which brought the 100,000 soldiers of the Red Army and their equipment to Kabul these expeditions are ridiculous. Yet, thanks to these expeditions, an umbilical cord links the Afghan resistance of the interior with the 2 million refugees in exile.

Besides the medicine, the caravan conveys weapons - Simenov rifles given by Egypt, one Ziguyak anti-aircraft cannon from Somalia - munitions, news and . . . Hope.

**Jérôme Bony**

We crossed the Afghan border only five hours ago and already in these somewhat idyllic surroundings we are plunged in total ignominy. Char Mansour, one of the mujahidin in the group, is the victim of an anti-personnel mine; the anti-personnel mines are dropped by helicopter throughout the countryside, they are camouflaged to look like the surroundings. People walk on them and are crippled by the explosion. Worse, some of the mines are made up to look like watches and bracelets or boxes of matches. People who pick up these objects, women or children in the villages, are also left crippled by the explosion.

**Interview with Frédérique II., International Medical Aid.**

What exactly happened, Frédérique, you were there?

Yes. We had just arrived, we were resting waiting for tea when
we heard a shot or a bomb, I don't know what it was. All the mujahidin as well as we hid behind the boulders waiting till it was over. Afterwards, we looked around, there was a group of men on the other side of the river. We were wondering what had happened. We thought there might be some wounded. And then we saw a man crawling across the stream waving to us to come over, they needed a doctor, we would see that the man's foot had been blown off.

What can you do?

We will have to amputate, there is nothing else to do.

Interview with Bertrand N., International Medical Aid during the operation.

How is the operation going? You waited quite a while for the medication.

We waited a long time for the drugs because they were transported by the horses which were . . . this material was divided up, part of it was way up front and part far behind, to such an extent that we had to wait more than an hour for the palpuim.

Dialogue between the doctors during the operation.

Look at those kids running around, there are mines all over the place!

Had it not been for the medicine, gangrene would have taken over and Char Mansour would have lost his right leg.

Anguish has now joined the caravan. The anguish of stepping on the right spot along a trail only 15 inches wide.

The limited destructive capacity of anti-personnel mines, similar to those used by the American army in Vietnam, seems to have been calculated by some Machiavellian mind: they wound but they don't kill . . . . Someone who dies in the Holy War becomes a martyr, but someone who is only wounded becomes a danger, slowing down the caravan, so vulnerable to attack from the air. Later, the victim will recall the terrifying situation in which he was wounded.

What methods of dissuasion for the Afghan people, who at all costs must keep their faith intact!

Our destination: the Panshir valley, 50 km (35 miles) north-east of Kabul. In order to get there by the north trail, these men must walk 15 hours a day for 10 days, a total of 400 km (300 miles), crossing three mountain passes at an altitude of 5,000 m (15,000 ft). Seemingly never-ending climbs over the precipice, across rock-strewn paths which make progress difficult. Crossing violent streams, the
plains under stifling heat, mountain passes where oxygen is rare and
blizzards threaten. Sleeping at night behind stone walls. Drinking tea,
eating bread and scarce pieces of fat, cold meat, poorly dressed with
bad shoes, the Panshiris never complain: they are trekking to the
Holy War . . . in song!

The horses, over-burdened, don’t always arrive at the end of the
trip. Many carcasses are strewn along the trail.

Except for the mines, there is no sign of Soviet presence: the
mountain passes are too high and cannot be controlled by helicopter.

THE PANSHIR VALLEY

The Soviet army and what is left of the regular Afghan army after
massive desertions control only 10 percent of Afghanistan. The
majority of the regions (districts) are resisting and many valleys have
kept or gained their liberty.

The Panshir valley is a thorn in the foot for the Soviets: it leads
to the strategic route linking the USSR to Kabul near the Salang pass
where guerillas ambush the military convoys. The valley is also a
symbol. Its organization is becoming a model for the other Afghan
provinces.

Surrounded by mountains on the East, the North and the South,
under pressure in the West by Soviet-Afghan troops, 100,000 men,
women and children have chosen to stay in the valley, to go on living
as if nothing had changed, as if there were no war.

Kabul is 50 km (35 miles) away. This proximity has not prevented
the Panshiris, since the arrival of the pro-Soviets in the government
and therefore well before the invasion of December 1979, from re-
fusing interference on the part of the central government in their
economic, cultural and religious life.

In July 1979, the governor of the valley, a teacher and several
policemen were killed. The central administration did not force
itself upon the valley and recalled all its representatives. Since then,
the Panshir has always been autonomous. But the valley lives a vicious
circle of guerilla warfare and reprisals. After two years of this war,
the valley pays the price and it’s heavy . . .

Bombed by Migs and Soviet helicopters the valley could inscribe
a long list of victims on its war memorial were there such a monument.
Most of the houses have been destroyed and all of the mosques. Why
the mosques? Because everything religious has become the number
one target of the Kabul government.

During the morning prayer the terrifying sound of the cannons is
heard. When we arrived home the helicopters began dumping bombs
and rockets, they destroyed the whole village.
(Was there any reason for this?)

No. My house was destroyed because I have a religious role, I am against the laws of the Soviets, and against their politics. Many other houses were also destroyed.

(How many dead?)

There were three, plus the wounded.

*The peasant's song*

My joy will be immense
when I will return to Panshir
my native land
What a joy to find
the one I have always loved
I will have
so much to tell her
All night long / I will reveal to her
my love / I will tell her / all my
thoughts and feelings
while singing, yes, while singing.

Oh God!

Since the beginning of the conflict, the peasants of the Panshir sow and reap their harvests under the threat of aerial attacks whose intensity strengthens when harvest season begins. An efficient agricultural system ensures this valley, cut off from the world, the most necessary food products. The whole population works in the fields.

In the Panshir, every single day of peace is a victory won by the *mujahidin* who hold the mountains and passes and the access to the valley over there, near Kabul. Their leader, the commander Ahmad Chah Massoud, was chosen by the population who appreciate his courage and intelligence. This leader has assumed full military and civilian responsibilities, at the age of 28.

For security reasons, Massoud never sleeps two consecutive nights in the same place. With a sense of organization, will and discipline, he has set up, in the valley, political institutions, founded on respect for democracy and faith in Islam. The responsibility is divided among five committees. Elected representatives of these committees live in each village in the valley.

First of all, a military committee, which takes care of recruiting and dividing up the weapons, clothes and food; this committee manages transportation consisting of a dozen trucks, which up to now have escaped the aerial attacks, which criss-cross the valley. Priority is given to transporting troops and food.

An economic committee, supervising supplies and levying taxes on
transplantation and commerce, manages the practical aspect of life for the whole valley. Only one type of currency is used here: the Afghani of before 1978. The Panshir naturally reject the new notes printed by the communists, a paper money system which will last as long as the worn-out bills.

The third committee deals with culture and propaganda. It distributes posters of the Jamiat Islami, one of the Islamic movements exiled in Pakistan. The leader of the group is Professor Rabani, Masoud's companion.

The job of the secret service committee is to collect all information useful to the resistance, in particular the dates of the forthcoming aerial attacks. Agents are everywhere, even in the General Staff at Kabul.

Finally, the judicial committee is particularly remarkable. Justice is not hasty. Prisoners of war are not immediately executed. If they are Afghan nationals they are incarcerated in this prison.

PANSHIR PRISON

A prison which is a rather exceptional institution in the Afghan resistance movement, which demonstrates the degree of organization and justice reached by the people of the Panshir. There are actually 80 prisoners who have been sentenced or who are waiting to be sentenced. Among them are 20 officers of the government army: the ordinary soldiers are released after seizure of their weapons and uniforms. Certain of them join the ranks of the resistance.

We saw no Soviet prisoners.

The other prisoners are militants of all ages from the Khalq or Parcham, the two Afghan communist parties. They are often teachers condemned, not because they represent knowledge, but rather, because they represent the central power and Kabul's doctrine.

Some were taken after an ambush on the route to Saleng, for example, two communist Afghans arrested in their car while on their way to the cement factory which they manage.

In spite of this apparent tranquillity the war is everywhere. Every day brings casualties (wounded) from the front. An 18-year-old man (shown in the film) had his arm blown off by shell fragments. He died the next day in spite of the care given to him at the hospital, organized and supplied as well as possible by two French doctors, Laurence and Philippe. They were the first to arrive during the spring of 1981. We filmed them as they turned the hospital over to Frédérique and Bertrand, who travelled with us.

Frédérique, International Medical Aid.

Well, as for us, when we get there, we’ll be a little lost. What did you find when you arrived for the first time three months ago, what has been happening?
Laurence, International Medical Aid.

Well, what happened . . . we were warmly greeted. They weren't expecting us and we told them we had come here to work for three months and that later more doctors would come and that we wanted to work for everyone, the civilian population as well as the mujahidin.

Frédérique.

What kind of pathology have you encountered, surgical or medical injuries?

Laurence.

As far as war injuries are concerned the first victim came eight days after our arrival. A grenade had exploded in the hands of a mujahid. So we did major surgery immediately. Later a mujahid commander who had been burned by napalm, burned 100 percent, he died 24 hours later. We had mostly bullet wounds.

Philippe M., International Medical Aid.

Special bullets, high speed, which means they provoke serious injuries when they penetrate the tissues and particularly bone fractures which are practically impossible to repair satisfactorily. Or the other hand, there is a specific wartime pathology, extremely important, a psychiatric pathology with serious personality problems. And of course . . . .

Laurence.

Philippe takes care of the mujahidin, I take care of the women.

Bertrand.

Were there other things?

Philippe.

Yes, there was wartime medicine and general medicine.

Laurence.

There was a whooping cough epidemic. I saw a lot of children with whooping cough. For three days I interviewed the women, asking them how many children they had and how many had died. From a group of 200 children 66 had died of fever, whooping cough, measles, stupid things, really simple ones. After that the women of the village asked me to teach them lessons; very simple ones, lessons in hygiene. Everything went quite well. We must keep that up. That’s what they want the most.

Inside the hospital, the new team is warmly welcomed by the Pan-shiris. During the French doctors’ absence the hospital continues to
functions thanks to seven Afghan nurses who were trained by Laurence and Philippe.

Their intervention is obviously limited by their lack of experience and training but they continued to ensure emergency care which has even included amputations!

The day after our arrival the patients flood in. For the whole Panjshir valley population of 100,000 there are three Afghan doctors of whom two are Khalqis. Because they are communists, they don’t necessarily have the patient’s confidence. As Bertrand puts it:

For the last two days we can see that the patients have heard of the arrival of the new team, the consultations take place at a rather rapid pace. I think that quite soon we will reach the same pace as our predecessors, that is about 60 to 70 people per day.

In the hospital two of the nurses are also interpreters, absolutely necessary for talking to the patients. It is important to note that these people have not seen a doctor in two years, that is since the beginning of the war. Some need only to be reassured, that they are in good health, but many others need care. There are various diseases: tuberculosis, parasitic diseases of the digestive system, pulmonary infections or diseases of the eye. The diseases are all the more serious in that there has been no medical care for so long, the level of hygiene is insufficient and there is of course, malnutrition, especially so in the case of the children.

The doctors have adapted themselves to Islamic custom, a curtain separates the women, they are treated by Evelyn, the nurse, and Frédérique.

Interview with Frédérique H., International Medical Aid.

What kind of medical schooling do you have?

I am a general practitioner, I don’t have any other background, I’m not a specialist.

A question which comes immediately to mind: why did you come to the Panjshir? Why do you take these risks?

That is kind of hard to answer just like that. I think that by instinct I’m attracted to a people who have a hard time in life and also a hard time gaining their freedom themselves and in Afghanistan, the mujahidin are fighting alone, for an ideal which I share and I knew they needed doctors, these people need us, so I came. But let’s be honest, I came for myself as well for the adventure, at least for a limited amount of time and with limited risks, also.
Emotionally, it must be quite hard too. When the accident of the mujahid stepping on the mine occurred, we looked at you, you were quite shaken.

Yes, I was. And as a doctor I am more directly concerned. We have to react immediately, we are responsible for what we do, we don't have time to wait or to weaken, we have to act immediately, but I was indeed quite affected.

MILITARY TRAINING

In the Panshir each and every civilian is a potential soldier. The metamorphosis nonetheless entails serious training. Massoud teaches guerilla tactics. His reputation has been made well beyond the confines of the valley. The Panshir is a leader in this field as well.

Interview with Walid, a resistance fighter.

Walid, why did you come here to Panshir?

Personally, I am a resistance fighter from the Kunar Valley. I came here to see Mr. Massoud to see if it is possible to send our groups here, and also for training, because in our province of Kunar from the technical point of view the mujahidin don't know how to wage war. Here in the Panshir there are real commandos.

How long does it take to get here from Kunar?

From Kunar to here it takes six days.

And Massoud's training is worth that?

Yes, it is worth more than that.

Training lasts at least two months for eight hours a day. New recruits learn their first lessons there. But warfare is not their job, for they are craftsmen, peasants, farmers, former students. They are simply fighting for the respect of their life style and their freedom. The resistance is not the work of a handful of mujahidin but of the whole population.

For these men, their participation in military operations lasts for periods of two weeks, between which they return to their families.

Interview with Ahmad Chah Massoud.

Commander Massoud, Western television spectators must be wondering how a small valley like yours, with five thousand men and only seven hundred weapons, manages to resist against an army reputed to be the most powerful in the world, the Red Army?
I think there are four reasons. The first reason is that my combat troops like to wage war against an enemy in order to attain *Jannah*; if we die we attain or reach *Jannah*.

*Jehad?*

*Jannah.*

You mean the Holy War?

*Jannah, Jannah*, the Garden of God... Yes, you know what I am talking about?

You mean that the *mujahidin* who die reach the Garden of God? They reach *Jannah* and because of that they are not afraid to die.

The first thing is the help of God. The second thing is that the *mujahidin* are all very courageous and now for the war they are complete, how do you say it, complete?

They are prepared.

They are prepared to begin the war, to continue the war. The third thing is the structure of the valley, the mountains and the rivers; for us it is an advantage, but not for the enemy. The fourth thing is that the enemy doesn't know us, he doesn't know the way and doesn't know the mountains and other things.

At the opening of the valley, the front is stabilized, a rather exceptional situation in this rather mobile war. The bottleneck of the opening leading to the valley is under constant pressure from the Soviet tanks.

Two days ago, the Soviet aircraft bombarded this village, the village of Shotal.

This village, attacked by Migs and helicopters, under constant mortar fire, is a heap of rubble. The Soviet Afghan troops are one or two miles away. As for the civilian population, they have found refuge in caves carved out of the mountains.

There thirty *mujahidin*, thirty soldiers, were sleeping in the mosque, but only one was wounded.

There, a rocket came through the wall?

Through the wall. Look, the wall fell down.

Yes.

**WEAPONS**

A Dachaka, heavy Soviet machine gun, a rocket launcher retrieved from the carcass of a helicopter. We arrived unexpectedly at the Pan-
shir weapon stock and repair shop. We didn’t see any American or Chinese weapons.

Commander Aoued, responsible for weapons.

We didn’t see anything but Soviet weapons.

Throughout this war in the whole Panshir Valley weapons were taken only from the Soviets.

Had he had a ground-air missile he would proudly have shown it to us.

In the Panshir an estimated 80 percent of the weapons and ammunition are recovered from the enemy while the remaining 20 percent come by caravan. Before the arrival of Arogoul’s caravan the mujahidin were practically out of ammunition. The adversaries use very powerful weapons. These (shown in the film) fragmentation bombs for example. The idea behind these weapons is simple. A pre-cut metal ribbon surrounds a heavy load. The explosion sends off thousands of fragments which rip up everything they hit in a radius of hundreds of feet.

What do the Panshiris do with them when they recover them from the grounded helicopters? They take them apart in order to analyse the mechanism, they reconstitute them and use an electric wire hooked up to two 1.5 volt batteries and re-establish the firing mechanism. Looks like tinkering but they do the best they can with what they’ve got. And it’s this Afghan ingenuity which causes the Soviets so much trouble. And courage takes care of the rest. As for mines, they are hooked up to a detonator set at a certain distance and designed to attack the mine-clearance squad.

This lightweight cannon (shown in the film) with explosive bullets is the latest invention in Soviet weaponry. Only the firing pin is missing.

Troops at attention.
Disciplined, properly clothed, good shoes, these men have spent the last two weeks on the front. The encounters take place mostly at night. During the day they must hold out at all costs in spite of helicopter attacks, a shower of mortar.

Massoud under the trees talking to a mujahid.

What happened?
They came from the other side.
Did they spot the Dachaka?
No, they are setting up communications but they haven’t spotted our positions.
(In French) It's a retreat, then? It's the mujahidin's retreat?
Yes.

The helicopters came to bomb Shotal, but luckily because of the fire from the Dachaka and the Zigouyak which was taken from the Soviet tank, the helicopters were downed. One fell next to a large fabric factory and the other on the plateau of Shamoli.

The one flying around now is over which position?
It is flying above the troops. Allamondine is a great hunter of helicopters.

How many has he shot down?
Up to now he has shot down five helicopters.

What did he shoot them down with?
With a Dachaka.

The one over there?
Yes.

And now are you going to move it?
Yes, now they are coming down from the mountain to move the Dachaka.

At one point on the front near Choteul Massoud’s men have been overtaken by the Soviet Afghan troops who have gained a position on a ridge. With mortars they pound at the Panshiris’ positions. Informed by messenger (the resistance fighters do not have a radio) Massoud organizes the counter-attack. The assault to regain the lost position is planned for the night. In groups of 33 men, the Panshiris head in the direction of the next skirmish.

During the night mortar fire is considerably closer. No sooner had we left the house where we were spending the night than it was blown to bits. Total: three dead among the Panshiris including one of Massoud’s lieutenants.

Also victims of this war, the soldiers of the regular Afghan army and the young Soviets of the annual call-up coming from the Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia; they are totally unmotivated, unadapted, so vulnerable.

In spite of its power, the Red Army doesn’t always have trustworthy equipment. Vehicles break down, bombs don’t explode. As in all the battlefields of the superpowers Afghanistan is a testing ground for special weapons. Nerve gas, as well as incendiary bombs
composed of napalm or phosphorus, such as this one.

*Interview with Massoud, examining a piece of the bomb.*

What kind of bomb is it?

It is a piece of burning bomb.

We have brought back from Chotcul a piece of this bomb and have turned it over to a specialized laboratory in France: emission spectrography and other analyses have shown the presence in high doses of phosphorus and magnesium. It is in fact an incendiary bomb.

*An old man, talking to Christophe de Ponfilly.*

Did the Soviets bombard here?

They destroyed all the houses.

It’s the Soviets who burnt and destroyed their houses.

We can’t do anything. There is no ammunition. There are no rifles. The people of the Panshir are poor; if they had rifles, if they had munitions, you would have seen how we would have cut off their heads.

Other victims of the war, the children, shown here with weapons. Obsessed by the Soviet invasion, traumatized by the bombing, even then they participate the best they can in the resistance.

Along the only road of the valley: the remains of the last four Soviet interventions (April and August 1980, January and September 1981). Four times since the invasion in December 1979, the Soviet-Afghan troops from Kabul have blown up the resistance’s hold on the front and have managed to cover 60 km (40 miles) by land in the direction of the end of the valley. Harassed by Massoud’s commandos, hidden in the mountains, the Soviets have never been able to hold the Panshir valley for more than three weeks. Each time they have retreated, leaving behind them hundreds of casualties and a considerable amount of equipment.

Once the soldiers have left the scene of the ambush, the dealers arrive. Everything is recovered. Everything which can be transported disappears. Taking apart the remains he (a scrap-metal merchant) chooses the pieces of metal which can be used in fixing the vehicles which still work.

In the villages, some houses have been destroyed as many as three and four times. Nonetheless reconstruction continues and all the neighbours lend a hand. The incredible spirit of the Panshiris who, in spite of repeated bombing, unendingly rebuild the image of peace, is extraordinary.

In spite of its natural resources, grain, fruit, trees, herds of goats,
cattle, sheep, the valley is not self-sufficient. At night, men and women and even children cross the fighting zone in order to reach the Big Bazaar of Kabul and bring back products which cannot be found in the Panshir. Rice, for example, whose price has tripled in three years.

Paradoxically, some goods come from the USSR. One-litre cans of oil, for example, or matches. Supply is not regular. If bags of fertilizer can be carried across the mountains with not too much trouble, the 20 litre (5 gallon) jerrycans of gasoline are hard to carry and do pose a problem.

Before 1979, at the time of the pro-Soviet government, the inhabitants of the valley had destroyed the schools which had become the symbols of atheist propaganda. The children are back at school today. Religious instruction with translations of chapters from the Koran, but also general education in geography, mathematics, history and science, etc . . . Teaching these children that life is not only earned with weapons is difficult.

Interview with a child.

Where did you go?
Behind the village.

What did you do there?
What did you touch?
Did you catch something?
A rock.

What was it?
A grenade . . .
It made noise.

What this seven-year-old child thought was a toy was in fact an anti-personnel mine which blew off his hand. The doctors were not there when the explosion occurred. His father covered the boy's hand with mud to stop the bleeding.

God is great
Mohammed is our guide
Islam is our faith
The Koran is our law

Oppressed in our own land
We will fight against the
Soviets' vassals
We will
Our force is our faith.
Neither rebels nor outlaws nor wild mountaineers, we discovered in the Panshir Valley an organized people's resistance being developed. It has already won a battle over despair, disorder and fanaticism...

As each day goes by, the Panshiris add a new verse to their song. An impossible war between an empire and a valley, between a country which has never been enslaved and a superpower which has never backed down.

*Interview with Massoud.*

Do you think you are going to win?

Yes, yes of course.

What makes you think so? What makes you think you are going to win.

I believe we are going to win. It is clear.