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Massacre a presage of war's failures

By Chris Sands

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QALA-I-JANGI, BALKH - At the entrance of Qala-I-Jangi, the soldier in charge held out his mobile phone and asked whose face was on the screen. It was General Dostum, the infamous Afghan warlord who allied with the US in 2001. "Who in the world doesn't know him?" the soldier boasted.

Nearly eight years after it all began, this place best sums up the tragedy of the US-led occupation.

A large rusty gate marks the main point of interest inside the fortress. A sign in bad English used to hang to the left, giving a crude account of its history. Those words have fallen down and they now rest among the dirt and weeds, fading in the sun.

What happened here over a century ago is irrelevant. But an event during the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom, hinted at briefly with a mention of the "devil Taliban", is crucial to understanding much of what has gone wrong since.

In Nov 2001, fighters connected to Mullah Mohammed Omar's movement surrendered to Abdul Rashid Dostum, whose militia was part of the US-backed Northern Alliance. Fearing for their lives, they were taken to Qala-I-Jangi, close to the city of Mazar-e-Sharif.



December 2001 - Afghanistan's Interim President Hamid Karzai, right, leaves after a cabinet meeting with Rashid Dostum, center and Qasim Fahim, defense minister.(AP)

The next morning the prisoners rioted. Johnny Michael Spann, a member of the CIA who had been carrying out interrogations, was killed. He became the first American casualty of the

war.

A fierce battle ensued and a number of the prisoners were shot dead with their hands tied behind their backs. Others sought refuge in the basement of a small building.

In the presence of British and US Special forces, gunfire and grenades were poured down onto them. So was burning petrol and water to flood them out.

When the carnage finally ended, only 86 of the 300 to 400 detainees remained alive.

Today, only two issues from Qala-I-Jangi still warrant attention. The first is the death of Mr Spann. The second is the capture of John Walker Lindh, a Californian Muslim convert who had come to Afghanistan in the spring to join the Taliban's fight against the Northern Alliance.

Few questions are raised regarding the massacre and its consequences, either because the world has forgotten or because it doesn't care. The fact that the US funded, supported and fought alongside a warlord known for his sadism has been buried. Instead, the image of Americans on horseback riding into battle with him is perfect Hollywood material.

As for the prisoners, little has changed in the way the media view those associated with the Taliban. In 2001, the movement included conscripts and young volunteers who believed they were defending Afghanistan. This was ignored in the drumbeat for revenge following 9/11. The men who died were extremists and terrorists, pure and simple. For much of the British and US press, they still are.

The section of fortress where the massacre took place is now silent and overgrown. Old bullets, shells and rockets are scattered around, some put together neatly in rows.

Freshly harvested grain lies in front of a monument to Mr Spann. The domed structure is decaying and the inscription on the centrepiece describes him as "a hero who sacrificed his life for freedom".

Overlooking all of this is the remains of the building where the detainees hid. In the basement, down a staircase of twisted metal, swarms of flies buzzed around in the pestilential darkness.

Mr Lindh was trapped here for days with a bullet wound before he found himself being filmed by CNN. He was eventually sentenced to 20-years in jail.

The war was, of course, supposed to have been won soon after the carnage at Qala-e-Jangi. But now, nearly eight years later, it drags on. Security is worse than at any point since the Taliban regime collapsed and the insurgency is getting stronger.

At the time of writing, 630 members of the US military have died in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The exact number of civilians and Talibs who have died will probably never be known.

Mr Dostum, meanwhile, has pledged his support for President Hamid Karzai's re-election. Other men with appalling pasts have also thrown their weight behind America's preferred

candidate.

Today the occupation is justified in much the same terms as the invasion was. In London and Ottawa it is likened to the fight against Nazi Germany, in Washington it is seen as a war of necessity, not choice.

This conflict appears destined to last long into the future, and there is little to differentiate those the US and Nato call friends and those that are deemed mortal enemies.

Wars have always been about failure and squander. Standing here, the sheer waste of it all is almost too unbearable for words.