

CNN documentary on Mazar-i-Sharif prison revolt: film footage documents US war crimes

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“House of War: The Uprising at Marzar-e-Sharif,” broadcast August 3 on CNN, documents the events at the Qala-i-Janghi prison fortress in northern Afghanistan last November. Broadcasting footage shot by German, American and other film crews, much of which has never been seen by a US audience, the program records events that, by their conclusion, would leave at least 400 captured Taliban soldiers dead.

Pieced together, scenes from the documentary serve as an indictment of the US military and government for war crimes in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions and international law. The CNN documentary clearly confirms that what transpired at Mazar-i-Sharif last year can only be described as a massacre, led and orchestrated by US forces.

Some of the most harrowing images come near the conclusion of the program, on the final night of the prison siege, as the fortress was bombed by US air strikes. That night, warplanes dropped 2,000-pound bombs on the compound. AC-130 helicopters gunships, firing up to 1,800 rounds a minute, as well as tanks were ordered in by US forces on the ground. The next day, witnesses describe—and the cameras record—a scene of horrific carnage, with dead bodies and body parts everywhere.

Events leading up to this final assault depicted in “House of War” confirm that this slaughter was in no way a defensive response of the US and Northern Alliance forces, but was provoked and orchestrated by Special Forces and CIA operatives on the scene with authorization at the highest levels of the Bush administration and the US military.

Footage near the beginning of the program shows Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum and his forces during the negotiation of the surrender of Taliban forces to the Northern Alliance near Mazar. Curiously, several CIA agents, donning sunglasses and scarves, accompany him. The program’s narrator notes that while Dostum indicated that captured Afghans would be allowed to go home upon surrender, and foreign Taliban should be handed over to the UN, this notion was considered a “slap in the face to the Americans.” The implication of the CIA agents’ presence at the surrender negotiations is that they were on the scene to see to it that such a “slap in the face” did not take place.

It is well-documented that during the weeklong siege of Konduz which preceded the Mazar-i-Sharif uprising US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made repeated statements calling for the killing or imprisonment of all captured foreign Taliban. In direct violation of the Geneva Conventions—which expressly prohibit

discrimination on the basis of race, nationality or religion—all of the foreign Taliban were subsequently transported to the Qala-i-Janghi prison.

Some of the most indicting footage involves the treatment of the prisoners following their transfer to the fortress. The program shows them being taken out in groups with their hands tied behind their backs to the prison courtyard, where they are interrogated by CIA agent Johnny Michael Spann and another agent referred to as “Dave.” The narrator indicates that the US operatives are attempting to single out the terrorist “leaders” among the prisoners.

The two CIA men strut among the prisoners, barking provocatively in their faces: “You are terrorist,” and, “You come to Afghanistan to kill people, no?” The prisoners—who on their surrender had been led to believe they would be allowed to return home—were now confronted by the two American bullies and feared for their lives, with legitimate reason. CNN freelancer Robert Pelton comments: “It started to sink in to these prisoners they weren’t going anywhere. The Americans want to use them for intelligence.”

Alex Perry from *Time* magazine underscores this point: “Threats have been made to the Taliban and that could quite plausibly have set off the revolt. You tell people they’re all going to die, and then they talk to the CIA and that completely undermines what Dostum said about guaranteed security and so on.”

The situation quickly unravels. The narrator reports that “the revolt was under way” and the Taliban prisoners have seized the main weapon’s store in the facility. A German news team films “Dave,” running from the courtyard with his Kalashnikov and pistol, as he arrives at another area of the fortress. He reports that prisoners have overpowered Spann and he believes he is dead. “Dave” says he shot and killed four prisoners, and he believes Spann killed two. Obviously shaken, he nervously attempts to fasten his pistol under his waistband. He then uses the German crew’s satellite phone to contact the American Embassy in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, reportedly to call in air support.

German reporter Arnim Stauth (ARD-TV) says that “Dave” is in charge at this point, and tells them, “It’s time to go.” “Dave,” the film crew and Northern Alliance forces make their way out of the fortress under Taliban fire and find a car waiting for them. The narrator reports that “allied and US reinforcements” and “a few special forces” then began to arrive on the scene. The stage is set for a brutal assault on the fortress and its captives that will last for

two more days. Among those on hand are the British Special Air Service commandos and the US 10th Mountain Division troops. The air raids begin.

One of the first bombs hits the wrong target, reportedly killing six Afghans and wounding five Americans. The Americans don't appear overly concerned about bombing their allies. Some of the reporters on hand are enthusiastic about the show of military might. Cameraman Damien Degueudre comments about one of the bomb blasts that it's a "beautiful explosion ... pretty impressive" and one comments later that reporters came "looking for adventure—looking for a story. It's wild, just a wild story."

The Special Forces want the journalists to do them a favor, with one asking, "We do a lot of cool stuff and we never get to see it—can we get a copy of your video?" A member of the Special Forces warns them, however, "Whatever you do, don't be inside the fortress tonight," indicating that a scorched earth campaign is planned.

As members of the German film crew accompany a number of the Special Forces as they direct the operation, one US trooper orders them to turn their cameras off—"I'm going to f—ing shoot you," he says, clearly nervous over the operation being filmed. One of the reporters retort: "You're not in America. You're a guest, just like we are." In the end, they are allowed to continue filming, and the footage they capture is both gruesome and damning.

One journalist describes the actions of the Northern Alliance forces, clearly operating under the direction of the Americans, as the "carpet-bombing approach." A number of them go to the top of the wall of the fortress and begin shooting into the prison to slaughter any Taliban prisoners still left alive after the air strikes. They shoot through windows. They pour huge cans of gas into the building followed by grenades. Finally, a tank is brought in and few final shots are fired.

The Northern Alliance troops exhibit particularly heinous behavior. A reporter recounts how the soldiers were seen throwing rocks at the head of a Taliban prisoner they found alive. Footage shows the dead body of a Taliban being propped up as a sandbag as the soldiers continue to fire into the compound.

At the time, an Associated Press photographer who entered the area reported seeing the bodies of about 50 prisoners, who appeared to have been executed with their hands tied behind their backs with scarves. Northern Alliance soldiers were seen cutting the scarves with knives and scissors, evidently to destroy evidence they had been executed. There were other news reports of the corpses of Taliban prisoners propped up in a gateway, each killed by a single bullet to the head.

On Wednesday, November 28, General Dostum returned to this scene. The siege continued into Friday, when the US and Northern Alliance pumped cold water into the fortress in a final effort to rout the prisoners. On Saturday, those who miraculously survived the three-day assault finally walked out, giving themselves up.

Among those who survived was John Walker Lindh, the so-called "American Taliban." Lindh is filmed shortly after his surrender describing the assault, clearly disoriented and in pain. He describes the treatment of the prisoners holed up during the siege, "Yesterday we were bombed; with airplanes, missiles, guns. They

poured gas and burned us; poured water down into the basement. Every single one of us believed we were going to die."

The documentary at this point flashes back to CIA agent Spann's interrogation of Lindh, who has been singled out for questioning and is seated with his hands tied behind his back. Spann says: "The problem is he needs to decide if he wants to live or die, and die here. I mean, if he don't wanna die here, he's gonna die here 'cause this is ... we're just gonna leave him and he's gonna sit in prison for the rest of his f—ing short life. It's his decision."

Robert Pelton comments that "in a strange way, they sort of threaten him with death." Spann continues: "We can only help those guys that want to talk to us. We can only get the Red Cross to help so many guys." In another violation of the Geneva Conventions, the CIA agent indicates that medical treatment will be withheld if Lindh does not cooperate.

The narrator concludes that John Walker Lindh has subsequently pleaded guilty to charges in the US and sentenced to 20 years in prison, and that the majority of those who survived the massacre at Mazar-i-Sharif have been transferred to Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. No mention is made of the fact that these prisoners are being held indefinitely, without being charged; again, in violation of international law.

"House of War: The Uprising at Marzar-e-Sharif" leaves one with the impression that the US authorities allowed journalists to film and report on the events because they anticipated it might result in useful propaganda for the US war effort; an object lesson for would-be rebels who might challenge US policy. While the program does indeed illustrate the brute force of the military campaign, at the same time it depicts an operation tenuously controlled by its commanders.

Most importantly, despite the CNN's efforts to provide a "balanced" presentation of the events, the savage methods of the US military and its collaborators are clearly on display. The camera doesn't lie. The actions depicted in the program further substantiate that what took place last November in Mazar-i-Sharif was a war crime, and that the responsibility for the slaughter rests with the highest levels of the United States government and military.

An interpreter, Jauibullah Qureshi, speaks at the end of the program to the level of bloodshed at the prison fortress, and the one-sided attack perpetrated by the Americans and their allies: "Just one American was killed here, Mike Spann," he says. "But more than three hundred of them [Taliban] were killed here, more than three hundred, and I saw many of them with my own eyes."



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