

## **Lion of Panjshir**

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9-10<sup>th</sup> Grade Category, Third Place**

I thought about the articles in the newspaper I had seen recently and realized that only horrible and grisly things are reported about Afghanistan and the other Middle Eastern countries. There is hardly any mention of strong, and able Afghans who made or are making a positive difference. I wanted to learn about someone who worked for justice; someone who worked to better the lives of his countrymen. Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Lion of Panjshir, has done just that. But who is this Massoud?

The history of Afghanistan is a long and bloody affair. For the past century different warlords, terrorists, and religious extremists have been vying continuously for control. As a result, this once noble nation has deteriorated into a war-torn hell. Today the extreme Islamic organization named the Taliban is largely responsible for sinking Afghanistan deeper than ever before into war, poverty, and fear. The Taliban meddle in every aspect of an Afghani's life. They use an extreme interpretation of the Koran, the Islamic holy text, calling for horrible restrictions on the Afghani people: "The Taliban had closed all girls' schools and women were rarely permitted to venture out of their homes...The Taliban had banned almost every conceivable kind of entertainment..." (Rashid 2) To stand against the Taliban means certain death. Yet in 1996, Ahmed Shah Massoud began a resistance that would last five years and culminate in his assassination.

When the Taliban first arrived in Afghanistan they were welcomed as a peacekeeping force. Massoud, 40 Taliban representatives, and government officials met in Kabul to discuss the differences between the government and the Taliban, and to reach a compromise for a system of government. However, instead of negotiation, the Taliban launched a massive offensive against Kabul. Massoud barely escaped. It was then that he vowed to destroy the Taliban: "We consider this our duty -- to defend humanity against the scourge of intolerance, violence, and fanaticism." (superpatriots.com)

And defend it he did. Massoud was already an established leader of the people, having earned their devotion during the war with the Soviet Union twenty years earlier. (superpatriots.com) His guerilla fighting skills acquired during that war proved invaluable while fighting the Taliban. However, for all of Massoud's genius in the field, he could not

maneuver so deftly in the political arena. Each time he attempted to lay the groundwork for a government administration, the Taliban ruined his plans. It is not difficult to see why: "The future government should be formed through elections by the people. Men and women should take part. The only form of government, which can balance the different ethnicities, is democracy." (Ahmed Shah Massoud, quoted in superpatriots.com) A democratic government-with women taking an equal role-was the opposite of what the Taliban wanted for Afghanistan.

Sadly, this extraordinary man was assassinated on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001-two days before the Al-Qaeda attacks on America. (Anderson 6). Two suicide bombers disguised as journalists were sent by Bin Laden to kill Massoud. (They used a bomb disguised as a television camera). (Anderson 237). It is widely suspected that Bin Laden did not want such a powerful man allied with the West. If Massoud had witnessed September 11<sup>th</sup>, he would have been a key player in America's retaliation against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Massoud's death was by no means in vain; it simply underlined his total commitment to his beliefs. All of Massoud's actions define moral courage. Massoud knew that his duel with the Taliban would end in his death yet he continued to fight because of his moral courage-his willingness to stand in the way of evil. Each offensive and every speech was made because of his belief in a free Afghanistan, an Afghanistan of equality and peace. Massoud was the one true, strong voice of the Afghani people. He refused to just give in to the Taliban and live a life of fear and oppression. He spent 31 of his 48 years fighting for justice in Afghanistan. That war is still being fought today, as his fellow Afghanis continue to resist the Taliban. "Our policy was always to have good and friendly relations with everyone. But we never have accepted being oppressed and we will never accept it."(Ahmed Shah Massoud quoted in superpatriots.com).

Massoud's life reminds me of a poster in my third grade classroom that read: "What is right is not always popular, and what is popular is not always right." I know that this little poster has been the basis of my moral development because that saying has stuck with me through all these years! However, Massoud's story has strengthened my beliefs and encouraged me not be afraid of speaking out against what is wrong and evil. The worst I can expect from going against the crowd is a few barbed comments, but he risked his life and ultimately gave it for his principles. In addition, I believe I am now a messenger of Massoud's cause and beliefs. Too many people in America think that all Afghanis are Islamic extremists and torturers. This stereotype casts all those who are

working for freedom and justice into suspicion. It is selfless men and women like Massoud who must be recognized and honored. Perhaps if we see their commitment and courage in the face of evil, we can begin to strengthen our own values.

**“Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.”**  
~ C.S.Lewis

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