

Afghan Air

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After weeks of bombing in Afghanistan it is debatable that the air war is being won. There have been so many own goals and civilian casualties that the accuracy of American weapons and their guidance systems must be called into question. There have been far too many civilian casualties. Hitting hospitals, old people's homes, food depots and ordinary anti-Taliban villages is unforgivable. We are only being told a fraction of the story. The public doesn't just want revenge and news spin, they want answers and they want results. They want strategy that works. The phrase 'High Tech Bully' has been used in America and it fits the bill very well. Anything apart from real action and body bags.

Have we for instance been told about the mystery of the American helicopter undercarriage? Special forces it would appear last week tried to attack what they thought was a soft target in Afghanistan and beat a quick retreat winching the rest of the wreckage up with them, so there was no proof of their mistakes. They then talked about hard resistance and Afghanistan being a 'tough nut' to crack. It is a war of propaganda and pictures, belief and commitment. It is a war between Allah and Mammon. Between the Koran and the computers. Between Osama bin Laden and President 'Smoke them out' - High Noon - Bush. It is the 'Not so Mad Mollah' versus John Wayne. It is the cunning and skills of seventh century AD desert warfare against the 21st Century gadgets and helicopters. It is the one war we could have done without.

But 'high tech' guerrilla war behind lines is nothing new to the Arab world. Who was it who taught the Arabs to blow up trains? None other than a couple of very respectable British guerrilla leaders, Colonel Newcombe and Lawrence of Arabia. The Arab tribesmen got a taste for demolition and in return were promised freedom from Turkish domination and a state of their own. Alas the only train ever to run in Afghanistan was out of action when I visited it in 1974. Housed in a small run down shed next to the museum lay a couple of 1909 saddle tank engines that had been brought piece by piece up the Khyber Pass. The track was only two miles long and for the personal use of the King. It connected his town residence in the centre of Kabul to his summer residence. The museum was in those days gold mine of Central Asian artefacts including early Buddhist statues from the Kushana period. No doubt this has all been destroyed in the fighting over the last ten years and looted. Maybe the Americans will finish it off.

But to return to the ethics of air warfare. At least the British, when they bombed villages on the North West frontier, would drop notes first telling the villagers that it was in their best interests to vacate the villages the next day when the bombers came. But then it depended on which language the notes were written in and whether they could read. What is interesting is the scale of the RAF operations. First used in Mohmand blockade in 1916, aircraft were used again in Afghanistan in 1919, but again in Mahsud, 1919-1920, in Waziristan in 1921-1924 and again in 1925. In 1930-31 against Abdul Gaffer and the Redshirts, in Mohmand in 1933 and again on the NW frontier in 1935 to say nothing of South Persia, Iraq, Kurdistan and Palestine. It was in Kurdistan that aircraft were first used to transport troops and also to drop mustard gas. So bombing from the air is nothing new; but these actions were often in association with large numbers of troops on the ground. Without that link you can never hope to achieve anything lasting.

And what of the aircrews? There were no helicopters in those days to whisk the crew back to base if their aircraft got shot down or more likely if there was a blockage in the fuel pipe or a bit of the engine fell off. This was all open cockpit stuff with bi-planes and Biggles; But the safety of the crews was not left totally to chance; They were issued with 'ghoolie chits' - One of the Afghan specialities is to return your prisoners minus some of their more important personal articles. These 'chits' or pieces of paper written in several languages and promised to pay the bearer a large bag of gold if they returned the aforesaid airmen intact back to base. No aircrews would ever fly without these 'ghoolie chits'.

What really worries me is that the air war far from achieving its aims, is turning public opinion against the Americans in a way they will never understand. Afghan refugees who would not fight for the Taliban, will however fight for their country. Maybe the money spent on bombs would have been better spent on a massive firework display;

During the fifties in Malaya the British won the 'war against communism' by winning hearts and minds and slowly re-gaining control of the land and returning areas to safe havens. A lesson the Americans singularly failed to learn

in Vietnam. What worries me most is that our country is being drawn into a war that we do not understand and that we cannot fight, by a country that has one of the worst records for intervention in other people's affairs.

A special relationship, but for whom ?