

## Who Helped Osama Bin Laden Escape Tora Bora?

Contributed by Yvonne Ridley  
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I had the privilege recently of meeting some brothers who fought in Afghanistan against America and Britain. No doubt if the authorities knew their identity they would be wearing orange jump suits by now, squatting in cages in Guantanamo Bay.

One thing that struck me about these brothers was how principled they were ... going on jihad for ideals almost forgotten in a selfish world corrupted by greed and power. The driving force that led them into battle in the mountains and caves of Tora Bora was no different to that which propelled 2800 men AND women from the United States to fight in the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

There was no less than 60,000 young people from the West who fought in the International Brigades. Thousands of young Brits also went to take part in the conflict - they even fought on opposing sides depending on their political beliefs. It was the first major military contest between left-wing forces and Fascists. The Republicans fought to maintain the Republic while the Nationalists sought to restore the monarchy.

The Republicans, or Loyalists, received aid from France, the Soviet Union, and Mexico while the Nationalists received troops, tanks, and planes from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The Spanish Civil War, specifically the anti-Fascist side, became a cause célèbre in the United States. Writers and artists including Ernest Hemingway, Muriel Ruckeyser, and Robert Motherwell paid homage to the struggling Republic while famous Baritone Paul Robeson sang for the international brigades.

Rick Blaine, the protagonist of the 1940s film classic Casablanca, struggled against Fascism in Spain, as did Robert Jordan, the main character in Hemingway's novel For Whom the Bell Tolls. In Britain we had George Orwell, author of 1984, who headed out to Spain.

The war continued until March 28, 1939, when Nationalist troops, led by General Francisco Franco, overcame the Spanish Republic's forces and entered Madrid. Those young men and women who survived returned home to resume normal lives. They certainly were not treated as terrorists or enemy combatants.

Young men and women around the world still go off to follow their ideals and then there are those who serve in the Israeli army, an army which terrorises, murders and maims. But when they finish their active duty, they return home without fear of being persecuted, arrested or detained.

The same can not be said for the young Muslim men I met. Their heroics, bravery and the martyrdom of their comrades can never be discussed openly. Yet they all fought for the same sort of ideals and principles as those in the International Brigades. Instead, their derring do and actions can only be whispered about in select circles.

Not that these young men want to boast about their actions. It took some time to get Shaheen from the Midlands of England to talk about his time as a jihadi. He went to Afghanistan in the spring of 2001 with the intention of living and working in a pure Islamic state, so sick was he of Western excesses.

He says he was inspired to make Hijra in the belief that it was his duty as a sincere Muslim to immerse himself fully in an Islamic way of life. It was a decision which nearly cost him his life &ndash; and it has left him with deep emotional scars which will outlast the now fading shrapnel wounds on his left arm.

Shaheen, in his mid-20s, was studying in an Afghan madrassa on the outskirts of Jalalabad when George W Bush vowed to invade if the Taliban did not hand over Usama Bin Ladin. It was made clear to Shaheen that he would be expected to take up arms to fight, but any romantic notions he had of becoming a mujahideen were quickly dispelled as he and other ill-equipped men took on the might of the US and British military and the Northern Alliance soldiers.

Within weeks of the start of the one-sided war on October 7, 2001, he and several hundred other Taliban and Al Qaida fighters found themselves pinned down in Tora Bora as American B52's released hundreds of 500lb bombs overhead.

&ldquo;The unit I fought with, although poorly trained, had become experts in the art of firing mortars right into the heart of the opposing forces. The Northern Alliance fought strictly for mercenary and personal revenge reasons, whereas most of the Taliban and foreign fighters were possessed with a religious zeal which terrified our enemies.&rdquo;

Running his hand through his long, dark beard, he paused thoughtfully and added: &lsquo;'Even if some of the brothers did feel scared, they were spurred on by the cowardliness of the Americans who used the Northern Alliance mercenaries as human shields.

&ldquo;When the Americans returned with bursts of semi-automatic fire, we would laugh out loud enough for them to hear or shout takbirs. This was a psychological technique which utilised the American&rsquo;s own propaganda of fanaticism against them.&rdquo;

Shaheen remembers vividly the day Bin Ladin escaped &ndash; he thinks it was around mid-December 2001. &ldquo;We positioned ourselves in a reverse pincer movement amongst the mountains,&rdquo; he says, &ldquo;leaving a central group which fired mortar rounds into the Northern Alliance. As they scattered and lost formation, we picked them off at will.

&ldquo;This prompted the Americans to send in Chinooks and try to drop in soldiers immediately in front of the Northern Alliance line, hoping that the Mujahids would scatter and give the Americans enough time to push the front line forward.

&ldquo;What was happening in fact was that many of the Arab and Chechen Mujahideen had stayed forward to sacrifice themselves so that the Sheikh and his protectors could escape as the Americans concentrated the fighting at the front line.

&ldquo;As the Americans dropped in, the battle-hard Chechens, Arabs, Uzbeks and some Pakistani volunteers were waiting. I saw that the helicopters were so low that RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] were being used to knock out the fuselage. We took out six helicopters, although the Americans insisted this was due to mechanical failure.

&ldquo;Some of the brothers began to talk of taking the fight back to the times of the Prophet Mohammed and fighting the Americans with swords."

I wonder how history will treat Shaheen? Once this War on Terror is discredited, maybe he will be recognised officially as a Mountain Warrior and treated with the same respect as those thousands of young Westerners who went off to fight in the Spanish Civil War.