

Battle of Qala-i-Jangi

The **Battle of Qala-i-Jangi** (also incorrectly referred to as the Battle of Mazar-i-Sharif) took place between November 25 and December 1, 2001, in Northern Afghanistan, following the invasion by United States forces to try to overthrow the Taliban, which it had accused of harboring Al-Qaeda operatives.

Hundreds of men, many from outside Afghanistan, surrendered who were believed to have been fighting with the [Taliban](#); they were held as enemy combatants for interrogation at [Qala-i-Jangi](#) fortress by United States, British and [Northern Alliance](#) forces. The 300-500 prisoners, having expected to be freed after surrender, rebelled and the fighting escalated into one of the bloodiest engagements of the [War in Afghanistan](#). Northern Alliance fighters, assisted by British and American [Special Forces](#) and air support, took seven days to quell the revolt. They killed all but 86 prisoners.

The only U.S. fatality was the [CIA](#) officer [Johnny "Mike" Spann](#), the first American to be killed in combat during the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Among the surviving prisoners were two American citizens suspected of fighting with the Taliban: 21-year-old [Yaser Esam Hamdi](#) and [John Walker Lindh](#).

In October 2004, after years of detention without trial, Hamdi won a landmark [US Supreme Court](#) case, *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld* (2004), which affirmed the right of U.S. citizens to [habeas corpus](#) and trial. He was released from United States custody without charges. He was deported to [Saudi Arabia](#), where he had grown up and where his family has lived since his childhood. John Walker Lindh was also held for years in detention.

The Taliban surrender

On November 24, with the military situation in Northern Afghanistan becoming critical, many Taliban commanders agreed to surrender to the [Northern Alliance](#) general, [Abdul Rashid Dostum](#). Between 300 to 500^[1] foreign fighters (mostly from [Pakistan](#) and [Arabic](#)-speaking countries of the Mideast), believing that they would later be set free, drove to Mazar-i-Sharif and surrendered their weapons. Included in the group were some men caught in the area at the end of the fighting.

As the United States forces wanted to question the fighters about possible links with the [Al Qaeda](#) network, they transferred the men as prisoners to *Qala-i-Jangi* ("the war fortress" in [Persian](#)), a 19th-century fortress that [Dostum](#) had previously used as his headquarters and ammunition depot. Dostum claimed the surrender was a "great victory" for the Alliance,^[2] a bloodless success that would allow the future reconciliation of citizens of Afghanistan.

The uprising

On November 24 the foreign Taliban suspects were transported to the fortress, now turned into a prison. The prisoners had not been searched, and some had concealed weapons during the surrender. On the day of the surrender, prisoners with grenades committed suicide and killed two of Dostum's commanders in separate incidents at the makeshift prison. Despite the four deaths, the allies did not reinforce security at the prison.^[3]

On the 25th, two [CIA](#) officers, [Johnny "Mike" Spann](#) from the highly secretive [Special Activities Division](#), and Dave "Dawson" Tyson, an [Uzbek](#) speaker and area expert,^[4] arrived at Qala-i-Jangi to carry out the interrogations.^[5]

The CIA officers questioned the prisoners, especially [John Walker Lindh](#). At the time, the interrogators noticed only that Lindh was a European-looking prisoner and different from the others, so he was singled out. Spann asked him, "Are you a member of the [IRA](#)?" (The Taliban had advised Lindh to claim he was Irish to "avoid problems.") (Part of the interview is shown on British Television (Channel 4 news). Approximately two hours after the interviews began, the prisoners attacked Spann, Tyson and the few Northern Alliance Guards.^[6]

The prisoners overran Spann and some of the other guards, as well as capturing the southern half of the Qala-i-Jangi fortress, including the armory. The prisoners took a large store of [AK-47s](#), [RPG](#) rocket launchers, [mortars](#) and ammunition.^[7]

With Spann missing in the chaos, Tyson escaped to the northern and more secure part of the fortress, where he was trapped with a television crew from the German [ARD](#) network. He borrowed their [satellite phone](#), and called the U.S. embassy in [Uzbekistan](#), requesting reinforcements.^[8] Tyson specifically requested no air support, due to the proximity of allied Afghan forces. The Afghans also brought reinforcements: their personnel and a [T-55](#) tank entered the compound and started firing into the prisoner-controlled area.

Several other television crews arrived on the scene of the battle, ensuring it got wide media coverage. The successive stages of the fighting were filmed extensively, providing rare footage of special forces units in combat.

At 2:00 PM a mixed Special Ops team, formed with nine [U.S. Special Forces](#) and six British [Special Boat Service](#) operators, arrived and joined the Afghans firing at the prisoners from the northern part of the fort.^[citation needed] From 4:00 PM until nightfall, they directed nine airstrikes against the entrenched prisoners, who continued to put up a fierce resistance. Despite Tyson's requests, the U.S. aircraft dropped several 500-pound precision-guided bombs to try to destroy the armory, which was serving as a firebase for the prisoners.

The next day, the Alliance soldiers set up a [command post](#) near the Northern gate, to direct their tank and mortar fire.^[citation needed] By mid morning they were joined by U.S. forces divided into three teams, a close air support team designated CAS1 that went inside the fortress along the bottom of the northeast tower to direct bombing strikes into

the southern courtyard, a second close air support team designated CAS2 that positioned itself near the main gate of the fortress and a QRF or Quick Reaction Force consisting of four more Special Forces soldiers, a Navy surgeon, and eight men of the [10th Mountain Division](#).

At 11:00 pm, a [GBU-32](#) guided bomb, weighing 2,000 pounds (957 kg), directed by the Special Tactics Air Force Combat Controller (CCT) on the CAS-1 team, called in the JDAM. The pilot mistakenly punched in the wrong coordinates, hitting the Combat Controller's position, killing four (some sources say 30^[2]) Northern Alliance soldiers on the northeast tower above the CAS-1 team, destroying a tank and injuring all members of the CAS-1 team, including five U.S. and two British Operators.^[8]

That night two [AC-130](#) Spectre gunships circled over the fortress (callsigns GRIM 11 and GRIM 14), firing thousands of rounds at the prisoners. The main ammunition depot was hit, creating a huge explosion which continued to burn throughout the night.^[9]

By the morning of November 27, prisoner resistance had slackened. The Alliance soldiers mounted an attack supported by tanks and APCs and, by the end of the day, they had recaptured most of the fort. The Americans recovered Spann's body, which the prisoners had [booby trapped](#) with a grenade.^[8]

In the basement of a central building, a holding cell was occupied by men who refused to surrender. Northern Alliance fighters shot rifles into the area, threw in grenades, and finally poured oil and lit it afire. This failed to kill or dislodge all the fighters.

On the 28th, General Dostum arrived and tried to persuade the last prisoners to surrender, to no effect. The next day, he ordered the basement flooded with frigid irrigation water.^[10] The final Taliban fighters surrendered on 1 December. Of the estimated 300–500 prisoners brought to the fortress, only 86 emerged alive from the flooded basement, including John Walker Lindh.^[11]

Aftermath

Afghan soldiers looted the bodies of the fighters, extracting gold teeth. They killed at least two wounded prisoners.^[11] American soldiers found a number of the dead with their arms tied behind their back.^[12]

Of the 86 prisoners who survived the battle, one was found to be American citizen [John Walker Lindh](#), who had moved to Afghanistan to help the Taliban battle the [Northern Alliance](#). Shortly after the battle, a journalist working for [CNN](#), [Robert Young Pelton](#), managed to interview Lindh. Lindh was later repatriated to the United States to face charges of [treason](#).

In early 2002, the other surviving prisoners were transferred to [Camp X-Ray](#) at the newly constructed [Guantanamo Bay detention camp](#) at the U.S. Naval Base at [Guantanamo Bay](#), [Cuba](#).

For his actions during the battle, [Major](#) Mark Mitchell, a [U.S. Army Special Forces](#) officer, was awarded the [Distinguished Service Cross](#), the first such decoration to be awarded since the [Vietnam War](#).^[13] Additionally [Chief Petty Officer](#) Stephen Bass was awarded the [Navy Cross](#) to for his actions while attached to the British [Special Boat Service](#).

Mike Spann, the only U.S. fatality, was recognized as the first American killed in combat during the U.S. 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. For his "extraordinary heroism" in fighting off the prisoners long enough to allow his colleagues to escape, Spann was posthumously awarded the CIA's [Intelligence Star](#).^[14] Because the Intelligence Star is considered analogous to the [Silver Star](#), the Department of Defense allowed him to be buried at [Arlington National Cemetery](#).^[15] At Spann's memorial at the Arlington National Cemetery, officials said that, after being attacked, Spann "fought with his [AK-47](#) until it ran out of ammunition, then drew his pistol and emptied it, before turning to hand to hand combat which saw him shot".^[16] Members of a German television crew said they had watched Spann talk with prisoners. He asked them who they were and why they joined the Taliban. They massed around him. "Why are you here?" Spann asked one. "To kill you," came the reply as the man lunged at Spann's neck.^[2]

Mike Spann's family visited the fortress after his death. Afghan doctors on site at the time of the riot told the Spann family the following account. They said they "thought Mike might run and retreat, but he held his position and fought using his AK rifle until out of ammo, and then drew and began firing his pistol," Spann's father said. Because Mike was fighting, the doctors were able to run to safety. They told his family that only reason that "they and several others were able to live was because Mike stood his position and fought off the prisoners while enabling them the time to run to safety".^[2]

Controversy

Due to the high number of prisoner casualties, and the use of heavy weaponry against them, the Northern Alliance and the coalition were accused of breaking the [Geneva Conventions](#) by using disproportionate means.^[17]

Abdulaziz al-Oshan, one of the detainees, later summarised the incident and told American authorities at [Guantanamo Bay](#), "They called it an uprising and it's not; it's some kind of [massacre](#)".^[11] [Amnesty International](#) called for an independent inquiry,^[18] but the U.S. and British governments rejected this. They argued that the fierce resistance of the uprising fully justified the use of airpower and heavy weapons against the prisoners.

The allied forces were criticized for mismanagement of the prisoners, which was believed to enable the uprising. The fighters were not properly searched, and some carried grenades into the prison. Dostum later admitted this had been a mistake.^[2] Also, as Qala-i-Jangi had been until recently a Taliban base, many of the prisoners had been there before and knew its layout. Dostum had planned to hold the men at a nearby airfield, but the U.S. was using it to ferry in supplies.

By questioning the prisoners in a group, rather than separately, protected by few guards, the interrogators put themselves at risk with men known to be dangerous.^[*citation needed*] [George Tenet](#), director of the CIA, dismissed the accusations of mismanagement, and praised his agents as "heroes".^[19] In the journalist [Bob Woodward](#)'s book *Bush at War* (2002), he describes Spann as a hero whose actions saved the lives of many.^[20]

Representation in other media

- In the documentary *The House of War*, film maker [Paul Yule](#) and [Robert Young Pelton](#) provided a detailed account of these events. Interviews and footage from CNN, ARD, and elsewhere (Dodge Billingsley and recovered interrogation footage) show Mike Spann and Dave Tyson moments before the uprising.
- [Robert Young Pelton](#)'s *The World's Most Dangerous Places* one-hour special, "Inside Afghanistan," details his time with the U.S. Special Forces team (ODA 595). They fought with Dostum's soldiers. Pelton learned that Lindh was a U.S. citizen and interviewed him; he later returned Lindh to his compound for protection during the uprising.^[21]
- [Doug Stanton](#)'s book, *Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of U.S. soldiers Who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan*, opens with an account of the battle.
- [Frederick Forsyth](#)'s novel *The Afghan* includes a partly fictional but detailed account of the battle and its context.

References

1. [^] Estimates of the number of prisoners vary: some sources place their number at 300 ^[1], others at 400 ^[2], others at 500 ^[3].
2. [^] ^a ^b ^c ^d ^e [Alex Perry](#), "Inside the Battle at Qala-i-Jangi", *Time Magazine*, 20 December 2001, Retrieved February 20, 2007
3. [^] Perry, Alex, "Inside the Battle at Qali i Jangi", *Time Magazine*, Dec 1, 2001 (same or different as article above marked for Dec. 20?)
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6. [^] [George Tenet](#), *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* 2007, pp. 221-224. ISBN 978-0-06-114778-4.
7. [^] Berntsen, Gary and Ralph Pezzullo. *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA's Key Field Commander* 2005, p. 252. ISBN 978-0-307-23740-8
8. [^] ^a ^b ^c [The house of war – www.cnn.com](#) – Retrieved February 20, 2007^[*dead link*]
9. [^] Dodge Billingsley on location account of the event and post action interview with AC-130 105mm gunner
10. [^] [Boot, Max](#) (2006). *War Made New*. p. 373. ISBN 978-1-59240-315-8.
11. [^] ^a ^b ^c [Worthington, Andy](#), *The Guantanamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison*, [Pluto Press](#). ISBN 978-0-7453-2665-8, 2007
12. [^] Justin Huggler, "[How our Afghan allies applied the Geneva Convention](#)", *The Independent*, 29 November 2001
13. [^] [Afghanistan SF leader gets first DSC since Vietnam](#); <http://www.army.mil/>; – Retrieved June 28, 2007

14. [^ "CIA Honors Slain Agency Officers at Annual Ceremony Press Release. Director of Central Intelligence, CIA. Archived from the original on 2006-05-13".](#)
15. [^ Bob Woodward, *Bush At War*, Simon and Schuster, 2002, page 317.](#)
16. [^ "Johnny Michael Spann, Captain, United States Marine Corps, Central Intelligence Agency Officer". Arlington National Cemetery Website.](#)
17. [^ Luke Harding, Simon Tisdall, Nicholas Watt & Richard Norton-Taylor. "Fatal errors that led to massacre", *The Guardian*, Dec 1, 2001.](#)
18. [^ Richard Norton-Taylor."SAS role in fort deaths questioned". by *The Guardian*, Dec 15, 2001.](#)
19. [^ "Spann described as a hero". CNN, Nov 28, 2001](#)
20. [^ Bob Woodward, *Bush At War*, Simon and Schuster, 2002, page 317](#)
21. [^ See www.comebackalive.com – this is apparently the source for this statement](#)

External links

- [Photo gallery of the uprising](#), CNN
- [Robert Young Pelton's account of the battle](#), National Geographic
- [Robert Young Pelton, "The Truth About John Walker Lindh", Kathryn Cramer, 24 January 2006](#)
- [Video footage of American and British Special Forces at Qala-i-Jangi](#), YouTube
- Damien Lewis book *Bloody heroes* based on SBS soldiers fighting in the Qala-i-Jangi fort against the prisoner uprising (March 8, 2007). ["Gitmo's Guerrilla Lawyers: How an unscrupulous legal and PR campaign changed the way the world looks at Guantanamo."](#) *Opinion Journal*. [Archived](#) from the original on 17 July 2007. Retrieved 2007-07-15