

ISSN : 2454-6429

Vol. IV

JUNE 2018

No. 1

# EXPOSURE

THE JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

(A Peer-Reviewed Journal)



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The Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

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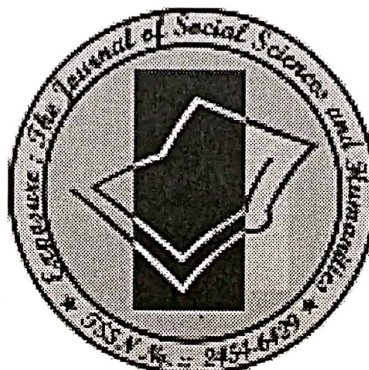
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## FILM REVIEW

### Beyond Military Exploits and Gunfire: Reviewing *12 Strong: The Declassified True Story of the Horse Soldiers*

(Starring: Chris Hemsworth, Michael Pena, Michael Shannon,  
Navid Negahbon)  
Prasun Banerejee

#### ABSTRACT:

Based on a military campaign that took place after 9/11 attack, in the North-Western theatre of Afghanistan -*12 Strong* is an accurate, no-nonsense, brutally factual war movie that keeps the audience absorbed till the dying seconds. The director Nicolai Fuglsig has been spot-on in narrating the fraction-ridden Afghan politics after the last Russian tank rolled out of Kabul in 1989. The rise of Taliban, the Taliban-Al-Qaida nexus and the post 9/11 desperation of the U.S. to avenge the destruction and deaths have been depicted frame-by-frame, with not a shot extra. Stellar performance by Chris Hemsworth, stunning cinematography and fluid storytelling have ensured a permanent place for this movie in the Hollywood's Hall of Fame reserved for all-time great war movies. A touching story of converting a mission impossible into a mission possible.

#### KEYWORDS:

Afghanistan, Taliban, Al-Qaida, Northern Alliance, 9/11 attack, Hollywood, Military Operations, U.S. Special Forces.

January 2018 witnessed a game changer in the world of cinema. Based on a true story that happened in northern Afghanistan in 2001, the movie *12 Strong: The Declassified True Story of the Horse Soldiers*, directed by Nicolai Fuglsig, has shown that there are true incidents and military exploits which can outclass imaginative scriptwriting and screenplay. No place and requirement to imagine - just depict the reality. May be *12 Strong* would change the way in which majority of the films are conceptualised and executed. It looks like the future of cinema.

Hollywood's penchant for converting real military exploits into cinema has always been there. Dozens of films have been made on such real military operations and true stories - but very few of them could stick to the real incident till the end; being ruthlessly forced by cinematic compulsion and popular choice to deviate from the trajectory (Hitler's death sequence in Tarantino's *Inglorious Bastard* is a classic example of such cinematic deviation). Only a handful of movies could withstand the pressure and turned out to be magnum opus without compromising an inch of reality that soaked the earth with sweat and blood. This true to the fact ingredient makes *12 Strong* a stand out one.

Leading the pack in this genre of film will be two other masterpieces. One from Steven Spielberg- *Munich* and another from Ridley Scott – *Black Hawk Down*. In *Munich*, Spielberg stuck to the facts of murder of the Israeli athletes during Munich Olympic inside Olympic village campus and the subsequent retributive action taken by Mossad, who literally ferreted out each and every accused from every crevices of this planet, and avenged the killing of their countrymen. Spielberg is a master story teller, and his forte lies in being brutally realistic in his approach to narratives and in his clinical precision in portraying human characters in the time line. *Munich* is a signature Spielberg creation with Eric Bana playing the Mossad operative, assigned the task to locate and liquidate.

*Black Hawk Down* is another classic based on a true story which was converted into film retaining all the factual realities. The blood curdling Civil War in Mogadishu (Somalia), where the entire political, social and economic control was usurped by the ruthless warlords is the backdrop of this epic. The U.S. Special Forces operation to restore the norms of civilization has been portrayed with unbelievable accuracy and pace. The film is a story of the battle of Mogadishu also known as the *Day of the Rangers* after the elite group of soldiers who were involved in the operation. This was adapted from a book by an American journalist Mark Bowden – *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*. Stunning visuals, great cinematography, and a pacy narrative have made *Black Hawk Down* one of the pioneering works in this genre.



On the other hand, *12 Strong* is more political. A detailed political understanding of the convoluted Afghan politics in the post Soviet era, particularly after 1990, is necessary to appreciate the craftsmanship of storytelling and screenplay. After the last Soviet tank rolled out of Kabul in 1989, Afghanistan became a fractured landscape with areas of control divided and demarcated between warlords. Thus Abdul Rashid Dostum, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Barhuddin Rabbani, Ahmed Shah Masood had their fiefdoms and liberated territories. They were divided clan wise into Tajik (Ahmed Shah Masood), Uzbeks (Abdul Rashid Dostum) puritans like Hekmatyar, Shia Militia groups and so on.

The film opens with a subtle human touch as we see Captain Mitch (Chris Hemsworth) tying the lace of his daughter's shoes - the innocent baby girl had her eyes on a TV set, watching cartoon picture; the wife busy with domestic chores, the captain was on leave - on leave from the battle field, Special Forces Headquarters, and spending time with family, probably he had not enjoyed in years. The TV set suddenly started showing a breaking news as the most audacious attack on United States happened - smoke spiralling out of a collapsing twin tower, and the news channels kept blowing America under attack. The world's mightiest military power was under attack, and their pride was collapsing with the falling twin towers, and the nation was in a state of shock by this unbelievable, dastardly, audacious attack on the U.S. on U.S. soil. The captain's reaction was first of disbelief, then and after the momentary loss of words and thought, he reorganised himself quickly as the man in uniform in him started taking control of the body and mind. Unshaven, uncouth, informal, he reported back to the Head Quarter. The girl was too small to understand that the smokes on T.V. would change her father's life and the family forever. Her papa had decided to take on the enemies in his own inimitable manner and like every war, innocence became the first casualty.

Mitch was ready to go for the jugular of the enemy and requested for his team - a team trusted and efficient - a team that had won many battles and more impotently was like a family who were ready to undertake an almost mission impossible - without battling an eyelid.

The operation Head Quarter was K2 - situated within 100 miles of Afghanistan's northern border- probably in Uzbekistan. The fun frolic and brawny military barrack camaraderie soon got transformed into gloom and despair as the 12 men for this special mission started realising that they might not come back alive. Some tried to write the last letter to their families, some lied on their back and kept on gazing at the ceiling. We see the warrant officer (Michel Shanon) whose son had refused to formally see him off - being angry that his father was again going to undisclosed destination for



another agonisingly long period and the instinct of a father only compromised by the call of duty - looked on - eyes vacant, listless. The 12 men were strong, very strong – but they too were human.

After that the movie was on an accelerator. The team was airdropped somewhere in Northern Afghanistan could connect with the Northern Alliance of Ahmeed Shah Masood and after initial acrimonious exchanges – they could iron out the egoistic issues and set off on horseback. Primary target was to reach Mazar-e-Sharf.

It was a long, arduous and treacherous path. The Taliban were well entrenched and being funded by Osama's Al Quida; the Taliban were a formidable force. The Northern Alliance had limited area of influence and was no match for the Taliban's with far greater military and human resources at their disposal. The stage for an epic battle was set.

What has really been impressive about this movie that it didn't try to superhumanise the characters. They knew that without air support they wouldn't be able to reduce the Taliban's artillery – so air support was requested. They did their bit by providing exact latitude longitude of the nearest Taliban base, observing it from the nearest vantage point. Air support had its limitation particularly in the undulated, hilly terrain of northern Afghanistan – so even after the repeated 'drops' – the Taliban remained in sufficient number and with huge ferocity. There came the bravery. The attacks on the remaining component was organised in a blitzkrieg fashion sweeping away the battle hardy Taliban before they could realize what had hit them. It was swift, precise and often almost hand to hand combat. The 12 Strong marched ahead, surprising the K2 Base Commander – who didn't give them such of a chance, but still had given the nod as the US was desperate for retribution. As they advanced through the ravines of Afghanistan, there was excitement in the base camp. They continued to fight and eventually reached Mazar-e-Sharif, at the cost of one innocent boy – a Northern Alliance Kid fighter and with one of their own very seriously injured.

The operation was never officially acknowledged by US Govt. for obvious reasons but in recognition of their supreme act of patriotism and bravery – a statue of a soldier on a horse back was built at the World Trade Centre – a symbol of America's pride and patriotism.

The concluding part is emotional and touchy but I would refrain from telling the magnificent ending that this movie had keeping it undisclosed for the readers to see and feel. The end is a tear jerker in true sense.

*12 Strong* is thus a portrayal of patriotism, supreme sacrifice for the nation, and an accurate depiction of the geopolitical situation of Afghanistan post 9/11. A tale so absorbing, so gripping and so accurate – that it has become a documentary on the crisis – beyond military exploits and gun fire.



The movie has beautifully captured this aroma of Afghan politics as we see that the 12 American Special Forces who enter Afghanistan, rather airdropped, were helped by northern Afghan militia known as Northern Alliance - in the early stage. The daring dash towards Kabul began and we see a hard hitting no nonsense political war movie which has every ingredient to keep you glued to your seat. The aura of Masood in the northern part of Afghanistan and his strategic alliance with US were very accurately showcased.

Written by Ted Tally and Peter Craig, and directed by Nicolai Fuglsig, *12 Strong* has a strong cast led by Chris Hemsworth as captain Mitch Nelson of U.S. Special Forces. Michael Sharon as the Chief Warrant Officer, the Iranian – American actor Navid Negahban as the Afgan Warlord and a pack of powerful performers who have delivered a superlative performance. If poetry is what you can not translate- as Robert Frost once suggested, then art is one you can not define. In his book *How to Read a Film*, widely considered as the Bible of cinema – James Monaco has made an observation that cinema is beyond this bits and bytes. That's true but the technical and mechanical components are very essential accessories of a good cinema. What we commonly called the making of cinema always deserves a special mention for any movie. From that perspective too, *12 Strong* scores seriously high. Long shots are really soothing, extreme close ups have been carefully placed not to overload it with undue emotional quotient. Use of long shot, wide shot, mid shot and cowboy shot have been used in the same scene with seamless transition. The application of mid wide shots in action sequences made it very organic. The Mise-en Scene of cinema craft has been immaculate.

*12 Strong* is thus an unforgettable portrayal of a real but unadvertised military campaign – a true story of the highest valour and supreme sacrifice by U.S. Special Forces - up against an enemy that takes no prisoner. A must watch.