

# The Lion of Afghanistan

► **By Michael Mountain**

*Our work for the animals is a work of the soul.*

“The King of Beasts has become a sacrificial victim in a world gone astray.”

In every war, there are one or two photographs that come to symbolize the essence of the conflict itself. Think of the raising of the flag at Iwo Jima, or the image of the naked, nine-year-old girl running, terrified, down a street in Vietnam.

In the new war in which we now find ourselves, the moment of the collapse of the Twin Towers has been etched irrevocably into our minds. And now, months later, in a different way, so too has the photo of Marjan the Lion at the Kabul Zoo.

The 25-year-old lion's history is sad enough in itself. Donated (whatever that means) to the zoo in Afghanistan when he was just a cub, Marjan lived in a small concrete compound, looking on as the Soviets came and went, as the local warlords feuded around him, and then as the Taliban took over. He lost one eye and was blinded in the other when, out of sheer spite, someone threw him a grenade and he innocently picked it up and began to play with it.

As the latest war wound down around him, and his photo appeared all over the world, donations poured in to help him and the few other animals that had survived at the zoo. This outpouring of help was truly heartwarming. (But it was too much, apparently, for a member of Britain's parliament, who rose in outrage to ask that tired, old question: "How come so much money is being sent to help animals when there are people who need help, too?")

Throughout the years of horror, Marjan and his fellow animals were looked after by a handful of caring zoo keepers. Finally, those good people were able to give him

the food and medicine he urgently needed. A few days later, he passed away. But perhaps he knew, during that last, brief, period, that he was not alone in a world of hell, and felt the prayers and concern of millions of people out there who had heard about him and wanted to help.

So, what was it about the Lion of Afghanistan, among all the other animals at the zoo, not to mention a host of wildlife that was shattered during the bombing raids, that touched such a deep chord in us all?

Perhaps, in part, it was that the King of Beasts is such a powerful symbol in our religious and mythological traditions – from the ancient biblical Lion of Judah to the Lion King of the modern American musical.

And while we have grown used to sheep and goats and cows being sacrificed on the altars of food or medicine or ancient religion, to see the King of Beasts become the sacrificial

victim of humankind's hatred and folly is, somehow, just desperately wrong.

Marjan tells us something that, deep down, we already know: that our relationship to nature – and to our fellow humans – is profoundly out of joint.

The Blind King was imprisoned, humiliated, starved, wounded, and laid low. Would it be too much to say that, in his own way, he died for the sins of a world gone astray? Will his kind, like Aslan the Lion in C.S. Lewis's famous children's stories, find a way to rise again one day?

As he looks out at us in his final portrait, we know, at the core of our being, that if he and we are to rise again, it will only be when kindness and respect for each other and for all life take root at the very heart of our way of life. 🐾



AP Photo/Laura Rauch