

L'ÉTOILE DU SOLDAT THE SOLDIER'S STAR



CAST

Nikolai	Sacha BOURDO
Vergos	Patrick CHAUVEL
Najmoudine	Mohammad AMIN
Assad	Ahmad Shah ALEFSOURAT
Leïla	Gol GOUTEY
Valoudia	Igor NARYSHKIN
Mosgh	Denis Manohin
Lieutenant	Pavel Kuzin
Nikolai's mother	Elena MIKHEEVA
Nikolai's father	Sergey SONOVSKY

CREW

Director	Christophe de PONFILLY
Screenplay	Christophe de PONFILLY
Dialogues	Christophe de PONFILLY / Rim TURKI
Director of photography	Laurent FLEUTOT
Production designer	François CHAUVAUD
Editor	Anja LÜDCKE
Sound editor	Manuel LAVAL
Sound engineer	Alain CURVELIER
Mix	Matthias SCHWAB
Original music	Jean-Baptiste LOUSSIER
Production manager	Philippe GAUTIER
Producers	Frédéric LAFFONT / Jacques HINSTIN

A French / German / Afghan Co-production
ALBERT FILMS in association with VOLTAIRE PRODUCTION
NEF FILMPRODUKTION UND VERTRIEBS GmbH / AFGHAN
FILM / FRANCE 2 CINEMA / EUROARTS MEDIEN GmbH

With the participation of
EURIMAGES / MINISTÈRE DE LA CULTURE ET DE LA
COMMUNICATION (CNC) / CINECINEMA / MEDIEN UND
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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Behind the scenes of so-called "Islamic terrorism" - which now appears as a permanent threat, just as stories of wolves were once used to scare children - lies Afghanistan. The Afghanistan I first discovered in 1981, that I've crossed several times on foot, that I've shot for my documentaries. The Afghanistan where I found certain truths hidden in the shadows.

During one of my clandestine trips there back in 1984, Massoud liberated a young Soviet soldier that his men had captured and that wanted to come over to the West. With my partner at the time, we set off on a dangerous journey across Hindu-Kush to escort the soldier into Pakistan. Unfortunately, once we arrived in Peshawar, the leaders of Massoud's political party contested the soldier's release. They seized our Russian friend. A few months later, he was killed. At the time, few people in the Western countries were interested in the story, whereas for me it became the catalyst for a feature-length film project. The media hype that followed the September 11 attacks and the ensuing obsession with terrorism only further fuelled my desire to make a film.

Since the September 11th attacks, a lot of nonsense has been said about Afghanistan. During the Taliban era, the Afghans were depicted as dangerous fanatics, while they had previously been preposterously portrayed as violently ignorant, feudal warriors. In recent years, the gap between reality and its representation has dramatically widened.

I wanted to take advantage of this gap while developing the film, using my own experience as a starting point. The reason why I chose fiction over documentary is that only with fiction can you recreate the past - and particularly Soviet everyday life in the 80s, the Afghan way of life around the same time, and the 2001 media hype surrounding Afghanistan. Only with fiction can you mix such different worlds through characters that you've grown to know intimately. Only with fiction can you combine several genres into a single work.

CHRISTOPHE DE PONFILLY (Deceased on may 16th 2006)



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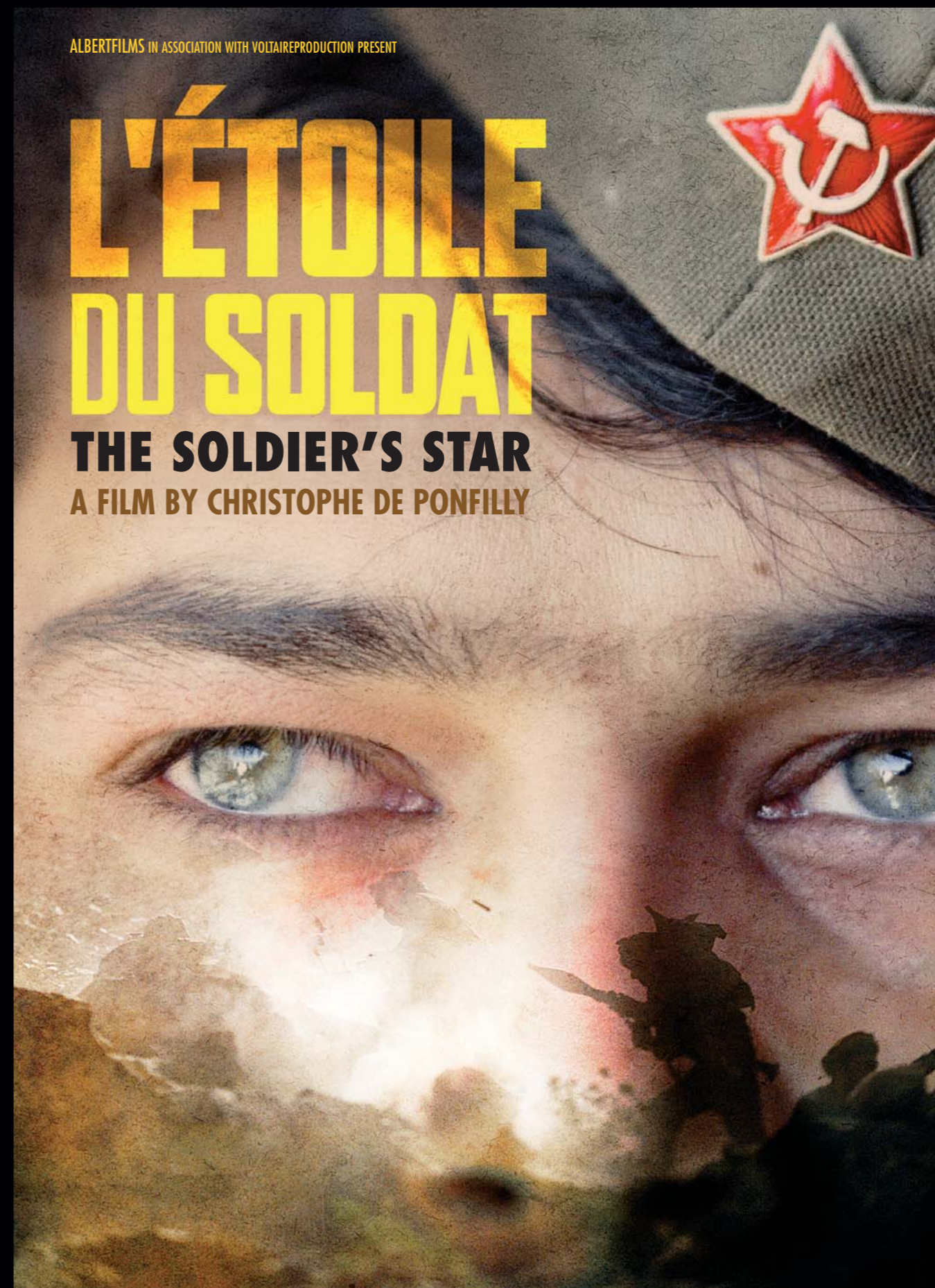


ALBERTFILMS IN ASSOCIATION WITH VOLTAIREPRODUCTION PRESENT

L'ÉTOILE DU SOLDAT

THE SOLDIER'S STAR

A FILM BY CHRISTOPHE DE PONFILLY



SYNOPSIS

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001. High up in the mountains of Afghanistan, Vergos, a French reporter, learns of Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. He remembers... 1984. Nikolai, a young Soviet musician, is drafted along with thousands of others to fight in the war in Afghanistan. Sick to his stomach with fear, he's suddenly engulfed in a world of violence and death. While on a combat mission, Nikolai is captured by Commander Massoud's Mujahideens and taken deep into the mountains where Afghan rebels and Vergos - who has managed to sneak into the country - are in hiding. Although some Mujahideens want Nikolai dead, others feel compassion for him. Against all odds, the Soviet soldier, the French reporter and the Mujahideens gradually form a friendship... Meanwhile Western countries have kept funding the most extreme Afghan rebels, out of ignorance and indifference, and have therefore fostered radical Islamic groups and brought about the dire consequences we all know about...



INTERVIEW WITH FREDERIC LAFFONT (*)

■ How did the idea of *L'Etoile du soldat* come about?

I have the feeling that Christophe de Ponfily has wanted to make this film ever since I first met him 22 years ago. In a way, almost every piece Christophe has done on Afghanistan, starting with *Une vallée contre un empire* (1981), has served as background material leading up to *L'Etoile*. Several scenes of the film are in fact taken from Christophe's personal experiences, and many of them have already appeared in the previous documentaries he did on Afghanistan. Since way back, Christophe has had this desire to present people and things differently from the way they're typically shown on TV (*it's the reason why he created our agency Interscoop*) and he was always hoping to turn this vision into a feature-length film. From his earlier Super 8mm films up to his 35mm feature debut with *L'Etoile*, he has constantly tried to break away from the constraints of television in order to explore the styles and techniques of cinema.

■ Did he wish to present a less simplistic vision of Afghanistan than the one usually conveyed by the West?

Yes, but there's more to it. Christophe wasn't really interested in politics... For him, Afghanistan was above all about the different people - oftentimes illegal immigrants - whom he encountered during his various trips there, as well as memories of endless mountain walks, different rebellious characters he was fond of, or else the taste of dried pellets of goat cheese... You see, Christophe's attachment to Afghanistan was primarily emotional. However, one must not underestimate the dangers involved in crossing the border or walking on an anti-personnel landmine or coming face-to-face with an enemy commando unit... When you're there, the framework of references is totally different - I mean the starry sky above you looks different and the way people connect with one another is different too. One word summarizes it all - resisting.

■ How did the shoot go?

There were so many problems! First of all, we had to inform the Americans that we were shooting in the area, otherwise they'd have been frightened at the sight of hundreds of refu-



gees suddenly crossing the countryside on foot. Then, we had to strengthen the security crew because we were shooting during the elections period, which could be rather dangerous. Moreover, we had to set up an intricate logistical system to ensure that the dailies were safely sent to Germany to be processed... The discrepancy between an idealised Afghanistan and the nitty-gritty of everyday life was often a source of frustration for Christophe. And yet the crew managed to overcome those hurdles and Christophe was able to talk the Afghans into playing in scenes touching upon delicate issues, such as the rape scene, because his previous films were proof that he could be trusted. It was because the Afghan people trusted him that he was able to make the film.

■ It seems as if the film is a series of small miracles...

That's exactly what it is! We were constantly on the brink of disaster. When extras showed up with their guns for an action sequence, they were intent on using actual bullets rather than the production's blanks. If it hadn't been for Philippe Gautier's cleverness and Afghan experience, we wouldn't have had any helicopters because the Afghans had already promised the UN that they would stop using them. When the choppers were finally delivered, Christophe insisted that the pilot refrain from flying low because of the dust scratching the lenses, but of course that's what wound up happening, and Christophe was extremely pissed off. In the same way, the presence of tanks in the film was based on a mere gentleman's agreement - the odds were against us getting tanks - but at the end of the day we got several of them!

■ Did he ever contemplate shooting the film somewhere else than in Afghanistan?

Never. At one stage when fierce fighting was announced on the ground, there had been talk about shooting a few scenes in Tajikistan - this was the only compromise he was willing to make. Otherwise, he was pretty much convinced that if we shot the film elsewhere we wouldn't find the Afghanistan he loved... That's why the film couldn't exist unless it was shot there. Afghanistan was never used as a mere setting for the film: what Christophe wanted was to lead his crew, some fifty-odd people, into his world, into his story.

■ How did the casting process work?

Christophe often said that if he saw the film through to completion, it was thanks to Sacha Bourdo. He led Sacha into his universe by showing him his Afghanistan- and Sacha was more than ready to follow him. What's more, Sacha promptly left for Russia with a camera to recruit his pals from drama schools to act in the film. When Christophe saw people like Sacha embarking upon such an adventurous journey - and it applied to each and every crew member - he knew he'd go all the way. Otherwise, Patrick Chauvel, who plays Vergos, is a close friend of Christophe's. He's a professional photographer who has scoured the globe, often covering wars at close range.

(*) FREDERIC LAFFONT, producer of the film