

TACTICAL DECISION

EXERCISE:

Bomb Attacks in Afghanistan

Editor's Note: *The following vignettes were adapted from The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War, which was written by Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau. The four vignettes were submitted by Haji Mohammad Yakub, an urban guerrilla in Kabul during the war, who describes how he and Mujahideen members planned and carried out bomb attacks on Soviet and Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) targets in the 1980s.*

Examine the vignettes below and then read the discussion that follows.

Bombing is a necessary part of being an urban guerrilla. The object is to create fear and take out selected individuals. We got our explosives from Pakistan. Commander Azizuddin and Commander Meskinyar were our contacts in Paghman District who forwarded the explosives and detonators to us. They used elderly people as our go-betweens to carry messages and explosives to us.

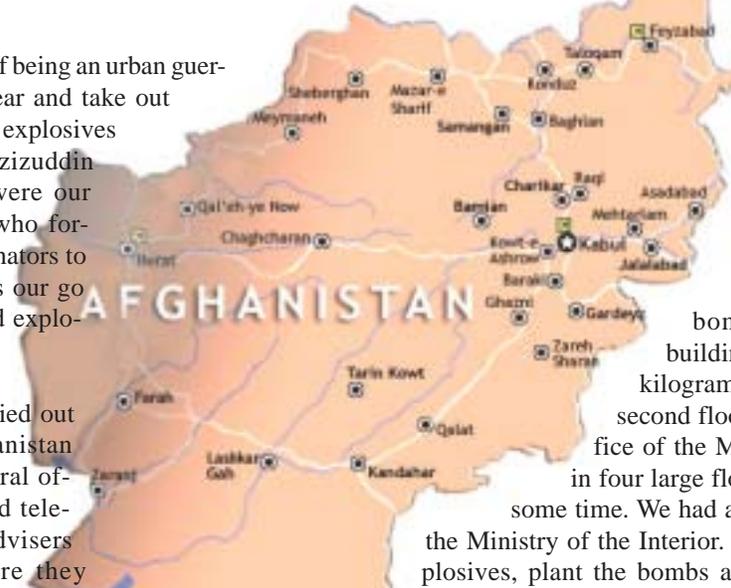
❶ In April 1980, we carried out an attack on the Radio Afghanistan building. This housed the central offices for Afghanistan radio and television broadcasting. Soviet advisers worked at the building where they oversaw radio and television broadcasting and edited and cleared the news before broadcast. The Soviets were our targets. We received a bomb from our contacts and gave it to a woman who worked in the radio station. She smuggled it into the station and armed it. The bomb went off at 1000 hours on a work day. The explosion killed two Afghan Party activists and two Soviets. It also wounded a DRA soldier. For some time after the blast, Afghanistan Radio and TV stopped broadcasting. After this, the security procedures for the building were greatly increased and everyone was carefully searched. Our lady contact later managed to get herself transferred to the payroll office of Kabul University.

❷ The communist regime converted Kabul University into a center for communist indoctrination. We decided to target the primary Party Organization at Kabul University in January 1981. Bombing seemed to be our best option. By this time, our lady contact at Radio Afghanistan was working in the payroll office at Kabul

University. We gave her two bombs. She planted one in the University Administration building and set the timer for 1100. She set the second in the primary Party Organization building and set that timer for 1145. The theory was that, after the first bomb went off, people would mill around the site and then the key party activists would gather in the primary Party Organization building to discuss the bombing. The second bomb would attack this concentration. Our plan worked as we thought it would. Following the blast in the administration building, the party secretaries of all the various communist organizations gathered in the primary Party Organization building. The blast killed a Soviet adviser and several party secretaries. The bombs killed a total of 10 and wounded an unknown number.

❸ On May 6, 1983, we bombed the Ministry of Interior building in Kabul. We had planted 27 kilograms of explosive in a room on the second floor of the building close to the office of the Minister. The bombs were hidden in four large flower pots that had been there for some time. We had a contact who was a gardener for the Ministry of the Interior. He agreed to smuggle in the explosives, plant the bombs and set them for detonation. We trained him how to do the job. He mixed the explosives with limestone and smuggled them in plastic bags over a period of time. We planned to detonate the bombs during the daytime for maximum casualties. However our HIH (Islamic Party) headquarters in Peshawar overruled us and told us to set the bombs off at night. HIH wanted to keep the Minister of the Interior Gulab Zoy alive, since he was a leading member of the Khalq faction and his survival would insure that the friction between the Khalq and Parchim communist party factions continued.

The gardener set all the time pencils for 2300 hours when he went home at 1600 hours. There was no sense setting different times since the building would virtually be deserted. The time bombs went off on time and killed four duty officers and damaged the minister's office. If we had set off the bombs during the day, we would have killed Gulab Zoy, Ghazi (his body guard), Sheruddin (his aide-de-camp) and perhaps a hundred others. The DRA closed roads around the building for two hours and conducted an investigation. However, they thought that the blast was





In one of the vignettes, urban guerrillas hid a bomb in the bottom of a food cart in Kabul. Improvised explosive devices have become a frequent threat to our forces deployed overseas.

connected to some internal quarrel within the communist leadership and never suspected our gardener.

④ The Soviets lived in the eastern Micro rayon region of Kabul. We decided to attack the Soviets right where they were living. There was a bus stop in the area where the Soviets would wait for their buses to work. We checked the timing of the buses. There was a daily 0745 morning bus that drew the most Soviets. We needed to establish a pattern so that we could leave a bomb without drawing attention. We got a push cart and loaded it with the best fruits and vegetables that we could get. The produce came from Parwan Province. We charged reasonable prices. The Soviets and local people got used to seeing us there and buying from us. We kept this up for several days. At night, we would work on the push cart. We put a false bottom in the cart so that we could put our bombs in the bottom of the cart and they would be undetected even if the cart were inspected. We attacked on the 2nd of October 1983. We loaded five bombs into the bottom of the cart. We inserted time pencil fuses in the bombs and set them for 0743. Then we put in the false bottom and loaded the cart with produce. Six Mujahideen carried out the attack. None of us carried weapons. We brought the cart to the bus stop as usual. Thirteen

Soviets crowded around it to see what was on sale. We slipped away from the cart and mixed with the local people. The bombs went off at 0743 just before the bus arrived. The blast killed 13, wounded 12 and damaged a nearby store. The DRA searched the crowd but made no arrests from our group.

DISCUSSION

The following observations are not intended to second-guess the actions of those who had to deal with the urban guerrillas in Afghanistan; they dealt with an adversary whose tactics and techniques they had seldom if ever seen before, and whose implacable hatred of them impelled him to strike whenever and wherever he could. However, a careful reading of the details of these four attacks reveals a number of factors which — if taken into account — could have either reduced their effectiveness, or perhaps even prevented them altogether. This series of actions so effectively outlined by Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau describes the innovation and boldness of the Afghan insurgents, some of whose techniques are being employed today by our own adversaries. It is up to us to examine these accounts, derive our own lessons from them, and use them to our advantage.

Over the past decade, we have learned a

thing or two about how insurgents fight, their tactics and methods, and their weapons and explosive devices. This experience has come from the Israelis, from other allies in the Middle East and Europe, from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan and in Chechnya, from our own and our allies' experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, and from other sources in close contact with our adversaries. Improvised explosive devices (IED) have become a frequent threat to our forces deployed overseas, and as we further close in on the enemy he will become increasingly desperate, eventually resorting to further measures such as IED and even the homicide bombers with which Israel has had to contend for so long.

Upon reading these accounts, one gains the impression that the Soviets and their DRA allies were overconfident, believing that their preponderance in men and materiel and their highly visible presence would overwhelm the guerrillas, driving them underground and eliminating the threat. Such was not the case; they soon learned to move among and around the Soviets and DRA by blending into the pattern of life. In this manner, guerrillas and their sympathizers soon became insiders within the very infrastructure they sought to attack. The gardener in the Ministry of the Interior was a good example of this. In a foreign country, host nation personnel eventually may begin to all look the same to those charged with manning checkpoints, and — given fewer or no bomb attacks and the concomitant perception of a lower threat level — the clearance and screening procedures in effect may eventually become little more than *pro forma* actions, more symbolic than effective. That is when we are most vulnerable.

Screening procedures for all local national employees must be both detailed and rigidly enforced, with the movement of employees within the infrastructure being closely monitored. Such procedures should include background checks, polygraph examinations, daily sweeps with metal detectors, and spot checks of their persons and work areas. The secretary who worked first for Radio Afghanistan and later at Kabul University illustrates the damage such a mole can inflict. Low-level

employees such as she are often well below the horizon because of the perceived menial nature of their jobs, and because they are often allowed to come and go at will. These often ingratiate themselves with superiors and security personnel, over time earning a measure of immunity. To these dedicated revolutionaries, working for months or years in the same job for a pittance is worthwhile, for it eventually affords the opportunity to plant or detonate that one bomb — or fire one or more shots — at the right time. In Vietnam we learned that the enemy is capable of incredible patience, and today's adversaries are no exception.

Man's best friend is a staunch ally in the search for explosives, and there is little information to indicate that the Soviets ever used dogs as widely as we do. The gardener at the ministry of Interior and his deadly cargo would have never gotten to first base if he had been stopped at a checkpoint where bomb dogs were in use. We need to expand the use of these superb animals, and employ small walking patrols supported by riflemen in overwatch positions to detect potential bombers as they approach their targets. The bomber will become increasingly nervous and wary as he gets closer to his destination, but he may be taken unawares several blocks away. Dog handlers and the riflemen they have as security will need training on the special rules of engagement their mission requires.

Another of the lessons learned at high cost in Vietnam — and reinforced by the Soviet experience in Afghanistan — is the danger in setting a predictable pattern. Vary your routes and times of movement. The most effective ambush is one set at the precise time and place where you know your adversary will be. United States Army units in Vietnam executed some spectacularly successful ambushes exactly because our enemy became complacent and let his movements become predictable. Soviet soldiers got used to regularly using the buses, and the urban guerrillas soon picked up on the pattern and employed a fruit vendor's cart — another common sight in the Third World — to attack them. In this case, we see another significant factor: the cultural difference between American and guerrilla perceptions of collateral damage. We view the loss of innocent bystanders as something to be avoided whenever possible; to the terrorist — be he Hamas, Hezbollah, Saddam Fedayeen, Taliban, al Qaeda, or any other group, the death of a number of civilians means little or nothing.

Maintain your situational awareness at all times. Crowds of local nationals will show up at the worst possible time, and when a crowd suddenly forms or disperses ask yourself why. Whenever possible, avoid masses of locals and always be alert to the possibility of trouble. With that in mind, make a mental note of what you would do if you came under fire, because when an ambush is sprung, seconds count. U.S. Army units have well-planned and rehearsed battle drills for such contingencies, and the recent spate of bomb attacks are a reaction to those fast, effective countermeasures. The remnants of Saddam's paramilitary bands cannot withstand the fire and maneuver of American infantry, and now they are resorting to other means. But it is our infantry that will ultimately defeat them in detail, and they know it.

Finally, when a bomb goes off, it is imperative that those in the area not run to the site to gape at the damage, as happened in the Kabul University bombing in 1981. Everyone from the Viet Cong

to the Irish Republican Army has employed the second — delayed or command detonated — bomb technique to stack up casualties, and we needn't lose Soldiers for the sake of curiosity. Let the experts — host nation and medical personnel and explosive ordnance teams — get in and do their jobs while we provide security as needed.

The U.S. Army personnel currently serving America and her people in the remotest corners of the globe are some of the finest Soldiers ever sent forth in defense of this great nation, and they deserve our total, unstinting commitment to their support. For this reason, I encourage you to continue to write to *Infantry Magazine* and pass along your experiences and ideas so that we can share them with American and allied units engaged in the War on Terrorism. Our address is inside the cover of this issue, and my e-mail is enor@benning.army.mil.

— Russell A. Eno
Infantry Editor

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Topics for manuscripts include information on organization, weapons, equipment, tactics, and techniques and to provide a forum for progressive ideas. We also include relevant historical articles, with the emphasis on the lessons we can learn from the past. The best advice we can give you is to write and tell us about your article idea, explaining your intended theme, scope, and organization. We'll let you know whether we would be interested in seeing the proposed article, and we will give you any further guidance you may need.

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