

# TACTICAL VIGNETTE

## Mining Attacks Near Mehtar Lam

**Editor's Note:** *This vignette was 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 vignette was submitted by Commander Sher Padshah and another Afghan fighter named Sheragha, from Laghman Province. These actions took place in the region north of the Kabul-Jalalabad highway, and are significant because they were executed in the pattern followed by Afghan and Iraqi insurgents even today, and show the techniques still employed by irregulars in mine warfare. Examination of raids and ambushes against Coalition forces in Iraq and in Afghanistan today likewise reveal similar improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and methods commonly used by our own adversaries. By studying these and other attacks, we can better learn how our own opponents operate, and the types of materials they are likely to employ in carrying out mining operations against us and Coalition allies.*

### VIGNETTE

After the battle for Alishang District Center, Commander Padshah gathered 30 Mujahideen and moved further south to the village of Mendrawur. Mendrawur is about 11 kilometers south of the provincial capital of Mehtar Lam and about five kilometers north of the Kabul-Jalalabad highway. We received information that an armored column would be moving from Jalalabad to Mehtar Lam toward the end of August 1981 (Map 5-1 - Mehtar). We decided to attack the column with bombs and an ambush. We liked powerful mines, so we usually took the explosives from two Egyptian plastic mines and put these into a single large cooking oil tin container. We also used the explosives from unexploded Soviet ordnance to make our own bombs. We put one bomb under a small bridge and hooked a remote-control device onto it. We strung the detonating wire about 100 meters further south where we established our ambush in an orchard on the east side of the highway. We had two RPG-7s, one PK machine gun and one Bemau light machine gun. There were three Mujahideen in the bomb-firing party.

We saw the Soviet column approach slowly. Dismounted Soviet engineers were walking in front of the column with their mine detectors. They were carefully checking the route. When they came to the small bridge, they discovered the bomb. Several Soviets gathered around the bomb, but instead of disconnecting the wires, they stood around talking about the bomb. The three-man firing



party, Sheragha, Matin and another Sheragha, were watching them through binoculars. We saw several Soviets checking the bomb and knew that the ambush was spoiled, so we detonated the bomb, killing several Soviets. The Soviet column began firing in every direction. We left the orchard and withdrew through the Bazaar of Mendrawur going north. Some of the villagers were wounded by the Soviet fire.

Three or four days later, we had 40 Mujahideen in our group and were ready to try another ambush. We went to the village of Mashakhel. We buried two of our bombs in the road. We did not have any more remote-control firing devices, so we rigged these bombs with pressure fuses. We put cow manure on the mines to hide them. God bless Matin's soul; he used to always put the manure on the mines. We set up our ambush covering the mines.

We saw the column approach slowly. Soldiers with mine



due in large part to the ubiquitous local population, it was possible to gain information on the movements and intentions of the Soviets and DRA. Additionally, as the Afghan War wore on, it was also possible for the guerillas to infer likely Soviet responses to their attacks, as Soviet ground forces' enthusiasm for the war against a determined, resourceful, and courageous enemy began to wane.

Then, as today, we see an established tendency to fashion innovative and more powerful explosive devices that were command detonated instead of simply being time fuzed. The habit of keeping the IED under surveillance and at the same time covered by small arms both ensured that the device was unlikely to be disarmed and that anyone tampering with it could be shot, leaving the mine in place for the intended target.

We have learned a number of

detecting dogs were walking in front of the column. The dogs were running loose, and they promptly found and pointed out our bombs. Sheragha and Shawali moved forward when they saw the dogs. They watched as the dogs stood by the mine. Two soldiers got out of an APC (armored personnel carrier) with a long probe. The soldiers started probing the manure piles, and they found the mine in the third pile. Four Soviets, including an officer, crowded together looking at the mine. So Sheragha and Shawali opened fire killing the four Soviets. The remaining Soviets pulled back out of the ambush kill zone.

The Soviets began to return fire. Commander Padshah ordered four Mujahideen to move north onto Tarakhel hill to provide covering fire for the group's withdrawal. To confuse the enemy, he grabbed a megaphone and yelled, "Keep your positions. The reinforcements just arrived." A DRA (Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) column came from Mehtar Lam and took up defensive positions and started firing at us. Tanks also maneuvered against us on the Mehtar Lam plain west of the road. We withdrew under the cover of night. We know we killed four Soviets and many have killed or wounded up to 18 DRA and Soviets. We destroyed one of their tanks and two trucks.

## DISCUSSION

In this and in other Mujahideen operations, detailed intelligence on the movement of the targeted units played a critical role. Because of the interdependence of Soviet and DRA forces, and

lessons from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, and one of these is to disperse upon discovery of an IED. In these attacks, Soviet soldiers were lost — either through detonation of the mine by Afghans or by small arms fire — because they had not yet learned that lesson. The Soviets were, however, successful in their use of mine-detecting dogs, something they may have learned from the U.S. experience with war dogs in Vietnam.

If there is one trait common to our and the Soviets' adversaries, it is their resourcefulness. In 1981 the Afghans were gathering explosives from several mines to make a more powerful charge and covering buried mines with manure to avoid attracting attention. Today, Iraqi insurgents have concealed IEDs in everything from dead animals to inconspicuous, windblown trash piles, and are constantly attempting to strike in the least predictable manner. But we are meeting them at every turn and are defeating them apace. We are an Army at war, and we have taken the fight to the enemy on his own ground and defeated him by improving Soldiers' situational awareness, their reactions to a threat, and by demonstrating that our response to enemy actions will be swift, precise, and deadly.

