

TACTICAL VIGNETTE

Ambush at Qafus Tangay

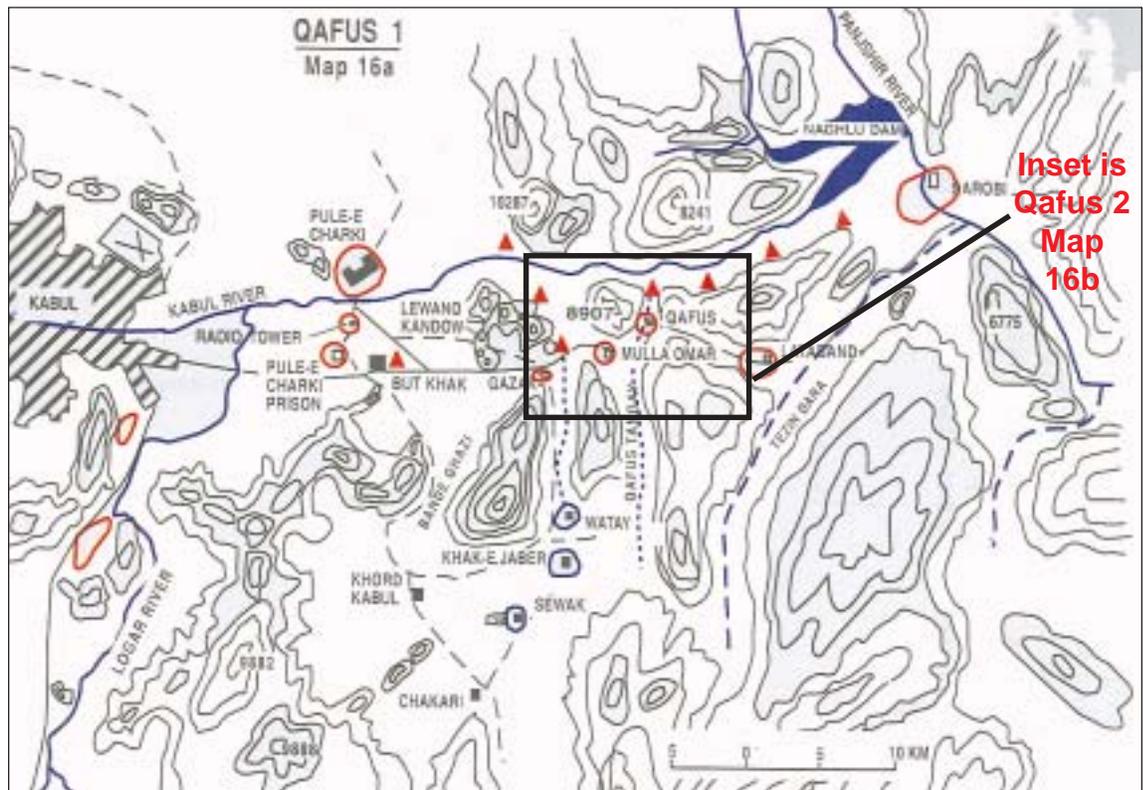
Editor's Note: *This vignette was adapted from The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War, which was written by Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau. The vignette was submitted by Major Sher Aqa Kochay, who was a graduate of the Afghan Military Academy in Kabul. He also received training in commando tactics in the Soviet Union. Kochay served as the 37th Commando Brigade and participated in Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) actions against the Mujahideen in Panjsher Valley. He defected, with a large amount of weapons, to the Mujahideen in 1982 and became a NIFA commander in Kabul. He organized a new Mujahideen base in the Khord Kabul area some 20 kilometers south of the Afghan capital.*

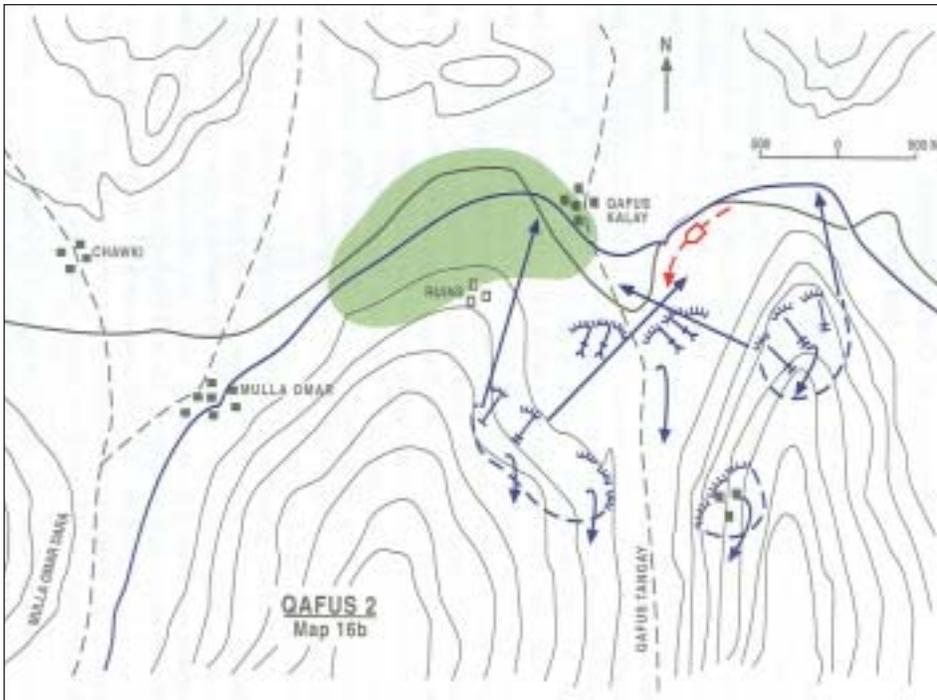
VIGNETTE

On August 13, 1985, my 40-man Mujahideen force moved from its base at Sewak (20 kilometers southeast of Kabul) to establish an ambush at the Qafus Tangay (some 25 kilometers east of Kabul). The area was protected by a Sarandoy (Internal Ministry Forces) regiment. This area was previously protected by tribal militia, but exactly one year prior, the local tribal militia of Hasan Khan Karokhel defected to the Mujahideen. Hence, the regiment deployed east of Kabul between Gazak and Sarobi to protect the power lines supplying electricity from Naghlu and Sarobi hydroelectric dams to Kabul. The regiment's headquarters was at Sur Kandow and its forces were deployed along the Butkhak-Sarobi road (southern east-west road on map) in security posts. (Map 16a - Qafus 1).

Each day, the regiment sent truck convoys with supplies from headquarters to the battalions. In turn, battalions sent trucks to make deliveries to all their highway outposts. About two kilometers from the DRA Mulla Omar base, the road cuts across the mouth of a narrow valley called Qafus Tangay. Qafus Tangay begins at the Rhak-e Jabar pass in the south and stretches north to the Gazak-Sarobi road. The valley offered a concealed approach from the Mujahideen bases in Khord Kabul in the south. The road at the mouth of the valley passes through difficult terrain forcing the traffic to move very slowly. This was a favorable point for an ambush.

I moved my detachment at night reaching the ambush site early in the morning of August 13. My group was armed with four RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers, several light machine guns and Kalashnikov automatic rifles. I grouped my men into three teams. I positioned a 10-man party with the four RPG-7s at the bottom of the valley near the road. I positioned two 15-man teams on each of the ridges on the two sides of the valley that dominated the road to the north. Both of the flank groups had PK machine guns. (Map 16b - Qafus 2)





The plan was to wait until the enemy’s supply vehicles arrived at the difficult stretch of road directly facing the Qafus Tangay Valley. I planned to assign targets to the RPGs as the trucks moved into the kill zone (for example number one, fire at the lead truck). I hoped to engage four trucks simultaneously, maximizing surprise and fire power. The teams on the ridges were to cover the valley with interlocking fields of fire and to support the withdrawal of the RPG teams while repelling any enemy infantry. They would also seize prisoners and carry off captured weapons and supplies once they had destroyed the enemy convoy.

Finally, the group heard a vehicle approaching from the east. Soon an enemy jeep appeared around a bend in the road. As the jeep slowly moved over the rocky road to the ambush site, a machine gunner on the ridge suddenly opened fire at the vehicle.

I was extremely upset because the ambush had been compromised and ordered one RPG-7 gunner to kill the jeep before it escaped. A few seconds later, the vehicle was in flames and the wounded driver was out of the jeep. He was the sole occupant of the vehicle. He was returning from the battalion headquarters at Lataband where he had driven the regimental political

officer. We gave him first aid and released him. He was a conscript soldier from the Panjsher Valley who had recently been press-ganged into the military.

The Sarandoy sent out patrols from the nearby Spina Tana and Nu’manak outposts. Because it was too risky to remain at the ambush site we withdrew through the Qafus Tangay Valley to our base.

DISCUSSION

Although the convoy lost one vehicle when the ambush was sprung, the unit was lucky that the machine gunner had fired and initiated the ambush prematurely. Had the ambush gone as it had been planned, the losses in men and materiel would have been significantly greater. The weaknesses inherent in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan forces’ planning and conduct of the road movement highlight the vulnerability of such operations. Given the current operating environment in Iraq and Afghanistan — where ambushes continue to be a favored tactic of insurgents — we do well to learn from the mistakes of Soviet and DRA forces.

Due to a perceived low threat level, the DRA unit ran convoys along the same routes — setting a pattern easily learned by the Mujahideen — and provided no

point, flank, or rear security that could detect and react to ambushes. Likewise, no provisions such as artillery fires plotted along the route or aerial gunship overwatch had been made for immediate reactions to enemy acts. The morale impact of all this on the DRA soldiers unlucky enough to pull convoy duty can only have been severe: they were sent out unprotected and on their own, apparently on the off-chance hope that nothing would happen to the convoy.

Our Army’s experience in Vietnam, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq has yielded valuable experience which we have used to modify the way we move, resupply, communicate, and anticipate and react to enemy actions. But vehicles moving along a road will always carry with them a certain level of vulnerability, and we are sparing no effort to reduce that vulnerability to the lowest possible level. Each measure we take — dispersion; overwatch; security moving before, beside, and behind the convoy; preplanned fires; control of population movements along the route; varying the times and rates of movements; and extensive HUMINT operations within the area of interest — will progressively reduce the risk.

As we further infuse the tenets of Warrior Ethos into the Army, and as indigenous populations further realize that they are dealing with Soldiers willing and eager to kill their attackers, we will see fewer successful ambushes against our forces. Even now, we are seeing that tactics the enemy formerly successfully employed are no longer as successful; he is being forced to become ever more innovative and resourceful at a time when he is losing the initiative and his resources are rapidly diminishing. The enemy we faced in World War II, in Korea, and in Vietnam was a far more skilled one than today’s adversaries, and the enemy’s mounting casualties — far in excess of our own — are proof of the adaptability and aggressiveness of our Soldiers and their leaders.

