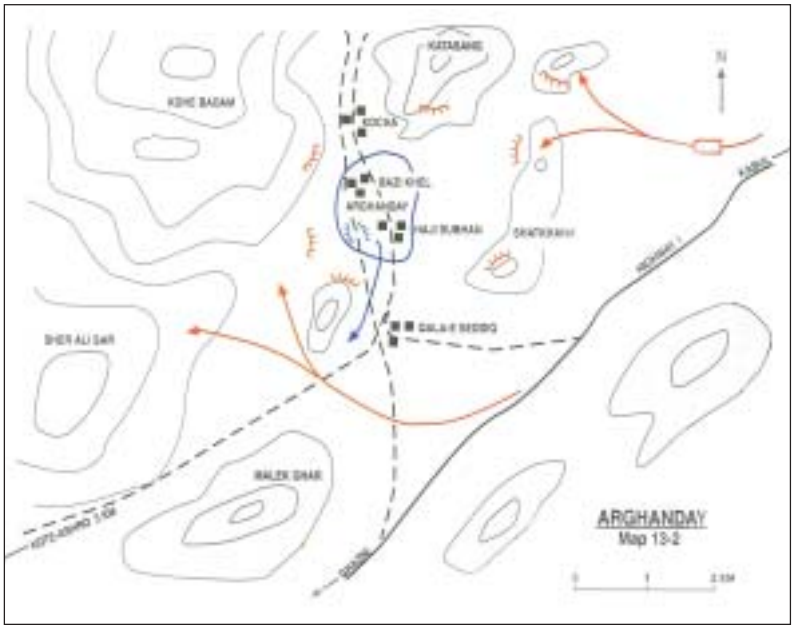
TACTICAL VIGNETTE

Escape from the Arghanday Encirclement

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 Haji Mohammad Seddiq from No-Burja Village in Logar Province. The village is in the Tangi-Wardak area which connects the Saydabad District of Wardak Province to the Baraki Barak District in the Logar Province. Commander Seddiq's village is located on the border between the two provinces. Therefore, his command fought in both provinces in coordination with other Mujahideen. Commander Haji Mohammad Seddiq was affiliated with the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar (HIH).*



VIGNETTE

In July 1986, I took a detachment of 13 Mujahideen to abduct a Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) officer from his house in the western Kot-e Sangi section of Kabul. For several days, we gathered information about the officer — his time of arrival and departure from his house and the road he took to and from his residence. We gathered the information with the help of a contact at the Kot-e Sangi gas station. We discovered that the officer did not stay at his residence overnight, but spent a few hours in the evening at home and then returned to his unit. We decided to abduct him during those hours he was at his house.

We spent the night in the nearby Deh-Bori section of Kabul. The next day, at dusk, we met with our gas station contact who reported that the officer was at his residence. I took three men who were dressed in army uniforms with me. I had on traditional clothing. We went to the officer's home which was located between Qala-e Shada security outpost and the Kot-e Sangi Police station. When we reached the house, the uniformed Mujahideen knocked on the door. The officer's daughter answered the door. One of the Mujahideen told her that there was an urgent message for the officer from his unit. A few minutes later, the officer came to the door. As he stepped out, I stepped around from behind the corner and told him to follow us and make no attempt to escape because we would shoot him on the spot. The officer and I knew each other and he recognized me. He was nervous but made no attempt to escape. We escorted him through the streets to Qala-e Shada and from there to the Mujahideen base at Arghanday. At Arghanday, we turned the officer over to a Paghman commander named Zahed. The officer supposedly had killed several Mujahideen from Zahed's group.

We spent the night at the residence/base of Shafeh, a local commander. Early the next morning, at about 0400 hours, we woke up to the noise of tanks approaching the village (Map 13-2 - Arghanday). At first, we thought that the noise was from normal military traffic resupplying the security outposts along the Kabul-Ghazni highway. Then Shafeh's father climbed to the roof top and saw that the village was surrounded by tanks and other vehicles. Soviet soldiers and DRA militia men from Rashid Dostum's militia group occupied the surrounding hills. We were trapped. Shafeh took us to a hideout near the house. It was a cave that they had dug to hide the Mujahideen during the enemy's cordon and search operations. After a while, we heard movement and noticed that the Soviet/DRA search party had posted a guard at the entrance of the cave. The guard called out and asked if there was someone inside. Then he asked for anyone inside to come out. Next, he stooped over to check out the cave. At that point, Alam Gul (who we nicknamed the Uzbek – because he looked like an Uzbek) shot the soldier. The soldier's body fell into the cave. We pulled his body aside and rushed out of the cave. As we came out, we encountered soldiers in the streets. We fought our way to a natural ditch at the edge of the village.

We jumped in the ditch and faced in both directions. We all had AK-47s plus one RPG-7 (rocket-propelled grenade). We fought from this position until 1300 hours. At that time, some Mujahideen units at Kot-e Ashro, about 10 kilometers to the southwest, started shelling the area with BM-12 fire. The rockets' explosions forced the enemy away from the south side of the

village. We took advantage of this and slipped out of the encirclement through the southern gap and fled to Kot-e Ashro through the mountains. One of my Mujahideen was wounded.

DISCUSSION

Given the size of the force involved and relatively limited firepower that the Mujahideen had at their disposal, it should have been possible to effectively cordon off and kill or capture the guerrillas, instead of what actually took place. The DRA was too weak to adequately secure the cave in which the insurgents had taken shelter; the one soldier assigned the task had no backup and no means of calling for reinforcements.

The cordon itself had reinforcements which could serve as reserve, strengthen weak spots in the cordon, or move aggressively to seize the opportunity offered. As a result, the Mujahideen were fixed in position until past midday armed with only rifles and one RPG. During the duration of the standoff, the rebels could move about relatively unimpeded without the DRA knowing either their true strength or their locations at any given time. Poor intelligence, particularly HUMINT, hampered any decisive action, until another Mujahideen unit opened fire to break the encirclement and allow their sister unit to escape.

The encircling DRA force lacked aggressiveness, partially because of poor intelligence, and partially because it consisted of poorly trained soldiers who had been fighting that day-in-day-out, protracted, enervating war against a more highly motivated and more aggressive adversary for years. The DRA forces were in need of replacements, but seldom got them, and the guerrillas were fully aware of the personnel, logistical, and morale problems facing the DRA.

Today, we employ air mobility assets to quickly capitalize on opportunities such as those described in the vignette, and commit sufficient forces to a cordon operation to make sure we can react quickly and decisively once the enemy has been identified and his location determined. In any operation such as this, a commander also needs to aggressively develop his HUMINT capabilities to effectively monitor enemy movements, logistical activities, and likely courses of action.

BOOK REVIEWS

Gerhard von Scharnhorst. Private und dienstliche Schriften. Band 1, Schueler, Lehrer, Kriegsteilnehmer. Kurhannover bis 1795. (Gerhard von Scharnhorst. Private and official correspondence. Student, Teacher, Warrior. From Hannover to 1795.) **Edited by Johannes Kunisch, compiled by Michael Sikora and Tilman Stieve.) 864 pages, occasional sketches, index, and glossary.** Reviewed by Christopher Timmers.

When those of us with any knowledge of German/Prussian army history think of Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst (or just Scharnhorst), we think of a brilliant man whose writings and efforts helped reform the Prussian army in the wake of the disastrous defeats at Jena and Auerstadt in 1806. But this volume of private and official correspondence covers only the first 40 years of his life, well before his reforms had made their mark and he had achieved the renown that would lead to his elevation to the rank of lieutenant general and grant of nobility from the King of Prussia.

In these 471 letters, we see close up young Scharnhorst as a cadet at the Wilhelmstein academy and a detailed listing of his course of instruction (from 1773 – 1777), a curriculum which included classes dealing with shipbuilding and principles of gunnery (both of which were drawn from English texts published in 1754 and 1742). Among the letters in this first volume are over 50 addressed to his fiancée and (later) wife Klara (nee: Klara Schmalz, whose brother Theodore was the first director of Berlin University). Letters to Klara are affectionate and frequently long. One, written in July of 1793 begins: "Don't write me such short letters, my love, my only wife; for it is better to not write at all." Scharnhorst's letters to Klara are long, involved, and deal with many of the issues separated couples encounter in any dislocation.

Somewhat humorously, the greetings to men of high rank strike one as almost dickensian in their formality:

"Hochgeborner Reichsgraf Gnaedigster Landesherr!" Oh Highborn Imperial Count Esteemed Governor (my loose translation).

And his farewells equally recall Dickens: "Ew. Hochgraeflichgnaden Unterhaenigster Knecht" Your highest esteemed count, I am your humble and obedient Servant (again, my somewhat free translation).

Scharnhorst is remembered as an army reformer, who, among other achievements, advocated and secured the admission to the officer corps of men drawn from other than the ranks of nobility. His years of service to Prussia in opposition to Napoleon can arguably be his most interesting, but these years are not covered in this first volume. Nonetheless, these letters and official correspondence shed light on a man, not an icon, who has been a fixture in western military thought for over 200 years.

One final note to those who wish to approach this work in the original German: Much of the phrasing and many of the words in German are from 200 years ago. I would ask you to think of the ease of translation from the English of many of our country's founding documents into contemporary German. The task, I submit, would be more difficult than is apparent. Much of Scharnhorst's correspondence relies on an older vocabulary and syntax, which is not currently accessible in present day German. Even if you regard yourself as fairly fluent in German, be advised that this volume will probably present you some problems in translation. But the results will be well worth your efforts. I would like to acknowledge the translational help of Ms. Martina Abel whose help with archaic German phraseology was indispensable.

Escape!!! The True Story of a World War II P.O.W. the Germans Couldn't Hold. **By John M. "Jack" Roberts Brundage Publishing, 2003, 237 pages, $23.95**. Reviewed by Randy Talbot.