

Lessons from the Soviet-Afghan War

Editor's Note: *Given the unique nature of mountain operations and the Mujahideen actions against Soviet and Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) ground forces, we have selected three operations from The Other Side of the Mountain, by Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau, that illustrate an ambush, a shelling attack and its consequences, and a mining attack using improvised explosive devices. These three actions are noteworthy because they discuss tactics commonly used by the insurgents, and because they all include mistakes that either caused the operation to fail or resulted in higher casualties on either side.*

AMBUSH AT QAFUS TANGAY

By Major Sher Aqa Kochay

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 (the southern east-west road on the 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 Khake 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.

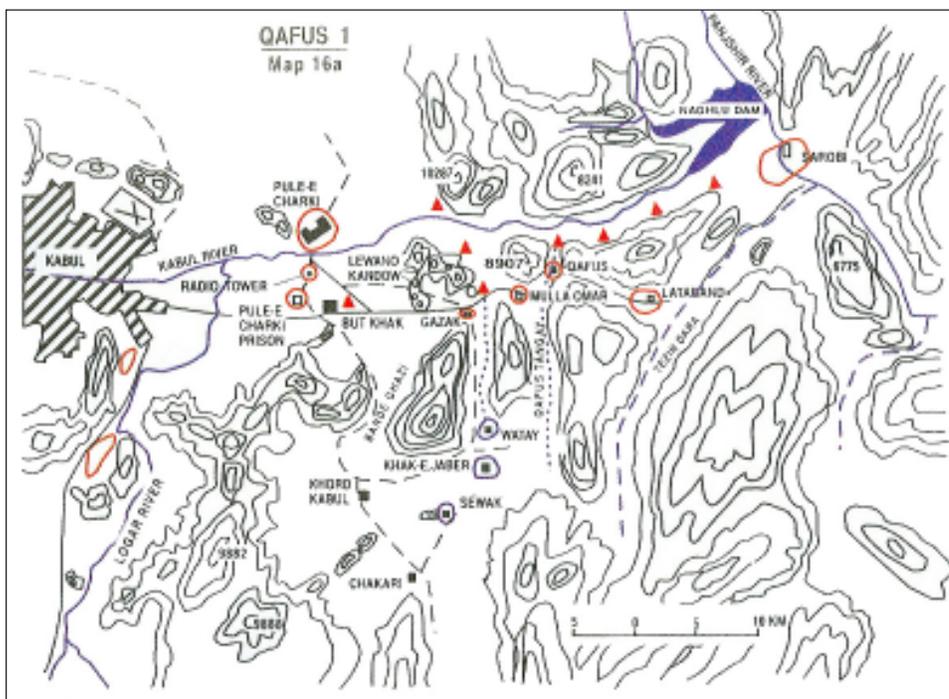
I moved my detachment at night reaching the ambush site early in the morning of August 13. My group was armed with four RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers, several light machine guns and Kalashnikov automatic rifles. I grouped my men into three teams. I positioned a 10-man party with the four RPG-7s at 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)

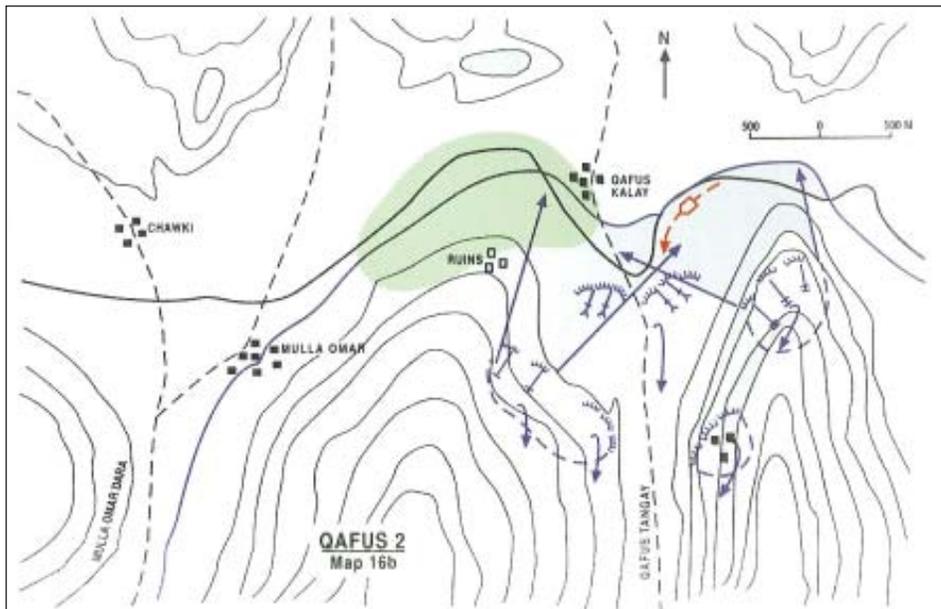
The plan was to wait until the enemy's supply vehicles arrived at the difficult stretch of road directly facing the Qafus Tangay Valley. I planned to assign targets to the RPGs as the trucks moved into the kill zone (for example number one, fire at the lead truck). I hoped to engage four trucks simultaneously, 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 Panjshir 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.

COMMENTARY: The Mujahideen ambush failed for lack of fire discipline. The unauthorized initiation of fire compromised a carefully planned and deftly prepared ambush. It was always a challenge for Mujahideen commanders to train and control a volunteer force fighting an organized military power. Further, some Mujahideen commanders ignored certain basic control measures. It is not clear what arrangements Major Aqa made to control the fire of the Mujahideen deployed on the ridges. Had the commander assigned sub-group leaders on each ridge with clear instructions to control the fire of the teams the outcome of the ambush could have been different.

The ambush also lacked sufficient early warning which could communicate the size, composition and activity of approaching convoys. If the commander had early warning and a chain of command, he could have anticipated the arrival of vehicles using something other than sound, determined whether or not to attack the vehicles and gotten his new orders to his men in a timely manner.

Major Sher Aqa Kochay is a graduate of Afghan Military Academy, Kabul, and received training in commando tactics in the Soviet Union. He served in the 37th Commando Brigade and participated in 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 southeast of the Afghan capital.

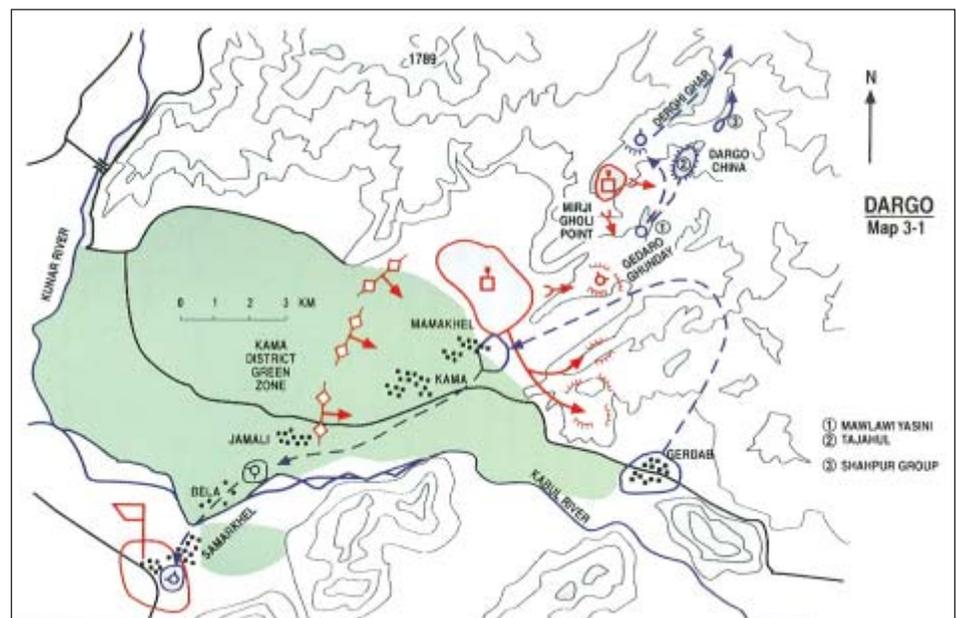
A SHELLING ATTACK TURNS BAD By Mawlawi Shukur Yasini

In the spring of 1981, the Soviets and DRA were very active in our area. As a result, we dismantled our permanent bases and changed them to mobile bases scattered throughout the area. I intended to launch a major show of force against the Soviets using my mobile bases. I had two mortars — a 60mm and an 82mm. The problem with the 60mm mortar is that it only has a range of 1,400 meters, so the gunner has to get close to the target to use it. I also had two DShK machine guns, and five RPG-7s. I kept these heavy weapons at my base

at Gerdab. My men had small arms which they kept with them.

On 17 April 1981, I launched a shelling attack against the Soviet 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade in Samarkhel. I only took 42 men with me since we were not very well equipped and we were not ready for a major encounter with superior forces. Further, Kama District is right across the river from the 66th Brigade garrison and they kept the area under constant surveillance. I did not want to move a large group of men through the area and alert them. To avoid observation, we went north from Gerdab into the mountains and then west across the mountains and into Mamakhel Village in the Kama area (Map 3-1 — Dargo). We stayed for three nights in Mamakhel and spent the days in the mountains at Dargo China spring — some three kilometers away. From Mamakhel, we went to Kama Village where some people were still living — although many people had already emigrated to Pakistan

At Kama, I put my nephew Shahpur in charge and told him to my two mortars and 38 men and to go shell the 66th's camp. I kept four men with me. The shelling group left Kama at dusk. They positioned the 82mm mortar on the north side of the river at the house of Khan-e Mulla at Jamali Village — since it had the range. Then they crossed the river at Bela and approached the camp through the village of Samarkhel. They occupied positions close to the entrance of the enemy camp. They had the guerrilla mortar (60mm) and the RPGs with them. They opened fire with the RPGs and



the 60mm mortar from close range at 2200 hours. The 82mm mortar joined in long-range fires onto the sleeping camp. The shelling attack created chaos. The shelling group fired at intervals over a two-hour period and then broke contact and withdrew. I was in Kama throughout the attack. My men had orders to join me in the mountains at the Dargo China spring the next day. I went to the rendezvous point. I arrived at dawn and they were already there. Two of my men were missing, since they had forgotten the 60mm mortar and a video camera and had gone back to retrieve them.

While I was in Kama, informers told me that the enemy would launch a search and destroy mission in Kama District in five days. I decided that they would now come sooner since we had shelled them.

I decided that we had to leave the area. At sunrise, I instructed my men to go deeper into the mountains. I was tired and had a cold, so I decided to go back home to Gerdab. However, as I set out, I saw helicopters lifting off from the airport and flying low over Kama District. I hit the ground and hid. I was alone except for Hail Shahbaz. Other helicopters followed the first two. At first I thought that the helicopters were enroute to Kunar Province, but then they started landing troops from two helicopters at Mirji Gholi point on Derghi Ghar mountain — about a kilometer away. They also landed troops north of Mamakhel on the plain and on Gedaro Ghunday hill. My men saw the helicopters landing and realized that they would be seen if they continued to climb into the mountains. So they turned around in the wide canyon and started back toward me. I was in a ditch between Mirji Gholi and Dargo China and was hidden by the early morning shadow from the mountain. As I raised my head, I could make out some 25 Soviet soldiers along with several people wearing tsadar moving to the southeast from the high ground of Mirji Gholi toward Gedaro Ghunday. I could also see Soviets setting up mortars on top of Gedaro Ghunday. I crawled about 50 meters in the ditch. The Soviets were facing the sun and I was in the shadow, so they couldn't see me. As I crawled, I got rid of heavy things that I had in my pockets — such as pliers and wads of money. I headed north toward the mountain ridge. At that point, Zafar and Noor, carrying the missing 60mm mortar and video camera, walked into the Soviet group setting up at Gedaro Ghunday. They were immediately captured. Noor was my cousin. I climbed Derghi Ghar Mountain to try and see what was happening. I saw that my men had split. Thirteen were now back in Dargo China. These 13 men were commanded by Tajahul and the rest, commanded by Shahpur, were going back into the mountains. I saw that part of the Soviets were heading toward my 13 men. The Soviets began firing flares at the group of 13 to mark their position. Helicopter gunships then attacked my men with machine-gun fire. Other Soviets headed down from Derghi Ghar toward them. After the air attack, the Soviets began attacking my 13-man group. I was midway between the attacking Soviets and my men — about 500 meters away. I looked in my binoculars and saw that another group of Soviets were down in the valley picking up the pliers, first aid packets and money I had discarded. The group examining my things looked different than the others and I thought that they were officers. I decided that when the helicopters made their next strafing run, I would use the noise of their gunfire to hide my fire. When the helicopters made their next gun run, I fired on the group in the valley and hit one. I then took cover, raised my head, fired and got another one. This drew the Soviets attention and they

opened up on me. Artillery started to fall all around. I ran from this position to another position about 100 meters away. I had a “20-shooter” [Czechoslovak M26 light machine gun] and some of my men had “20-shooters.” As I ran to change positions, I heard firing from “20-shooters” in my group. They were involved in a heavy fire fight.

I then heard noise from the north and I thought that the Soviets were coming from that direction as well. But then I saw Shapur and one of men. They were coming for me. Shapur reported that tanks were moving through Kama and had sealed the exits. The enemy were arresting people throughout Kama. We decided to leave to the north. Earlier, Shapur had sent a messenger to my group of 13 telling them to move north. However, they were pinned down by heavy artillery fire and direct fire. They could not break contact and fought to the last man. As we left the area, one of my Mujahideen fired an RPG at a helicopter. The helicopter caught fire and flew off and fell to the ground near Kama where it exploded. I don't know whether the RPG hit the helicopter or whether other ground fire got it.

We moved to the village of Ghara Mamakhel, some four hours into the mountains, where I met two more of my men. By morning, 12 of my people arrived there. I learned the fate of my group of 13. The Soviets remained in Kama for two days. Then we returned to retrieve the bodies of my men. I found the bodies of my 13 men in a group, plus those of Zafar and Noor and five more of my men. The Soviets had booby-trapped some of the bodies and had sprinkled chemicals on other bodies which caused them to disintegrate. We couldn't evacuate these bodies. So we built graves over them. Their bodies are still there under stones. I do not know what the Soviet casualties were, but I do know I shot two, we downed a helicopter and the Soviets lost three vehicles to our mines during this action.

Throughout the war, I faced the Soviets like this during seven sweeps. I moved the families of the martyrs to refugee camps in Peshwar, Pakistan, since we couldn't support them in the Kama area. I later learned that the Soviets were looking for me personally. They arrested someone who looked like me (the narrator has a prominent nose) while he was harvesting clover. At that time, my beard was shorter. They took him to Jalalabad and paraded him around — “We've caught the son of a b—” they said. Someone finally recognized him, and said that he wasn't me and so he was released. Around that same time, the DRA governor of Kama District was in the Merzakhel Village. The Soviets arrested him and put him into forced labor since they didn't recognize him. They had him carrying water to their soldiers on the high ground. The Soviets were very careless of Afghan lives. They killed several villagers indiscriminately. They also killed one of my men who was unarmed. I am glad we drove the Soviets out, but the subsequent actions of the Mujahideen tarnish their record of victory. I have written many poems of protest against their current activities.

COMMENTARY: The Mujahideen were able to fire on the garrison over a two-hour period since they periodically shifted firing positions to avoid return fire. The Soviets did not push out any night patrols to find the firing positions but only replied with artillery fire. The artillery fire did no good. Apparently, the garrison commander had not surveyed potential and actual Mujahideen firing positions to counter them.

The Mujahideen rendezvous point was located in one of three

escape routes into the mountains from Kama District. Further, it is adjacent to a likely blocking position which the Soviets used during their periodic block and sweep operations. The Mujahideen were caught downhill from the Soviet blocking force and could not escape. As usual, the Mujahideen were severely hampered by the lack of portable, short-range radios which would have allowed them to coordinate their actions.

Mawlawi Shukur Yasini is a prominent religious leader in Nangrahar Province. He is from the village of Gerdab in Kama District northeast of Jalalabad. During the war, he was a major commander of the Khalis group (HIK). Later, he joined NIFA. During the war, he took television journalist Dan Rather to his base in Afghanistan.

MINING ATTACKS NEAR MEHTAR LAM

By Commander Sher Padshah and Sheragha

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 Bernau light machine gun. There were three Mujahideen in the bomb-firing party.

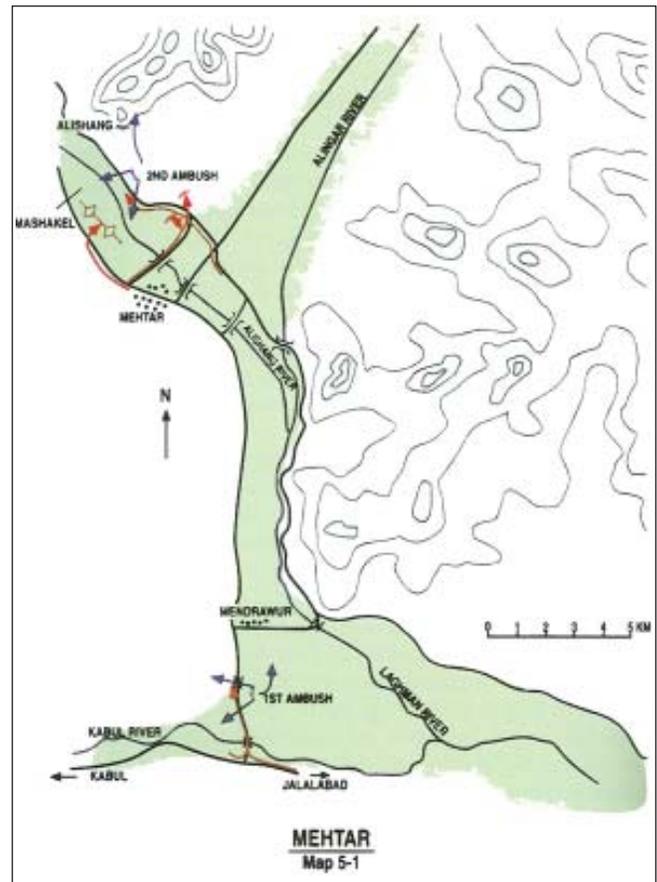
We saw the Soviet column approach slowly. Dismounted Soviet engineers were walking in front of the column with their mine detectors. They were carefully checking the route. When they came to the small bridge, they discovered the bomb. Several Soviets gathered around the bomb,

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 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 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 his megaphone and yelled "Keep



your positions. The reinforcements just arrived." A DRA 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 may have killed or wounded up to 18 DRA and Soviets. We destroyed one of their tanks and two trucks.

COMMENTARY: The Mujahideen preference for homemade mines in metal cans made it easier for Soviet mine detectors to find them. The tendency for curious troops to cluster around a newly-discovered mine is not uniquely Soviet, and the Soviets eventually trained their engineers to quit clustering around mines.

The Mujahideen usually combined demolitions and mining with other forms of offensive and defensive action. They usually covered their mines with direct fire weapons. The Mujahideen seldom left their mines unattended if they were located a distance from the border and a ready supply of mines. After an ambush or fight, they would often dig up their unexpended mines and take them with them to the next mission.

Commander Sher Padshah and Sheragha are from Laghman Province.