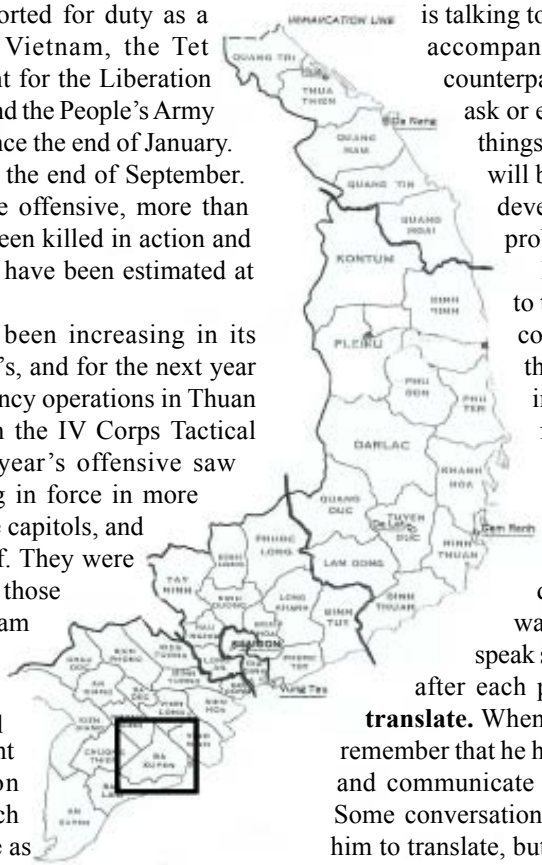
Mekong Delta 1968
Counterinsurgency Then and Now

RUSSELL A. ENO

In June 1968, the month I reported for duty as a district assistant advisor in Vietnam, the Tet offensive by the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (Viet Cong or VC) and the People's Army of Vietnam (NVA) had been raging since the end of January. The offensive would last nearly until the end of September. Before the communists broke off the offensive, more than 4,300 U.S. and ARVN Soldiers had been killed in action and 16,000 wounded. Communist losses have been estimated at more than 85,000 killed.

I arrived during a war that had been increasing in its intensity since at least the early 1960's, and for the next year my focus was to be on counterinsurgency operations in Thuan Hoa District, Ba Xuyen Province, in the IV Corps Tactical Zone (See map). This lunar new year's offensive saw Vietcong and NVA soldiers attacking in force in more than 100 cities and towns, in province capitols, and in the nation's capitol of Saigon itself. They were opposed by U.S and allied forces and those of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Trying to draw specific parallels between our experience in Vietnam and current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan can be risky, but I want to share some thoughts on counterinsurgency as I saw it and touch on some of the considerations that are as relevant to Arab cultures today as they were in the Mekong Delta four decades ago. The geography may have changed, but the fundamentals of counterinsurgency have not.



First and foremost, learn as much of the language — and as much *about* the language — as you can. You may not develop a native proficiency, but do not let that stop you from trying. As you build vocabulary and learn the rules of grammar, you will be dismayed at how much you don't know, but keep going; this anxiety is normal and provides a standard against which to measure your progress. Remember, at first your passive vocabulary and understanding will always exceed your active use of the language. Simply put, you will understand what people are saying, although at the time you may not be able to say it. But you will learn steadily and eventually amass an impressive level of skill and confidence. One way is to keep a radio tuned to a host nation station, only loud enough to hear the words and phrases. At first it will be totally unintelligible, but as you study and get accustomed to the tone and sentence rhythm you will gradually pick out single syllables, then words, phrases, and finally sentences. Repeat them aloud. In your interactions with host nation personnel you will also learn key words such as those related to weapons, explosives, vehicles, commands, and simple conversational phrases. Write them down phonetically and learn them. When your interpreter is talking to a local, listen closely to see how phrases and accompanying gestures are used. Your host nation counterparts will probably assist you in this, but don't ask or expect them to become tutors; they have other things to do. You will be surprised at how fast you will be able to pick up snatches of conversation, so develop listening skills. Various dialects can be a problem, but do not get discouraged; keep trying.

Let's talk about translators. Before going out to talk to host nation centers of influence or your counterpart, go over what you plan to say with the interpreter to make sure he understands your intent. Depending on the interpreter's skill and familiarity with American English, you will want to avoid slang, jargon, and idioms that may throw him a curve. If he has studied English in school instead of picking it up on the street, it was likely standard English but did not expose him to idiomatic usage. If you want him to accurately translate your message, speak slowly and clearly, use short sentences, pausing after each phrase, and watch him. **Give him time to translate.** When he stops talking, go on to the next point, but remember that he has to absorb your message, translate the ideas, and communicate the intent and essence to your counterpart. Some conversations will be routine, unemotional, and easy for him to translate, but others will not. When emotions are running high, keep your cool and let him finish the message. Do not interrupt him; instead use the time to listen carefully and formulate what you're going to say next.

While we're on the subject of language, remember this: the locals understand far more than you think, even though they may be unwilling or unable to speak English effectively. By now, they've been exposed to a great many Americans, have heard the language, probably picked up key words and phrases — including negative comments about their nation and its customs — and have developed that same passive understanding I mentioned earlier. Make sure your subordinates understand this: a careless joke or insensitive cultural comparison can destroy your credibility. Every member of the team must understand this and take it to heart. You may be the most sincere, skilled negotiator on the planet, but another American's muttered comment or smirk can undermine everything you're trying to accomplish. The host nation's people know far more than we do about the local enemy and the threats he can pose, and if treated properly will share that information with us.

Today's cultural awareness training is built upon the strengths and weaknesses of the training that prepared us for service in Southeast Asia, although we received comparatively little on customs and courtesies, focusing instead on what we needed for the immediate requirements of the duties we would be performing.

Having been selected for advisor duty, I was fortunate to attend the U.S. Army Military Assistance Training Advisor course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Instruction was heavy on the Vietnamese language, U.S. objectives and current operations in Vietnam, the organization and training of regional forces, and the key roles played by the district and village chiefs. We also learned a great deal about explosives and demolitions and the detection and setting of booby traps.

Just as in Iraq today, the resourcefulness of the enemy in Vietnam and his supporters was remarkable. Their eyes and ears were everywhere. They employed a variety of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), but their effects and sophistication were primitive compared to today's IEDs. The VC would sometimes quickly move into the impact zone of a B-52 or other bomb strike, count the craters — they knew the payload of each type of U.S. aircraft — and start looking for the ones that had not detonated. Once dug up, these 750 and 500-pound bombs could be defused and hauled off to be used as truly impressive command detonated mines, but this was a comparatively rare event, due to the difficulty in excavating a 750-pound bomb from 10-12 feet of Mekong Delta mud, and because of the sheer logistics of moving their prize to where it could be wired for detonation and reburied with any of this being detected. A far more frequent form of IED was an artillery or mortar shell, either a fired round which had malfunctioned or one which had not been collected from the drop zone (DZ) following an airdropped resupply for the 105mm section at our district headquarters. VC would comb the rice paddy that was our DZ after dark, looking for the odd round that had sunk unnoticed into the mud. I was finally able to convince the district chief to have his troops conduct detailed sweeps of the DZ after all drops and cross-check the load list with the rounds recovered until all rounds were accounted for, something that greatly reduced casualties from command-detonated 105mm shells. This lesson is no less relevant to today's global war on terrorism, where checking your area and litter discipline can literally be a matter of life and death. Just as in Vietnam, insurgents will use anything and everything against us. If something appears out of place, it is probably there for a reason.

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Information operations, often pigeonholed under the category of propaganda in the 1960's, have achieved a far greater degree of sophistication than I experienced four decades ago. Today, Al Qaeda and their surrogates are able to rapidly exploit local, regional, and international media — including our own — to communicate their message. When I first arrived in Vietnam, VC elements were still fighting in many of the major cities, and Saigon was packed with refugees fleeing fighting in the suburbs and countryside around the capitol. Our Braniff airliner was on its final approach to Tan Son Nhut air base, only to be diverted to Bien Hoa because of a VC rocket attack underway on Tan Son Nhut. Sappers and small teams of VC still roamed the city, but they were being ruthlessly hunted down and killed by U.S. and South Vietnamese soldiers, who went after them with the grim determination of men with a job to do. The air of uncertainty surrounding the capitol created an ideal growth medium for speculation and defeatism, and the aggressors did not miss the opportunity. The Viet Cong relied heavily on random attacks and word-of-mouth messages to create the impression that there were greater numbers of them in the city than was actually the case. This is no different in Iraq today, where the message of one Iraqi to another is the best and most credible sort of information operation, having greater credibility that any leaflet, broadcast, or other media image.

Just as today, the international media, including our own in the U.S., were intent on getting the news out ahead of their competitors, and repeated whatever they could get — either on their own or as Communist press releases — without elaborating on either the full extent of casualties suffered by the VC or the limited objectives they had actually achieved. Without committing extensive resources to their media effort, the VC and NVA were thus able to influence public opinion here and abroad, and it was this external feedback that created the sense of foreboding that pervaded Vietnamese public opinion during those first trying months of 1968. The South Vietnamese government sought to restore stability, both by its own public announcements and by denying the Communists access to media. Radio stations taken over by rebels soon found their power cut off. Our own province capitol of Soc Trang was penetrated, but ARVN units quickly sealed off access and egress routes and set about mopping up the sappers and rifleman who now found themselves with no way out. Sporadic gunfire was a part of the city's routine until well into June 1968, but ARVN successes were well enough publicized to encourage the citizens to resume their day-to-day business. The press and broadcast operation seriously undermined the morale of the remaining VC and served to dry up what little support they had been receiving from sympathizers.

An advisor's credibility is his stock in trade. Your counterparts must come to understand that your word is your bond, and because of this you must never promise anything that you cannot deliver. You control the assets available to you, but for anything else you need to coordinate before you find yourself in over your head. People will ask for everything from money to assistance in rebuilding infrastructure, and if your response is going to be "I'll try," make sure they understand that this does not constitute a promise to deliver the goods, but that you will make an effort to resolve the matter. And this is why you need to know what you can count on before you enter into negotiations. A last comment: keep track of what you are asked to do, and what you agree to. Keep a pocket notebook, write it down, and keep the details of negotiations confidential. Faced with a cloud of conflicting demands, it is easy to lose sight of details, and that little notebook will save you a whole lot of trouble.

Don't go in blind. Talk to your predecessor if at all possible. Find out who the key players are, whom you can trust and whom you need to watch, what ongoing unfinished business he's leaving behind, where he has not been successful, and why. In many areas, his commitments may be your commitments, because the locals only understand that the U.S. Army promised to restore power or water treatment and that hasn't happened yet. Changing attitudes and building credibility takes time, and you

will be reaping the rewards — and disappointments — of your predecessor's work for a matter of months, just as your own successes may not become evident until well after you took those first tentative steps. What we see as small steps may in fact come across as giant successes in the eyes of the people we are trying to help. Continuity shows commitment, and your successor in turn needs to know what you're leaving for him to accomplish. This is where your next higher comes in: he needs to understand and agree to the plan and what it will cost. It may be great to hit the ground running and launch all sorts of mind-boggling initiatives, but if they're accomplished at the cost of projects the locals have been counting on, the net gain for U.S. credibility is zero. When we redeploy, the last thing we want to leave behind is the Middle Eastern version of the cargo cult, waiting eternally for the great plane load of largesse that never quite gets there.

Tact and diplomacy will be some of the most important tools in your bag. We are used to dealing and speaking directly and openly with one another, but other cultures do business differently. What we take for openness can be seen as bluntness. Our insistence on punctuality is baffling to those we are trying to advise, and may easily be interpreted as an attempt to impose our customs and priorities on them. If a meeting is set for 1400, be there, but don't take it too hard if the counterparts show up a little later. We want to get right down to business, but they will want to sip coffee, pass the time of day, renew acquaintances, eventually get around to the subject at hand, and conclude when they feel they've accomplished enough. The agenda is good for a plan, but don't be surprised if you don't get to all the topics in the first sitting. They may want the same things we want, but they have a different way of getting to them. Patience is truly a virtue, and once we understand that we will become less easily irritated and frustrated, and our body language and facial expressions will reflect this. And our counterparts will notice it.

Counterinsurgency is not a simple matter, but all successful counterinsurgencies have recognized that the host nation population is where campaigns are won or lost. The guerrilla seeks to draw his psychological, financial, and logistical support from the population, as he always has. We have heard Mao Tse-Tung's water and fish analogy enough to understand it in light of the global war on terrorism, and we need to take it to heart. If we try to master — or at least learn — the host nation language and learn to use translators effectively, if we develop and sustain our credibility with local citizens and their leaders, and if we continue to expand our cultural awareness training programs and dismiss the idea that such subjects are too touchy-feely we will have taken a giant step toward defeating Al Qaeda and their surrogates, whatever names they may go by. And we cannot afford to underestimate the enemy's resourcefulness, his determination, or his ability to conduct effective information operations. The insurgency is crumbling. Our adversary is losing men faster than he can replace them, his support at home and abroad is dwindling, and our allies in Iraq and Afghanistan are increasing their pressure against him. We have learned the lessons that contribute to a successful counterinsurgency, and now we need to continue to build on them.

Russell A. Eno is currently serving as the editor of *Infantry* Magazine. As an infantry lieutenant, Mr. Eno served as an advisor to the 566 and 567 Regional Force Rifle Companies in the Mekong Delta, Ba Xuyen Province. He is a 1967 graduate of the University of New Hampshire ROTC program. He retired from active duty in 1991 and has been editor of *Infantry* since 1992.

The Bear Went Over the Mountain

More Lessons from the Soviet-Afghan War

Editor's Note: *We have selected two operations from* The Bear Went Over the Mountain, Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*, edited by Lester W. Grau, that illustrate an ambush and truck convoy operations in combat. These two actions are noteworthy because they discuss tactics commonly used by the insurgents.*

ESCORTING A TRUCK CONVOY FROM KABUL TO GHAZNI

By V.I. Rovba

At the end of 1981, guerrilla forces were very active in the province of Ghazni. Especially bitter combat was fought along the Ghazni-Kabul and Ghazni-Kandahar highways. The enemy paid attention to mining the roads where convoys would pass.

The 9th MRC (3rd Battalion, 191st Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment) was stationed six kilometers west of Ghazni with our parent regiment. On 5 September, our company commander was ordered to provide an escort on the next day for an 80-vehicle convoy from Ghazni to Kabul. On 7 September, we would off load the cargo and would return on 8 September. Two motorized rifle platoons were detailed to provide security and convoy escort. The company commander would command the detail on an R-142 radio set from the regimental communications company. (The R-142 radio system is actually an R-130 shortwave radio, two R-111 medium-range FM radios and one R-123 short-range FM radio mounted on a GAZ-66 truck. The R-142 can communicate over distance and with helicopter aviation [ed.].) The route is 160 kilometers long.

The only preparation that the troops had for the mission was drawing their ammunition and cleaning their individual and crew-served weapons. The drivers pulled maintenance on their vehicles by themselves.

My company commander decided to keep the convoy together in one single column. He put a BTR in the lead of the convoy and two at the tail. He spaced the remaining BTRs between every 15 or 16 trucks in the convoy. Altogether, he committed seven BTRs to the mission. In the event that the mujahideen would attack, each motorized rifle squad's BTR would pull over to the side of the road from which the enemy was firing and return fire with all its weapons. Thus, they would provide covering fire for the trucks driving out of the kill zone. Once the convoy was clear, the BTRs would rejoin the column and reoccupy their positions in the march column. Under no circumstances were we to allow the enemy to stop the column. It would be very difficult to get the convoy going again should it be stopped.

The road march to Kabul passed without incident. However, there was a delay in refilling the fuel trucks that constituted

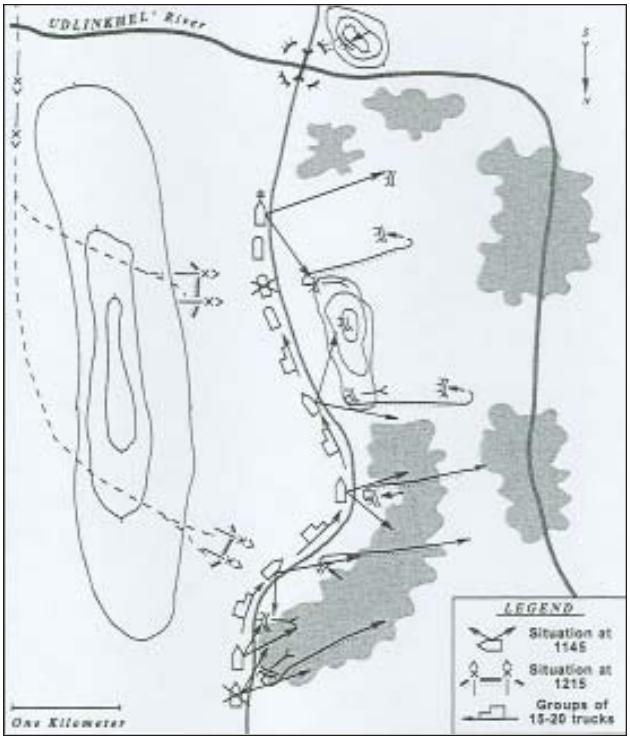

Figure 1 — Defeating an enemy attack on a convoy

the bulk of the convoy back to Ghazni. The return trip was supposed to start at 0600 hours and finally got started at 1030 hours. We had sat on the outskirts of Kabul for four hours waiting for all of the fuel trucks. While we were waiting, individual Afghan trucks loaded with men and cargo continually passed by the entire convoy.

When the loaded fuel tankers finally arrived, they took their place in the convoy. The commander gave the order and the march began. After driving for an hour and a half, we entered the minor Kabul river canyon, and traveled through a green zone. Three kilometers ahead of us was an Afghan Army post which guarded a river bridge. The presence of this post had a certain psychological effect and we relaxed our vigilance as we approached the post. The company commander's BTR and the truck with the R-142 radio set traveled at the front of the column. Right behind them was a fuel truck towing a broken-down fuel truck. Once the entire convoy was flanked by the green zone, the enemy opened fire on the lead vehicles with grenade launchers at a range of 25 to 30 meters. The fuel truck towing the other fuel truck was hit. Simultaneously, the enemy opened on the tail end of the convoy and knocked out a trail BTR with a RPG.

The escort vehicles reacted as they had been briefed and returned fire. The truck column began to drive out of the zone while the enemy was rattled by the return fire. The company commander radioed for air support and 30 minutes after the battle began, helicopter gunships arrived. They hit the enemy and supported the motorized riflemen in their battle. The enemy ceased fire and began to withdraw to fall-back positions. In this combat, we lost one soldier KIA and seven WIA.

Frunze Commentary:

This vignette shows insufficient preparation for the convoy duty and further insufficient preparation in its accomplishment. On the day before the mission, the company commander did not conduct training with his personnel including training on coordination of actions in the event of enemy attack. The prolonged wait along the road side permitted the enemy to closely study the convoy as he drove by the column. The use of helicopter gunships to cover the column from the air did not come soon enough to ward off the enemy attack. Reconnaissance was not used during the course of the march. Nevertheless, the high psychological preparation of the drivers and the selfless actions of the motorized rifle soldiers allowed the column to rapidly exit the kill zone.

Editor's Commentary:

In this vignette, the commander is taken to task for not carefully supervising the preparation of his troops for the march. Part of this criticism is based on lack of trust of subordinates and the lack of a Soviet NCO corps. The commander is expected to personally conduct all training. In armies with a professional NCO corps, such training and preparation is done by trained, seasoned sergeants who understand the unit missions and train their forces to meet them. The commander checks his sergeants, but does not have to get involved in training to the extent that his Soviet counterpart had to. This leaves more time for carefully planning the action. The Soviet system overburdened the company grade officers and limited individual training opportunities.

The mujahideen learned to take out command vehicles early in the battle. Command vehicles were always distinguished by the extra antennae and convoy commanders usually rode in the first vehicle of the main column. Other Soviet writings talk about strapping extra antennae on all vehicles before going into action and varying the commander's position in the column. This did not happen. Consequently, when the commander's vehicle was hit, communications were usually lost and the commander, if he survived, could not control the fight. In this vignette, the essential communications were in a soft-bodied truck, instead of an armored vehicle. The Soviets used radio almost exclusively to control the battle. Although the mujahideen had little jamming capability, once they have knocked out the Soviet vehicles with the multiple antennae they usually had disrupted the tactical control net.

V. I. Rovba served from 1981 to 1983 as the platoon leader of a motorized rifle platoon. He was awarded the medal "For Bravery."

A REINFORCED MOTORIZED RIFLE COMPANY CONDUCTS AN AMBUSH IN KANDAHAR PROVINCE

By Major V. I. Pavlenko

Our separate motorized rifle brigade (the 70th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade) completed its road march to its new base camp in March 1981. Its movement was covered from the air by a squadron of helicopter gunships. At the same time, the squadron began reconnaissance of enemy forces located along the Kandahar-Shindand road.

The squadron commander reported that at 1820 hours, a truck convoy carrying supplies entered Musa-Kala village. Further, a number of enemy was concentrated at Musa-Kala, which is located about 20 kilometers from Kandahar. The brigade intelligence officer also confirmed this information.

We could not waste any time. The village of Musa-Kala is located close to the border with Pakistan and was a rest stop and a staging point for the mujahideen bases. Weapons and ammunition were brought through this village for distribution

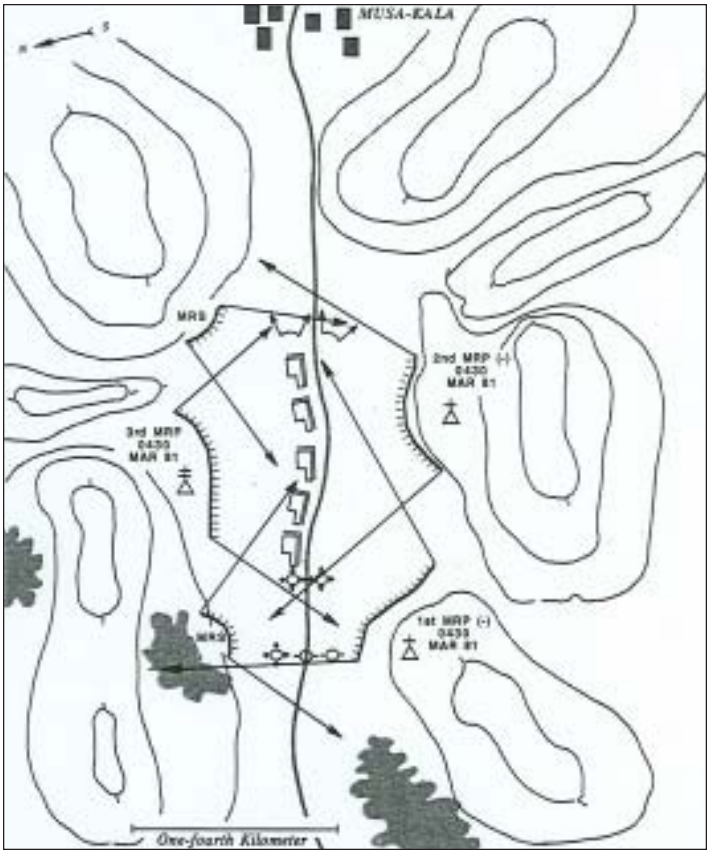

Figure 2 — An ambush in Kandahar Province

throughout the country. Our brigade commander, Lieutenant Colonel Yu. P. Shatin, devised the following plan. He would seal off the village from the north and the southeast with two motorized rifle battalions. Then he would use the air-assault battalion and some Afghan Army subunits to sweep the village. At the same time, in order to halt the northwest movement of the enemy convoy, he would fly a reinforced motorized rifle company ahead of the convoy to establish an ambush.

My battalion commander, S. V. Antonov, designated my 8th Motorized Rifle Company as the ambush company. I was a senior lieutenant at the time and the company commander. My brigade commander personally gave me my mission. My company had three motorized rifle platoons. The brigade commander reinforced my company with three AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers with their crews, three sappers with twenty mines, and two RTOs with two radios. Seven Mi-8T transport helicopters were to deliver my company close to the ambush site. I had two hours to prepare my force for the mission.

At 2055 hours, my company was loaded on the helicopters and at 2130 hours we landed five kilometers from the ambush site. The landing took place 15 minutes before dusk. After the landing, I assembled my company at the rally point which was located 500 meters from the LZ. We waited for the cover of darkness before moving out. I pushed out a patrol squad in front of the company. I had each platoon split into two groups and move side-by-side in two columns where they could be controlled by hand signs and visual signals. I had a patrol move in front of and behind each platoon. I had every squad and platoon conduct all-around observation and stop periodically to get their bearings. At 0020 hours, my forward patrol reported that they were at the ambush site and 20 minutes later, my entire company had closed into the area.

I put my platoons and squads into position. I placed forces to block the entrance and exit to the ambush site and concentrated the bulk of my force in the center of the ambush site. All-around observation was maintained on the site entrance and exit while my troops dug in and fortified their firing positions and then camouflaged them. The sappers mined the road at the ambush site. By 0430 hours, my company ambush was ready.

At 0500 hours, brigade subunits sealed off the village of Musa-Kala and began the sweep at 0530. The enemy, shooting at the Soviet forces in the village in order to slow them down, put their ammunition-truck convoy on the road and headed toward our ambush. At 0620 hours, my sentry reported that five trucks were approaching the site. The trucks entered the site and the lead truck hit a mine. The 1st and 3rd platoons immediately opened fire on the enemy. Two trucks turned around and tried to leave. We killed one with a command detonated mine and the 2nd platoon killed the other. The enemy was confused and his return fire was wild and disorganized. Some of the mujahideen tried to break out, but we cut them down. The battle was short.

The results of our ambush were 26 enemy killed and 20 captured. Eight of the captives were wounded. We destroyed five trucks loaded with ammunition and food. I lost one soldier KIA and five WIA.

Frunze Commentary:

The success of this combat was determined by the rapid decision to employ the ambush; the short time taken to organize the action; the rapid, concealed movement into the ambush site; the initiative and bravery displayed by all commanders, the uninterrupted control of the subunits and their fires, and the support and continual coordination with the subunits which were carrying out the block and sweep of the village.

Editor's Commentary:

This book does not discuss the problem of fratricide, but this particular ambush seems to set the conditions for fratricide. Forces on low ground are positioned across from forces on high ground. The forces on the high ground fired through the convoy and maybe into friendly forces. The account states that the mujahideen return-fire was wild and disorganized, yet the Soviets lost one killed and five wounded. Some of these Soviet casualties may have been from fratricide. Further, if the mujahideen had entered the ambush at night, the force on the low ground would have fired into the force on the high ground, since night firing is inevitably high unless bars and elevation blocks are constructed at each firing position. These field firing aids are hard to put in at night.

Although this ambush worked, there are still some troublesome details. There was apparently no control on traffic entering the kill zone from the west and inadvertently setting off a mine, spoiling the ambush. Further, the use of conventional mines on the road takes control away from the ambush commander. If the mujahideen had sent a patrol vehicle ahead of the main convoy, it might have triggered a mine and ruined the ambush. Command-detonated mines seem appropriate here.

V. I. Pavlenko served in the OKSVA from 1980 through 1982 as a motorized rifle company commander. He was awarded the medal "For Bravery."