CANSOFCOM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

SQUANDERING THE CAPABILITY

SOVIET SOF IN AFGHANISTAN

MAJOR TONY BALASEVICIUS

THE CANSOFCOM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

MISSION

The mission of the Canadian Forces Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Professional Development Centre (PDC) is to enable professional development within the Command in order to continually develop and enhance the cognitive capacity of CANSOFCOM personnel.

VISION

The vision of the CANSOFCOM PDC is to be a key enabler to CANSOFCOM headquarters, units and Special Operations Task Forces (SOTFs) as an intellectual centre of excellence for special operations forces (SOF) professional development (PD).

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6. develop CANSOF publications that provide both PD and educational materials to CANSOF personnel and external audiences;
7. maintain a website that provides up-to-date information on PD opportunities and research materials; and
8. assist with the research of SOF best practices and concepts to ensure that CANSOFCOM remains relevant and progressive so that it maintains its position as the domestic force of last resort and the international force of choice for the Government of Canada.

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SOVIET SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN AFGHANISTAN

Major Tony Balasevicius

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FOREWORD

It is my pleasure to introduce the second monograph produced by the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) Professional Development Centre (PDC). As the editor of the series, I am pleased to be a part of a growing body of literature on special operations forces (SOF) in general and Canadian Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) in particular. As Brigadier-General Denis Thompson has asserted, "continual professional development remains a staple of SOF warrior development and the PDC monograph series provides one vehicle to assist with the self-development of CANSOF personnel." Moreover, he added, "in addition, initiatives such as this also go a long way in providing the necessary information and dialogue to inform fellow military members, decision makers and Canadian society at large on the issue of special operations forces, specifically what they are and the capability they represent." Certainly, this is the intent behind developing the series.

In short, we wish to create a series that provides quality publications that address topics pertinent to CANSOFCOM personnel and that are of general interest to a broader audience, including the wider military community, the Canadian public, military and civilian decision-makers, as well as international allies. As such, each monograph is designed as a self-contained article, case study or handbook. Moreover, they are designed to evoke discussion and further debate concerning current and past SOF experiences. As such, a key goal of the series is to increase SOF knowledge and critical thinking skills amongst CANSOFCOM personnel and other interested readers.

As the monograph series grows, we hope to provide multiple, preferably contrasting, views on any given subject or domain. Additionally, in the near future, we will be accepting topic ideas and

paper submissions in the hope of growing and expanding the body of literature on CANSOF and related subjects.

It is now my pleasure to introduce *Squandering the Capability: Soviet Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan*. In this volume, Major Tony Balasevicius does an admirable job of representing the Soviet SOF experience in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Ultimately, as Balasevicius concludes, SOF – whether in the 1980s or present day – are key enablers but, in order to maximize their effectiveness, they must be tasked with the proper missions and given the correct resources, including an appropriate amount of time to meet operational and strategic demands. As is often the case, historical examples provide insight into the future.

Dr. Emily Spencer
Monograph Series Editor
CANSOFCOM Professional Development Centre

SQUANDERING THE CAPABILITY: SOVIET SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN AFGHANISTAN

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is currently in Afghanistan fighting a major counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign directed against a resurgent Taliban threat. Dealing with this menace has not been easy. Realizing they cannot defeat NATO's superior military strength, the Taliban have resorted to actions that strike at the coalition's will through the cumulative effects of the use of terror, invoking suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and small-scale "hit and run" military operations. To help deal with the multidimensional aspects of this unconventional threat, NATO is increasingly turning to the use of Special Operations Forces.

SOF warriors are currently in high demand because they operate comfortably in ambiguous situations and possess the unique skills to successfully deal with the complex and volatile situation that characterizes the war in Afghanistan. For example, at the beginning of the Afghanistan campaign in 2001, with only approximately 300 soldiers on the ground, SOF teams were able to successfully rally rival and unorganized anti-Taliban opposition groups into an alliance, which initially defeated the Taliban only 49 days after these forces became directly involved in operations.[1]

Such successes have not gone unnoticed by senior political and military leadership, and over the years NATO's use of SOF has steadily increased. Today there are almost 2,500 SOF operators in Afghanistan and, according to many reports, this number is expected to expand.[2] This increase is directly related to the fact that SOF missions in Afghanistan have evolved significantly from

unconventional warfare operations, which was their focus in 2001. In fact, SOF tasks now include everything from direct-action missions against insurgents to working with tribal elders in providing a plethora of social, economic and security services to many villages in the rural areas, and everything in between. At the national level, SOF have also been an important contributor to training both the Afghan National Army and Afghan Special Forces.[3]

As Western SOF get ready to expand their capabilities in Afghanistan it is worthwhile to review the Soviet SOF experience during its COIN campaign of the 1980s. Of particular interest to those that will employ these capabilities is the fact that during their ten-year struggle with the Mujahideen, between 1979 and 1989, the Soviets also deployed a significant SOF capability based around their highly trained Spetsnaz units.[4] A critical examination of the Spetsnaz's performance during its time in Afghanistan, however, reveals that Soviet SOF were often misemployed and, as a result, were unable to make a significant contribution to the outcome of the war.

This misemployment was based on the Soviet's desire to focus their SOF efforts on propping up their conscript army rather than looking at how it might fit into a grander operational vision for success. Although Spetsnaz was initially able to make a significant contribution to increasing the Soviet army's tactical efficiency, it proved to be only a short-term solution. The failure to achieve long-term significant results via this method was due to the fact that the Mujahideen were able to adapt their tactics and procedures to deal with this new threat. Conversely, if Soviet SOF had been given the necessary conditions to succeed, including the right missions, the appropriate resources and the necessary time to achieve the desired operational or strategic impact, then they most likely would have been more effective. As such, Soviet SOF arguably missed an opportunity to change the tide of the war.

Unfortunately, this misemployment of SOF is often dismissed by Western militaries as being a strictly Soviet phenomenon that occurred at a different time under different circumstances and, therefore, has little applicability to NATO forces currently in theatre. Nonetheless, the misemployment of SOF is an ongoing concern and something to be guarded against even under the best of intentions.

This exploration of the Soviet's use of Spetsnaz and other SOF during their occupation of Afghanistan focuses on the evolution of SOF missions as the Soviets attempted to meet a number of complex COIN challenges while employing a conscript army trained for conventional operations in Western Europe. In the process, it will highlight critical shortfalls with the Soviet's employment of their SOF capability.

Background

First, it is important to put Spetsnaz's employment in Afghanistan into context. Making direct comparisons between Soviet and Western SOF capabilities, such as those of the British Special Air Service (SAS) or American Green Berets, can at times be difficult and misleading. These challenges are due to the fact that Soviet SOF are rooted within both the military and state security apparatuses.[5] As a result, both of these organizations have their own Spetsnaz units, which overlap in capabilities and responsibilities.[6] Adding to the confusion is the fact that the Soviets often referred to SOF units with the same capabilities by different names. For example, *reydoviki* (from the English word "raid") often refers to diversionary and reconnaissance/sabotage troops, and these same forces are also known as Spetsnaz, which is derived from the Russian phrase *spetsialnoe naznachenie*, meaning special purpose.[7] Finally, differences in both training and capabilities between Spetsnaz and non-Spetsnaz units such

as Guards Airborne Divisions are far less significant than they are in Western forces having comparable units.[8] Although these standardized capabilities gave the Soviets the ability to interchange various units when planning missions, it can create confusion when commentators attempt to describe Soviet SOF operations.

Notably, Spetsnaz evolved from the Soviet's idea that SOF activities are closely aligned with their intelligence functions. This concept is articulated in the notion of *razvedka*.[9] Within this context, as scholar David M. Glantz articulates, the Soviets believed there was "a seamless web of intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance, and other activities associated with the collection and processing of information about actual or potential enemies."[10] Consequently, Soviet SOF capabilities are usually embedded within their various intelligence and security agencies and allocated to military forces for such things as reconnaissance and other types of special missions.[11]

Modern Spetsnaz units have their genesis in the development of independent reconnaissance companies of special purpose forces that were formed shortly after the Second World War and assigned to Soviet armies designated as part of the "first echelon." By 1957, however, it was realized that these units would be expected to carry out a number of tasks beyond simple reconnaissance so a more robust capability was created in the form of the first five Spetsnaz battalions.[12]

The newly formed Spetsnaz battalions were expected to carry out what the Soviets viewed as strategic level missions within a high intensity conflict in Europe.[13] The missions focused on deep reconnaissance of strategic targets, the destruction of important command, control, and communications facilities, the capture or destruction of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, and the neutralization of important transportation nodes.[14] Spetsnaz

training and organization focused on being as self-sufficient as possible while carrying out any of these operations.[15]

To accomplish the necessary levels of self-sufficiency, Spetsnaz teams were organized around a primary group of eight to ten men commanded by an officer. The team was composed of a number of specialists that included "a radio operator, demolition experts, snipers, and reconnaissance specialists." Additionally, all team members received training in multiple areas so that missions would not be impeded simply because of the loss of a specialist.[16] Teams were usually controlled and administered by a company, which was approximately 135 men strong and consisted of a small headquarters element that controlled up to 15 teams. Notably, although teams were organized and trained to operate independently, in practice they were often combined to create larger organizations that were tailored to meet specific mission requirements.[17]

Once a Spetsnaz team was tasked to carry out a mission, the supervising headquarters attempted to keep its interference to a minimum, rather relying heavily on the skill and initiative of the team leader to successfully complete the task. Nonetheless, some coordination was always maintained in order to realign missions to the changing nature of ongoing operations.

Once deployed, teams would usually infiltrate into an operational area using a variety of means. Although the preferred method was by parachute, other means could include helicopter, boats or land vehicles.[18] As most missions involved some element of reconnaissance, especially at the beginning of an operation, Spetsnaz groups would try to operate as covertly as possible. If they were required to spend any time in the area before completing their mission, they would organize a base camp and move its location periodically to avoid detection.[19]

Spetsnaz usually worked closely with Soviet espionage and other support networks located in the target area and would routinely have Intelligence and Engineer Officers accompany them on missions. As many of the Soviet's various SOF capabilities were interchangeable, it was common for other organizations, such as the Guards Airborne, to be assigned to work with Spetsnaz.[20] For politically sensitive operations, Spetsnaz would work closely with the Soviet Secret Service (KGB).[21] Such cooperation between Spetsnaz, the Guards Airborne and the KGB was evident during the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in April 1968.

In the spring of 1968, Czechoslovakia was experiencing a period of political liberalization commonly referred to by Western media as the "Prague Spring." As the movement progressed, the Soviets grew increasingly uncomfortable with the political instability in the country and decided to launch an invasion in order to restore control to the situation. The well-coordinated operation started when a plane carrying a Spetsnaz group attached to the 103rd Guards Airborne Division requested permission to land at Prague airport under the pretext of engine trouble.[22] When the aircraft touched down, a Spetsnaz group quickly deployed and secured the airport for follow-on forces. Shortly thereafter, key government buildings were occupied and 500,000 troops, most from the Soviet Union, poured across the Czech border to occupy the country.[23]

From an operational perspective, an analysis of the Czechoslovakian operation reveals that the Soviets liked to employ their SOF capabilities selectively and, when they did, it was with forethought and precision. Additionally, they preferred to do so within the realm of tightly controlled missions where they achieved almost complete control over the situation before the operation was launched.

Unfortunately, these conditions did not exist during the initial Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. Moreover, as the occupation continued, the Afghans were able to maintain an effective resistance which impacted how the military situation unfolded. Under these circumstances the true versatility of Spetsnaz was revealed, as was their misemployment.

What makes the study of the Soviet SOF experience in Afghanistan so interesting is the fact that the situation was incredibly fluid and there was the potential for SOF to have a significant effect on the battlespace. For instance, without centralized control being maintained over COIN operations, both the Soviet command and Spetsnaz had to adapt. In some respects, their capabilities proved sound and were enhanced during the occupation. However, the decade-long struggle also exposed some limitations both in terms of the Soviet thinking on how SOF should be employed and with Spetsnaz's ability to adapt to changing circumstances. As such, the Soviet SOF experience in Afghanistan is an important case study in the modern employment and misemployment of this capability.

Initial Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan

The genesis of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan started with the seizure of power by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) on 27 April 1978. Once in control, the new Marxist government quickly announced a number of broad but ill-conceived reforms, which alienated large segments of the population. Additionally, they then did little to actually implement these reforms, thereby marginalizing those Afghans who might have supported them.[24]

Frustration with the new regime quickly mounted and turned violent when rebellion broke out in the Nuristan region of Eastern

Afghanistan. In the months that followed, the rebellion spread throughout much of the rest of the country.[25] As the situation worsened, the fledging PDPA government increasingly asked for Soviet support and, by the late fall of 1979, they had formally requested Soviet intervention.[26]

Once the decision was made to get involved, the Soviets were quick to respond. On 8 December 1979, Soviet advance forces began arriving in the city of Bagram and shortly thereafter a contingent of Spetsnaz was moved into Kabul to secure the airport. These preliminary moves put two key entry points into Soviet hands. Meanwhile, three motorized rifle divisions, part of the 40th Army, were positioned on the Soviet-Afghan border.[27] On 20 December, Spetsnaz forces were tasked to secure the Salang Pass, a key chokepoint on the main highway coming from the Soviet border.[28] As these events were occurring, Hafizullah Amin, the President of Afghanistan, decided to move into the Tajbeg Palace for better protection.[29]

The Soviet Coup d'État in Kabul

On 25 December 1979, the Soviets deployed about 5,000 men from the 105th Guards Airborne Division into Bagram and Kabul airports. This move coincided with the advance of two Soviet motorized rifle divisions across the border with the objective of occupying Herat and Kabul.[30] Moreover, the Soviets had concluded that Hafizullah Amin was proving to be unreliable and had to be removed. As a result, they decided to seize power in the capital by taking over key government offices and launching an assault on the Presidential Palace.[31]

The coup of 27 December 1979 had many of the hallmarks of the 1968 Czechoslovakian invasion and involved Spetsnaz, Airborne and KGB forces. The operation started with the seizure of the Ministry of the Interior, the departments responsible for

internal security and the secret police.[32] At 1915 hours, an explosion at the telecommunications building knocked out communications between the various Afghan government authorities and shortly thereafter Soviet troops dressed in Afghan uniforms occupied the major governmental, military and media buildings in and around Kabul.

In consonance with these actions was the storming of the Tajbeg Presidential Palace.[33] The Presidential Palace was located in Kabul on top of a hill that dominated the surrounding area. It was defended by approximately 1,300 men who were organized into three lines of defence, each surrounding the Palace. The inner defence cordon was focused in and around the immediate vicinity of the palace, and consisted of Amin's personal bodyguard of about 150 men. Within this zone there were at least 15 sentry posts, which covered all of the approaches leading up the hill and all entrances into the Palace.[34] The second line of defence was approximately 500 metres from the Palace's most forward sentry posts, and consisted of elements from various Spetsnaz units that had been provided to President Amin under the pretext of strengthening the overall defence of the Palace. The third line was made up of Amin's personal Guard brigade and included three motorized infantry battalions, one tank battalion, and various other elements that totalled approximately 1,200 men.[35]

Although the Soviets had a distinct advantage in mounting the attack on the Palace from within the security perimeter of the second line of defence, it would not be an easy task. In order to reach the building, Spetsnaz units were required to get through the well-sited sentry posts while at the same time repelling attacks by Amin's brigade from the third line of defence.

The task of actually securing the building and capturing the President was entrusted to 24 men from Alpha Group (Spetsnaz),

along with members of the Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye (GRU), and about 30 men from the KGB. In order to breach the defences around the Palace and hold off the expected counter-attacks from Amin's brigade, the assault force was reinforced with about 520 men from the 154th Separate Spetsnaz Detachment and 87 troops from the 345 Guards Airborne Regiment, along with a number of heavy weapon systems.[36]

The initial phase of the operation was started under extremely heavy covering fire from two ZSU (air defence) systems. While this attack was in progress two other ZSU systems, along with an AGS-17 (automatic grenade-launchers) platoon, were deployed to suppress Amin's Guard brigade.[37]

According to a number of military analysts, after overcoming the presidential guard posts, Spetsnaz and KGB forces entered the palace and began to methodically clear each room until they had secured the entire building. Although it was far from being a surgical strike, the operation was successful and resulted in the death of Amin, along with most of his guards and a number of unfortunate guests who happened to be in the Palace at the time of the assault.[38]

The details of what actually happened to Amin are still unclear. Some reports indicate that he was dead before the Soviets entered the building, having been poisoned along with others at dinner that evening.[39] Other accounts suggest that once the Spetsnaz had secured the Palace and captured Amin, the Soviets took him and members of his entourage out into the grounds of the Palace where they were shot. Still other sources suggest that Amin was captured and taken alive to the Soviet embassy where he was then shot.[40] Regardless of the details, what is clear is that shortly after the coup, Radio Kabul announced that Afghanistan had been liberated from Amin's rule. According to the broadcast,

Amin had been executed by the Afghan Revolutionary Central Committee (ARCC), which had then elected a former Deputy Prime Minister, Babrak Karmal, to lead the new Afghan government.[41]

In the days following the coup, the Soviet 40th Army continued with its occupation of the country. When the consolidation was complete, the Soviets had two Guards Motor Rifle Divisions, an independent Motor Rifle Regiment, a separate Airborne Assault Brigade and a Mixed Air Corps.[42] In all, the initial Soviet troop strength in the country included 1,800 tanks, 80,000 soldiers, and 2,000 Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFV).[43] With the subsequent arrival of two additional divisions, the total Soviet troop strength rose to just over 100,000 personnel.[44]

The COIN Operation

The coup and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan grabbed much of the international community's attention. Nonetheless, the efficiency of the operation overshadowed the fact that the Soviets had severely underestimated the level of resentment the fiercely independent Afghans harboured towards their actions and presence in their country. This resentment was so deep that the Soviets quickly found themselves fighting with disparate Afghan tribes that united in a holy war against them. These holy warriors were regularly referred to in the Western media as the Mujahideen.[45]

Although the perception of the Mujahideen represented in the media was one of a united army fighting against an oppressive invader, the reality was actually quite different. These fighters were little more than a loose collection of irregular tribal militia bands that fought the Soviets using an assortment of tried and proven guerrilla tactics that they had utilized throughout much of their history. These tactics included ambushes along key supply

routes, sabotage, raids on key government infrastructure, and various acts of terror against government officials and their supporters.[46]

Despite their ruthlessness, the Mujahideen were well supported by the people, especially in rural areas, where they primarily operated. More importantly, they were extremely well supplied by a number of supporting bases located in the mountains along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. These bases also allowed fighters to move back and forth across the border for supplies and sanctuary as needed.[47]

Despite their overall lack of cohesion, the combat skills of the Mujahideen were exceptional. As early as June 1980, they displayed their lethal fighting abilities by defeating a Soviet battalion near Irgun on the road from Gardez to Khost. During the battle, a Soviet battalion was cut off and surrounded. Unable to manoeuvre off the road or elevate their heavy guns to engage the Mujahideen, who were occupying the high ground, the Soviets held out until their ammunition was depleted. Once the Soviets were out of ammunition, the Mujahideen moved in and killed everyone in the column.[48]

A series of high profile failures such as this one early in the war showed the Soviets that Afghan resistance was far more effective than they had initially expected. By the late summer of 1980, the Soviet Army command had started a comprehensive review of both its organization and tactics. The review revealed that the Soviets were fruitlessly trying to fight a guerrilla campaign with a force organized, trained and equipped for war in Western Europe.[49]

This realization resulted in a number of changes being made. From an organizational perspective, the 40th Army's structure transformed from heavy mechanized units to a lighter force capable of operating more effectively in the mountainous terrain of

Afghanistan. In the process, anti-tank and anti-aircraft units, along with about 700 tanks, were returned to the Soviet Union. These units were replaced with additional motorized rifle and helicopter units such as the S6 Air Assault Brigade.[50]

From a tactical perspective, the Soviets began moving away from large sweeping operations, which had been the norm, to precision attacks on identified rebel positions. Unfortunately, these changes did not achieve the desired outcome, largely because the Soviets did not have the quality or quantity of soldiers they needed to effectively subdue the Mujahideen.[51] Military analyst, C.J. Dick, explains:

> For the most part, stereotyped, unsuitable tactics remained the norm. In defence, there was a "bunker mentality" with the *Mujahideen* being allowed to manoeuvre largely unchallenged and to own the night. Ground recce and flank and rear security were neglected, with recce troops, whose quality and training standards were higher, being misused as combat sub-units. There was excessive reliance on artillery, air and AFV-[Armoured Fighting Vehicle]delivered firepower at the expense of manoeuvre and dismounted infantry closing with the enemy. Motor rifle troops were reluctant to leave their armoured vehicles (especially the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan]) and engage in close quarter battle; tanks were disinclined to advance against RPGs [rocket propelled grenades] without them. Wise to these failings, the *Mujahideen* would "hug" the enemy as close as possible to make it impossible for him to use his artillery and attack helicopters.[52]

In an attempt to fix the problems with the quality of their soldiers and move away from the use of unsuitable tactics, the Soviets started integrating highly trained and mobile

Airborne, Airmobile and Spetsnaz forces directly into their tactical operations.[53]

Tactical Missions in Support of the Army

After the 1979 coup in Kabul, a number of Spetsnaz units were sent back to the Soviet Union. By late 1981, however, the Soviets had realized they needed better troops to provide a backbone to their forces in country. As a result, two Spetsnaz battalions returned to Afghanistan. They were initially sent to carry out vital point security tasks. One unit was deployed to Pol-i-Khumri to guard the oil pipeline and the other was tasked to secure the entrance to the Panjshir.[54] Once these forces were deployed into theatre, however, the Soviets wasted no time in expanding their mandate.

Shortly after the Spetsnaz arrived, the Soviets decided to build up the Afghan government's influence in and around the city of Rukha in the Panjshir valley.[55] Although the Afghan Army had constructed and manned a series of security outposts located on the heights surrounding the city, they were poorly fortified and generally occupied by low grade conscripts. In order to strengthen these defences, the Soviets planned to re-site some of the positions and man a number of them with Spetsnaz teams.[56]

On 15 July 1982, 15 men from the 31st Spetsnaz Reconnaissance Group were tasked to occupy one of these outposts. When they arrived at the location they quickly got to work putting in proper defensive emplacements, which included: sighting firing positions, mining the approaches, establishing a fire plan and constructing low wire obstacles.

This work paid off a few days later when a band of Mujahideen attacked the outpost.[57] According to the Spetsnaz group commander, despite precautions, the enemy was able to get very

close to the position without being detected. In fact, it was only when the raiding force began its final approach onto the objective that their firebase opened fire, alerting the Soviets to the situation. Caught off guard, the surprised Spetsnaz dove for any shelter they could find. As the battle raged on, the Mujahideen pushed forward with a well-coordinated attack, throwing grenades and firing as they advanced. Unfortunately for them, however, they had not spotted the low wire entanglements which stalled the momentum of their attack, giving the Spetsnaz time to regroup. Now able to shift positions and start returning concentrated and well-coordinated fire, the defenders were able to eventually beat back the attack. The Mujahideen withdrew, leaving behind four dead. Incredibly, despite the initial surprise, the Spetsnaz suffered no casualties in the assault.[58]

Such performances reinforced the value of the well-trained Spetsnaz units to the Soviet high command who believed these units could now help take the fight to the Mujahideen. To this end, the Soviets began grouping large contingents of Spetsnaz and Airborne Forces with their conventional units to carry out tactical missions.[59] For example, in what became known as blocking operations, SOF forces would be used as reserves and in heliborne landings to close enemy escape routes.

Typical of these blocking operations was one that involved the capture of weapons and ammunition caches in the Xadigar Canyon, in Kandahar Province, in early 1986. The Soviets had received information about a possible enemy supply location and sent in two Spetsnaz reconnaissance groups into the area to confirm the reports. The reconnaissance verified the information so the Soviets launched an assault on the canyon with two motorized rifle battalions and a large Spetsnaz detachment.[60]

The operation began at 0600 hours on 20 March 1986, with aircraft strafing and bombing the canyon floor and nearby

villages which were believed to be sheltering enemy fighters. At approximately 0800 hours, four Spetsnaz groups were deployed onto the high ground where they could observe Mujahideen trying to escape.[61] Thirty minutes later two motorized rifle battalions, formed up in two echelons, started a dismounted assault into the canyon. This assaulting force also included two BMPs (Soviet amphibious tracked infantry fighting vehicles) and two ZSU-23-4s providing direct fire support for the advance, while a Spetsnaz company mounted on BMPs was held in reserve.[62]

The speed with which the motorized rifle units advanced allowed the Soviets to quickly clear the canyon, with little difficulty. As expected, groups of Mujahideen began withdrawing under the pressure of the assault. As they did so, they were intercepted by the Spetsnaz blocking groups, which hit them in a series of ambushes or with directed fire from helicopter gunships that were supporting the assault. The operation was over by 1200 hours and resulted in a number of Mujahideen killed. Various small arms, a large amount of ammunition, documents and combat equipment were also captured, with no Soviet casualties.[63]

Although these operations were very successful, few Mujahideen positions were located in easily accessible areas where the full weight of a Soviet combined arms attack with its superior firepower and mobility could be employed. This difficulty forced the Soviets to start targeting the more inaccessible areas, relying more heavily on the more mobile Spetsnaz and Airborne units.[64]

The Soviets reinforced these lighter assaulting forces with tribal militias loyal to the government or regular Afghan Army units, along with motorized rifle units when it was practical to do so.[65] Although this light and highly trained force package gave the Soviets the ability to pursue the Mujahideen into their mountain

hideouts, such operations were never easy and even successful ones came at a heavy price. The high cost was due to the fact that the hideouts were often well sited, and always very well defended.[66]

An example of the difficulties the Soviets had fighting the Mujahideen in these types of situations occurred in July 1983, when an outlying defensive system of what was believed to be a main support base located along the Panjshir River was discovered. The position was believed to be extremely strong and was well sited on a plateau, which was surrounded by steep cliffs that were as much as 800 metres above the river. The Soviets decided to take the plateau using three Guards Airborne Regiments and Spetsnaz supported by a number of Afghan troops.[67]

In an effort to deceive the enemy about the true direction of the attack, the Soviets concentrated a force of 200 BTRs (armoured personnel carriers) and BMDs (airborne amphibious infantry combat vehicles) to the West of the position. The following morning they began shelling and strafing the position. At 1500 hours, vehicles from the decoy force began to move in from the south-west in order to attract the enemy's attention while the main assault would come in from the North and South by heliborne forces.[68] Despite this ruse and the fact that the Soviet's were using their best troops, the battle for the plateau lasted almost ten days and resulted in a failure for the Soviets.

The difficulty with these operations resided in the fact that the highly-trained SOF were essentially light troops and these light forces were being expected to attack well dug-in defensive positions, usually head on, which did not present an ideal match for their skills. Although the Soviets attempted to offset this difficulty with extensive airstrikes and artillery preparations before the battle started, the mountainous terrain and well-sited

positions often eluded damage from the aerial and indirect fires. More importantly, these extensive preparations served to alert the enemy to the pending attack.[69]

Unable to make progress against the enemy using some of the best troops available to them, the Soviets started looking for better ways to hit back. This search refocused the Soviet command back onto the operational aspects of the problem and once this review was completed more suitable missions would be given to their SOF.

Operational Missions and the Struggle for Logistics

By late 1984, to be victorious, all the Mujahideen had to do was maintain the current situation: they had succeeded in dragging the war on for over four years with no end in sight; they had the support of the people; and they could count on both military and political aid from outside of the country coming through Pakistan. Additionally, to wear down the Soviets in combat, the Mujahideen were constantly attacking the convoys hauling supplies between the Soviet Union and their major garrison centres and outposts within Afghanistan. This strategy not only created a continuous flow of Soviet casualties at little cost to the Mujahideen, the captured convoys helped resupply the Mujahideen while simultaneously preventing badly needed goods from reaching Soviet troops.

By this time, the Soviets had come to realize that they were at a significant operational disadvantage. They knew that the enemy's strength was derived from the rural population where the Mujahideen received their food, shelter and intelligence. To overcome this situation, the Soviets adopted a policy of destroying villages, standing crops, animal herds, and irrigation systems in an effort to drive the rural population off their land and into the cities or

refugee camps. In the end, this strategy forced over seven million Afghans to flee the countryside. This ruthless approach galvanized Western support for the Afghans, however, at a time of continued East-West tension during the Cold War.[70]

With much of the rural population gone, the Mujahideen had to increase their reliance on supplies coming into the country from Pakistan and this need forced them to create a series of supply dumps. Once established, this infrastructure became a valuable target. The Soviets believed that if the border could be closed or the supply centres destroyed, then Mujahideen operations would be severely disrupted.[71]

Based on its proximity to the Pakistani border and its easy access to other parts of the country, Kunar Province was an ideal location for the Mujahideen to setup logistics bases. Indeed, one such base was established at Krer. An additional benefit to this location was that the approach to Krer from the Afghanistan side of the border was extremely difficult.[72] One account described the terrain as, "A bare plateau, some 600 meters above sea level [which] dominates the river crossing. Then mountains rise sharply from the plateau until they reach some 2000 meters [6562 feet] above sea level along the Spina ridge."[73]

This terrain meant that, in order to get to the position, an attacking force would first have to cross a river.[74] Additionally, once that was accomplished, it was all uphill from there. Another problem with attacking the Krer complex was the fact that it was garrisoned by about 400 fighters equipped with mortars, recoiless rifles, and various types of heavy machine guns.[75] Past experiences in taking such strong points, like the one on the Panjshir River in 1983, had shown the Soviets that carrying out major operations on well-sited fortresses would be costly unless a weakness could be found beforehand and exploited. As a result, the Soviets

decided to use Spetsnaz to test the Mujahideen defences at Krer in search of vulnerabilities.[76]

The raiding force selected to carry out the operation consisted of about 100 Spetsnaz. After some initial preparations the party moved into an ambush site near the river where they prepared to cross. Once on the other side, they moved up onto the plateau, where they continued to climb until they came upon two of the Mujahideen forward observation posts.

After a quick assessment of the situation, the commander decided to try and hit the two posts simultaneously so he divided his force into two assault groups and a supporting element.[77] As the assault groups began moving towards their objectives, it was quickly realized that the rugged terrain would not allow a simultaneous strike of both posts. Showing a great deal of adaptability, the Spetsnaz commander quickly altered the plan to sequence the assault. It was decided that the group with the easier route would attack first and, once they had secured the position, they would then support the second assault.

Fortunately for the Soviets, the first group attacked and overran the post so quickly it was all over almost before it had even begun.[78] Incredibly, the Mujahideen in the neighbouring post decided to climb out of their positions to see what was transpiring on their flank and this unexpected development gave the second raiding group the chance to close the gap and overrun the post with little difficulty.[79]

The Spetsnaz held on to the positions long enough to take whatever weapons they could and destroyed the rest. In the mean time, the support group, which had provided covering fire for the assaults, continued its suppressing fire onto other security posts in the area, which had by then been alerted to the assault.

This support allowed the raiding groups to withdraw without any major difficulties.[80]

Although important, these successes contributed little towards achieving the overall operational objective of cutting off the Mujahideen from their source of support and supplies in Pakistan. As a result, the Soviets turned their attention to interdicting the Mujahideen while they were on the infiltration routes coming to and from the border. Over time, these operations became increasingly important to the Soviets and, by 1985, a large contingent of their SOF capabilities in-country were engaged in these interdiction missions along the Afghan-Pakistani border.[81]

As part of the effort to close the border, the Soviets created a number of government posts in the region from which they could monitor activity and, when necessary, launch attacks against Mujahideen columns.[82] According to one Spetsnaz veteran, the tactic of choice for these operations was the ambush. He explained, "for me, the ambush remains the classic Spetsnaz operation. It is really an intellectual contest. Every group leader worked out their particular methods of operation."[83]

Interestingly, despite enthusiasm for the tactic, the Soviets discovered that fighting the ambush war was not an easy venture. In fact, initially Spetsnaz had difficulties just getting everyone to remain awake for long periods of time without moving. As one veteran lamented, "You can't really train people to keep still." However, he acknowledged "...the knowledge that you may die if you don't tends to concentrate the... mind."[84]

Ambush discipline became critical against the Mujahideen who were masters of this type of fighting and usually had the advantage of better intelligence.[85] The Spetsnaz quickly found out that the cost for not maintaining such discipline could be death. A veteran stated, "There were cases where, because some fool rustled the

vegetation, or talked to his neighbour, the enemy located them, and summoned a large force which then slaughtered the group."[86] In spite of these difficulties, the ambush proved to be an effective tactic when carried out properly and over time even motorized rifle sub-units (companies) that had received special training were carrying out these types of missions.[87]

Unfortunately for the Soviets, however, ambushes became so effective that the Mujahideen started to employ counter-ambush tactics. An example of the effectiveness of these counter efforts was displayed when a Mujahideen group, working on a tip that Soviet commandos would soon be in the area, took up positions in a gorge and ambushed the Spetsnaz when they arrived to set up their own position. All of the Soviets in the group were killed and their arms and equipment captured.[88]

Over time these aggressive counter-ambush tactics started taking a toll on the highly trained Spetsnaz. "We were always on a knife-edge" one veteran commented. He continued, "Even if we were just drinking tea we were constantly ready to roll over on the floor and start shooting." Everything a soldier learned in training became far more important. The veteran explained, "If you were on sentry duty you were really guarding your friends' lives... if you were shooting you really had to hit your target."[89] Indeed, the Mujahideen had proven that they were more than capable of holding their own in the ambush war along the border.[90]

The Soviets inability to destroy the sanctuaries and supply routes proved to be a major operational failure, which allowed the Mujahideen to continue their operations of wearing down the Soviets' strength with the cumulative effects of long-term fighting.[91] For example, even in 1986, which logistically was the worst year for the Afghan rebels, the Soviets intercepted only about one third of the supplies crossing over from Pakistan.[92] This failure also meant

that the Mujahideen could only continue building up their own strength with the help of outside political and military support.[93]

The Decline of Spetsnaz's Effectiveness

The failure of SOF along the border was merely a symptom of a more systematic shortcoming regarding the employment of the Soviet SOF capability. Ironically, the longer the Soviets employed their SOF in Afghanistan, the less effective they became. A major factor in this reduction in effectiveness can be attributed to the combat capabilities of the Mujahideen and their ability to adapt and evolve their tactics to counter Spetsnaz's changing missions. This fact was highlighted during Soviet offensives, such as the May-June 1987 Jadji offensive, which saw substantial defeats of Spetsnaz, leading to cutbacks in their use.

Moreover, from late 1986 onward, the Mujahideen began to improve their air defence capabilities, particularly with the introduction of Stinger missiles.[94] The Stinger missile had a significant impact on Soviet helicopter operations as it drastically reduced Spetsnaz's long-range missions into enemy dominated areas thus eliminating an important and potent offensive capability for the Soviets.[95] As a result, after 1986, Soviet interdiction operations continued but were confined to areas around established forward operations bases where artillery fire support could be made available.[96] In the end, even this solution proved to be only a temporary measure due to the fact that by 1987 the Soviets began withdrawing from their more isolated garrisons. This action continually reduced the number of forward operating bases that the Spetsnaz could use, which further restricted their reach and effectiveness.[97]

By 1988 increasing social, political and economic pressures at home had forced the Soviets to rethink their Afghan policy. The

end result was that they decided to leave the country as soon as possible. Before departing, however, they attempted to transfer the burden of fighting to the Afghan Armed Forces by helping to increase their numbers and level of training. As the Soviets were undergoing this process, they restricted their support to providing the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan with artillery, air support and technical assistance and this reduction all but eliminated the need for Spetsnaz.[98] In May 1988 the Soviet began pulling out, with the final troops leaving the country without incident in February 1989.[99]

Concluding Remarks

So what can be taken away from the Soviet SOF experience in Afghanistan? The Soviets chose to minimize the size of their forces in the country but attempted to upgrade the capabilities of those forces through the introduction of more appropriate weapons and tactics. They also attempted to compensate for the poor quality of their conscripts by integrating Spetsnaz and other SOF capabilities, such as the Guards Airborne Forces, into the Army's tactical operations.

As the Soviets increasingly integrated Spetsnaz into their conventional operations, they also adjusted the scope of their missions. By the end of the war, Spetsnaz missions had evolved from simple security tasks such as vital point security, to reconnaissance, blocking operations, ambushes, raids, and direct assaults. More interestingly, their *résumé* also included such tasks as acting as a mounted reserve for Motor Rifle units and the defence of forward operating bases. To be fair, such misemployment of the capability is to some extent understandable given the fact the Soviet Army was a conscript force trained for heavy mechanized warfare and thereby out of its element in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately for the Soviets, the introduction of their SOF into conventional operations proved to be little more than a short-term solution. More importantly, it meant that they were not exploiting the vast capabilities of their SOF. The Mujahideen were an adaptable enemy and, although they were forced to constantly readjust their tactics and develop a number of defensive or counter operations, they made the necessary transitions extremely well. In the end, this adaptability severely limited the impact of Spetsnaz on the battlefield.[100]

Conversely, the Soviets did not appear to have put any effort into developing countermeasures to the various Mujahideen innovations. For example, rather than seeking to reduce or eliminate the impact of the stinger missiles on helicopter operations, they simply shifted the focus of their SOF operations to less effective interdiction missions staged out of forward operating bases. The lack of desire to overcome various countermeasures meant that as the war dragged on, Spetsnaz capabilities continued to erode in relation to their enemy's ability to defend territory.

Significantly, as the employment of Spetsnaz in Afghanistan focused on fixing tactical short-comings, the Soviet command lost sight of the possibilities of integrating this strategic resource into a more comprehensive, sustained, and aggressive operational approach to dealing with the insurgency. For example, although the Soviets used tribal militias to fight alongside their Spetsnaz, they appeared to have made little or no attempt to develop these militias into an organized counter-resistance capability or to develop local defence capabilities based on the well-entrenched tribal system such as the American Green Berets had done in Vietnam. Such an effort would have likely developed additional and badly needed security resources while separating the insurgents from the population. More importantly, this effort would have been directed at one of the key operational requirements

the insurgents needed and could have contributed to reversing the power relationship within the country.

Additionally, an important aspect of the Mujahideen's resilience was their ability to gain outside political and military support. To overcome this problem, the Soviets used Spetsnaz in interdiction missions in an attempt to close the border. Unfortunately, they also continued employing Spetsnaz in a plethora of other missions in support of the army. This splitting up of resources did little more than reduce the overall impact of their operational efforts in the border regions.

The major lesson to be taken away from the Soviet SOF experience in Afghanistan is that highly trained SOF can make a significant difference to the outcome of a conflict but only if they are given the necessary conditions to succeed. These conditions include the right missions, the appropriate resources and the necessary time to achieve the desired operational or strategic effect. For example, when used in the storming of the Presidential Palace, Spetsnaz had all of these elements available to them and they proved decisive. However, when they were used in interdiction missions along the border, a mission they were well-suited to undertake, without the necessary resources or time, the result was failure and they did not succeed in closing the border.

Above all, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan shows how easy it can be for militaries to abuse SOF by using them as a means of solving the immediate short-term crises that often occur in conflicts. For instance, in order to deal with the issue of inadequate training of their conscripts, Soviet SOF became little more than a fire brigade of well-trained light fighters. As such, they lost many of their operational advantages and, in the process, became easy prey to a competent insurgent force fighting a battle of attrition.

It is without doubt that Soviet SOF had both successes and failures in the decade-long struggle for Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Ultimately, however, this highly adaptable and capable force was not provided with the conditions necessary to significantly impact the outcome of the war. These shortcomings and successes provide a good case study for how SOF can and should be applied in COIN operations and what avenues, though they may be tempting, should be avoided. It is important not to neglect these hard-earned lessons.

Major Tony Balasevicius is an infantry officer and member of the the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR). He has served in many command positions in the RCR as well as in the Canadian Airborne Regiment. He served as the deputy commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, the RCR in 2002. He has also served as staff at the Department of Applied Military Science at the Royal Military College of Canada.

ENDNOTES

1 John T. Carney and Benjamin F. Schemmer, *No Room for Error: The Covert Operations of America's Special Tactics Units From Iran to Afghanistan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 23.

2 Linda Robinson, "Inside the 'New' Special Operations Forces," <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2009-07/inside-new-special-operations-forces>, accessed 13 January 2010.

3 Gary Sheftick, "Army Expanding its Special Operations Force," <http://www.army.mil/-news/2010/10/28/47245-army-expanding-its-special-operations-force/>, accessed 1 February 2011.

4 *Mujahideen* means "Those who participate in Jihad (Islamic Holy War) -Soldiers of Islam." <http://www.rawa.org/glossary.html>, accessed 21 October 2006.

5 John Laver, *The Impact of Stalin's Leadership in the USSR, 1924-1941* (Gloucestershire: Nelson Thornes Publishing, 2008), 3. In 1920, the Soviet military employed a verity of special units including "insurgency" Cossack cavalry, Red Polish cavalry in Polish uniforms, and special diversionary/insurgency capabilities. On the security side, the Cheka (the Soviet Secret Police 1917-1922), formed special units during the Civil War and these units later became part of the organizational structure subordinate to state security under various titles. Such units were usually included with Frontier Troops, Internal Troops, and specialized state security formations. See also: Major William H. Burgess (ed.), *Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations: a Critical Analysis* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1990), 1.

6 Kenneth Sewell and Clint Richmond, *Red Star Rogue: The Untold Story of a Soviet Submarine's Nuclear Strike Attempt on the U.S.* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 161.

7 John Dziak, "Historical Precedents" in Burgess (ed.), *Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations: a Critical Analysis,* 31.

8 Burgess, 203.

9 David M. Glantz, *The Fundamentals of Soviet Razvedka (Intelligence / Reconnaissance)* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1989), 7-11.

10 Ibid.

11 Captain Erin Campbell, "The Soviet Spetsnaz Threat to NATO," *Airpower Journal* (Summer 1988), <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj88/sum88/campbell.html#campbell>, accessed 4 January 2011.

12 Robert S. Boyd, "Spetsnaz: Soviet Innovation in Special Forces," *Air University Review,* Vol. 38, No. 1 (November/December 1986), 64.

13 Burgess, xv.

14 Boyd, 64. Spetsnaz also have the missions of snatching or assassinating important military and political leaders. This activity is usually carried out by a special section (company) and was used in Afghanistan. See endnote 17.

15 Ibid.

16 David Dvorkin and Daniel Dvorkin, *Dawn Crescent* (Holicorg, PA: Betancourt and Company, 2003), 190-192.

17 Mike Ryan, *The Operators: Inside the World's Special Forces* (New York: Skyhorse Pub, 2008), 156. Ryan comments, "A Spetsnaz brigade is 1,000-1,300 strong and consists of a headquarters, three or four battalions, a communications company, and supporting troops. It also includes an anti-VIP [very important persons] company, composed of some 70-80 troops whose mission it is to seek out, identify and kidnap or kill enemy political and military leaders." Additionally, Boyd states that "one Spetsnaz company was given to each Army; one Spetsnaz

regiment in each of the three 'theatres of operations'; one Spetsnaz brigade in each of the four Soviet Fleets; and an independent Spetsnaz brigade in most military districts of the USSR. There were also special Spetsnaz intelligence units, one to each Front and Fleet: total 20." Also see Boyd, "Spetsnaz: Soviet Innovation in Special Forces."

18 Ryan, 156.

19 Boyd, 68.

20 Ibid. Boyd notes, "SPETSNAZ is not well known within the Soviet military and they do not publicize their existence or capabilities. They usually wear airborne or signal troops' uniforms and naval SPETSNAZ wearing naval infantry or submariners' uniforms. Confusion about the employment of SPETSNAZ units also results from the fact that they tend to be employed with a variety of other elite units such as the Soviet's airborne forces."

21 David Charters, "Coup and Consolidation: The Soviet Seizure of Power in Afghanistan," *Journal Conflict Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1981), 42.

22 Campbell, "The Soviet Spetsnaz Threat to NATO."

23 GlobalSecurity.Org, "Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia" <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/czechoslovakia2.htm>, accessed 15 November 2010.

24 Lester Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, March 2004), <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/miredinmount.htm>, accessed 1 December 2007. This article was previously published in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies,* Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2004).

25 Ibid. Although hesitant to intervene, from a practical perspective the Soviets realized that they could not just stand by "while an embryonic socialist state faltered on its own border, possibly to be replaced by one of an actively anti-Soviet disposition."

26 Cary Schofield, *The Russian Elite: Inside Spetsnaz and the Airborne Forces* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993), 52. In a pre-emptive move to prevent weapons falling into the hands of the enemy, Soviet advisors ordered their Afghan counterparts to undergo a maintenance cycle on major equipment holdings.

27 Ibid. This force consisted of three motorized rifle divisions, an airborne division, an assault brigade, along with two independent motorized rifle brigades and five separate motorized rifle regiments

28 Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan, the Soviet Invasion in Perspective* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1981), 93.

29 Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1994), 1017-1018. His brother and General Dmitry Chiangov met with the commander of the 40th Army before Soviet troops entered the country to work out initial routes and locations for Soviet troops.

30 Charters, 44.

31 *Encyclopaedia of the Soviet war in Afghanistan* <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Soviet-war-in-Afghanistan#Soviet_invasion>, accessed 12 October 2010.

32 Charters, 44.

33 Boyd, 68.

34 Charters, 44. All members of this unit were either related to the President or were trusted friends of the family.

35 Schofield, 55.

36 David Miller. *The Illustrated Directory of Special Forces* (St. Paul, MN: MBI, 2002), 86.

37 Schofield, 58.

38 Ibid. These included the Soviet physician that was attending Amin and the wife of Foreign Minister Shah Wali. Soviet losses were about 21 men.

39 *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, <http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft7b69p12h&chunk.id=s1.1.4&toc.id=ch01&toc.depth=1&brand=ucpress&anchor.id=d0e562#X>, accessed 1 December 2010.

40 Hassan M. Kakar. *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 27, <http://www.netlibrary.com/urlapi.asp?action=summary&v=1&bookid=21236>.

41 Ibid, 51.

42 "Soviet war in Afghanistan," <http://uk.ask.com/wiki/Soviet_war_in_Afghanistan#cite_ref-4>3>, accessed 12 January 2011.

43 Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: the Conquest of the Middle East*, (London: Alfred Knopf, 2005), 40-41.

44 Stephen Blank, *Afghanistan and Beyond: Reflections on the Future of Warfare*, (Pennsylvania: U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, 1993), 9-10. This was an SSI Special Report.

45 Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid,* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002), 135. The word *mujahid* is an Arabic participle drawn from the same root as the Arabic word *jihad*, to strive or struggle. *Mujahideen* is simply the plural form of the same word. A term derived from the word *mujahid* or "one who strives or struggles on behalf of Islam."

46 Ibid, xiv. Most of the weapons used by these Afghan fighters were taken from the Soviets and included the AK-47s, an assortment of machine guns, and RPG-7 antitank grenade launchers. The RPG-7 became the Mujahideen's weapon of choice because it was capable of taking out Soviet tanks, armoured personnel carriers and, in some cases,

helicopters. As the war progressed, heavy machine guns, recoiless rifles and mortars were also used.

47 C.J. Dick, *Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Conflict Studies Research Centre, January 2002), 6. <http://edocs.nps.edu/AR/org/CSRC/csrc_jan_02.pdf >, accessed 22 January 2011.

48 William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), 87.

49 Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War," xiii.

50 Schofield, 63. By mid 1981 there were almost 300 rotary aircraft in the country, up from about fifty in June 1980.

51 Ibid.

52 Dick, 4.

53 Ibid., 99. This is likely due to the absence of standard operating procedures beyond the standard conventional combined-arms framework that was being used during the first year of the war.

54 Burgess (ed.), *Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations: a Critical Analysis*, 205. Later the battalions were to be located in Jellalabad and Gazni. Although Spetsnaz units were to be involved in ambushing caravans, this role was not assigned to them until 1983.

55 Schofield, 99.

56 Lester W. Grau. *The Bear went over the mountain: Soviet combat tactics in Afghanistan* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 115. According to Grau, the Group was armed with a number of small arms, two AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers, one heavy machine gun and one 82mm mortar.

57 Ibid., 116.

58 Ibid., 117.

59 Schofield, 96. Spetsnaz were also used to provide support for convoys in the form of escort duties. Troops were dropped off by helicopter on crests of hills ahead of the convoy and extracted once the convoy had passed.

60 Grau, *The Bear went over the mountain*, 56. The use of Spetsnaz for reconnaissance, target acquisition, and target designation was also important to overall Soviet efforts in Afghanistan. It is believed that these efforts were part of *Razvedka*.

61 Ibid., 56. "For the mission each Spetsnaz group consisted of 16 men and were armed with an AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher, two PK machine guns, an SVD sniper rifle and various other small arms."

62 Ibid., 57.

63 Ibid., 58.

64 David C. Isby, "Afghanistan," in Burgess (ed.) *Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations: a Critical Analysis,* 205-206. Isby also states that, "These operations often proved to be of value as both forces were able to carry out dismounted operations without the need for supporting arms. The Spetsnaz were able to do it because of their training and organization and the militia because they were armed and operated like the Mujahideen. More importantly, working together allowed the Soviets to take advantage of the militia's knowledge of the local terrain and excellent intelligence gathering capabilities. In many instances the Mujahideen were more concerned about these militia bands than they were with the poorly motivated conscript infantry of the Kabul regime because many of the militia were former Mujahideen fighters."

65 Ibid.

66 Grau, *The Bear went over the mountain*, 56.

67 Schofield, 75-77.

68 Ibid.

69 Grau, *The Bear went over the mountain*, 57.

70 Dick, 6.

71 This section is largely a paraphrase from Lester W. Grau and Ali Ahmad Jalali. *Forbidden Cross-Border Vendetta: Spetsnaz Strike into Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan War*, 1, <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Krer-SOF.pdf>, accessed 10 October 2010.

72 Ibid., 3.

73 Ibid., 5.

74 Ibid., 3.

75 Ibid., 3.

76 Ibid., 3.

77 Ibid., 3. What is interesting to note is that the Mujahideen posts were well laid out. There were deep bunkers and storage areas for arms, ammunition and food. They were prepared for sustained, unsupported combat and were equipped with radios and telephones.

78 Ibid., 3.

79 Ibid., 3.

80 Ibid., 2.

81 Ibid., 37. The attempt was complicated by the extremely long and rugged nature of the border between these two countries – over 1400 miles with approximately 320 mountain passes.

82 Isby, 211. Isby states "Heliborne operations were also used in conjunction with Soviet decapitation efforts against guerrilla leaders. While use of Afghan assassins in the pay *of KHAD/WAD* has been the preferred tactic (as in the 1984 attempt to kill Ahmad Shah Massoud immediately before the Panjshir VII offensive, and the December 1984

killing of Zabiollah, Jamiat commander in the Mazar-e-Sharif area by KHAD infiltrators in a competing resistance group), other actions were obviously carried out by the Soviets. Examples include the killing of guerrilla commander Qari Samad at the village of Siachok in Shinwar by heliborne SOF... the attempt to kill Abdul Haq in Peshawar, [and] the killing of Captain Mohammed Afghan."

83 Grau, *The Bear went over the mountain*, 151.

84 Schofield, 100.

85 In order to achieve success, the insurgent needs to establish and then maintain certain tactical conditions throughout the campaign. Colonel Julian Paget, a leading authority on the subject of counter-insurgency, believed that as a minimum the insurgent must have, "a cause to fight for, support from the local populace, bases, mobility, supplies and information." This argument suggests that support from the people is the foundation of success in such conflicts. Julian Paget, *Counter-insurgency Campaigning* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1967), 23.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., 208.

89 Ibid.

90 E.R. Girardet, "Afghanistan: Eight Years of Soviet Occupation," *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. 88, No. 2132 (March 1988), 37. See also *Lessons from the War in Afghanistan,* 6.

91 Rosanne Klass (ed.), *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* (London: Freedom House, 1987), 180. The Soviets also tried to financially co-opt tribes living in the area to harass the Mujahideen bands as they attempted to move back and forth, which also proved ineffective. When these actions failed, they started to carry out direct actions on both sides of the border which also had little effect.

92 O. Roy, *The Adelphi Papers: Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War* (London: Brassey's, 1991), 22. The only example of success of this tactic was in the narrow Wakhan Province, the area connecting Afghanistan and China. Aided by the rough geography, Soviet conventional forces were able to effectively interdict mujahideen supply lines through the area. See Col. F. Freistetter, "The Battle in Afghanistan: A View from Europe," *Strategic Review*, Vol. IX, No. 1 Winter (1981), 41.

93 Girardet, *Afghanistan: Eight Years of Soviet Occupation*. See also *Lessons from the War in Afghanistan,* 6.

94 Cary Gladstone, *Afghanistan Revisited* (New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc., 2001). 22.

95 Lester Grau, *Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan*, 10, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA470066>, accessed 14 January 2011. See also William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), 49. During the relief of Khost in January 1988 a platoon-sized force of Spetsnaz was completely destroyed when its helicopter was hit.

96 Isby, 210.

97 Ibid.

98 It was hoped that over time the DRA armed forces could be built up to number 302,000. These numbers proved unrealistic, however, and were never achieved before the Soviets finally withdrew from the country.

99 Misra Amalendu, *Afghanistan: The Labyrinth of Violence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 54. Also see Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

100 Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired In The Mountains."

CANSOFCOM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE MONOGRAPHS

1. *More Than Meets the Eye: The Invisible Hand of SOF in Afghanistan* Colonel Bernd Horn, 2011.


VIAM INVENIEMUS


VIAM INVENIEMUS