

Marin Strmecki

THE ROAD TO KABUL

On patrol with the *mujahedeen*.

When an estimated 85,000 Soviet troops swarmed into Afghanistan under the command of General Ivan Pavlovsky—whose previous credits included the planning and execution of the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968—Moscow probably expected the Afghan insurgency to collapse after a spasm of heroic resistance. Now, after six years of steadily increased fighting, the Afghans are still holding out against Moscow's superior forces.

It is often said that Soviet troops control the major cities and highways and the Afghan resistance holds the countryside. That is correct as a broad generalization of the military situation. But on my first trip into Afghanistan last year I found that even this commonplace probably overstates the degree to which the Kremlin leaders have achieved the least of their goals.

From Peshawar, Pakistan, I traveled with twenty *mujahedeen* for several hours in a pickup truck on a dirt road. When the road ended, we clambered up a desolate ridge to reach the Durand Line—the arbitrary out-of-bounds line drawn by London and Moscow for the Great Game in the nineteenth century which later became the official Afghan-Pakistani border. Hamed, a young *mujahed* who was one of my guides, turned to me and said, "Welcome to Afghanistan—no passport required." As we crossed the border there was not a hint of a Soviet presence, for the only point on the entire thousand-mile frontier controlled by the Soviets is the Khyber Pass. We descended on foot, heading toward a base camp at Daka, a front-line position near the road running from the Khyber Pass to Kabul.

The phrase "guerrilla conflict" con-

figures up images of a war without front lines and fixed positions and with invisible insurgents suddenly appearing for hit-and-run raids. Along this border area, the terrain, rocky and utterly barren, would seem to make guerrilla operations problematic, with cover scarce and stealth difficult.

As we walked around a fold in the ridge, I was surprised to find the *mujahedeen* base camp—in plain sight—with its tents and supplies almost begging for a Soviet Mi-24 helicopter gunship to come along to unload its rocket pods. On an adjacent peak, a black-and-white flag of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan, one of the Peshawar-based resistance organizations, fluttered in the wind, announcing our position to one and all. And in case anyone missed the point that we were there, the *mujahedeen* fired off a fusillade into the air from their AK-47s to welcome their journalist guest.

After the traditional late-afternoon Afghan lunch, I sat down for an inter-

view with the base camp's commanders, Sangean Khan and Guldan Khan. I first asked whether the Soviets knew about this *mujahedeen* position.

"Yes, of course," Commander Sangean answered.

I asked if the Soviets could see it.

"Yes, of course."

I inquired whether enemy forces could attack the location easily.

"Yes, of course."

Anxiously loosening the tie I was not wearing, I then asked, "If they know where we are and if they are so nearby on the highway, why don't they attack us?"

After a momentary pause, Commander Sangean replied defiantly, "Because they are afraid."

On balance, he was correct. The *mujahedeen* have made the most of what little they have. Despite foreign-supplied military assistance, the *mujahedeen* are poorly armed and sup-

plied. Compared with having nothing, the Afghans have a lot; compared with what they need, they have next to nothing. Around Daka, among the platoon-size base camps of the National Islamic Front, there was a total of five DshK heavy machine guns, thirty-five AK-47s (fifteen captured and twenty foreign-supplied), about seventy clips of bullets, two rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and three RPG rounds.¹ That stockpile was relatively low even by resistance standards, only enough to arm about 20 percent of *mujahedeen* in the area. For a Western army, it would be occasion to begin a disorderly general retreat.

But the Afghans have largely compensated for this handicap by mastering the art of defensive positioning. A typical camp, like the one at Daka, is tucked into a crease between two ridges of a mountain, with steep slopes rising on three sides, and has DshK heavy machine guns positioned at the crests of the surrounding hills. (In addition, many base camps have bomb shelters chiseled into the mountainside, though Daka did not.)

As a result, if an air strike comes over the adjacent ridges, it is likely that bombs and rockets will hit the opposite side of the hill; and if a jet or helicopter approaches up the crease between the ridges, it will fly broadside past the heavy machine gun sites. That provides a measure of protection from a MiG fighter-bomber. It is less effective against the heavily armored Mi-24 helicopter gunship, though even it is vulnerable around its engines. A ground assault requires the enemy to fight uphill on foot against *mujahedeen* lying in ambush at carefully constructed sniper locations; and if the base falls, the resistance troops simply fall back to another loca-

¹Since I visited Daka, the levels of arms and ammunition have changed with combat operations and resupply efforts, so publication of these figures will not in any way help the Soviets.



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tion higher in the mountains.

This is not to say that *mujahedeen* positions are not vulnerable. Soviet forces have the firepower to overrun them at will—but only at a price. If Moscow seeks enduring territorial gains, it must be willing to suffer substantially increased losses. It must not only displace the Afghans but also replace them with its own troops—and then be prepared to fight off sustained Afghan counterattacks.

So far, given the potential costs in rubles and lives, the Kremlin leaders have balked.

In late afternoon, our conversation turned to a planned attack on an enemy post on the nearby highway. Soviet and Afghan government forces controlled the road by dotting it with squad or platoon-size outposts at half-kilometer intervals. Afghan resistance forces harassed the enemy by periodically launching raids against the posts, and one of these had been slated for attack.

Commander Sangean told me that battlefield trenches had not yet been dug and ammunition shipments had not yet arrived—not unusual in a world wholly lacking the Western concept of efficiency—and all agreed to delay deciding the timing of the attack until the next day. In this case, procrastination was the better part of valor. In the meantime, Hamed suggested, “Tonight we will go down to the road to look around. I think it will be interesting for you.”

At dusk, as we prepared to set out, Commander Guldan chose ten *mujahedeen*, equipped with AK-47s and RPG-7s, to protect us. After instructing the men where to position themselves, he told them we would use the password “Harakat,” the name of one of the other Peshawar-based resistance parties, as we approached. “Take every precaution,” Guldan added while setting out with the advance party. “The guest is with you.”

We walked for two hours over loose rock along a dry river bed, which, according to Hamed, was heavily mined. It is a standard tactic to surround Soviet and Afghan government positions with minefields, partly to keep the *mujahedeen* from approaching but mostly to prevent Afghan government troops from defecting. Since mines cause about half of all resistance casualties, we walked single file to minimize the danger. Intact, we came around the corner of a hill, climbed over a five-foot wall, scrambled up a sandy embankment, and emerged on the road to Kabul.

It was a two-lane asphalt highway, about the same quality as a typical county trunk in Wisconsin. In the light

of a half moon, the pavement shone with a silvery hue—which was good because we could see where we were going, but then so could the enemy. With his Soviet-made 1938 pistol in hand, Commander Guldan expansively explained that foreigners were wrong to say that the Russians control the roads in Afghanistan. He showed me where a *mujahedeen* mine had destroyed a tank, leaving a pothole rivaling any found even in New York, and where the Soviet troops inside were caught and killed. He also pointed out the

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silhouettes of enemy posts on the hills above, smiling with delight as we heard Soviet guards shout alerts and fire warning shots.

As we continued walking along the road, I leaned over to my other guide, Tor, and asked how dangerous it was to be walking on this part of the road.

“Very dangerous,” he answered. “There are Russians all around.”

I inquired whether they could see us. “Yes, why not?”

I told him to ask Commander Guldan why the enemy was not shooting at us.

“They do not want to fight *mujahedeen* at night,” Guldan replied with a broad, satisfied smile. “They also do not know how many *mujahedeen* are here—so they will not dare start the fight with us.” Fear governs war. But for Guldan, running risks is not only a means to an end, but also an end in itself. It was at once both disconcerting to be on his side and reassuring that he was on ours. It was even more comforting to know that looking through Soviet telescopic and night sights is about as helpful as peering through the bottom of a Coke bottle.

After walking for a couple of kilometers, we climbed a ten-foot-high embankment on the roadside and looked down on an enemy post not fifty yards away. This was the position the *mujahedeen* were planning to attack. I could see that our armed escort had placed itself yards away from the post’s perimeter, and when the wind died down we could all hear the Afghan government troops singing inside their tents. Commander Guldan turned to me and said, “We will conduct the attack now if you wish.”

I told him that as the military commander he should determine when we should attack.

“You are the guest,” he said. “You must decide.”

I responded that if there was a military reason to attack now, we should do it; if not, we should wait.

“No, the guest must decide,” he insisted. “This attack is being conducted for your sake. Whenever you want the attack to begin, we will go ahead.”

That was not idle talk. Afghan resistance leaders desperately want news coverage because theirs will become a forgotten cause without it. Since journalists are pressed by

til another day. As we stood up to leave, we heard a shout from the enemy post on the hill behind us. Hamed observed, “I believe they are saying that we should go on our way now.”

As we began walking back toward the base camp, Tor said, “It is good we no attack.”

I asked why.

“We no have too much bullets,” he answered. It was an astute observation: We could have offered a real fight for about ten minutes.

What was most impressive about the evening stroll on the road to Kabul was the degree of vulnerability of the Soviet and Afghan government positions. When the raid on the post finally took place two weeks later, it touched off a chain of attacks that led the *mujahedeen* to overrun and to hold temporarily all Soviet-Afghan government positions on a 30-kilometer stretch of the highway, including those at the Khyber Pass.

In guerrilla war, “control” of territory is measured by how freely each side can operate in it. If the Soviets can move around in small groups, they control the area; if the *mujahedeen* feel secure moving in large groups, the territory is theirs. In general, Moscow’s positions are hemmed in by *mujahedeen* base camps. Each Soviet position is a Dien Bien Phu waiting to happen.

In most of the countryside, including areas bordering Pakistan, resistance forces are free to travel in large groups because there is virtually no Soviet or Afghan government presence. Around their front-line base camps, on the other hand, *mujahedeen* forces operate in platoon-size units; their defensive positioning and heavy machine guns give them a degree of protection from enemy air strikes. But between the resistance base camps and the Soviet and Afghan positions, there is a no-man’s land where neither side operates freely. The *mujahedeen* dare not move into this area in large groups, for they would be detected and destroyed by helicopter patrols; enemy forces cannot enter it in small groups, for they would be ambushed by resistance squads. Soviet-Afghan government positions remain secure in the sense that Communist forces operate safely in small patrols around them, but vulnerable in the sense that the *mujahedeen* can easily approach or even overrun the positions, especially under cover of darkness.

Thus the overwhelming majority of Afghanistan’s territory—at least 90 percent—is strategically accessible to the *mujahedeen*. Kabul’s administrative reach does not extend beyond the perimeter of its military bases. Still, Moscow’s armies in Afghanistan,

which now consist of 118,000 troops, can take any territory they choose—but only if they attack in force.

Our walk on the highway was also instructive about what it will take for the Soviets truly to win the war. The point of departure for a Soviet strategy is to control the Afghan-Pakistani border, thereby cutting resistance supply routes. If Moscow tries to seal the border in the same way it holds the highways—a string of small outposts—it will have to send in at least

500,000 troops; and pacifying the countryside will require still more reinforcements. It is worth recalling that when President Johnson was contemplating the major escalation of the U.S. commitment in Vietnam, his military advisers told him it would take 700,000 to one million troops and seven years to do the job.

Afghan resistance forces have two advantages. The first is depth of

defense—Afghanistan is a large, rugged country. The second is depth of conviction. Moscow might think that in international politics right and wrong are not decisive factors. But justice is not irrelevant to the balance of power, for a just cause can create a powerful motivation to prevail, especially among troops who act more like warriors than soldiers.

Although the word *mujahed* literally means “one who undertakes a great effort,” it is usually translated poetical-

ly as “holy warrior.” That is an apt characterization. The *mujahedeen* tell all visiting journalists that because the Koran orders the faithful to “fight the invader” the Soviet-Afghan war will continue as long as even one Russian is still in Afghanistan and one Afghan is still alive to fight him. This observation is usually made in a matter-of-fact manner. But no one should be misled by the tone—for them it is simply a matter of fact. In Afghanistan, the Age of Faith never passed. □

Rael Jean Isaac

SANCTUARY SCOUNDRELS

Movement politics in a humanitarian guise.

On March 24, 1984, as the bells pealed, a caravan of twenty-eight cars pulled into the grounds of Weston Priory, a Benedictine monastery in the Green Mountains of Vermont. The cars were adorned with signs: “U.S. Out of Central America,” “Stop the Guns to Central America,” “This is a Freedom Train.” At the head of the procession was a brown van, blaring marimba music and carrying Felipe and Elena Excot and their five children, illegal aliens from Guatemala. Weston Priory was the destination of a week-long, 1700-mile journey to eight cities, in which the caravan had been met at each stop by TV cameras, reporters, and hundreds of church supporters. On pulling into the monastery, Felipe Excot told an Associated Press reporter that he felt “a duty to tell Americans how governments supported by their tax dollars force Christians in Central America to bury their Bible and hide their communion wafers.”

Such hoopla is typical of a movement that calls itself, incongruously, the new underground railroad. In Seattle, sanctuary families have been greeted by the mayor while the chief of police assigned them a special escort. The accompanying publicity is crucial,

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for while officially its goal is purely humanitarian, the real goal of the movement is to achieve guerrilla victories in Central America and to bring the “revolution” home—to the United States.

By last winter approximately 250 churches and twelve synagogues had declared themselves “sanctuaries.” More impressive than the relatively small number of participating churches (compared with the 339,000 churches in the U.S.) has been the endorsement of church bureaucracies. While the Na-

tional Conference of Catholic Bishops and even the normally activist United States Catholic Conference have steered clear of the sanctuary movement, the Protestant mainline church organizations, ranging from the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church to the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, have lent official moral—and financial—support.

The movement is spreading outward from the churches. In the past several years, we have seen how local com-

munities have grown accustomed to forging their own independent foreign policy in accordance with the nuclear freeze movement (hundreds passed freeze resolutions or declared themselves “nuclear free zones”). At this writing Chicago, Madison, St. Paul, Ithaca, Olympia, Duluth, Berkeley, Seattle, and Cambridge have declared themselves sanctuary cities; many more have such declarations in the pipeline.

Actually, these resolutions are more of symbolic than practical importance. Seeking simultaneously to satisfy activists and reassure ordinary citizens, politicians sometimes find themselves in the position of claiming that what they describe as a tremendously important humanitarian undertaking will, nevertheless, have no ramifications for the taxpayer. In Seattle residents were told that declaring the city a sanctuary will not bring more refugees to it, will not make refugees eligible for any benefits, and will not bring federal penalties upon the city. But the chief practical consequence of these resolutions lies in the encouragement they give to would-be immigrants in Central America, where, according to the *New York Times*, word of these declarations has spread rapidly. There they are wrongly construed to mean that if an immigrant can reach any one of these sanctuary cities, he is safe from the immigration authorities.

For all the peripheral civic activity, churches remain at the heart of the

