

30 DAYS, 300 MILES, 30 POUNDS LOST.

WHEN THEY WERE FRIENDS

BY RICHARD VENOLA

Afghan commies had just taken control of the government when the Marine Corps sent me there in 1978. As embassy guards, we were required to take 100 hours of language instruction during our tour. Two weeks after arriving, I bought a horse and spent most of my liberty riding outside of Kabul, where I got to practice my Dari—a sort of hill-billy Persian—and really learn about the culture. Embassy guards either love or hate their assigned country, and I fell head over heels for everything Afghan. The Brits would have said I'd "gone tropo." I transferred out in August 1979, and the Russians invaded that December. After getting out of the Corps, I practiced my Dari with

Iranian students at Glendale College in California. In 1981 I wasn't sure if I wanted to go back in Corps or become a journalist, but either way, there was a shooting war and it seemed a good opportunity to see the elephant.

OCTOBER-NOVEMBER, 1981:

The Pakis threw me in jail for a week.

I had made contact with mujahiddin of Gulbaddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan party and was with a group headed for Ghazni, south of Kabul. A cop spotted me when we stopped for chow in the border town of Wana. As it turned out, the Paki authorities just wanted to make sure I was on the side of the Afghans, but they promised to arrest me again if they caught me in the tribal areas. Before releasing me, the police commissioner in Peshawar said, "Yes, we will arrest you if you enter the tribal territories. But, young man, what is a week in jail compared to the experience of a lifetime?"

My contact at Hezb-i-Islami set me up with another group returning to their homes north of Sorobi. There were about

30 Pashtuns who were freshly indoctrinated and armed with a bizarre mix of weapons, from Mosin-Nagants and trashed SKSs to newer AKs, some brand-

new Chinese Type 56s and a like-new RPD. We also had four camels carrying a disassembled KPV 14.5mm heavy machine gun, donated by the Egyptian army, compliments of Congressman Charlie Wilson.

We spent a night in the village of Teri Mangel, in Parachinar. It was like something out of the Wild West, with mules, camels and horses all loaded with ammo crates, and every turbaned Turkman, Hazara, Uzbek and Pashtun seemed to be carrying a firearm.

As we hiked up to the border I was almost arrested again, but while arguing with my guys, the Paki tribal militia had their SMLEs slung on their shoulders. They subtly noticed that the Muj had their more modern arms casually at the ready. Exercising a little discretion, the militia NCO decided to let the obvious foreigner cross the border.

It was early in the war, and border villages were still offering traditional hospitality to Mujahiddin passing through. Later in the war they were forced to start charging for food and lodging. We slept on felt carpets or straw in the villages' common rooms.

On the third day, we were approaching a village when it was hit by a combined Afghan and Soviet bombing. At the time, I thought the Soviet jets were MiG-27s, but I've since learned that there were no 27s in Afghanistan at that time, so they must have been MiG-23s. The two Soviet jets dropped bombs, and they were followed by two Afghan MiG-21s. Soviet Mi-8 Hip helicopters then dropped bombs and shot up the place with their 23mms. Finally, two

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Typical Afghan village, Wuzbin Khwar valley.

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View of Alingar valley just before dropping over the ridge.

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Mi-24 Hind D's gave the village a working over with their 12.7mm miniguns. Meanwhile, we all sat on the hillside and watched the show as if it were a sporting event.

The next day, I saw the only AK74 during my month in country. The Pashtun owner would not let me examine it. Early in the war, the Soviets had invited in Com Bloc allies and established small outposts. The Muj overran many of these platoon-size positions and were quite proud at having captured their AKs. They reported that the toughest fighters were the Cubans and the laziest were the Bulgarians. When I asked if there was anything they were really scared of, most of the Muj said the AGS-17 grenade machine gun.

Arriving at the Kabul River, with 82mm mortar flares drifting eerily in the distance, we tied our clothes to our heads, put the camels upstream to break the current and linked arms to ford the river. The guy next to me, rifle slung bandito-style, said, "Don't let go or you'll

wake up in Jalalabad."

We took a break in a small village, and the tribal elders were examining the RPD. I could see that they were going to chamber a round. Sure enough, they

put a round into the mud ceiling. As the dust rained down, I gained some points by using my shawl to cover the Mosin-Nagant I was carrying instead of myself.

Upon arriving "home" in Wuzbin Kwar, I was taken to a village about 12 miles up the valley. The Muj had given me a 1921 Mosin-Nagant that was so worn out, the bolt had to be lifted up in the rear to scrape a cartridge out of the magazine. It still shot well, and I was able to smack rocks across the valley. We cleaned rifles with rags, knotted boot laces and motor oil.

When the KPV was set up and the camel teamsters paid off, I helped them bore-sight it. The optic sight was in a beautifully made wooden box, complete with gun book. Obviously built for export, it was printed in English. I opened it and burst out laughing. "This is a product of the people of the Soviet Union and is guaranteed free of defects for one year of crossing the Soviet frontier. Return to any Soviet military representative for repair or replacement." The

image of some bearded, turbaned Afghan walking up to the local firebase with sight in hand was too much.

The first shot from the KPV blew the flash suppressor halfway across the valley, and the assembled children of the village (no doubt we're fighting them today) sprinted down the hillside to have the honor of recovering it. The 14.5x114mm is one heck of a cartridge, and tracers seemed to be laser beams going straight out to distant hillsides.

The Afghans staged a perimeter

machine gun fire. Across the Kabul River a BTR-60 drove at top speed, its turret spinning while it fired long bursts from the coaxial SGM machine gun at nothing in particular.

The whole scene was made comical by a searchlight crew at another firebase south of the river. They were using the searchlight to draw pictures on the clouds while the shooting was going on on our side of the river. Every time there was a burst of fire, my escorts would drag me down off the ridge to make sure I wasn't nicked by a stray round.

The next night they gave me a No. 4 Enfield and seven rounds, and we crawled up onto a ridge about a thousand yards from the company-size firebase. We provided distraction fire while an RPG team went in for a close shot. The squad I was with fired maybe 100 rounds total,



The whole village assembling a Russian made 14.5mm anti-aircraft machinegun that we had brought in with our group on camel back.

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plinking raid on a local firebase to make sure their American guest was entertained.

"Agar farangi dart-shoda, shoma mort-shodehn!" the valley Amir-sahib party leader said. While the main group went in close to the firebase, three escorts took me up to an overlook. The Amir had said, "If the foreigner gets a scratch, you die!" The escorts believed him. The Muj moved in close to bombard the firebase with political rhetoric from a bullhorn and occasional rifle fire. Someone in the firebase hollered back with another bullhorn and a lot of

then yelled insults at the distant enemy. The commies shot back about 10,000 rounds, including a very accurate quad 12.7mm DShK. The 12.7 raked the ridge every time one of us fired, and they threw out some 37mm rounds, which passed high over us. AK47 rounds sounded trans-sonic, while AK74 rounds still



Village of "Pushuee" speakers. Anthropological misteries. Their skin is very light, many have blue eyes, and many have blonde or red hair. It's hard to see in this flick because they all have sun-browned skin and don't wash their hair in the winter. They are known to be among the most vicious of rebel fighters, and the Soviets tend to leave them alone.

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popped overhead. Obviously, there was a mix of Soviets and Afghan communist troops at the base.

Afterward we had to police up our brass so it could be accounted for in the Amir's ledger, then sent back to Pakistan to be reloaded. It should be noted that the life of a guerilla fighter is



The mujshiddin of Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan party (Gulbadin faction) from Wuzbin Khwar assembled prior to an evening raid on Soviet and Communist government troops. Symbol of authority is the megaphone

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much easier than that of a subsistence farmer. Due to cultural restrictions, most men can't afford to get married until they're in their late 20s or 30s and can't have a girlfriend before that. They can't get drunk either. I'd blow myself up, too.

After eight days the Muj took me east to the next valley, Alishang. There were two groups of Muj in the valley from different parties. One was fully armed with AKs and SKSs, while the other, less well led, still had Lee-Enfields of various types.

Afghans ID rifles by how many rounds the magazine takes, so an SKS is a *da-taka*, or "takes 10," while a Lee-Enfield is a *yazda-taka*, or "takes 11."

One local mullah was quite proud of his FAL, which he bragged about being British made and that he had paid a lot of money for it. When he handed it to me, it must have weighed 12 pounds, and the proofs and rollmarks revealed it to be a Dara-made copy. I made the mistake of pointing this out, and his

humiliation was evident. He hated me after that and made every effort to insult me.

Next day I passed into the next valley to the east, Alingar. We moved through a village of Nuristanis, a strange cultural group of the north-east. They were Animists until the late 1800s, and their language, Pashayi, is

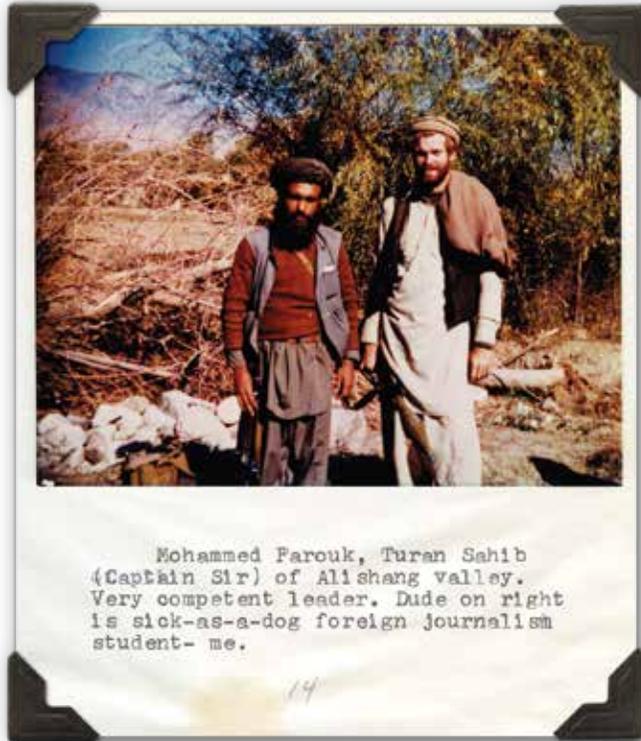
different than Pashtun or Dari. It was strange to see blonde, blue-eyed folks in those mountains, and one red-headed lad could have been from Dublin. They were almost all armed with Lee-Enfields.

Moving steadily east, we rowed across the Konar River on a raft made of light branches and inflated cowskins. The Muj used cigarette lighters to signal each other at night, and we had to pay about a dollar each—10 Afghans at the time—to ride the raft across the light-blue glacial water.

Hiking north along the river, we hailed a heavy Bedford truck and, *baksheesh* paid to the driver, piled on, rifles sticking out like porcupine quills. An Mi-8

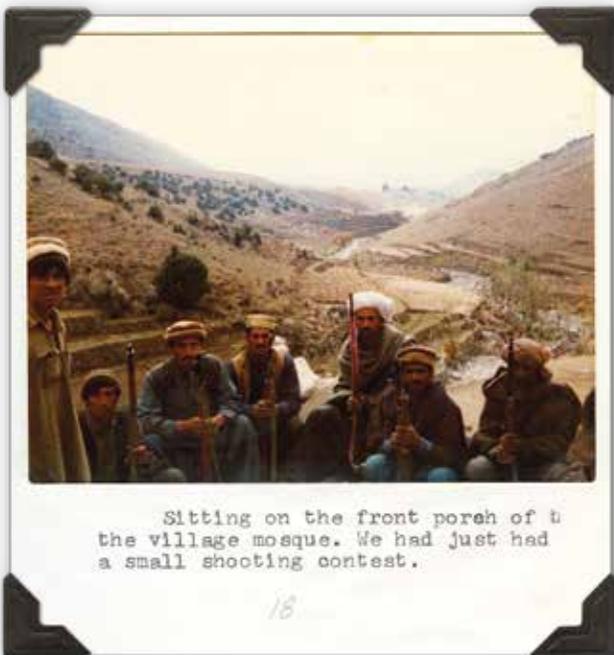
Hip flew by low, and I almost soiled my baggy trousers. The Muj were unconcerned. "*Rainahzan!*" ("Don't worry!"), they said and explained that Soviet air wasn't allowed to hit targets of opportunity.

The next day we ran into a cheerful group headed out on a perimeter plinking raid. One of them had a Goryunov



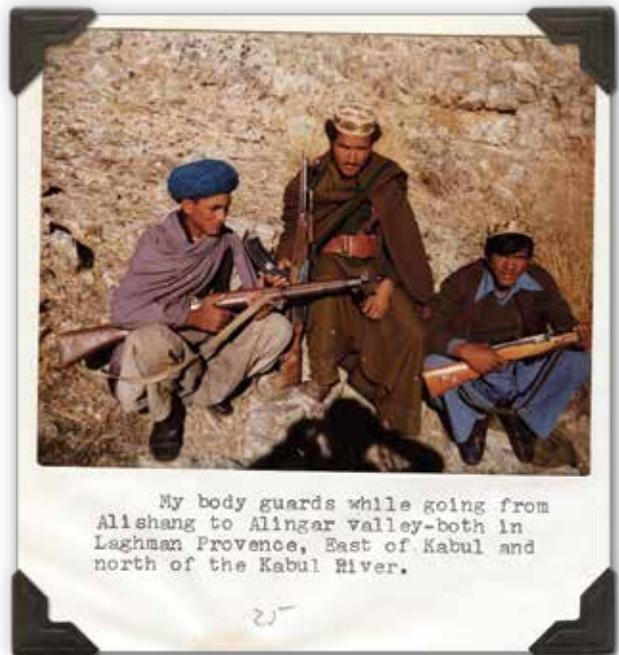
Mohammed Parouk, Turan Sahib (Captain Sir) of Alishang valley. Very competent leader. Dude on right is sick-as-a-dog foreign journalism student- me.

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Sitting on the front porch of the village mosque. We had just had a small shooting contest.

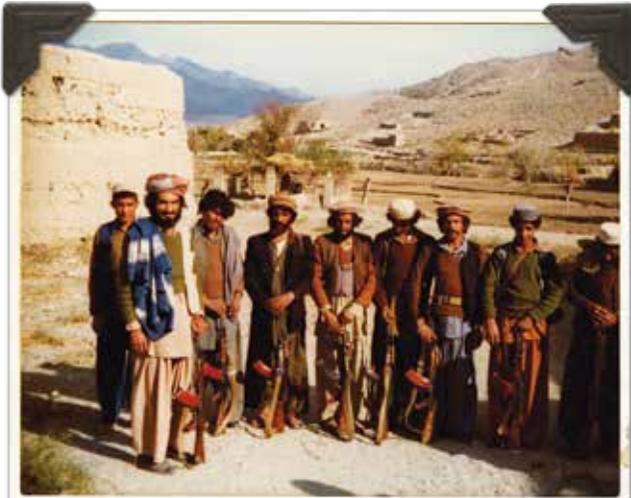
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My body guards while going from Alishang to Alingar valley—both in Laghman Province, East of Kabul and north of the Kabul River.

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Crazed rebel captain of Alingar valley on left, some of his regulars on line. Red magazines for their captured AK-47's are made of fiberglass.

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Shear drop into Konar valley. Afghans do not believe in switch-backs and go roughly straight up and straight down hills.

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SGM that had apparently been removed from an armored vehicle, and the stock was made of hand-hammered wrought iron. One youngster had a .177-caliber Diana air rifle.

As we worked our way east up a long glacial valley, our small group was turned away by a village that didn't want to risk hosting a foreigner. We spent the night in a solitary farmer's basement. There was no house left, as the Soviets had bombed it two days before. The farmer apologized for the meager hospitality, explaining that his wife and daughter had been killed by the bombs. Afghans are intensely tough, both physically and emotionally. You can't bomb them into the middle ages, because they're already there.

The next morning, as we approached the top of the valley, two Mi-24s attacked the village that had turned us away the day before. We were about a mile away. One of the 24s expended its ordnance and circled in the distance while the second

made large banking passes, strafing each time at the bottom of the loop. We began to hear a faint, defiant popping from the top of a hill across from the village. Each time the 24 reached the top of its pass, the hilltop gunner would fire a burst.

After the third time, the gunship

stopped strafing. It made two more passes, and it seemed as if you could see the gunship itself thinking. Then it swooped up high and fired all four of its 57mm rocket pods at the hilltop, which was completely covered with explosions. The machine gun didn't fire again. The group I was traveling with seemed to welcome the raid as an excuse to take a breather, and we all took a drink of the pure mountain water coursing down the bare rock face of the narrow stone face of the valley.

Finally, after being handed off to yet another crew, this time refugees, we crossed into the tribal areas north of Jalalabad. My guide gestured to the hills around us. "Dacoiti," he warned. "Bandit country." Great, I thought, a month dodging the Russians only to get knocked off by some furry Afridi. But the only folks we saw were other refugees. We finally arrived at a small town in Mohmand Agency north of Peshawar.

The Pakis threw me in jail for another week. **CA**



Under arrest in Mohmand Agency following exit from Afghanistan. I gave jail keepers money to buy Cokes and they brought me Fanta. I had lost 30 pounds in a month.

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