

## My last trip into Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, in 1987

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*Commander Ajab Khan test-fires a 14.5-mm Zikuyak in Shultan Valley, Kunar – Oct. 1987*

It's been almost 30 years since I wrote this story. The writing is a bit awkward because I was under strict orders from my editor to avoid penning it as an account of a personal experience, which of course it was. -- It was my 4th and last visit to Afghanistan since 1972, the 3rd one since the Soviets invaded that country at the end of 1979. -- I have inserted some text in italics and square brackets for explanation.

One of the people mentioned, the one-eyed Italian would-be mercenary Eugenio, was an interesting character whom I met in a dingy, cheap "hippie" hotel in a dark corner of Peshawar. He had a glass eye, which he took out to clean from time to time. He said he'd lost his eye to a stray bullet somewhere in Europe. He had spent 2 months in Logar, Afghanistan the previous year with mujaheddin attacking convoys on the main road from the south to

Kabul, and, like the French guy Jacques, he wanted to get into some more action this time.

I was shocked when Eugenio showed me a picture of two beautiful baby boys and told me those were his sons back in Rome. He gave me the address of his girlfriend, their mother, in Rome and told me to contact her in case he didn't make it out alive....

*asadab.DO [For information: This was originally written on a small NEC PC-8201 laptop with less than 32 kilobytes of usable RAM. This is scanned from a printout of the original, unedited version that I typed up in Peshawar]*

### **ASADABAD -- KUNAR PROVINCE (18-22 October 1987 -- written on 1 November) [1987 in Peshawar, Pakistan] [from my article in the Middle East Times weekly, based in Cyprus -- now long defunct]**

TARI SAR PLATEAU, Afghanistan -- Mujaheddin commander Ajab Khan, a short, wiry man with a vaguely bird-like quality in his movements and speech, is perched precariously on a rocky outcrop. In rapid Pakhtu, he is speaking into the microphone of a red plastic walkie-talkie. Next to him, Pazlimalek, a tall, seasoned fighter at 25 with a thick beard, leans on a flat rock and peers through binoculars into the Kunar Valley far below.

Seconds earlier, the heavy blast of the driving charge of an 82-millimeter mortar reverberated through the rugged mountains and valleys to the east of the fast-flowing, slate-grey Kunar River. Then a small cloud rose from some low hills across the river, just above Shigal Tarna, a garrison of a few hundred government troops.

"Down five millièmes," suggests Pazlimalek, and the commander repeats the message into his microphone. The next mortar bomb, fired by one of two mujaheddin positions in the mountains near the border with Pakistan, explodes on the road that leads to the base of the Soviet-backed dushman, the enemy. The second mortar also places a bomb close to the road.

"Allahu Akbar -- God is great," shouts the commander. Pazlimalek suggests a further slight shift in the aim of the mortars. Soon, the cries of "Allahu Akbar" multiply as, one after another, three clouds of smoke from mujaheddin mortar bombs rise in the middle of Shigal Tarna itself.

Later, the mujaheddin fire a few 107-millimeter rockets from a single, man-portable tube -- the Bimyak -- and, following some adjustments in the aim of the weapon, rejoice when two of the missiles hit a large house in a village by the Shigal River upstream from the army base. People in the village, the families of pro-government militiamen from other regions who were resettled there to occupy houses left behind by refugees, can be seen running for cover.

Throughout the firing by the mujaheddin, the heavy thump of a large-caliber artillery gun can be heard from the government base, followed by the explosions of its shells in the mountains to the east. The gun,

well hidden under earthworks in Shigal Tarna, fires roughly one shell a minute.

On a different frequency than that used by the mujaheddin, the radio crackles with the excited voice of the commander of Shigal Tarna base. Later, another voice speaks in rapid Russian.

Suddenly, the air above Tari Sar Plateau is filled with a sort of swishing sound that is followed within seconds by a series of powerful explosions. Flashes can be seen on a mountainside across the lower Shultan Valley, and soon clouds of smoke cast shadows over the pine-covered slopes.

"Asadabad, Bimsiezda," Pazlimalek tells three foreigners who watch the spectacle from the vantage position on Tari Sar. Bimsiezda is the Afghans' term for one of several modern versions of the famous Stalin Organ multiple rocket launcher that was dreaded by invading German soldiers on the Soviet front in World War II. Asadabad is the capital of Kunar Province and the site of Chagha Sarai military base, roughly 10 kilometers to the south of Tari Sar Plateau and about twice that distance from the Pakistani border.

[I had brought two other Europeans with me to this place in Afghanistan: Eugenio, a one-eyed Italian adventurer and Jacques, a French ex-Foreign Legionnaire. I ran into them separately in Peshawar after each of them had tried in vain for weeks to find a mujaheddin group that would take them across the border. I then took them to my contact Engineer Es Haq in University Town, who arranged the trip for us after they presented themselves as journalists like me – which they were not.]

High above Asadabad, on two mountain plateau to the east and one to the west of the Kunar River, Soviet Spetsnaz commandos have established small permanent bases that are regularly supplied from the valley by helicopters, mostly at night. Four helicopters were parked on the tarmac of an airfield at Asadabad when the fighting around Shigal Tarna began.

Pazlimalek claimed that each of the three mountain bases, Soder Sar, Mechellay Sar and Shahbazay Sar, housed about 300 Soviet commandos. According to Ajab Khan, the Spetsnaz have a Bimsiezda on Soder Sar, only a few kilometers to the south of Tari Sar mountain and clearly visible from the highest peak above this plateau. [I believe I must have misunderstood this at the time; the Bimsiezda must have been in the valley, not on the mountaintop. Also, surely, the number of Spetsnaz forces in those locations could not have been as high as the mujaheddin claimed]

The mujaheddin count 13 rockets in the first salvo. A second salvo blasts the same mountainside across the valley with nine rockets but all fail to hit the mujaheddin mortar and Bimyak positions.

Commander Ajab Khan was well aware that the Soviets, together with the Afghan government forces, could lay a heavy rocket and artillery barrage over the entire area under his men's control, including Tari Sar mountain. They could also call in Mi-24 helicopter gunships and Sukhoi-25 ground attack jets to blast the mountains and valleys all around, as they did just two months earlier in August. Compared with the firepower at the disposal of the communist enemy, that of the mujaheddin seemed truly pitiful.

Normally, the mujaheddin would continue to fight no matter how much retaliation they had to expect from the Soviets. But this time, the commander felt responsible for the lives of the three foreigners, the first to visit this area since Ajab Khan and his men established their bases on the massive rocky ridges along the upper Shultan Valley about two years ago. He decided to call off the attack on Shigal Tarna at about 1:30 p.m. and save his remaining mortar and rocket ammunition for future operations.

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[Actually, in retrospect, I don't think Ajab Khan broke off the attack because he was concerned about us 3 Europeans. I found out a bigger attack was to take place a few days later with a larger force. A week or two after these events I met the well-known American correspondent Kurt Lohbeck (since deceased) at the American Club in Peshawar, and when he heard I had been north of Asadabad he told me he went there a few days later and filmed a major offensive by the mujaheddin towards the Kunar capital in which they came close to capturing the town.

I could not believe it and asked if I could see his film, but he said he had already sent it to New York for editing. It then occurred to me that most likely the mujaheddin had sent me and my companions out of the area because they wanted to give Lohbeck exclusive coverage of whatever operation they planned -- Lohbeck himself may have asked for it -- because he was a much more important witness than we were.

I have never since been able to find any information about the battle for Asadabad that Lohbeck said he filmed, and the town was captured only a year later -- months after Soviet forces withdrew from the area.

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Also, our mujahed guide Mohammed Kaftan was unhappy when he realized Eugenio and Jacques were not journalists as they had claimed, because they did not have cameras, never took notes and were only interested in getting Kalashnikov assault rifles from the mujaheddin so they could join them in fighting.

They did get the Kalashnikovs but were very disappointed they couldn't use them when we were under artillery bombardment far from any enemy soldier. Kaftan is the one who insisted on sending us back over the mountains to Pakistan].

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While some mujaheddin based on a mountain to the north fired random shots from a heavy single-barrel 14.5-millimeter anti-aircraft gun as a diversionary tactic, the commander had a few of his men lead the three foreigners down into the Chowgam Valley below Tari Sar Plateau.

From there, the party proceeded over several ridges back to the mujaheddin camps in the upper Shultan Valley. But although the mujaheddin stopped firing early in the afternoon, the riposte from the Soviets and the Afghan army continued for several hours until long after sunset.

A slow but steady rhythm of heavy mortar, artillery and rocket fire continued to rock the Shultan Valley, coming from the nearest Soviet commando base on Soder Sar Plateau to the south-west, Shigal Tarna to the west and Asmar to the north-west. Two of the Bimsiezda rockets tore holes into the mountainside only about 10 meters above one of the mujaheddin's Zikuyak 14.5-millimeter machine-gun positions.

The operation cost the life of one mujahed, who stepped on a mine near the east bank of the Kunar River and apparently bled to death after losing both legs. His body was later carried on a mule for burial in the Bajaur tribal area of Pakistan.

The number of casualties on the other side of the river was not known but mujaheddin reported that one helicopter made at least two return trips between Asadabad and Shigal Tarna, presumably carrying wounded people to a hospital in the city.

The mujahed who became shaheed, martyred, had triggered the fighting somewhat earlier than planned when the mine exploded under his feet. Firing had started along the Kunar River before the mujaheddin mortars and the Bimyak, carried by mules on treacherous paths up the mountains, were in position.

Soldiers in Shigal Tarna raked the east bank of the Kunar with bursts of heavy machine-gun fire and one tank blasted the lower slopes of Tari Sar, while mujaheddin near the river responded by firing rocket-propelled grenades and rifle bullets.

In the Kunar Valley, there is a striking contrast between the military situation to the north of Asmar and that to the south between Asmar and Asadabad.

In the north [north of Asmar, where I went with another group of Yunus Khalis mujaheddin two years earlier, in August 1985], the mujaheddin control a number of villages along the river itself and have laid siege to the government garrison of Barikot near the border with Pakistan.

In a major offensive during the spring of 1985, a division-sized Soviet force [in hindsight I'm sure I was misinformed about this -- there is no way the force could have been that large] backed by an estimated 100 warplanes and helicopters fought its way up the narrow dirt road along the Kunar to relieve the besieged garrison at Barikot, using airborne Spetsnaz commandos to destroy as many as nine anti-aircraft machine-gun posts that the mujaheddin had set up on mountain peaks overlooking the valley.

The Soviets managed to bring Afghan army reinforcements to Barikot but as soon as the main Russian force returned to the south the mujaheddin retook control of almost the entire stretch of road between Asmar and Barikot, established fresh machine-gun nests in the mountains and resumed their siege of the border garrison.

In May last year, Soviet jets destroyed an important bridge across the Kunar River between the villages of Sao and Neyshagam north of Asmar in an effort to deny the mujaheddin an easy way to cross to the west bank with their mules laden with heavy arms. According to Pazlimalek, the mujaheddin have since stretched at least three cables across the river and use rafts to transport heavy weapons and ammunition, and they are trying to repair the Sao bridge as well as another one at Narei further north.

South of Asmar, however, the Soviets have made a strong commitment to keeping the Kunar Valley under direct control and it is extremely dangerous for the mujaheddin to try to cross the river. The east bank of the river is heavily mined, and the Soviet commandos in their mountain bases above Asadabad are ready to intervene at any time should the mujaheddin threaten any part of the valley.

Due to the possibility of surprise attacks on mujaheddin strongholds by helicopter-borne Spetsnaz forces, the guerrillas keep guard posts with watchdogs on all the strategic high points above the Shultan Valley as well as in some of the villages in other side valleys of the Kunar.

The majority of the original inhabitants of most farming villages on both sides of the Kunar Valley have fled to Pakistan since Soviet forces pushed into this extremely rugged region more than four years ago, using heavy bombardment to terrorize the population.

Many of the men from those villages are now mujaheddin. After the Soviets asserted control of the valley, tribesmen who were willing to work with the government that was installed during the invasion in December 1979 were resettled in some villages, occupying abandoned houses and farmlands.

Few civilians live in the villages of the lower Shultan and Chowgam valleys just to the east of the Kunar, in the areas under mujaheddin control. Some families whose houses are still intact remain in the area despite frequent fighting nearby, growing maize and wheat, tending orchards and raising cattle, sheep and goats.

Some children were playing in a field at Gaweja village as mortar bombs, rockets and tank shells passed high overhead, exploding in the mountains to the east. The children belonged to the only family that remained behind in the village, and they seemed almost oblivious to the din. All other families had long fled.

Just across the valley, the village of Wan was completely abandoned. Scattered bomb craters and gaping holes in most of the houses, which were built of rocks and mud, provided mute testimony to the tragedies that must have forced the people out.

Considering the Soviets' enormous advantage in firepower and equipment, and the very rough conditions under which the mujaheddin continue to live and fight their jihad (holy war) in this region eight years after their country was invaded, it comes as a surprise to witness the courage and determination of these fighters.

The most active group of mujaheddin in the Kunar Valley, both north and south of Asmar, appears to be the Hezb-e Islami (party) of Maulvi Yunus Khalis, an aging but tough leader who was recently named chairman of the seven-party Ittihad-e Islami Mujaheddin Afghanistan (Islamic Alliance of Afghan Mujaheddin) based in Peshawar. Maulvi Khalis is expected to lead a mujaheddin delegation which will attend the debate on Afghanistan in the United Nations General Assembly beginning on 9 November.

The three foreigners who visited the Shultan Valley for five days to watch the attack on Shigal Tarna in late October were impressed by the fervor with which the mujaheddin practiced their faith. Islam is a very demanding religion. To pray five times a day in the Islamic way is not easy, especially under difficult conditions such as those encountered in the jihad in this rugged land.

At one point, on the day before the attack on Shigal Tarna, a small group of mujaheddin raced at breakneck speed over very treacherous terrain for well over an hour just in order to reach a mosque in an abandoned village in time for the Maghreb (sunset) prayer.

After eight years of a terrible war against a superpower in Afghanistan, it is perhaps no wonder that only a fervent commitment to their religion, Islam, can provide the mujaheddin with the courage and determination to carry on their difficult struggle.