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PRAVDA MILITARY CORRESPONDENT DESCRIBES LOCAL ASPECTS OF AFGHAN WAR

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[Article by Lt Col Petr Studenikin, reviewer and assistant editor of the military section of the newspaper PRAVDA: "Now I Know How to Build a New Life"]

[Text] Soldiers of the Revolution

The helicopter seemed to hang over the strange and mysterious planet: To the left, all the way to the horizon, stretched the red dunes of the Registan [Desert] in ocean-like swells; to the right, dead "lunar" mountains, and under them, as if giant termite hills had been stuck together, stood dwellings that were labyrinths of clay villages [kishlak]. Seen clearly were bomb craters, smashed cupolas of roofs and signs of burned out buildings. Two months ago, a large group of bandits [dushman] had been routed here.

The crew of the Afghan helicopter conducts one last air reconnaissance prior to the operation being prepared by the corps of the Afghan people's army. According to the security organizations known as the KHAD [expansion unknown], after having been defeated in the mountains, the counterrevolution has made its nest in some of the villages in the green zone of Kandahar.

I peer -- until my eyes start hurting -- at the narrow, little alleys through which tanks could never pass, the tiny courtyards that are as deep as wells, and the lush, overgrown vineyards stretching out for many kilometers in all directions where an entire regiment and even a division could be concealed. Not a soul! Perhaps we are flying too high. But at this point, the flight engineer, Mohammed Khan, touched my shoulder and pointed first in the direction of the Registan Desert and then the mountains, and I caught sight of a black dotted line made up of artillery pieces, tanks and armored vehicles. These were units and subunits of the Afghan corps moving out to their initial positions. A bullet from a British BUR rifle suddenly pierced the bottom of the helicopter; it was a confirmation of the undeclared war that was going on.

...At the corps command post, we were met by Col Mohammed Kabir, the corps commander. Short and stocky, with a face that showed intelligence and resoluteness, he greeted us happily and energetically, and briefly laid out the operational plan.

"The bandits [dushman] have changed their tactics: They do not engage in open combat with large forces, but have "dissolved" in the mountains and villages, and have begun to engage in terrorism. Our mission is to find and neutralize the bandits. Last time, Gul'buddin Khekmattiar, the "commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the Islamic party of Afghanistan," as he calls himself, engaged us in combat in this very same village. The heavy, bloody battle, with tanks, artillery and aviation lasted several days. The bandits were defeated and the "commander-in-chief" was wounded and barely made it to the border. We shall see if he decides to engage us today."

"Well, anyway," Col Kabir looked at his watch. "It is time to start."

A command rang out and dense grey lines of Afghan submachine gunners moved out through the cemetery toward the high clay walls with narrow slits in them. We also moved out with Sr Capt Mohammed Anvar, the division political officer, Sr Lt Khazrat Shir, the regiment propaganda officer, and two enlisted men, Fatakh from Farah and Rasul from Gura.

The hot December sun (+27 degrees in the shade) warms our backs and the white clay of the walls blinds our eyes. Stillness. We enter a tiny courtyard, and it is as if we had crossed over centuries. How can we describe an Afghan dwelling that looks as if it had been especially built for defense? The bandits, after seizing a village, convert each such dwelling into a small fort. Surrounded by an outside blank wall, the inside is like a labyrinth, with narrow passageways, small enclosures for cattle, all divided by the same kind of clay wall. A bullet gets stuck in it and a shell easily penetrates it without exploding. Here, you do not see your combat buddy, neither to the right nor left. You do not know what awaits you two meters ahead or on either side behind the walls -- a grenade, a bullet, or the blow of a dagger.

Two months ago, tanks and armored vehicles were burning in these tiny passageways, and defenders of the revolution were being killed at point-blank range. The bandits even fired machine guns and mortars as if they were pistols -- at point-blank range. I was told by participants of those battles that battalions and regiments were broken down into groups of 5-10 persons. Each group fought independently. There were some improbable situations. For example, soldiers in the garden would surround a house in which there were bandits; other bandits would surround the garden where the soldiers were. It was like a multi-tiered cake, and it was a harsh examination of each soldier's readiness. And they passed the examination.

A large group -- around 800 bandits -- was crushed. Today there are only sporadic, single rifle shots, short machine gun bursts and dull explosions of hand grenades. But it cannot be definitely determined yet if the enemy has retreated to the center of the green zone in order to fight or if they have hidden their weapons. That sometimes also happens.

We are met in the tiny courtyard, next to an old peach tree, by the owner, a grey-bearded elder. Instead of a document he gives us a photograph from his family album in which we see him looking at us; an elderly woman -- the mistress of the house -- and five sons, two of them in the uniform of the Afghan people's army. Sr Lt Khozrat Shir translates the ensuing

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conversation: "The owner's name is Fazil' Mohammed. He is 65 years old. He lives by selling fruit from his little pomegranate garden. He can live on what he sells for 4-5 months. He goes to Iran or Pakistan to make money. His father and his father's father did the same thing. He believes that a new life is beginning, and that is why he sent his sons, Dust Mohammed (he is now a lieutenant) and Khayr Mohammed (he is fighting somewhere in Baglan), to the army to defend the revolution.

"I have seen a lot in my time," says the old man. "My grandfather was a slave, my father was also, and even I was, but my sons here are never going to be slaves. It is worth fighting for that...."

Yes, for the first time in the entire history of Afghanistan the April revolution proclaimed that its most important task was to guarantee true equality for all peoples and tribes, large and small, regardless of language, religious belief, way of life [nomadic or sedentary] or place of residence. In order to achieve this goal the Central Committee of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan [NDPA] and the government of the DRA [Democratic Republic of Afghanistan] intend to grant, guarantee and secure to all peoples of the republic not only formal, but actual equality: Equal opportunity in developing an economic life and a rich and distinctive culture, including self-education in the native language. The party and government are paying especially great attention to an accelerated development of areas populated by national minorities and tribes that are backward in social, economic and cultural matters.

The enlisted men, Fatakh from Farah and Rasul from Guram -- our "bodyguards" -- grew up in remote mountain villages. From their childhood years they both learned about the bitter lot of hired hands and felt the searing pain of landowners' whips. This is not their first year in the army. When their two-year enlistment ended, Fatakh said to the commander: "Now is not the time to think about one's small house. One has to think about the big house -- our homeland. I shall be a soldier until we annihilate all the bandits." Fatakh has taken part in 33 combat operations.

"They fight boldly. They are the first to go into an attack and the last ones to leave the field of combat," says the commander about them.

I asked Fatakh what he wants to do after the final victory.

"I will go home, to the mountains. Now I know how to build a new life...."

For this destitute family, the victorious April revolution was like water from a spring for a traveler, like the gust of a fresh mountain breeze on a hot, stifling day. His sisters were given the opportunity to study, his brother became a pilot, and Fatakh himself -- when the achievements of the revolution began to be threatened by the forces of domestic and foreign reaction -- joined the Democratic Organization of Afghan Youth (DOMA) and took a submachine gun into his hands, so that he could fight the enemy.

Today's Afghan army is a political school that is attended by tens of thousands of former laborers and nomads, deprived and illiterate people.

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From the very first day, the enemies of the revolution began an intensive struggle for the minds and hearts of the soldiers. They sent their agitators into units and subunits, trying to turn the soldiers to treason. They obstructed the military draft (often forcibly sending draft-age youths into Pakistan, to the terrorists' bases) in order to force soldiers to throw away their rifles, and took their families as hostages into the mountains. Lies and vengeance, terrorism and blackmail were put into operation. All in vain. While at first there were cases of individual subunits going over to the side of the counterrevolution, right now only individuals or small groups of servicemen go over.

The officer corps of the Afghan army has also changed qualitatively.

Sr Lt Khazrat Shir -- our interpreter -- from his childhood, together with his father, bent his back in working for Khan Shir Mohammed, who had 1,000 dzheribs of land. Khazrat, however, managed to finish eight years of school and enter the Kabul technical school for auto mechanics. Here he learned Russian. ("Please give my best regards to our teacher, Valentina Aleksandrovna Kolomeyets. I think she is from the Ukraine.") During his third year Khazrat Shir left for the army to defend the revolution. Political officer of the company and battalion; propaganda officer of the regiment; dozens of battles, thousands of kilometers of fatally dangerous mountain paths; hundreds of illiterate youths have been placed by him -- Khazrat Shir -- into the revolutionary ranks.

...A bullet flew by next to us, and our group was immediately returned to the command post. Col Kabir, the corps commander, happily announces: "There will be no big battle. Several caches of arms have been seized.... Wouldn't you like to see the royal villa?" He pointed to a high castle-palace reigning over the entire green zone.

The royal villa -- the former one, of course -- is a strong, stone fortress on the side of a mountain, now occupied by the local "detachment for the defense of the revolution." These detachments (somewhat similar to ours during the ChON [Special Mission Detachments] days of the civil war), comprised of the poor people and those devoted to the revolution, exist throughout the entire republic. They fight the counterrevolution and defend their homes and villages against the bandits.

Along a narrow staircase, pock-marked by pieces of grenade shrapnel, past fierce-looking, black- and grey-bearded sentries wearing criss-crossed machine gun bandoliers and cartridge belts, we climbed to the flat roof where we could see all around us, as from a low-flying helicopter. We find ourselves in a tight circle of armed people, old and young. We are amazed by the "assortment" of weapons: British and Egyptian rifles, Spanish machine guns, Pakistani grenades, Belgian pistols...

"Aliakbar, commander of the detachment for the defense of the revolution," introduces himself in Russian, a lieutenant of the tsarandoy (militia). "We are still having a difficult time. Our peasant still has the same little world he has had for centuries: A pair of oxen to till the soil, a wooden plough; he is a born feudal princeling whose word is law; the village mullah who has unquestioning authority.... But a break has already taken place in the hearts of the people. They have made their choice."

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found ourselves at the edge of the roof. The observer was a 13 or 14 year-old boy. Slung over his shoulder was a PPSH [submachine gun] with a light blue ribbon wrapped around its stock. He was talking excitedly and pointing to the distant stream.

"Bandits," said Aliakbar, giving me the binoculars.

Beyond the river, in the grass, I saw dark figures. Four or five. They would appear, then vanish. Then I saw that they were being pursued by a group of Afghan soldiers. Next to me, a machine gun began to rattle angrily. After the third or fourth burst, the figures disappeared and did not reappear any more.

"And that is how we live," said Alikbar, lieutenant of the tsarandoy, getting up from the machine gun.

The Enemy

"Name?"

"Farouk, son of Sardar Mohammed."

"Nationality?"

"Pushtu."

"Age?"

"22 years."

"Parentage?"

"My father is a merchant; my father's father a small trader...."

"Do you know how to read?"

"No."

"What do you know about the April revolution?"

"When I served in the army (Farouk, son of Sardar Mohammed was discharged from the people's army eight months ago), the officers said that a revolution for the people had taken place. I returned home, and the mullah said: 'There wasn't any kind of revolution....' He gave me a flatbread and a bullet, and said: 'Go kill a soldier, and I'll give you three flatbreads and three bullets....'"

"But what do you yourself think about the revolution?"

"I don't think anything myself. The mullah is closer to Allah; he knows everything."

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This conversation took place in the women's half of the house, the palace of a former millionaire smuggler, now occupied (and lived in, worked in, and as it has happened, even fought in) by personnel of the KhAD, the organization of state security of Kandahar Province. The previous night the KhAD and a battalion for defense of the revolution conducted a successful combat operation; they seized a cache of arms and 14 dushman terrorists. Farouk, son of Sardar Mohammed, is one of them, a man condemned by Gul'buddin Khekmattiar, the "commander-in-chief" of the armed forces of the Islamic Party of Afghanistan."

And I remembered a trip that I had taken over two years ago now to the Pushta tribe with Faiz Mohammed, the minister for border and tribal affairs of the DRA. He was meditatively looking out the window at the vast expanse seen under the wing of the aircraft and was telling of the needs and hopes of the simple nomads and their joyless, hard life.

"Our party and government," said the minister, "has a deep respect for national, religious, and tribal traditions and customs. This was proclaimed most emphatically by Babrak Karmal, the general secretary of the NDPA [National Democratic Party of Afghanistan] Central Committee and chairman of the DRA Revolutionary Council during a recent radio and television appeal to the people. We are trying to do our work in such a way that the word of the people's power, its position and the measures passed in the best interest of the vast majority of the representatives of the Pushtu nomadic tribes and peasants, will find a real response and support in places in every little corner of our country."

Faiz Mohammed, who had come from the Pushtu people, and who wanted to see both his fellow tribesmen and all people of Afghanistan happy, died at the hands of a dushman.

Among the primary problems that faced the republic immediately after the April revolution, was that of land reform and the problem of Afghan nomads. There are nearly three million of them, that is, nearly a fifth of the population. Most of the nomads are Pushtus, although there are also representatives of other peoples and nationalities of Afghanistan.

"Our problems," noted Hafar Khan, one of the well-known Pushtu leaders during our discussion, "in many ways are identical with the problems facing the entire country. They include a struggle against poverty and sickness, illiteracy and economic backwardness. It is a struggle against those who are trying to prevent our people from building a new life."

...They pass through the small office of the KhAD chief, young and strong, in white turbans (Sunnis) and in black (Shiites), some silent, others talkative, bearded and beardless; and in my notebook I have these remarks:

"For killing an activist of the NDPA, when confirmed by other 'honest Muslims,' they pay me 10 thousand afghanis, but if I bring a head, I receive 50 thousand.... Abduldzhilil (an unskilled laborer in Afghanistan earns around 2 thousand afghanis per month)."

Said Hussein, a cutthroat from Gul'buddin Khekmatiar's special group of condemned men tells the following: "Our main mission today is to work among the masses. We have become smarter; we do not cut up or punish our fellow Muslims openly. For this there are courts of justice organized in the Islamic committees. Acts of terror -- killing of teachers, tsarandoy workers, members of cooperatives, activists -- are now done wearing the uniforms of soldiers of the Afghan people's army...." And he told in detail how in the green zone of Kandahar his group, posing as soldiers, brutally dealt with six activists. And in Kandahar itself they shot an 8 year-old child whose father worked in the local government office.

Shirali (apparently a nickname): "No, I am not a terrorist. I am a recruiter. I recruit youths and men for our educational centers. How do we do it? The Islamic Committee (it can be either on the territory of Afghanistan or Pakistan; it does not make any difference) promulgates a 'law' on calling up youths from age 18 to 20 (or the entire male population capable of carrying a gun) for military service. The servants of Allah (the recruiters -- P.S.) deliver the text of these 'laws' to the villages, the 'recruits' are gathered in groups and sent across the border...."

The texts of these 'laws' conform strictly to the ancient Oriental style: "In the name of Allah, the all-benevolent and all-merciful, we have been permitted to turn to you, the most revered...." Next are listed the duties to be performed for Allah by the Muslim brothers and directly by the "Islamic Committee." And only after this comes the request -- an order -- to send so many youths and men with the bearer of the letter. But if all this does not have an effect on the elders, there is a "harsh version," in which the pious tone is replaced by a threatening tone. In the event that even this does not have an effect, there is an ultimatum: By such and such a date, collect and deliver to such and such a place so many youths and men.

...They took away the last dushman terrorist and we stayed alone with comrade D., the KHAD chief (I was asked not to name the workers of state security). Twilight, unnoticed, had engulfed the office. We sat silently. Either the approaching darkness was not conducive to talk, or we both have really been affected by our drawn-out meeting with the enemy. Then, somewhere nearby, a single rifle shot rang out and was answered by the angry staccato of a submachine gun. Several minutes later began what seemed to be a furious, random exchange of fire. With heavy footsteps someone ran along the corridor, and someone -- just a little boy, but with a submachine gun -- flew into the office and apparently received a reprimand from the chief, for he left in a noticeably quiet manner. The exchange of fire ended as suddenly as it had begun.

Comrade D. stood up, opened the safe, and took out a thick notebook filled with handwritten Arabic curlicues....

The notebook had hundreds of intelligence reports: "Rustam" reported from Pakistan that 600 units of air defense weapons of the "Red Eye" type were being sent to the area of Kandahar in "Benz" and "Simurg" vehicles; "Fayda" (also from Pakistan) reported about a secret meeting in Cheman in which several dozen heads of large groups participated; their own man from the

small rural district of Argandab (a suburb of Kandahar) sent a map showing the "winter deployment" of bandit groups in the Kandahar green zone. And so forth, and so forth....

It is not enough to give the bandits a place. They also have to be supplied for combat with everything they need. Every country that adheres to the disgraceful, semi-legal, anti-Afghanistani pact carries a responsibility. Some supply the bandits with mortars, recoilless weapons, flamethrowers and small arms; others, for example, the US, with "ground-air" type missiles, mortars, Jeeps, with flamethrowers, and the latest grenades and mines (there are especially large numbers of these); the FRG, with antitank rockets; Japan, with field radio transmitters; and Egypt, with hand antitank mortars....

Arms and instructors for the primary anti-Afghanistani base, into which Pakistan has been made by the US and other imperialist powers, continue to flow along the Karakorum road, through the seaports of Karachi and Guidar, and by air.

...Along the dark corridor and the narrow little staircase, past the windows filled in with stones and turned into peepholes, we went down with comrade D. into a small courtyard, as dark as a well, where we were awaited by young, 15 to 25 year-old defenders of the revolution, waiting to go out on a combat mission. They were dressed in their national costume. It could be guessed that they had submachine guns under their light blue and black capes.

Among the combat troops I recognized Navruz (also a pseudonym), the fearless reconnaissance scout. His fate was the same as that of thousands of Afghans: His father, a peasant, was brutally killed in front of his eyes by the landowner's loyal followers. He himself also had his share of grief. Because of this, he accepted the revolution with all his heart, and from the first day was in the ranks of its defenders in one of the most difficult sectors. He works among the enemy, and the least bit of carelessness would result in a terrible reprisal. But every time he discovers another gang of bandits, he is raring to go into open combat.

I had first met Navruz on the eve of this operation. He had just returned from the enemy camp. We had time to speak of many things, and as we parted, Navruz said:

"I am not afraid of death, because I am fighting for the bright future of Afghanistan.... I feel fortunate when I am able to neutralize a bandit...."

The dark little figures slipped through the narrow gate and immediately blended in with the rippling night of the guarded town. Somewhere, on the outskirts, occasional shots could be heard, and then, red tracers from submachine gun bursts would draw their designs on the black velvety sky.

At the Call of a Friend...

The white sun rose over the seemingly dead, grey mountain ridges. On a helicopter, I was catching up with a column of Soviet and Afghan trucks,

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protected by tanks and armored vehicles, loaded with supplies for the people of Direnkot, a hard-to-reach border area of the DRA.

Porous volcanic pumice that had solidified from its boiling liquid state, kirizes -- the wells for underground canals (unique system of water-supply that had developed here over thousands of years), fortress-like villages with hemispheric roofs of houses, as if they were sealed off beehives; all this was unusual and foreign. Capt Velikam Akhmadulin's engineers were in an armored vehicle. The white, pungent dust that was being raised in front of our vehicle by the tanks of Lt Il'ya Osipov only increased the feeling of the unearthly reality of the mountains and the labyrinth-like dwellings.

The road veering off from the river channel went steeply up the mountain, and Captain Akhmadulin signaled for me to go down into the armored personnel carrier, slammed shut the hatch, and yelled out: "If we pass through this sector safely, the little Afghan kids will have bread and sugar...."

He did not finish his sentence when the vehicle was bounced up and a sharp clap resounded.

The white Afghanistani sun burned one's eyes until they hurt: On the dirty road the medical instructor, Sasha Marinyak, a Moldavian from faraway Tiraspol', was busily working next to heavily wounded Marat Tyshtubyev, a Kazakh. Marat loved fiery jumpers... "To you, my Afghan friend, I turn in this hour when we have become brothers because of civic duty. Our hearts beat in unison. I know you are ready for battle. For a happy tomorrow. You and I have the same friends; you and I have the same enemies. The enemy is at your doorstep. They bring death and darkness. And I came to help. I came to you, at your call." This poem was written not by a poet, but by a simple soldier.

On that dusty road I thought of the mothers of our soldiers and of the mothers from the faraway Afghan village of Direnkot. It was for their children that these fellows were transporting products, so that they would live and not die of the hunger to which the enemies of Afghanistan were condemning them.

For several years, the Afghan counterrevolution and its American and other protectors who are fighting against the people have had as one of their main objectives to paralyze traffic on the roads of Afghanistan. The bandits blow up bridges, create landslides in deep gorges, and on the sides of mountains make "fox dens" or caves, in which they place large caliber machine guns capable of firing at ground and air targets. In populated areas, food convoys are fired upon with grenade launchers and mortars. A mine war has developed: The bandit gangs are armed with the newest models of plastic mines, which are impossible to find with mine detectors, because they have no metallic parts. They are difficult to sweep, because this kind of mine might allow 40 vehicles to pass over it and will blow up the 41st. Cutting off the roads this way -- the only threads connecting the many populated points of border areas with the outside world -- the insurgents have the mission of blockading them, not allowing government authorities to control them, and provoking discontent among the people due to shortages of food, salt, kerosine and water -- everything that the mountain people need in order to survive.

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Many villages and provincial towns of Afghanistan greeted us with silence and with an absence of people, as if time had stopped a century ago. But the silence and the absence of people were misleading: The peaceful, predawn noises -- the calls of the mullahs to prayer -- were often drowned out by bursts from the bandits' submachine guns and grenade explosions, and the ancient clanging of little bells of camel caravans by the roar of motors, carrying new life into the mountains. Everything necessary for a normal life, from firewood to mobile power stations, is delivered to the most remote corners of the mountain country by Afghan and Soviet military drivers.

...Nightfall comes suddenly in the mountains of Afghanistan, as if the earth were covered by a thick black veil. We set up our field camp on an even plateau that could be defended easily. Security vehicles, tanks and armored personnel carriers with machine gunners at their places took up combat positions around the perimeter. Between them deployed in a ring were paired patrols, while concentrated at the center was equipment that had been blown up or damaged. All night long the specialists of the repair company would work their magic on those vehicles that could still be made operational. Soon campfires were flickering in the camp.

A combat field camp lives by special rules: Whoever works during the day behind the wheel or throttles or radio, rests all night. Others are busy with simple tasks: Washing their faces and hair, preparing dinner.... It is not possible to take a nice company or battalion field kitchen on every run. And the soldiers' day rations, as everyone knows, are prepared for their caloric content and would not be very popular in a household kitchen: Barley and rice pudding, both canned, and crispy pieces of bread....

The engineering "crew" of armored personnel carrier no. 86 was known as the veteran crew in the company. For three nights already they had given their hospitality to the journalist, sharing their barley with him, giving him the best place next to the campfire or in the BTR [armored personnel carrier], saving the last canteen of water for him and keeping his submachine gun in good order. All the fellows had already served two years here in Afghanistan, including the driver and mechanic Sergey Tsurkan and senior engineer Viktor Arpentin, both from Moldavia; a Ukrainian, the commander of the engineering unit Sergey Shamray; Petr Nikulin, an engineer from Perm', Komi [ASSR]; and another engineer, Korbuzhay Lizbanov, from Kazakhstan. This is the last run for these fellows. How much they have gone through during this time!

They have had to remove obstructions (often under fire) in deep gorges, rebuild blown-up bridges, clear roads of mines, mines that are the latest models to be found in the inventories of NATO countries, and go ahead of supply convoys into the most remote areas. In camp they sometimes sing an old but not ancient song about themselves: "... Come one, raise your swords! ... We were all born in battle, we were all born in bat--tle...."

No, they were not born in battle and most of their fathers were never in combat. But I shall always remember the black nights, the deathly silence of the mountains, the silhouettes of the combat vehicles bristling with cannon and large caliber machine gun barrels in a circle defense, and our long talk by the campfire with Seryozha Tsurkan.

"One time we were transporting food for the people of Tirin and Daraut. The bandits had blockaded the villages, and it was very bad there. Children and old people were dying of starvation. We knew about this and were carrying hundreds of tons of food supplies. The convoy had stretched out over several kilometers. This is dangerous, because the bandits, just like a pack of jackals, usually attack the vehicles that fall behind. We passed through the plains area quietly. Everything started in the mountains: The Afghan vehicles are old and began breaking down. We did not abandon them, but towed them. Then we began encountering 'traps.' You go along and the road is as smooth and even as can be. And suddenly the vehicle would disappear into a pit, exactly how mammoths used to fall into hunters' pit traps. Then mines would begin to harass us. And finally the bandits would appear."

In one gorge they cut off our tail, about 30 vehicles. The Afghan driver in the first vehicle was wounded and the truck stopped. Our commander, Lt Sergey Popov, ran to the truck through fire and took the wheel, but was also wounded. He was dragged out to a safe place by Corporal Nikolay Pinchuk, who then went back and drove the truck out of the line of fire. All in all, on that run we got more than our share of grief. But you should have seen how we were met by the inhabitants of the mountain villages when it became known that we had delivered food to them -- meat, flour, tea and sugar -- in blown-up, machine gunned, bullet-ridden Shuravi (Soviet) trucks.

Even now, before my eyes, I can see the little boy from Khinzhan.

There is snow, but he is barefooted, and his feet are full of sores ("they should be warmed in hot water and thickly smeared with sour cream..."). His thin little shirt, torn into shreds -- probably in a fight with other boys -- was the only clothing he was wearing. In his eyes was distrust and a fright that he had not completely gotten over, but there was also hope and a deeply hidden plea for help. Then we found out: His father, mother and older brothers had been murdered by the bandits ("Oh, you little fellow! What can we do with you? Can the battalion adopt you? We cannot do it....") A sweater, a little too large, of course defrosted the little boy's eyes, and a loaf of bread and a can of stew filled them with happiness. It is time for the convoy to leave, but the battalion commander, Capt Leonid Khabarov, is stalling: He plopped his tank helmet onto the head of the youngster, but immediately ripped it off as if he were startled. The helmet had a bullet hole right in the forehead, made by a British BUR rifle. This was yesterday's mark of the bandit sniper. The battalion commander had been saved by fluke. He had been climbing the side of a snow-covered mountain and slipped, but the shot was definitely that of a sniper.

And later, when we were once again raising the dust of Afghanistani roads and children ran out to meet our convoy, it seemed to me that I saw "the boys from Khinzhan" among them, looking for their Khabarovs among us.

But that real boy from Khinzhan will no longer meet L. Khabarov on the roads of Afghanistan. On one of the food runs, the battalion commander was seriously wounded.

* * *

In Moscow I visited Major L. Khabarov in the hospital. The ward was filled. Two days before he had been operated on for the 11th time and today the doctors allowed him to have visitors, his friends and combat buddies.

In Kabul they had wanted to amputate his arm, but he would not let them. After three not too successful operations they offered him a disability retirement, but he entered the Military Academy imeni M.V. Frunze. He studies hard ("I cannot permit myself to study just so-so, otherwise someone will say that they feel sorry for me"). There were also times when his friends who had a number of unsuccessful operations would lose hope that their arm could be saved. He would encourage them: "Everything will be all right. I believe...."

And even right now, when we were already at the door, Khabarov suddenly said:

"It's too bad, too bad I didn't give my helmet to that little boy. But it would have been embarrassing to give a helmet with a bullet hole in it...."

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