Troubleshooting Afghanistan

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Russian Army

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Troubleshooting Afghanistan

This Russian soldier describes his experience in Afghanistan and advice for navigating through the country's mines, terrain and uncertainty.

by Timothy Gusinov, Soldier

"Oh Gods, from the venom of the cro­bra, the teeth of the tiger, and the vengeance of the Afghan—deliver us!"

An Old Hindi Saying

The Mine Problem

Now, when the days of Talibani’s rule in Afghanistan are over and American troops have established their land bases and continue a full scale hunt for Al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, more dangers await American and international secu­rity forces, as well as humanitarian con­voy leaders, in this country. Even though they use helicopters for their missions, and they already have armored vehicles on the ground, all will still have to use the roads.

And for me, roads in Afghanistan imme­diately bring to mind only two things: mines and ambush. There were mines planted by all sides during the Soviet-Afghan war, which have been left behind everywhere, surgical and explosive. They have been planted by all sides during the Soviet-Afghan war, which have been left behind everywhere, surgical and explosive. There are mines everywhere.

There will be many Taliban supporters remaining in the country who will try to claim remote locations. They will try to take advantage of the remote locations and try to claim them for their own purposes. They will try to use these mines to make it difficult for the Americans and other security forces to move around.

What is the situation like for the American and other security forces on the ground? How do they deal with the mines and other security threats they face? What kind of equipment and strategies do they use to deal with these issues?

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The Treachery of Mine Clearing

During the Soviet-Afghan war, mines were planted on a large scale. They were planted in large quantities by the Soviet Army in the village of Sheh rak. c/o Soviet Army in the village of Sheh rak. c/o

A girl stands near the armored vehicle left by the Soviet Army in the village of Sheh rak. c/o AP

During the Soviet-Afghan war, I have seen mines, which have been laid only a couple of years ago, harmless crushed without explosion under tank tracks. This was a surprise to the Soviet military engineers concerned about their mines' endurance. But still, we should treat every discovered mine as if it were "live", even if it looks old and rusty. However, it is also worth mentioning that many, but not all Soviet mines were equipped with self-destructing devices so they would explode after a certain period of time.

Clearing efforts of Soviet troops in many cases were poorly coordinated: one unit often laid a mine field and marked it only on its own map without inform­ing other units. A military convoy would lay mines around its own area to prevent a surprise night attack and depart in the morning without removing the mines or even marking them on the maps for the next convoy. Spetsnaz (Special Forces) teams would mine and booby-trap their way of retreat after the raid into the enemy's territory to discourage the enemy from pursuing (and not giving a damn about infantry, who might have to con­duct combat in the same area in the future). Additionally, the Air Force would lay mine fields without considering any­one on the ground. Because of this type of mine clearance, the best solution for military and humanitarian aid convoys is to be accompanied by military engineer­ing units trained in mine clearance.

Tank-mounted mine sweeps are of­ten not effective if a mine is planted deep enough. The mine sweep, the tank and a number of other vehicles can pass over the mine before the soil gets compressed hard enough to put sufficient pressure on a mine, but it is impossible to determine under what vehicle in a convoy it might happen.

mining operations of the Soviet Army in the village of Sheh rak. c/o AP

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What is the situation like for the American and other security forces on the ground? How do they deal with the mines and other security threats they face? What kind of equipment and strategies do they use to deal with these issues?
Home Made Mines

Despite the fact that a lot of modern weapons (including modern landmines) are used in Afghanistan, a lot of homemade devices are also in use. Finding a pile of empty artillery and tank shell cases, as well as unexploded aerial bombs and other kinds of munitions, clearly indicates that the place is used for explosive devices manufacturing. When conducting combat actions, it is strongly advised not to leave empty artillery and tank shell cases in the area. They will be carefully collected by the enemy, filled with explosives and used as anti-vehicle mines. If the situation permits, collect them, put them together and run a tank over them to make them unusable. Finding great amounts of cheap soap and empty glass bottles indicates the production of simple explosive charges to military bases and charges hidden under merchandise had convoy leaves the main road to camp for the night along the road, be very careful in choosing the place for your convoy or a military unit has to camp for the night along the road. Be very careful in choosing the place for your

Navigating the Mined Irrigation Canals

All populated areas in Afghanistan (villages, towns) have well developed irrigation agricultural systems consisting of water canals and irrigation ditches (Aqai or Jui in Dari language). The local population uses simple but effective methods to direct flow of water by creating little clay and soil dams. To prevent loss of water from evaporation, water distribution usually takes place in the evenings and nights. If directed into dry creek beds and irrigation canals, water turns clay and soil on the bottom into mud, making them significantly more difficult to cross. Drivers have to stop to go in low gear. The distance between vehicles becomes shorter, making them easy targets. If one vehicle gets stuck in a canal, the entire convoy comes to a halt. Such crossings require that the tank moves at a considerable speed and especially when surrounded by green vegetation–areas are good places for ambushes and may be mined as well. If your troop is in the area, be cautious if water comes flowing into such irrigation canals especially during the hot time of day. It is usually a clear indication of hostile activity in the area and may require some movement and organize ambushes at crossings.

Local Support

Using the help of local authorities, tribe leaders, field commanders, village elders, etc., divide the roads frequently used by military or humanitarian convoys, into the zones of responsibility between local tribes and villages located along these roads. Request local population to organize and maintain permanent surveillance of the roads and report any hostile or suspicious activity in their areas of responsibility such as individuals laying mines, or destroying or damaging bridges and other road facilities, and any armed groups presence or any suspicious movement through the area. Reward them for good information by providing food, medical supplies and fuel.

Information Gathering

Local bases and trading centers can be a good source of information about the mine situation in the area. Watch what roads and routes locals use to bring agricultural goods and other merchandise for locals. Pay attention to the movement of refugees and nomads in the area: their routes usually indicate what roads are safe from mines.

Conclusion

In Afghanistan, you can survive an ambush. You can fight the enemy in the mountains and in caves, because you know where he is and can use a weapon of your choice to defeat him. Landmines are as invisible and treacherous enemies, and this makes them especially dangerous. When Soviet units in Afghanistan were deployed for combat from their locations, drivers used to wish each other "clear route." So let me wish the same for American and international troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

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The Latin America Conference:
Sharing Ideas to Improve Mine Action

In early December of 2001, mine action affiliates gathered in Miami to discuss the past, present and future of mine action efforts in Latin America. The three-day conference gave all who attended a better idea of what lies ahead and allowed them to share ideas on how to reach their mutual goals.

by Nicole Kreger, MAIC

Introduction

The U.S. Department of State (DOS) and the Organization of American States (OAS) co-sponsored a regional mine action conference about Latin America on December 3-5, 2001. James Madison University's (JMU) Mine Action Information Center (MAIC) and the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) hosted the event, which took place in Miami, Florida. The conference was designed to bring together different key players involved in mine action in Latin America so that they could learn from each other and improve their own efforts through contact with one another.

The conference consisted of 15 presentations given by various mine action personnel on topics including information management, lessons learned in individual countries, socio-economic surveys, technology used in the field and victim assistance. Each panel of presentations was followed by a question and answer period during which participants could ask questions or add their comments to the presentations. Throughout the conference, it was easy to see how closely related all of the presented topics and how necessary each one is to the overall goals of mine action.

The Topics

Over the course of the three-day conference, 10 panels gave presentations on the following topics: General Program Activities, Socio-economic Impact Surveys, Mine Risk Awareness and Preventive Education Programs, Standards, Training and Coordination for Demining Operations, Lessons Learned from Humanitarian Demining Programs, Victim Assistance, Non-Governmental Organization Perspectives, Information Management Systems, Humanitarian Demining Technologies and Future Challenges.

Day One

Day One consisted of General Presentations and two other panels. The presentations progressed as follows:

• General Presentations:
  - The OAS's Mine Action Program and the support they receive from the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB)
  - The Office of Mine Action Initiatives and Partnerships.
  - The DOS Humanitarian Demining (HD) Strategic Plan
  - The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS)