Troubleshooting Afghanistan

Timothy Gusinov
Russian Army

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal

Part of the Defense and Security Studies Commons, Emergency and Disaster Management Commons, Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons, and the Peace and Conflict Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.
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 Hindu Saying

The Mine Problem

Now, when the days of Taliban’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 con­voys, 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 and civil wars; even after the cur­rent victory of the Northern Alliance, there will be many Taliban supporters remaining in the country who will try to stop international peacekeeping, relief and reconstruc­tion efforts by mining the roads.

Name any type, any country-made mine, and you will find these mines in Afghanistan. Most of them are Soviet-type landmines, and that does not necessar­ily mean Soviet made, because such mines have been manufactured in China, Egypt, Eastern Europe and some other countries as well. Their lethality may also be exaggerated. In Afghanistan’s climate, with its sharp changes from hot summers to cold winters, and its autumn rains and melting snow in spring, any mine will hardly keep its lethality for more than ten years—unless it has been purposely planted to do so. Examples would be mines planted inside a building, deep in the ground or under any other kind of protec­tion from nature and environmental factors.

During the Soviet-Afghan war, I have seen mines, which have been laid only a couple of years ago, harmlessly 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.

Mining 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 bypass 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 clearing.

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’s body to detonate it. It is im­possible to determine under what vehicle in a convoy it might happen.

Detection and Demining: The Tools

Standard mine detectors perform poorly in Afghanistan because most of the mines have plastic casings. Also, after many years of war, battlefield debris (bul­let casings, splinters, etc.) piles up around mine detector, which has been tested in Bosnia. However, during the Soviet-Afghan war, Soviet military engineers relied heavily on ancient-looking but reliable probe poles. An experienced sapper could feel even a slight anomaly in the soil’s structure even before the probe touched the buried mine. Another favorite and very effective method was using specially trained mine detection dogs. Very often, the enemy tried to fool the dog’s senses and suppress the smell of explosive by pouring some gas or diesel fuel in the mine’s nest be­fore burying it. In many cases, particu­larly in the hot season, the fuel evapo­rates inside the warm soil, creating cir­culating oily spots that are slightly visible from a certain angle and are different from those left by passing vehicles in color and density. The history of the Soviet-Afghan war shows many cases of relationships be­tween dogs and men, who, after sharing the same dangers and hardships, developed a close relationship. I know of one story of a military engineer who dragged his mine detector to safety under fire after he had been severely wounded.

Disarming and Disengaging Mines in a War Zone

... an Afghan chief, who lies
Beneath his cool pomegranate-tree.
Chicke’s sword in fierce serenade
When on the mountaineer he see
The fleer-foot Marri khan, who comes
To tell us how he hath heard of
The measured roll of English drums.
Beat at the gate of Kandalakhan.
Oscar Wilde, Ave Imperatrix

As a foot soldier or a civilian, it is strongly advised, whenever possible, not to disarm or try to extract the mines. The mines themselves may be booby-trapped by another explosive device (a simple bridge or fence wired with nails for example) or equipped with an anti­extraction mechanism. Use a small explo­sive charge on the top of the mine to eliminate it in place. If for some reason this is not possible (for example, if the mine is on a bridge or near a building) use a long rope with a wire loop or a hook to move the mine from its next fire, and then disarm it. In both cases, take cover, there might be another mine, or an additional strong explosive charge (very often an unexploded artillery shell or even an aerial bomb) under the de­tected mine, and the explosion will be much stronger than you expect. Russian military engineers have a saying: "A sapper makes only ONE mistake in a life­time!" Have in mind, there is a high pos­sibility that the places nearby that you may choose to take cover (a ditch, a stone boulder, a packed-mud wall by the road) might be purposely mined as well, and instead of providing shelter, they might turn into death traps. If a convoy or a military unit is ambushed or attacked, keep in mind, that the most likely places where demounted personnel could take positions and cover along the road on the ground, as well as possible areas of retreat, will be mined and ranged by enemy grenade launchers, mortars and recoilless weapons.

Mine Tactics

On many occasions, an enemy would lay some mines in a way that they can be easily detected and disarmed, while other mines in the same place are much better concealed and laid with much more resourcefulness. An example would be laying united mine walls of easily detect­able metal casing, surrounded by mines in plastic casings, which are much harder to detect or combining pressure-detona­ted mines with remote radio or wire­detonated mines and charges. The power of remotely and pressure-detona­tioned charges is greatly increased by putting pieces of cut thick metal, nails or splinters collected on battlefields, etc., around them or stones on top.
Home Made Mines

Despite the fact that a lot of road-corn 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 site of Molotov cocktails. Soap is greased, placed in a bottle and mixed with gas. Thrown on a vehicle, the bottle breaks, and the burning mixture of soap and gas sticks to the vehicle.

If your convoy or a military unit has to camp for the night along the road, be very careful in choosing the place for your bivouac. Because of mountainous terrain, there are only a limited number of flat and safe places for such camps, and the enemy is aware that the convoy will more likely stay in this particular place; so there is a very high possibility that the place will be mined. Pay special attention to checking for mines at the points where the convoy leaves the main road to camp alongside. Try not to use the exit from the main road that has been used by previous convoys.

Be aware that animals (usually donkeys and camels) can be used to deliver explosive charges to military bases and factories, camps, shopping areas, barracks and other public places frequently visited by troops. These tactics have been used in Kabul at the shopping area near the residential districts populated by Soviet military advisers and Afghan government officials. The animals (donkeys) were carrying some merchandise and accompanied by several freedom fighters posing as delivery people or traders. After reaching the area, they left quickly, and the charges hidden under merchandise were remotely detonated. Be aware of unattended animals with loads on their back.

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 (Ariq or Jil 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 flows and seeps on the hot concrete, making it 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 the vehicle gets stuck in a canal, the entire convoy comes to a halt. Such crossings even on considerably flat terrain and especially when surrounded by green vegetation areas—good places for ambushes—and may be mined as well. If your troops are in the area, be cautious if water flows coming into such irrigation canals especially during the hot time of day. It is usually a clear indication of hostile activity in the area. The tactic can be more difficult to cross.

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 populations 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 movement through the area. Reward them for good information by providing food, medical supplies and fuel.

Information Gathering

Local bazaars 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 that can help you to make them change. 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. But it is much better to fight him on the hot concrete, making him invisible and unreachable enemy, and this makes them especially dangerous. When Soviet units in Afghanistan were familiar with combat from their locations, drivers used to wish each other a "clear route."

So let me wish the same for American landmines and international troops on the ground in Afghanistan.

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 landmine 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 (OUTHCOM) 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 35 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 brief 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 are 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 Survey, 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 (HDD) Strategic Plan
• The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS).