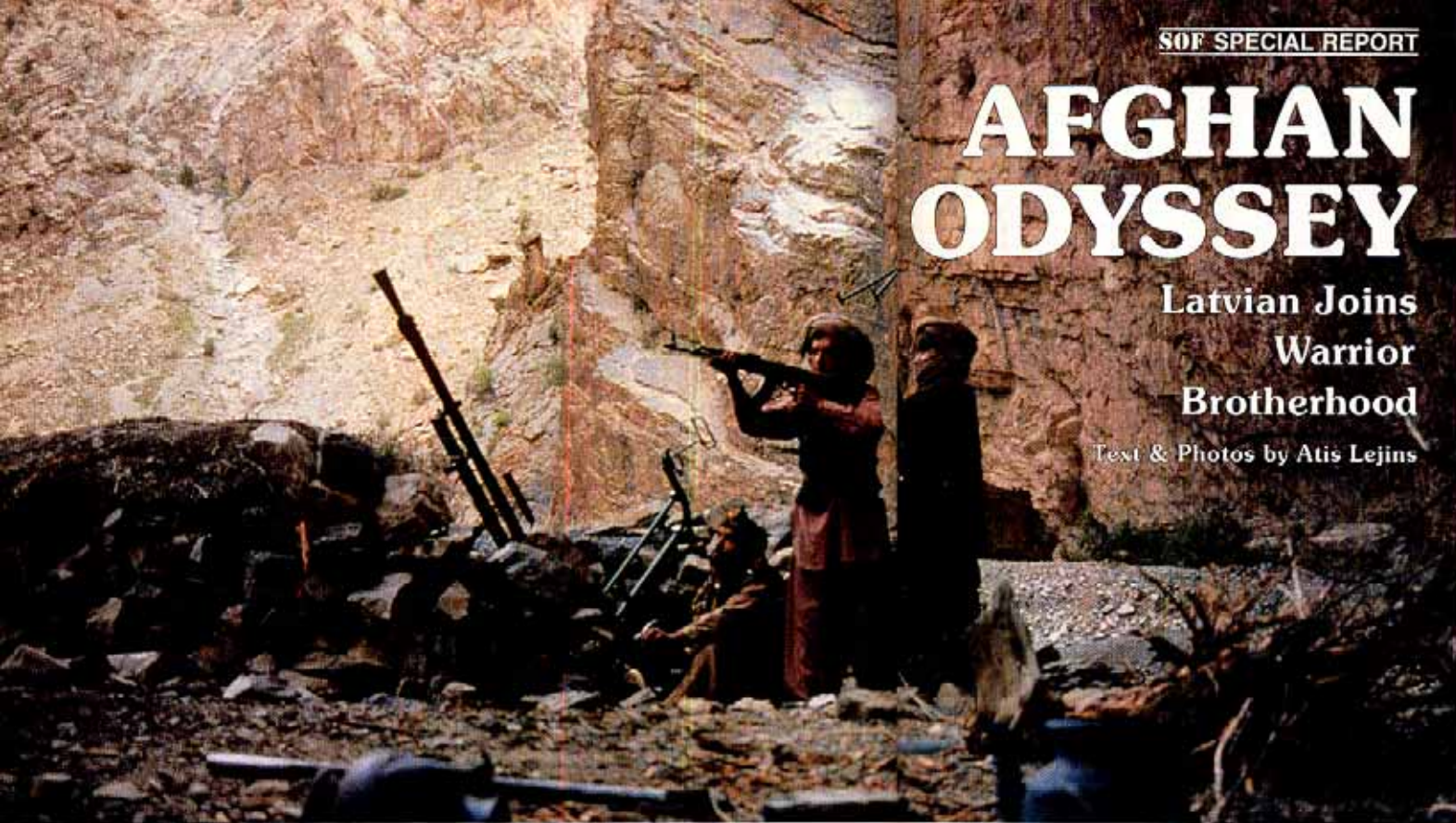


AFGHAN ODYSSEY

Latvian Joins Warrior Brotherhood

Text & Photos by Atis Lejins



flies over our heads and, with a terrific blast, smashes to the ground a good distance from us.

The chubby, short mujahid who joined us in Teri Mangal, and who had a hard time climbing up the slope now takes command. Half running, we make for the creek and for the trees and bushes which grow along its winding path.

Another big bang, a sinister rush of air above us, an explosion. Madrasol, my new friend, points a finger to the hills ahead, saying, "Dushman!" (Enemy!) He makes circles with his fingers and thumbs, and looks through them. The Russians are observing us through binoculars.

In a cluster of aspen trees, where the two ponies are hurriedly plucking green grass, I remove my glasses (no mujahid wears them), wrap my head and shoulders in the chadar and wait until our leader crosses the dry bed of another creek. It must be some 200 meters to the other side, where there is another bombed-out village. Silence. Reaching the other side, he throws rocks into the branches of fruit trees and, munching the fallen fruit, waits for us.

LATVIAN PATRIOT

Atis Lejins writes as a freelance journalist, separate from his job as an editor with the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

Lejins was born in Latvia. He has lived in the United States, serving in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and receiving an M.A. from UCLA. Living now in Stockholm, he is separated from the land of his birth physically by the Baltic and politically by the continuing Soviet subjugation of once-independent Latvia. Lejins' interest in the liberation of Afghanistan from Soviet occupation derives from his patriotic interest in the liberation of his homeland from Soviet domination.



Author Atis Lejins (left) in mujahideen garb with mujahideen commander Tabei Shirzad in Kolanagar.

BOUNCING in a pickup over flooded and rutted tracks, we finally reach the border village of Teri Mangal after a day's ride from Peshawar. It's lit up by scores of small kerosene lanterns and in the night the heavy staccato of machine guns can be heard. Tracer bullets streak toward the mountains and occasionally the hollow bang of an RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launcher punctuates the night. The mujahideen are checking the accuracy of their weapons.

Horses neigh, donkeys bray. Eastern music wails from cassette radios and everything is sunk in mud. We climb up the rickety stairs of a teahouse and turn in for the night. Moslems get up before sunrise for their first prayer.

When I finally awake, I look around the room and can't believe my eyes. The men have their hands full of weapons! On the way here they had none, only some picks and shovels. Now they're diligently clean-

ing Kalashnikovs, RPGs and a few RPD light machine guns.

We won't leave before 1500 hours, so there is plenty of time to get acquainted. I have with me 10 pages of Persian phrases and key words, while the leaders of our group between them know some 50 English words. I had no trouble communicating with the party leadership in Peshawar — all spoke good English. But what about these boys? Will they not mistake me for a spy if I tell them I'm a Latvian, if they hear that I'm from the "other" side?

I draw a map of Europe on a piece of paper and point to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, then to Moscow, then back to the Baltic countries, pressing down upon them with the palm of my hand and saying, "Shuravi" (Russians). They understand what I mean, and they know when it took place, because Hitler and Stalin are not unknown to them.

They ask, "Were there Baltic mujahid defeat meant for us. This 'touching of souls' is something I have not felt in the West. I also see something else in their eyes — the awful question — will they suffer the same fate?

"Bale" (Yes), I say, and I show seven fingers for seven years of guerrilla struggle. Then I say, "Mujahideen shahid" (martyred).

Silence. Our eyes meet, and in that flicker of a second I know that they know what defeat meant for us. This "touching of souls" is something I have not felt in the West. I also see something else in their eyes — the awful question — will they suffer the same fate?

I now say that I am a Latvian, that my uncle is shahid (deported during the first Russian occupation in 1940) and that my family too have been refugees. These mujahideen extend to me their sympathies. We have become friends, brothers.

We are climbing a steep slope. There is an easier way to get into Afghanistan, by

Mujahideen man the Ziqriat anti-aircraft gun in Surhab canyon. Ziqriat is a Chinese copy of the Soviet ZPU-1 anti-aircraft gun, which comprises a single KPV 14.5mm heavy machine gun with sights on a towed-carriage mounting.

way of a zigzag track on a tractor pulling a wagon, but my men think the fare is exorbitant, so instead we take the shortest possible path to the border.

I feel like I'm climbing the side of the Empire State Building. My lungs are working like bellows and a whole ocean of sweat is pouring off of me. When we reach the Pakistani border post a chadar (the thin blanket worn by all Afghans) is thrown over my shoulder and on top of it a Kalashnikov. Now you really can't tell me from a mujahid and I cross the border unharmed.

Opposite the Pakistani post are the ruins of the Afghan border station. The whole

area is crawling with guerrillas. Now my men are ready to avail themselves of the tractor service, and we all jump into a wagon where we mix with other armed men. We bounce down a potted incline, dodging bomb craters and hanging on for dear life to the rails of the hurtling machine.

We jump out at the first village, which is bombed, destroyed and empty. The tractor goes no farther. The landscape is stunning — mountains higher than the clouds.

Our bags are stacked on the backs of two donkeys, which trail us with the other half of our group. We tire of waiting for them and continue on our way. Our path stretches beside a creek; on its other side lie uncultivated irrigation fields. Two small Afghan ponies trot in front with huge packs on their backs, the chimcs on their harnesses jangling gently. Such peace and beauty.

Suddenly, there's an enormous bang on our right. Something heavy and powerful



Now it's my turn. Madrasol clenches my left hand and we hurry, bent over with our heads pulled in, across the mass of jumbled rocks.

Something strange curls up inside my stomach. Here there is no shelter; the terrain is as flat as a table, offering a completely unobscured view to the Russian (or Kabul?) garrison. Are there rifles powerful enough to shoot a bullet that far? Is someone peering at us through a gunsite right now? Who will the bullet strike?

Madrasol is keeping me close to his side. Only now do I fully realize that his body is shielding mine.

We're putting distance between ourselves and the garrison, moving over fields, along rows of trees and bushes that run along deserted irrigation channels. I jump into a dry ditch and my hand strikes against a child's clothes laid out on the rocky sides. A woman must have washed them, and she must have left in a very big hurry; in a poor country, clothing is not left lying around without good reason.

We're surrounded by yellow fields — wheat, not like in the West, much shorter, but wheat nonetheless. Where are the farmers? There they are, in the next bombed-out village. All have not left; some have remained, or ventured back, to eke out a living from the land. Their faces are tired and old. Sitting in a circle they watch us logging through their village.

Never have I seen such destruction. Formerly solid, two-story houses made of stone and dried mud are now complete shambles. Craters, large as elephants, gape like open wounds in the earth. I poke my head through a broken garden door and see a jumble of cross-beams and sticks in the courtyard. Still, some peasants persist in living here. Other villages are completely empty. This part of Pakia leading to Lowgar is devastated.

Twilight is fast becoming night, but we have to struggle on along the muddy path, which is getting steeper and steeper. We have to reach our first *markaz* (guerrilla

Mujahideen commander Najibullah (center, with rifle) with his men and camels in Lowgar.

center) by midnight.

One lad with six loaded Kalashnikov magazines around his chest — with the magazine in his rifle this makes 210 rounds — hands me a strong stick.

"*Teshakur*" (Thank you), I say. It isn't long before we come upon a camel caravan and I realize how grateful I really am.

As the big animals slowly pick their way down the hill, they have the right-of-way; we must slide past them off the track. The walking stick is a lifesaver as I try to keep my balance and avoid being jabbed in the eyes by the roughly hewed logs the camels are carrying.

The logs are long and heavy — how can these camels carry them? They are being taken to Pakistan. Apparently the war has not disrupted this ancient trade, but here, closer to the border, the caravan must move under cover of darkness. Will it ever end? There must be a hundred of these big brutes.

Finally they pass and we can climb back on the path. The rain has stopped, and on the horizon white lightning is still flickering, but without thunder. The path ends and we're struggling up the bed of a creek, sometimes hopping over rocks in running water.

Rocks everywhere, sharp and jagged. My chubby friend is beaming his pocket torch in front of me so that I can have some idea where I'm putting my feet. Some of the men in front also have their miniature pocket torches on, but I left mine in my bag on the donkey. Never would I have imagined that in these night marches we would be using such lights! Where are the famous Russian commandos, the dreaded *Spetsnaz*, who lie in wait along such paths and ambush unsuspecting guerrillas? Here there must be too many mujahideen for them to make an appearance.

My men climb on and on, now and then inquiring about the state of my *pai* (legs).

"*Pai khob*" (My legs are good), I lie.

Drenched in sweat and with parched mouths, we finally arrive at the *markaz* at midnight. I sit down and observe my new surroundings. We're in an underground bunker and my guerrillas are sitting around with others. Now and then a tiny sand stream pours down on my head; the roof must be covered with earth. A single kerosene lamp lights up the men's sunburnt faces — sharp, hard features that look as if they have been hewn out of granite.

Who are these people? Wherein lies their strength? They have dared to take up arms against Soviet power, sword against sword. No paperwork here, no letters of protest. If the Russians show themselves, they will be hit by a hail of lead. That's why they stay away, shooting only from a distance, throwing bombs down from the sky.

Madrasol is telling the others about Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. I can clearly hear those names. The men are listening. They are thankful for the medical aid the Swedes are shipping them, but can't understand why they don't send weapons. I'm hard put to give an answer because I really don't understand that myself. Sweden did give weapons, quietly, to Finland when the Finns were fighting for their lives in the Winter War against Russia. Checks were written out to liberation movements in Africa with no questions asked. Why not Afghanistan? An abstract concept like "neutrality" is incomprehensible to these men. Their people are dying, and they need weapons.

I am pressed to give an answer. I try to make them understand that Russia, having devoured the Baltic states, is now much closer to Sweden. Soviet submarines cruise about in Swedish waters and maybe the Swedes are afraid to give weapons to somebody at war with the Russians, their mighty neighbors.

They ask, "Did they give weapons to the Baltic mujahideen?"

"No," I reply.

We turn in for the night, packed together like sardines. The local guerrillas have left and, before I collapse into sleep, I hear the sound of their small metal whistles as they communicate with one another from their sentry posts. Walkie-talkies would be better, I muse.

When I wake up, the hut is empty. I creep outside and see the sun already climbing in the sky. And again the panorama — huge fir trees occasionally covering the slopes of mountains; jagged, bold rocks reaching for the blue sky through the flimsy clouds.

I wash in clear spring water, drink tea with the troops and inspect the camp. The commander shows me deep caves, dynamited in the stony ground, that serve as air-raid shelters. He proudly shows off his "'Ziqriat,'" a Chinese anti-aircraft gun. I take pictures. Then he gives us four of his men who will take us to the next *markaz*.

Approaching us is a pony carrying a man and two small boys. Their faces are lifeless.



I ask why. The guerrilla leading the horses stops and one of the boys raises his arm; the hand is wrapped in rags and is seeping blood. A Russian bomb, I am told, and they hurry on to Pakistan.

Today is like a walk on a Sunday. My legs don't hurt anymore, the sun is shining and the passage between the mountains and hills is easy and wide.

We join a long stream of mujahideen walking to different points in Afghanistan. I see Turkmen heading for the northern border. Their commander has lost his eye in Tadjikistan SSR, where he has led several military excursions across the Amur river.

At the first "hotel" — a very crude clay, stone and wood hut where tea, bread and rice can be bought — we run into our donkey unit. It bypassed us in the night and now, delighted, the men greet us with smiles and handshakes. This group is led by one called Sofi. A competition of sorts has sprung up between him and myself — who will beat the other to the next hotel?

We meet a caravan of five camels and one baby camel. The commander of this group, Engineer Nadzhibur, a proud and handsome man, speaks good English. He apologizes to me that he is not able to receive me properly, that his country is in such a bad state. He explains that the Russians have occupied his land and he has to drive them out. Then he asks, "Where are you from?"

"Sweden," I answer.

He thanks me for coming to his country, and then continues his trek to Pakistan for new provisions. He will be back in a month.

We spend the night in another hotel. We still have to cross the Goban mountain to reach the Surhab *markaz* on the other side.

The Goban mountain almost does me in. I explain to the men that I'm an old man; I point to myself and count up to 43 with my fingers. They laugh and take another rest for my sake. I wonder why I'm panting so much; I'm in top physical shape again. Then it comes to me — of course — the air up here is much thinner.

Mujahideen commander Tabel Shirzad (second from right) with his people in Kolangor.

We finally make it to the top, and we see small groups of refugees coming toward us. On ponies and donkeys are men, women and children; they are from Mazar-i-Sharif on the Soviet border. As we come into the Surhab canyon we see many groups traveling on foot. A little girl, wearing plastic sandals, sits on a rock; she can't go any farther.

At the entrance to the Surhab canyon there is much movement. There are several hotels here and many camels. Entering the canyon itself is almost like entering a cave; the tops of the opposite cliffs almost touch, leaving a space of only a few meters. The base is wider, with a running spring in the middle.

It would be hardly possible to drop a bomb through the crack of this canyon's "roof," but if the unlikely happened there would not be much left of the scores of mujahideen ponies and donkeys standing here. The guerrillas would be all right, though, for they have built strong stone walls along the base of the canyon.

Farther on, the canyon widens. Not much skill would be required to get a bomb in here. Pieces of bomb casings are indeed scattered about everywhere.

Sure enough, the first MiG soon appears, slowly flying over us and then back, circling. We creep under an overhang. It flies away, and we go on.

More MiGs — this time two together, circling fairly low. I'm getting a little worried. The jets fly off, but then return, and now I feel absolutely worried — the mujahideen don't have any anti-aircraft missiles.

A "Dashika" fires off a few rounds. This heavy machine gun is smaller than the Ziqriat, but with luck a bullet from it could hit a jet. It seems to scare off the planes, but pretty soon they come back. This time a Ziqriat lets go and it sounds vastly more powerful than the Dashika. The aircraft dis-

appear.

Thank you, China, for the Ziqriat, I think to myself. I am relieved, but maybe the Ziqriat should have kept quiet. The jets were not bombing and maybe they simply wanted to know where it was.

Up until now I have only seen Chinese weapons, but journalists in Peshawar say that even these supplies are financed in large part by the United States. Other weapons have been taken from the Russians.

The commander of the Ziqriat crew welcomes us, and we stay for lunch. The men smile at me and ask the same questions I heard on the way here. "We need Stingers," they say. "When is America going to give us Stingers? If America won't, why can't Sweden?" [Editor's note: For an update on Stingers and the mujahideen, see "The Sting That Kills," beginning on page 44 of this issue.]

We leave the Surhab canyon, passing about six or eight destroyed Soviet armed vehicles. This must have been done early in the war, when the Russians didn't know better than to force their way up the canyon.

At the canyon exit lies a village in ruins, and beyond that irrigation fields, fed by a spring that is clear and clean. I drink until my belly is ready to burst. Looking up I see shepherds driving sheep and goats toward the safety of the canyon. Some of the fields are under cultivation.

We go past silent, ruined villages and past villages untouched by bombs but deserted nevertheless. In some, however, there is life; not all have left for Pakistan. Two small boys on donkeys drive some cows and goats up the slope from the valley, where wheat is being harvested.

We finally reach Chiambul, a giant hill of rock rising out of the slope leading down to the irrigation fields. Mud huts line its side facing the creek and hidden behind are several caves. I sit on the roof of one of the huts, soothing my huge blisters, and wonder



Two 15-year-old mujahideen in Kolangor.



why the Russians haven't bombed this guerrilla stronghold to pieces. There can't be an easier target than this solitary rock.

Two mujahideen parties live here side by side — *Jamiat*, the party of Missoud, the famous commander in the Panjshir Valley, and "my" party. Farther on in the next village, *Herb-i-Islami* reigns supreme. People are reluctant to talk about this party and I gather that it is not too popular. Its leader is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an extreme fundamentalist.

After dinner the men pile their weapons in front of Madrasol, who writes down their identification numbers in a notebook. Here I also meet Dr. Farid, who takes care of the whole Surhab zone and who gets his medical supplies from the Swedish Committee in Peshawar. He speaks English and invites me to stay in his cave.

The bombing starts about 0600. MIGs and Tu-28 bombers are pounding away at a village

called Zerekal, less than two kilometers from Chambul in the direction of Surhab canyon. Farther to the left, up on a bare mountain slope, is another target for the jets. They are dropping cluster bombs that explode with devastating force split seconds apart, shooting flames up into the sky.

There is no anti-aircraft fire other than RPG-7 anti-tank rockets, and these are fired mostly from our position. The planes dive down with an awful noise, leaving behind them in the sky red balls of fire — flares — that are to divert any SAM-7 rockets fired at them. They release their cargoes of destruction and, climbing steeply, roar off again.

By about 1000 hours the attack peters out and I can take a much-needed bath down in the creek. There are still planes flying but I can't see them. I am protected by the aspen trees whose tops form a roof over the rushing creek.

In the afternoon comes news that two mujahideen have been killed and another

five wounded in Zerekal. I am also told that it is impossible to take me to the chief commander. He has Soviet prisoners, among whom perhaps are Bales. The situation has become too dangerous, and I will be taken to Kolangor, out of danger.

I say goodbye to Madrasol and the other men; they have to take another route, checking the party's other units and weapons. Sofi and four armed guerrillas from Surhab will take me to Kolangor. I'm bundled up in the chadar again and my camera is taken from me. Three of the guerrillas, then Sofi himself, advance ahead to check if the way is safe; this is the standard procedure, but now they seem to be extra cautious.

I am alone in a flat desert with Bazmabumad, who, like Sofi, doesn't speak a word of English. He points to tank tracks in the hard earth and says, "*Djang, jai djang*" (Big holes). Many guerrillas shudder.

Sofi appears up ahead and, at the entrance to Zarinshar, a small town, the other men

Mujahideen in Chambul.

By now it's pouring and the streets are a veritable madhath. We slosh through the town, where Sofi sends for four more men armed with RPG-7s and RPGs. The rain stops and I can see that we are approaching two low hills through which leads a pass.

Again I'm alone, now with Sofi. I want to hurry on, but he beckons to me to stay at his side. It is night when we come into the pass and he squats down, listening intently. I want to know what is happening. He points a finger to the hills and softly says, "*Dushman*."

So that's it — Russian commandos! We hurry on, silent as mice.

Sofi sees them before I do — the three shadows that spring up out of the black ground. They are extra guards he engaged in the town. One of them points ahead with his hand and says, "*Herakar*" (Forward). Apparently the way is safe, but where are

angry woman shouting and we lose no time in moving on.

We grunt gingerly along the narrow, slippery paths on top of dykes, water all around. Sofi leads me by the hand now, because once I fell flat on my face — I didn't notice the hole in front of me. I pui my feet deliberately in puddles to extinguish the fire burning under my soles from blisters that now must be as big as pillows.

I'm almost ready to regret this night maneuver, but with a sudden rush I remember everything I have read and heard about guerrillas and guerrilla warfare. Now I am getting some firsthand lessons in what it really is all about.

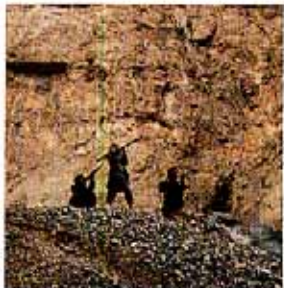
Another thought flashes through my mind now and then. What if there is a Spetsnaz unit lying in wait for us? How many of us would survive the first burst of automatic gunfire? What would it feel like to have a bullet tear through my flesh? But that is precisely why Sofi has chosen these tortuous paths, just in case.

We divide into two groups. Sofi knocks softly on a door and we enter the courtyard of a farmhouse. Tabei Shurad, Kolangor's

Continued on page 91



Mujahideen enter the vast Surhab canyon, site of a guerrilla center, or markaz.



Mujahideen inside Surhab canyon stand ready for attack from above. Soviet and Soviet-backed Afghan government forces attacked the guerrilla stronghold between the author's trips through.

This interview was conducted before the Immigration Reform Act was passed. Asked recently what effect he thinks the new law will have, Mr. Zard said, "I feel the new act gives the DHS the tools to better control the border, but it won't succeed unless businesses voluntarily comply. We believe 99 percent of the American companies are law-abiding citizens who will follow the new laws. But the DHS doesn't have the resources to monitor all businesses."

AFGHAN ODYSSEY

Continued from page 73

commander, greets us with hot tea and bread. We started walking at 1530; now it is one hour past midnight. I sleep the sleep of the dead.

At daybreak I wake again to the sounds of war. The Russians are bombing Dubandy, the guerrilla stronghold nine kilometers away. When I go outside with the commander my jaw drops in amazement — we're right next to Russian-controlled Pol-i-Alam!

The whole landscape is completely flat. The mountain range forms a girdle far in the distance around this immense plateau, and I clearly see huge helicopters rise up from Pol-i-Alam and head toward Dubandy in the hills. The air is filled with their vibration, and they stay a little over 500 meters up in the air, where RPG-7 rockets can't reach them. I count 14 helicopters in the sky at one moment. They return to Pol-i-Alam, firing big red flares from their tails before descending. They pick up a fresh load of Russian commandos and Afghan government troops, and off they go again.

"Have you used SAM-7 rockets?" I ask the commander.

"Yes, but they are worthless. We need Stingers."

We are joined by Mudjir, formerly the director of a department in a ministry. He has been tortured in prison. He now assists the commander, and he speaks good English.

Mudjir tells me that this is the first big offensive against Dubandy this year; last year there were two. Also, Surhab is being bombed. Tomorrow we'll know about Chambul. We go in for breakfast, tea and bread. No rice here.

Today, all is quiet on the Dubandy front, but Surhab is still being bombed. Helicopters returning from there fly right over our courtyard, but a more sinister group is circling an area only half a kilometer away from us on the Dubandy side. We're sitting hunched up against the outside wall of the courtyard, and I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't high time to run for cover.

"Don't worry," Mudjir says. "They won't come here. We are too many."

"But why are they circling?"

"They have a purpose."

The commander and some of his men show me the countryside. People are working in the fields, and everywhere we go we are invited in for tea.

Lunch here consists of bread, fatty broth, cucumbers and onions. In my four days here I was offered eggs twice. Once upon a time people were well-fed here, the diet was varied and good. I can see that from the farming country still being cultivated. Not everything has been destroyed, not all fields lie abandoned. Some of the houses still standing are fine, impressive structures with meter-thick walls, clean carpets, carved doors, cupboards and sparkling tea glasses filled with undiluted tea.

The enemy is selective, punishing those caught in "anti-government" activity. I am shown a blackened wheat field; last week government soldiers burned it but left the other fields unscathed. When the dragnet is put out for guerrillas, they disappear, warned by informers in the government or working for the Russians.

We cross the road connecting Pol-i-Alam with Kabul, and behind some trees and bushes I am shown a Russian armed vehicle graveyard. The Russians now clear the roadside of shot-up vehicles so that foreign dignitaries and journalists traveling along the road as guests of the regime won't see them.

I am taken to a destroyed house where a fight took place 13 days ago between the

commander's men and Vietnamese and Indian troops. One Vietnamese and two Indians — and one guerrilla — were killed. At the bottom of a dry well lies the body of an Asian, knees drawn up to the chin. But is it a Vietnamese soldier? Mongols also serve in the Soviet army.

In the evening, while we are the guests of an old and proud farmer, Sofi comes around with a grin on his face. He tells me that just after we went through the pass between the low hills, Russian tanks closed it and surrounded Zarusnar. The three mujahideen who stayed in the pass barely escaped with their skins intact. Early in the morning the tanks shelled Chambul, and Zarusnar was combed for guerrillas.

Today, I'm being taken to see a tank convoy. We have to be careful because the Russians have guards along the road and guards with dogs in every ruined house along the way. Through the scrub I can actually see one guard poking about the ruins of the former government post we passed the day before.

The tanks arrive precisely when the commander said they would, and I can't believe my eyes! When the mujahideen say hundreds of tanks, there really are hundreds of tanks. Only by "tanks" they also mean trucks, armed personnel carriers, artillery, jeeps, etc. I sit hunched on my heels for what must be an hour and the column keeps roaring by. The distance is only 350 meters, and with binoculars I can clearly see not only Afghan government troops but also Soviet soldiers with their floppy desert hats, like pancakes, poor imitations of the "digger" hats still worn by the Australian army.

Are there men of my people among them? Perhaps my nephews, old enough now for military service?

The war winds down, the clouds leave, the sun warms the lazy days up to 35 degrees, and time stands still. Even the oxen pulling the wooden plough seem slower than usual. *Yeet*, the Moslem Christmas, has come and I have nothing to do. People clean their houses, dress up in their Friday best and visit friends and relatives. The commander distributes money to the war widows.

During this time I spend many hours talking about Sweden, America, the Soviet Union and the war. Mudjir tells me that religion is the source of the mujahideen's strength, but I don't think it is the whole answer. You also have a people's cultural and historical traditions; the Afghans are a warrior nation, never before cowed by a foreign invader. They have made a terrible decision — either to drive the Russians out or die to the last Afghan. But it seems the world couldn't care less.

I love the children here. Hard work, undernourishment, the war have not smothered their inborn childish delight and inquisitiveness. Some would call the Afghans simple and naive, too straightforward and friendly, too generous in the midst

of poverty. But I see this as another well-spring of their strength. These "primitive" national characteristics have saved their souls from the effects of a long and cruel war. They have not become evil. Despite everything, they laugh and tell stories. Of course, they're not angels — they have the same faults we have. But they have awakened something good in me, something I once had but was about to lose in the stress and turmoil of my life.

It's time for me to leave. The commander is making excuses to keep me longer, but I entertain a vague hope that one of Chambul's commanders, Engineer Hamid, six feet tall with dark blond hair and light green eyes, can still take me to see Soviet prisoners. He said he would when I came back from Kolangor, but that was before the attack.

Sofi, my trusted guide, leads the way back and we arrive in Zaranushar in two hours — straight across the desert, no roundabout excursions. His friends give us food, but nobody can speak a word of English; I'll find out what happened from Dr. Farid in Chambul. Here everything is normal again — children playing in the narrow dirt streets, little girls smearing their cheeks with bright red rouge.

We take a "taxi," a beat-up Russian jeep painted bright blue, to Chambul. On the way we cross fresh, deep tank tracks in the ground. I feel worried about my new

friends; they would have defended me with their lives if necessary.

Chambul is a shambles, but the driver shows only two fingers — two *shahid*. Both Hamid and Dr. Farid have left for Peshawar. There is nothing else to do but to press on to Surhab and the Ziqriat nest. We must get there before dark.

Dusk settles as we enter the canyon. It has an eerie feeling about it now; it is much emptier. A group of mujahideen, laughing and washing grapes in the creek, invites me to tea, but we hurry on.

Night falls and my spirits are at rock bottom. There is the cliff but no tent. Wait. Yes, there it is! Shouts of joy in seeing each other again. We've come right in time for supper. But where are the others? Is there another battle brewing?

Nobody speaks English, but I gather from their answers that many bombs were dropped on Surhab; the Ziqriat position and the guerrilla center itself under the "roof" got six bombs each. One jet was downed, and four tanks and two trucks were destroyed. The tanks were blown up by mines placed out in the desert — they didn't try to enter the Surhab canyon.

The guerrillas show me the mines, heavy round ones with English markings. They say they are American and explain that you have to put one on top of another, otherwise the tank will not blow up. They lost one guerrilla, and six were wounded, including the commander. His hip was struck by a

flying stone while he was shooting at the Russian commandos up on top of the canyon. The commandos had been placed there by the helicopters, and there had been one hell of a din down in the canyon as the mujahideen fired back with everything they had. Enemy losses are unknown.

Anargul and Asadulah, my good friends, are taking eight days off to guide me back to Peshawar.

On the way, I keep seeing before me the poor farmer, face lined with age, in Kolangor; he is praying in the midst of his harvested wheat. As he sits back, one arm inadvertently reaches out for a grain ear. He gleans it and inspects the kernels. Has the unexpected rain spoiled his crop? Tiny yellow shoots can be seen creeping out of the seeds already. He and the children will stay, over the winter, while the mujahideen return to Peshawar until next spring. He must be brooding over the food supply. Then he remembers — and quickly finishes — his prayer. Picking up his fork, he goes back to work.

We're back at the border. Ziqriats and Dashikas resound in the mountains. If anything is going to happen to me it's bound to happen on this last day. But Anargul says it's all right, it's just the mujahideen practicing.

Now comes that big bang. I count until 10 before the shell explodes upon impact. It's a

long way off, and we get up and continue to walk, cool as cucumbers.

Another bang — the same procedure — and another. After the fourth shell whistles over our heads, my counting stops at three between the bang and the explosion. I see long, perpendicular columns of smoke rising less than a kilometer in front of us on the road. I look around for Anargul; he has already found a safe spot in a ditch and invites me to join him. The shells keep flying, perhaps eight more, then there is total silence. We go on.

Again I get that weird feeling in my stomach I felt on the first day, crossing the exposed dry riverbed. This, after all, is war — and in war anything can happen.

Around a bend, we meet up with Asadulah and the man carrying my bag waiting for us. He shows gravel in the skin of his hands; he barely ducked into a trench in time when the shells came down. They were being fired at the horses that had passed us returning to Pakistan.

The last thousand meters now. Caravans of loaded horses, the moon big and white, a dog barking in the distance and my feet are killing me. But I can't help worrying about those bombs and the Russian air force. The Soviet leader, Gorbachev, is on the move and wants Afghanistan out of the way.

Can such a country, in this day and age, really be conquered by Soviet armed power?

STYLING

Continued from page 88

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