

## **The Battle for Hill 3234: Last Ditch Defense in the Mountains of Afghanistan**

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*The Battle for Hill 3234 was a small, bitterly-contested mountain fight that was a near-run thing, yet part of one of the most successful operations of the Soviet-Afghan War—Operation Magistral. Indeed, this combat by an under-strength 39-man paratrooper company has gained iconic status in Russian and inspired the popular movie and computer game 9th Company. The movie is great entertainment, but hardly accurate. This is the most-accurate account of this battle in the English language.*

There is something about a defensive fight by an outnumbered small unit that stirs national pride and interest. The Greeks have Thermopylae, the Texans have the Alamo, the Soviets have the House of Pavlov, the United States has Beecher's Island, and the British have Rourke's Drift. Now the Russians have a new symbol—the Battle for Hill 3234, a small, bitterly contested mountain fight that was a near-run thing, yet part of one of the most successful operations of the Soviet-Afghan War—Operation *Magistral* [thoroughfare]. Indeed, this combat by an under-strength 39-man paratrooper company has inspired the popular movie and computer game

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*9th Company*.<sup>1</sup> The 9th Company of the 3rd Battalion, 345th Airborne Regiment fought a desperate struggle, losing six dead and 28 wounded on 7–8 January 1988. Two of the dead were decorated as Heroes of the Soviet Union and all members of the company were decorated for heroism with the Order of the Red Banner and/or the Order of the Red Star. The embattled company reportedly repulsed 10 to 12 enemy attacks by an estimated 200–400 Mujahideen.

It was a stellar effort, but it also highlights some of the basics of mountain defense. Occupying the highest terrain may provide good observation, but limits fields of fire and fragments the defensive perimeter. Radio communications may be the final determinant for a defensive position. Crew-served weapons should be sited for long-range fields of fire and effective grazing fire. The commander needs to walk the position to determine dead space and plot grenade, mortar, and artillery fires to deal with it. All weapons require alternate firing positions. Aiming stakes, as well as physical traverse and overhead limits or transverse and elevation mechanisms are essential for crew-served weapons firing at night. Close air support is not available 24/7, nor can it be, but artillery can. Properly sited field fortifications, though tough to construct in the mountains, are the defending infantryman's best friend.

## OPERATION MAGISTRAL

The Mujahideen closed the road from Gardez to Khost in 1981. This was the main line of communication (LOC) to Khost and, although there was another long, convoluted road (also blocked) to Khost, the Khost garrison was looking much like the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's (DRA) version of Dien Bien Phu. Consequently, the Khost garrison and city were primarily supplied by an air bridge.

In February 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev announced the planned withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. It was clear that the Soviets had to either force the roads open or abandon Khost—giving the Mujahideen a major victory and a city that they could then declare the capital of “Free

<sup>1</sup> Fedor Bondarchuk directed *9 Rota* [9th Company] that was released by in 2005 by Art Pictures Group. It was a box-office hit in Russia that set records for domestic ticket sales. The movie is good entertainment, but does not stick close to actual events. The actors are sweating in T-shirts in the summer heat while the fight was actually in the snow. There is a single movie survivor of the fight, when in fact there were 33. The movie unit had no radio communications whereas there actually were. The movie shows a well-prepared defense with bunkers and trenches, whereas the best the paratroopers could do on the hard frozen ground was to pile up *kladki* [walls of rock and scree]. A helicopter lands on Hill 3232 in the movie, but helicopters could actually only hover next to lower mountain slopes while wounded were passed overhead into the aircraft. The movie adds many vignettes that reflect the Afghanistan experience, but not the actual fight. The computer game was developed in Russia and is now being released in the West. It is a shooter game that allows the player to be one of several of the Soviet participants.

Afghanistan.”<sup>2</sup> The Gardez-Khost road had to be opened, but the first threat to Khost was in the south. The Mujahideen maintained a major supply and armaments complex in the caves of Zhawar on the road to the Pakistani supply depots in Miram Shah. In September 1985, the Armed Forces of the DRA had attempted to seize Zhawar and failed. In February 1986, the DRA and Soviet 40th Army launched a 57-day campaign that finally captured Zhawar. They only held it for five hours, destroyed what they could, and withdrew.<sup>3</sup>

After the campaign for the caves of Zhawar was complete, the Soviets withdrew from Khost. But, by the fall of 1987, the situation was becoming critical for the beleaguered DRA 25th Infantry Division holding Khost. Air transport could only get in at night. The Mujahideen of Jalaluddin Haqani were back in force in a rebuilt Zhawar. Local Mujahideen had also improved the defenses blocking the entry to the Gardez-Khost road. Food was running short in Khost for both the 15,000 civilians and the military garrison. Insuring Khost’s security was a primary strategic objective for the Soviet Union and DRA and the task fell on the 40th Army Commander, General-Lieutenant Boris Gromov. His first mission was seizing the Satakandow pass, which rises abruptly some 800 meters from the plains of Gardez.

Although General Gromov had some five and two-thirds divisions in the 40th Army, the bulk of the force was involved in securing the cities, airfields, garrisons, and main roads of Afghanistan. He could not pull entire units out for this operation. Instead, he pulled pieces of 40th Army and DRA units from across northern and eastern Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> Gromov mustered approximately 24,000 soldiers and a significant amount of army, division, and regimental artillery. He concentrated this force outside of Gardez beginning on 21 November 1987. From 21–27 November, while negotiations were conducted with Jalaluddin Haqani (through letters) and tribal elders, the artillery and division and regimental command posts dug in while battalion, regiment, and division commanders conducted reconnaissance and planning.<sup>5</sup> During negotiations, the Soviets and DRA advanced to seize the approaches to the Saroti Pass which controls a barely passable road some

<sup>2</sup> Boris V. Gromov, *Ogranichennyi kontigent* [Limited contingent] (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1994) pp. 298–299.

<sup>3</sup> Lester W. Grau and Ali Ahmad Jalali, ‘The Campaign for the Caves: The Battles for Zhawar in the Soviet-Afghan War’, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 14(3) (September 2001) pp. 69–92.

<sup>4</sup> Participating Soviet units included the 108th and 201st Motorized Rifle Divisions, the 103rd Airborne Division, the 56th Separate Air Assault Brigade, the 345th Separate Airborne Regiment, and the 191st Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment. The DRA units include the 8th, 11th, 12th, 214th, and 25th Infantry Divisions and the 15th Tank Brigade. A. N. Shishkov, ‘An Airborne Battalion Seizes the Satukandau Pass’. In Lester W. Grau (ed.), *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: NDU Press 1995), p. 62. General Gromov also used some ten Afghan battalions from the DRA armed police (*Sarandoy*) and secret police. His DRA counterpart for this operation was General-Lieutenant Shah Navaz Tani, the Army Chief of Staff. Gromov, 300. The DRA 37th Commando Brigade was a key part of the operation. Carey Schofield, *The Russian Elite: Inside Spetsnaz and the Airborne Forces* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993) pp. 117.

<sup>5</sup> Shishkov, p. 62.

seven kilometers to the east of the main road through the Satakandow Pass. To protect their families, many local guerrillas left the area to move their families to Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> The negotiations, which sought the unhindered passage of trucks carrying non-military peaceful cargo, failed.

On 28 November, General Gromov conducted a fake parachute assault on the Satakandow Pass (pass elevation 2800 meters). Mujahideen air-defense positions and heavy machine guns opened up on the 20 dummy paratroopers. Reconnaissance aircraft then directed aviation strikes and a four-hour artillery barrage to decimate these now-pinpointed positions. The initial ground attack on the Satakandow Pass failed, but a push through the Saroti pass succeeded. Soviet air assaults on the high ground between the two roads put air and artillery controllers where they could call for fires on both axes. On 1 December, Soviet paratroopers and Afghan commandos, under the personal command of General-Major Sergei Grachev, took the Satakandow Pass.<sup>7</sup>

Then the attack stopped. This was a political event as much as a military fight. The government of the DRA convened a *Loya Jirga* [grand council] of local tribal leaders to negotiate again for the safe passage of trucks carrying food, fuel, and other peaceful cargo. The DRA Senior Minister for Tribal Affairs, Sulayman Laeq, representing President Najibullah, presided over the two-week session with the leaders of the dominant Zadran tribe.

About all the 40th Army could do during this time was to reinforce their forward positions and land more air and artillery controllers and their security elements on the high ground between the two roads.<sup>8</sup> The protracted negotiations again failed. On 16 December, the 40th Army and Afghan forces again resumed the offensive. They advanced along the main axes through the Satakandow Pass and the road through the Saroti Pass. The air and artillery coordinators positioned on the high ground pummeled Mujahideen resistance as the force negotiated the hairpin turns and repaired the road sections that the Mujahideen had destroyed.

The Mujahideen withdrew higher up into the lightly forested mountains. They found concealment in the evergreen trees, brush, and scrub. An Afghan Commando Brigade and a Soviet battalion conducted an air assault landing near Khost and linked up with the beleaguered 25th Afghan Division. In a spectacular assault, the 345th Separate Airborne Regiment captured and destroyed the Mujahideen main base at Sarani, which included Hill 3234. The Mujahideen withdrew. Soviet engineers removed mines and obstacles.

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<sup>6</sup> General Gulzarak Zadran, Lieutenant Omar, Mawlawi Nezammudin Haqani, and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman; "The Defense against the Soviet Operation "Magistral". In Ali Ahmad Jalali, and Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: United States Marine Corps Studies, 1998) pp. 165–173.

<sup>7</sup> Gromov, 302. Grachev commanded the 103rd Airborne Division.

<sup>8</sup> Boris Gromov, 'Afganskije memuary, MAGISTRAL' [Afghanistan Memoirs, MAGISTRAL], *Krasnaya zvezda* [Red star], 30 December 1993.

On New Year's Eve, the convoys began rolling from Gardez, eventually delivering 24,000 tons of food, fuel, ammunition, and other supplies to Khost (see Figures 1 and 2).<sup>9</sup>

### THE FIGHT FOR THE SARANI BASE CAMP

In the predawn hours of 23 December, the Soviet artillery opened up on the Sarani base camp. The gunners used the 'Afghanistan method' of initiating a heavy artillery barrage at night. They opened with illumination rounds, large flares that slowly descended on individual parachutes revealing the objective area. Then the gunners fired a smoke screen to confuse enemy observation and finally pounded the objective area with high-explosive fragmentation rounds. The 345th Airborne Regiment swung into action. As the paratroopers climbed and crawled up the slopes, they could see the results of the artillery fire among the patches of snow. The 9th Company was climbing Hill 3234. Here, they could see some booted legs without a body, some smashed cooking utensils strewn about, several collapsed launching tripods for 107 mm rockets. The enemy had fled.<sup>10</sup>

The rest of the regiment was not so lucky. The 3rd Battalion Commander, his chief of staff and communication chief were wounded in stiff fighting. Captain Igor Pechorsky, the deputy battalion commander took charge.

As you might imagine, Srana [Sarani] was extremely well defended. There were between six and a dozen different [weapons] systems being used, many of them together. So, for example, there might be "Strela" and "Blowpipe" used at the same time, together with large-caliber machine-guns. The weapons emplacements were linked by a series of tunnels, along which ammunition was brought, and the area was full of natural caves which made marvelous defensive positions, naturally camouflaged. We used a new method of assault for the first time. This involved using grenades in close combat from ten to fifteen meters.<sup>11</sup>

The regiment cleared their objective, established a defense, evacuated casualties, and took stock of what they had captured. They had captured

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Russian website, 'Before the Battle', *The Truth about the 9th Company*, <http://www.pravdao9rote.ru/afgan/vysota> (accessed 3 September 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Igor Pechorsky in Schofield, 119–120. The Strela is the SA-7 shoulder-fired air defense missile that was manufactured in the Soviet Union and China. The Blowpipe is a British shoulder-fired air defense missile. The new method of assault involved copious amounts of grenades thrown just prior to the assault. The bursting radius of most Soviet hand grenades is 15–20 meters, so the assaulting forces were accepting risk from their own grenades as well as enemy fire.

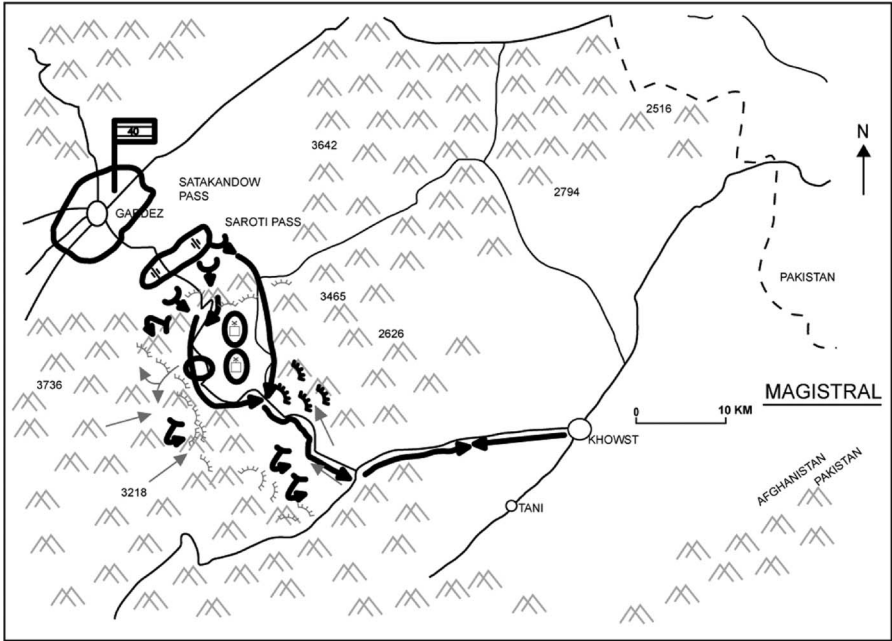


FIGURE 1 Operation Magistral.

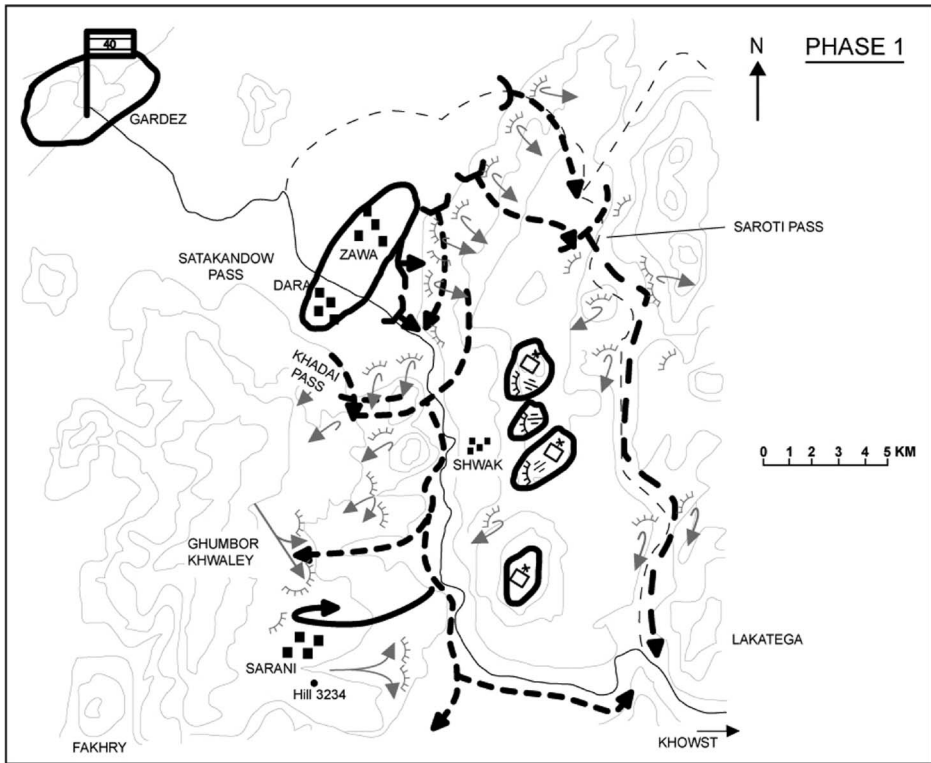


FIGURE 2 Phase One Operation Magistral.



a major logistics site that probably belonged to Jalaluddin Haqani.<sup>12</sup> There were weapons of all kinds, including two tanks, artillery pieces, machine guns, grenade launchers, and assault rifles. A large amount of ammunition was piled up in the caves. There were land mines from China, Britain, the United States, and Czechoslovakia as well as gas masks, clothing, and sleeping bags from West Germany and the United States.<sup>13</sup> Franz Klintsevich, the head of the Regiment's *Spetsprop* [special propaganda which included psychological operations and running agent networks] detachment stated:

There was a surprising amount of paperwork including plans and records, maps, photographs and a lot of passports and other documents, many of them false. . . . There were sacks and sacks full of documents, which I removed and then sifted through. The Soviet troops removed anything that might have been useful, but much of the booty, including a great deal of ammunition, simply had to be blown up. It would have been impossible to remove it all. So, for example, we took the barrels of 12.7 mm DShK machine-guns, but destroyed the rest.<sup>14</sup>

The enemy began counter-attacks. Sarani was too valuable to let it fall into Soviet hands. The 1st Battalion was under heavy attack and its 2nd Company lost so many officers that the battalion surgeon, a senior lieutenant, was in command. He was the only officer left.<sup>15</sup>

### HILL 3234

The Mujahideen base camp at Sarani was a key objective during Operation Magistral. It lay near the point where the main road turned east to Khost and where the main Mujahideen supply trace from the Shah-i Kot Valley interdicted that road. The destruction of the base was a major setback to the Mujahideen but it was also the first indicator that the Soviet force did not intend to hold the route open for an extended period of time. As the convoys were carrying supplies to Khost, the Mujahideen who had taken their families to Pakistan began to return. Major commanders, such as Jalaluddin Haqani, General Gulzarak Zadran, and Mawlawi Abdul-Rahman entered the

<sup>12</sup> There were three major logistics bases directly linked to the Mujahideen logistics facility in Miram Shah, Pakistan. They were Zhawar, Sarani, and the Shar-i Kot Valley. The Soviets were aware of Zhawar and Sarani but unaware of the ammunition storage facility overlooking the Shar-i Kot Valley. Soviet agent intelligence reported that there was a Mujahideen force of five units totaling 415 guerrillas operating out of the Shar-i Kot during Magistral. See Magistral operations map on Russian website, 'Grenade launchers and shelter', *The Truth about the 9th Company*, <http://www.pravdao9rote.ru/afgan/vysota> accessed 3 September 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Schofield, p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

area with reinforcements and set up base camps in the mountains west of the main road.<sup>16</sup> There were rumors that units of the “Black Storks”, a commando unit of the Pakistani Army, had also crossed the border by helicopter and set up close to Hill 3234 in order to retake it.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of the main supply trace from the Shah-i Kot Valley was not lost on the Soviets. Lieutenant Colonel Valeriy Vostrotin, Commander of the 345th Separate Airborne Regiment, was ordered to take and hold not only the Sarani base camp, but also the area around the main road bend and its junction with the Shar-i Kot Valley trace. It was a large area for an under-strength regiment to control, but what had worked well so far was to gain control of high ground and position air and artillery controllers with radios on that high ground. The optimum way to engage the Mujahideen was with long-range fires for which they had few counters.

After taking Sarani base camp, Lieutenant Colonel Vostrotin decided to establish a strong-point defense in a wide semi-circle around the critical point. The 3rd Battalion would have the southwest sector. The 8th and 9th Company would establish strong point defenses as would the battalion reconnaissance platoon. Each would have an artillery and air control party with it.<sup>18</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Vostrotin put his regimental command post, his artillery battalion, and his supporting tanks in the center of the semi-circle so that he could provide support to his troops in any direction. He pulled his regimental reconnaissance company back to secure his command post and become the regimental reserve (See Figure 3). His strong points were not mutually supporting due to the distances that had to be controlled and the difficulty of the terrain, but he hoped that artillery and aviation support plus the small reserve should be adequate. Up to this point, the Soviets had only encountered small groups of Mujahideen who were moving ever-deeper into the mountains away from the Soviets. The exceptions were the Mujahideen counter-attacks against the Sarani base camp. These kept the 1st and 2nd Battalions fully engaged.

The Soviet paratroopers trudged up the mountains into their positions. The 9th Company was already in position in the “eagles’ nest.” Battalion scouts held the heights of Hill 3234 some 500 meters away. Although the soldiers were conscripts, they were all tough paratroopers and graduates

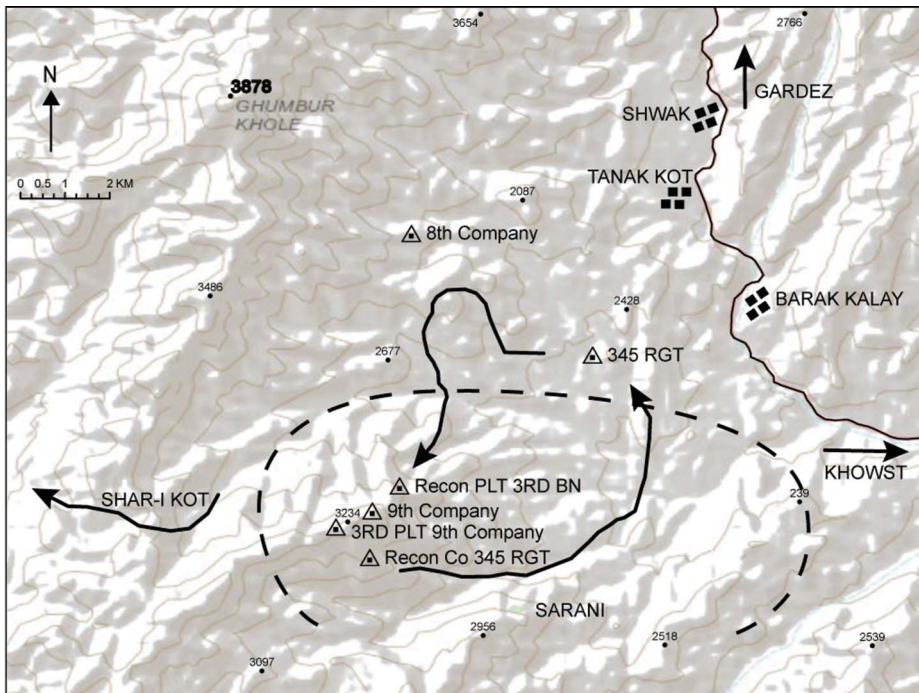
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<sup>16</sup> Zadran, pp. 171–172.

<sup>17</sup> The Black Storks reportedly are an elite Special Operations unit with some ten battalions of highly trained and motivated professional soldiers used for extraordinary missions. The unit is officially called the Special Service Group. It belongs to the Army of Pakistan and is headquartered in or near the magnificent Attock Fort. Some of the Soviet participants spoke of their attackers being dressed in black uniforms with their webgear uniformly arranged. The black uniform is reportedly one of the uniforms of the Black Storks.

<sup>18</sup> Each battalion had three parachute companies. The 1st Battalion had the 1st, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>, and the Second Battalion had the 4th, 5th, and 6th companies.





**FIGURE 3** 3rd Battalion and 345th Airborne Regiment Positions.

of five months of intense combat and mountain training at the Kostroma mountain training center, located in the Fergana Valley of the Uzbek ASSR.

The paratroopers began to dig-in to their defensive positions, although it was not so much digging in as building up. The ground was frozen and rocky. Digging a decent trench and bunker system would take too much time and much better tools or blasting charges. Instead, the paratroopers piled large rocks to make low walls (*sangars* in the local dialect, *kladki* in Russian). The problem with these low stone walls is that there is nothing but gravity holding them together and if they are hit by an exploding RPG-7 round, they collapse downhill while providing additional lethal fragments to endanger the defenders. The troops worked hard on the positions during the day and into the night. Many wrote final letters to their mothers and gave them to their officers, just in case.

The fire control party tried to register artillery fire on a nearby mountain crest. It was easy to be confused by all the different mountain crests. The artillery fire fell on the wrong crest. Fortunately, it was unoccupied, but this did not inspire confidence. The Mujahideen were also having problems with their maps. Between dawn and dusk, they fired 10–15 rockets, trying to hit the company's position below the top of Hill 3234. They all fell to the south and southeast. When the Mujahideen fired from a distance at Hill 3234, it was

impossible to tell where the shots were coming from. The folds and canyons wrapped the sound about until it finally emerged from a different location. Then it would echo about in several different directions. The paratroopers could not respond effectively since they could not determine where the fire was coming from.<sup>19</sup>

The 9th Company, up in their “eagles nest” held the heights while the engineers cleared the mines from the road and road shoulders. Senior Lieutenant Sergei Tkachyov was acting in command. The company defense was built around one tripod-mounted 12.7 mm NSV heavy machine gun, several bi-pod-mounted 7.62mm PK machine guns, and an AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher. The force also had Kalashnikov assault rifles, several SVD sniper rifles, and some rocket-propelled grenade launchers.<sup>20</sup>

On New Year’s Eve, the Third Platoon of the 9th Company moved to the top of Hill 3234, allowing the battalion scouts to move back into reserve. The Third Platoon brought the 12.7 mm NSV heavy machine gun and two PK machine guns with them. The artillery fire coordinating officer, Senior Lieutenant Ivan Babenko, and his radio operator were with them and their job was to protect them so that they could call in artillery and air strikes.<sup>21</sup> The third platoon was now some 300 meters southwest and 200 meters higher than the rest of the company. The platoon was commanded by Warrant Officer Vasily Kozlov. The second platoon was deployed north, hugging both sides of the ridge. The first platoon and scout platoon were deployed on the flank of the second platoon, also hugging both sides of the ridge.

After New Year’s, the weather took a turn for the worse. There was a heavy snowfall that continued until the morning of 4 January.<sup>22</sup> A Soviet jet flew over that evening, as the troops were eating their field rations. A shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile snaked upward toward it. The soldiers were yelling “Stinger” as the pilot jerked his plane away from the deadly projectile. The missile hit and the plane flew off toward the Bagram airfield, trailing smoke.<sup>23</sup> The troops kept watch, slept, and played cards to pass the time. There was not usually a lot of apparent enemy activity. Cigarettes

<sup>19</sup> ‘Before the Battle’, *The Truth about the 9th Company*.

<sup>20</sup> Normal TO&E strength for a Soviet airborne company was 85 personnel—79 soldiers and 6 officers. The 9th Company had 39 personnel which included 4 of its officers, an attached artillery fire control officer, and a warrant officer.

<sup>21</sup> The regimental commander postponed observance of New Years until after the operation. ‘Before the Battle’, *The Truth about the 9th Company*. This was a major holiday in the Soviet Union and celebrated with much vodka. In the movie, the troops enjoyed a drunken bacchanalia while on the mountain, drinking *samogan* [moonshine]. The actual observance was muted and sober. The commander sent up plum juice and cookies for the troops. Alcohol at altitude can have serious effects on blood pressure and turn a scratch into a serious wound.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Before the Battle’, *The Truth about the 9th Company*.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Stinger’, *The Truth about the 9th Company*. Stinger was a US-manufactured system. The British ‘Blowpipe’ and the Chinese ‘SA-7’ are also possible candidates.

were now in short supply. The troops had plenty of the mountain-winter field rations that kept them well fed, but nicotine was a problem.<sup>24</sup>

## CHRISTMAS DAY

The 7th of January dawned—Christmas Day in the Russian Orthodox calendar. Although the Soviet Union had spent decades trying to destroy or subvert the Christian faith, the troops were aware of the significance of the day. Some of their grandmothers had taken them to be baptized and to observe Christmas. Although Santa Claus had been replaced with the Soviet New Year's Day “Grandfather Frost” and the “Snow Maiden”, it was still a day with meaning and memories for many of the young soldiers. This Christmas morning, the troops were greeted with mortar and rocket fire.<sup>25</sup> The enemy was firing on a schedule that ran from morning to evening. During one 20-minute period, some 300 mortar and rocket rounds fell on the Soviet positions. Some recoilless rifles may also have fired. The first death was that of Corporal Andrei Fedotov, the radio operator for the artillery fire coordinating officer at the peak of Hill 3234. His radio was knocked out of action.<sup>26</sup> The 345th artillery responded to the enemy fire, but the primary position for directing fire was out of action and communication. The company and platoon radios were working however.

At 1530 hours, the 1st Platoon, commanded by Senior Lieutenant Viktor Gagarin (call sign Cosmonaut), was struck by over 20 rockets. This was followed by rocket launcher and recoilless rifle fire from three sides. Gagarin called for fire on the enemy firing positions he could detect. Soviet multiple rocket launcher fire silenced many of these positions. A large enemy force attacked up the hill and were stopped about 200 meters from the Soviet positions. At 1610, the enemy again attacked under heavy covering fire. They came from two directions shouting “Allah akbar”. The main attack was from the north. The attackers were reportedly wearing black uniforms with chevrons of black gold and red on their arms. They attacked as a trained unit, moving in, bounding over-watch, and coordinating their actions through hand-held radios.<sup>27</sup>

At 1735, the enemy launched another attack from three sides, this time against Senior Lieutenant Sergey Rozhkov's 2nd Platoon. Simultaneously,

<sup>24</sup> ‘On the Combat Post’, *The Truth about the 9th Company*.

<sup>25</sup> Some Russians attribute the Christmas Day attack as a deliberate provocation by Islamic forces, but this is conjecture at this point.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Shelling the Heights’, *The Truth about the 9th Company*.

<sup>27</sup> A. Oliynik, ‘Klyatva tritsati devyati’ [The Oath of the 39], *Krasnaya zvezda* [Red star], 29 October 1988; Schofield, 121; and time line from [http://www.rsva.ru/biblio/prose\\_af/afghan-soldiers/4.shtml](http://www.rsva.ru/biblio/prose_af/afghan-soldiers/4.shtml) (accessed 20 September 2010). Lieutenant Gagarin's call sign ‘Cosmonaut’ is a bit of a soldier humor. Yuri Gagarin was the most famous of the Soviet cosmonauts.

they attacked the battalion Scout Platoon, commanded by Senior Lieutenant A. Smirnov, which was located in reserve on another lower ridge line.<sup>28</sup> These attacks were driven back, but ammunition reserves were running out.

At 1910, the enemy launched their heaviest attack against the entire company. They advanced in strength under heavy machine gun and RPG fire. The paratroopers returned fire as the enemy continued to advance. Senior Lieutenant Babenko called artillery fire in on top of the 9th Company. It was a desperate act for a desperate situation. The paratroopers huddled behind their *kladki* while rockets and howitzer rounds smashed into the mountain, most of the rounds falling among the enemy. The enemy attack failed, but only just. At points, they had come within 10–15 meters of the defending paratroopers. At other points, the combatants were locked in hand-to-hand combat. The soldiers were down to a magazine or two of ammunition. There were no grenades left. Soviet radio interception picked up a message, apparently from a headquarters in Peshawar, Pakistan congratulating the enemy regimental commander for seizing the mountain top. The congratulations were premature.<sup>29</sup>

## RELIEF FORCE

It was very dark. The enemy attack stopped. Medics on both sides were busy tending to the wounded. The 9th Company acting commander, senior Lieutenant Tkachev had been requesting ammunition resupply throughout the battle. Six kilometers away at the 345th Regimental headquarters, Colonel Vostrotin was pulling together a relief force under his Political Deputy Nikolai Samusev. The 1st and 2nd Battalions were still tied up with their sectors, so the relief force would have to come from the rest of the 3rd Battalion and the Regiment. At regiment, according to Franz Klintsevich:

There were two platoons of the reconnaissance company, a platoon from the communications company, soldiers from various supply and support platoons, cooks, bottle washers, you name them, we had rounded them all up. We all knew how desperately ammunition was needed, that one zinc box containing 1120 bullets for an assault rifle or 700 for a machine gun would only last ten minutes.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Time line from [http://www.rsva.ru/biblio/prose\\_af/afghan-soldiers/4.shtml](http://www.rsva.ru/biblio/prose_af/afghan-soldiers/4.shtml) (accessed 20 September 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Time line from [http://www.rsva.ru/biblio/prose\\_af/afghan-soldiers/4.shtml](http://www.rsva.ru/biblio/prose_af/afghan-soldiers/4.shtml) (accessed 20 September 2010) and Schofield, p. 121.

<sup>30</sup> Schofield, 122–123.

At 0100 on 8 January, the make-shift reserve from regiment boarded BTRs and BMPS and began a slow, jolting ride toward the 9th Company. They drove as far as they could and then dismounted. The 3rd Battalion Scout Platoon met them and led the slow climb up the mountains. Again, according to Franz Klintsevich:

As we climbed we heard shouting, from time to time, from the 9th Company position. We knew that ammunition meant life for those guys. People cut their legs, tore their fingernails, blistered their feet and twisted their ankles on the mountains, but we kept going. One soldier, carrying a full load, fell about thirty meters down the mountainside. The commander of the communications platoon shouted "are you alive?" several times. There was no answer until we heard scuffling and the soldier's voice swearing. But he managed to climb back up the rock face again.

The situation we found when we reached the 9th Company was beyond description. 1500 [mortar rounds] and shells had been fired at these men. They had been so short of ammunition that during the last wave of the attack, the soldiers had only been able to fire single shots; they couldn't spare the ammunition to fire in bursts. By the time we arrived they each had about fifteen bullets left. If we hadn't arrived the company would have been eliminated, we knew the attack would start again at dawn. We found the wounded groaning in agony, and the dead lying where they had fallen. One man, whose head was wrapped in makeshift bandages, and whose arm was bleeding, had to prop his weapon under his arm and push the bullets in one by one when we gave him ammunition. I called for helicopters to evacuate the dead and the wounded, but their commanders refused, saying that it was too dangerous to send them. So the two reconnaissance platoons and I had to carry the wounded to the battalion medical point, a couple of kilometers across the mountains. . . .

At that moment I saw a helicopter approaching us . . . I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was not enough space for the helicopter to land properly, so it just touched down with its front wheels on the rock, the rear in the air, and the blade still rotating. The pilot and crew said that they had heard our calls for help, and had decided among themselves to come, even though they had not been given the order. They had flown along the floor of the canyon to avoid the worst of the enemy fire. . . . Igor Pechorsky and I began to load the wounded into the helicopter and then we began to load the dead bodies. . . .<sup>31</sup>

The helicopter was a Mi-8MT, so the bodies could be loaded into a side door, but it was still overhead and awkward. The same pilot returned later with a load of ammunition, ammunition that was vital for any future fighting.

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<sup>31</sup> Scholfield, pp. 123–124.

Colonel Vostrotin nominated the pilot for the Hero of the Soviet Union title and medal. However, the command group of the helicopter regiment had already formally rebuked this brave pilot for his recklessness and disobeying orders. They sent him back to the Soviet Union in disgrace.<sup>32</sup>

## AFTERMATH

The 9th Company had survived the worst of the attacks and now that they had ample ammunition, they were in much better shape to survive future assaults. There were shelling attacks during the following days, but these lacked the intensity and fervor of those on Christmas. There were no more ground attacks.<sup>33</sup> The regiment suffered another badly wounded soldier from a land mine. The 9th Company troops rebuilt their *kladki* and held. The weather turned colder and it snowed heavily again. To compound the paratroopers' misery, they were now crawling with lice. They filled empty zinc ammunition cans with snow and then boiled the soldiers' clothing while naked paratroopers tried to keep warm and kill the remaining pests.<sup>34</sup> By the end of the second week of January, the fighting was done and the Soviets held the supply and ammunition dumps. The Soviets held the road until the end of January. They destroyed or evacuated tons of captured ammunition as well as four captured tanks, ten captured BTRs, and all type of weapons. They then transferred control of the Khost Highway to the armed forces of the DRA and withdrew. Within a week, the Mujahideen once again controlled the road. Within a month, the Mujahideen were restocking their supply and ammunition dumps.<sup>35</sup>

Mountain defense is difficult since the terrain often prevents integrated fields of fire, mutually supporting fighting positions, and well-constructed foxholes and trenches. FM radio communications are dependent on line of sight. The best communications are frequently at the very top of the mountain, but this may not be the best place for defense. Usually, occupying the crest does not permit the defenders to conduct effective longer-range fires because the mountain sides have large spaces of dead zone that cannot be observed from the crest. The 9th Company had this problem and their enemy was able to approach fairly close to their positions before they could be engaged.

The paratroopers believe that they were fighting special forces soldiers from Pakistan along with some supporting Mujahideen. They cite intercepted

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<sup>32</sup> Steven J. Zaloga, *Inside the Blue Berets: A Combat History of Soviet & Russian Airborne Forces, 1930-1995*. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press 1995) p. 261.

<sup>33</sup> Zaloga, p. 261.

<sup>34</sup> Schofield citing Klintsevich, pp. 124-125.

<sup>35</sup> Zaloga, p. 261.



radio traffic and an airlift of combatants from Pakistan on board helicopters. Some claim that the enemy were in black uniforms and were well-trained soldiers. They claim that during Christmas night and during the next day, they could hear helicopters carrying the wounded back to Pakistan. If so, this would be unique. Pakistan occasionally sent advisers into Afghanistan to accompany the Mujahideen, but committing a uniformed national military force on national helicopters into a foreign country is a very different proposition — and could be construed as a deliberate provocation and escalation. Whether Pakistan committed a provocation that could result in an international crisis on the eve of the Soviet withdrawal remains conjecture. The paratroopers were hit by a seasoned, well-supplied force that was determined to overrun them. Whether the enemy were professional soldiers or rugged guerrillas, is one of the mysteries of Hill 3234.