

FORBIDDEN CROSS-BORDER VENDETTA: SPETSNAZ STRIKE INTO PAKISTAN DURING THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR

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The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy of the US Army, the Department of Defense or the US Government

Lieutenant-Colonel Babushkin wanted revenge. The Mujahideen guerrillas maintained a large base camp in his 15th Spetsnaz Brigade area of operations and the Soviet command in Kabul would not let him go get it. The Mujahideen used their border base at Krer to launch forays against him and resupply Mujahideen forces throughout northeast Afghanistan. In February 1985, the Mujahideen “Black Storks” unit had massacred one of his Spetsnaz companies. Only Captain Oleg Mart’yanov, the deputy commander, and a wounded RTO survived. Then in August 1985, Captain Bykov and 50 of his men were caught during a reconnaissance of Krer’s well-prepared forward defenses and took more casualties. The reaction of 40th Army was gutless. They forbade any combat within five kilometers of the border. They were worried that Soviet forces might stray across the Pakistan border and create an international incident. The Mujahideen crossed that border daily and no one seemed to give a damn. Now, the Soviets finally had a “tongue”—a captured Mujahideen who served in Krer and who, with some persuasion, provided good intelligence on the personnel strength, weaponry and lay-down of the defending Mujahideen regiment. The time to settle Krer was now—and those bastards in Kabul were playing international niceties. The frigid January wind howling down the Kunar valley did nothing to cool his desire for revenge.¹

Krer—Mujahideen bastion on the Kunar River

By January 1986, the Soviet-Afghan War had settled into a struggle to strangle each others logistics. The Mujahideen targeted the Soviet’s long convoy route and trucks hauling supplies from the Soviet Union to the major garrisons in Afghanistan. Since the Mujahideen depended on the rural population for food and shelter, the Soviets attacked the rural population’s villages, standing crops, orchards, granaries, animal herds, windmills and irrigation systems with bombers and artillery to drive them off their land. This ruthless approach forced over seven million (of 17 million) people in Afghanistan to become refugees—fleeing to the cities of Afghanistan or the refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. It also forced the Mujahideen to carry their own rations with them on operations. In order to stay in the fight, the Mujahideen were forced to create a logistics network of bases, dumps and caches in order to sustain their forces. Krer was a major logistics base supplying Mujahideen forces in Kunar Province and northeast

¹ Source of the Soviet information in Sergei Kozlov, “Karera: Novyy vzglyad” [Krer: A New Look], *Soldat udachi* [Soldier of Fortune], Number 7, 1997, pages 4-9 and 41. His account is based on interviews with four officer participants. The map is based on a Russian map from this article.

Afghanistan.

The Krer base complex was located on the route from Bajuar, Pakistan—a Mujahideen supply distribution point and camp. Krer was garrisoned by the Asama Ben Zaid Regiment. It was usually under-strength but would grow to some 400 for an upcoming battle.² [Soviet intelligence estimated the regiment's present-for-duty strength at 500 and misidentified it as the Abdul Vakilya Islamic Regiment]. The regiment belonged to the Sayyaf faction and was commanded by Commander Assadullah.³ It was well armed with mortars, recoilless rifles, and DShK and ZGU heavy machine guns. Krer base was located some 20 kilometers southwest of the Afghan town of Asadabad at the head of Krer canyon on the heights of Spina ridge and Spina Tsoka peak. The approach to Krer from Pakistan is easy and gradual, but the approach from the Afghanistan side is difficult. First, the broad Kunar river has to be crossed. A bare plateau, some 600 meters [1969 feet] above sea level dominates the river crossing. Then mountains rise sharply from the plateau until they reach some 2000 meters [6562 feet] above sea level along the Spina ridge. The first 1000 meters of the mountains are bare and then larch, aspen and juniper forests and alpine meadows begin and continue to the top.

The 15th Spetsnaz Brigade was headquartered in Jalalabad and commanded by LTC Babushkin.⁴ The brigade's 334th Spetsnaz Battalion was garrisoned in Asadabad and was commanded by Captain Grigori "Grisha" Bykov.⁵ The brigade's 154th Spetsnaz Battalion was garrisoned in Jalalabad and was commanded by Captain Roman "Roma" Abzalimov.⁶ The brigade drew aviation and artillery support from the 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade that was also stationed in Jalalabad. Often, the brigade was augmented by forces from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) army, *Sarandoy* (armed police) and KHAD (KGB). The brigade's primary mission was to interdict Mujahideen supplies coming in from Pakistan.

The Reconnaissance Raid

LTC Babushkin needed more information before launching a major effort against Krer,

² Asama Ben Zaid was a close companion of the Prophet Mohammad and one of the prophet's military leaders. At one point, Asama Ben Zaid fought the Byzantines.

³Commander Assadullah gave an interview to the authors. His account of the battle is in Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau, The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War, Quantico: USMC Study DM-980701, 1998, 327-330. The source for other Mujahideen information in this article is an unpublished interview conducted by Ali Jalali in the summer of 1998 with Ahamadullah Wejdani, a Mujahideen Commander from the Kahlis faction.

⁴The 15th Spetsnaz Brigade codename was the 150th Spetsnaz Brigade.

⁵The 334th Spetsnaz Battalion was also known as the 334th Separate Spetsnaz Detachment and the Asadabad battalion. Its code name was the 500th Spetsnaz Detachment or battalion.

⁶The 154th Spetsnaz Battalion was also known as the 154th Separate Spetsnaz Detachment. It's code name was the 100th Spetsnaz Detachment or battalion.

so he planned a reconnaissance raid against Krer's forward defenses. He drafted a plan to establish ambushes at the fording sites along the Kunar river close by the Krer canyon approaches. He sent this plan up through channels and the 40th Army staff in Kabul approved it. LTC Babushkin then dispatched a raiding force from the 334th Spetsnaz battalion to the ambush sites. The raiding force consisted two company command groups with about 45 men each. The two companies trudged through the winter night to the ambush sites. Once on site, they radioed their battalion Combat Control Center and reported that they had been in contact and were pursuing the fleeing enemy into Krer canyon. In fact, there had been no contact. The raiders moved onto the plateau. They climbed the heights until they discovered two forward Mujahideen posts. The company commanders talked it over and decided to raid the posts. They reorganized their force into three groups—two raiding groups and a support group that would stay on the mountain ridge to provide covering fire and support the raiding groups' withdrawals.

As the Spetsnaz neared the posts, it became obvious that one of the posts was much harder to reach due to the rugged terrain. A simultaneous raid on both sites was impossible. The company commanders conferred on the move and altered the plan. One group would attack its post first over the more accessible approach route. The second raiding group would wait for the security element in the second post to get out of their bunkers to determine what was going on at their neighboring post. The first group attacked and overran its post. As expected, the Mujahideen in the neighboring post occupied their positions, but when they could not detect a threat, they climbed out of their positions to try and see what was going on to their flank. At that moment, the second group opened up on the Mujahideen and then overran their post.

The Mujahideen posts were well laid out—by the book. There were deep bunkers and storage areas for arms, ammunition and food. They were prepared for sustained, unsupported combat and were equipped with radios and telephones. The raiders held the posts for a total of ten minutes. They grabbed enemy weapons and blew up those enemy weapons they couldn't carry. The support group fired on the remaining Mujahideen forward security posts in order to draw their fire while the raiding groups withdrew into the darkness. The raid was successful, developed good intelligence information and proved that there was a way to get around those sanctimonious meatheads in Kabul who were so nervous about border fighting. It was time to begin planning for the main event.

Getting ready for the Main Event

The information from the raid and from the Mujahideen "tongue" helped develop a picture of how Krer was defended. LTC Babushkin began planning a feint and end-run designed to destroy Krer base. The attack would go in on the afternoon and night of 30 March 1986. The 334th and 154th Spetsnaz battalions would conduct the attack. They would be supported by a platoon of 122mm D-30 howitzers and a BM-21 multiple rocket launcher from the 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade. DRA KHAD troops would accompany the raid. The staffs of the two battalions began working together on details of the plan. Grisha Bykov's 334th Spetsnaz Battalion would travel from Asadabad to the District Capital of Sarkani on armored personnel carriers. There, they would cross the river, move to the mountain, and then dismount and climb. Their personnel carriers would cover their advance as they climbed up the same northern crest where they had earlier conducted the reconnaissance raid. They would advance up this crest

while drawing Mujahideen attention to their approach. Roma Abzalimov's 154th Spetsnaz Battalion would move from Jalalabad to the ferry site on armored personnel carriers. The artillery would accompany them. The carriers and artillery would remain on the western bank. The raiders would ferry across the river and secretly advance along the southern ridge—while the Mujahideen were focused on the northern advance. In the morning, both battalions would link-up on Spina ridge near Spina Tsoka peak. They would destroy Mujahideen weapons, ammunition and fortifications as they advanced. Once they seized the ridge and linked up, they would remain for the day, destroying the base, and then withdraw under the cover of darkness.

The battalions conducted mission training, issued ammunition and inspected equipment for the raid. Unfortunately, there was an outbreak of hepatitis in the 154th Spetsnaz battalion.⁷ Even after drafting cooks, clerks and other battalion support personnel, the battalion could only muster 150 combat-effective personnel for the mission. Lieutenant Oleg Mart'yanov's 3rd company was the strongest with some 70 personnel. The 1st Company was second strongest and it was led by Lieutenant Udovichenko—the deputy company commander. The 2nd company was down to two platoons and moved with the battalion headquarters.

The Raid Begins in the North

The weather was still cold and the mountaintops were covered with snow. Commander Assadullah, the Krer commandant, could see a column of Soviet and DRA vehicles approach Sarkani in the late afternoon. They moved through the town and across the Nawabad Bridge. They headed toward his northern ridge—the main approach route into Krer base and the expected route of enemy attack. Heavy fighting broke out as the Soviets dismounted and began to attack the forward security positions under the covering fire of their armored personnel carriers. Darkness fell and fighting continued. The 334th Battalion had a local guide, but the battalion got lost in the darkness and finally ended up climbing a flank of the ridge. Getting lost was lucky since the Mujahideen concentrated murderous heavy machine gun and recoilless rifle fire against the Spetsnaz expected route of advance. The Spetsnaz approached the Mujahideen positions from the flank and systematically took them out with hand grenades. Still, both sides took heavy casualties as they slugged it out in the night.

One of the Mujahideen groups that the 334th bumped into was not from the regiment guarding Krer. Ahamadullah Wejdani and his group of 16 Mujahideen were returning from Pakistan to their base in the Pech Valley of Kunar Province. They were armed with two PK machine guns and 15 AK-47 rifles. They were carrying a large load of ammunition and a battery-operated megaphone. They had tried to cross the river earlier, but the ferry operator warned them of DRA and Soviet military activity in the area. They decided to return to Pakistan and wait for things to calm down. On the way back to Pakistan, they formed a defensive

⁷Viral hepatitis was common among Soviet forces and often incapacitated entire units. It was a product of poor field sanitation—particularly the failure of cooks to wash their hands thoroughly after defecating. During 1980, the entire 5th Motorized Rifle Division in the Western corridor of Afghanistan was rendered combat ineffective by hepatitis. See Lester W. Grau and Dr. William A. Jorgensen, "Medical Support in a Counter-Guerrilla War: Epidemiologic Lessons Learned in the Soviet-Afghan War", U.S. Army Medical Department Journal, May-June 1995.

perimeter and camped for the night. About ten PM, they heard noises that sounded like a stampede of wild hogs. They jumped to their feet and, in a flash of lightning, saw a large group of soldiers below them climbing in their direction. Ahamadullah Wejdani put his men in position to open fire on the soldiers during the next lightning flash. Moments later, the target was illuminated by lightning and they opened up on the Spetsnaz. The Spetsnaz returned fire and the Mujahideen ceased fire and withdrew up the hill. They lost their megaphone during the withdrawal. After the Mujahideen climbed some 300 meters, they settled in to repeat the process. They heard the squeal from their megaphone and realized that the Spetsnaz were in their old positions and playing with the megaphone. They opened fire on their old position and started to climb again. They systematically withdrew up the mountain, firing at the Spetsnaz and then moving out of the path of return fire.

The Raid Begins in the South

The 154th Spetsnaz Battalion left Jalalabad on the night of 29 March and arrived at the ferrycrossing site in the morning. The battalion dismounted and began to cross. The armored vehicles and artillery stayed on the western bank. The ferry was old and it took four hours to get the raiding party across. Then the group started to climb the plateau and moved toward the mountains. The second platoon leader of the 1st Company had to be replaced since he had come down with hepatitis. By nightfall, the southern raiding group started climbing the mountain. It was tough going and the group that was having the most trouble was the 20-man rear guard composed of DRA KHAD troops. They were out of shape and refused to keep up. When the rear guard commander, Lieutenant N. Zubkov, radioed his problem to the battalion commander, Captain Roma Abzalimov replied “Abandon them. Screw them.” When Zubkov relayed this to the reluctant warriors from the KHAD, they realized that being abandoned in Mujahideen territory might be unpleasant and suddenly were able to keep up with the battalion.

The terrain was rugged and the climb was tough. At several places, the only way the soldiers could climb up was by standing on each others shoulders. Thanks to the attack by the 334th Battalion, the 154th Battalion was able to climb to the top of the mountain undetected. They reached the Spina crest shortly before dawn. The company commanders and battalion commander were deciding on how to seize and occupy the area when a loudspeaker broke the early calm. The loudspeaker was waking the faithful and calling them to morning prayers. The 3rd Company immediately assaulted a Mujahideen firing position they discovered during the ascent. The battalion moved across the Spina crest, seizing well-constructed, amply-supplied Mujahideen fighting positions and digging in. By 0400 hours, the 154th Battalion controlled the Spina crest and could fire down at the Mujahideen trapped below them. They overran the bases and supply depot and captured a lot of ammunition and many Mujahideen heavy machine guns and RPGs. The 1st Company moved onto the heights where it could dominate all the approaches into the camp from Pakistan. The company began to dig in some 700 meters inside Pakistan. The Spetsnaz controlled the area. Ahamadullah Wejdani’s group was still fighting a systematic retreat but was now out of ammunition and could see the signal rockets of the Spetsnaz above them. He gathered his men and withdrew through a side canyon and headed into Pakistan.

Counterattack

Dawn broke and the winter sun warmed the troops of the 154th Battalion. Another lieutenant fell to hepatitis and had to be replaced. Around 0730 hours, 40 Mujahideen came strolling toward the 1st Company positions inside Pakistan. They were chattering and relaxed and many of them were at sling arms. When they were about 70 meters from the 1st Company, the Spetsnaz opened up on them. Some 15 fell and the rest jumped behind the shelter of some rocks. About 40 minutes later, some trucks began to move toward them from the town of Bajuar. When the 154th Battalion overran the Krer bases and supply depot earlier, Commander Assadullah had hurriedly crossed over to the Mujahideen camps in Bajuar to raise a relief force. That relief force was now back and on the trucks. The Spetsnaz called artillery fire on the Mujahideen as they began to dismount from the trucks into an assembly area. The artillery fire slowed the Mujahideen down, but the Mujahideen counterattack was beginning. Soon the Mujahideen assault fire was so thick that the Spetsnaz had to hold their assault rifles up over the rocks and fire back blindly. The Mujahideen approached closer to the Spetsnaz. Lieutenant Osobenko continued to adjust artillery but it was not falling close enough to allow the Spetsnaz to break contact. Osobenko finally called the artillery on top of his own position. After a brief radio argument with the brigade commander, the rounds slammed onto the Spetsnaz position. The surviving Spetsnaz withdrew pell-mell. The Mujahideen now controlled the high ground and were firing directly into the command post of the 154th Battalion. It was now 1045 hours and the 1st and 2nd Companies were combat ineffective. Radio calls for help from the 3rd Company went unanswered. The 334th Battalion was still below the 154th Battalion and there were an increasing number of Mujahideen moving into the gap between the two battalions. The Brigade Commander finally requested helicopter gun ship and medevac assistance—disclosing his unauthorized raid to the high command. But as the first medevac helicopter approached the 154th Battalion, it was unable to land due to the intensity of the Mujahideen fire.

Enter the Gun ships

Commander Assadullah's counterattack was going well. While some of his force overran the defending 1st Company of the 154th Battalion, the bulk of his force infiltrated through concealed approaches into Krer. His gunners occupied the high ground and fired down into the disjointed Spetsnaz. Commander Assadullah's six-man security group bumped into the command group of the 1st Company and killed a Soviet officer during the fierce AK and grenade fight. The 154th Battalion was falling apart and only air strikes and artillery could save the pieces.

Finally Soviet helicopter gun ships arrived overhead. Lt. Osobenko, who had survived the artillery strike on his own position, was now inside an adobe building with other Soviet wounded. Mujahideen were on the roof tossing F-1 hand grenades at the building doorway. LTC Babushkin directed Lt. Osobenko to adjust helicopter gunship fire. Lt. Osobenko called the helicopter flight leader and asked him them to hit various targets. Instead, the pilot answered "I am not allowed to because of the international border". Then the helicopters made a dry run over the area, but did not fire. They did this six or seven more times and then, after a half hour of dry runs, a quiet, ice-cold voice spoke over the radio "I am tail number 25 and I am ready to fire. Give me the target."

Lt. Osobenko directed the gunship runs. They first cleared the Mujahideen from the roof of the building in which Osobenko and the wounded were sheltering. Then the helicopters flew repeated low-level gun runs at the the Mujahideen. The helicopters stayed on station until darkness. The surviving Spetsnaz began dragging their dead and wounded downhill as they moved to link up with the 334th Battalion.

Policing the battlefield

The helicopter gunship strikes and artillery fire had saved the 154th Battalion from certain annihilation, but their trial was not over. Two companies of the 334th Battalion pushed up the mountain to link up with the 154th. These companies helped carry out the dead and wounded of the 154th. The nearest spot that helicopters could set down that was not controlled by the Mujahideen was on hill 1917--about ten kilometers away. This was not a regular landing zone, rather a rock ledge where a helicopter could touch down with one wheel on the ledge while ground troops threw the dead and wounded into the troop compartment. As the night passed, one of the companies of the 334th went back up the mountain to look for the dead and wounded.

The morning of the 1st of April dawned as the company pushed forward. Soviet air and artillery strikes were pounding the Krer region. Later in the morning, Soviet helicopters landed the air assault battalion of the 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade from Jalalabad. The troops of the 66th and the 154th were able to find and evacuate more Soviet dead, wounded and missing. Two patrols of the 334th strayed into Pakistan and discovered a Pakistani border security post – apparently abandoned by the Pakistani border guards with the advent of the fighting. Finally, on the morning of 2 April, the Soviets abandoned the search for their two remaining missing Soviet Spetsnaz and withdrew completely from the fight.

Aftermath

Mujahideen casualties among the Krer regiment were 33 killed and 40 wounded—about 25% of the regiment's pre-battle strength. Exact casualty figures from the Mujahideen counter-attack force are not known. Soviet casualties have not been released. Two Soviets hid in one of the supply caves after the general Soviet withdrawal and were eventually killed following a prolonged fight. The Soviets never recovered their bodies. The Mujahideen captured some 60 Soviet small arms and felt that Soviet casualties were at least 60. Indications are that they were much higher.

The Soviet 40th Army forbade any future attacks on Krer (although they attacked again in December 1987). The over-blown Soviet estimates of Mujahideen losses were over 300 casualties and they also reported the lurid, but fictitious, account of the Mujahideen execution of Commander Assadullah and his deputy for letting the base be overrun. Soviet after-action reports also incorrectly stated that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the major Islamic Party faction, personally led the fighting on 31 March.⁸

⁸Krer was garrisoned by fighters from the Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan faction.

LTC Babushkin and his officers were quickly called on the carpet for an official investigation of the cross-border fight. The colonel and his officers were waiting for a helicopter to Kabul in a Jalalabad airfield hanger. Lieutenant Osobenko approached some aviators and said “Guys, who’s the fag who flies tail number 25?”

The aviators stared back at him and LTC Tseloval’nik answered “That’s my bird. Do you have a problem with it?”

“Yeah, what’s the idea of leaving us stranded for a half-hour while you made all those dry-fire runs?”

LTC Tseloval’nik replied, “As soon as we returned to this airbase, we began reloading and refueling our aircraft. Uniformed KGB officers immediately approached me and said ‘Explain to us, Lieutenant Colonel, who gave you the right to conduct combat beyond the border?’ I looked back at them with astonishment and denied doing so. The military prosecutor who was with the KGB stated ‘There was a group across the border and you provided fire support for them.’ ‘That cannot be’, I replied. ‘Here, listen to the flight recorder tapes.’ They listened to our tapes and heard your requests and our denials over and over again.” The aviators had played this charade for a half hour, then shut off the tapes and provided fire support.

The inquiry found against LTC Babushkin and he was relieved of command and sent back to the Soviet Union. Commander Assadullah rebuilt the Krer base and it was soon supplying the Mujahideen in northeast Afghanistan again. The Pakistani Strategic Studies Review , which provided detailed coverage of the war reported in April on the Krer fighting. “Soviet forces launched air-cum-ground attack on Mujahideen base in Krer area killed 26 Mujahideen destroyed their entire armament and lost 42 men after 15 hours fighting March 26. Mujahideen killed 70 Kabul and 50 Soviet troops and lost 42 men in their bid to break Soviet-Kabul encirclement of Soran base in Krer area of Sarkani District March 28-31. Mujahideen repulsed Soviet attack after hours of occupation of their base in Krer after inflicting heavy losses and capturing three Soviet troops during 48 hours fighting March 30-31.”⁹ After all the Soviet concern about cross-border operations, the Pakistani authorities were either unaware that the Soviets had crossed their international border or did not want to make an issue of it.

Krer was a major stationary depot and had to be defended—the antithesis of guerrilla war. To hold the base, the Mujahideen built their defenses around heavy crew-served weapons and well-positioned permanent fighting positions. These protected them from Soviet aircraft and artillery fire. But Krer was not protected from well-trained Soviet light infantry who moved at night. The Mujahideen felt that Soviets did not fight well at night and would not fight at long distances from their armored personnel carriers. The Spetsnaz were the exception and they succeeded in overrunning Krer. However, since they did this in secret, they were unable to mass Soviet fire power in support until it was too late. The Spetsnaz vendetta ended badly—as uncontrolled actions by elite forces often do.

⁹Strategic Studies Review, April 1986, Islamabad, Pakistan.

