Book Review



The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan, by Lester W. Grau, Frank Cass Publishers (Portland, Oregon), 1998, 220 pages. The ISBN is 0-7146-4857-4 for a hard-back copy and 0-7146-4413-7 for a paper-back copy.

Lester W. Grau's *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* provides an outstanding look at and commentary on Soviet tactics against the mujahideen fighters from 1979 to 1989. The author uses a series of vignettes that were originally published by the Soviet's Frunze Combined Arms Staff College. The intent was to pass on both positive and negative lessons learned from that conflict to Soviet forces. Given the college's original effort and Grau's translation, editing, commentary, and incisive conclusion, this unique work enlightens Western readers about the Afghan war. Grau's work is a tool that allows leaders to learn from the Soviets' efforts and possibly use this hard-won knowledge to keep their soldiers alive on future battlefields.

The introduction sets an attention-getting stage for the vignettes. A Soviet airborne division began to land in Kabul on December 24, 1979. By December 27, airborne and Spetsnaz forces had overthrown the Afghan government and killed the president while heavy divisions executed a cross-border invasion. A pro-Soviet president was installed on December 28. The last Soviet combat units withdrew from the country on February 15, 1989. In the intervening decade, 620,000 Soviets served in Afghanistan; 13,833 of them were killed and another 469,685 were sick or wounded. The Soviets left 118 jets, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1,314 armored personnel carriers, 433 artillery pieces and mortars, 1,138 radio sets and command vehicles, 510 engineer vehicles and 11,369 trucks destroyed across Afghanistan's mountain-desert terrain.

After setting the stage, the author presents 47 vignettes that were written by junior officers based on their firsthand combat experiences against the mujahideen. The vignettes typically have four parts: the plan, a brief summary of mission preparation, the outcome, and both Frunze and Grau commentaries. A map showing key terrain features and Russian graphic-control measures accompanies each vignette. The author uses Russian map symbols because they clearly illustrate time-phased execution of the action. While the officers often developed the maps from memory and some have errors in location and terrain, the maps add significantly to the readers' understanding of the plan and its execution. Each vignette is an outstanding after-action review complete with graphics and commentary that capture key lessons learned.

Many of the vignettes discuss Soviet and mujahideen engineer operations. Mobility operations focus on route clearance, obstacle reduction, and creating "mouse-hole" entrances to buildings. While none of the vignettes discuss combined arms breaching in detail, breaching operations were part of several missions. The purpose of many missions was to find supply and arms caches and to destroy them using explosives. Soviet static positions and security outposts typically featured extensive protective obstacle systems. Both sides used mines and other obstacles to support ambushes. They blocked avenues of approach, fixed the enemy in the kill zone, and disrupted counterattacks against the ambushing unit's flanks. The mujahideen apparently were very adept at war-gaming likely reactions of Soviet vehicle drivers during ambushes and then mining those locations. The Soviets used BM-22-delivered scatterable mines as situational obstacles to disrupt withdrawing enemy forces. The combined effect of mujahideen mines on armor avenues of approach and the restricted terrain contributed to the ineffectiveness of Soviet tanks in the Soviet-Afghan war. Road mining by the mujahideen disrupted the movement of Soviet units and supplies. Although not specifically discussed, Soviet engineers apparently provided extensive survivability support to their base camps and sometimes dug in combat vehicles that occupied static blocking positions.

Lessons learned range from the basics of light and litter discipline to the correct use of indirect fires and the synchronization of mounted and dismounted elements. The value the noncommissioned officer corps provides to the U.S. Army is evident in almost every mission. In addition to the lessons in commentaries at the end of each vignette, Grau's concluding chapter addresses tactics, equipment, force structure, morale, and the effects of Soviet operations on the Afghan population. Interestingly, he states that engineers were always in demand. The book brings home the following key points concerning engineer operations:

- Effective terrain analysis is imperative.
- Obstacles must be integrated with fires to achieve their intended effect.
- Event triggers and an appropriate observation plan are essential to effectively employ situational obstacles.
- Engineers with mobility assets must be located near the front of every combat formation.

The Bear Went Over the Mountain is a valuable learning tool, especially for leaders at the battalion level and below. The vignettes are ideally suited to support a series of leader-development classes. The lessons learned are not unique to the Soviet army or to a specific geographic location. Whether the reader is trying to learn more about the Soviet-Afghan war or to prepare himself and his soldiers for future combat, this book will not disappoint.

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