

Soviets get training in Afghan war

by Clifford Gaddy

In November 1939, a year and a half before the U.S.S.R. entered World War II, the Soviets began their own "private war" by attempting to invade and occupy their neighbor, Finland, a nation with 4 million people and no allies. The results were disastrous: Instead of the anticipated two-week campaign, the Soviets were mauled by the Finns for over three months and finally had to deploy fully half of the divisions they had in the eastern U.S.S.R. and western Siberia, in order to force Finland to sign an armistice. Meanwhile, the Red Army lost 200,000 men in the process of pushing the Finnish lines back a bare 15 miles.

In the years afterward, however, there was doubtless more than one Soviet marshal who reflected that the massive losses against Finland had been worth it, reasoning that it was better for such disasters to occur in that "little war" against Finland than if the unpreparedness and incompetence displayed then had remained hidden until the Nazis invaded in 1941.

The lesson that it is worth the casualties to acquire combat experience before the "big war" starts, has dictated Soviet behavior in their nearly five-year-long war in Afghanistan. The military finds advantages in prolonging that bloodshed that override any desire for a political settlement. The Soviets are using Afghanistan not only as a base of potential operations in Iran and Pakistan, for which they have built up a hefty military infrastructure inside the country, but also for training.

The Mi-24 ("Hind") helicopter gunship, for instance, widely deployed in Afghanistan, is the main attack helicopter provided to Soviet forces facing off with NATO in Europe. Afghanistan and its population are being bloodily torn up, as the country serves as testing ground for a new generation of Soviet military commanders, those who in a global showdown with the United States will be leading the fighting—in Europe, the Far East, or the Middle East.

The best example of how the Soviet command has used the Afghanistan War to give its troops combat experience for its own sake is the case of the elite airborne forces. At any given time, not more than 10,000 of the over 105,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan are airborne. Formally, there is only one airborne division fighting in Afghanistan, the 105th

Guards Air Assault Division. But this is deceptive. The 105th Guards is merely the vehicle for rotating entire airborne regiments, from all over the Soviet Union, through combat experience in Afghanistan. Instead of the normal three regiments per division, the 105th Guards has at all times two "extra" regiments: one rotated in from the 103rd Guards Air Assault Division and one from the 104th Air Assault Division. A similar arrangement holds for the other 10 Soviet divisions in Afghanistan.

The end of the 'secret war'

After nearly five years of this process, there exists a new generation of combat-tested Soviet officers, the first since World War II, and the Soviets have recently decided to publicize this fact. In the government daily *Izvestia* on Aug. 8, Army Gen. Ivan Shkadov, the deputy defense minister in charge of cadres (personnel), declared that the postwar generation of officers can now start to be compared to the generation that fought in World War II. Noting that "the representatives of the older generation of our officers corps went through the bitter school of the Great Patriotic War, and they matured and were steeled in the fire of its cruel battles," Shkadov stressed that there are "thousands" of young commanders now starting to attain that level. Listing over a dozen such officers by name, from the rank of major-general down to lieutenant, Shkadov commended them for the "bravery and valor which they have displayed in the performance of their military and international duty." The latter phrase is the code-word for service in Afghanistan.

Already, the campaign to elevate the Afghanistan War from the status of a "secret war" to a real war has spread to the public. Newspaper coverage of a veterans' parade in the Soviet republic of Kirghizia in late July reported that Afghanistan vets were being greeted by the population as heroes on a par with the former World War II soldiers. The Soviet military daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star) has gone farthest, with a series of feature articles on the exploits of Soviet officers in Afghanistan, with large photos of those recently decorated with the highest military awards.

Until July, mention of fighting in Afghanistan was rare and oblique, even in the military press; now it is frequent and blunt. On July 31 and Aug. 2, *Izvestia* carried a two-part article on Soviet troops in the Panjshir Valley, where the Soviets began a bloody major offensive in the spring. The articles centered on the activity of mine-clearing units and helicopter crews, two categories of troops that have suffered the highest casualties in the war.

In short, the Kremlin has apparently decided that it is time for an intensive indoctrination of the Soviet population on the results of the bloody training program known as the war in Afghanistan. The population and the soldiers are being prepared for the "big war" that might well be the result of the past year's continuing Soviet push for a showdown with the West.