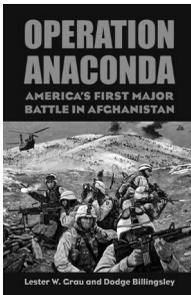


under the Turkistan Military District, not the Turkmenistan Military District. Shaving the heads of Afghan recruits is not against the Afghan culture. The 21 February 1979, demonstration in Kabul was a spontaneous public uprising, not an event staged by an American Central Intelligence Agency agent. There has never been an Anglican Church in Afghanistan near the Pakistani border. Soviet prisoners were never incarcerated in the Afghan Pul-e Charkhi Prison. The author's acceptance of the Soviets' claims that despite the brutalities they committed the Soviet soldiers "got on with the Afghan population rather well—better than the NATO soldiers who succeeded them" is incongruous. Finally, throughout the book Afghan geographic names are inaccurately transliterated from Russian into English. "Punjsher," a well-known location has been distortedly spelled as "Pandsher."

Despite the various inaccuracies, *Afghantys: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* has its own merits and is the best available source for a comprehensive account of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. No doubt the study dispels many myths of the Cold War and clarifies many unanswered questions about the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s. However, because of its exclusive focus on the Soviet side of the story, it does spawn many misrepresentations about the realities of the Afghan battleground where the Soviet-Mujahedin struggle was played out. For a more balanced view, this book should be read along with other studies such as Peter Tomsen's *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*.



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Operation Anaconda: America's First Major Battle in Afghanistan

by Lester W. Grau and Dodge Billingsley

Reviewed by Colonel Robert M. Cassidy, US Army, a military professor at the US Naval War College, served as a special assistant to the operational commander in Afghanistan in 2010-11

Les Grau and Dodge Billingsley offer keen insight in their historical account of Operation Anaconda. Both authors are eminently qualified to write such a book. Les Grau is an Afghanistan expert and has written prolifically about the Soviet-Afghan War. Dodge Billingsley is a daring combat journalist who covered the first Russian-Chechen War of 1994-96 and was on the ground in the Shar-i Kot Valley during Operation Anaconda. This book focuses on the tactical level, much like Grau's earlier work *The Bear Went over the Mountain*. This poorly planned and executed operation shines a light on the conspicuously regrettable arrogance and ignorance engendered in the Pentagon and US Central Command during the first years of the Afghan War. The detailed anatomy of the March 2002 debacle in the Shar-i Kot Valley is an enduring testimony to strategic failure of significant magnitude mainly because various officials and planners in the Pentagon did not comprehend or plan for any long-term outcome in Afghanistan or Pakistan. To be certain, in the 2001-02 period, US military thinking, doctrine, and organization were focused almost exclusively on potential adversaries. Ultimately, this book recalls the fundamental risks in engaging in wars without fully understanding

the enemy, our own capabilities, and the type of conflict we were about to enter into.

The book's beginning includes a cogent quote attributed to Field Marshal William Slim: "preparation for war is an expensive, burdensome business, yet there is one important part of it that costs little—study." This aptly sets the context for *Operation Anaconda*; there were few people in the US defense community in early 2002 who knew much about Afghanistan or about fighting irregular forces in the Hindu Kush. As a result, the Pentagon and CENTCOM failed to understand and apply the many lessons from the Soviet-Afghan War. The United States undertook the early Afghan War with too few forces and ad hoc and convoluted command and control arrangements. The leadership in the Pentagon mistakenly inferred the Soviets had failed in Afghanistan because they had committed too many forces. A large part of the explanation for the Soviets' failure, however, was that they had too few of the right type of forces, fought with the wrong tactics, and were hamstrung by a convoluted command and control. *Anaconda* was, to a degree, a metaphor for the first eight years of the war—years that saw forces employing untenable tactics encumbered by ludicrously complicated command and control arrangements. *Anaconda* violated almost every axiom that students of military art and science learn. It was an ad hoc and poorly planned fight, with terrible interservice coordination, abysmal command and control, and far too few forces. In fact, these forces essentially occupied the enemy's engagement area in a disastrously piecemeal manner.

Operation Anaconda does a good job of detailing the poor command and control interservice coordination between the Army and the US Air Force, and the almost cavalier attitude that characterized a number of the Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) teams. These self-imposed obstacles to effective military operations combined with the inexorable friction and fog of combat to make *Operation Anaconda* a close-call in terms of which side was victorious. It was really only the audacity and tenacity of some very good junior and mid-level tactical leaders that prevented the operation from becoming a debacle. The alarming and incredible insight that comes from this account is how closely many of the mistakes in the battle mirrored the blunders evident in *Operation Urgent Fury* in Grenada two decades earlier. Similar operational omissions and errors that cost lives in Grenada were repeated. It was the experience of Grenada that precipitated the US Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. Indeed, this legislation's primary purpose was to improve joint command and control and cooperation among the services, and between special and conventional forces. Yet, 16 years after Goldwater-Nichols, identical command and control blunders and fratricidal gaffes were repeated in a remote Afghan valley.

The positive side of this story is that since that forsaken battle, now almost a decade ago, the current campaign, resources, and leadership in Afghanistan are the best since the war began in October 2001. The combined operations of coalition and Afghan forces have taken away the Taliban's momentum and sustained unambiguous gains, having driven the Taliban out of key areas and safe havens in places like Helmand and Kandahar. Even still, command, control, and interoperability of the services, conventional forces, and all types of special operations

forces, have truly witnessed unprecedented effectiveness and lethality in places like the Helmand River Valley.

This reviewer needs to make two final points. One is that this book comes with an excellent documentary assembled by the authors. This video amplifies some interesting facets of the operation and is a useful supplement to the book. The second aspect is there are some factual errors in the book. An example appears in the beginning of the book where it mistakes the date for Pakistan's 1971 war with India as 1973. Another example is an error that lists the date of the 1991 Persian Gulf War to repel Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait as 1981 (on page 47). Finally, in the concluding chapter, the authors claim that until this battle, the US military had not had a major fight in more than a decade. But the October 1993 Battle of Mogadishu was a major battle of commensurate intensity resulting in a number of casualties and deaths.