

# With Rod & Reel in Afghanistan

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM  
RELEASE AS SANITIZED  
18 SEPT 95

**SECRET**  
**No Foreign Dissem**

*The development of a forthright outdoor collection methodology.*

## **Lester M. Viniar**

"Why don't you go fishing?" suggested the U.S. Army Attaché in Kabul. We considered his proposal, decided that it was a good one, and proceeded to take his advice.

We were the four-man Singapore XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX Team on a yearly trip to Afghanistan. Previous trips had acquired data on XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX from the Pakistani border west to Kabul, along the road through the Khyber Pass, Jalalabad, and the Sarobi Gorge. We were now looking for other opportunities, and we found them to the north of Kabul, in a new Soviet road project to run from the capital over the Hindu Kush to the Soviet border. The particular section under construction at the time ran from Charikar, some 40 miles north of Kabul, through the Salang Pass to Doshi, 50 miles farther as the crow flies. When completed it would eliminate 100 miles of marginal road then being used, or misused, to bring goods (including heavy equipment) down from the north.<sup>1</sup>

Inquiries at the Embassy turned up the only American who had been through the Salang Pass Project. He had gone through with a hunting party of officials from the Afghan Ministry of Public Works but had been unable to fill many of the U.S. information requirements respecting it. His

standing with the Ministry would be helpful in getting from it a permit for us to travel and fish in the area.

## First Hurdles

While waiting for the arrival of the permit we borrowed a Willys Jeepster from the Army Attaché, along with all the necessary camping equipment—tent, stove, water cans, gasoline cans, clothing, and last but not least fishing rods. When the permit finally arrived, it merely stated that we had the right to travel and fish outside of Kabul as far north as Baghlan and as far west as Bamian. That gave us plenty of territory but not necessarily access to the Salang Pass, which was off limits, with all requests by Western embassies to visit it refused. Since the permit did not specifically exempt the Pass, however, we set out the next morning just before dawn.

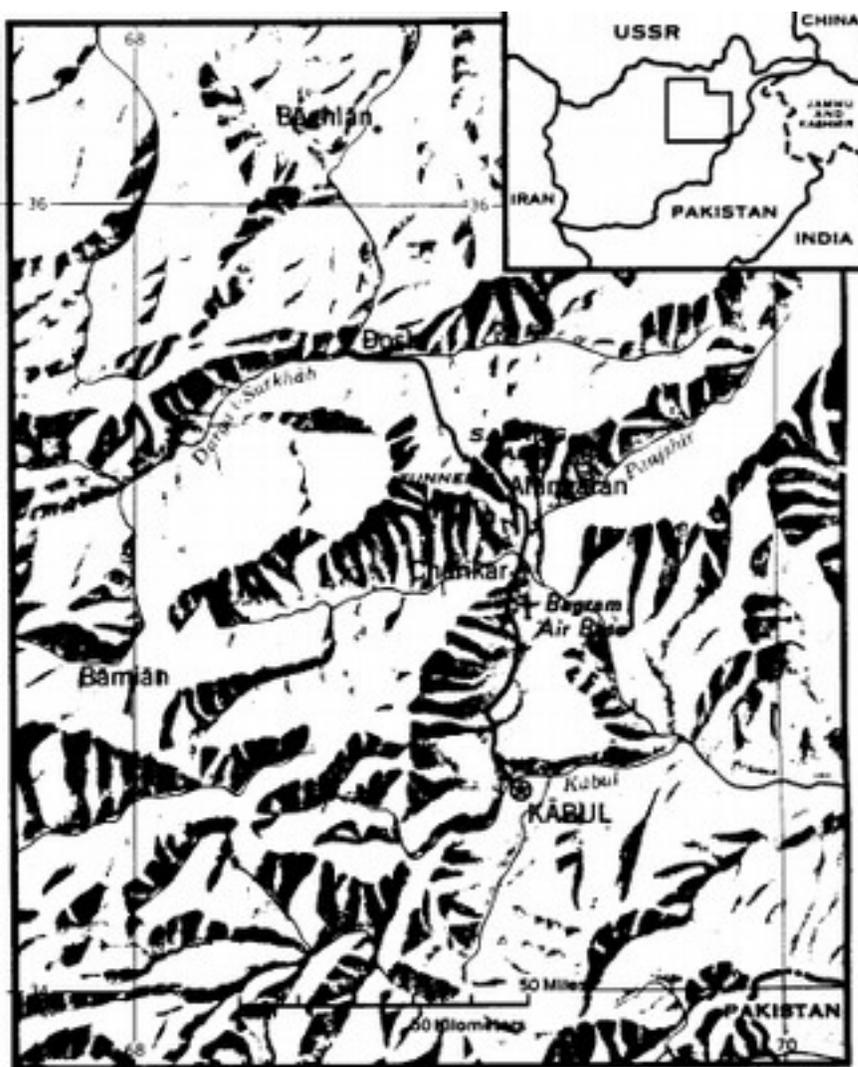
The road north to Charikar is a paved two-lane highway, in good condition. After crossing a ridge on the outskirts of Kabul it runs the entire 40 miles through a broad, shallow valley, past fertile orchards and fields of grain, as well as the Bagram Air Base.

At Charikar we entered the Salang Pass Project. Several kilometers up the road we encountered our first checkpoint—a guard hut and a bar across the road. The guard, like all the road workers, was a member of the Afghan Labor Corps. His ragged uniform, originally blue-grey, was now earth-colored from years of accumulated grime. He motioned to us to turn around and go back. Racing the engine, we flourished our pass under his nose. He looked at it with interest, but it was obvious that he couldn't read. Shaking his head from side to side in a puzzled manner, he looked up at last and said, "Engineers?" "Yes, yes," we agreed, "engineers."

The road into the Pass followed the river upward past the ancient caravanserai at Ahingaran and on through a high arid valley in a last straight stretch before beginning its hairpin turns over the Hindu Kush. While its course was in general that of the old north-south caravan trail, modern equipment and construction methods had turned it into an all-weather road. It tended to ride along the flank of the mountains high enough to avoid the spring torrents released by melting snows but low

enough to be sheltered from the high winds that sweep the exposed ridges.

At 10,000 feet, after making a number of steep curves and grinding in low gear around a rock spur, we came to another barrier across the road. We had arrived at the main construction camp. Two rather scruffy hillmen appeared from a sentry but and pointed extremely long tum-of-the-century Mausers at us. We blew the horn and waved our travel permit vigorously. The rifle barrels didn't waver. Finally one of the guards jerked his gun in the direction of a group of low stone buildings, and two of us got out of the jeep and walked toward them. No longer covering us with their rifles but still holding them ready, the guards led us into an office.



# Fish and Tea

The room was furnished with a faded burlap rug, two or three crudely made armchairs, and a desk and chair that seemed serviceable in spite of having been fashioned from random boards. The inevitable single bulb hung from a wire in the center of the room. Plaster was breaking away from the stone walls, graced by one unidentified framed photograph. A single small window set in the wall just under the roof line did not add materially to the poor lighting. A small cast-iron stove with its pipe through the roof completed the scene.

We sat down in the chairs, and in a few minutes one of the camp functionaries arrived through a door leading into the room from behind the desk. He was Russian, about 5' 10", well set up, with black curly hair and generally alert-looking Slavic features. He also had a pleasant manner which I immediately attempted to capitalize on. Even as he was entering the room, in fact, I rose and said, "Dobriy vecher," and stuck out my hand. He took it with a friendly smile.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "You are visitors! Are you from Kabul?" This was getting to be too much for my Russian, but my companion attempted to reply in his Polish-Russian (which I privately suspect is only Polish spoken with a Russian accent). Here we bogged down, and the man seemed to be cooling off a bit. We could understand most of what he said but apparently could not get through to him. I tried French to no avail, but then German made contact, and we began communicating again.

I explained that we had been given a travel permit and proceeded to show it to him. It was obvious that he could not read the Pashto. I then began an animated description of the roadbed over which we had traveled so far. He interrupted and asked, "But why are you here? " This was cue for our cover story: we had heard from Afghan friends in Kabul that the fishing in the north was unbelievably good, and we had prevailed upon them to get us a travel permit so that we could try out some of the streams.

His face lit up with a broad smile. We had found a Russian fisherman. He called for refreshments, brought his chair around from behind the desk, and opened up on the wonders of Afghan fishing. The tea arrived

in glasses, and as we sipped and chatted the atmosphere thawed completely and the guards were dismissed. For me, though, the conversation was very trying. I had not been fishing for over 20 years, and to be relaxed and expansive in a language not my own about a subject of which I knew nothing took on the aspect of a nightmare. After a few minutes, however, I noticed that he was repeating phrases I used and not introducing any himself. I then realized that his German was less fluent than mine and that I was leading the conversation.

When at last we finished the tea, I stood up and said we had to be on our way, since we wanted to get over the pass before nightfall. We shook hands again, and he accompanied us part of the way back to the jeep. He said we should have telephoned from Kabul before coming; since it was Friday, the Moslem sabbath, the engineer in charge and most of his associates had gone to Kabul. In parting, he offered to telephone ahead so we would not have trouble with the other checkpoints. This he undoubtedly did, for thereafter the barriers swung open with welcome regularity as we approached.

## **Over the Top**

Always climbing, we proceeded through the construction camp along a road that was for the most part cut into the side of the mountain. Because of avalanches and rockfalls in the area, thousands of feet of reinforced concrete snowsheds had been constructed. They had slanted roofs that followed the slope of the mountain, very similar to those found in the high passes of the European Alps.

At 12,000 feet we came suddenly to a tunnel mouth. The old caravan trail continued on to the summit 2,000 feet above, but the slope here was so steep and the possibilities for building a successful road so few that it had been decided to tunnel under, assuring an all-season road through the pass.<sup>2</sup> The tunnel was being driven from both sides simultaneously, but the two shafts had not yet met. An armed and resolute guard prevented us from entering the tunnel, so we backtracked and found the caravan trail. Shifting the jeepster into fourwheel drive, low range, we began the precipitous ascent to the summit.

It was apparent that jeeps, undoubtedly Soviet GA269's, were the only vehicles that had ever traversed the trail. A trip that would have taken perhaps 10 minutes on a reasonable road, even at that altitude, took us almost two hours. The passengers got out and climbed afoot. The road was so narrow that at each corner it was necessary to back and fill to get around. The rear end of the Jeepster hung over the edge, the nose pointed higher than 40 degrees, and the engine stalled regularly at each turn because of the altitude. All the while we were continually blinded by swirling clouds and buffeted by freezing winds, snow, and sleet.

At last we reached a relatively straight stretch of trail, and we who had been climbing alongside the Jeepster got back into it and rode the last 100 feet to the summit. There giant rocks on either side formed pillars, leaving just enough room to squeeze the Jeepster between them. The wind and supersaturated fog and clouds whistling through this cleft left a thick deposit of hoar-frost over the area, a venturi effect on a grand scale. The wind, shrieking up and down the frequency range, rocked our vehicle. It was impossible to face into it. We tried to get some pictures, then clambered aboard and headed north to Doshi through essentially the same kind, of terrain that lay behind us.

During the next two days we photographed the road in various stages of construction, important air-interdictable points along it, its bridges and culverts, and the condition of the roadbed. We also shot panoramas of open range, the approaches to villages and towns, their main streets, and any natural or artificial features that might be useful as reference points. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXX XXXXX XXXX XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX for this we developed a practical modus operandi to use in Afghanistan, one that was to prove successful in later trips through other parts of the country.

## **Inspectors from Kabul**

We found that the best time to work was during lunch break or siesta hour; and if the target was more sensitive than usual the midday hours on Friday, the sabbath, gave the most promise of success. We learned to become actors, and we used the Stanislavsky method of immersing ourselves in the role to the point where we were shocked and angry if





real Soviet engineer got out. The engineer, a short, slight person with Mongoloid features, clearly a Kazakh, harangued the watchman, then approached us. We were sitting in the Jeepster enjoying a can of beer from our icebox. The group, glowering fiercely, gathered around the Jeepster. We tried to look bland and mildly surprised.

The Kazakh engineer remonstrated with us for a while in Afghan, Pashto. When we looked puzzled he asked, "Do you understand Parsi? " We shook our heads no. I then asked—and the Afghans around the engineer hung onto every word, though they understood none of it—"Sprechen Sie deutsch? " The engineer shook his head. "Habla Vd. espafiol? " The engineer shook his head. "Parlato italiano? " The engineer shook his head. "Do you speak English?" The engineer shook his head. With an exaggerated look of "Ahal Now I have it," I asked, "Govorite po russki? " The engineer slowly—and it seemed regretfully, but perhaps my mauling of the Russian pronunciation confused him—shook his head.

Turning to the surrounding Afghans, I gave the classic mime for "What shall I do now?"—shrugged shoulders, questioning look, arms thrown wide. The Afghans roared with laughter. The engineer stamped away in a rage to the shack, a rage against his own men, I think, because they had witnessed his losing the initiative and consequent humiliation. We engaged the clutch, the Afghans moved aside still laughing, and we rode off, waving to them as they disappeared around a curve in the road. We did take the precaution of returning the way we had come—away from the telephone lines. We stopped a few miles down the road, had a meal, and later in the day continued back past the repair yard and the main encampment without incident.

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It was also determined that each Soviet project in Afghanistan began with brand-new equipment and there was no organized shifting of equipment from one project to another. It became apparent that a central planning group had estimated the manpower and equipment each project would require in order to operate autonomously and allocated it these for its exclusive use.

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# Bibliography

1 *Izvestiya* later (13 November 1988) poetically described it thus:

"After bursting out of the suburbs of Kabul, the road rushed north. It races across a valley, climbs into the mountains like a gigantic spiral and, after piercing the majestic Hindu-Kush, it again makes a smooth descent from the clouds."

2 *Izvestiya* called it a "subway in the clouds."

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Posted: May 08, 2007 08:11 AM