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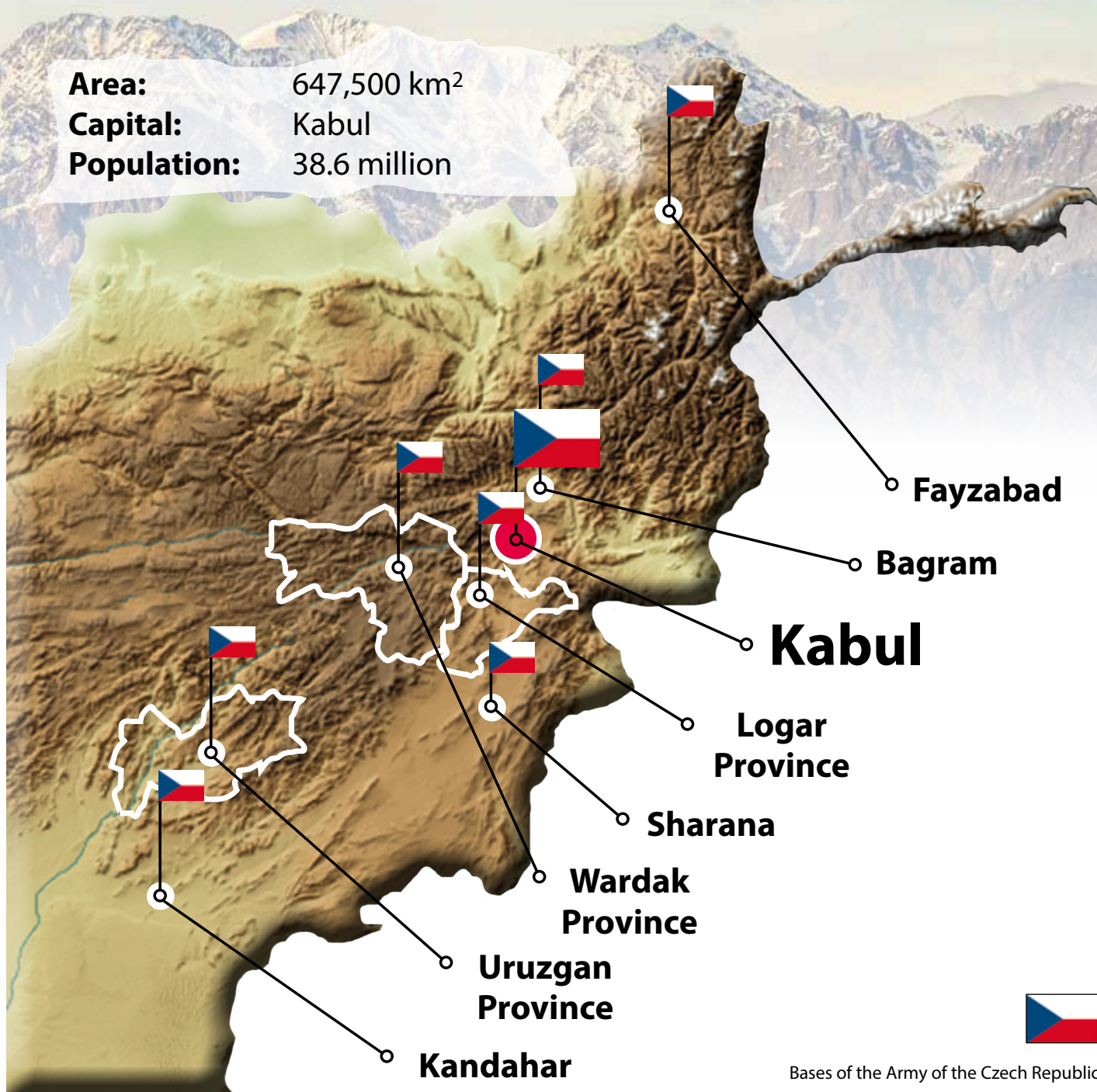
review

AFGHANISTAN
2001

2021

AFGHANISTAN

Area: 647,500 km²
Capital: Kabul
Population: 38.6 million



Bases of the Army of the Czech Republic





Dear readers,

after almost twenty years, we have closed the Afghan chapter. We legitimately ask: what was it like?

The events of the end of August this year and the Taliban takeover in the country show reality in its current, time-conditioned form. The speed of power transformation was very surprising to many. However, it is necessary to look at the Allied deployment in Afghanistan also from a broader perspective and with a certain distance. In the long run, the departure of Allied troops – including our army – was planned. There are also views that, from the point of view of NATO and world security, this mission was useless and lost. I can't agree with that. The main goal was to suppress terrorism, so that events like September 11, 2001, could never happen again. This task has been largely accomplished. And from our Czech point of view, we can state: the Afghan chapter was successful in developing the capabilities and building the prestige of our armed forces. I also dare say that thanks to the Afghan mission, the Army of the Czech Republic has matured.

In terms of training, equipment and deployment, we have gained a number of invaluable experiences. In today's army, there is basically no unit where we would not find at least a few soldiers who experienced Afghanistan on their own skin. While in the past, foreign operations were mainly the domain of combat brigades, in Afghanistan, members of a number of specialties took turns. From special forces, surgeons and paramedics, scouts, artillerymen, anti-aircraft gunners, engineers and military police, through pilots, technicians and air controllers, to logisticians, meteorologists, or the Castle Guard.

The mission in Afghanistan was also a driving force for the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic in the

modernization of technology, equipment and armaments. Years of practice have shown that if we want to keep up with our partners and at the same time have the upper hand over the enemy, we must invest in our own equipment. Today, we could no longer imagine patrolling soldiers in unprotected UAZ cars, with submachine guns model 58, and without modern, updated ballistic protection. This was exactly the reality twenty years ago.

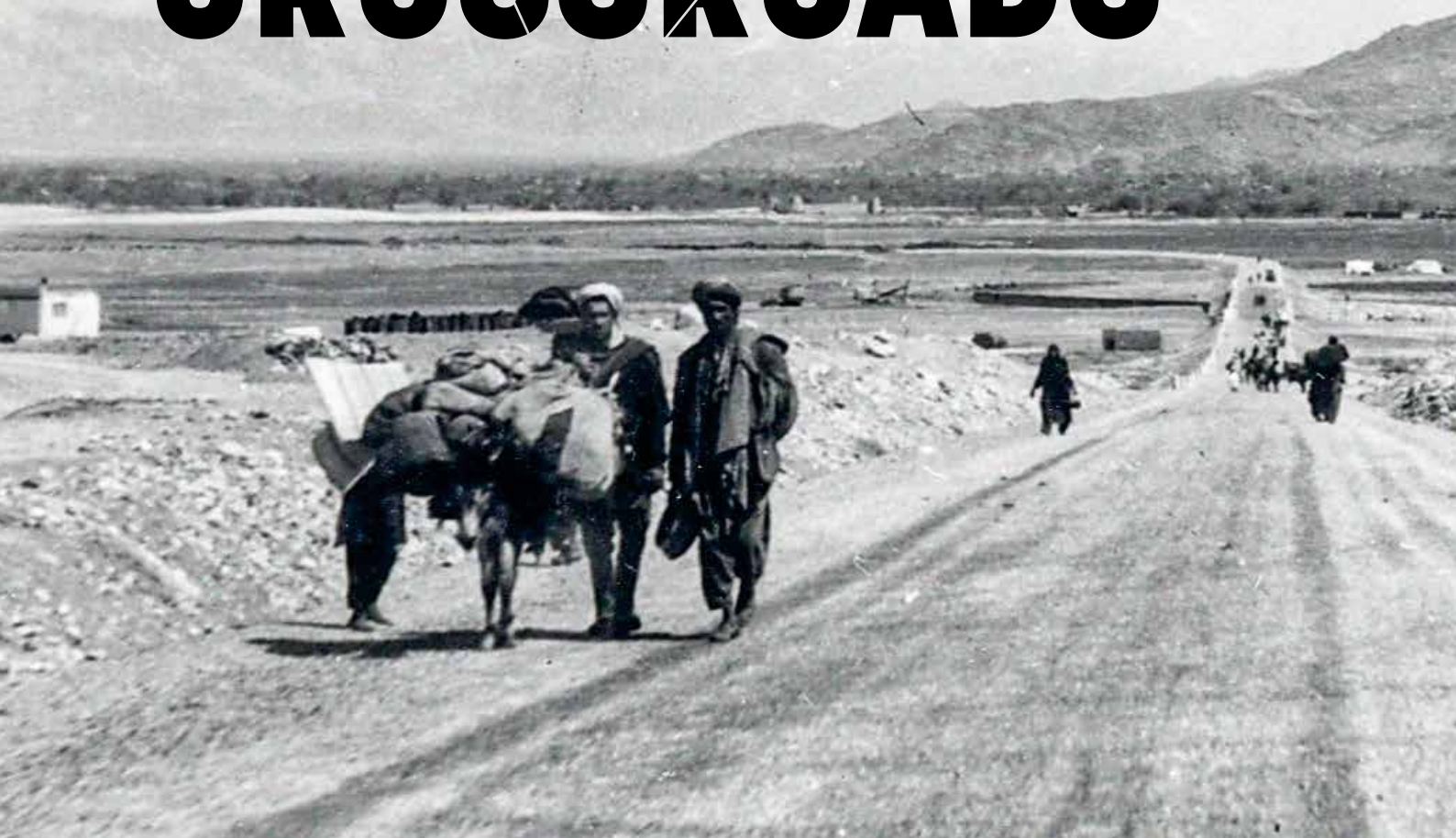
For us, it was also a mission with many "the most". The most time spent in the mission, the most logistically demanding, the most servicemen and servicewomen took part in it. And unfortunately, also the most grief-stricken. Fourteen heroes, whom we will always remember, laid down their lives there, for peace and security at home.

Over time, the dimension of the Alliance's presence has expanded and included the stabilization of this troubled country and improving living conditions there. Progress has been made in various areas. Literacy has risen, and the availability of health care, electricity and water has increased. All this was done with a significant contribution from the international community, including the Czech Republic.

For us, this chapter ends, but more await us. I believe, we will use in them everything we have learned in Afghanistan. I thank all soldiers, women and men, deployed in Afghanistan, who experienced it on their own skin. And I wish you, as well as everyone else, an interesting reading of this special issue of our departmental magazine A report.

Lubomír Metnar, Minister of Defence of the Czech Republic

THE HEART OF ASIA AT HISTORICAL CROSSROADS



Afghanistan is a hard country, far from the Western world. The protracted war conflicts of recent decades have exacerbated the deep political, economic and social divisions. The geographically fragmented area has experienced an alternation of different periods over the last hundred years. In some periods it was completely self-contained, other times it was more willing to act under foreign influences. But it always paid for its role as a strategic, buffer zone. And that is why Afghanistan regularly used to become a scene of armed conflicts and wars.

With its location in the heart of Asia, Afghanistan attracted the interest of its neighbours and world powers. The first unifier of the Pashtun tribes in the territory of

today's state was Ahmad Shah Durrani, who ruled from 1747 to 1772. In its modern form, Afghanistan declared independence in 1919. The country was internationally recognized.

In the 19th century, Great Britain and Russia had their own plans for the territory, competing for influence over the whole of Central Asia. The British tried to control

The country has never overcome poverty and is still one of the least developed countries in the world.



Afghan roads more than half a century ago. This picture is from the 1960s. In many cases, the situation has not changed to this day.

the area under the wall of the Hindu Kush mountains, and the country was also for some time their dependent territory. Until 1919, the British claimed the right to control Afghan foreign policy. However, they never conquered it permanently. In dominating the country, they made mistakes, which the Soviets repeated at the end of the 20th century: they did not gain enough support from tribal chiefs, Afghans supported by them acted hard with their local enemies, and it was very difficult to find a suitable ruler of the country. Part of the Afghan identity was

the country defence against foreign armies; Afghans have been proud of being able to stand up to them.

The country has never overcome poverty and is still one of the least developed countries in the world. Modernization efforts often were met with radical religious, ideological resistance. The traditional tribal arrangement of the population, and the related historical absence of a functioning central government, also played a role. The infrastructure is in very poor condition. For an ordinary Afghan, life in his country was and remains extremely difficult.

A difficult journey forward

In the 1920s, the country embarked on a path of partial openness. Amanullah Khan (1892–1960) between 1919 and 1926 ruled as amir and from 1926 to 1929 as king. He reduced land taxes, supported agriculture, and sought to build railways. His reforms brought the possibility of private land ownership. He also founded schools where Afghans learned foreign languages, science or literature. Afghan sports teams participated in international competitions. However, his reform efforts began to meet with resistance, especially in rural areas. The rebels did not hesitate to reach for their weapons. At the end, after a period of internal political chaos, accompanied by armed conflict, Amanullah Khan went into Italian exile.

King Muhammad Zahir Shah (1914–2007) came to power in 1933 and ruled until 1973. At the beginning of his long era, Afghans sought economic independence. They decided to limit foreign influence on business life in the country, but industrial development proceeded very slowly. However, the import of foreign goods did not stop completely. In the 1930s, Afghanistan also established diplomatic relations with the USA.

During World War II, the country remained neutral. After the war, Afghanistan joined the so-called non-aligned movement. Anti-colonial agitation developed. In spite of that, the country was affected by US-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War. American investment replaced former British investment in some areas, but the Soviets also wanted to participate. Already in the 1950s, Soviet military instructors and Soviet weapons entered the country; as part of the first five-year plan of building a modern infrastructure, from 1956 to 1961.

Thanks to the help of the USSR and Western countries, Afghan secondary and tertiary education developed. Americans sought to promote lower-level education, so there was an increase in the number of children in schools after World War II. However, apart from Afghan capital city Kabul, the girls



One of the main problems has been and remains the education of the Afghan population. School teaching takes place in various ways.

encountered barriers everywhere. Economic development was slow. The infrastructure for electricity production was mostly located only around Kabul. In fact, in the countryside, outside the capital, there was no electricity, no sewerage, no paved roads. The main source of income for farmers remained the cultivation of poppies for the production of opium. In 1953, the cousin of the then King Mohammed

the elite. Many students then turned to radical political or religious movements, Marxism, Maoism or Islamism. In 1965, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was formed. At the same time also Islamist opposition began to unite. And this was the very background from which later faith fighters emerged from, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar or Ahmad Shah Massoud.

It all resulted in the overthrow of King Zahir on July 17, 1973. He fled abroad and Afghanistan became a republic. The former Prime Minister Daoud took over the presidency. However, he was unable to restrict the activity of left-wing organizations, and so he himself was overthrown in a coup carried out on April 27, 1978 by communist and Marxist military officers. A pro-Soviet regime was in being.

The period of the 1960s was one of the peaks of the liberal era, especially in the capital Kabul. The position of women and the chances of their self-realization improved.

Daoud Khan (1909–1978) became prime minister. He allowed the women to go public without a veil, which aroused opposition from tribal officials. At that time, Daoud was still able to overcome their resistance. He also enforced a land tax in the traditional centre of the Pashtun tribes, again contrary to a long tradition. The following decade, the 1960s, brought new social tensions: young people left for Kabul, the country's social centre, but looked critically at members of

The period of the 1960s was one of the peaks of the liberal era, especially in the capital Kabul. The position of women and the chances of their self-realization improved. Some Western journalists predicted that Afghanistan would become a regional centre of trade and tourism. However, Soviet influence in the country was strengthening and social differences between the population, including the army, were growing.

Under the Soviet flag

After internal political struggles, Hafizullah Amin (1929–1979) seized power. He realized that his government would not be able to do without Soviet help, and Moscow began to calculate with the fact that it would have to intervene militarily. In his book, *History of Afghanistan* (NLN 2006), author Jan Marek states that the legal justification for the invasion of Afghanistan was an agreement between both countries on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation. At that time the head of the communist government was Babrak Karmal (1929–1996), who asked the Soviets for armed help. In December 1979, Moscow sent the so-called "limited contingent" to Afghanistan, which, however, included both tank units and armoured personnel carriers, as well as aircraft and helicopters. It seemed that Moscow finally

fulfilled the old tsarist dream: to control Afghanistan militarily.

The situation in the country was dramatized. The government in Kabul was unable to enforce its new power throughout Afghanistan. Karmal was unsuccessful in gaining the favour of the people. The introduction of land reform, or expropriation of land, was an impulse for tribal chiefs and their families to leave the country. Above all, there were the Pashtuns in particular who fled abroad. Neighbouring Pakistan set up many refugee camps on its territory, but also provided support to armed Mujahideen groups. The resistance of the inhabitants was interpreted as a fight for the faith (jihad), actually it was directed against the presence of unbelievers, ie Soviet troops. However, even the opponents of the Soviets themselves interpreted Islam differently. There was a typical tribal jealousy, differences between Shiites and Sunnis, etc.

The brutal war of the Mujahideen, with both Soviet troops and government forces, began in the early 1980s. The Soviets could not control the whole Afghanistan, especially the countryside, both militarily or politically, nor could they benefit sufficiently from air superiority. At the same time, their troops acted very brutally towards the civilian population. Many children were killed or injured after landmine explosions.

The war aroused a negative international response, and resistance groups using guerrilla tactics were able to take advantage



Afghan society is a community whose axis is religion – Islam. And it is also a society with strong male dominance.



Kabul in the second half of the 1960s.

of it. Aid from abroad gradually grew, from the USA or Saudi Arabia (Mujahideen, for example, could use Stinger anti-aircraft missiles). The situation showed that the only way out could be through diplomatic negotiations. When Mikhail Gorbachev became head of the USSR in 1985, Moscow began looking for a diplomatic solution. Karmal's resignation from the highest party function in 1986 was also to help resolve the overall situation. His successor, Mohammad Najibullah (1947-1996), pursued a policy of national reconciliation. Generally, the regime sought liberalization.

International talks on the settlement of the Afghan conflict took place in Geneva. Apart from Afghanistan, the negotiations under the auspices of the UN were also attended by Pakistan, the USSR and the USA. Finally, in 1988, agreements were reached. They specified that the USSR would withdraw armed forces within



It's beautiful to sit, drink tea and talk. Even in the 20th century, the Afghan world reflects elements of the past.

nine months. The departure of Soviet troops was completed in mid-February 1989. The last Soviet commander who left Afghanistan was Boris Gromov.

The conflict bill was high. From 1979, a total of 750,000 Soviet military personnel served in Afghanistan. Figures for human casualties vary: over 13,000 Soviet soldiers were killed, other sources cite 15,000. The actual numbers can be much higher. For the Soviet Union this was a military, geopolitical and economic catastrophe, which underscored its weakening at the end of the Cold War. For Afghanistan, the war meant internal disintegration, which continued in the following years. The country was destroyed, people became impoverished, many government officials and educated people were either killed or fled the country. Overall estimates of the number of Afghan victims of the war start at hundreds of thousands of deaths.

The Taliban are coming

After the departure of Soviet troops, Najibullah's position continued to weaken. In 1992, the Mujahideen conquered Kabul. However, quarrels grew even between the victorious Mujahideen, the country was fragmented, and real power was held by individual local military commanders. Conflicts arose between the numerically strong ethnic groups in Afghanistan: the Pashtun elites controlling Kabul on one side and the Tajik-Uzbek groups on the other.

The conflict bill was high. For the Soviet Union this was a military, geopolitical and economic catastrophe. For Afghanistan, the war meant internal disintegration, which continued.

The radical Sunni Taliban quickly became a major military and political force. It was originally a small group, but its strength was growing – young men from Afghanistan and Pakistan joined the movement, as they saw it as the only chance for the future. At first, the Taliban seemed to bring some form of law and order, but hand in hand with that, the strictest rules of Orthodox Islam were enforced. The Taliban finally occupied Kabul, and its leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar (1959-2013), became the de facto ruler of the country after 1996. The movement established an extremely repressive regime.

The Taliban isolated the country from the world, the position of women in society was changed. It was not just about restricting access to education, work or health care – a wave of violence against them began, pushing women out of public life. Some families preferred to send their daughters

abroad. Public executions or stoning were also part of the Taliban regime. Ordinary Afghans began to experience another difficult and dangerous period.

The practices of the Taliban regime aroused opposition around the world. The situation culminated in 2001, after 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington. The Taliban granted a refuge to the al-Qaeda terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. This started another war in the country. Although the Taliban resigned at the end of 2001, the country was further divided and lived in turmoil.

By Petr Janoušek

The author is a historian of MHI Prague.

The photos for this article were taken by Ivo Dostál, a former diplomat who worked in Afghanistan in the second half of the 1960s as a cultural attaché at the Czechoslovak Embassy. Dostál's photographic collection is now deposited at the Military History Institute Prague.

2001–2021

TWENTY YEARS IN FIGHTING THE TALIBAN

The attacks of September 11, 2001, were a shock to the United States. The retaliation was aimed at Afghanistan, which provided support to al-Qaeda terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. After the expulsion of the Taliban regime, NATO began to strengthen its presence in the country.

Prior to the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, Afghanistan was not a priority area of President George W. Bush's administration. However, the death of almost three thousand people immediately changed that, the headlines of the leading American newspapers spoke of an "attack on the USA" or a "war against America". President Bush was determined to act. NATO allies reacted in the same way, condemning the attacks and offering US support. For the first time in Alliance history, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty on Collective Defence was activated.

Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar did not extradite Osama bin Laden – apparently calculating that Americans and their allies did not decide to react violently. However, they associated with the Afghan enemies of the Taliban, allied in the so-called Northern Alliance, which had 15 to 20 thousand men at its disposal. Operation Enduring Freedom began on October 7, 2001, with air strikes. Two weeks later, they were followed by a ground campaign. Americans deployed their modern weapons – precision-guided munitions, Tomahawk missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles Predator. Their special forces also operated closely with Afghans. At the same time, CIA teams were sent to Afghanistan. Their task was to capture and kill Osama bin Laden. Already in 2001, he was almost caught: in the battle for the Tora Bora rock complex, Americans killed more than 200 members of al-Qaeda, but the terrorist leader still escaped. The defeat of the Taliban in the autumn of 2001 was swift. As early as November 13, 2001, Taliban forces with about 45,000 men (plus 2,700 al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters) left Kabul. The city was occupied by the forces of the Northern Alliance. At the same time, the Taliban was losing control of other parts of Afghanistan.

Operation ISAF

After its defeat, the Taliban immediately began a guerrilla war. The West, on the other

hand, sought to stabilize Afghanistan. Already in January 2002, the first members of the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) arrived on the scene. Under a UN Security Council resolution, these forces were to help building lasting peace in Afghanistan. In the same year, the United States began developing the concept of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which were later taken over and managed by some other states.

An important milestone was the NATO summit in Prague, which paved the way for the involvement of NATO forces. In 2003, the Alliance assumed Operation ISAF. In the following years, NATO forces strengthened their presence in the country and took

In May 2011, US Special Forces killed Osama bin Laden in his hideout in Pakistan. One of the main goals was thus met. However, the process of handing over responsibility to Afghans was not easy. But the Allies did not hesitate to sacrifice large sums of money – at the Chicago summit, four billion dollars were allocated for the benefit of the Afghan armed forces. Over time, the Allies also had to face an increase in attacks from the Taliban, which was gaining strength.

The ISAF mission was one of the longest and most difficult in the Alliance's history. At its peak, the force numbered more than 130,000 soldiers from fifty countries – NATO member states and their partners. Allied operations in various operations cost many lives: more than 2,300 Americans died in the country alone, but members of other armies died as well.

Operation RSM

As of 1 January 2015, Operation ISAF was replaced by the non-combat Operation Resolute Support (RSM), and at the end of 2014 Operation Enduring Freedom was closed. Afghans took over responsibility for their country – as early as the end of December 2012, more than 80 per cent of the population lived in areas where Afghan forces played a primary security role. Foreign

Allied operations in Afghanistan

Enduring Freedom (OEF-A)

From 7 October 2001 to 28 December 2014
Participation of 25 NATO member and partner countries

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)

From 20 December 2001 to 28 December 2014
Participation of 38 states, including 26 NATO members

Resolute Support (RSM)

From 1 January 2015 to 4 July 2021 (military presence)
Participation of 36 states, including 29 NATO members

Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS)

From January 1, 2015 to August 2021
US mission following Operation Enduring Freedom. Part of the NATO-led Resolute Support mission, which began on the same day.

over other parts of it. They participated in maintaining security, and also assisted in the conduct of parliamentary and presidential elections. Hamid Karzai became the country's president in 2004.

One of the fundamentals of the Alliance's strategy were the provincial reconstruction teams: if the country's level of civilization (schools, health care, etc.) could be raised, the risk of radicalization of the population would be reduced. The UN, the World Bank and the European Union also took part in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The Allies emphasized the training of the Afghan security forces, which were to be able to take responsibility for maintaining security in the country on their own.

partners still paid attention to supporting democratic processes.

NATO realized that only a consensus among Afghans themselves would bring hope for peace. In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement that allowed the remaining international forces to withdraw. The year 2021 completed this process, the departure began on May 1. During the summer months of 2021, the country was already under the rule of the Taliban, and in August, this movement occupied virtually the entire country and the capital Kabul. The future of Afghanistan thus remains uncertain, with many questions.

By the editors

WE HAVE LEARNED A LOT

He has completed seven foreign operations. In 2007, he commanded the 5th CZE Contingent and was Chief of Staff of the International Provincial Reconstruction Team in ISAF operation in Afghanistan. From 2010, he conducted foreign military operations and regularly visited soldiers. The Czech Republic withdrew its troops from Afghanistan as one of the last NATO countries. "Our troops in Afghanistan faced difficult combat situations. We've learned a lot and we will never forget it," says the Chief of the General Staff of the ACR Army General ALEŠ OPATA. "I'm incredibly proud of our soldiers."

What comes to your mind first when somebody says Afghanistan?

Challenging environment, different culture. In order to operate there, we had to know the history of Afghanistan and its cultural peculiarities. Understanding the mentality of Afghans was quite difficult, but crucial.

Do you remember your first impressions after arriving in the country?

At first glance, everyone is attracted by the Afghan nature. It is strange, but in a way beautiful.

In 2007, you commanded a Czech contingent and was Chief of Staff of the Multinational Reconstruction Team in ISAF operation. How did you prepare for it?

It was obvious that it would not be easy at all. Climatic and geographical conditions in Afghanistan are extremely unfavourable. Therefore, we directed the preparation of the unit so that it would be able to conduct combat operations in an alpine environment. We started to train in Turkey. The Turkish army recommended us some training areas that resembled the terrain in Afghanistan. In addition to combat training, it was also preparation for hard geographical conditions.

Due to the distance, the foreign operation in Afghanistan differed

significantly from previous missions in the former Yugoslavia. How did it differ the most?

Everything was complicated: the planning process, preparing the unit for deployment, transportation, supply. In the operation, six thousand kilometres away, the soldiers were initially dependent on themselves or what they brought with them. Traffic was also complicated, Afghanistan, unlike in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, did not have a transport infrastructure.

Did you have any idea what you were going to do?

Of course, we had information from our predecessors. Czech soldiers had been operating in Afghanistan from 2002, and one reconnaissance battalion unit operated directly in Badakhshan. During our training, very helpful was the commander of the 601st Special Forces Group that had been already engaged in combat assignment in Afghanistan, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. The soldiers gave us a number of experiences and key recommendations. A few months before the training, I had begun reading the available literature on Afghanistan, including several Russian books translated into English. One of them was the study *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*.

Was it instructive?

Definitely! The book described Soviet tactics in detail during the war in Afghanistan. We operated in Badakhshan, where Soviet troops faced a number of problems. From a study of the literature on the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan, we found that the situation in the area is exactly the same, only moved a few years forward. When we talked about the zones where Soviet troops were attacked, we found that they were essentially identical. The Soviets also had a network of airports in the same places as we did. So a lot of useful information about Afghanistan could be obtained from the books. Absolutely crucial for me, however, was the cooperation with the 601 SFG – their opinion concerning our mission and the engagement zone was decisive.

How did you prepare for the cultural diversity of the country?

The basis of preparation is to understand the country and the conflict. In every operation abroad, it is important to know the culture of the nation, its customs, way of life, and then adapt our behaviour to it. The dominant religion in Afghanistan is Islam, it affects the development of the whole country, so it was necessary to read something about it. We also had to learn to understand the culture of tribal leaders and the specifics that come with it. We wanted to treat the Afghan people correctly. Failure to understand the local culture can



generate a lot of problems in the future. When we arrived in Afghanistan, some districts were closed, due to very complicated relations between ISAF troops and their residents. Thanks to the fact that we studied things related to their culture, way of life, tribal establishment, we gradually began to penetrate enclosed areas, whether it was thanks to information operations or CIMIC projects.

What surprised you during the operations in Afghanistan?

It was strange how climatic and geographical conditions affected the planning process. We were moving in a very difficult terrain, where the communication infrastructure was missing, with the exception of the connection between the capitals. The average speed of our patrol was between ten and twenty kilometres per hour. The soldiers operated at an altitude approaching three thousand metres. I was surprised that we did not have significant problems with acclimatization to alpine conditions. The soldiers were well prepared. The weather was very changeable. In the Hindu Kush mountains, there were sudden, sharp reversals of the weather, which hit us hard.

At the beginning of May 2007, during a patrol, the water-logged road broke out and an avalanche of rocks and mud swept away two soldiers from your unit, one of whom perished. What is the necessary response to such an event?

The commander does not have time to mourn or cry because he must keep the unit together. He has to get the unit back in shape quickly so it can perform operational tasks. The moment to suffer the losses comes only after that. The unit must manage the situation, it must restore combat readiness, the soldiers cannot take two weeks off, they must start again. When you lose a soldier, it is always very difficult, however you have to reckon with losses in the operation. I had known Kolja Martynov from the time he joined the airborne battalion. For paratroopers, relationships are not anonymous, they are built on friendship and mutual respect, so it's even worse.

Nikolaj Martynov was the first of fourteen Czech soldiers who lost their lives in Afghanistan.

Some of them were my long-time friends.

What did you take from Afghanistan?

My "take away" from Afghanistan is the fact that all soldiers, without distinction, understood that on right or wrong decisions

depended their lives. Every commander, and I mean even in the lowest command positions, is a key figure for his soldiers. The soldiers expect a decision from their commander. In the Balkans, he could usually think about it ten times or eventually he could put it off. In Afghanistan, the speed and importance of commanders' decision became clear. It was necessary to think ahead, to make dynamic decisions, to take responsibility for your decisions. Thanks to that, we have a quality command corps today. Only a minimum of soldiers from combat units did not go through foreign operations. The self-confidence of the soldiers strengthened, they became better professionals, they learned to work with foreign partners, they found out that what they learn theoretically and practically during training really works in a real situation. We have moved significantly forward in the professionalization and training of soldiers.

Has the training of soldiers for foreign operations changed in the last twenty years?

We have always tried to adapt the training in the maximum way to reality, therefore the system of preparation and training for Afghanistan has been adjusted over the years. Among other things, it was established that the unit that had recently ended its operations in Afghanistan was involved in the training of the new unit. Thanks to this cooperation, in my opinion, there has been erased the division according to occupation specialties in the army. Soldiers from different branches and units began to communicate more with each other, the army began to behave as a whole. The troops took their

deployment in Afghanistan very seriously, each subsequent contingent was a more prepared unit. I am absolutely convinced that every soldier, who went there, knew exactly what he would do and what could happen.

You talked about the importance of decision making. Is it possible to train something like that?

The army has a set up command system, including various procedures. In Afghanistan, the importance of standard operating procedures became apparent. Soldiers must have these principles practised in detail; they must respond automatically. When a patrol is attacked, they need to know exactly how to behave and what to do. When the cover fire begins, how to escape from the trap, when they leave the kill zone, how to take the all-round defence. We practised reactions to various situations, the basic ones were rocket attacks by guerrillas on bases. The soldiers knew exactly what to do and did not think about it. Combat drills became automated. When I look at old photos, I see the difference at first glance.

In what, for example?

It can be identified by the way how the soldiers are dressed, how they hold weapons, how they behave.

Is the current army differently equipped and armed?

For four years, as director of the Joint Operations Centre, I was able to observe how the equipment of soldiers changed in terms of weapons, weapon systems or means of communication. In 2007, we used radio

Group photo of the 5th Contingent of the Army of the Czech Republic of the international PRT Faizabad. In the foreground there are three commanders. At the head, there is the then commander of the 43rd Airborne Mechanized Battalion Zdeněk Kolář, behind him there stand the future commanders of the unit: Róbert Dziak on the left and Aleš Opata on the right.



Photo: Collections of MHI Prague

stations, with which it was difficult to establish a connection in rugged terrain. However, this was a long time ago, a few years later we achieved a perfect connection, compatible with our Alliance partners. Of course, I must mention an "endless story" on the subject of bulletproof vests and helmets. This was also reflected in our operations in Afghanistan. Even though this is a basic thing that every soldier must have, there used to be problems with it, because our acquisition process is complicated and protracted. I thought it would be the same as shopping the rolls, but I was wrong. Of course, the equipment was supplemented. As the conflict and individual threats evolved, so did the tactical procedures, based on our experience.

So it's become the norm that you're trying to learn?

I consider it very important. We have learned from every incident we experienced. We analysed it in detail and took measures to avoid it or be able to respond to a similar situation in the future.

From 2010, as Director of the Joint Operations Centre, you conducted foreign operations and travelled regularly to Afghanistan. The soldiers then said, "It wasn't control, it was encouragement." Was that your intention?

I took part in seven foreign operations and I remembered well what bothered me during the inspections and on the other hand, what I missed then.

What bothered you, when you were a captain or a major, or simply, what you just didn't want to do?

Exactly. I remembered what I was thinking when a bureaucrat checked my documents, recalculated the pages in the battle order, and looked in the records to see if I had filled in the reference number correctly. These were mostly administrative check-ups; they were seldom directed at the equipment of units. The great models for me were General Šíba and General Kuba, who were able to solve the materiel and technical needs of the soldiers in IFOR very quickly and efficiently.

So that's why you changed the unit's control system in operation?

For inspections, I introduced vulnerability and assessment teams (VATs). The VAT team focuses on the security of soldiers, their protection and needs. At the same time, I strictly

ensured that the control teams included people who themselves had undergone the operations. We always tried to meet the needs of the soldiers, but the VAT team was able to distinguish what was essential for their combat activities and what exceeded their expectations. During the inspection, we spoke to three groups of people – with command, soldiers and support. Debates with soldiers and commanders will enrich you, because each unit was in a different situation. We also placed great emphasis on ensuring that our National Command in Kabul, the NSE (National Support Element), which support troops and task forces, was effective and resolved things quickly. We tried to dismantle the administrative bureaucratic system.

In Afghanistan, we have been operating alongside the Allies for twenty years. We have our wounded and dead, it cost some resources. How do war veterans from Afghanistan perceive the current situation?

Withdrawing troops is a political decision. We are a professional army and we work on the basis of the assignment we received. I'm not saying we departed from the country early. But from my military point of view, we should have stayed there for some more time. Ending domestic armed conflicts is a complicated matter. Twenty years ago, the country looked different. The then Afghan government and its security forces were expecting help from NATO troops, and we met their expectations to a significant extent. On the other hand, we expected Afghans would get and learn the most of what we brought. The soldiers, who were in Afghanistan for almost twenty years, undoubtedly did their job there well. They gave Afghanistan what they could.

The army has made great qualitative progress. Aren't you afraid that the experience and skills gained in Afghanistan will fade over time?

The "capital" we've gained in Afghanistan in training and many other activities will undoubtedly be beneficial for a long time. Thanks to the experience from Afghanistan, today we have great instructors in NCO and WO corps. When you met ten soldiers ten years ago, each held a weapon differently, each was occupying a different shooting position. Today, everyone behaves in the same way, their habits are automated. The medical training of soldiers at the basic, tactical level, has also moved to a higher level. Every year I award several plaques for saving human life,

which proves that a well-trained soldier is able to apply his skills in everyday life.

What does it mean for the military to have over 11,500 veterans from Afghanistan?

I'm incredibly proud of our soldiers. They did not sit somewhere in the lee. The army operated there in difficult areas of deployment, in Kandahar, Hilmand, Wardak, Logar or Parwan, where they actually fought. Czech soldiers gained not only vast experience, but also recognition from the Allies. They gained the same respect as our soldiers during World War II. Our Alliance partners know that our soldiers can be relied on.

You often emphasize that the professional army relies on its experience and historical tradition.

An army that has no traditions and its heroes basically doesn't exist. Traditions are important for soldiers, as they remind them that former members of the unit actively led brave combat operations. Nowadays we have new generations of experienced soldiers who have gone through the war and can be a role model for others. In 2010, I therefore supported the project of the Military Historical Institute in Prague, which preserves objects and memories of soldiers from present-day places of operational deployment. Sooner or later, the present will become history. I myself was lucky to meet Czechoslovak paratroopers Jaroslav Klemeš, Josef Černota, Rudolf Pernický and Rudolf Krzák, who fought during WWII. They never allowed themselves to give up, they were able to sacrifice anything for their homeland, they never said wrong words against their country, even though they were persecuted in the 1950s. It was important for the soldiers, but also for me, that before leaving for the mission, Jarda Klemeš told us at the muster parade, something like this. I will paraphrase him: "You will go to war and that war is not easy. Don't get cold feet and never forget that you are Czech." Everyone immediately knows from which country a soldier is, and therefore he constantly represents their country.

What would you say to the soldiers who fought in Afghanistan?

I'm incredibly proud of our soldiers. I am delighted with our army and the journey it has taken from 1993 to the present.

By Hana Benešová



YEARS OF SWEAT, **BLOOD** AND EXPERIENCE

Deployment of the Army of the Czech Republic in Afghanistan in the years 2002–2021

In June this year, after two decades, the Czech army left Afghanistan. An important and longest chapter in the deployment of Czech soldiers in a foreign operation is over; since 2002, more than 11,500 people have taken turns in it. Field hospital, surgical team, reconstruction team, pilots and combat units, chemists, pyrotechnicians, meteorologists... The Czech army has left its mark on Afghanistan and, above all, gained extremely valuable experience from deploying in live combat operations in the most difficult regions of the country.

President Václav Havel: "You are going to perform a very important task... You are the ones who will deepen the international credibility of the Czech Republic."

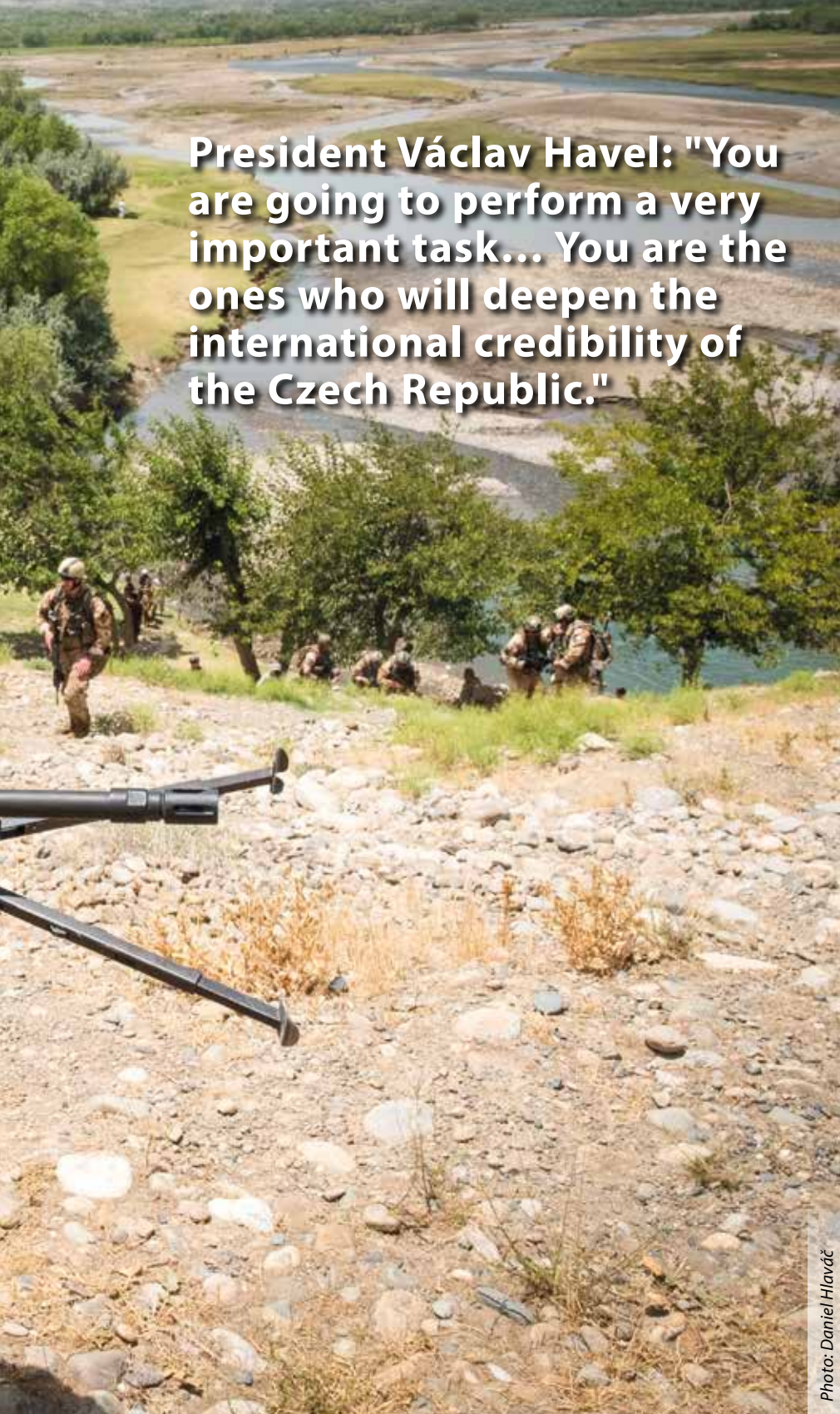


Photo: Daniel Hlaváč

An infantry patrol on the borders of the provinces of Parwan and Kapisa.

The first operation in which Czech troops participated was the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In April 2002, the Government of the Czech Republic sent to Afghanistan military surgeons of the 6th Field Hospital, which were replaced six months later by the 11th Field Hospital. Before leaving the Ruzyně Airport, the President of the Republic Václav Havel came to say goodbye to this first unit, with new patches on soldiers' shoulders.

"You are going to perform a very important task. First, you will help the suffering people of a country tried by long wars, but you will also help the soldiers who perform their tasks there. And not only that. You are also the ones, who through their activity will deepen the international credibility of the Czech Republic. Thanks to you, our country will be perceived as a country that is not indifferent to the fate of man, human rights, freedom

and democracy anywhere in the world," said Václav Havel to the soldiers and medical personnel before their departure.

"During its previous deployments in foreign missions, the military hospital was able to convince our allies of its professional and human qualities," said the unit commander, Colonel Jindřich Sitta. "Therefore, as a commander, I am pleased that thanks to the excellent results of the work of Czech military surgeons, this unit was given the confidence to represent our country in the fight against terrorism." An eleven-member field surgical team completed its work in Afghanistan in April 2003.

Later, other Czech units were deployed within ISAF. Recognition of the people of Afghan people earned namely the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). The history of the Czech Republic's involvement in the PRT dates back to March 2005. At that time, the 1st ACR contingent in the northeast of Afghanistan in the Province of Badakhshan was deployed as part of the ISAF forces. Forty Czech soldiers under the leadership of Major Miroslav Vybihal, together with a Danish unit with the same number of members and about 130 members of the German Bundeswehr, provided protection for people involved in the economic recovery of the country.

The core of the Czech contingent was formed by soldiers of the 102nd Reconnaissance Battalion from Prostějov. Although the guerrilla war did not rage in this province, breadseed poppies were grown there on a large scale and opium was produced. "Immediately after arriving in Afghanistan, our patrol came into conflict with the local population in one of the nearby villages," Major Vybihal recalled the difficult beginnings. "The villagers thought we were there because of their poppy fields, so they started stoning the soldiers. They smashed glass windows of a car, even one soldier was slightly wounded. At the end, everything was resolved in cooperation with the local police and the governor. Then there were no more problems."

During the rotation of another contingent, the core of which again consisted of scouts from Prostějov under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Radek Černý, there was also some change of equipment. The failing Soviet UAZ cars were replaced by new Land Rover 110 TDi vehicles. The soldiers then underwent one of the most difficult movements: they covered seven hundred kilometres in three days, over difficult mountainous terrain, from Kabul to Faizabad.



Waiting for a night patrol near the Bagram Airbase, Operation Resolute Support, 2019.

Overcoming obstacles, gaining trust

With the arrival of the 5th Contingent in 2007, under the command of the then Colonel Aleš Opata, several changes took place. The core of this and the next contingent was formed by members of the 43rd Airborne Mechanized Battalion from Chrudim, and the number of personnel increased. Czech soldiers began operating in eight districts, instead of the original five.

At the beginning of May 2007, this contingent was hit by a tragic event. The convoy moving in the mountains got into a storm, torrential downpours released an avalanche of water, mud and rocks, which knocked military vehicles and equipment off the road into a deep gorge. One of our soldiers died, the other was seriously wounded. These were

difficult times for the unit, but they managed the situation mentally and the soldiers continued to perform their tasks. "The Czech army has enormous potential in its people, enthusiastic and determined," said later Colonel Ivo Střecha, commander of the first PRT contingent Logar.

It was in Logar where Czech soldiers began performing their tasks in March 2008. A total of 2,500 Czech soldiers and five civilian teams took turns in ten contingents. "The biggest surprise was meeting local people," made an observation Ivo Střecha. "I was surprised by the great distrust - it was impossible to know who could be trusted and with whom it was worth working. Whether it was government officials, local police or ordinary people. But I think we finally gained the necessary trust with our own style."

In January 2013, a ceremonial parade took place at Shank base, on the occasion of the end of the PRT's activities. The then Commander of the 10th PRT Unit in Logar, Colonel Josef Kopecký, remarked: "Five years ago, our provincial reconstruction team began to run operations in Logar. So, I am proud now that we were able to contribute to building the province." The head of the civilian part, Ms Magdalena Pokludová, together with her team, focused their efforts mainly on agriculture, water management, security and education.

The risk is an honour for us

In addition to ISAF troops, there were also troops under the command of the US anti-terrorist operation Enduring Freedom (announced in 2001). More than

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF FOREIGN MISSION OF THE ARMY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN AFGHANISTAN

Field Hospital, Kabul

2002–2003/6th Field Hospital and 11th Field Hospital, more than 290 soldiers

EOD + Meteo, Kabul

2004–2007/pyrotechnic and engineer survey, meteorology, 100 soldiers in six detachments

PRT Faizabad, northern Afghanistan

2005–2007/protection of the German PRT, six contingents, more than 400 soldiers

Lead nation KAIA, Kabul

2006–2007/Czechia in the role of the so-called leading state at the Kabul Airport, a contingent of 47 people

Field hospital and chemical unit + Meteo + AIR OMLT, Kabul

2007–2008/paramedics, chemists, meteorologists, in five contingents over 500 soldiers

KAIA and chemical unit + Meteo + AIR OMLT, Kabul

2008–2010/chemical and hydrometeorological support, air traffic control, more than 200 soldiers

Chemical and Biological Protection Unit, Kabul

2010–2012/assessment of the radiation and chemical situation, five rotations, and more than 50 soldiers

Field Surgical Team, Kabul

2011–2013/paramedics in a French field hospital, six rotations, each more than 10 soldiers

SOG Military Police, Helmand Province

2007–2008/ Special Operations Group, reinforcements to British troops, three contingents, about 100 soldiers

PRT Logar

2008–2013/building and conducting our own PRT, 10 contingents, more than 2,600 soldiers

Uruzgan Province

2008–2009/protection of the Dutch base Deh Rawod, two contingents, more than 120 soldiers

Helicopter unit, Paktika

2009–2011/Mi-171Š helicopters unit, seven contingents, each up to 100 soldiers

a 100-member contingent of soldiers of the elite 601st Special Forces Group under the command of Colonel Ondrej Páleník began its operations on March 24, 2004. It was a historic moment, because it was the first deployment of a really combat unit of the ACR in history. "It was a regular war and there was always a threat to life," said the unit commander, Colonel Páleník. "Risk is a challenge and an honour for us. All soldiers know that this is a real combat operation in Afghanistan. They know about the danger, but they were perfectly trained and ready to perform tasks even in the most difficult conditions."

They faced booby-traps on the roads, rocket attacks, individual suicide bombers, and motorbike death squads, in the most dangerous areas of the country. "A mate's injury is an unpleasant event, but we were trained how to deal with it. But mainly, we were trained so that we could help him, as quickly and effectively as possible," recalled one of the soldiers who commanded a special purpose group and also took part in hard fighting.

Czech soldiers focused on conducting special reconnaissance and small-scale direct actions, both in high-altitude and populated areas. Members of the 601 SFG (601st Special Forces Group) served in Operation Enduring Freedom and even in the following years, they took part in a total of over 200 combat operations and had to deal with tense situation during the parliamentary elections. From January 2010 they protected the Czech Embassy in Kabul and from mid-2011 served in Nangarhar Province. There they trained an emergency squad of the Afghan police and also cooperated with other allies in operations against organized crime.

Support and drill

Between 2007 and 2008, a unit of the Special Operations Group (SOG) of the Military Police also operated in Afghanistan. The first contingent arrived in the south of Afghanistan in the Province of Helmand in April 2007. With our unit, the British infantry

and American special forces also joined the operations. These were attacks on buildings where members of the Taliban were staying. We fought for control of the territory.

Proper preparation and planning were necessary for each operation. Intelligence support, perfect map materiel, studying sites and approaches to them, all this was the alpha and omega for the successful completion of the operation. "You will really learn a special tactics only during combat operations," said the commander of the first contingent Major Petr Krčmář. "You can practise a thousand times how to take a firing position, how to break into a building, but only on the spot you will find out how the enemy secures the entrances to the houses through improvised explosive devices, how they put trap and raids convoys from the ambush."

According to Major Krčmář, the Taliban's tactics could not be learned in advance, everyone had to master it on the very spot. It was a place where they also tested their reactions under direct fire. How to move, how to watch out for booby traps, how to shoot, how to use close air support or artillery. Or where a flood can unexpectedly appear in the dry riverbeds: "Suddenly you may find yourself up to your

and Hero. "The dogs themselves aroused great respect among the local community," describes the behaviour of dogs Alexandr Vraga. "A dog also knows if a person is afraid of it and reacts accordingly. It made it easier for us to check whether there was a potential terrorist among the people who was going to attack."

Advanced flight training

From April 2008 to January 2019, the Czech Army operated in three air force missions, namely the OMLT (Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team), AMT (Air Mentoring Team) and the AAT (Air Advisory Team). The main task of the advisory teams was to train flying and ground personnel, pilots and flight technicians of the 377th Helicopter Unit of the Afghan Air Force. The training took place first on Mi-24/35 helicopters, later Mi-17/171. From 2015, the AAT unit also included a protection group, the so-called Guardian Angels, which ensured the safety of Czech and Alliance mentors and instructors.

Almost 250 Czech aviation mentors and instructors took turns in Afghanistan. During three different missions, a total of 30 Czech units operated there, from four to six months. Around 500 Afghan pilots

They faced booby-traps on the roads, rocket attacks, individual suicide bombers, and motorbike death squads.

neck in the water, all around the swamp, you, your car and supplies will be drowned in a moment. And so, I'm not talking about millions of mosquitos. There was a danger of malaria with them," the contingent commander described the difficult conditions. As part of SOG operations, dog handlers from the then Veterinary Base Grabštejn took part in combat actions, together with their dogs. Sergeant First Class Alexandr Vraga and his mate were the first to fly to Afghanistan, accompanied by dogs, Floyd, Nero, Gandhi

completed training under the guidance of Czech instructors. "Training was not always easy," describes the beginnings of Colonel Petr Čepelka, who in the year 2008, as Deputy Commander, opened the first OMLT training mission. "From the beginning, we had not only to overcome a great language barrier, but we also had to create and implement new procedures. From scratch, for example, we began to train the Afghan Air Force (AAF) in aerial fire, with unguided missiles S-5 and from GŠ-23 cannons."

AMT and AAT, Kabul

2010–2012/training Afghans on Mi-24/35 and Mi-17 helicopters, seven contingents, each about 20 soldiers

Headquarters TF ACR, ISAF + NSE Kabul

2010/organizational coverage of all units and elements of the MoD Department operating in Afghanistan

OMLT, Wardak

2010–2013/ "omelette" team trained Afghans, battalion size unit, in each of the five rotations there were about 50 soldiers

MP Training unit, Wardak

2011–2013/members of the Military Police helped to build the Afghan National Police, four rotations, each 12 members

TF Special Forces, Nangarhar Province

2011–2012/two task forces, each with 100 soldiers, the 601st Special Forces Group from Prostějov

Enduring Freedom

2004–2009/special forces, reconnaissance, direct actions, each contingent of about 100 members

Task Force ISAF/RSM

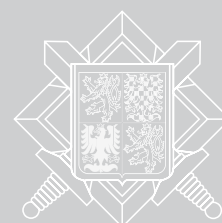
till 2014, or from 2015/task forces of various specialties, field surgical team, or Air Advisory Team

BAF

2013–2020/guard unit at Bagram Air Base, control of the outer perimeter of the security zone, 13 rotations, roughly 2,000 soldiers

MP KAMBA

2017–2021/Military Police unit guarding the Embassy of the Czech Republic, protection of diplomats on their tours



Czech mentors also taught Afghans to implement flight records, process planning, and command and control of AAF people. "The training concerned helicopter Captains, co-pilots-operators, flight technicians and gunners, as well as ground technical personnel," said Colonel Miroslav Svoboda, commander of the 22nd Helicopter Air Force Base, who commanded the 13th RSM Task Force in 2016.

Czech "omelette"

The training of the Afghan security forces was an important element in the stabilization of Afghanistan. Creating and deploying the Czech OMLT unit (nicknamed "the omelette" by our troops) in Afghanistan was one of the optimal ways how to join NATO and Allied efforts to create a secure environment and stability in the country. Military police trained members of the Afghan National Army and the Afghan police.

OMLT teams were to mentor, lead and develop the capability of Afghan military units. "They teach soldiers and police officers basic skills, to handle weapons and equipment, familiarise them with common operational procedures, they help with effective planning of operations," said Marek Hruška, the then Deputy Director of the Defence Policy Department of the Ministry of Defence. The first OMLT unit, composed of Chrudim paratroopers under the command of LTC Ladislav Švejda, began operating in Wardak in September 2010. The team's main task was to train, mentor (educate, teach, explain) a battalion-sized infantry unit ("kandak") of the Afghan National Army. When the pioneering mission of the 1st OMLT unit in Wardak ended in April 2011, the

The second unit to operate in this province was the Military Police Training Unit, which became operational on 21 March 2011 at the Afghan National Police Training Centre (NPTC). This unit performed tasks in the formation of an international team led by France.

The experience gained from this operation could be used by ACR soldiers during the current EUTM mission in Mali, both in the training of individuals and the coordination of units, including support in operations with the Malian army.

The OMLT was subsequently replaced by the unit of Military Advisory Team (MAT) Wardak, which took over its tasks from April to September 2013. Another unit operating in the Wardak province was the Training Unit of the Military Police in the number of 12 people, which performed tasks related to the training of members of the security forces of Afghanistan.

Resolute, determined, firm

The Resolute Support mission began its next phase of joint coalition efforts in Afghanistan on 1 January 2015. The support and security of deployed forces and resources accompanied all teams, units, task forces and individuals, from the very beginning to the end.

In addition to medical, veterinary, financial, legal or information support, the logistical assistance will also be included in the history of the deployed units. Teams of specialists called the National Support Element (NSE) accompanied the Czech soldiers throughout the whole deployment and comprehensively provided suitable settings for the performance of their operational tasks. In close cooperation with centres and logistics institutions in the Czech Republic,

Two decades of operation in Afghanistan represent the longest operational deployment in the history of the Army of the Czech Republic.

then commander of the Czech PRT, Colonel Miroslav Hlaváč, emphasized: "You have accomplished what no one else will do after you. You have set up the system and prepared the conditions for the cooperation of all other OMLT units that will operate in the following rotations with the kandak. You are making a good name for the 43rd Airborne Battalion and the 4th Rapid Deployment Brigade, and you deserve thanks for that."

they responded flexibly to the needs of commanders in individual operations and also contributed to the successful performance of operational tasks by acquiring materiel, service tours, and providing security in the entire spectrum of service support.

"Logistics has always been and will be part of our teams, without which we could not function as a whole," said logistics Captain Marek Jeřábek, commander of the 4th Guards



Company, operating in the 11th ACR Task Force, in the operation of Resolute Support.

Air base and its background

Bagram Airfield was one of the most important US air bases in Afghanistan. Almost two thousand Czech soldiers served there. They were tasked with protecting the base with everything that goes with it. Since 2006, the airport has had two runways for aircraft of all sizes. In addition, 40,000 locals also needed protection. The Airport of Bagram had its positives, which included above all quality facilities. It also had its negatives, such as a large area and harsh weather conditions, an altitude of 1,500 meters. The Czechs had to ensure continuous patrolling in the area of responsibility, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In practice, this meant tours within a radius of 15 kilometres, even several times a day, for more than 12 hours. Outside the base, in addition to the pervasive dust or the summer heat of over 40 degrees, sudden attacks, traps and improvised explosive devices were waiting for them.

Regardless of the contingent in question, the Czechs performed their task perfectly. This is evidenced by regular unit citations by American commanders. They emphasized



Photo: Štěpán Maláček

Picture from FOB Shank, Logar Province. As for heavy equipment, the Czech Army first used the older Soviet infantry combat vehicle BVP-2, then the armoured personnel carriers Pandur.

above all the determination, diligence and professionalism of our soldiers.

In seven years, 13 Czech contingents rotated there. Unfortunately, we did not avoid tragedy. In July 2014, five of our soldiers died after the attack of a suicide bomber. The other three died four years later, in August 2018.

Departure and benefits

On Sunday, June 27, 2021, the last of the three large-capacity Antonov An-124 Ruslan transport aircraft landed at the Pardubice Airport. It brought back to the Czech Republic the last twelve soldiers with the materiel from the Resolute Support mission. The task of the unit, which had been operating in Afghanistan from February 2021, was to dismantle the Czech base in Kabul and move all armaments, equipment, materiel, back home. The last task force also consisted of the headquarters, the field surgical team, and the representation at the headquarters of the Resolute Support mission.

"A plan of a complete withdrawal of units was prepared in a number of months. It included withdrawal phases, the division of materiel according to priorities, classification, and the likelihood of their further use in the Czech army, as well as anti-epidemic and veterinary use," said Colonel David Schnabel of the

Operations Command. "We removed most of the materiel, building equipment. Furniture and small items remained on site. We brought approximately 170 tons of materiel back to the republic," said the commander of the last task force in Afghanistan, Lieutenant Colonel Michal Thon.

Two decades of operation in Afghanistan represent the longest operational deployment in the history of the Army of the Czech Republic. In terms of the number of deployed soldiers, the Czech Republic ranked 6th to 8th, out of the total number of 39 Alliance nations that participated in ISAF or Resolute Support operations. ACR units checked their readiness and training in real combat, verified the tactical procedures learned in practice, tested vehicles, weapons, equipment. The soldiers served in various climatic conditions and experienced the fighting. Some contacts with the enemy lasted thirty minutes, others ten hours.

Backed by this experience, we have changed the procedures for conducting combat operations on the ground and in the air, e.g. the use of Scan Eagle. We have modernized weapons (BREN), means of communication, uniforms, ballistic protection gear, other used equipment has been improved. Air units gained

experience in flying in alpine conditions, tested tactical procedures during the training of local pilots. Medical officers, surgeons, applied their experience during war surgery (gunshot wounds, injuries after bombings, mass triage). Logistics units tested the ability to support troops in extreme situations.

"Soldiers are trained to be deployed. They see their involvement in the missions as part of their career and as a great challenge," sums up the assets of foreign operations Major General Petr Procházka, Deputy Commander of the Operations Command. According to him, Afghanistan was a huge lesson: "From their first deployment in operations in 2002, the capabilities of our troops improved day by day. The huge benefit is that the unit's experience gained will be used and applied during further deployments to operations. Everything we have gone through and what we have achieved in Afghanistan increases our credit as a reliable Alliance partner," concludes Major General Procházka.

By Jana Deckerová



ONE FOR ALL THEY ALL DID THEIR DUTY

Every Czech soldier lived his own story in Afghanistan. Everyone there encountered challenging moments, sometimes dramatic, often exhausting physically and, above all, mentally. How to choose a single soldier who would speak for everyone, whose story would summarize the unique and unrepeatable experience, which perhaps all members of the Army of the Czech Republic took with them from the country? We chose the story of a man whom we present only with the initials: M. J. It has its meaning and symbolism. Anyone else could be here. Every Afghan experience was exceptional, noteworthy, and has a high value. And it carries a piece of heroism.

M. J. first joined the foreign operation of the Czech army in 2001. He was twenty-one years old, and worked in the army as a professional for only a year. He served as a shooter-operator in a mechanized company at the base of Donja Ljubija in Bosnia and Herzegovina. "I imagined that I would perform operational tasks, but my main assignment was to re-fill the bags at the base first. I moved the sand only. I got out on patrol several times, but it was a long way from my original idea of a foreign operation. My second deployment was in 2004 in Kosovo, when I started as a section leader. There I experienced the first real problems in the mission, also in terms of commanding the soldiers. It was a good job and we did interesting tasks on the border with Serbia." A native of a small village between Česká Lípa and Liberec, his father an electrician, his mother was "often unemployed", because there was little work in the region, but at the same time she was still busy caring for a total of three sons. The first major turning point in his life came at the age of twelve, when he became a member of the Scout organization.

Here he encountered concepts and themes such as fairness, justice and honour. "It's always about being an honest person," M. J. recalls of the years in the Scout. "Of course, one sometimes fails, but honesty is probably the most important virtue." Scouting led him to discipline, life in nature, a sense of friendship, a desire for romance and adventure, and also to uniforms: he originally wanted to be a police officer, then he went to the army. "I was not close to computers or cars, but not to money. At the same time, I didn't want to end up in a factory, at work that I wouldn't enjoy. And the feeling of patriotism also played a role. I like our country; I would not exchange it for another." He arrived in Afghanistan for the first time in 2009, with a reconnaissance platoon, as part of the Mobile Observation Team. "When you first find yourself in Bagram, you suddenly realize that history was going on there, there the Russian invasion was taking place. They had a huge base, now there's an incredible American base. You will realize that you are becoming part of history with everyone who

has passed through this airport." He returned to Afghanistan in 2012 and then in 2018.

In the fire of battle

M. J. met the most dramatic fighting moments right at the first deployment in 2009. "It was such a knock, nothing long, forty minutes. But I will remember it forever. The hardest time I've ever had." They operated with the platoon in the Baraki Barak district, an area in Logar province. Daily task: routine inspection of a water construction, escort for a water supervisor. They knew from the intelligence officers that this was a problem area, but none of the soldiers counted where the situation would take them.

"We arrived at the river, about two hundred metres from it, we left Hummer and Dingo vehicles on the road. We walked to the embankment. I was a shooter, the inner guard was in charge of the person, and we, as the outer guard, were placed around them in pairs."

After about ten minutes, the first shots were fired. "My partner and I were forty metres from

the inner guard. The boys immediately started to withdraw themselves, they had a terrain advantage: there was a stream bed where they jumped in. Support teams withdrew to the vehicles. Only my partner and I stayed there. The vehicles left because protecting the expert was our main task. The second part of the unit remained in the stream bed, but we didn't know about them and they didn't know about us."

The fire continued, going from a distance of about thirty metres. As it turned out lately, the firing was led by a fifteen-year-old attacker. "A minute before he had walked past me with a rake and said to me: salam alejkum... I smiled at him and greeted him too." After a while, the Czech cars returned and opened fire with long bursts from a machine gun. The projectiles also flew even over his head, close to M. J. "It simply came to our notice then that we were in real trouble. The nearest bullet hissed 20 centimetres from my head. I took cover, but yet I saw another target moving 150 metres from me. A man in his fifties with a grenade launcher and two little boys carrying other rounds. The firing was immediate, the enemy was close. Whenever I tried to get up and wanted to shoot the rifle, the enemy immediately started firing. Clay, stones, reflections from bullets flew. Whenever I got up, I got more clay in my face. My glasses were so sweaty that I had to take them off my face. I remember lying down then, protected by a wave of terrain, about twenty centimetres high."

Due to the proximity of the enemy, M. J. decided to use a hand grenade. But there were trees around, and if he threw the grenade inaccurately, he could injure himself. "So I just pulled out a pistol and waited for the enemy to come up to me to shoot him. Using a radio station, I communicated with a boy who was also hidden. I told him: I'm completely in an ass... He replied that it's the same for him, when he moves, the opponent shoots at him immediately. The enemy saw us both. Desperate situation. At that moment, I thought: I'm probably going to die here. I was thinking about my daughter, who was four months old at the time. She doesn't even know me. That was the only thing I could focus on."

After about half an hour, a radio connection was established. The fire from the enemy and our machine gun units was already silent at that moment. "When we found out where who was, it poured energy into my veins. We are not alone here, maybe we will not

end here, there is a way out. I told the boys to prepare the SMOKE and cover fire. They obscured by smoke all terrain around me... As I lay there for forty minutes, I suddenly ran out with equipment and weapons, twenty-five kilos on top of me, and developed a completely insane pace. It was an incredible experience. I covered the distance of fifty metres as a sprinter. In such a situation, one puts everything into it. As I jumped into a shoulder of the creek, where I was already protected, a great rage flooded me. Suddenly I had the motivation to fight the enemy. Backed by accumulated emotions, I started firing at the attacker."

The last task remained, to free another mate from the fire. This was done personally by a platoon leader. Afterward all men were already hidden. "I have some photos of that stream bed. Exhaustion and faces you won't see in any movie. It is impossible to describe what was going in our heads. We started retreating to the cars, drove to the Baraki Barak base, and only there came the euphoria that we had all survived."

But the day was not over yet, the soldiers had to get back in the vehicles and drive to the Shank base, about 30 kilometres away. The journey was very careful, everyone acted emotionally, they immediately reported any threat, a man somewhere in a window. "It turned out to be our first encounter with the reality of a soldier's work. None of us had any previous combat experience with the enemy. From the point of view of a tactical instructor, we must have made some mistakes, but I didn't see any cowardice anywhere. I just saw soldiers who wanted to help their friends."

M. J. even in later years, on other missions, got into combat situations. "Probably every soldier who likes his job is waiting for a fighting moment. That's what he went to the army for. But when the fight occurs, you realize that it's best to try to avoid such situations. Over time, you'll also understand that nothing but drills will help you. After the first experience, you always think about what you should have done and what you should not have done. But at the end, you have nothing in your hands, but confidence in what has been learned."

A soldier and his DNA

Reflecting on the motivation to take part in other missions in Afghanistan, M. J. says: "Being in a foreign operation is like gaining the real knowledge and experience for the work you love and do. From the first, I gained experience from combat platoons, then



from command positions. The possibility of working with American soldiers and their commanders, with other armies, is also interesting and beneficial."

Other reasons also play a role. Certainly friends and team, people with whom a soldier often spends more time than with family. "When everyone applied for missions, there was no way that I didn't go either. Even today, when a friend commander calls me that he needs me for a foreign operation, I can't refuse. And one more reason: finance. I would be a liar if I said they didn't play a role. I have three little girls, my wife is still on maternity leave, we have a mortgage, also a car that needs repairs. It's nice that I can provide the



Photo: J.M.'s archive

M. J. (in the foreground) at an observation post, during deployment in the Afghan province of Logar. The province is located south of Kabul.

family, to buy the children what they need. So it's always a mixture of factors. But at the same time, before each foreign operation, I also consider the negatives. Especially the fact that you leave your family."

Interesting are M.J.'s memories of Afghan soldiers, with whom he underwent numerous trainings. "Their soldiers were the same reflection of the country and culture as the Czech soldiers were a reflection of ours. Everyone has it, his own national DNA. Generally, in Afghan culture, there is a need to survive. The country is soaked with conflicts, there were many occupying powers and they just wanted to live. Of course, they lacked a system of education, many soldiers

could not write, count, use instruments. But on the other hand, it was always about interpersonal relationships. You are either a proud white man trying to impose his truth on them, or a person who acts friendly and realizes that the land belongs only to them. Not to us, although we have better weapons and more money. They were different, but I respected them."

He is an experienced soldier and also a man with the ability to perceive things in a broader context, which corresponds to his opinion on the meaning of military operations of the Army of the Czech Republic in Afghanistan. "If I have to answer the question why we were here, it is because dozens of American soldiers

died in the Czech Republic when we needed their help. And hundreds of thousands died across Europe and Asia when the world needed it. I was in Afghanistan because they needed it."

By Andrej Halada, CAPT Pavel Stehlík

The story of M. J. was recorded within the oral history project *Memory of a Soldier – Stories of Foreign Operations*, focused on modern war veterans. The project, implemented by the Military History Institute Prague, focuses on the history of military missions and depicts the lives of Czech soldiers in foreign operations.

WE WERE THERE

INQUIRY: How twenty years in Afghanistan have changed us

Thousands of our soldiers have been deployed to Afghanistan in the last twenty years. These are thousands of stories, combat experiences, stress, new friendships or unusual work. Read the memories of some of them.

SSG Adam MACHÝČEK

7th Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2016–2017

I would go again. This is the first thing that comes to my mind when I remember my only deployment in a foreign mission in Afghanistan. It has enriched me in many ways. I got to know a different culture, a lot of new people from different parts of the world, made some good friends and strengthened family cohesion. I just won't forget that.

CAPT Martin KONVALINKA

2nd Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2014

The mission was a huge life experience for me. I could always count on my soldiers. I knew we could manage it together, in case of danger. We have become friends who stick together in every situation. When I was on a mission, I regarded impending danger as normal. But that day, when five of our friends died during a suicide attack, my life turned upside down. I began to appreciate my life much more, and I realized that it could have been me who would never return home to my family. Only after returning to the Czech Republic I realized what I had experienced and what could have happened to me in various situations. Thanks to my experience from Afghanistan, I have grown up, both militarily and humanly.

SSG Jaroslav MACH

3rd Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2014–2015; 12th Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2019

The first mission in Afghanistan was really important and crucial for me. I was newly promoted to the rank of sergeant and as relatively young, I was ordered at the same time to command the vehicle and three other soldiers on a combat mission. I almost always rode first in the platoon column. It was a difficult task for me. Thanks to a great team and especially the experience gained during training and preparation for the mission, we all managed it. Yes, there were a few moments during the mission when the soldier said to himself, "What the hell am I doing here?" After one incident (hitting my vehicle on a CWIED – Command Wire Improvised Explosive Device), for the first time in my life I realized what it's like when someone tries to kill you. It wasn't pleasant. But a professional soldier must be able to deal with it, hold on to the very end, regardless of the danger. I would also like to emphasize: all missions are the most difficult, especially for our wives, girlfriends, and immediate family. They are the main support of soldiers and often have to endure a great deal of stress.

WO Michal DOBEŠ

11th Representations, HQ, RS, 2020

I remember Afghanistan mainly thanks to an incredibly good group of people and our commander. I was in the task squad for psychological operations (CJPOTF – Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force) as the only Czech, the other boys were from Poland, America, Romania and Italy. Our commander was a member of SEAL. A really good guy who did everything for the team. Once he helped us fill our bags with sand, then in the evening we met at the burning barrel and talked into the night. And so it used to be for seven months. There was a lot of work, but when there is a good bunch, good coffee and a place to return to, it's worth it!

1LT Daniel PALUCHA

11th Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2018–2019

I put the maximum into preparation and I took also the maximum from the mission. Experiences, memories and great friendships. For me, money is in the last place, it is useless if you lose something irretrievably in the mission. In Afghanistan, thousands of kilometres away from home, we managed to put aside pettiness, our own ego, and focus on the task, which was partly helped by the explosion of a suicide bomber right at the beginning of our deployment. I never get tired of looking back at photos and videos of our crazy gang and reliving feelings of euphoria and fear, but mainly joy and friendship. So far it has been my best life experience.

SGT Oldřich NEHUDEK

7th Unit PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2010-2011

I have changed my view of our European lifestyle, I've gained great professional, but mainly life experience. I've realized the prosperity we live in. And many of us don't appreciate it at all!

SFC Václav KRÁL

3rd ACR Contingent, PRT, Fayzabad, ISAF, 2006

When I compare it to Kosovo, this was a real mission to me, where something really happened. Different and much more demanding environment, conditions. At that time, we drove in UAZ vehicles and in two LRDs, with removable canvas roof, on weekly patrols on "hills". And often we snore outside. One had great respect from the environment and the local people, who went through many wars. Right at the beginning of the mission, we adjusted and lightened the cars, so that there was enough room for a gunner and a heap of materiel in the back. Handy Czech hands. I remember most of the patrol to a distant district, when we went three days there and two days back, around the river. We drove through many villages. We slept mostly outside. In fact, you didn't get much sleep. Yes, we were scared, but we trusted each other, it was a great team where you could rely on everyone.









MSG Jiří JONÁŠ**12th Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2019**

In Afghanistan, I understood the true meaning of practised tactics and drills. You simply test some theoretically acquired experience in practice. The deployment by itself was psychologically demanding for my whole family and my loved ones. I did realize how great people I have around me. I was surprised at how easily my body adapted to the local climate. Cooperation with members of other armies was also a good experience.

MSG František NĚMEC**2nd ACR Contingent, Uruzgan, ISAF, 2009; 9th Unit, PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2012; 4th Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2015**

I remember flying to Logar when Colonel Procházka said several farewell words to us. My comrade-in-arms and I were the last to board a plane in Prague. Colonel Procházka shook everyone's hand. At the end stopped at our side, looked at us, and said: "Good luck, boys, you'll need it!" We automatically recalled the movie Black Hawk Down, General Garrison, as he told the lads the same thing before departure for action. We said to ourselves: Why we, why did he say that, does he know more? And all his words were really fulfilled... During the deployment, several times we got into combat situations and fortunately we were lucky. We all returned to our families at home.

MSG Pavel BRODŇAN**1st MAT Unit, Wardak, ISAF, 2013**

For me, being employed in Afghanistan meant a change in my view of the words like security and freedom. A change in my perception of ordinary everyday moments, such as the smile of my wife and my daughters. I remember Afghanistan as a beautiful country. The local people certainly left not only many bad memories in my head, but also a lot of good memories.

CLP David GOINÝ**7th Unit, PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2010-2011; 5th Guard Company, BAF, RSM, 2016**

From a professional point of view, working in Afghanistan helped me to gain confidence in many practiced drills and skills that are difficult to simulate in times of peace. The mission moved me forward and I learned the importance of communicating in English. Afghanistan has changed my outlook on life.

MSG Romana ŠMEJKALOVÁ**17th ACR Task Force, RS, 2018**

I left on a mission with a heavy heart because I left my four-year-old son at home. I spent most of my work at Kabul Airport by asset accounting. The most difficult moments met us on August 5, 2018, and the following few days later. The loss of our comrades-in-arms in Bagram was a huge blow to everyone. Despite these bad events, however, I like to remember the activities in the mission. I gained a lot of new experiences and friends there.

LTC Vít DUCHÁČEK**3rd Contingent, PRT, ISAF, 2008**

I was employed in Logar. I participated in the planning and management of the activities of the units of the Provincial Reconstruction Team. There was the chance to get acquainted with the planning and implementation of operations, in the Czech

Contingent and our international partners, especially with the US 10th Mountain Division. Every foreign deployment broadened my horizons, strengthened friendships. Such deployment allows you to think on a wider spectrum, not only at a battalion level. It teaches us to make quick and flexible decisions.

WO Leoš VALTA**2nd OMLT Contingent, ISAF, 2011**

I remember Afghanistan from two perspectives. The first: it is an invaluable opportunity (but not always welcome) to gain practical experience in conducting combat operations against enemy militants. Whether it was a direct engagement against our unit, or the removal of booby traps that were prepared against coalition troops. I also really appreciate the opportunity to gain experience in a small group of soldiers and to verify that perfect coordination and trust must always work. With the team we created, I would go anytime and anywhere. The second and very painful look is that this mission took one of my best friends. A member of the 73rd Tank Bn SFC Vyroubal (2LT In Memoriam). Equally painful loss was the death of a friend SFC Adrian Werner (2LT In Memoriam), who was certainly the same personality with the 71st Mech Bn.

SGT Vojtěch VOŽDA**1st Guard Company, BAF, ISAF, 2013–2014**

I take this period as a positive experience. Although my wife left me due to my long involvement abroad and we were subsequently divorced. Overall, I came out more careful and more mature, which helped me in my career and in the next life.

CAPT Vladimír PÁNEK**1st MAT Unit, Logar, ISAF, 2013**

Afghanistan is a very rugged but interesting country. As part of a ten-hour infantry transfer in full ballistic protection, with a weapon and a rucksack of backup materiel (I weigh 105 kg, so I went into operation with a total weight of 137 kg), in full summer, a person is able to sweat five litres of water. But in the evening, when the sun sets, you are getting cold, because the cold air from the mountains blows. I was impressed by the mountains around the province's plateau — we were at 2,000 metres and the mountains rose to 3,500–4,000 metres. In spring, when the first flowers were in blossom on the plain, but the mountains were covered with snow! Working in Afghanistan has brought me a lot of experience. Mainly military: preparation for the operation, real combat contact, and at the end of the so-called debrief. Also human experience: ways of surviving in the harshest conditions, how much can be built with minimum resources, and the fact that they have been practicing this in the same way, without any change, for hundreds of years. And finally, ethical and moral experience: friendship in a community of people, which is sometimes more than subordination, ie relation subordinate vs superior.

CPL Lukáš BÁRTFAY**12th Guard Company, BAF, RS, 2019**

I got a different view of this country. The contrast of the lives of ordinary people, from living in tents with cattle, through kalats, up to splendid villas. I remember the local kids playing in the field, while we crouching down in bomb shelter, across the field, waiting for the end of rocket attack.

MAJ Lada FERKÁLOVÁ

5th ACR Contingent, PRT, Fayzabad, 2007; 4th Contingent, PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2009-2010; 7th Unit, PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2011

Afghanistan means 21 months of my life full of hard work in difficult climatic conditions, the continuous feeling of danger, separation from loved ones, pain from the loss of my comrades-in-arms. But it was also 21 months that gave me a huge work and professional experience and determination, I met new friends and gained faith in myself, my comrades-in-arms, and what we do. All the time I tried to understand the local mentality and countless times I admired their joy of living in conditions that are completely unimaginable for us. All this together taught me mainly humility to live.

2LT Martin REJŠEK

13th Guard Company, BAF, RS, 2019–2020

Thanks to my specialization (CIMIC, civil-military cooperation), I struggled with some non-military problems and perceived the suffering of ordinary people in the war gears. I tried to do everything to help to reduce it and also ensure a higher level of safety for my comrades. There are many memories from the mission. Some are good, others are not. But I always come to the conclusion that it made sense. Looking back, I also realize again and again how much my loved ones had to do during my absence. I tip my hat deeply in front of them.

MSG Tomáš SÖLÖŠI

5th ACR Contingent, PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2010; 4th OMLT Unit, ISAF, 2012; 3rd Guard Company BAF, RS, 2014–2015

I always image first the 4th OMLT 2012, in which I had the chance and honour to participate, with comrades-in-arms and, at the same time, my best friends. This foreign operation in the style of "whatever you do, that's what you have" is probably the most for me. An unforgettable adventure with a higher degree of risk, in a sense freedom and experiences with friends that will connect us for life.

SSG Richard VONDRÁŠEK

3rd Guard Company, BAF, RS, 2014–2015

My first feeling of being assigned to the mission was all sorts of things, I only knew it from recounting and various documents. Until you know it for yourself, you don't even know what it's all about. I mostly worked as a scout during patrols, so from my point of view, a lot of experience and responsibility. The local population was divided into several blocks, some welcomed us and were friendly, but the others may not like to see us, which we often recognized by stoning our vehicles. What I liked most about the mission was that we performed a lot of operations for which it was unable to prepare at home. Often you had to make immediate decisions and proceed in a way so that nothing could happen to anyone.

SGT Štěpán BRICÍN

13th Guard Company, BAF, RS, 2019–2020

I have to thank you for the opportunity to go to a foreign operation and be there with the boys. I wouldn't trade any of them. My memories are now a bit spoiled by the sight of released photos of an abandoned and devastated base, taken after the withdrawal of coalition forces. We lived there a piece of life and at the same time

we left a piece of ourselves there as well – it is the same with each of those, who were there. Thanks to our deployment and a team, we have grown together, not only professionally, but also humanly. Only in comparison to the reality we saw there, you can realize how well we are at home.

CPL Jiří ZACPÁLEK

12th Guard Company BAF, RS, 2019

My mission in Afghanistan have changed me a lot, but what it gave me the most is pride and love for the Czech Republic. The lives of the people in Afghanistan showed me how well we are here. Luckily, my mission went smoothly, without major incidents – except for frequent rocket attacks on the base and the feeling that something might happen in a moment. That was crazy.

CAPT Jiří MAGERSTEIN

5th ACR Contingent, PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2010; 1st Guard Company, BAF, ISAF, 2013–2014; 12th Guard Company, BAF, RS, 2019

I experienced a suicide attack on one of our platoons while patrolling. After returning to base, I decided to wait for a platoon at one of the entrance gates. I expected shocked and tired soldiers, but the opposite was true. Soldiers dismounted from the vehicles and joked with each other, despite the seriousness of the situation. Paradoxically, this event calmed me down – we were ready for all crisis situations, mentally resilient, always ready to support each other.

1LT Lubomír VYSLOUŽIL

12th Guard Company BAF, RS, 2019

I remember Afghanistan as a comprehensive test of my knowledge and skills. In a real conflict, mistakes cannot be "cleared", either you know it and can do it, or you can't.

1LT Rudolf NEČAS

5th ACR Contingent, PRT, Logar, ISAF, 2011

Afghanistan was my second mission after a very long time. I was partially prepared to be separated from my family, but this time I left my wife and 15-month-old daughter at home. The departure and farewell were the hardest... I took the mission as a valuable experience in an environment where, unlike training, there are no second chances.

CPL Jakub ŠKOLNÍK

5th ACR Contingent ISAF PRT Logar, 2011

I remember the mission in Afghanistan in a good way, even though I was shot in the leg. For me as a soldier, it was a huge experience that I drew on in my next military career.

SSG Radek VAREČKA

6th Guard Company, BAF, RS, 2016; 3rd Support and Influence Unit, Logar, RS, 2019–2020

I joined the paratroopers when we lost five soldiers in Afghanistan. This motivated me even more so that I could one day stand in desert camouflage at the Bagram base, to follow the legacy of our veterans and honour the flag on my left shoulder. I think that every soldier who entered this hot dusty ground, who was lucky to return home safely to his family, he must appreciate that he lives in a safe country like ours.

WHAT WE SERVED WITH



Photo: Jana Deckerová

MOTOR POOL, ARMAMENT, OUTFIT

A soldier without weapons and equipment and an army without technical means cannot exist. We present to you a part of what the soldiers of the Czech army could not do without in Afghanistan. When coming to the country, some weapons remembered even the period before 1989, but when leaving in 2021, the Army of the Czech Republic had often the most modern equipment available today. Everything helped to protect lives and fulfil given tasks, professionally and with confidence.

Land vehicles: from UAZs to MRAPs

In previous armed conflicts, as far as heavy military equipment is concerned, the protection against explosive devices was not a priority. However, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that in a changed environment, booby-trap explosive devices cause a large part of the losses. Both conflicts belong among typical asymmetric wars we face now around the world. It is a clash between parties whose military strength and strategy differ significantly: on the one hand, there is a modern regular army, on the other hand, it is a guerrilla way of fighting, usually based on avoiding direct combat and preferring attacks, with the use of booby-trapped systems. To attack allies, the Taliban also often used suicide bombers or improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The Czech army experienced attacks of this sort, unfortunately, including live casualties.

The beginnings of our deployment in Afghanistan were accompanied by the famous cross-country vehicle, Soviet UAZ 469, the production of which began in 1971. This vehicle was later replaced by more modern army Land Rovers and Toyota Land Cruiser cars, used worldwide. Toyota cars have served our soldiers for decades and, thanks to their reliability and high off-road capability, they did them a great service. Probably the best known was their hardened white version. They ensured not only the classic operation at the bases, delivery of materiel, supplies, but also, for example, postal services. However, the Toyota crews were not properly protected. This was also the same case with Land Rover cars, which are used today by

our soldiers only in the Czech Republic. But these cars were also deployed in Afghanistan territory.

The safety of the soldiers cannot be underestimated, and therefore the loan of American Humvee cars (HMMWV) in 2008 was an important step. Thanks to their robustness, vehicles provide sufficient ballistic protection, as well as the necessary space. Czechs borrowed Humvee cars from the US military, and their four-year deployment in the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Logar was a real shift in the protection of soldiers. This was followed by Iveco armoured cars (2010–2020) and several German-Dingo cars (until 2013).

In Afghanistan we deployed even heavy motor pool, with better protection and better firepower, in order to protect the bases in Logar. At first, they were again old cars of Soviet origin, specifically infantry combat vehicles BVP-2 (from 2008). These were replaced in the years 2011–2013 by four pieces of Pandur, a wheeled infantry combat vehicle.

The key vehicle for soldiers abroad, deployed in dangerous areas, became a car of MRAP category (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected), which provided protection against mines and fire. These vehicles, which the Czech army used in 2010–2021, protected the lives of many soldiers. The MRAP car gradually became an imaginary technical symbol of the war in Afghanistan, always with Czech national flag on radiator grilles, stuck to these thirteen-ton cars.

Mi-171Š helicopter

The Czech Army's aircraft deployed in Afghanistan could be represented by a Mi-171Š helicopter, which assisted in the transport of people and materiel, including members of the US Special Forces and soldiers of other task forces. The reliable Russian-made aircraft was technically developed in the early 1960s and is still used in fifty countries around the world.

The upgraded version of the Mi-171Š is powered by two powerful TV3-117VM engines, with improved characteristics when operating at high altitudes or in environments with high air temperatures – which was the case in Afghanistan. Thanks to the deployment in Afghanistan, a number of improvements were made. The rear cargo deck was modified, a number of passive protection elements were installed (eg false targets FLARE), and the helicopter was also equipped with a thermal imaging equipment FLIR (Forward Looking InfraRed). The Mi-171Š helicopter was equipped with a radio with an encryption module for communication according to NATO standards.

In connection with the operational deployment of helicopter units in Afghanistan, the Czech Army's helicopter crew was also expanded by two positions for air gunners. Newly composed crews significantly extended combat capabilities of our units during the mission. Such robust and versatile aircraft was deployable day and night and even in degraded climatic conditions. It was able to



operate very reliably at high altitudes, in inhospitable environment of Afghanistan.

Helicopters of the same provenance – Mi-17 and also Mi-24 – were donated by the Czech Republic in 2007 to the Afghan National Army. After that, as part of the Air Advisory Team (AAT) mission, the Czech Army for a long time provided training for pilots and technicians of the Afghan Air Force. Over the years, our mentors trained Afghan ground and flying personnel, so that they were able to perform operational tasks by themselves, independently.



Small arms: from SA-58s to BREN-2s

The development of small arms underwent a number of changes from 2001, when the Allies began to be involved in Afghanistan. From the start of our deployment, the main weapon of soldiers was the famous Czechoslovak assault rifle SA model 58, which had been in the arsenal of our army from the turn of the 50s and 60s of the last century. The need for its replacement was given both by modernization needs (expansion of using weapon accessories and the transition to a standardized calibre), and above all by the effort to unify the calibre of weapons within the Alliance. In Afghanistan, NATO used 5.56 mm ammunition, assault rifle 58, however, has a calibre of 7.62 mm.

For these reasons, the BREN A1 assault rifle produced by Česká zbrojovka has been used since 2012. Towards the end of the Czech army's operation in Afghanistan, it was gradually replaced by the most modern version of the CZ BREN 2. Unlike the previous version, it is lighter and more compatible with weapon accessories used in NATO armies. For example, the interchangeable magazine housing is compatible with AR-15 weapons. Last but not least, the modern optics of the BREN rifle also significantly increased the combat effectiveness of an infantryman.

The first short small handgun used by our army in Afghanistan was a pistol model 82. It is a design of Česká zbrojovka, manufactured from the year 1983. It was replaced by the legendary CZ-75 pistol, 9 mm calibre. Together with Glock-17 pistol, they both belonged to permanent and reliable equipment. In recent years, the armament has been changed and each soldier was equipped with a CZ 75 SP-01 Phantom pistol, with a polymer frame (as with Glock pistols).

Czech soldiers also used hand-held anti-tank weapons and grenade launchers. Small anti-tank weapons were represented by rocket-propelled grenade launcher RPG-7, with

modified thermobaric and anti-infantry ammunition, which was subsequently supplemented by Carl-Gustav 84 mm M 3a recoilless rifle, with a wide range of ammunition designed to destroy heavy armoured vehicles and hardened buildings. Grenade launchers were represented by a 30 mm automatic grenade launcher AGS-17, which was complemented by new underbarrel grenade launchers, calibre 40 mm, add on the assault rifle BREN.

The snipers used mainly a reliable rifle from the production of the Finnish arms factory Sako, model TRG 22, which has an effective range of 800 meters. Experienced snipers can use it at even greater distances.

As for the machine-guns, it is necessary to mention the FN MINIMI machine-gun. For the first time it was first introduced in 1974. This machine-gun was developed in Belgium and at present it is used not only by the Czech army but also by the armies of the USA, Great Britain, Canada, Belgium or Italy. The Czech Army mainly uses the 7.62x51 calibre version, with a cadence of up to 800 rounds per minute.





Helmet

The ballistic helmet protects the soldiers from bullets, shrapnel and various fragments of material. It is a necessary equipment for a soldier. In Afghanistan, Czech soldiers used a whole range of helmets, almost a dozen different models.

At first, it was a protective armoured helmet Kirasa-BŠ-E (2002–2010), but it did not offer too high a level of ergonomics or user comfort. The installation of accessories, such as night vision devices or headphones, was difficult. Gradually, the soldiers began to use other types. Since 2014, it was a protective ballistic helmet for paratroopers, another type was the RBR SF MACH helmet, in use since 2017. In 2018, these helmets ended their service life, and so they were replaced by a new type of Air Frame Helmet. At the same time, the FAST XP ballistic helmet was introduced, suitable for airborne operations, which was used by members of the 601st Special Forces Group.

In the last phase of our operations in Afghanistan, soldiers used protective ballistic helmets 2017 (introduced in 2021). Almost the entire army is now equipped with them, and this helmet is also gradually introduced into the Active Reserve. Unlike previous helmets, the FAST XP has side rails and a front fastening system. The side rails can be used for a flashlight, camera and other equipment, the front mount is designed for a night vision system, for example the MUM type.

Unmanned aerial vehicles

A modern battlefield cannot do without drones, and Afghanistan is no exception. In foreign operations in Afghanistan, the Czech army, for the first time, deployed unmanned aerial vehicles Raven, Skylark and ScanEagle. They helped the Czech soldiers in surveying the terrain and also accompanied the patrols protecting Bagram base. The ScanEagle became an imaginary air eye that watched over this largest air base in Afghanistan.

The ScanEagle does not carry weapons, it is designed primarily for intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance tasks, the so-called ISR (Intelligence, Reconnaissance and Surveillance). In practice, this means, among other things, that it can provide real-time video output to the unit commander or the command post. The Czech Army first received the unmanned system ScanEagle as a gift from the USA in the fight on terrorism, which was followed by the purchase of additional unmanned aerial vehicles. Their use is also



possible in the Czech Republic - not only for training, but also in an integrated rescue system, such as monitoring natural disasters, industrial accidents or social events of political and international importance.



Plate carrier vs ballistic vests

The ballistic vest or anti-fragmentation vest protects individuals. As in the case of helmets, first the old bulletproof armoured vest Kirasa-L was originally used at the beginning of deployment. It provided sufficient protection, but as part of the innovation, the

SAPV06 vest and the protective steel vest 09 BP-SPR began to be used. Both were equipped with a universal carrier with the possibility of attaching modular accessories, which include bags, admin panels, etc.

Concurrently with vests, panel carriers are becoming popular. They allow soldiers not only a variable arrangement of armament support, but also several various accessories. Even though the carriers do not have as wide protective coverage of body as vests, they are more flexible in use and, above all, much lighter. At the beginning of deployment in Afghanistan, the soldiers wore NPP-06 steel panel carriers, however, they have been discarded for several years now, because they reached the end of their service life. Alongside with them, other types of ballistic protection equipment were also used. Since 2017, the Army of the Czech Republic has been using universal ballistic protective vests, which soldiers wore when they were in Afghanistan. In the same year, soldiers in Afghanistan were also equipped with soldier plate carrier system SPCS Magnum TAC-1, the carrier used by US Army soldiers. The TAC-1 is an imaginary link between a vest and a plate carrier.



Pyrotechnic equipment

In Afghanistan, among the biggest threats were Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The danger waited on the roads, in the countryside, but also in the villages and towns. The deployment of pyrotechnics with sophisticated equipment was a necessity.

Above all, pyrotechnic equipment included a bomb suit EOD-8 (Explosive Ordnance Disposal), as well as its newer versions EOD-9 and EOD-10. They are manufactured by the Canadian company Med-Eng. The suit consists of a coat (aka jacket), trousers, and

a special helmet. To some extent, it protects against the effects of an explosion, such as pressure, heat, fragments or splinters. The coat is equipped with Kevlar plates, which protect the vital organs of a trunk. The trousers include a spine protector, as well as knee protection and shin braces, which enable to operate in a kneeling position. In hot weather, there could be installed internal cooling. When searching for and destroying IEDs, pyrotechnicians also used various types of robots to search for and destroy. The first one was bomb disposal robot "tEODor". It was later replaced by a mobile unit more suitable for Afghan environment, Talon robot, made by the American company Foster-Miller. Talon is lighter, moves on belts and is able to overcome even more demanding terrain. It can move in water, mud, snow, sand. It is controlled remotely up to a distance of one kilometre, according to the surrounding terrain. The main means of transport for vehicle patrols used by Czech pyrotechnics was a vehicle MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles), Cougar JERRV variant. It differed from "conventional" MRAPs in their higher resistance to the effects of the explosion and by its equipment, such as a telescopic gyroscopic camera, which was located at the rear of the vehicle. Thanks to the work of our specialists, many human lives have been saved, not only from the ranks of the coalition forces, but also from the civilian population.

Communication systems

Czech soldiers used a number of means of communication. At the beginning, these were RF-13 radios from the Czech manufacturer DICOM, which in 2012 were replaced by radio sets from Motorola, L3Harris and Thales. L3Harris and Thales stations use cryptographic algorithms certified not only by the American National Security Agency (NSA), but also by the Czech national agency NÚKIB (National Cyber and Information Security Agency). The radio stations allow operation in classified modes up to the level of "NATO secret", "mission secret", and currently also "national secret". Hence these radios have become a universal tool, with an extraordinary level of sophistication, in terms of secure and reliable connection for deployed units. Due to their versatility, the same type can be used by ordinary soldiers in the field, air controllers, specialists of individual branches of armed forces, or provide communication with command posts. Within the ACR, the shift in terms of tactical radio communication was striking, satellite communication in the field significantly increased the ability to command and control in the operation. Initially they were VSAT systems, later the military satellite system MILSATCOM.



Means of electronic warfare

In Afghanistan we deployed electronic warfare devices made in the Czech Republic. They protected both our and the Alliance's soldiers. We are talking about RCIED Manpack jammer systems that protected dismounted foot elements. LOV STAR V protective jammers, or

jammers STAR LIGHT that protected individual vehicles. They all were able to protect entire column formations.

Furthermore, in Afghanistan, there was used the Mobile Electronic Combat Kit (MKEB), which enabled advanced signal analysis in the electromagnetic spectrum, with the support of the LOV MPRS. This allowed targeting dangerous signals, within moving columns, or at the base.

These elements of combat support significantly increased the protection of deployed units against radio controlled improvised explosive devices (RC IED systems), and at the same time to verify in practice products manufactured in the Czech Republic. It has proved that our Czech technology, created in cooperation between state-owned enterprises, is comparable to the world level. Advanced analysis and research of the radio spectrum made possible to increase capabilities in the field of electronic warfare and intelligence.



Identification tag

Each soldier has identifiers at his disposal, which are called in military jargon "dog tags". Even with these small and simple elements we can see a gradual development. Practical experience

with the use of military documents and Identification tags (Id tags), especially in foreign operations, disclosed the need to update them and align them with international standards.

At the beginning of the deployment in Afghanistan, the soldier had only one tag: a small square plate. It showed the abbreviation of the Czech Republic in the form of CZ and the personal number of a soldier, or birth number of reserve soldiers. The new tags are now larger and two, which is standard in NATO armies. The soldier's number and the abbreviation CZE are engraved on them again, as well as the name and surname. The Id tag also contains information on blood type and RH factor. In the event of a soldier's injury, it facilitates a rapid blood transfusion.

Medical equipment

In addition to weapons, the soldier's equipment also includes a personal first aid kit, which has acquired its standard in the form of the soldier's individual medical equipment (INLEK). As to other medical equipment, the soldier has always a compression bandage (tourniquet) with him.

In each patrol, there was a specialist with the occupational speciality of CLS (Combat Life Saver), whose task was to treat his comrades-in-arms and prepare them for possible transport to a medical facility. For this purpose, he completed a medical course. His accoutrements differ from an ordinary soldier, mainly by the so-called CLS kit, which contains all necessary equipment to provide urgent medical care. The kit contains compression bandages, surgical dressing, splints, decompression needles, isothermal foils, medicines including morphine and other medical supplies, up to the TCCC card, which records the necessary data about the soldier's wounds for further treatment. Because the situation sometimes requires the treatment of several soldiers at once, the CLS specialist has also triage labels or triage tapes of various colours, for classification of the wounded, according to the severity of the wounded.



Things of a personal nature, talismans

Soldiers operating in a foreign mission are far from their families, loved ones, friends. Although today we have a comfortable connection to the world, through modern means of communication, there are various talismans that help soldiers to overcome their separation. Somebody has a pendant, another a plush toy, some a small item donated by his loved ones. Some take a book to the mission, some a rosary or a bible. What matters is the importance of the talisman. All these little things are supposed to bring the holder a memory of home, but also to ensure happiness and health.



To protect and fight

In addition to ballistic protection, helmets and weapon systems, ie short and long firearms, the soldier also has a sufficient supply of ammunition. It has the so-called throw-away bag, a bag for empty magazines, further there are durable gloves, a knife, possibly a repair kit, a scarf (aka shemagh), elbow and knee protectors and, last but not least, glasses or a night vision system. There is also the so-called camelbag, which is a water backpack, then medical gear, as well as a compression bandage (tourniquet). Thanks to progress in the development of materials and ballistic protection, it is possible to carry more ammunition, or even more water – this was a necessity in Afghanistan. Of course, the equipment and suitable footgear are a part of it. The so-called Meals Ready to Eat, BDP (combat food ration) also underwent certain development. Instead of canned pork, soldiers in foreign operations are today equipped with packages of meal of high nutritional quality and a satisfactory dose of food.

by: RED,
photo: General Staff Archive

TOO MANY EYES THAT CAN'T SEE

Ophthalmologist LTC Veronika Poláčková worked in a foreign operation of the Army of the Czech Republic in Afghanistan, at the turn of 2013/2014. As a specialist, she worked at a hospital at the Kabul Base, at the local airport, where she was a member of the Czech Field Surgical Team at a hospital run by the French. "I've always wanted to go to a foreign operation, it's part of a soldier's experience," says Veronika Poláčková.

How did you feel when you got off the plane and first stood on Afghan soil?

I was hit by heat. It was hot, heavy air. In the Czech Republic, there was already autumn, but in Kabul it was the end of summer. The sun shines in Kabul for most of the year, but the city lies in a valley, in a smog, and under smoke haze. The sky is blue from the plane or from the mountains, but a black cloud is rolling below and you can feel a stinky odour, because the locals burn absolutely everything.

Then I remember the picture of our quartering. For military conditions, well, we had good conditions, a brick building, rooms of three... But everything was empty, austere, almost like in prison. I asked myself: what am I doing here? You enjoy freedom and suddenly you lose it. For four months I will move in a very narrow area, between the quarters, hospital, mess, and the gym. No family. Moreover, I did not undergo joint training, they assigned me in a team at the last minute. I didn't know what kind of people I would be there with; they may be nice, but you can have problems

with them for months. That's why it hit me hard the first day.

When did this feeling change, when did it disappear?

Fortunately, very quickly. You have a job where you spend a lot of time. Time there runs at a completely different pace, also relationships develop differently, they have completely different dynamics. It's not like when you're at work for eight hours and then you go home, to your own world. You are with your closest colleagues, 24 hours a day. After a week, I felt that I had known them all for years and that I had been there for an awful long time. There were eleven of us within the Czech field surgical team, then also other Czechs: helicopter pilots, support team. A total of about eighty people.

Try to roughly describe your ordinary day...

I got up at seven in the morning, first I had breakfast, then the consulting room or the operating theatre until twelve o'clock, then an

hour or two for lunch break – the French don't eat in a hurry. After lunch, the consulting room again, until five in the afternoon. Then I went to do some PT in the gym, for an hour, and then I had dinner. For personal things, there was a little time in the evening. Six days a week, one day off, mostly Friday, which was a day of rest for Afghans. On Sundays, we usually worked only in the morning.

How often have you been in contact with loved ones at home?

If possible, every day. At that time I had a five-year-old son, so I wanted to communicate with him.

What was going on inside you when you decided to go on a mission and knew you were leaving a small child at home?

Honzík was always independent, so I knew that he would manage it. Before I left, I made him a diary, I came up with a task for him every day, wrote a small note, a message, and that I also think of him. The opposite page of

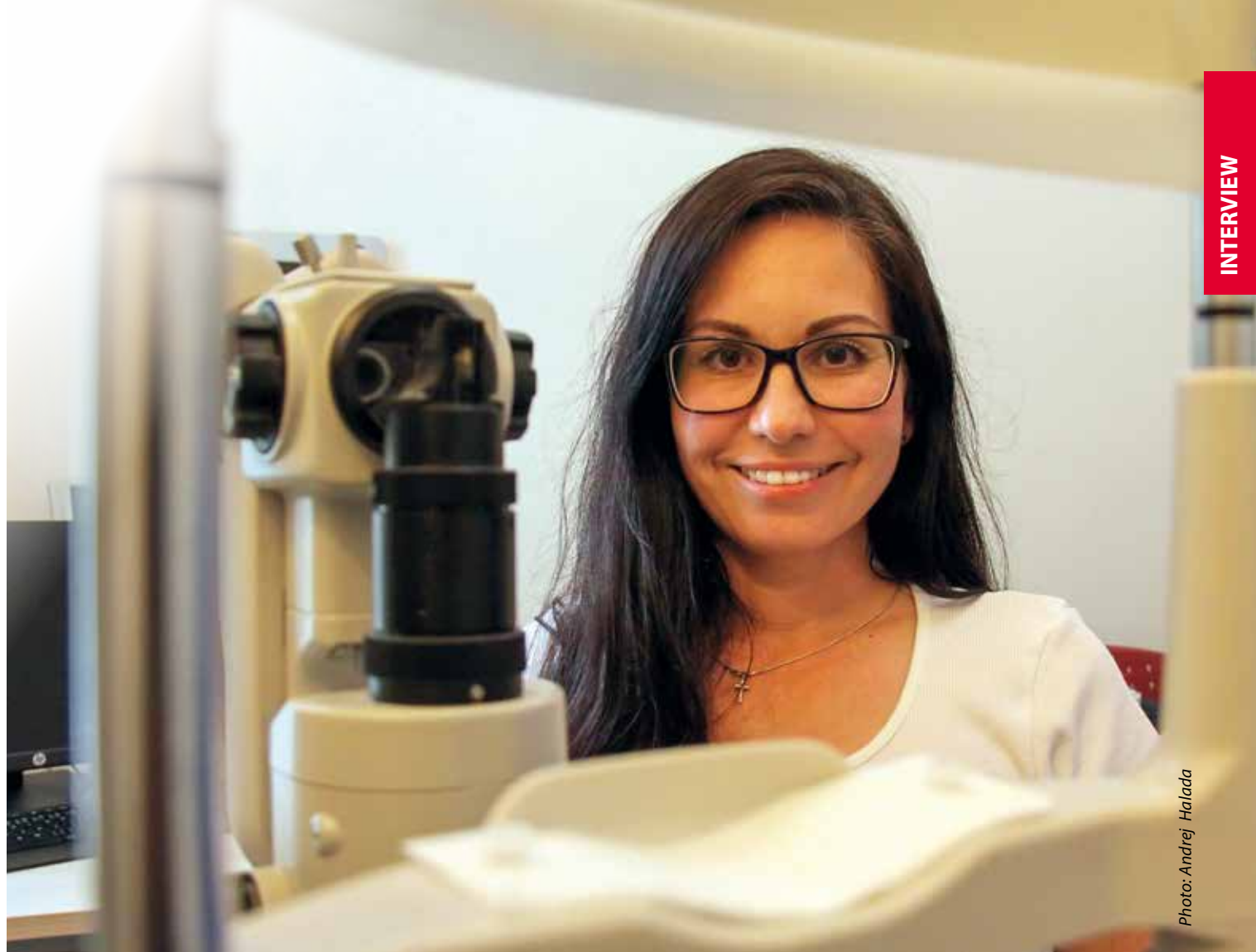


Photo: Andrej Halada

Veronika Poláčková now works at the Institute of Aviation Medicine, as the main expert of the Army of the Czech Republic in the field of aeromedical medicine

the diary was empty, there he painted how he spent the day. Sometimes he didn't enjoy talking to me on Skype, so he just called to his grandmother from a distance: "Tell my mother I'm unavailable." It was hard for me, but it was better than see him crying, because he missed a mom. He handled the separation well. We did not want to exclude him from the environment to which he was accustomed, out of his kindergarten, so my parents moved in to our flat at that time. My husband is also a soldier, he served in Vyškov and went home on weekends.

Have you seen Afghanistan closer? Did you get out at all – to Kabul or elsewhere?

Unfortunately not, all activities were at the base. But you get in touch with patients. We took care of the coalition troops and the Afghan population. They went for examinations and operations.

What problems and difficulties did they suffer from, most often?

Coalition troops had acute complications: inflammation or minor injuries. Once it

was the retinal detachment of a civilian contractor, he was sent home. Czechs also went to preventive examinations, which they neglected at home, so I prescribed a lot of glasses.

For Afghans, it was often an investigation into the consequences of the accident. I never saw so many eye injuries in my life. Most of them were the consequences of a knife injury, often from childhood, caused by careless handling or during children's games. Similar wounds would have been cured in our country, with a promising result. But in Afghanistan, you do not have sufficient facilities for more complex operations and long-term postoperative care is lacking as well. When proposing treatment, you must take into account that when you send a patient for operation in Pakistan or India, where the level of ophthalmology is high, the family must pay for all the care, and this can ruin them.

Somebody came only for advice, sometimes we could help practically. We provided all care free, so there was a lot of interest in it. We operated cataracts, sometimes tumours.

We operated cataracts, sometimes tumours. All were in much more advanced states than in our country. With us, I never have a chance to know what I saw in Afghanistan. It was a huge professional experience.



Photo: Archive of Veronika Poláčková

Dr. Poláčková (left) in the operating theatre, during tear duct surgery of an Afghan patient

All were in much more advanced states than in our country. With us, I would never have a chance to know what I saw there. It was a huge professional experience. In the West, people come to the eye doctor much earlier, in Afghanistan it takes them several years, until they completely lose their sight. We could only provide medication for a limited time, up to a month. European medicines are extremely appreciated on the Afghan black market, and if they got medicines for a long time, they would sell them because they need money. For some diseases, such as glaucoma, medication for a month does not solve anything, because eye diseases require long-term treatment and regular monitoring.

What were the local people like? How did you perceive them?

I was surprised by women. When they put down the burka, they were mostly neat and nice. Not all women wore burkas, some wore only a headscarf. On the contrary, the men did not look neat. Both men and women looked much older than they were, and their teeth were in a rather miserable condition. In winter, they only wore light boots or slippers, usually

Afghanistan is a country of male dominance, because women play a minor role. When you have to take care of them, it is like skating on very thin ice.

barefoot. In fact, our patients were more from the poorer classes, the richer ones could pay for medical care elsewhere.

When you examined women in burkas, did they take them off?

Yes, it must be done during an eye examination. I'm a woman, so it was much easier. The female patient's husband always remained during the examination. Yet, women and children went to the surgery much less than men.

How did you perceive the position of women in Afghanistan and what about you, as a woman, within coalition armies?

Afghanistan is a country of male dominance; women play a minor role. When you have to

take care of them, it is like skating on very thin ice. Many things that seem obvious to me as a Western woman are for them completely unacceptable. And they are very sensitive to that. Once I needed a female patient to read something, to examine her visual acuity. I asked her if she could read, I meant Latin, not their script. The husband replied offendedly, "Of course she can read." Finally, we had to use simple symbols – rotated rings to know how she could see. As for the Western armies, women in missions are in the spotlight. What is overlooked in male soldiers is immediately seen in a woman. If you want to do something as a woman, you have to be better than others. You can't afford to make a mistake. And certainly not too much affection for someone else.

Do you remember any non-standard medical case which you dealt with?

A relatively young man arrived with a tumour over one eye, so large that the eye was invisible. I don't understand how he could have lived with this in previous years. My colleagues removed his tumour, but we could no longer provide him with further care. He received samples from us to arrange histology at an Afghan hospital. This is really the most difficult: in this country, there is a lack of continuity of care, you cannot complete the treatment as it should.

Have you experienced a really difficult crisis situation?

Before Christmas, when some Czechs were returning home, there was an attack on the base. There were a lot of alarms, but often we didn't even know about them, we worked in a hardened building. This time I was just having breakfast, there was a huge bang and everything was shaking. They all tossed trays of food and lay down on the floor. In a moment like this, you don't know what will happen if someone runs in there and starts shooting. I didn't even have a gun with me, because we were not allowed to carry it in the hospital. They did not call off the alarm and already they called me to the hospital. As I walked alone, through the depopulated base, I was envious of those who flew home that day. I was really scared.

Were you worried about yourself or that your son might lose his mom?

I did not think so far. I knew my son was safe at home. I was worried about myself and how it would end. Whether someone broke into the base or whether the attack was repulsed. It turned out to be a suicide bomber who drove a car full of explosives into a rampart at the base. Fortunately, no one got inside. But there were the wounded, as a pressure wave knocked some people down.

What were the relations between the coalition troops?

Completely friendly, I don't remember any conflict. The French soon discovered that our anaesthesiology and scrub nurses were priceless, because the nurse was giving him the instrument as soon as he thought he might need it. There weren't many Slovaks there, but sometimes we regularly met them in a mess hall. Once we heard an explosion



Admission of wounded soldiers to the emergency room in the Kabul hospital, where Czech soldiers also worked. The basic element was to determine the exact diagnosis (Dr. Poláčková on the right, in uniform)

from a place, where the boys were, the boys with whom we had lunch at noon. It hit you hard. How close death is. You're having fun with someone and he's not alive in an hour.

When you had half the mission behind you, were you already looking home?

Of course, I was looking forward to going home, but I still liked it there. I found my regime and tried to make the most of my stay. To learn as much as possible, to meet new people and also improve my physical condition. I was surprised how quickly time passed – on the one hand, I would like to stay there a few weeks longer, but I already missed my son. Afghanistan is a dangerous but beautiful country. The mountains are beautiful. My friends showed me photos, videos – there are also a lot of places that are green, not just rocky.

If you were to mention the greatest benefits and importance of your stay in Afghanistan for you – what would it be?

I always thought it was hard for me to make friends. There I found out that I could quickly fit into the community. I also managed to stay for a long time in such a small area. On twelve square metres, three girls at once, 24 hours a day. I learned to appreciate ordinary things, a normal life. I'm glad I don't have to worry every day that my kids get into a skirmish or step on a mine on the way home from school. I also realized that I could work in an international team, but at the same time I would not want to go abroad to work permanently. I also don't want to convince

others that even though I'm from the East, I'm pretty good.

And one personal thing: my dream was flying; I went to study military medicine in order to do aeronautical medicine. After graduating, I moved a bit away from aviation, but the months spent at Kabul Airport reminded me of the smell of airplanes. And that it missed me terribly. Immediately after returning, I began to seek a position at the Institute of Aviation Medicine (ÚLZ). After a year, I succeeded. Thanks to the support of the ÚLZ, the military sent me to study aerospace medicine at King's College in London. Now I am not only a qualified aeromedical examiner, but also a chief expert of the Army of the Czech Republic in the field of aeromedicine. That's probably the most important thing the mission has given me. The courage to change the specialization and fulfil my dreams.

Would you like to go on a military mission again?

If I had to go with the same team, then for sure. But I would go into it even with another group. I would also go to Africa, where I could use not only English, but also French. I've been thinking about an observation mission, but it lasts for a year and I have two children and they're still quite small. So it's not on my agenda. I would go on a mission for up to four months, up to half a year. This separation is manageable for both family and children.

By Andrej Halada

WE KEEP THEM

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Military History Institute Prague has been systematically focusing on the area of foreign operations of the Army of the Czech Republic. As part of the Monitoring of Foreign Operations, in 2011 in the MHI collections, there began to be deposited items and documents related to operations in the Balkans and also in Afghanistan. Gradually, the interest spread to all foreign deployments of the ACR. Today, this collection counts for thousands of artifacts. We present here only a small fraction of items from Afghan missions.



Motorcycle of a Taliban suicide bomber

One of the large range of tasks of Czech soldiers were mobile patrols – together with the Afghan National Army. Regular patrol activities were to prevent or directly suppress any insurgent activities. During one of these patrols in the province of Wardak, a motorcycle of Asian origin was seized. Behind the handlebars of the machine sat a suicide bomber from the Taliban, who was neutralized only by the prompt and accurate reaction of our soldiers. No loss of life!

Signboard of FOB Shank quarters

At most bases where Czech soldiers operated, we would find hand-made signposts. The signposts indicated the location in the Czech Republic and the distance to it from Afghanistan. The picture shows part of the signboard from the quarters at FOB Shank, Logar Province. The PRT ACR worked there. The signposts refer to the places where the Czech soldiers came from.



Training dummy replicas of improvised explosive devices

One of the most serious threats were improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Hidden charges were able to be used in a wide range of situations and places. Prevention of this risk was represented by training aids – replicas. Visually plausible models were to teach soldiers the recognition of suspicious objects in the field, to deactivate them or perform guided blasting.

FOR THE FUTURE

Home-made kitchen utensils

Some subjects demonstrate the imagination and manual skills of Czech soldiers. In Afghanistan, for example, they made simple metal welded tongs for turning meat, complemented by a potato masher, made of wire. These tools made everyday life at the base easier. They also show the ability to adapt themselves to the conditions of a foreign environment.



Game board from Wardak

The self-made board contains a classic square chessboard and a game plan Man don't get angry! This served not only the 1st OMLT unit, which decorated it with insignia, and other ACR units, but also NATO allies. The following 2nd OMLT unit enriched the board again with the features of the participating ACR units.



Christmas tree PRT Logar

Unusable residual material was used for the production of a wooden tree, the production of which required manual skill and great imagination. The conifer consists of three main parts and profiled Christmas ornaments. Height 120 cm, final spray painting with yellow spray. Successful deed of members of the ACR Logar in the ISAF mission.



Czechoslovak light machine gun ZB 30

A historic Czechoslovak weapon that returned to the country of its origin after more than seventy years. In 1937, the Afghan Royal Army ordered from Czechoslovak Arms in Brno 2,030 light machine guns ZB 30, calibre 7.92 mm, Mauser. One specimen was acquired in 2011 in the province of Uruzgan by Dutch troops. Subsequently, the machine gun was handed over to the Czech unit from the 52nd Mechanized Battalion, which guarded the Dutch base.

Food rations for soldiers

In field conditions, soldiers had food rations at their disposal. Ours used provisions of the US military: easy preparation, lower weight and relative variety. It included not only food rich in protein, but also chocolate and candies. At the bases, the soldiers ate in mess halls. The variety of food there was comparable to meals in military garrisons at home.



Prepared Ivan Fuksa,
photos: MHI collections



MARTIAL MATURATION OF ONE ARMY

Czech soldiers learned a lot in extraordinary Afghan conditions and in a complex conflict. They have become more mature and sophisticated, with higher self-confidence.

In the spring of 2008, several Czech journalists arrived in Kabul. They took a taxi and, after more than an hour's drive, knocked on the gate of the then new Shank base, in Logar province. After negotiations with surprised guards and HQ personnel, they were let in. At that time, the Czech Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), consisting of approximately a dozen civilians and several hundred soldiers, was billeted in FOB Shank. There were more Czechs than Americans, so for example Czech cooks cooked and American soldiers had to enjoy Czech cuisine.

The journey from Kabul to Shank in a taxi was not without danger, but it still seemed that the risk was small compared to Iraq. But the impression was apparent, the situation worsened each spring with the Taliban's offensive. This was also felt by Czech soldiers, for whom Afghanistan

became – after the Balkans of the 1990s – their centre of gravity as to deployment abroad was concerned.

The years 2007 and 2008 were a milestone for the operation of the Czech Army in Afghanistan. Not only in terms of the scope and type of tasks, but above all it was the beginning of the formation of a close and experienced fighting force in a culturally and geographically distant country. After the 2001 invasion and the fall of the Taliban, our units were composed of doctors, meteorologists, air traffic controllers, and pyrotechnicians, and operated mostly in quieter Kabul. Exceptions were members of the 601st Special Forces Group, which was then subordinate to Military Intelligence in Operation Enduring Freedom; Special Forces SOG of Military Police in Hilmand, and later Logar; and support for the security units of

the German PRT in Fayzabad, Badakhshan Province, in the northeast.

There is often talk about the transformation that the Czech army underwent thanks to its activity in Afghanistan, in the technical, tactical and logistical fields. However, much less is said about the impact of the deployment on its esprit de corps, ie morality, ethos, cohesion and fighting traditions, which are framed by common experiences, symbolism and rituals, and which sometimes have a higher value in war than the most updated equipment. "In war, moral factors outweigh the materiel ones, Napoleon estimates, as three or more to one," writes John Keegan in *A History of Warfare*.

Political conflict

Journalists arrived in FOB Shank shortly after a member of the 102nd Reconnaissance

Photo: Daniel Hlaváč



More troops, more trips, more activities and more cooperation with the local population is, on the one hand, the only possible strategy for proceeding in counter-insurgency operations in order to achieve a positive result. On the other hand, it exposes soldiers and civilians involved in the reconstruction to a higher risk. At the same time, it does not guarantee that a political settlement of the conflict will take place and that at least partially functional state structures will be built, whether they will be able to survive, without outside help.

In other words: political conflict cannot be resolved by force. Armies can only help to create a safer environment, they can support state-building, but that's all.

Afghanistan is a good example of the above. Wars from the second half of the 1970s upset a flourishing country, destroyed generations, and only strengthened tribal governance. The central government was always distant, but mostly useless. For many, the only possible alternative to the ongoing chaos became the tribe or the Taliban.

New role models and myths

Czech soldiers also had to learn to read this security environment, which was politically and structurally complicated. They had to work with civilians on reconstruction, talk to local people on patrols and on other occasions, understand who was who in the area in which they operated, they had to watch and read signs and signals. And not only for their own safety, but mainly for meeting the tasks. And that the results were good was proved by the praise of the Allies at every opportunity and the selection of Czechs for specific and complex tasks, such as guarding the key Bagram base.

From 2008, due to the high operational pace, soldiers from various ground and aviation forces started rotating in Afghanistan. They worked as air traffic controllers, trained Afghan pilots and also fulfilled transport tasks with Mi-171S helicopters. In short, not only soldiers from two brigades, 4th and 7th, which are the backbone of the army, went through combat experience, whether in the PRT in Logar and Bagram, in the famous training OMLT in isolated locations in the worst provinces (with hundreds of Afghan soldiers of with various levels of training and morale), but also members of the special forces and reconnaissance battalion, as well as pyrotechnics, soldiers from units of reconnaissance and electronic warfare,

artillerymen, helicopter crews, surgeons and paramedics from field hospitals (who had the opportunity to try war medicine), logisticians, and others. And it must not be forgotten that "non-army" units – the Military Police and the Castle Guard – also experienced Afghanistan. New patterns and myths emerged. They are added to the heroes and myths of our history. And this is the way how the civilian world also understands Afghanistan deployment. Not every citizen approved of the operation in Afghanistan, yet a clear majority of the population of the Czech Republic regard highly our soldiers for their service. For example, five victims after a suicide attack on a patrol near Bagram in July 2014 aroused huge public empathy across the country. People wore T-shirts in support of soldiers, contributed to a collection that originated at Chrudim, where four of the five fallen came from. The collection gradually grew into an all-army Military Solidarity Fund, to which today, in addition to soldiers, many citizens and companies contribute.

So many people from our small army served in Afghanistan and this fact has a positive effect not only on training, doctrines and modernization, but also on shared memory. The units recall their fallen, wounded and heroic deeds. The Military History Institute Prague preserves artifacts of everyday life in Afghanistan that can be seen on the Internet. New soldiers listen to stories, often exaggerated as from fishermen, but motivating and shaping.

Those, who went through Afghanistan in lower positions, now have grown into decision-making positions, and they carry with them the experience of deployment and project it into their daily work. The role of clergy has grown significantly, many of whom have become "partners" and ceased to be distant elements. All this is key to morale and confidence, it is a glue and increases the combat value of individuals and the army.

The army of the Czech Republic, which was established on January 1, 1993, matured in Afghanistan, and transformed from a compulsory conscript army into a truly professional one. It is proud and self-confident, with a shared experience. And as opinion polls show, the vast majority of people are well aware of this and value both "their" army and the service of soldiers.

By František Šulc

The author is a political scientist.

Battalion, Warrant Officer in memoriam Radim Vaculík, died in April 2008, during a burst up of improvised explosive device in Logar. He was then the third victim during the Czech deployment in Afghanistan.

Allied losses began to grow slowly after 2006 and peaked in 2009-2011 (515, 710 and 566 soldiers killed in action), which, according to a study by the Afghanistan Index, published by the Brookings Institution in August 2020, roughly follows the peak number of coalition forces in the country (2009 – 101,800 soldiers, 2010 – 130,500 and 2011 – 131,300). However, most of the soldiers were killed in a conflict that has "more to do with clashes of primitive tribes than with large-scale conventional conflict," Martin van Creveld wrote prophetically about the wars of the future in his book *The Transformation of War*, published in 1991.



WE WILL NEVER FORGET...

Fourteen members of the Army of the Czech Republic were killed in foreign operations in Afghanistan. Their names at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the National Memorial on Prague Vítkov Hill commemorate their eternal memory.

Warrant Officer In Memoriam
NIKOLAJ MARTYNOV
29. 10. 1979 – 3. 5. 2007

Warrant Officer 1st Class In Memoriam
RADIM VACULÍK
8. 4. 1979 – 30. 4. 2008

Second Lieutenant In Memoriam
MILAN ŠTĚRBA
25. 8. 1973 – 17. 3. 2008

Second Lieutenant In Memoriam
ROBERT VYROUBAL
24. 1. 1980 – 31. 5. 2011

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
DAVID BENEŠ
30. 6. 1986 – 8. 7. 2014

Second Lieutenant In Memoriam
ADRIAN WERNER
3. 12. 1979 – 9. 10. 2011

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
IVO KLUSÁK
15. 9. 1980 – 8. 7. 2014

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
JAN ŠENKÝŘ
8. 11. 1975 – 8. 7. 2014

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
LIBOR LIGAČ
15. 10. 1981 – 8. 7. 2014

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
JAROSLAV LIESKOVAN
14. 1. 1975 – 14. 7. 2014

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
KAMIL BENEŠ
17. 1. 1990 – 5. 8. 2018

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
MARTIN MARCIN
14. 2. 1982 – 5. 8. 2018

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
PATRIK ŠTĚPÁNEK
14. 9. 1993 – 5. 8. 2018

Staff Warrant Officer In Memoriam
TOMÁŠ PROCHÁZKA
19. 12. 1976 – 22. 10. 2018

A BIT DIFFERENT WAR

We Czechs did not come up with the concept of Provincial Reconstruction Team – PRT. Nor did Americans. They took it from the British and the French, who learned it in their colonial clashes that they were "slightly different wars." Along with it, the work of the Czech PRTs in Afghanistan was demanding.



Author of the text (in the picture on the right) during his stay at the PRT in Afghanistan



One of the results of the work of Czech PRTs: a water construction in Dehnew

The soldier is trained to destroy the enemy as best and most effectively as possible. But what to do in a war where the enemy is invisible and the main question is to which side will the civilian population join? Therefore there is a need for people who bring a different perspective, different knowledge and experience.

That is why specialized teams were set up in the past, for example in Malaysia and Algeria, focusing not only on security, but also on relations with local people and improving their living conditions. Initially, these specialized teams were made up of soldiers with knowledge of the local environment, but Americans in Vietnam added civilians to them. And so, in Afghanistan and Iraq, they dusted off the concept under the brand of the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

They chose, we supported

The Czech Republic had its PRT from 2008 in the Logar Province, about an hour's drive from the capital Kabul. There were about a dozen civilian

experts: civil engineers, water managers, agricultural experts, etc. They supervised a wide range of projects, from bridges, schools, retention walls, irrigation works, milk collection centres, crop warehouses, and checkpoints, to a prison or secret service HQ. It wasn't like we were going around the province and wondering what we would do. On the contrary, all the ideas had to come from the locals and then they had to go through what was trying to be the local Afghan provincial government, through a relatively multifaceted process. Only then we chose what we thought to be the best, and supported this.

We tried to act moderately, according to the conditions. For example, we rather repaired schools where they were already functioning (even in the form of a dilapidated house or a torn tent) than to build new ones. It was never clear whether some teachers would come to the beautiful new building and whether there would be someone who would pay for them. Here we often differentiated

from Americans, who at one time had too much money to develop to spend. Such an approach sometimes ended in a similar way like in Khoshi district, where we came across brand new hospital that stood empty, without doctors or patients, and no one knew who had built it. But officials somewhere above ticked off one box and the country's development statement looked better...

We learned on our own. Above all: to make the project in Afghanistan meaningful, it had to be as simple as possible, it had to be as easy to maintain as possible, and it had to be clear who would be responsible for it. It also happened that in a quarrelsome Afghan society, they told us bluntly that if we built a milk collection centre in another part of the village, they would blow it up at night. Or two or three local "ministries" were arguing about a project. Alternatively, for unknown reasons, it was blocked by the governor.

In general – Afghan partners were the biggest problem. We had ideas, experts and money,

but the agreement with the local people and authorities was a great test of patience. The villages had no board of councillors and mayor. The boroughs (districts) were headed by a person assigned from above, who was changed every moment. Together with ten officials, he was in charge of a place with, for example, with 100,000 inhabitants, but a large part of them had no idea of their existence. At the top stood a provincial governor and something like a district government with many ministers, most of whom, however, did not carry out any activity. They held office only as a reward for some kind of merit. The governor himself was an old Mujahideen who fought against the Russians and then against

administration – we could only support our allies, ie the Afghan government. The basic problem was the local dysfunctional government, army and police. Working with them was painfully frustrating. I kept telling myself that we were in a country where they had been fighting continuously from 1978, where most of the educated middle class had emigrated. Even though it was more than difficult. The physical and mental condition of the recruits of the Afghan police and army always took us by surprise, the (in)ability to maintain the entrusted equipment and materiel was striking. No one in our country can even imagine the level of corruption and incompetence.

we were dependent, played a key role. They approached us with the generosity of a great nation that appreciates someone standing by their side. Despite all the goodwill on both sides, it was an experience that proves how difficult it is to function in a multilateral operation. The language barrier, as well as a different culture and mentality, are sometimes difficult to overcome. For Americans, everything was routine – a huge operation where losses were expected. It was still new for us to operate in such an environment and so far from home. The fear of war losses was, of course, greater. Even the cooperation of us, civilians, with our army counterparts was not always completely



Building a milk collection centre in Zakum Kheil farm

the Taliban, but his administrative skills were poor and limited largely to collecting bribes. Despite this, many things have succeeded. Thousands of children attended "our" schools. People use our bridges and footbridges, our office buildings. Local farmers transport the milk to collection centres, where it undergoes basic processing and so they could receive more money for it on the market. We instructed local beekeepers, local farmers; the war often disconnected passing down experience from generation to generation. Retention walls reduce flood damage and irrigation constructions significantly increase the crop in many places.

Of course, the goal of our mission was not just community development. We were part of ISAF forces and were to contribute to the greater legitimacy of the Afghan Government and to the defeat of the Taliban, by improving the lives of the people. We could not be the army, the police or the state

Moreover, everything you need to perform the administration, ie cadastres, birth registries, files, were missing... Most of the inhabitants even did not have any identification document. The court existed only in the capital and was hopelessly slow and corrupt. The police chief in some district was not able to read or write. The police chief smuggled drugs in the province. And what about the Taliban alternative? It attacked girls' schools or sent suicide bombers to a women's clinic (both cases brought dozens of innocent victims).

Basically, we did not realize that changes in a society like Afghanistan do not need years, but decades. And that it is something that our democracies are not equipped for. For endless missions in distant and culturally completely different countries.

Civil and military world

It's good to know that we were only a small player in Logar. Americans, on whose support

smooth. The civilian and military worlds are different, and a system, in which both civilian leaders and military commanders were equal, depended a lot on art how they could tune in to each other. Most of the time it worked well, but it wasn't a completely systemic solution. The soldiers performed their role as protectors of civilian experts perfectly, without them we would not get anywhere, but there was still a certain dividing line. Among others, this can be seen from the fact that the soldiers referred on civilians as PRTs, although the PRTs were themselves (they even had those letters on their patches). But they felt that they were the military and the PRT were civilians, doing "not-so-understandable projects."

There might have been more music for that money. But I know one thing for sure – we tried something, we helped someone and we learned something. Some of this may be useful to us in the future.

By Matyáš Zrno, author was the head of a civilian part of PRT Logar in 2010/2011. Photos: author's archive

THE LAST OPERATION: AIR BRIDGE

The transfer of Czechs and Afghans, which took place over three days.

The rapid rise of the Taliban after the Allies had left Afghanistan took the entire Western world by surprise in the summer of 2021.

For the army, however, this meant the final task: in a matter of hours to take care of the air bridge and the evacuation of Czech

citizens, as well as Afghan collaborators and their families. Against the background of the political upheaval, almost two hundred people were successfully transported to safety.

The first evacuation aircraft started from Prague already five hours and 40 minutes after the

political decision. As one of a few countries in the world, Czechs were able to land and fly to Kabul on Sunday, August 15. The army safely evacuated the embassy, members of the military security service, Foreign Ministry contractors and Afghan interpreters with their families. Three planes full of people. A total of 195 people arrived in the Czech Republic, in addition to Czechs, two more Poles and Afghan employees, whose evacuation was requested by Slovakia.

Still on the ground, soldiers from the security service had to evacuate the Czech embassy under time stress, load sensitive materiel, search for Afghan collaborators and get them with their families into the first two flights. The most difficult conditions were solved by the army in time of the third flight, when no soldiers were available. Therefore, the army sent an extraction team and special forces, which demonstrated the ability to respond to the national crisis within a few hours.

"There was a shortage of fuel at the airport, whoever wanted to arrive, he could not rely on refuelling," one of the army pilots described the





experience from Kabul. "We had a two-hour slot that we stretched for almost six hours. But at the end, we were able to take on board everyone who was waiting at the airport."

Afghan children were also on board, many passengers flew for the first time in their lives. They all landed and took off at their own risk, the command "At your own risk!" was heard by all members of army crews. The pilots already experienced something similar, in the past, as they evacuated the embassy in Libya and Japan, after the earthquake.

In parallel with the evacuation operation, there began the preparation and security support of military facilities, where evacuees from Afghanistan underwent an asylum procedure. It was the end of the Czech Republic's involvement and ACR operations in Afghanistan, which few expected. But we managed to do it.



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Project manager: Andrej Halada. **Professional supervision:** BG Aleš Knižek, COL Magdalena Dvořáková, Ivan Hamšík. **Layout:** Milan Syrový. **Editing:** CAPT Pavel Stehlík, Hana Benešová, Jana Deckerová, Ivan Fuksa, Petr Janoušek, Michal Voska. **Proofreading:** Presentation and Production Department, MHI Prague. Published by the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, Department of Communication, Tychonova 1, 160 01, Praha 6. **Identification number:** 60162694. **Editorial address:** Rooseveltova 23, 161 05, Praha 6, phone: +420973215542. Distributed by MHI Prague, Production Section, phone: +420973215563. **Print:** Czech Print Centre, a. s., ISSN 1804-9672.

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The concrete protection of the airport in Bagram, the so-called T-Wall, as decorated by Czech soldiers as a reminder of their predecessors, the Czechoslovak paratroopers from World War II. They died after a heroic battle in June 1942 in the Saints Cyril and Methodius Cathedral in Prague's Resslova Street, after the May assassination of the Deputy Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich.