A book review by Scott L. Gainey

Although there have been many books and articles on the crucial first test of conventional forces in Afghanistan, few take the comprehensive and sequential approach of these two authors. Lester W. Grau, a Vietnam veteran, Retired Army LTC, and research director for the Foreign Military Studies Office at the U.S. Army’s Combined and General Staff College and Dodge Billingsley, a documentary filmmaker who was actually embedded with U.S. Infantry units during Operation Anaconda, give the reader an unparalleled view into the background and circumstances leading up to the battle. Using their extensive knowledge of the area and tactics of military forces, they provide a brief history of the years leading to this event, and compare the tactics that Soviet forces and Mujahdeen used in similar situations during the Russian involvement in Afghanistan. Their approach to the events and circumstances leading to Operation Anaconda, from both a political and a military viewpoint, enables a deeper understanding of all the factors influencing the battle and the decisions of the leaders involved.

After reviewing the background of the Soviet era, the authors describe the actions that precipitated the eventual fall of the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. They discuss the United States’ initial reliance on Special Operations Forces and the follow-on piecemeal deployment of conventional forces (the 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne Divisions) and coalition partners. The authors go on to describe the detailed planning involved with Operation Anaconda and the many obstacles encountered by the planners. American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization coalition partners had spent the previous decade executing peacekeeping operations or planning for large scale conflict against a conventional opponent. The early experiences conducting initial operations against an unconventional force echoed the mistakes made by the Russians during the Soviet-Afghan War.

In earlier engagements, such as Tora Bora, the Northern Alliance fighters under guidance of Special Forces with overwhelming fire support would force the Taliban and Al-Qaeda to withdraw to the mountains leaving small detachments of rearguard forces to fight a delaying action until the main force could retreat safely over the mountainous border to strongholds in Pakistan. This precedent set the tone for planning Operation Anaconda, in which two task forces were envisioned to trap the enemy in a classic “hammer and anvil” operation. Task Force Hammer, composed of Afghan militia forces guided by Special Forces, were to drive the enemy up the Shahi-Kot Valley into Task Force Anvil, composed of the American infantry units established in blocking positions at likely exit routes. The Afghan forces would convoy into the valley, while the 1-87th and 1-187th Infantry Regiments would air assault into the mountain landing zones. Several Special Operations Forces units, to include U.S. Navy Seal Teams, established observation posts at key positions in order to report the movement of enemy forces and provide reconnaissance of the landing zones. Despite intelligence reports, Task Force Anvil ended up facing a set-piece battle with a large, well-entrenched, and experienced enemy. The operation illustrated many of the problems encountered during joint operations early in Operation Enduring Freedom.

The authors were careful to construct their approach and provide enough background information of Operation Anaconda so that even a novice student of military history could understand and relate to the decisions and processes affecting the battle. The book pieces together various parts of the planning process and recounts numerous shortfalls that include inaccurate intelligence estimates and lack of lift and attack aviation assets. The book includes a DVD that features maps, interviews with actual participants, footage from the battle, and author commentary. Operation Anaconda: America’s First Major Battle in Afghanistan is recommended reading for anyone interested in reading of the early operations in Afghanistan, especially air assault and operations in mountainous terrain.