

In Shah-E-Kot, Apaches Save The Day - And Their Reputation

By Sean D. Naylor, Times staff writer

The soldier's weather-beaten face was streaked with tears of gratitude. Just days earlier, separated from his buddies and pinned down by intense fire from al-Qaida soldiers in the ridgelines around the Shah-e-Kot valley, he thought he was going to die. Then, like fire-spitting avenging angels, Apache attack helicopters sliced through the thin mountain air pouring rocket and chain-gun fire on his would-be killers. "We came in and took the fire away from him," said Capt. Bill Ryan, the commander of those Apaches. He said it matter-of-factly, as if there were nothing remarkable about piloting a helicopter through hails of bullets and rocket-propelled grenades to save a man's life.

Now safely back at Bagram Air Base, that soldier had come to thank his deliverers. As Operation Anaconda wound down, a string of well-wishers stopped by to pay homage to the dozen or so Apache pilots who had kept the al-Qaida troops at bay. Not every visitor broke into tears. But all echoed the sentiments of Lt. Col. "Chip" Preysler, commander of 2nd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment. Preysler's battalion was one of two that flew into the teeth of entrenched al-Qaida positions March 2, the first day of the operation. Their very lives depended on Ryan's seven Apaches for close air support. When he came out of the battle nine days later, Preysler immediately sought out Ryan. With a smile on his face and his hands spread wide, he said, "You guys have huge balls." The Apache exploits on the first day of the battle of Shah-e-Kot have done much to bolster the reputation of an aircraft that saw its battlefield role called into question after its role in Albania in 1999.

In that bleak period in the helicopter's history, 24 Apaches were sent to Task Force Hawk for use in the war against Yugoslavia. But the choppers were held back from combat after two crashed and two pilots died during mission rehearsals. The Apache community complained that ignorant journalists and casualty-averse Pentagon officials had unfairly turned their beloved killing machine into a scapegoat. Now, three years later, the contrast could not be starker. The Apache drivers are being lauded as heroes, and their helicopter is receiving what to many pilots is praise long overdue. With al-Qaida fighters so close to U.S. troops that close air support from "fast mover" jets was often out of the question, the Apaches became the only fire support available to ground commanders. In the crucial hours of that first day, when the carefully scripted battle plans had been rendered irrelevant and the outcome hung in the balance, Apaches saved the day. "The weapon that changed the face of the battle for us was the Apache," said Col. Frank Wiercinski, commander of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)'s 3rd Brigade and in charge of all conventional U.S. troops in the battle. "I was just so impressed by its capability," he said. "I had never seen the Apache in combat before, though I've always trained with it. I am a firm believer right now that a brigade combat team commander needs his Apache battalion in an air assault division - its ability to protect us en route, its ability to set the conditions on the landing zones and then its close combat attack capability to take out fires. "Artillery is a wonderful asset, but you need an observer, you need a sensor, and then you've got the artillery [tube] as the shooter. An Apache can do all of that, and it's always moving." On station in the valley from dawn on the battle's first day, the Apaches flew again and again through withering small arms, heavy machine-gun and rocket-propelled grenade fire to provide fire support to the beleaguered infantry troops.

Five Apaches were present at the start of the battle, a sixth arrived later that morning and a seventh flew up from Kandahar to join the fight that afternoon. None of the helicopters was shot down, but four were so badly damaged they were knocked out of the fight. The fire the Apaches braved was so intense that when the day was over, 27 of the 28 rotor blades among the seven helicopters sported bullet holes, said Lt. Col. James M. Marye, the commander of the 7th Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment. Marye's aviation task force included the Apaches of Ryan's A Company, 3rd Battalion, 101st Aviation.

Beneath the cold numbers are tales of heroism and extraordinary achievement. None are more dramatic than the story of Chief Warrant Officer 4 Jim Hardy. At about 6:45 a.m., an RPG exploded under the nose of Hardy's Apache, sending shrapnel slicing through the helicopter's innards. "I looked up and there was a black puff of smoke, like World War II flak," said Chief Warrant Officer 2 John Hamilton, who was flying nearby. "There was major damage to that aircraft," Ryan said. "They had lost the weapons systems and the target-acquisition systems." Despite the fact that Hardy's Apache was now essentially unarmed, he stayed on station. He later told Hamilton that his plan was to fly up the valley and draw fire, allowing the other Apaches to engage enemy gunners once they had revealed themselves. About 10 minutes after an RPG struck Hardy's aircraft, another hit the Apache piloted by Chief Warrant Officer 3 Keith Hurley, smashing into the left Hellfire missile launcher. "The RPG struck me on the left, rocked the aircraft, and a microsecond after that, a bullet came through the cockpit," Hurley said. By the end of the day there were 13 bullet holes in Hurley's aircraft.

Lights immediately started flashing on Hurley's control panel, warning him that he was hemorrhaging oil. Hardy, one of the company's most experienced pilots, realized Hurley was in trouble, and got on the radio. As Hurley recalls it, Hardy told him, "I've got to go back to the [Forward Arming and Refueling Point], fall in trail and follow me, and we've got to go quick."

The two wounded Apaches headed for the FARP, a way station for the helicopters roughly halfway between the valley and their temporary base in Bagram, north of Kabul. They didn't make it very far. About a mile west of "the Whale," the humpbacked ridgeline that marked the western edge of the valley, more lights came on in Hurley's cockpit, including one that told him he had no fluid left in his transmission. "I called off the lights to Mr. Hardy and he said, 'You've got to land, you've got to land now,' " Hurley said. The two landed in a dried-up riverbed, within range of the al-Qaida positions. With bullets flying around him, Hardy, who Hurley described as "the unit maintenance god," shut the helicopters down and went to work on Hurley's aircraft. "He did sort of a triage of the aircraft, examining it like a doctor," Hurley said.

Hardy took the three one-quart oil cans that each helicopter carried as spares and poured all six quarts into Hurley's engine. Then he told Hurley they were going to swap helicopters and fly back to the FARP. "He told me, 'Don't dick around, when I get it started, I'm going,' " Hurley said. Hardy was drawing on his deep knowledge of the Apache to take a calculated risk. With Hurley's chopper leaking fluid like a sieve, he knew the six quarts of oil he had just poured in would not last long. But he also knew that the Apache's engine was supposed to last 30 minutes without oil before seizing up. Hardy was gambling that he could nurse Hurley's Apache 50 miles to the FARP in less than half an hour. The alternative was to strap two of the four pilots onto the side of Hardy's helicopter, leaving Hurley's Apache behind as a dead loss. Hardy's gamble paid off. Twenty-six minutes after taking off under fire from the riverbed, the two damaged Apaches landed safely at the FARP. Hardy's colleagues were in awe. "There are not a lot of folks out there who would have taken that aircraft off the ground," Ryan said. "It was an incredible action by Mr. Hardy." Hamilton said: "He's a hero, no doubt about it." Marye recommended Hardy for a Distinguished Flying Cross. He also recommended Ryan, who continued flying despite being

nicked on the chin by a bullet, for a Silver Star and several other pilots for the Air Medal with "V" device.

----Original Message-----

General Officer comments

This was sent by one of our General Officers, they usually don't send emails like this...good reading, the last paragraph is the best.

From Anaconda AO... Ground war will be run by CINC's man on the spot, the Commander of 10th Mtn Division. (The CINC isn't trying to run the war via video from Tampa - he has a hell of a lot more to run besides Afghanistan, and that is his job and his place). As any other senior officer who has grown up in a branch culture, the 2-star 10th Mtn Division commander is most comfortable with Army and will primarily rely on them to be the lion's share of the offense on the ground. That's the way they are designed and supported. I think the performance during ANACONDA was a bit of an eye opener. Intel very hard to pin down - it's not a perfect world. Afghans often playing both sides of the fence, thus the senior leaders have to be cautious. Don't think they thought resistance would be as bad initially as they found. Al Qaeda were well-entrenched and prepared to fight. UK SAS had a significant cave fight on a small complex last fall, and it was a brutal close quarter battle.

That should have keyed us to always be thinking they will do the same anytime we find pockets of them, especially if you intend to surround them and provide no "back door" for escape (setting up ambushes to catch them just as they think they've gotten out. ANACONDA AO almost impossible to close off (huge and rough terrain), and locals supported Al Qaeda in many ways. We nailed a lot of them, but a lot got away. We can expect more of the same in the future. Certainly not a failure, and we'll take them out 100 at a time or 2 at a time, it matters not. The end will be the same, just might take longer. SF A Teams doing dynamite mixing in with locals and doing their thing.

USAF CCT doing incredibly well calling in heavy fire and bombs from above with precision. USAF PJs have been on every hot mission supporting as combat medics. Unfortunately, there's still some mistaken concept out there that SEALs are only comfortable in water. A target is a target, and very few are on water. SEALs learned long ago to conduct raids, ambushes, recon missions, hit buildings, bridges, and encampments anywhere they exist. Multiple units of SEALs are on the ground searching caves, conducting raids, and moving by helo and organic ground combat vehicles (yes they have some), taking the fight to the enemy. (SEALs have had a mountain warfare capability for decades - they just don't advertise everything they can do. Conventional forces and leaders may not have gotten the word) SEALs are raiding alongside other raiding brothers from the Army SF's top unit, UK SAS and SBS, Australian SAS, New Zealand SAS, German KSK, Dutch commandos, and Canadian JTF-s commandos and infantry. (When the Pentagon doesn't tell you exactly who is conducting some of these raids, there's a reason. They also don't report every action that takes place) We now also need to get the USMC out there raiding also. There's plenty to go around and rotating troops will help keep them fresher.

The Marines can move fast, however, and having them offshore on the ships for now allows commanders the option to go into other countries quickly if an intelligence windfall identifies something that needs to be hit quickly, such as in Somalia or Yemen. UK 45 Commando now coming in to help out, with more rough terrain expertise. Air war has been a beacon of

technological genius. Unfortunately it can't do it alone. Combined with ground forces, it's extremely lethal. Army Apache gunship helos worked well until they got shot up badly at beginning of ANACONDA (but they delivered a hell of a fight where fast movers couldn't go), requiring re-intro of older (but also extremely lethal) USMC Cobras. Underestimation appeared in a couple spots at beginning of ANACONDA, but US was always in the drivers seat and will remain so. All helo pilots, USA, USAF, and USMC, have shown extreme courage in their operations under incredibly difficult circumstances. You have to ride these at night into a brown out situation where they kick up dust until you can't see, on night vision goggles to understand. Throw in RPGs and machinegun fire, and most people would be shaking in their boots. These guys all eat it up.

As far as the SEAL story goes, the full truth may never actually come out. MH-47 was hit just before landing a recon team by an RPG that failed to detonate, but went through back end. Roberts was either assisting a USAF spec ops guy who fell on the rear ramp as a result of the hit, or was knocked down as he stood on the ramp. When 2 more RPGs hit the helo, a hydraulic line was severed and the helo went critical, jinxed, and tried to bolt out of there, hydraulic spray all over, peppered by bullets as it flew away. In the confusion in the darkened rear, Roberts fell off the ramp. He was a SAW gunner and his light machinegun fell inside the helo. He hit the ground with a pistol and 2 hand grenades. The helo, having been shot up badly, was barely able to go 8 kilometers before being put down. They were lucky. Roberts was noted missing enroute, but the helo was in an emergency mode, pilots fighting to keep it from crashing at any moment, and in no condition to try to double back at the moment. After landing, the recon team immediately boarded a sister helo and went back to get Roberts, inserted nearby and immediately got in a firefight. Meanwhile, Roberts crawled from where he fell about 200 feet or yards (not certain which) to hide, activated his emergency beacon. 60+ heavily armed Al Qaeda in the area. When the rescue helo came back, a machinegun opened up on it as it came in. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Roberts totally disregarded his safety and attacked it with a handgun and his grenades. He was killed in a close quarter firefight, incredibly outnumbered and outgunned. The commandos on the ground were able to hold against heavy odds. Another rescue force was launched and flew max speed to the area, inserting a couple hours later. Rangers, CCT, PJs poured out and right into an extremely heavy firefight. That's where the other 6 got killed, many wounded. This was a brutal slugfest of a firefight. Close air support called in and the fight was on for about 9-12 hours. US commandos finally won, and more helos and forces inserted to recover wounded, KIA. Roberts body recovered as well. Predator watched after he was shot as 3 Al Qaeda dragged his body from where he was shot - he was already dead. For my money, Roberts and the others who came to try to rescue him deserve at least the Silver Star if not more. True heroes, taking it to the enemy, so we can all relax at home in the U.S. safer from terrorist attack. Believe it or not, this incident is only one of several unbelievable combat actions yet untold.

SAS is pushing for one of their men to get the Victoria Cross as a result of the cave fight last fall. (And he clearly deserves it from all accounts). UK SBS was in an extremely heavy firefight early in the action last fall. There are other US stories that have not (and may not) be told that are equally incredible, if not more. Stay tuned.

Whether we need heroes or not, the forces are clearly and eagerly going hand to hand and man on man with the Al Qaeda. We may underestimate from time to time in small battles, but the Al Qaeda have clearly underestimated what we were going to be like on the battlefield compared to their Soviet experience. The other reason we need the appropriate top awards pinned on these heroes is this - Let the message go forth to the Al Qaeda, other terrorists, and those who want to back them anywhere on the globe. Think you're tough? You want to kill our families,

blow up civilians? Stand by! We are sending our very best to hunt you down and take you out. These are the guys who are coming to get you. These are the guys who will climb into the mountains and into the darkened caves halfway around the world and look you in the eye, toe to toe, with any weapon at hand (ours or yours), to take you out. These guys have trained longer, are stronger, harder, faster, tougher, and more relentless and lethal than anything you will ever produce. And we will arm them with the best money can buy, from Spectre gunships and thermobaric bombs to knives sharper than any box cutter you can sneak on a plane. They are now on your trail. They're hunting you down. How's it feel to be a terrorist now? Never bring a box cutter to a Jihad.

April 26, 2002 Posted: 6:20 AM EDT (1020 GMT)
From Barbara Starr
CNN Pentagon Correspondent

[WASHINGTON](#) (CNN) -- U.S. Special Forces have completed an internal report on how seven men died during the opening hours of Operation Anaconda in eastern Afghanistan in early March.

The still-unreleased classified report details some of the most brutal fighting seen by U.S. forces in years including hours of vicious close combat and extraordinary heroism still largely untold. What exactly happened in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan March 4 may never be fully known as there are several differing accounts.

The report is based on interviews with the survivors, as well as classified video taken by an airborne surveillance drone showing disturbing pictures of U.S. troops fighting to the death. As it came in, enemy gunfire shattered hydraulic lines causing the helicopter to repeatedly lurch.

One of the Navy SEALs on board, Petty Officer Neil Roberts fell out of the helicopter. Several sources say he fell when he tried to rescue a door-gunner hanging by his harness. Others say it happened when the helicopter lurched. Roberts landed in a nest of al Qaeda fighters, fighting back until all of his grenades were gone, and his pistol empty.

It's unclear if he was captured and executed -- or if he was killed in an exchange of gunfire. Those who have viewed the still-classified videotape from an unmanned Predator drone flying overhead differ in their conclusions.

CNN has learned there was much more that has not been told.

Rescue team

Air Force Tech Sgt John Chapman was part of six-man rescue team sent in to get Roberts back.

Sources tell CNN Chapman came under very heavy enemy fire. He fought to the death and several other members of the rescue force were wounded.

What Chapman may not have ever known is that it was possible the Navy SEAL had already been killed by the time the rescue team got there.

Two other helicopters brought in more men to get the dead and wounded.

They too faced withering enemy fire -- four were killed, several more wounded.

Senior Airman Jason Cunningham tended to them for hours, moving the injured from the incoming enemy rounds now landing just feet away until he too was fatally hit.

He died of his wounds on the mountainside while trying to help others.

It was Cunningham's first combat mission.

Meanwhile, still under fire, remaining Special Forces called in air support for more than 12 hours, bringing in the withering firepower of an AC-130 gunship to repeatedly drive off the attackers.

Nonetheless, it was hours before everyone was brought off the mountain.

Special operations forces are still waiting for the Pentagon to release the report.

They want the men who fought so hard to save each other to be recognized for valor on a remote mountain they have now renamed Roberts Ridge.

Details emerge on death of Navy SEAL

March 7, 2002 Posted: 5:59 PM EST (2259 GMT)

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Soon after a U.S. helicopter was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade Monday, a Navy SEAL fell from the Chinook and was dragged away by three al Qaeda fighters and executed.

It was a horrifying scene that transpired as his commanders watched in agony the images beamed back from a reconnaissance plane, U.S. officials said Tuesday.

The description was one of the most detailed accounts of the deadliest day in the war against terrorism for U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

Six other U.S. service members died in a firefight Monday after their chopper was hit by enemy fire and crash landed about a mile from the first incident in rugged terrain in eastern Afghanistan.

U.S. officials said that when the first helicopter was hit by the al Qaeda-launched RPG, it rapidly took off and landed a short distance away with hydraulic failure from the attack. The crew then discovered one of its men had apparently fallen out.

Meanwhile, commanders of the forces watched real-time images from an unmanned Predator drone that showed al Qaeda members capture and kill Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts, 32, officials said.

"We saw him on the Predator being dragged off by three al Qaeda men," Major Gen. Frank L. Hagenbeck, the operation commander, told a pool reporter.

He said the United States responded Tuesday with withering force, using Apache helicopters and Air Force fighters to strike the al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

"We body slammed them today and killed hundreds of those guys," Hagenbeck said.

In the second incident Monday, officials said two helicopters were flying in the region when one of the choppers came under fire.

An intense firefight broke out on the ground after the helicopter crash landed. Six Americans were killed in the ensuing battle.

The remaining crew members had to survive coming under constant fire for about 12 to 14 hours before being rescued, officials said. The bodies of those killed were recovered at that time.

A commando team secretly moved into the area and retrieved Roberts' body. His crew mates in the crippled chopper also were rescued, officials said.

The Pentagon said there was no choice but to keep forces in the middle of the fight.

"There was an American, for whatever reason, [who] was left behind. And we don't leave Americans behind," said Brig Gen. John Rosa, deputy director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

- CNN Pentagon Correspondent [Barbara Starr](#) and National Security Correspondent [David Ensor](#) contributed to this report

What the Pilots Saw

At approximately 3 a.m. local time on March 4, Razor 3, piloted by Chief Warrant Officer “Al,” roared out of the darkness and set down at Objective Ginger, on a ridgeline near the battlefield. His cargo of Army, Navy and Air Force operators was tasked with calling in airstrikes on Qaeda troops attacking 101st Airborne soldiers nearby. As soon as they touched down, “the place lit up” with rocket and machine-gun fire. A door gunner was wounded; the chopper’s hydraulic and electrical systems shredded. Al threw the 60-foot-long Chinook helicopter into the air, heading south, when the crew shouted the horrifying news: “A guy’s out!” A Navy SEAL, Petty Officer Neil Roberts, had somehow fallen out of the chopper. “I turned around to go get him,” said Al. “That’s when the controls locked up.” Al couldn’t pick up the lost man. He limped south, looking for a safe landing zone, and calling on a battery-powered radio to his wingman to rescue Roberts. But the radio wasn’t working. Last week Al and his comrades from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment gave NEWSWEEK this exclusive account of what happened to them in Operation Anaconda.

It took wingman chief “Jason,” in Razor 4, 45 minutes to reach Al’s chopper. With reports of Qaeda troops converging on their position, Razor 4 loaded everyone onboard and returned to a Special Forces base near Gardez, dropping off Al and his crew before returning to Ginger with the operators to look for Roberts. When Razor 4 hit the LZ they were met with heavy machine-gun fire, but they dropped off the team before hobbling back to base. On the ground, a firefight with Qaeda forces broke out. Air Force Special Operations Combat Controller Sgt. John Chapman was shot and killed. Two other Chinooks, Razors 1 and 2, loaded a quick reaction force of Rangers and headed to the battlefield. Razor 1 roared into Ginger about 6:30 a.m., and in the morning light it was easy for Qaeda fighters to hit the huge black chopper as it neared the ground. The 20-ton Chinook belly-flopped onto the snow. “Everybody around me got hit,” says the mission commander, Chief Warrant Officer “Don.” “The two pilots in front of me were wounded, one door gunner was wounded. The other, Phil Svitak, was killed. Three Rangers were killed right then.” The surviving Rangers dashed out the back and took up positions in the snow, firing on the guerrillas only 25 yards away. Razor 2, with another team of Rangers, approached the besieged Americans, but, says Al, “the team on the ground told him don’t go into that LZ, or you’re not coming out.” The pilots dropped off their Rangers nearby, and the troopers hiked up the mountain to link up with their comrades. No one could get out. Enemy fire was too heavy. The Americans were cut off from rescue, but were not forgotten. An AC-130 gunship stayed overhead, raining fire on the enemy positions until it was almost out of fuel, and Air Force jets bombed throughout the day. As the Americans ran low on ammunition, they returned to the crashed chopper to scrounge for more. Air Force medic Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, treating a wounded man, was shot; he later died. As the afternoon went on, Qaeda resistance lessened. By evening three Chinooks got in to evacuate the Americans, their wounded and seven dead. Among them was Neil Roberts, the man they came to save. His body was recovered during the battle for what the men who fought there call Roberts Ridge.

— Colin Soloway

A Wintry Ordeal At 10,000 Feet Washington Post
May 25, 2002
Pg. 1

Ambush at Takur Ghar: Fighting for Survival in the Afghan Snow

A Wintry Ordeal At 10,000 Feet

By Bradley Graham, Washington Post Staff Writer

Second of two articles

Sgt. Eric W. Stebner knew something about snow and cold, having grown up in North Dakota. He also knew something about mountain trekking, having trained as an Army Ranger and climbed rocks in the Shenandoah Mountains. But neither Stebner nor any of the other nine U.S. Army Rangers struggling behind him on the morning of March 4 had encountered anything like Takur Ghar,

the mountain in eastern Afghanistan on which they found themselves. They faced a climb up a steep, forbidding slope, with upwards of 80 pounds of military gear, wearing inappropriate clothing and boots, and under sporadic enemy fire. They also were in a race against time.

The other half of their unit was stranded at the top of the ridge, their helicopter shot down shortly after sunrise. They had flown in to rescue a Navy SEAL team, only to be ambushed by enemy fighters. Four of the quick-reaction force were dead, three aircrew members were seriously wounded and the rest of the contingent was pinned down.

The ordeal had begun around 3 a.m., when the SEALs had come under attack as their helicopter landed on the ridge for a reconnaissance mission. One, Navy Petty Officer First Class Neil C. Roberts, fell off the damaged chopper as it took off. The SEALs returned to rescue Roberts and were ambushed again, losing the Air Force combat controller in their group, Tech. Sgt. John Chapman.

It was day three of what the U.S. military called Operation Anaconda, a three-week-long offensive against members of al Qaeda and the Taliban in the Shahikot valley. Over the course of 17 hours, seven Americans lost their lives, the highest number of combat deaths in a single day by any unit since 18 Rangers

and Special Operations soldiers had been killed in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1993.

As their comrades began the climb, the Rangers on the ridgetop had made one uphill attempt to assault enemy positions on a crest line 50 to 75 yards away.

They were forced to retreat behind boulders near their downed MH-47E Chinook.

Although airstrikes had silenced some enemy fire, the Rangers lacked sufficient manpower and weaponry to try again.

They were worried about an enemy counterattack. They saw enemy fighters moving in the distance toward their rear, and U.S. military spotters and aircraft picked up other signs of enemy reinforcement efforts.

Mortar shells fell around their chopper. The first landed ahead of the nose, the next one down the hill to the rear, suggesting the enemy was attempting to zero in on them. The whooshing of the shells sent shivers through the Americans, especially the helicopter crewmen, who were unaccustomed to ground combat.

Concerned about the condition of the three wounded aircrew members, some of the chopper team pressed the Ranger platoon's commander, Capt. Nathan Self, to mount a new assault to clear the way for an evacuation. Self told them he needed reinforcements first. "They didn't understand the timetable that we were really on," Self said. "They expected things to happen quick, quick, quick: 'You guys run up there and kill the enemy.'"

But Self shared their sense of urgency. He worried they all would be in trouble unless the rest of his unit got up to the top soon.

That half of the Ranger force, designated Chalk 2, had been in a helicopter over the Shahikot valley when Self took his Chalk 1 team to the ridge. Shortly afterward, communication with the chopper carrying Chalk 1 was lost, and Chalk 2 flew to Gardez, a town northwest of the valley that was a staging area for the larger U.S. offensive. As time ticked by with no information about the lead Ranger group, Chalk 2 grew anxious.

"At one point, I had a crew chief by the collar," said Staff Sgt. Arin Canon, the ranking Ranger in Chalk 2. "I'm screaming at him that regardless of what happened, the first bird only had 10 guys on it. That's the bare minimum package. If something happened to them, they need us. We complete the package."

Then word came in that the chopper carrying Chalk 1 had gone down. Within 30 to 60 minutes – accounts vary – Chalk 2 was back in the air and heading toward the ridgetop.

The first challenge was finding a place to set down. "It's the side of a mountain, so there are not a whole lot of places to land," said Ray, who piloted the chopper. "You basically hunt and peck around."

At about 8:30 a.m., the crew found a space just big enough to get all the wheels on the ground. The aircrew had advised the Rangers that Chalk 1 would be straight ahead of them, about 250 to 300 yards away. After they got off, the Rangers learned that Chalk 1 was actually about 2,000 feet up the mountain, at an altitude of 10,200 feet. The plan had changed, but no one told the Rangers.

'We Have to Keep Moving'

The Chalk 2 Rangers surveyed the landscape. Towering before them was a rocky slope angling as steep as 70 degrees in places and covered with snow as deep as three feet. They also could see, off to the right and about 1,000 feet up, another small cluster of Americans – members of the SEAL unit the Rangers had been sent to rescue.

The SEALs were edging their way down the mountain with two wounded. Two other members of their original team – Roberts and Chapman – had been killed on top.

A SEAL who had flown in with Chalk 2 to link up with the Navy unit asked whether the Rangers could hike over to help the SEALs before beginning their climb.

Canon forwarded the request to Self up on the ridgetop.

"I've got casualties up here, and I need you now more than they need you," Self radioed back. The SEAL headed across the mountain alone to join his team members. The Rangers of Chalk 2 headed up.

"It was kind of like a merry-go-round," said Chalk 2's medic, who asked that his name not be used. "We were trying to go up and they were coming down."

With no trail to follow, the Rangers blazed a path of their own. One route to the right looked promising but would take them close to an enemy bunker on top.

They chose a course to the left that appeared to provide some cover from enemy fighters and bring them around to the rear of Chalk 1's position.

Canon, who is qualified in Army mountain warfare, thought that if this had been a planned route of attack, scouts would have eased the way with fixed rope lines. The Rangers struggled for traction on the loose shell rock. "Just the grade of the ridge made it an unbearable walk, not including the altitude," Canon said. "It was enough to where my guys' chests felt heavy and my joints were swollen."

The Rangers at times got down on all fours – "kind of like a bear crawling up," in the words of the medic. Enemy mortar attacks punctuated the climb, although they were sporadic and poorly aimed.

"Everyone would stop and look to see where they were coming from," said Stebner, one of the squad's two team leaders. "I would say, 'You can't stop. It's not going to do us any good to stop. We have to keep moving.'"

Their weighty gear only made things worse. The Rangers' body armor alone totaled 22 pounds a set. Most of the soldiers carried an M-4 assault rifle, seven to 12 magazines of ammunition, two to four grenades, a pistol, knives, lamps, radios, night vision gear, a first aid kit and 100 ounces of water. Their helmets added another three to four pounds.

"There were some places where I had to throw my weapon up ahead of me, then climb up and pick it up again," said Spec. Jonas O. Polson, who carried one of the squad's two 17-pound M249 light machine guns, called SAWs for Squad Automatic Weapons.

Spec. Randy J. Pazder, the heavy machine gunner, probably had the biggest load, with a 28-pound M240B gun plus 30 pounds or so of ammunition. His assistant gunner, Spec. Omar J. Vela, carried a spare barrel and another 30 pounds of ammo. "You need to get to the top of the hill, where we'll be in a static position and can rest," Canon told them. "We've got to go, our guys need us."

When they were scrambled for the mission, most of the Rangers had been under the impression that they were being sent on a quick, in-and-out rescue. "My understanding originally, when they woke me up, was that a helicopter had been forced to land and we were going to pick up the crew – basically, just a taxi-ride type of thing," the medic said.

Anticipating a lot of sitting in cold, drafty helicopters or in stationary ground positions, many put on thermal underwear and bulky parkas that were now impeding their movement and causing them to sweat profusely. Others were wearing suede desert boots instead of cold-weather footgear. The desert boots soaked up the snow like sponges.

About halfway up, as the Rangers shimmied around a rock and hoisted themselves past a tree that jutted from the mountain face, Canon figured something had to give. "I took a look around and everybody had the, you know, 'Man, this sucks' face – just a long face," the staff sergeant said. The Rangers began to shed their heavy clothes, and Canon relayed permission from Self that they could take off the back plate of their body armor. Getting rid of the \$527 plates was a risky move. The basic Kevlar vest worn by troops protects against 9mm bullets; ceramic plates, placed in front and back, offer an additional layer to stop 7.62mm bullets – the kind fired by AK-47 assault rifles

used by al Qaeda. Removing the back plate would save only six pounds, but would allow greater mobility and comfort. Most elected to take them off. But to avoid leaving them for the enemy, the soldiers shattered the plates by heaving them onto the rocks below. "It's the most expensive Frisbee you'll ever throw," Canon told the men.

As they continued climbing, many of the Rangers thought of their buddies on the ridge. They knew there were casualties, although they did not know who or how many had been hurt or killed.

Many assumed that at least one of the casualties had to be Spec. Anthony R. Miceli, a SAW gunner considered the most accident-prone in the group. So legendary was Miceli's tendency to injure himself that the platoon had a saying about him: "No one could kill Miceli except Miceli." Coming over the final rise, the first thing Canon glimpsed were the casualties spread out on the ground near the helicopter's rear ramp. Miceli's luck had held. His SAW had been shot up, but he had picked up another gun and was still in the fight. Even so, Canon was shocked to see so many dead or wounded.

A climb Canon had estimated would take about 45 minutes lasted more than two hours. Chalk 2 was joined with Chalk 1, but the Rangers would have little time to rest.

'Everybody Just Went for It'

The Rangers moved quickly to organize an assault on the ridgetop. The chief objective would be the one enemy bunker they could see – off to the right of the nose of the helicopter and about 50 yards away. An airstrike had appeared to silence the bunker, but the Rangers were not sure whether enemy fighters were still in it – or beyond. The heavy machine gun team from Chalk 2 – Pazder and Vela – moved to a rock beside the helicopter, joining Chalk 1's machine gunner, Pfc. David B. Gilliam. Canon hunkered down between the two machine guns.

"Sergeant, I don't know if I'd get right there," Gilliam said in his thick Tennessee drawl. "I about got shot there a while ago."

"Well, I don't plan on getting shot today, Gilliam, so you just keep the fire on," Canon replied. The assault team, composed largely of members of Chalk 2, got into position behind another rock slightly ahead and to the left of the machine guns. The machine gunners let loose with supporting fire. Stebner, Sgt. Patrick George and Sgt. Joshua J. Walker pushed forward along with Spc. Jonas O. Polson, Spc.

Oscar Escano and Staff Sgt. Harper Wilmoth. The Rangers moved at what they call the "high ready" – weapons on their shoulders, their eyes focused directly over gun sights. They tossed grenades as they advanced. Rangers train to use two four-man teams for an assault, with the teams focusing on maneuver while other elements provide supporting fire. In this case, the Rangers had only a team and a half. "When the supporting fire opened up, everybody just went for it," Wilmoth said.

"The snow was so deep, and the terrain under it was rocky, so our footings weren't too good. We pretty much had to lead by gunfire." The Rangers were pouring on so much fire that some of the chopper crew worried they were overdoing it. The crew yelled at the Rangers to "slow down, they're going to run out of ammo," Self said. The assault group made it to a boulder about 40 yards up the hill, near the enemy bunker that was just around to the right. Stebner, approaching the boulder first, stumbled across a body lying face down in the snow. It was a dead American – he couldn't tell who and didn't have time to stop.

From the boulder, Wilmoth, George and Escano went for the bunker, finding two dead enemy fighters. Sandwiched between the fighters – amid the debris left by an earlier airstrike – was the body of another American. Stebner and Polson went left, then circled around right, blasting at other enemy positions over the

crest. The end, when it came, was strangely anticlimactic. The Rangers did all the shooting during the 15-minute assault. At the top, they found a network of enemy positions dug next to trees or behind rocks and connected by shallow trenches. A

canvas tent sheltered one position. The area was strewn with Chinese-made 30mm grenade launchers, sheaves of rocket-propelled grenades, a 75mm recoilless rifle, a Russian-made DShK heavy

machine gun, long bands of machine-gun ammunition and assorted small arms. The Rangers say they are not certain how many they killed. Self credits his men with killing at least two during the assault, and there were other bodies of enemy fighters scattered around the ridgetop. But the Rangers say it was

difficult to determine how many had died from airstrikes or in firefights with SEALs earlier in the day. A U.S. military team that visited the site days later counted eight enemy bodies.

After the shooting stopped, Canon went to identify the two dead Americans. Near the boulder lay Roberts, the SEAL who had fallen out of the chopper eight hours earlier. Some of his military gear was later recovered elsewhere in the area, and a dead enemy fighter was found wearing Roberts's jacket. In the bunker,

Canon identified Chapman. It was about 11 a.m. Chalk 1 had been on the ridge nearly five hours.

Feeling more secure and a bit more relaxed, the Rangers shifted their command and communications post to the ridgetop. They made plans to move the dead and wounded from

behind the chopper to the other side of the crest, where there appeared to be a suitable landing zone for evacuation. Canon, the most senior noncommissioned officer on the mountain, sat down beside Self, who told him the names of the Rangers who had died. "It hit me pretty hard, and I remember having to take a second and pause," Canon said. Self could not afford to have Canon – or any of the other men – lost in mourning, not with all that still needed to be done to get them all off the mountain.

"He said, 'Arin, there's nothing we can do about it now,' " Canon recounted. "He pretty much reminded me to get my head back into the game – 'Let's get the rest of these guys out of here alive, and we'll deal with what we have to deal with when we get back.'"

Down behind the chopper, Greg, one of the two wounded pilots, was taking a turn for the worse. "I hesitate to say he was close to dying. But he had a definite change in his level of consciousness," said Cory, the chopper's medic. "He was starting to speak to me as if he was going to die."

'I Have Only Two Magazines Left'

On the radio, Headquarters was asking whether the ridgetop was "cold," meaning no longer vulnerable to enemy attack.

"Controller asked me if the pick-up zone [PZ] was cold and how many guys we were going to lose if we waited to be exfiltrated," Air Force Staff Sgt. Kevin Vance, a tactical air controller attached to the Ranger unit, said in a sworn statement to Air Force authorities three weeks later. "I asked the medic, 'If we hang out here, how many guys are going to die?' The medic said at least two, maybe three. I reported to controller, 'It is a cold PZ, and we are going to lose three if we wait.'"

But just as he said that, three or four enemy fighters on a knoll to the south, 300 to 400 yards behind the chopper, opened fire. Machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades started ripping into the casualty collection area. Bullets also ricocheted around the feet of Rangers and aircrew members carrying the first of the casualties up the hill – David, the flight engineer, who had been shot in the leg. The group dropped the litter and ran for cover, leaving David on his back on the hillside. Stebner, one of the carriers, twice dashed out to try to drag David behind some rocks, only to abandon him again. "I stayed out there a good 15, 20 minutes, just watching stuff go over us," David said. The third time, Stebner reached David and pulled him out of harm's way.

Down behind the chopper, Cory and an Air Force para-rescueman, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, had just inserted a fresh IV into Greg when they came under fire. Their position left them exposed. "We realized we were just going to have to sit there and shoot it out with them," Cory said. "Neither Jason nor I were going to leave." One rocket-propelled grenade came straight at them and zoomed over their heads, exploding above the helicopter. One bullet struck about three feet in front of Cory, kicking snow over him. "We were shooting back and forth," Cory said. "And I can remember getting down, thinking, 'I have only two magazines left – something has to happen here pretty soon.'" That's when he and Cunningham were hit. "I had turned over on my stomach and crawled up a hill about five feet, thinking this might do something," Cory said. "I turned back on my back to shoot, and it was just shortly after that that Jason and I got shot at the same time. We were sitting no more than five or six feet apart." Two bullets hit Cory in the abdomen, but the impact was cushioned by his ammunition pouch and belt buckle. "It took me a little while to get up enough courage to check myself out," he said. "As a medic, you realize that a penetrating wound to the abdomen can be absolutely the worst thing. So I reached my hand down there and tried to see how

much blood there was. I pulled my hand back initially and it was wet with water. That was a very reassuring sign." The water was from his punctured canteen. Cunningham was in worse shape: He was hit in the pelvic area and bleeding profusely. Although still lucid, he was in considerable pain. Good-natured and enthusiastic, Cunningham, 26, was popular with his fellow para-rescuemen, known as "PJs," for parajumpers. He had been a PJ for all of eight months. It was his first time in combat.

Rangers down the hill from the copter shot at the enemy position with a heavy machine gun, a SAW light machine gun, a grenade launcher and several M4 assault rifles. They watched some of the enemy fighters maneuvering around the backside of the hilltop, shooting at the Rangers from two directions. "We could see the tops of their heads, barely," said Staff Sgt. Raymond M. DePouli, a member of Chalk 1. Pazder, spotting an enemy fighter pop up to the left, let loose a burst from his M240B heavy machine gun and killed him. Off to the east, about 700 or 800 yards away, the Rangers noticed four or five other enemy fighters walking up. Canon figured he could reach them with the

heavy machine gun but he needed more ammunition. He sent Vela, the assistant gunner, back to the helicopter about 150 to 200 yards away. As Vela dashed back, more enemy fire erupted and Vela dove for cover behind a rock with Stebner. "You might not want to be by me because for some reason the enemy doesn't like me," said Stebner, who had been dodging bullets trying to

pull Dave to safety. "What are you talking about?" Vela said.

Just then, a rocket-propelled grenade soared over their heads.

"That's one thing I'm talking about," Stebner said. "Every time I get up and move, they shoot at me. And now I'm laying here and they're shooting at us." Vela crawled to another rock outcropping, joining DePouli. He wrapped the machine-gun ammunition in a bag normally used to hold the spare gun barrel and tossed it to Canon, reaching only halfway. Canon scrambled out on all fours and dragged the bag back to the spot behind

several boulders where he and Pazder were set up. Pazder passed the heavy gun to Canon, who had a better angle on the enemy below. "We poured machine gun fire onto every tree or bush where they may have been hiding," Canon said. "I don't remember seeing them again." The enemy fighters on the knoll kept shooting at the Rangers for more than 20 minutes. Then Navy F-14 fighter jets arrived and dropped about a half-dozen 500-pound bombs on or around the enemy position, silencing it. "With one three-pound burst, shrapnel could be heard traveling through the air,"

said Air Force Staff Sgt. Gabe Brown, a Special Operations combat controller with Chalk 1 who was radioing directions to the jets. "We could see the bombs go down the hill below us, and we heard the material rising up past us, whizzing through the air." The force of one bomb blast pushed back the helmet on DePouli's head. He called Self on the radio. "Can we get a little bit of a head's-up down here the next time we're going to make a bomb run like that?" Canon asked the platoon leader.

Self replied, "Yeah, sure, no problem." With the enemy's southern knoll position eliminated and the northern ridgetop secured, the Rangers resumed carting the casualties – five wounded and six dead – to the other side of the ridge crest. The move, 80 to 100 yards up a snow-covered rocky incline, required four to six men to transport one casualty.

Again turning to the question of evacuation, the Rangers felt an even greater sense of urgency because of the two fresh casualties. The Ranger medic listed them both in the gravest category, "urgent surgical." He was not entirely sure just how serious Cory's injuries were, but he was definitely worried about Cunningham.

The medic had stopped Cunningham's external bleeding, but he had little idea what was happening inside. Only days before, Cunningham had been lobbying commanders to allow PJs to carry blood packs on missions and had won permission to do so. Now he received one of the blood packs he had brought to Takur Ghar.

'I Tried to Keep a Monotone'

As worrisome as Cunningham's condition was, commanders were wary of attempting another daylight rescue, knowing that this was part of what had got them into trouble in the first place that morning. Also occupying the commanders' attention was the rest of the battle, with about 1,200 to 1,400 troops of the 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne divisions spread throughout the valley and swarms of U.S. fighter jets, bombers, helicopters and other aircraft in the skies above. Earlier in the day, military intelligence sources had reported as many as 70

enemy fighters converging on the ridgetop. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Jim Hotaling, a combat air controller who had a commanding view of enemy positions atop Takur Ghar from a ridge about two miles to the south, never saw anything approaching 70 enemy reinforcements. But he did see small groups of several fighters each maneuvering up the mountain during the day. "Most of the enemy I was engaging was a good 1,500 to 2,000 meters away from their position, down on the bottom of the mountain and in the creek beds," Hotaling said.

At least some of the Rangers believed a daylight evacuation could be carried out and was worth the risk. "If we had CAS [close air support] on station dropping bombs, we could have gotten out of there at that time," Vance said in his statement. "Just having the planes nearby kept the enemy away."

Vance added: "I kept telling controller that we lost another one, cold PZ, when are we getting exfiltrated? Controller said to hold on. After asking him three times, PL [platoon leader, meaning Self] expressed urgency at getting the team out of there. I continued to tell controller but he just kept telling me to hold on. After the third time, I handed the hand mike to the PL and asked him to tell controller the same thing.

"I tried to keep a monotone voice. There were times that I tried to throw some words in there to make controller realize that we have to get out. It became a personal conversation, and we kept saying we have to get out of here," Vance said.

Once, the Ranger medic got on the radio and tried to convey to headquarters the gravity of the injuries. "I felt as though if I started making a big deal about their condition, then it would worry my patients," the medic said. "You want to be open and honest, and I was, but I wasn't jumping up and down, ranting and raving, that this guy was going to die if we don't get him off this mountain." "I said, 'Listen, here's the story. I've got two urgent surgical patients, and we need to be evac-ed.' And their response was, 'Roger, we understand.' "The medic repeatedly assured Cunningham and the others that help was on the way.

But the aircrew, especially the pilots, knew their commanders' preference for nighttime evacuations.

"I kept coming back to them saying, 'Hey guys, listen, they're going to come get us, we're going to be out of here soon, hang in there,' " the medic said. "And it was the helicopter pilots who were pretty upfront about it, and they said,

'We know we're not leaving until dark because that's just the way it is.'" "I knew in the back of my head that the chances of them coming during daylight hours were slim to none, but I was trying to be positive about it," the medic said. Cunningham's reaction? "For the most part, he listened."

Psalm 121

As the sun sank around 5 p.m., the wind kicked up and the ridgetop turned frigid.

"You couldn't get enough oxygen," Wilmoth said. "Everyone's throat was bleeding, coughing up some blood. Everyone had bad sore throats and dehydration." The soldiers searched the chopper for items – crew bags, equipment kits, anything that could provide warmth or something to eat. "We probably found enough food for everybody to have a bite of something and put

something in their stomachs – whether it was a pack of crackers or a Power Bar or sharing half of a cold meal" from military rations, Canon said. Don, the chopper's air mission commander, peeled off the aircraft's sound insulation liner for blanketing the casualties. Some of the men built a lean-to out of wood from a bombed tree to keep the wind off the wounded. "Pants, sweat shirts, jackets, blankets, sleeping bags – anything we could find that would retain heat was given to the casualties," the medic said. "Some had upwards of a foot of stuff on top of them to keep them warm." Seated on the ridgetop, admiring the stunning vistas, Stebner told Wilmoth about how strange it was to be in such a beautiful place amid such dire conditions.

The evening before their mission, some of the Rangers, attending a Bible study group at Bagram air base to the north, had read a passage about mountains and deliverance. It was Psalm 121, which begins, "I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from?" The psalm held particular meaning for Self, who thought of it during the first moments of the firefight that morning as he rushed off the helicopter. The passage had stuck with him since a day on a road march as a West Point cadet,

when he passed a chaplain standing on a hill reciting the psalm.

But as he and his men waited to be evacuated, Self did not want them getting too contemplative, and especially too mournful. Not yet.

"There were a few times here and there where guys would start to reflect on what had just happened, and their minds started to affect them a little bit," Self recalled. At those points, he would tell them, "Hey, you've got tomorrow and the rest of your lives for that."

Shortly after nightfall – at 6:10 p.m. local time, according to Self's records – Cunningham perished.

"I could tell you that we did everything that we could do up there," the medic said. "He had hung on for hours, and it was simply his time." Two hours later, at 8:15 p.m., three evacuation helicopters began lifting everyone off the ridgetop. A fourth picked up the SEAL team on the side of the mountain.

The first helicopter landed with its tail ramp at the opposite end of where the troops had planned for it to go. The Rangers once again had to carry the casualties across icy, rocky terrain, this time 40 or 50 feet, the length of the chopper.

"It was more than once that we had to stop and set down, or one guy slipped on the ice," the medic said. "We never dropped a casualty. But I know it was uncomfortable for the casualties, even with the pain control stuff they were given. I know they were hurting. They made it pretty vocal." Within an hour, all the troops, their wounded and dead, were loaded and gone.

'There's No Right Answer'

All told, seven Americans died on Takur Ghar that day and four were seriously wounded. In honor of the first to perish there, many among the Special Operations forces now refer to the place as Roberts' Ridge. As for the number of al Qaeda killed, military officials do not have an exact count. The Rangers figure they shot at least 10 enemy fighters during the course of the day. Other tallies, based on accounts of the firefight involving the SEAL rescue team and U.S. airstrikes, have put the total enemy killed at as high as 40 or 50.

"It really wasn't our concern to have a good enemy body count when we left," Self said. "If they were dead, they were dead."

Operation Anaconda ended inconclusively 19 days later. The military disrupted al Qaeda in the Shahikot valley, but an unknown number of enemy fighters slipped away to regroup over the border in Pakistan.

In the end, the Rangers accomplished their mission. They retrieved the bodies of all U.S. servicemen on the ridgetop, leaving no one behind. Don, the air mission commander on the downed helicopter, said he was later told by a member of the SEAL rescue team that if the

Rangers had not arrived when they did, the SEALs would not have lasted much longer. Although the SEALs had already started down the mountain by then, they were still under attack. "The fire had been focused on them, and when we came in, it got diverted," Don said. The events of March 4 have underscored the U.S. military's commitment to doing whatever is necessary to prevent any U.S. soldiers – alive or dead – from being left on a battlefield. But the episode also has provoked debate among at least some military officials familiar with the details about the need for establishing minimal thresholds for dispatching rescue teams – thresholds that would balance the need for urgent response against the risks of going in with incomplete information.

Releasing an official report yesterday on the battle on Takur Ghar, Army Gen. Tommy Franks, the Central Command chief responsible for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, dwelt on the bravery and tenacity of the American troops involved. As for the intelligence lapses, communications breakdowns and questionable command judgments, he suggested they were simply part of the "fog" and "uncertainty" that are "common to every war." Other military officials said the battle has led to improved communications and other changes in U.S. military operations in Afghanistan that cannot be discussed publicly. Efforts also have been made at the field level to advance coordination between conventional and Special Operations forces. "There was no reason to believe from history that we should have been doing it any differently than we had been up to this incident," said Army Maj. Gen. Franklin L. "Buster" Hagenbeck, who commanded Operation Anaconda from his headquarters at Bagram air base. "But we've just decided that we'll always know what each other are doing at any given time."

If the Rangers who fought on the mountain find fault with the way the mission was mounted, they are keeping any criticism to themselves. They say they knew, when they signed up, that duty on quick-reaction forces would be hazardous. "At our level, everyone did his job superbly that day," DePouli said. "We did everything we could do. We were in a crappy situation, and we came out on top." The Rangers, and the Army helicopter crews and Air Force members who were with them, cite a number of actions that they believe kept the casualty tally lower than it might have been. Reflecting, for instance, on his decision to break off the Rangers' first attempted assault on the northern bunker, Self noted that the assault team included the most senior Rangers on the ridge at the time. If they had died, Self said, the others would have stood little chance of survival. "We could have tried it again and had a couple of guys get some posthumous Medals of Honor," Self said. "But I don't know if anybody else would have gotten out of there." Self also observed that if Chalk 2 had not made it up the mountain when it did, and then quickly assaulted the ridgetop, Chalk 1 would likely have been more exposed to the enemy's counterattack from the southeast. "We would have had the whole force laying on the side of the hill, getting shot from behind," Self said.

Still, the Rangers remain haunted by other decisions, especially to delay their evacuation until dark. Could an earlier evacuation have saved Cunningham's life?

"It's something we've been asking ourselves now for the better part of a month and a half," Capt. Joseph Ryan, the commander of Alpha Company, which includes Self's platoon, said in an interview in early May. "But there's no right answer to that question." Said Self: "So many decisions we made that day that could have gone the other way. A lot of what-ifs. That was one of those decisions. It was a dilemma, and there were consequences." All in all, it was a day of both tragedy and courage, of bad luck and fortuitous timing, of poor coordination and true grit. The Ranger medic spoke about the "positives" and the "negatives" of the experience. "The positives are, we got to play the game and everybody did exceedingly well," he said. "Everybody did what they were trained to do,

everybody performed well above the standard. It's negative because, in getting to play the game, losing is very final, it's very ugly. And until you really see it like we got to see it, it's kind of this mysterious thing.

"Quite frankly," he added, "I think that if guys with our job dealt with it or thought about it quite a bit, there would be a lot fewer of us."

Editor's Note: Part 1 appeared in the Current News Early Bird May 24, 2002. DoD News: Interview with U.S. Army Soldiers who Participated in Operation Anaconda

Interview with U.S. Army Soldiers who Participated in Operation Anaconda

Live interview with U.S. Army soldiers who participated in Operation Anaconda in eastern Afghanistan. Participants: Bryan G. Whitman, Deputy Director of Press Operations; Army Major Hilferty; Marine Captain O'Connor; Army Captain David Mayo, support platoon leader, 1st Battalion, 182nd Infantry Regiment, 101 Airborne Division (Air Assault); Army First Lieutenant Joe Claburn, 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault); Army Sergeant Major Frank Grippe, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division; Sergeant First Class Robert Healy, battalion operations sergeant, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division.)

Hilferty: I'm going to start out, I've got another person added to the list. It is Sergeant Major Frank Grippe, 10th Mountain Division, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment. He's the command sergeant major for that battalion. He was in the fierce firefight the first day in the southern part of the sector, was wounded, and is back here with us as the great soldiers, a couple of them, will be here in a minute. I'd like to start out with Sergeant Major Frank Grippe. Here he is.

Q: Thank you, Sergeant Major. Now if you could just describe to us, for the American public, try to give them a graphic description of what that battle was like, what you were thinking as this was happening, describe the battle as best you can and just give us a very good image of that if you would.

Grippe: Can I have your name, please?

Q: Thelma Lebrecht with Associated Press Broadcast.

Grippe: Great. So you'd like to know about the battle.

Basically the 187 Infantry was involved in combat operations in the [Shalinkot] Valley starting last Saturday at first light, which would be zero six o'clock in the morning local Afghan time. The initial mission was to conduct blocking positions in the southern portion of the Shalinkot Valley south of the village of Marzak. I also had my scout sniper teams directly east of the village of Marzak, watching two small canyons that ran out of the village. I had an element which was a platoon sized element just to the north of Marzak on a larger canyon running out of the Shalinkot Valley, all running east of course.

In the south our two positions were estimated by the intel people to possibly hold the most terrorist exfiltrators. We had two blocking positions, one in a canyon that runs from the southeast of the valley and one that runs directly south.

The actual valley that we're engaging the enemy in, the base of the valley is approximately 8,500 feet. It's totally surrounded by mountain peaks that rise up to 11,000 feet. The terrain itself is very rugged, a lot of spurs and ridges running off the peaks. Of course, there's not much vegetation. Up along the side of the hills there're small juniper trees and so forth.

On the valley floor the day of the fight, or should I say at the beginning of operations, there were small patches of snow and starting about 100 feet above the valley floor was the actual snow line. So that should give you a good image of the battlefield and so forth.

Q: Sergeant Major, first if you could just clarify how many people you were talking about, and also on the actual battle itself, if you could describe to the American people what that battle was like, the fierce firefight, what was going through your mind, just some personal recollections and thoughts about it all and descriptions.

Grippe: Okay. I'm probably getting into a little too much detail for you in setting the stage for the actual battlefield itself and the terrain and so forth. Basically, bottom line up front, was we came in, 125 personnel and three CH-47 aircraft. We sent one aircraft to the northern blocking position which had a platoon-sized element and my scout snipers which I had actually set up as hunter/killer teams. In the south I brought in 82 people on the two CH-47s, two separate landing zones, separated by about 400 meters distance. As I explained, our mission was to set up blocking positions in support of our Afghan allies as they swept through the area. The intent was that the Afghans, after we set our blocking position, would sweep through the villages and dislodge any al Qaeda in the villages.

Basically what happened was the picture intel painted was just a little bit different than the actual events happening on the ground by numbers of al Qaeda and the type of positions they had set up and so forth. Basically my element to the south landed right at the base of an al Qaeda stronghold.

I would say just moments after the helicopters had dropped us off we started taking sporadic fire, and at that time we returned fire and we moved under some cover. Luckily there was a small ridge line that separated the landing zone from where we were taking fire from the al Qaeda forces. And basically my infantry reacted as the best trained infantry in the world as they are, returned fire and maneuvered to the small ridgeline, got behind it. Luckily there's a small depression behind

the actual ridge itself. I had some other units that moved onto some small ridges to our south and returned fire. And after about the first ten minutes of combat, I guess the al Qaeda came out of their caves and their well-fortified positions and we experienced a heavy volume of fire from the actual mountains above us. As the day progressed, of course, or should I say ten minutes into the fight we started receiving mortar fire, rocket-propelled grenades as per the Soviet RPG fire, heavy machine gun fire, light machine gun fire, small arms fire, all from the hills above us.

So if you can picture that, we're out in the open. Even when we're behind this ridge line there's still mountain peaks to the north and to the south of us and the peak lay to our front where we were receiving heavy volumes of fire.

Of course we returned fire. We did kill al Qaeda elements with our small arms. We set up our mortar, returned fire with our mortar. The al Qaeda, because they've been there for so many years, have all the low ground in the valley already zeroed in with their mortars so it didn't take long for them to bracket in on our mortar and we sustained our first injuries.

As the day progressed we called in close air support, probably within the first 30 minutes or so, at the start of the firefight. That quieted things down. We finally got some Apache aircraft to

help us out. And basically from zero six o'clock in the morning until I would say eight o'clock in the evening is when we got our casualties out. For the most part our more serious casualties. Some of us, of course, stayed there on the battlefield.

At midnight there were about, we were actually extracted out of the battle. So basically we landed at the base of an enemy strong point and we didn't have the combat power with us at the time to actually assault onto those facilities and basically, because of the valley floor we were on, the canyon floor actually where we were at, we didn't have the terrain that we could actually facilitate any type of movement to take down the al Qaeda defenses. Do you have any questions?

Q: Sergeant Major, could you tell us your home town, perhaps, and your age? Just a couple of details there. Also we were told, is it correct you were injured? Could you describe what happened and how you were evacuated? Were you still in –

Grippe: Basically about 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon during one of the numerous mortar barrages during the day and into the evening I received a shrapnel wound in the back of my thigh about the size of a quarter or so. I got eight to ten pieces of shrapnel up inside my thigh that I guess you could say I'll be setting off airport detectors, metal detectors for the rest of my life.

But I stayed on until I got extracted with the main element. I didn't leave with the wounded. And I didn't extract myself out of Afghanistan either, like most of the doctors wanted me to do. I'm down here. My injury's okay, I can walk and so forth. I just have to get it healed up enough, scabbed over enough so I can get up in the mountains with my men. Basically what you need to let the American people know is our infantry fought very well that day. We went from actually a mission to where we were going to sit in blocking positions to I guess you could say we turned this into reconnaissance in force and let our higher know there is definitely al Qaeda in the area and lots of them and heavily armed. My positions to the north, they were in a more -- of course you're in a valley, you're surrounded by mountains, but they had more terrain to actually maneuver on the enemy. Both of my scout sniper teams made contact with al Qaeda forces. My snipers, and the actual scout teams with them, did a tremendous job and killed and eliminated numerous al Qaeda elements and kept a lot of al Qaeda elements tied down.

My northern block position, of course they actually attacked and secured a ridge, a small ridge overlooking the villages north of Marzak and engaged elements, al Qaeda elements in those villages. Again, killing numerous al Qaeda with direct fire weapons, machine guns and so forth. Basically with the distances of our gun flights, the 7.62 sniper rifles and our machine guns did a really good job at actually suppressing and of course killing al Qaeda members. Down in our area it was the same thing. My riflemen were firing the 5.56 M4 and saw automatic weapons, I actually witnessed some of my guys taking out al Qaeda targets out to ranges of 500 meters. So they really did a good job. They stayed cool under fire. Even in the south where we were, where we took a tremendous amount of fire for practically 18 straight hours before we extracted -- during the evening we had an AC-130 gunship come overhead and that provided a tremendous amount of aerial fire support base for us. And basically I'll tell you, we didn't run from the fight. It wasn't a Mogadishu. It wasn't as though we were pinned down. We just kept the enemy fixed all day and kept the CAS [close air support] coming, and any time we could actually visibly see a target we'd eliminate that al Qaeda element.

But because of the actual terrain where we were at that would not facilitate an assault onto this mountain strongpoint, our highers extracted us by helicopter and under cover by AC-130 and aerial CAS, that evening so we could come back here, get the rest of our casualties out and refit, then immediately get back in the fight. That's where my boys are right now.

Again, I could talk here all night about personal braveries. You could write a book on the personal braveries that went on in the south that day and the information I'm getting from my northern positions now, they had some spectacular gunfights up there and did an awesome job in eliminating al Qaeda members.

Q: Sir, Martha Radich from ABC News.

Again, could we just ask you your home town and –

Grippe: Hello, Martha.

Q: Hi, how are you? Hometown and age please?

Grippe: Basically, for security reasons I'd rather not give my home town.

Q: No problem.

Grippe: I'm a member of the 10th Mountain Division. I'm based at [4 Germany ARC]. I guess you could say I grew up in the Mohawk Valley of upstate New York.

Q: Close enough. Thank you for that.

Grippe: I'm 39 years old.

Q: Okay, now we've got all those details. Thanks for that.

Could you give us an idea of when you were extracted what resistance was left? And also, an idea about were you surprised by the resistance? I mean you've sort of alluded to that, that there were more people there than you thought, or there were positions they had taken that you didn't think they had taken before that. But just sort of when you were extracted, how much work there was left to do. Also, just one thing and I'll ask these couple of questions because of this delay. You talked about the Afghans going into the villages to dislodge al Qaeda elements. How do you know who the al Qaeda are? Is that who you think you're fighting? Is that only who you're fighting there? A lot of questions, sorry.

Grippe: Yes, I understand the question, ma'am.

As per the Afghan forces, as I explained earlier, the Afghan forces were part of the operation to clear the villages of al Qaeda forces. The Afghan forces on the first day received heavy automatic weapons fire and mortar fire and they could not make it through the other canyons into the valley. So there Afghan forces never arrived. This was a total American force in the Shalinkot Valley that day. You had a 10th Mountain element in the south and a 101st element in the north. Now as per se how do we know what's al Qaeda, how do we know what's Afghan villagers? That was one of our concerns and we had specialists with us who speak the language and so forth to help us talk to the Afghan people and so forth, to point different elements out. But that did not come into play in this operation. Basically there were no civilians at all in any of the villages. No civilians at all. It's all al Qaeda soldiers. I don't want to call them soldiers, they're terrorists. They're not soldiers. They're just terrorists. But basically they were wearing black or blue uniforms and there was no problem identifying who was enemy that day, ma'am. Any more questions concerning –

Q: Sergeant Major, Tom Bowman with the Baltimore Sun. A couple of questions.

Grippe: Hi, Tom.

Q: How are you? First of all you mentioned that initially you didn't have the combat power, I think that's what you said, to go after some of the al Qaeda positions. Besides the mortars, do you see anything more that would be necessary in a fight from your side? There's been talk among some Army officers about maybe getting some artillery up there or some armor, first of all. Secondly, you talked about you guys being involved in the blocking positions. That seems to have slipped now, where the Afghan forces are doing the blocking and the American forces are actually leading the operation.

Grippe: Roger. The Afghan forces of course are members of our coalition. Most of the Afghan people, as you well know, do not want the al Qaeda here in their country. So yes, there are Afghans involved. And yes, at the moment they are in, some Afghans are on the offense, some Afghans are in blocking positions, and other areas around the valley. Basically because of the way the battle developed, it's become quite the American fight at the moment because we are engaged close up with the al Qaeda.

Now as per se my element in the south because of the terrain which will not facilitate attack on the strong point, we exfiltrated out. We were extracted by helicopter under the cover of aerial close air support and the gunship. But the whole American force did not extract out of the area.

(Connection lost)

Q: I came in late. He was describing the first day of the attack?

Whitman: He was describing whatever you asked him questions for.

Q: Was that what he was talking about?

Q: Yes. He was injured. He got shrapnel –

Q: I didn't actually hear the description.

Q: He said he got shrapnel in his thigh and –

Q: Okay. I was here for that.

Q: Bryan, what's the difference, it's already 10:20 now. Are the other two guys going to come on? Are we still doing the 11:00 o'clock in here?

Whitman: We're doing the 11 o'clock in here, and I suspect that we'll still have the other two individuals, but the sergeant major –

(multiple voices)

Whitman: My understanding is it's one of the other –

(multiple voices)

Q: -- about 125 people in the total command or was that just the part that was down in the valley and the snipers –

Whitman: A battalion is much larger than 125. So that (inaudible). You can ask for clarification.

(Connection reestablished)

Whitman: We have you back here in the Pentagon. I think you got cut off just a little bit into that answer.

Hilferty: Yes, we did.

Whitman: If you can go ahead and pick up with your answer there. You were talking about additional forces and artillery from Tom Bowman of the Baltimore Sun.

Grippe: Am I still speaking to Tom or is this the facilitator?

Whitman: This is Bryan Whitman, but Tom is sitting right here.

Grippe: Okay. Tom, can you hear me?

Whitman: Yes, he can.

Grippe: Tom, basically I'm explaining my portion of the battle in the southern area. My other forces to the north of me and of course the 101st element was never extracted. They have stayed in contact with al Qaeda forces. As per artillery, well yeah, it would be nice to have some artillery there. And as per tanks, well, as you well know, the Soviets fought here for ten years using armor forces and not wanting to get out of their vehicles. I think it's quite a surprise on all our enemies that my boys are up at 10,000 feet right now chasing them down. You can't bring a tank up those ridges and you can't bring armored vehicles up to those ridges. That's my view of the situation in the area. The artillery gives you very responsive fires, but we had an outstanding air cap with aerial fast movers and bombers and of course the AC overhead to give us direct fire support from ahead. Does that answer your question?

Q: I think it does. It's Martha Radich again. Let me follow up with something I asked you before.

Grippe: Hi, Martha.

Q: Hi. What you think is left of the resistance in the area where you were. And also let me add, have you been in combat before and where?

Grippe: Yes, I've been in a few gunfights over the years. I have past experience with the Army Rangers and most of my career, actually ten years with 2nd Ranger Battalion and did six years prior to that with paratrooper units. So I've been in some gunfights before, but there's really no need even to go into that. Basically there's still al Qaeda left in the hills of course. They're living in caves. They have great fortified positions. But the fight right now is a light infantry fight. That's what the 10th Mountain and the 101st is all about. And the boys are up there now, and they're in

the fight, they're doing great things. That's what it's going to take. It's going to take feet on the ground with some of our great aerial combat support and we'll do fine up there.

Basically I'm just disappointed now that I'm not there with my guys because I've got this hole in my leg, but as soon as that scabs over according to the doctors I can get back up there.

And basically, Martha, our facilitator here, Major Hilferty, we have a few other personnel who will have different views of the battle and he'd like to get those on. Okay, Martha?

Q: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Q: This is Mark Heller at the Watertown Daily Times.

Hilferty: Welcome again. I want to introduce Sergeant -- Hi, Mark. I'm going to introduce another guy from 187 Infantry. We have four people here. I've got Sergeant First Class Robert Healy. He's a battalion operations sergeant. He's an infantryman with 1st Battalion 87th Infantry Regiment of 10th Mountain Division Light Infantry out of Fort Drum, New York, as you well know, Mark, and he was in a mortar fight and he was wounded. So I'm going to give you to Sergeant First Class Robert Healy.

Healy: Hello, sir.

Q: Hi. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your injury, but also can you reflect a little bit on your training at Fort Drum and what has been useful to you, not just your physical training but also psychologically. How do you prepare yourself for the fact that you may be hurt today, for instance?

Healy: First of all the injuries I sustained was from a mortar round that hit about 15 feet behind us. I got some shrapnel in my leg, shoulder, and just a little bit behind the ear right there. But I'm up and walking around and ready to go back to battle.

As far as the training and what prepped us for this conflict here was, at Fort Drum we do some intense training out there from the team level on up to company and battalion level. Ongoing, nonstop. Have combined arms exercises which we're conducting right now as we speak. Putting it to the test here.

What really prepped us for this is just watching the September 11th attacks. We knew we were going to be called up and go into combat and rid the world of this evil here, basically. And all the boys are ready to do that. We're doing it right now and nobody has any regrets and we're all still motivated.

Q: Sergeant? This is Susan Schaeffer from the Associated Press.

Can you tell us what you consider your home state to be? If you don't want to mention your home town. Your age and the time you've been in the Army, and then I'll ask you a question about the event itself.

Healy: I'm originally from Michigan, that's my home state. It's where most of my family's still at. I'm 34 years old. What was the last question? I'm sorry.

Q: How long you've been in the service and your specialty.

Healy: This summer it will be 17 years.

Q: Can you describe for us what you saw in the events on Saturday? What it's like? If you were telling your mom at home, what was it like to face these al Qaeda people, to have them showering mortar fire down on you. It sounds like you were in the bottom of a hellhole.

Healy: We were. I probably wouldn't tell my mom the exact truth because I wouldn't want to worry her too much. But basically once we got off the aircraft, the aircraft lifted off, which was very fortunate that they were able to get out of there. We'd walked for about 30 seconds to a minute and then started getting a barrage of RPG rounds and small arms fire. The RPG rounds are going anywhere from five to ten feet in front of us. The leaders took over, we all ducked behind kind of a small bowl area with cover and concealment on pretty much four sides probably three sides. And got in there, everybody got organized and we started returning fire. From that point on whenever they would show themselves we'd take care of them. Just throughout the whole day it was RPG rounds and machine gun mortar rounds just landing everywhere. During the initial barrage we didn't take any casualties. That came later as mortar rounds, they started out walking them into our AO.

Q: Sergeant did you worry you weren't going to get out of there alive?

Healy: I didn't worry about me getting out of there alive. I was worried about some of the casualties that we initially took earlier on in the day. I was concerned for them. It didn't really cross my mind. I knew we had a job to finish. I knew they weren't going to move ground troops on us up close because we would have took care of them with our weaponry and everything. We can reach out a little ways but not too high up in the rocks.

Q: This is Mark Heller again at the Watertown Times. The terrain that you're in there is a lot different from what you would see at Fort Drum. I'm just wondering how you're adjusting to the terrain there, and did you do any training at the mountain training facility in Vermont?

Healy: The boys are adjusting real well here. The elevation from here at Bagram to where we went to for the operation is a little bit higher, well, it's a lot higher. We got in there, we adjusted really well. I was stationed in Alaska before so I'm familiar with the mountains as with a lot of people in our unit, so prior to this happening we did a lot of cross-training on mountaineering and made sure everybody was up to snuff on the operation.

Q: This is Craig Gordon from Newsday. How are you doing? You said as soon as you stepped off the aircraft within 30 to 60 seconds you came under fire. Had you been told to expect that kind of immediate response? Were you surprised at the intensity of the fire and the weaponry they had available to them?

Healy: As with any LZ you're going into there's enemy around there. Yeah, we were told to expect it so we could plan for it and react to it. As far as the intensity, we didn't think it would be that high a volume of fire coming down on us initially. Luckily they weren't accurate shots at us and we were able to get everybody under cover.

Q: Sergeant Healy, this is Dave Martin with CBS. Just to be clear, were you and Sergeant Major Grippe in the same battle? Or is this two separate battles we're hearing described?

Healy: It's the same battle. I'm sure probably what he's remembering and what I'm remembering are a couple of different things. We were at two different locations. We'd gotten dropped off probably a few hundred meters apart from each other. About 300 meters apart, different aircraft.

Q: But you were part of that southern blocking force?

Healy: Yes, sir.

Q: Sir, Martha Radich from ABC again. You talked about the casualties suffered and the men you were worried about when you first arrived. Can you tell us how serious those were, how many people?

Healy: It was actually one of the mortar rounds that initially hit within the area where we were at. That hit about six guys on that one. Probably ten seconds later another round came and took out about another six personnel on that one. Their injuries were just all shrapnel, different parts of the body. Our body armor saved the torso area so nobody sustained bad injuries around the chest or stomach there. Most of them were to the legs and arms.

Q: This is Staff Sergeant Shrees with Army News Service. You have a lot of experience, 17 years in, and the sergeant major, he's also been in numerous gunfights. Could you explain how the younger soldiers who haven't had this experience before are staying focused and motivated?

Healy: A lot of them, like I said, since September 11th that motivated a lot of guys and it kept them straight on the line on what they had to do and what our mission was to go down there. And as the President said, we're going to get rid of the al Qaeda. With the experience of the older soldiers, they're making sure these young guys are staying focused. They've been great. We've had no problems with them. They've stayed motivated the whole time. The injured ones that even went back, I gather they're healing up, they're ready to get right back in the battle.

Q: Sergeant, just one question for you. There were a number obviously of incidents of bravery. Can you describe, again just looking for personal stories, personal reactions. Can you describe some incidents of bravery you saw? Give us a clearer picture of the scene? And also if there are any others nearby you who could also relate similar stories.

Healy: The thing that stands out in my head there most is during one of the mortar rounds that hit myself and Sergeant Major Grippe and about six or seven others, we had to move out of that area because usually where one round hits another one's going to follow soon after. So we pushed away. About five of the guys from Charlie Company, they stayed up on the ridge line and they were receiving sniper fire and machine gun fire, rounds were bouncing all around them, but they stayed there to cover our movement. None of them faltered. They knew they could get hit at any time but they stayed there and held their ground and made sure we got out of there.

Q: Hey, Top, this is Lisa Burgess from Stars and Stripes. I have a question for you about resupply. You guys jump in there or walked off the chopper with a standard combat load. That's not going to last you for 18 hours. How did you get more ammo in there?

Healy: The initial load we went in with should have sustained us for more than that. We basically conserved fire after the initial assault. They weren't really popping their heads up too much so we would only shoot at what we could see. So we could have went another probably 24 hours without resupplying. We didn't get resupplied. We were good. We were running low but we were able to sustain ourselves for a little while.

Q: Dave Martin again. Just to clarify that, you were running low on ammunition? And also it's been assumed, but I just want to make clear, that the plan here was not to pull you out after 18

hours. You were coming out because of the unexpected intensity of the opposition, is that correct?

Healy: Yes, that's correct.

Q: In both cases you were running low?

Healy: We were, well we started to get a lot of close air support so that helped us to conserve our ammunition and kept the enemy's head down where we could start conserving our ammo and just prepare for the night and the follow-on day. So we were sitting good. We were low but we were able to hold them off basically.

Whitman: Sergeant, this is Bryan Whitman. It looks like we're running a little low on questions here. Is there anybody else there though that you wanted to have say anything to us back here?

Hilferty: I've got Captain O'Connor. I'm going to hand you off to him and he'll introduce the next person.

O'Connor: Hello, Captain O'Connor, United States Marine Corps. I'm Major Hilferty's deputy.

Q: Martha Radich from ABC. Can you give us your first name, age, and your home state?

O'Connor: Actually I've got a Captain David Mayo who was a support platoon leader, 1st Battalion, 182nd Infantry Regiment, and he'd like to talk to you all. Stand by.

Mayo: This is Captain Mayo.

Q: Hi, Captain Mayo, Martha Radich from ABC. Could you give us, if you would not mind, your age and your home state?

Mayo: Yes, ma'am. I am 27 years old and I am from the State of Tennessee.

Q: If you would just tell us what battle you were involved in, whether you were injured and as much detail as you can about that. Also, we've heard some reports from the field that al Qaeda members were actually taunting Americans, waving, shouting, throwing stones, running back into caves. If you have any information about that. But importantly, what you yourself saw in the battle.

Mayo: Yes, ma'am. We inserted in the early morning hours of D-Day. My task was two-fold. Number one, to provide security for the command and control element; and number two, to conduct reconnaissance of potential resupply landing zones for the operation. As we inserted we established the command and control element for those elements such as Sergeant First Class Healy just talked about. We established that within the first 15 or 20 minutes. About 30 or 40 minutes later another element linked up with us and about that time we began to receive some sniper fire from the ridge line just to our east.

The members of the command and control element began to ID the al Qaeda personnel that were approaching our position and the element that we linked up with had some more technical equipment, a little nicer than we had, and were able to engage those enemy personnel from the ridge line that we were situated on. And in fact destroyed two to four members that were trying to infiltrate our position.

As far as the taunting, from my position at least I was not able to see any of that happen although as far as sticking their heads out of caves, firing, and then returning into those caves, that seems to be something that they do quite often and we're trying to combat that.

As I said, the sniper fire continued throughout the day. Again, we were co-located with this other element. We spotted targets for them as they continued to take out the al Qaeda members that were approaching our position.

Later in the day we began to receive indirect fire. They began to bracket mortar rounds onto our position. We resituated as soon as that began to happen and moved to a safer location. Certainly from the front line infantrymen like Sergeant First Class Healy, they truly are the real heroes. The aviators that inserted us, although they were receiving fire the entire way, Apache gunships who were shot up quite a bit throughout the day still continued to do their mission in support of all the infantry units. So a lot of people to take your hat off too on that day.

Q: Captain Mayo, I'm Jerry Gilmore with the American Forces Information Services Press Service. How are you? And thank you all for your --

Mayo: Good sir, how are you doing?

Q: Fine. Thank you all, too, for your service over there. We're very proud of you and stay safe. I know it's not easy.

Mayo: Thank you, sir.

Q: You're with the 101st, right sir?

Mayo: Yes, sir. That's correct.

Q: Was this basically, that day-long battle it evolved into a war of attrition? You all were just taking out the targets as they appeared pretty much? You weren't trying to assault the ridges, were you trying to move up into the mountains and kick them out of the caves? Or --

Mayo: I want to certainly stay in my lane here. Like I said, I was part of the command and control element. And the elements like Sergeant First Class Healy was involved in, he saw more of the direct fire. I can tell you from my vantage, the command and control element contains an ALO, an Air Force representative that talks to the fighter aircraft, for instance the F-16s, B-1s, B-52s, etc. And from our position he was able to observe and call in the close air support in support of the infantry, like Sergeant First Class Healy's unit. So from my position we were able to observe the effects of the ordnance that those aircraft dropped.

Q: How were the effects?

Mayo: Unbelievable effects. It was amazing the amount of assets that we received that day, throughout the day. We got support from B-52s, F-16s, FA-18s, AC-130s, Apache gunships, AH-64 Apache helicopters, so it was a pretty big spectacle. It was very critical that those fires be placed in the correct positions because there were quite a few friendlies on the battlefield. Because of that, we had to be extremely careful. I think our ALO did a super job in doing that.

Q: This is a follow-up question, hopefully for Sergeant First Class Healy or maybe the sergeant major if they can still communicate with us. Without in the least saying anything negative about the bravery of your infantry guys, is it fair to say that the majority of the people, the al Qaeda who were killed were killed by your CAP?

Mayo: Ma'am, actually they are not here. I think they had to move to some other type of operation. But we're going to try to find them, ma'am, and if they're available certainly they can probably answer those questions.

Q: Is there anybody there who saw the fight who can comment on that?

Mayo: Ma'am, if you can repeat your question I can give you my perspective of it. Again, I want to stay in my lane. If you can ask the question though I'll try to give you my best answer.

Q: Okay. Sergeant First Class Healy was saying they were conserving ammo, that they were basically only firing back when they saw people popping up, which doesn't, from what other people have described, wasn't happening all that frequently. But at the same time the sergeant major said that there were lots of al Qaeda who were killed. My question is, is it fair to say that most of the people who were killed in this battle were killed by the air support as opposed to the infantry?

Mayo: Ma'am, I'm certainly not an expert on that. I'd probably defer to someone else on that. I am sure that there were quite a few al Qaeda members killed by direct fire, although the CAS played a major role in it as well. Like I said before, the amount of support we received from the aircraft was pretty impressive. So I would say they played a major role in providing security for those elements that were pinned down throughout the day. So they did a super job doing that.

Q: Captain Mayo, this is Thelma Lebrecht with AP Broadcast. I have just one quick clarification question and then I have another broader question.

A clarification. Did you say that you were injured in this? And how were you? Then I have another broader question.

Mayo: No, ma'am. I was not personally injured in this particular day.

Q: Thank you, captain. The comments have been terrific. Is there anyone else there that wanted to speak? We're just probably going to be wrapping it up pretty soon. But is there anyone else nearby that had wanted to give their perspective?

Mayo: Yes, ma'am. First Lieutenant Joe Claburn is here also, ma'am. He is from HHC, 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment. Again, ma'am, that's also from the 101st Airborne Division Air Assault.

Q: Lieutenant Claburn, if you wouldn't mind, could you tell us what your age is, how long you've been in the service and your home state?

Claburn: Good morning, this is Lieutenant Claburn.

Q: Yes, Lieutenant Claburn, if you could spell your last name for us and give us your age and how long you've been in the service and your home state if you could, please.

Claburn: Certainly. I'm 25 years old. My last name is spelled C-L-A-B-U-R-N. I'm a resident of Alabama.

Q: Thank you very much, lieutenant, if you could just give us a very general picture of the battle scene as you saw it, give us your personal perspective. Were you injured? And just give us a feel for the American

public of what it was like to be there.

Claburn: Certainly. My job here in the battalion is the S-3 Air. Here in the 101st Airborne Division I oversee all of the air assaults that we do and conduct. I act as a liaison for the battalion with the aviation units.

Currently the units have been engaging in combat on the front lines. My overall job here recently has been to resupply them with food, water, ammunition. I have personally escorted several of those resupply missions. Most of them have been during the daytime. The scene of the country is very nice. I have been very impressed with the overall beauty of the country, with the high mountains and the terrain. The majority of, I guess something I found neat was as I go through the country we observe a lot of the residents of the nearby villages coming out to look up at us as we fly by, a lot of them waving, lots of them running toward the aircraft, hands up in the air, almost as a cheering on.

Children in the streets running toward the aircraft. It seems to be a very happy spirit, and hopefully rightfully so as we're here trying to take care of the business.

This morning I flew in to do a resupply drop of food and water and ammunition. As we came into the LZ we dropped off the supplies where then I had to drop off some pacs, some personnel. They were actually reporters.

When we sat down on the ground after dropping our load I was in the seat between the pilot and the copilot to make sure that the equipment got into the right location. As we were dropping off the pacs and picking up the new ones who were also returning reporters, the aircraft was receiving fire from the mountainside. As I looked out the front of the aircraft I could see rounds hitting approximately five to ten meters in front of the aircraft. Just a slight combustion of the rounds hitting the dirt sent at least myself and the pilot into a little bit of a disarray. Once we got all the passengers on board, of course, we pulled up off of the LZ where we could see a lot of the American forces taking cover. They had been receiving fire in and out of that area quite often. As we were departing the LZ the tail gunner of the aircraft had spotted personnel up on the northern edge of the ridge and he engaged that target. I don't necessarily know if he successfully engaged and killed that personnel on the ridge, but I think he disrupted his day long enough to keep his head down and allow us the opportunity to escape the LZ without any harm to American personnel. But it was quite an interesting adventure this morning.

Q: Lieutenant Claburn, this is Bryan Whitman. Unfortunately we're going to have to bring this to a close.

I'd just like to give you an opportunity, if there's any of you individuals that have been talking to us that wanted to say something in closing, now would be the time.

Claburn: Actually I'm the only one left here. I guess the closing remarks on my behalf is we really do appreciate the American support that we soldiers have gotten over here. As you know, the infantryman who lives in the mud, sleeps in the mud, and the weather here is very terrible, so every bit of support we get from the American people really does mean a lot. We've received countless valentine's cards. My unit personally has missed Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, tons of birthdays, anniversaries, and the support of the American people tremendously does a lot to help us out here. The reminder of the reason why we're here and the business that we do, as serious as it is, and the risks that we take every single day, to know that people back in the United States really appreciate us and the work that we do means a lot to each and every single one of the soldiers over here that I serve with.

Whitman: Lieutenant, we'd like to thank you and your colleagues for taking the time this morning to speak to us all back here, and we wish you all the best of luck.

Claburn: Okay. I'm going to hand you over to Captain O'Connor. Thank you.

Marine Corps News> 13th MEU (SOC) provides needed punch in Anaconda

13th MEU (SOC) provides needed punch in Anaconda

Submitted by: Headquarters Marine Corps
Story Identification Number: 20024812141
Story by 1stLt. Jeff Landis

ABOARD USS BONHOMME RICHARD (LHD-6)(March 28, 2002) –

When the most intense battle in Operation Enduring Freedom kicked off - Operation Anaconda - Marines were called into action March 3 to do what they do best: launch a rapid-response, flexible and self-sustaining task force on a moment's notice to conduct offensive operations or other missions as directed.

Marine helicopter pilots, crews and support personnel from the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) provided the quick reaction force and muscle required to conduct deliberate air assaults on enemy mortar positions and hide-sites in Khowst and eastern Afghanistan's Shah-e-Kot Valley near Gardez, Afghanistan, Mar. 4-26, in support of the coalition effort there. Marine helicopters completed more than 400 combat sorties in Operation Anaconda.

In less than 24 hours after receiving the call, the 13th MEU (SOC) and Amphibious Squadron Three, aboard ships of the USS Bonhomme Richard Amphibious Ready Group off the coast of Oman, punched through the Indian Ocean full steam ahead to the Northern Arabian Sea to launch aircraft 800 miles inland the following morning. The U.S. Central Command directed 13th MEU (SOC) to provide five AH-1W Super Cobra and three CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters, as well as KC-130 Hercules aircraft to support the Coalition Force Land Component Commander Forward (CFLCC (FWD)) for Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. Additionally, 13th MEU (SOC) provided daily AV-8B Harrier combat sorties in support of the Coalition Forces Air Component Commander.

Under the command of LtCol. Gregg A. Sturdevant, commanding officer of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 165 (Rein), the 80-plus-member detachment of Task Force 165 performed close air support, airborne reconnaissance, logistics support and a myriad of other tasks for Coalition Joint Task Force-Mountain, headed by the Army's 10th Mountain Division, with elements from the 101st Airborne and Special Operations Forces.

Marine Super Cobras conducted daily combat sorties to flush out Al Qaida and Taliban forces in the mountainous regions of eastern Afghanistan. Three Marine CH-53Es, originally scheduled to provide logistics and refueling capability to Cobras on the trek from USS

Bonhomme Richard to Bagram, Afghanistan, brought a new dimension in support of combat operations. Super Stallions provided tactical refueling to every type of rotary wing asset in Afghanistan, ran combat support missions with logistics, supplies, ordnance and water, inserted U.S. and Coalition Special Operations Forces, moved utility and all-terrain vehicles for coalition forces and operated tactical Forward Arming and Refueling Points. Super Stallion pilots flew 191 combat sorties and 257 hours. The 53's proved to be one of the most flexible assets on station.

"We knew we would have some involvement in this operation because of the sheer distance inland," said Capt. R. Brian 'Chimpy' Fanning, a 29-year-old CH-53E pilot from Virginia Beach, Va. "I think we brought more to the fight than people realized. We performed a variety of missions - everything from running ordnance and supplies to refueling, even on short notice. All this was a credit to the maintenance crews, who worked miracles day and night, even in the freezing cold, to keep the aircraft maintained and combat ready. They are the unsung heroes of this operation."

According to Capt. Leaf H. "Grenade" Wade, a 29-year-old assistant air officer for 13th MEU (SOC) and liaison officer for the TF 165 detachment, responding to a broad array of missions was the hallmark of the 13th MEU (SOC) detachment. "Our planning cycle is very short, and we could react to a number of different missions on short notice," said Wade, a native of Eugene, Ore., and 1996 graduate of the University of Oregon. "That was one of the biggest strengths we had up there. Sometimes the tasks would change four or five times in a day, and I think the flexibility in being able to plan and adapt and make it work on a short timeline was a huge success."

The Super Cobra and Harrier pilots also dictated combat success. Cobra pilots flew an average of 40 combat missions apiece, 217 total sorties and 380 hours, and fired a total of 28 Tube-launched, Optically-tracked, Wire-guided (TOW) missiles, 42 Hellfire missiles, 450 2.75-inch rockets, and 9,300 rounds of 20mm high-explosive, incendiary rounds on Al Qaida cave complexes, mortar positions and hide sites. Harrier pilots flew 148 sorties and 331 hours total, including some in January, and dropped 32 GBU-12 500-pound bombs and two MK-82 bombs.

"We flew the first Harrier sortie off the ship, and it felt a lot different than training when we removed all of our squadron patches and name tapes, and grabbed a pistol and rounds to take with us," said Capt. Joshua L. "Spud" Luck, a 32-year-old Harrier pilot and Boise, Idaho, native. "When I felt the 500-pound bombs drop off my wing one at a time and I watched them impact the target area, it was almost surreal. From 18,000 feet it's pretty impersonal.

However, the personal side of it was seeing what happened on September 11, and having an impact on preventing anything like that from happening in the future. I am proud to be a part of this."

According to military reports, much of the heaviest fighting during Anaconda took place at altitudes 10,000 feet or more above sea level. The Cobra pilots were instrumental in providing good aerial reconnaissance while combing the mountains, and providing effects on target.

"I volunteered for this, and I was hoping I would get into the fight somehow," said Capt. Christopher W. "Harm" Roe, a 30-year-old Cobra pilot from Poughkeepsie, N.Y. "We happened to get the first mission out, and attacked a mortar position with TOW missiles. We also located a hide-site and made a few passes with 20mm guns and fired flechette rockets."

"Part of it for me was revenge. I watched the buildings collapse live in person," said Roe, who was home in New York on leave during 9/11. "I think it was easy to take the human dimension out of it, because they were firing at us trying to take us out of the air. It was either us or them." "We worked well with 'talking our eyes on target' to keep awareness," said Capt. Bruce W. "Jo Jo" Laughlin, a 31-year-old Cobra pilot from Ft. Worth, Texas. "With an obscured target, you have to work together to stay focused. You have to continually be aware of what the other crewmember is doing and try to be a strength to him. It was a life-altering experience for me as a Marine and a pilot."

With all of the integrated aviation assets, including KC-130 Hercules providing daily logistics runs for fuel and supplies as well as aerial refueling, the flexibility of the 13th MEU (SOC) proved a valuable asset to the battles in Afghanistan. After Operation Anaconda, and while conducting split-ARG operations simultaneously conducting an exercise in Qatar, 13th MEU (SOC) continued to provide close air support to maneuvering coalition forces.

On the last day of the detachment's operations in Afghanistan March 26, the Commander of CJTF-Mountain, MajGen. F.L. Hagenbeck, recognized 14 Marines for their exceptional meritorious achievement in combat. Sturdevant was awarded the Bronze Star, six Cobra pilots were awarded Air Medals with Combat "V," and seven support Marines were awarded Army Commendation Medals. Numerous other pilots and aircrew members have been nominated for the Air Medal, some with Combat V and some with the Air Strike device, for their actions in combat. In addition, more than a dozen aircrew members have been nominated to receive their combat aircrew wings. These awards and designations are pending approval.

Currently in its fifth month of the deployment, 13th MEU (SOC) has proven to be a quick, flexible and capable force, whether conducting exercises or combat operations in the Central Command theater of operations.

Photos included with story: A Marine CH-53E Super Stallion is refueled in the air by a KC-130 Hercules, before making a logistics run in support of Operation Anaconda. Both aircraft are from the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) Aviation Combat Element, supporting Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Official USMC Photograph Photo by: CWO2 William D. Crow

Review Of Afghan Battle Finds Lapses But No Errors In Judgment New York Times
May 25, 2002

Review Of Afghan Battle Finds Lapses But No Errors In Judgment
By Eric Schmitt

WASHINGTON, May 24 — A military review of a battle in eastern Afghanistan in early March that left seven American soldiers dead on a desolate mountaintop found intelligence lapses, radio glitches and miscommunication between commanders and commandos, officials said today. But Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the head of allied forces in Afghanistan, defended the operation, the fiercest firefight of the campaign against terror, and attributed any failings to

clever fighters from Al Qaeda, unforgiving terrain and a commander's unpredictable nemesis — the "fog and friction" of war. "From what I know now, based on the information available to the commanders on the ground at this time, I think their judgments were good," he said at a news conference in Tampa, Fla., near his Central Command headquarters.

The clash came on the third day of a three-week-long campaign in the Shah-i-Kot Valley, and stemmed from an attempt to rescue a Navy Seal who had fallen out of a helicopter on a reconnaissance mission. The ensuing battle resulted in the most American combat deaths from a single unit in a single day since a failed raid in Mogadishu in 1993 that killed 18 soldiers. Repeatedly invoking the coming Memorial Day holiday, General Franks praised as heroes the seven who died and said no disciplinary action or command changes were being considered as a result of the 17-hour battle on March 4 atop a snowbound peak called Takur Ghar. At a Pentagon briefing later, the senior military officer who conducted the review of the battle said he had sent a report on how to improve the "tactics, techniques and procedures" used by Army, Navy and Air Force Special Operations forces involved in the fight. The officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, refused to discuss his findings, which are classified. The officer said that the Pentagon's most sophisticated spy satellites, reconnaissance drones and surveillance airplanes never detected an enemy bunker hidden by a rock and tree and knee-deep snow atop the 10,000-foot mountain.

Events began shortly after 3 a.m. on March 4 when a black Chinook helicopter ferrying a Navy Seal reconnaissance team assigned to set up an observation post on the ridge top was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade fired from the fortified bunker. Machine-gun fire also ripped through the aircraft, cutting hydraulic and oil lines. One of the Seals, Petty Officer First Class Neil C. Roberts, slipped on the oil and fell out of the chopper, dropping about 5 to 10 feet to the snowy ground below. The damaged helicopter crash-landed about four miles away. A second Chinook arrived to pick up the crew and commandos, and a rescue mission was put into motion.

Investigators said they were not certain what happened to Petty Officer Roberts over the next two hours. But they say it was likely that he activated an infrared strobe light and fired at about half a dozen Qaeda gunmen before they closed in on him and killed him. But the Seals on the rescue mission did not know his fate, and commanders could not reach them because radio signals were blocked by the jagged peaks. The rescuers landed where the first helicopter took fire, and immediately came under attack themselves. An Air Force air controller, Tech. Sgt. John Chapman, was killed.

Back at the American staging base in Gardez, an Army Ranger quick-response force was dispatched aboard Chinooks to rescue the Seals on the rescue mission, who by now had retreated down the mountainside for protection. Commanders ordered the helicopter to land away from the peak and its fortified al-Qaeda bunker. But investigators said because of a miscommunication, the Rangers and Chinook crew never received the order and flew into the hostile landing zone, where they encountered withering fire. Four Rangers were killed.

By that point, dawn was breaking and the American forces were losing the cover of darkness. An AC-130 gunship that could have provided protective fire for the Rangers was pulled from the scene because the low-flying, slow-moving planes are too vulnerable to rockets and missiles during the day. American F-15 and F-16's eventually bombed the Qaeda bunker, and more Rangers arrived to storm the enemy positions. Officials said anywhere from 15 to 35 enemy fighters were killed. An Air Force search-and-rescue specialist, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, died from gunshot wounds, the seventh American death.

At the Pentagon, senior officials joined General Franks in avoiding any second-guessing of what might have gone wrong.

"It's very difficult, sitting in an air-conditioned environment with good lighting, to fully appreciate all that happens on the battlefield," said Gen. Peter Pace, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who commanded a marine platoon in Vietnam. "It is an enormously complex, chaotic environment — people shooting at you, things going `bang,' vision obscured, and there's a lot of things that you don't even know about." In Afghanistan today, the fighting continued. American-led forces swooped in by helicopter on a suspected sanctuary for top Taliban leaders west of Kandahar, killing one gunman and wounding two others in a firefight, Pentagon officials said. About 55 other suspected Taliban or Qaeda fighters were taken into custody in the eight-hour, nighttime raid 30 miles west of the former capital of the Taliban government, the officials said. No coalition soldiers were injured, they said. Military officials would not identify the raid's target, but said it was not Mullah Muhammad Omar, the former Taliban leader, who is believed to be hiding in the mountains just north of Kandahar. The raiding party of about 150 American Special Forces troops, allied Afghan soldiers and other coalition special operations troops returned enemy fire as they stormed the compound shortly after 1 a.m., General Pace said.

Operation Condor Presents Challenge To U.S. Forces European Stars and Stripes

May 19, 2002

Operation Condor Presents Challenge To U.S. Forces

By Jon R. Anderson, Stars and Stripes

BAGRAM, Afghanistan — Despite winds gusting above 40 mph, U.S. Air Force A-10 Thunderbolt warplanes took off regularly from Bagram air base throughout the day Saturday in support of Operation Condor. About 1,000 British Royal Marines are continuing the latest sweep for Taliban and al-Qaida holdouts in the rugged mountains of eastern Afghanistan. The new offensive began early Friday morning after an Australian special forces team was attacked Thursday while trying to keep watch over a suspected enemy way station in a region north of Khost, near the Pakistan border. A six-hour gun battle ensued. The Australians were able to kill one of their attackers as they tried to escape, said British spokesman Lt. Col. Ben Curry. The team, however, was still "actively and aggressively followed and attacked" as it tried to withdraw. That's when they called in the big guns of a U.S. Air Force AC-130 Spectre gunship. Armed with a 105 mm howitzer, a 40 mm chain gun, a 25 mm cannon and two 20 mm machine guns, the Spectre blitzed a ridge line, killing at least 10 suspected enemy fighters, said U.S. military spokesman Maj. Bryan Hilferty. The battle was enough to convince U.S. military commanders here that a wide sweep of the area was necessary.

Staff Sgt. Tim Johnson, a flight engineer and door gunner aboard a U.S. CH-47 Chinook, was among those who helped insert the British into snow-capped peaks early Friday morning. "It wasn't the most exciting mission we've been on," said the veteran of Operation Anaconda, which left eight U.S. troops dead and more than 50 wounded, "but it was definitely the most challenging." Johnson, part of Company B, 159th Aviation, home based at Hunter Army Airfield, Ga., said it was tricky terrain and gut-wrenching flying that made this mission stand out.

The landing zone, above 8,000 feet, was so steep and rugged that pilots could only land the Chinook's rear wheels on the ground while still keeping the rest of the bird at a hover.

Trees, rocks and shrubs along the outcropping — as well as sharply gusting winds — complicated the flying, he said.

In fact, the Chinook's massive twin rotor blades trimmed a few trees as the pilots backed their way in, said Johnson.

"That's the first time I've seen that in 14 years of flying," he said.

The pilots in another Chinook were forced to do the same maneuver, slightly damaging their rotor blades. A tree stump cutting into the Chinook's tail ramp caught everyone's attention in Johnson's aircraft. A piece of the tree flew into the helicopter, hitting the tail gunner in the head. "He's OK, it didn't hurt him," said Johnson. "It was pretty nerve-racking, though. It can be pretty rough when you're trying to back into a landing zone no wider than the ramp itself and still keep half the helicopter airborne." While the troops did not come under fire, A-10 warplanes were circling overhead just in case.

"We kept two aircraft in the air and on station from dawn until dusk," said Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Dennis Lyon, part of a combined reserve A-10 unit made up of the 303rd and 706th Fighter Squadrons that has been based at Bagram since the beginning of May. Those flights continued Saturday, but despite an active, aggressive search of their own, the British marines have so far been unable find enemy fighters the region.

A U.S. Army UH-60 Blackhawk MEDEVAC helicopter, escorted by two AH-64 Apache gunships, evacuated at least one British casualty from region. The British marine walked off the chopper, with only slight assistance from medical personnel, and was taken by ambulance to a nearby military hospital here for treatment. A British spokesman declined to say exactly why the marine had

been evacuated, but it's no secret that sickness has been as much of an enemy for the British contingent as any Taliban fighters. Two other marines were evacuated from the operation on Friday. One was suffering from high-altitude sickness, the other from a mysterious stomach bug that has afflicted more than three dozen British troops in recent days and caused more than 300 troops to be placed under quarantine. The British Defense Ministry announced Saturday that it believes the troops have contracted Winter Mountain Disease, a highly contagious viral infection.