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OF ARMY HERITAGE

**Special Forces
in Afghanistan: Oct 01-Mar 02**

Richard W. Stewart

During combat operations in Northern Afghanistan as part of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Army Special Forces (SF) were asked to accomplish miracles. With little to no preparation, Army teams were to land by helicopter deep in hostile territory, contact members of the Northern Alliance, coordinate their activities in a series of offensives, bring the entire might of US air power to bear on Taliban and al-Qaeda forces, and change the government of Afghanistan so that Afghanistan was no longer a safe haven for terrorists. They accomplished all of this, and more, in the space of a few months. How? That is the question I will attempt to answer, although obviously the information at the moment is too sketchy for anything definitive.

Major Players

Task Force Dagger: K2, Uzbekistan, and Bagram AB, Afghanistan

5th SFG (A)
B/2/160th SOAR
Air Force Special Operations

Northern Alliance Forces



Task Force K-Bar: Kandahar and Bagram AB, Afghanistan

Task Force 64: Kandahar

Coalition Joint Task Force Mountain: Karshi Khanabad, Uzbekistan, and then Bagram AB, Afghanistan

Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC): Camp Doha, KU

Joint Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command (JCFSOCC)

Central Command: Tampa, FL

Task Force Bowie: Bagram AB, Afghanistan

These were some of the major units or headquarters involved in operations in Afghanistan in late 2001, early 2002. I will focus on Task Force (TF) Dagger because, initially, it carried most of the burden for US combat operations in the region. I was assigned to this TF for three months in early 2002 and can speak knowledgeably about its operations.

TF Dagger, built around the 5th Special Forces Group (SFG) (A), was tasked to conduct special operations in support of a number of Northern Alliance commanders to gain their active assistance in overthrowing the Taliban regime. The three first contacts were with General (GEN) Abdul Rashid Dostum, GEN Mohammed Daoud, and GEN Mohammed Fahim Khan. It was important for SF to establish contact early with each of these leaders, provide them with the air support they needed, and work with them to establish a foothold in the northern part of Afghanistan before the winter came.

Task Force Dagger



Task Force Dagger: K2, Uzbekistan, and Bagram AB, Afghanistan

5th SFG (A)
B/2/160th SOAR
Air Force Special Operations

TF Dagger JSOTF Headquarters, Uzbekistan





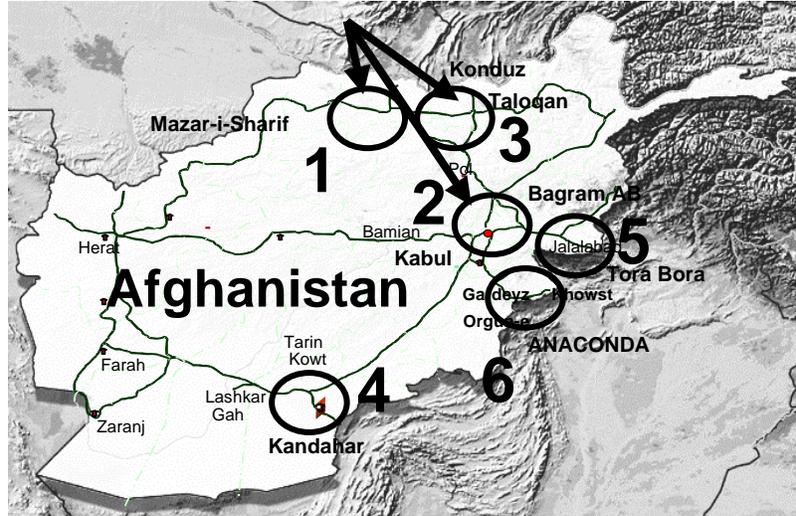
Karshi Kanabad (K2) Airfield, Uzbekistan



MH-47 Chinooks and MH-60 Black Hawks at K2

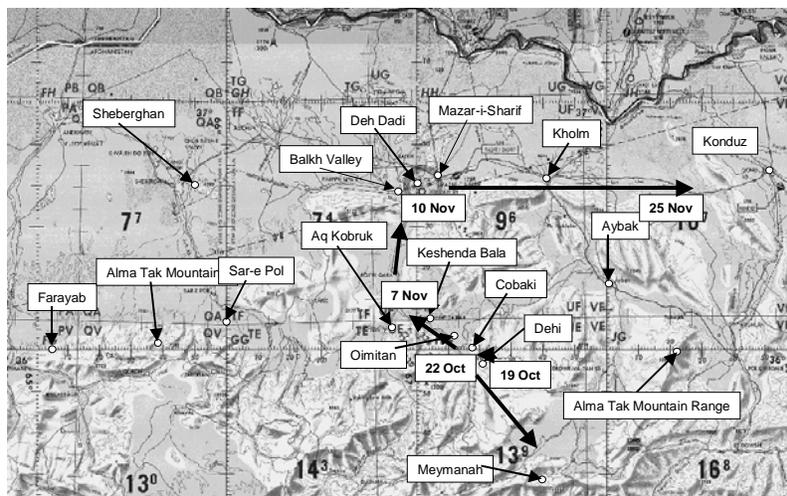


Major SF Operations in Sequence: Oct 01-Mar 02



The concept of the operation was to land teams in the Mazar-i-Sharif and Konduz-Taloqan areas, followed by insertions into the Bagram-Kabul area before moving on to the Tora Bora mountains region, a known al-Qaeda training site. Finally, the mission was to liberate Kandahar, the center of the Taliban movement. The SF teams were to coordinate the various Northern Alliance factions' operations and ensure that they worked together, in conjunction with US air power, to break the stalemate and defeat the Taliban and its terrorist allies.

The Capture of Mazar-i-Sharif



Working out of an abandoned Soviet air base in Uzbekistan, TF Dagger launched its first teams into Afghanistan in mid-October. The first 12-man SF team, radio call sign Tiger, infiltrated into northern Afghanistan to the south of Mazar-i-Sharif via helicopter on 19 October 2001. These insertions and the ones that followed were all at night, flying into mountains up to 18,000 feet high, with clouds and sandstorms limiting visibility. The insertion alone was highly dangerous.

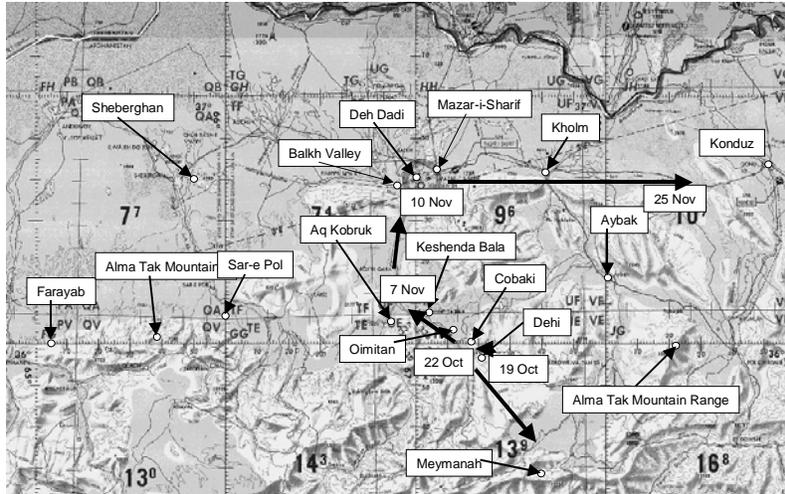
After a 2 ½-hour hazardous journey through high mountains and extremely poor weather, team Tiger reached its landing zone south of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif where it linked up with the local warlord, GEN Dostum.

General Abdul Rashid Dostum



The team then split into two elements to better assist GEN Dostum's scattered forces.

The Capture of Mazar-i-Sharif



From 19-24 October, the team operated as a split team. The Alpha element rode on horseback north into the mountains near Keshenda Bala along with GEN Dostum to help him plan the attack on Mazar-i-Sharif. The Bravo element moved south into the nearby Alma Tak Mountains to attack the Taliban in the southern Darya Suf Valley.

Team Alpha quickly began helping Dostum directly by calling in close air support (CAS) from US B-1 and B-52 bombers and F-14, -15, -16, and -18 fighter bombers. At first, however, the team was not permitted to move forward close enough to the Taliban positions to be most effective. Dostum was afraid team members would be killed or captured. On several occasions, he told the Tiger leader “500 of my men [Northern Alliance troops] can be killed, but not one American can even be injured or you will leave.” The SF had to call in CAS from a distance of 8 to 10 kilometers (km) away from the targets, looking across the Darya Suf Gorge. Weather conditions made visibility extremely hazy, even with binoculars and spotting scopes. Eventually this barrier was broken when it became obvious the team could take care of itself. The Tiger element was soon able to choose observation post (OP) locations at its discretion, regardless of the element of danger as Dostum began his move north to Mazar-i-Sharif.

SF on Horseback



The massive CAS the SF brought down had a huge and immediate psychological effect on the Taliban, causing panic and fear and a correspondingly positive effect on GEN Dostum's men. Starting on 22 October, the Tiger element, traveling on horseback in support of Dostum's cavalry, decisively demonstrated to the Afghans the US commitment to their cause. From an OP near the villages of Cobaki and Oimitan, it began systematically calling in CAS missions. In one 18-hour period, CAS destroyed more than 20 armored vehicles and 20 support vehicles. The Taliban began to reinforce its troops heavily, sending reserves into the area from Sholgerah, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Kholm. All that did was provide more targets for the CAS teams. Numerous key command posts, armored vehicles, troop concentrations, and anti-aircraft artillery pieces were destroyed.

Meanwhile, the Bravo element, also on horseback, moved to the Alma Tak Mountain range to link up with one of Dostum's subordinate commanders. The mission was to engage Taliban units in the southern Darya Suf Valley, preventing them from mounting a coordinated counterattack against Dostum and denying the Taliban the ability to resupply its forces. Bravo element would continue to interdict and destroy Taliban forces from these mountains until 7 November, destroying more than 65 enemy vehicles, 12 command bunker positions, and a large enemy ammunition storage bunker.

The two Tiger elements' airstrikes caused a crumbling effect, breaking the Taliban defensive positions wide open. Many Taliban vehicles and troops were killed, and those who were not killed fled for their lives north to Mazar-i-Sharif. Very few Taliban reached the city without being killed or captured. GEN Dostum's forces were able to continue to conduct cavalry attacks into the Darya Suf and Balkh Valleys. During these attacks, the

SF was in the forefront of the action, on horseback, even though only one member of the team had ever ridden a horse extensively. Dostum continued to pursue the Taliban toward Mazar-i-Sharif.

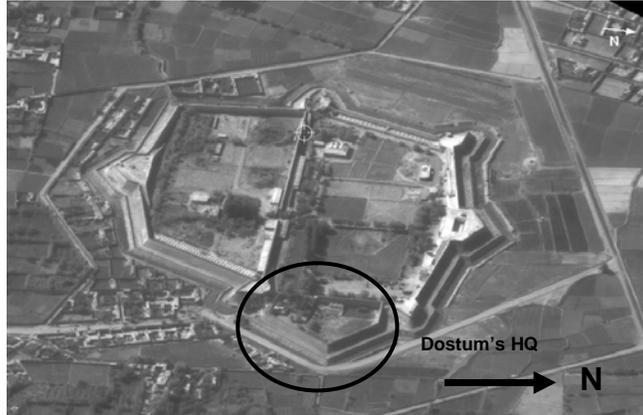
The SF was a critical element of support to the Northern Alliance troops in their assault through the pass just south of Mazar-i-Sharif. This was a natural chokepoint, and the enemy was there in force. Moving over treacherous terrain on horseback and on foot, the SF moved into a forward mountain OP and, on 9 November, engaged Taliban defenses on the north side of the pass with CAS. The CAS efforts destroyed several vehicles, a number of anti-aircraft guns, and numerous troop concentrations. Coming under direct effective enemy BM-21 multiple rocket launcher fire on two separate occasions, the SF continued to engage Taliban forces with B-52 strikes. The B-52 strikes broke the Taliban's back, and it began retreating to Mazar-i-Sharif.

SF at the Fall of Mazar-i-Sharif



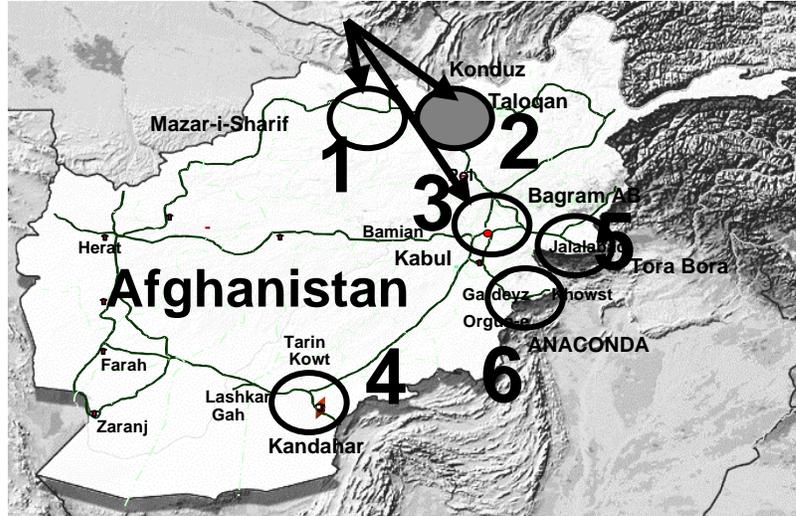
With the way to victory opened up to him by SF, GEN Dostum and his subordinate commanders quickly secured the city of Mazar-i-Sharif on 10 November. Riding with Dostum into the heart of the city, the SF team watched as local Afghan citizens lined the streets, cheering and bringing gifts to GEN Dostum. This triumphal progress into the city ended at the medieval fortress of Quali-Jangi where Dostum established his headquarters (HQ).

The Fortress of Quali-Jangi



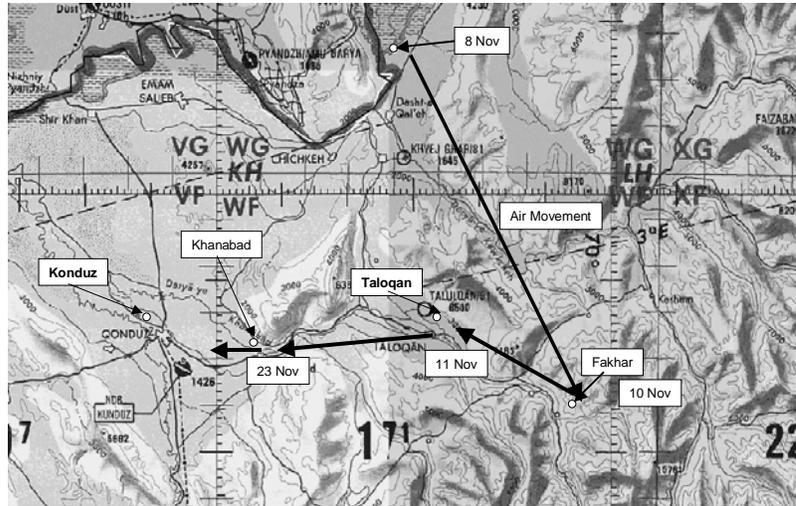
This was GEN Dostum's former HQ when he was in command of the city before the Taliban came to power. The capture of Mazar-i-Sharif was the first major victory by US forces in the war in Afghanistan. The United States now had a strategic foothold and an airport in northern Afghanistan.

SF Operations in Sequence: Oct 01-Mar 02



Now the targets shifted to the area to the east of Mazar-i-Sharif to the Taloqan-Konduz area.

Operations Around Taloqan and Konduz



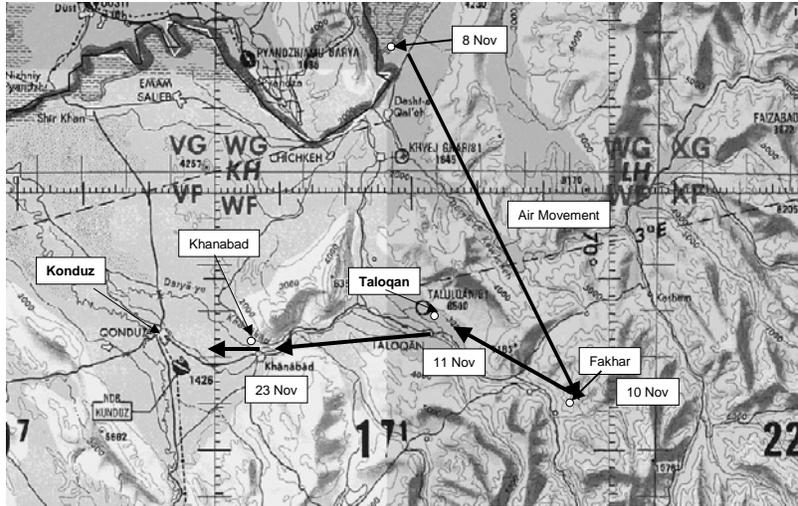
SF teams had infiltrated into the area on 8 November and moved quickly to link up with GEN Daoud, a prominent Northern Alliance warlord.

General Mohammed Daoud



Soon the SF soldiers were overlooking enemy positions near the city of Taloqan. They began setting up their OPs to call in CAS.

Operations Around Taloqan and Konduz



However, before the SF soldiers could call in the first mission against Taliban positions, GEN Daoud started his offensive, and his front lines quickly moved past the line of sight of the OP. By the end of that night, Taloqan fell with little resistance. A major victory had occurred almost without a fight, based solely, it seems, on Dostum's new confidence in US support and air power.

After the fall of Taloqan on 13 November 2001, SF continued its primary mission of assisting Daoud's combat operations with CAS as Daoud began moving west toward the city of Konduz. To accommodate both CAS operations and team sustainment, the SF team split into three teams. On any given day, one CAS team would be on or forward of the front lines at an OP calling CAS, while another was recovering from its CAS operations the previous day. The third element was preparing for its CAS operations the next day. Thus, the team established a one day on, two days off rotation cycle, maintaining 24-hour-a-day airstrikes on enemy positions blocking the advance to Konduz.

Up to this point, GEN Daoud had met very little Taliban resistance. Taloqan had fallen without a fight. But on 13 November, Daoud met his first heavy resistance when one of his commanders attacked enemy positions without orders, triggering a Taliban counterattack. While receiving both direct heavy weapons fire and indirect tank fire, the SF CAS team for that day repositioned to a different OP, called in CAS on the Taliban, and helped Daoud repel the attack. This marked increase in Taliban resistance, however, altered Daoud's plan of attack. Instead of trying to blitz through the Taliban all the way to Konduz, Daoud entrenched his forces and decided to use heavy US air attacks to weaken the Taliban, setting the conditions for a successful attack or forcing the Taliban into surrendering.

SF at Konduz Calling in Close Air Support



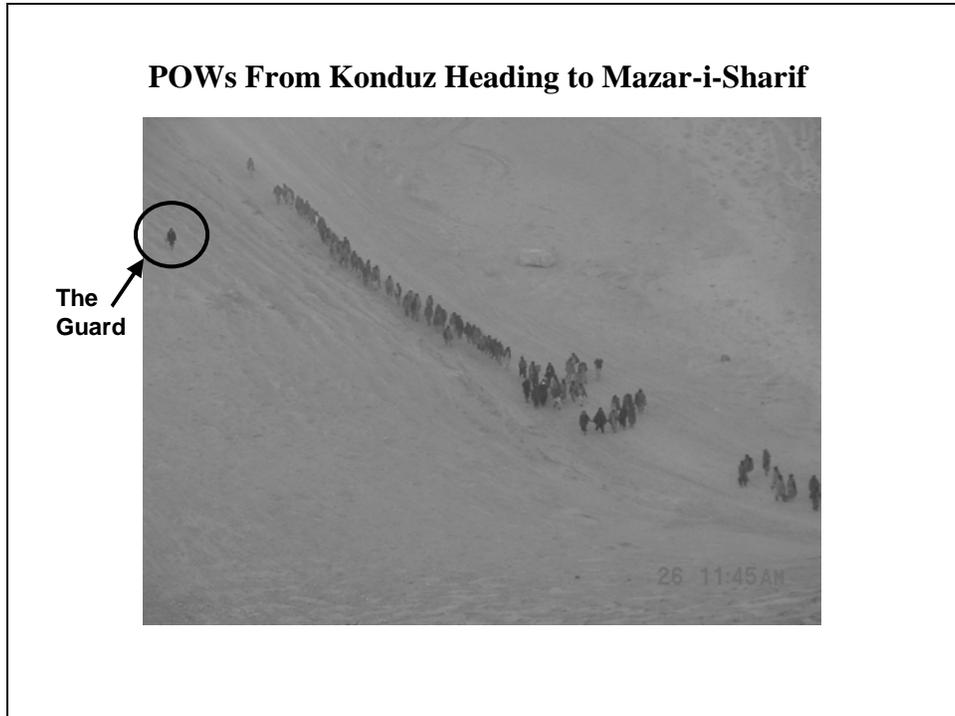
For the next 10 days, SF called in CAS to pound Taliban entrenched positions in and around Khanabad and Konduz. Over the course of these CAS operations, the SF teams destroyed 12 tanks, 51 cargo trucks, 44 bunker complexes, and numerous other vehicles and supply dumps while inflicting losses on the Taliban and al-Qaeda of around 2,000 killed or wounded.

By the end of 11 days of intense CAS bombing, GEN Daoud captured the nearby city of Khanabad and was prepared to move on Konduz. He then opened up negotiations with Taliban leaders in Konduz, and they, seeing that their position was hopeless, agreed to surrender on 23 November. Konduz, the last Taliban stronghold in northern Afghanistan, was under Northern Alliance control.

No one was prepared, however, for the Taliban forces' wholesale surrender. More than 3,500 Taliban troops surrendered in the Konduz area faced with the threat of the combination of Northern Alliance ground forces and American air power concentrated on the ground by SF. Many of these forces were moved quickly, but without fully disarming them, to join GEN Dostum's prisoners in the Quali-Jangi prison in Mazar-i-Sharif.

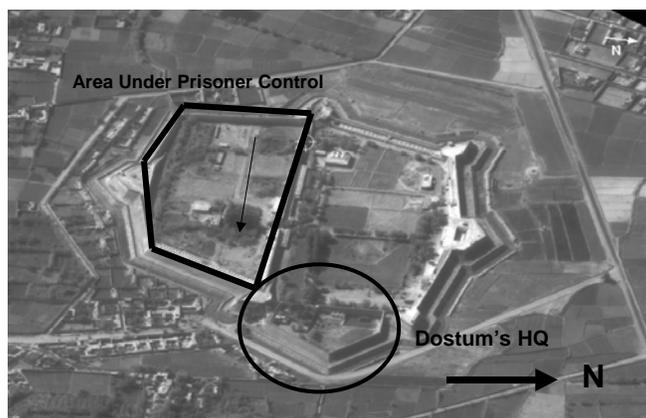
During these two campaigns with the Northern Alliance forces, SF troops effectively liberated the six northern provinces including the key cities of Mazar-i-Sharif, Meymanah, Sare pol, Sheberghan, Heyraton, Auybak, Konduz, and more than 50 other towns and cities. To accomplish this, the SF had traveled by horse, all-terrain vehicles, pickup trucks, and on foot along hazardous mountain trails, often at night and in extreme weather through 100 miles of mountains, gorges, hills, and valleys. The SF accomplished all of

this without any friendly US casualties and while inflicting thousands of casualties on the enemy and destroying its defensive positions.



The thousands of prisoners taken in this operation created a crisis in US operations, and it revolved around the fortress of Quali-Jangi.

The Fortress of Quali-Jangi



During interrogation operations in this fortress, some 600 poorly supervised al-Qaeda and Taliban detainees took over the prison compound. Two US intelligence officers were trapped and required immediate evacuation. SF personnel immediately responded by organizing a team of US and British SF to infiltrate the facility and bring back those the enemy forces held. As they neared the facility, the volume of enemy fire increased to include rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) rounds exploding in the team's immediate vicinity. The SF team requested CAS, even though it would be in the "danger close" range, and the risk was that bomb fragments would hit them even if the bombs were accurate. Throughout the next three days the team exchanged fire and used laser designator devices to illuminate enemy positions for airstrikes and for night attacks from circling AC-130 Spectre gunships. It was during this time that they received notification that Mike Spann, a missing intelligence officer, had fallen into prisoners' hands and was killed.

SF at Quali-Jangi



After five days of consistently engaging the enemy with fire and maneuver, during which time five US and British soldiers were medically evacuated for severe wounds received by exploding munitions, the battle came to an end by flooding the lower level of the facility where the prisoners were hiding. Out of the more than 600 prisoners at the facility, approximately 500 were killed while the remaining few surrendered.

10th Mountain QRF at Quali-Jangi



During this crisis, the first major element of US troops arrived from the 1-87th, 10th Mountain Division, assigned to provide base security initially at K2. They assisted the SF in perimeter security and in taking charge of and finally disarming the prisoners taken at Quali-Jangi and other nearby battles.

With winter closing in, it seemed as if the SF had accomplished all it could hope to in Afghanistan until spring. It was wrong. Let us now turn to the situation north of Kabul.

SF Operations in Sequence: Oct 01-Mar 02



The Capture of Kabul

The situation near the capital city, Kabul, looked intractable. Northern Alliance forces north of Kabul near Bagram, an old Soviet air base, had been in a stationary position against the Taliban for close to five years. The Taliban could not penetrate the defensive minefields near the base nor attack into the rich Panjshir Valley. The valley was the home of Ahmed Shah Masood, the revered leader of the Northern Alliance that al-Qaeda agents assassinated on 9 September 2001, just days before they attacked America on 11 September.

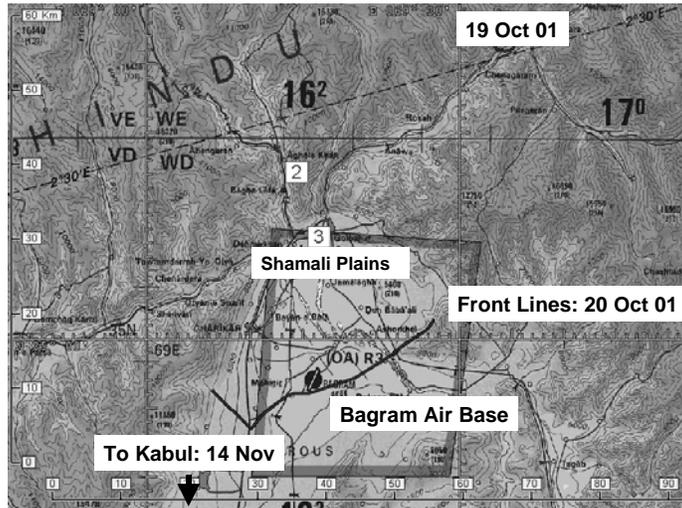
Fahim Khan



Bismullah Khan



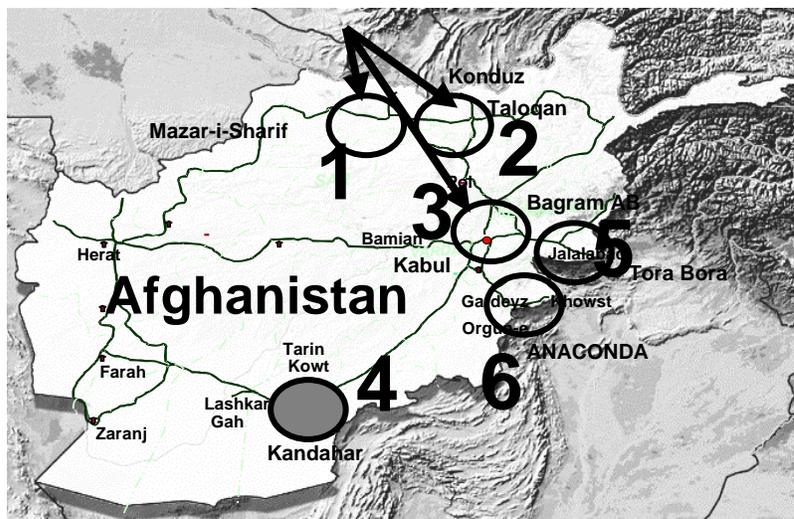
CAS at Bagram: 20 Oct-14 Nov



The next day, the team linked up with the alliance commanders at Bagram and began looking for vantage points in the valley to call in CAS. The team members noticed an ideal position and established an OP in the old air traffic control tower for the airfield. From this position, they immediately began calling in airstrikes on the entrenched enemy. From 21 October through 14 November 2001, SF teams directed 25 continuous days of CAS missions against the dug-in enemy. The constant air attacks degraded Taliban and al-Qaeda command and control, killed hundreds of entrenched front-line troops, and disrupted support elements. GEN Khan was encouraged to begin thinking about an immediate move against Kabul while the enemy was in disarray.

The Afghans had originally planned a multiple-day, five-phased operation to attack Kabul. However, the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces were so weakened by airstrikes that when the attack was launched on 13 November, they crumbled. By noon on the first day of the offensive, the operation had achieved all of its phase three objectives. Twenty-four hours later, to the surprise of the world press and the delight of the Northern Alliance, GEN Khan's ground forces liberated Kabul. The Taliban and al-Qaeda fled in disarray toward Kandahar and into the nearby Tora Bora Mountains.

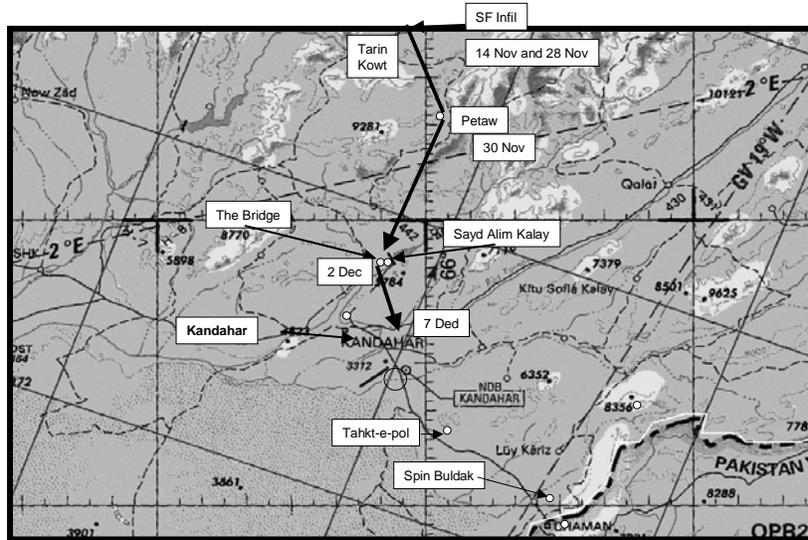
SF Operations in Sequence: Oct 01-Mar 02



Special Forces: Two Approaches to Kandahar

Kandahar was to be the next objective. It was also suspected that it would be the hardest to take. The populous southern city was a long way from the Northern Alliance's region of control, was of a different ethnic makeup—Pashtuns, not Tajiks—and was the spiritual and political center of the Taliban movement. There was little or no opposition force in the area to work with. It seemed as if its capture would take months and might have to be delayed until spring. Still, two separate SF elements infiltrated the region and approached the city from the north and south with their supported host nation commanders picking up support along the way.

The Approaches to Kandahar-North



The first SF team was inserted north of Kandahar on 14 November. There it linked up with Hamid Karzai and a small number of his followers.



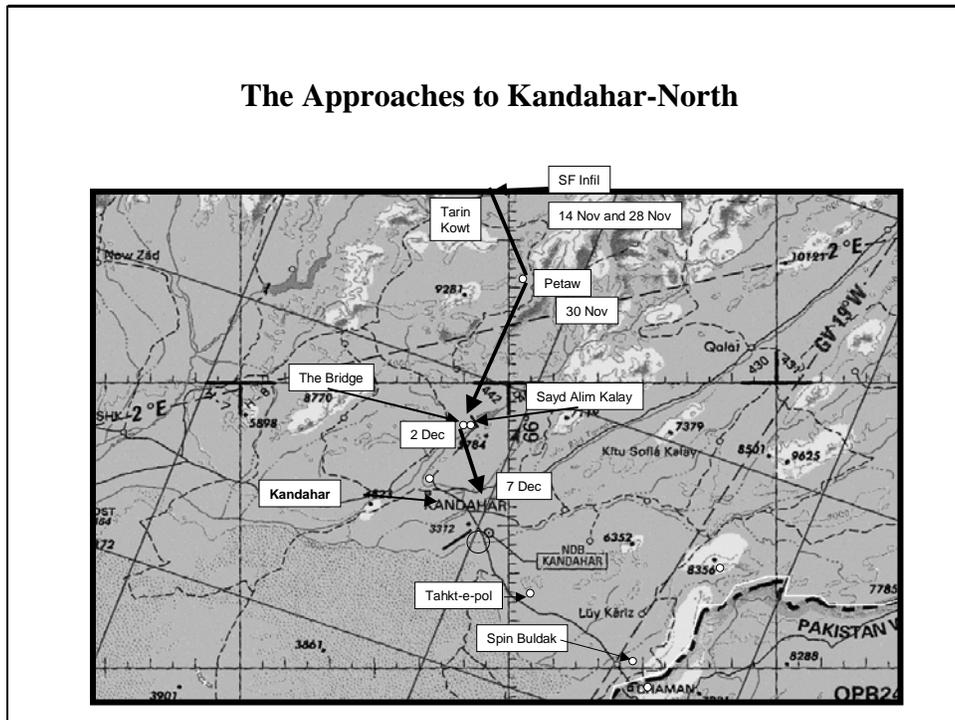
Hamid

Karzai

Karzai was a charismatic Pashtun tribal leader from that area, and it was vital that the United States support his attempts to establish an anti-Taliban front in the region.

The SF team was almost immediately drawn into operations when, on 16 November, Taliban forces moved about 500 soldiers to crush Karzai. He deployed his handful of men near the village of Tarin Kowt but relied heavily on his new US allies to provide CAS. As US planes pounded the approaching Taliban, guided by SF teams on the ground, the Afghan opposition fighters rallied and repulsed the Taliban attack. The Taliban, stunned by an attack for which it had no defense, retreated in disarray.

The Approaches to Kandahar-North



Having gained a breathing space, the SF team began working closer with Karzai's small force to equip, train, and prepare it for the move south. Feeling that time was wasting, Karzai agreed to move toward Kandahar as soon as possible. This action would show the Taliban that he was serious and a force to be reckoned with. Accordingly, Karzai's small Afghan force, initially little more than 35 "well-meaning" supporters—a force that would eventually grow to an "armed mob" of almost 800 men—moved southeast around 30 November from Tarin Khowt through narrow passes, along what was virtually a goat path, toward the village of Petaw.

Karzai's men spent a few days resting at Petaw while the SF brought in some weapons, food, and clothing for the growing army. Then, on 2 December, the "army" moved south to the village of Sayd Alim Kalay where there was a critical bridge over a dry riverbed. By this time Karzai had been notified that he had been selected as head of the interim government of Afghanistan, making speed of movement to Kandahar important.

Karzai's forces quickly routed the small force of Taliban soldiers holding the village, but they could not take the well-defended bridge. For the next two days, despite the steady drone of CAS missions, the Taliban successfully defended the crossing. It even launched occasional attacks through the dry riverbed in an attempt to gain a foothold on the friendly side of the bridge. Each time they attempted it, the alert SF team would bring in more CAS missions and, in conjunction with Karzai's soldiers, drive them back.

The morning of 4 December the force began to prepare for an all-out attack to take the bridge. After final coordination with the Afghans, the combined force of SF soldiers and Afghan irregulars mounted up on their Toyota pickup trucks and drove to battle. Each pickup was packed with a motley crew of Afghan warriors with a variety of weapons such as machine guns, AK-47s, and RPGs hanging out of the back. Some crew-served weapons were mounted on the vehicles, making the convoy look like a combination of a traveling circus and a Somali war party.

The SF team directed CAS on the enemy-held ridge opposite them, but the enemy directed heavy and accurate fire on the attacking force. Next, the Taliban tried a flanking counterattack. One SF leader observed it attempting to cross the dry riverbed, and he alerted an Afghan/SF quick-reaction force (QRF). The Afghans laid down a base of fire and prevented the Taliban from moving. Three times the Taliban tried to cross, but each time the fire from Karzai's forces turned it back. Meanwhile, the SF team on the ridge continued to call down CAS onto the enemy positions. One SF soldier was wounded, but the Taliban failed to dislodge the combined SF/Afghan force, and the Taliban began to withdraw. Karzai dug in his forces that night to avoid the confusion of a night operation and next morning moved over the intact bridge without a problem.

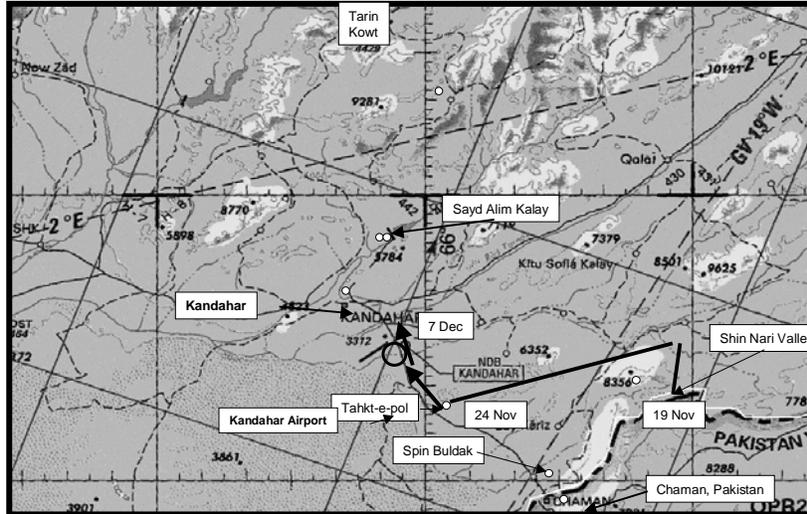
The next day, 5 December, the US effort suffered a horrible setback. While observing from the ridgeline near the bridge and calling in CAS, a stray 2,000-pound joint direct-attack munition (JDAM) bomb landed in the middle of the SF observation party. They were blown off their feet. Three Americans were killed and dozens wounded along with many of their Afghan allies. They called for a medical evacuation (medevac) and patched up the survivors as they waited. The same helicopters that came in to evacuate the wounded also brought in another SF team to fill in for the broken team. The mission had to go on despite the dead and wounded.

Hamid Karzai and SF Team



As the SF team was recovering from the bomb accident, Karzai's negotiators finalized an agreement for the Taliban forces to surrender across the river and for the surrender of the entire city of Kandahar. On 6 December, the force moved again toward the open city.

The Approaches to Kandahar-South



While Karzai and his SF element were making their way toward Kandahar, another team had linked up in the south with a different opposition group commander and was also advancing on the city.

On the night of 18 Nov, an SF team infiltrated into southern Afghanistan into the Shin Narai Valley. The team quickly linked up with an anti-Taliban leader, Gul Sharzai, a former governor of Kandahar.

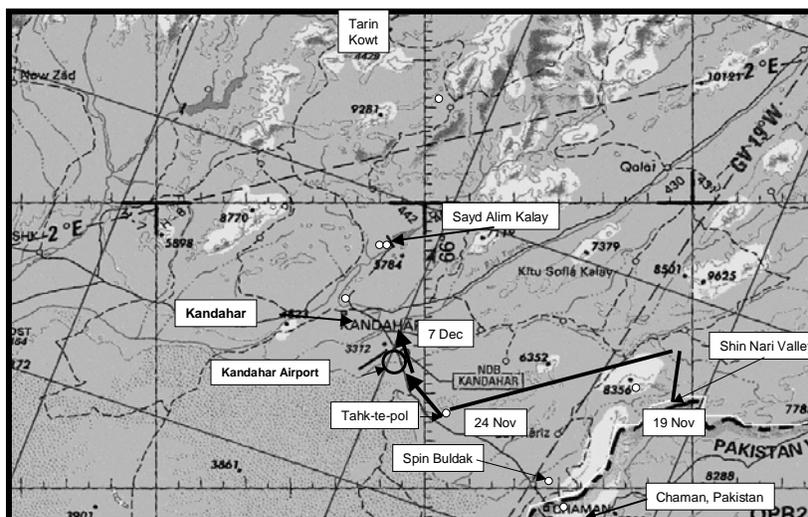
Gul Sharzai



The Afghans, heavily outnumbered by the local Taliban, were very glad to see the team, and they moved quickly to provide weapons and food to support Sharzai's force of close to 800 tribesmen.

During the night of 21 November, Sharzai sent a delegation led by his brother out of the valley to meet with the local Taliban representative to negotiate the Taliban's surrender and ensure safe passage out of the valley for his forces. Unfortunately, the mission did not go well, and the "truce party" came under small-arms fire. There were no casualties, but Sharzai was forced to change his movement plans to avoid an early, and disruptive, battle.

The Approaches to Kandahar-South



To avoid this battle, Sharzai decided to move north from the Shin Narai Valley and then west through the Arghastan wadi district to Tahk-te-pol located on Highway 4 south of the Kandahar Airport. That way the force would avoid any major Taliban emplacements that could slow down its movement. The prize was Kandahar, where Sharzai was determined to be made governor, and intermediate firefights might only disrupt the force.

On the morning of 22 November, the group departed the valley. The movement took the entire day and progress was slow. The convoy consisted of more than 100 vehicles of many different types, including pickups, transport trucks, and tractors pulling trailers. The movement to Tahk-te-pol took two and one-half days and was virtually unopposed until the second night. At that time the group moved into a small bowl-shaped valley just east of Highway 4 approximately 6 km from Tahk-te-pol. Sharzai decided to send a delegation into the town to negotiate for the local Taliban's surrender. The SF moved two CAS teams forward with the Afghan commander, covering the town from a ridge overlooking the negotiations. The Taliban suddenly ambushed the small security force. Immediately, the SF requested CAS and used the aircraft to break up the ambush and allow the forward friendly elements time to withdraw to the main body located in the valley. The Taliban moved its vehicles from Highway 4 behind several ridgelines to the immediate north of the main body where it began to attack Sharzai's men with machine guns and RPGs. The SF moved a CAS team to engage the vehicles and successfully eliminated the threat. Almost immediately the Taliban retreated and shortly thereafter abandoned the entire Tahk-te-pol area. It only took a few CAS missions to knock much of the fight out of it.

The next morning, Sharzai's forces entered Tahk-te-pol with very little resistance, severing the main highway between Kandahar and Chaman, Pakistan. Sharzai established 360-degree security around his force with checkpoints north and south along the highway. From the northern checkpoint, one could almost see the major airport at Kandahar.

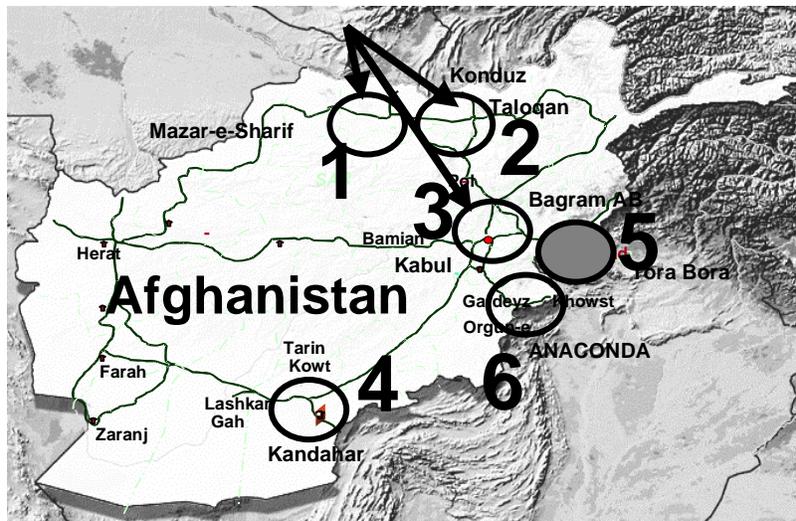
On 25 November, the friendly checkpoint to the north started to receive indirect fire from the airport. The SF team sent a small CAS team forward with a 100-man friendly Afghan element to secure the ridgeline and eliminate the indirect-fire threat. This was accomplished without incident, and during the next week, the team rotated a CAS team to the ridgeline 24 hours a day. The team could overlook the airport and direct CAS onto the enemy forces operating between the ridgeline and the airfield.

The Taliban launched regular artillery and rocket attacks against the SF and Afghan security elements on the ridgeline and against the village of Tahk-te-pol. The airport appeared to be heavily defended, and the defenders had antiaircraft artillery and missiles. The team conducted CAS around the clock to destroy enemy forces at the airport and to prepare for the all-out assault on the airfield by Sharzai's forces. During the same week, Taliban forces began to move north from Spin Bolduc, a small town to the south, along Highway 4 to defensive positions in a large wadi approximately 5 km from the southern element of Sharzai's army, but they never posed much of a threat.

By early December, Sharzai had positioned his troops for an all-out attack on the airport. The Taliban probed his forces by launching a number of small counterattacks from the west using a series of canals to mask its movement. However, Sharzai's men, supported by US CAS, were able to repel the attacks and take a number of emplacements around the canals.

Finally, on 7 December, Sharzai began his assault on the airfield. His forces moved carefully to the entrance of the airfield but ran into no resistance. Then suddenly, Sharzai received a satellite phone call informing him that the Taliban had evacuated Kandahar. He immediately gathered his personal security force and, along with an SF element, sped into the city to gain control of the governor's mansion and solidify his position within the city. The rest of the SF elements followed the next day and moved into the governor's mansion with Sharzai. The city had fallen without a shot, and Karzai confirmed Sharzai as governor.

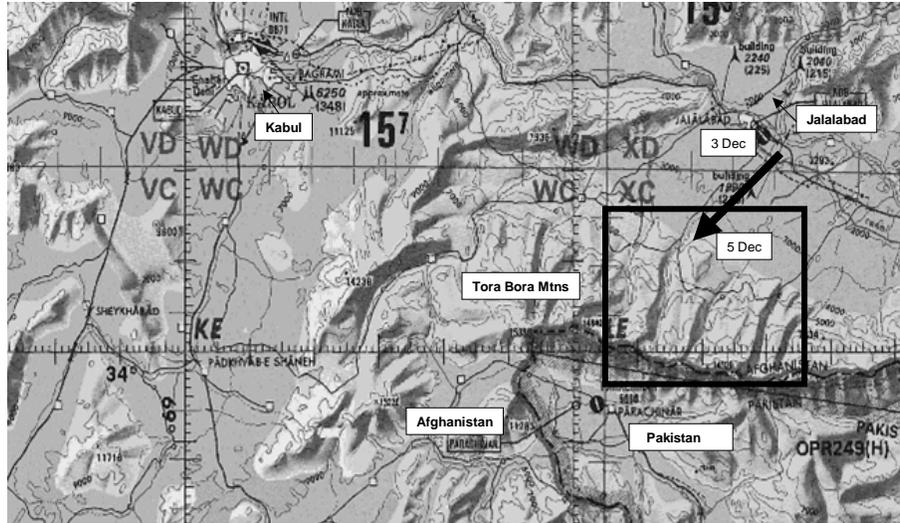
SF Operations in Sequence: Oct 01-Mar 02



Tora Bora

While SF were operating around Kandahar, they were also pursuing enemy forces in the area near Jalalabad. After the fall of Kabul, al-Qaeda and Taliban forces had retreated into major strongholds in the Tora Bora Mountains south of Jalalabad near the Pakistani border.

Tora Bora Region



This is some of the most rugged terrain in the world, and terrorists had controlled the area for years. In addition to being intimately familiar with the area, they had dug extensive fortifications and stockpiled weapons and ammunition to fight a protracted defense. With large numbers of fanatical al-Qaeda troops dug into extensive fortified positions and supplied with vast stocks of weapons and ammunition, Tora Bora was going to be a very tough nut to crack.

Approaches Into the Tora Bora Mountains



To make matters worse, the local anti-Taliban forces were even more disorganized than they were in other areas. They were divided into mutually hostile factions, and they deeply distrusted the United States.

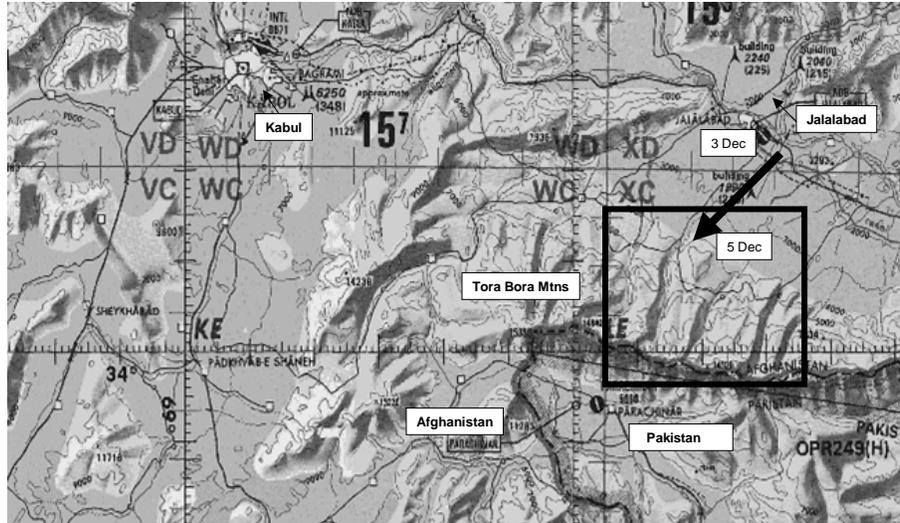
TF Dagger directed several SF teams to go the Tora Bora region; meet with the local Afghan anti-Taliban commander, Hazrat Ali; and coordinate his attacks on the caves with US air power.

Hazrat Ali



Hazrat Ali's forces were a heterogeneous mixture of Northern Alliance soldiers whose loyalty was to Ali but whose fighting qualities were somewhat mixed. Yet, because of the US policy that local forces were primarily to conduct ground operations, it was necessary to give them guidance and direction but not to lead them into combat directly. The plan was to send the Afghan forces up into the Tora Bora, into essentially a box canyon, and assault al-Qaeda positions on the high ground. The latest intelligence even placed senior al-Qaeda leaders, possibly even Osama bin Laden, in that area.

Tora Bora Region

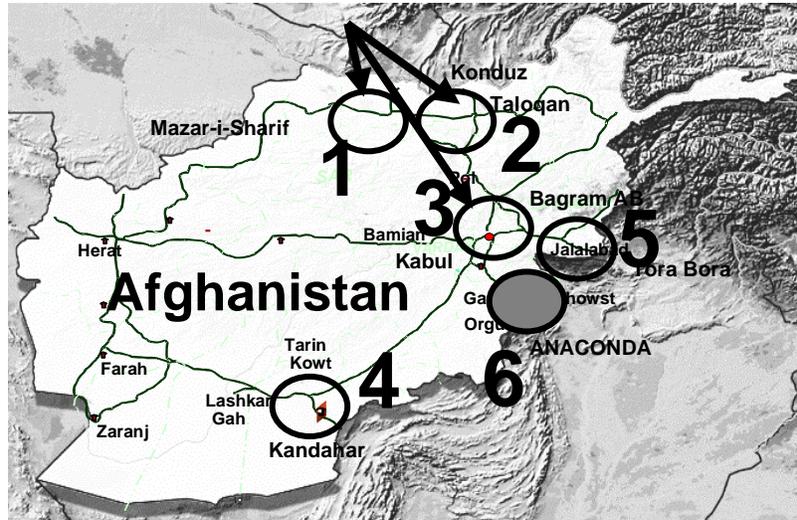


The SF teams moved south out of Jalalabad and set up an OP along the high ground near the canyon the al-Qaeda held. A small Afghan security element guarded them to ensure that while they were calling down airstrikes an enemy counterattack did not disrupt their activities. The movement down into the Tora Bora Mountains was slow and hazardous. After a short movement by the ubiquitous pickup truck, the teams were forced to unload and move forward by foot with burros carrying their packs. They moved into mountains where the altitude varied from 8,000 to 10,000 feet, the terrain was rocky, and the pathways were extremely narrow.

The SF team set up an OP on the western ridgeline and immediately began calling down airstrikes, forcing the al-Qaeda to concentrate into a small canyon. They then moved to set up another, smaller, OP on the eastern side of the ridgeline, allowing them to directly observe the canyon concentration. Then, for 17 straight hours, the SF team rained fire onto enemy positions just in front of the advancing Afghani forces. At night, as enemy troops lit campfires to keep warm, the team used thermal imagers and brought in more bombs and fire missions from AC-130 Spectre gunships' 105mm howitzer 40mm cannon.

The enemy fought stubbornly. Each day, Ali's forces would take advantage of US air power and advance up the mountain, and each evening they would fall back. The ground would have to be taken again the next day. This went on for eight days and nights, as the enemy pocket grew smaller and smaller. By the time the Tora Bora fighting slowly ground to a halt in mid-December, SF teams had called in hundreds of airstrikes, dropping thousands of tons of munitions and killing hundreds of enemy troops. A few al-Qaeda were captured, but most of them fought to the death or slipped away into the relative safety of nearby Pakistan.

SF Operations in Sequence: Oct 01-Mar 02



Special Operations Forces in Operation ANACONDA

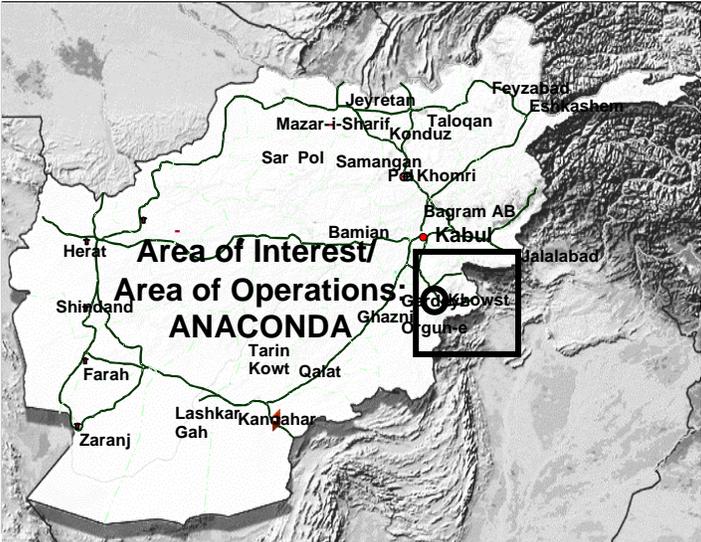
With the capture of Kabul and Khandahar and the destruction of organized resistance at Tora Bora, Afghanistan was now, in effect, liberated. It had taken less than 60 days of concentrated military operations and only a few hundred soldiers to seize the country from the Taliban and its terrorist allies. Attention now turned to locating and destroying other, hidden al-Qaeda and Taliban forces. This was easier said than done. Afghanistan is the size of Texas and has hundreds of square miles of virtually impenetrable mountains and valleys. Plus, there was the problem of what to do with them once you found them. Afghanistan had no army. US forces were still only in the few hundreds on the ground. The attack on the Tora Bora caves complex in December 2001, while successful to the degree of destroying an enemy stronghold and clearing hundreds of caves, was not successful enough. Hundreds of al-Qaeda soldiers slipped away into Pakistan despite Pakistan's token attempt to "seal" its border.

Thus, the incomplete result of battle forced US intelligence to look for the next concentrations of enemy forces. The focus began slowly to shift toward the nearby Paktia province to the south and west of the Tora Bora Mountains. In particular, the Gardez-Khowst-Urgun-e triangle seemed to hold promise of enemy activity. This region became the new focus of US intelligence and special operations assets in Afghanistan. The attempt to deal with this concentration of enemy forces came to be code named Operation ANACONDA.

Operation ANACONDA The Shah-i-Kowt Valley

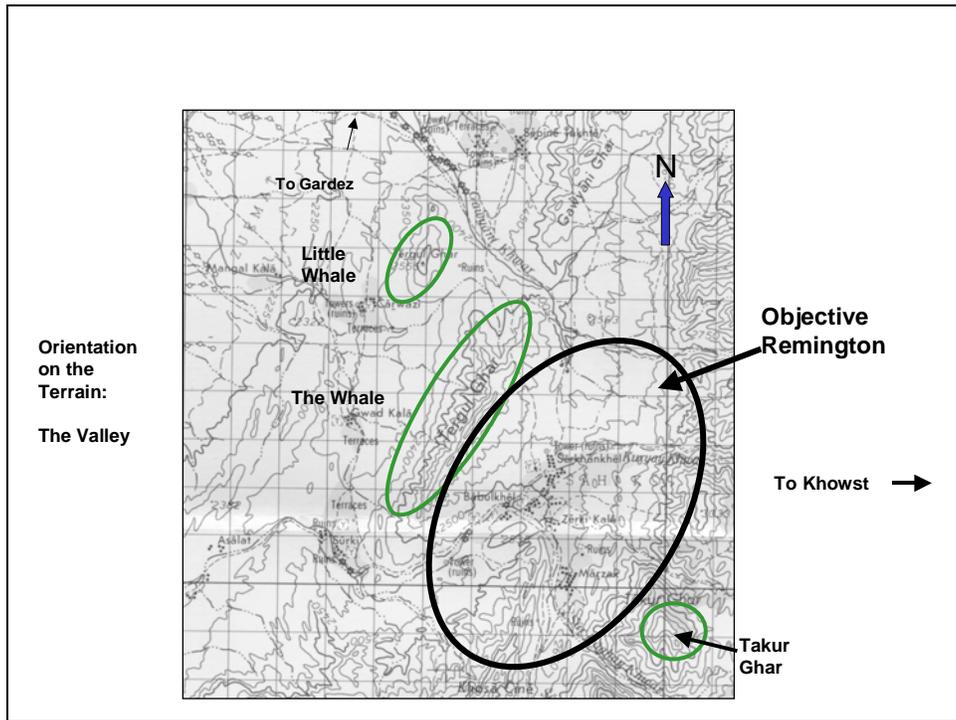
2-14 March 2002

Anaconda: Area of Operations

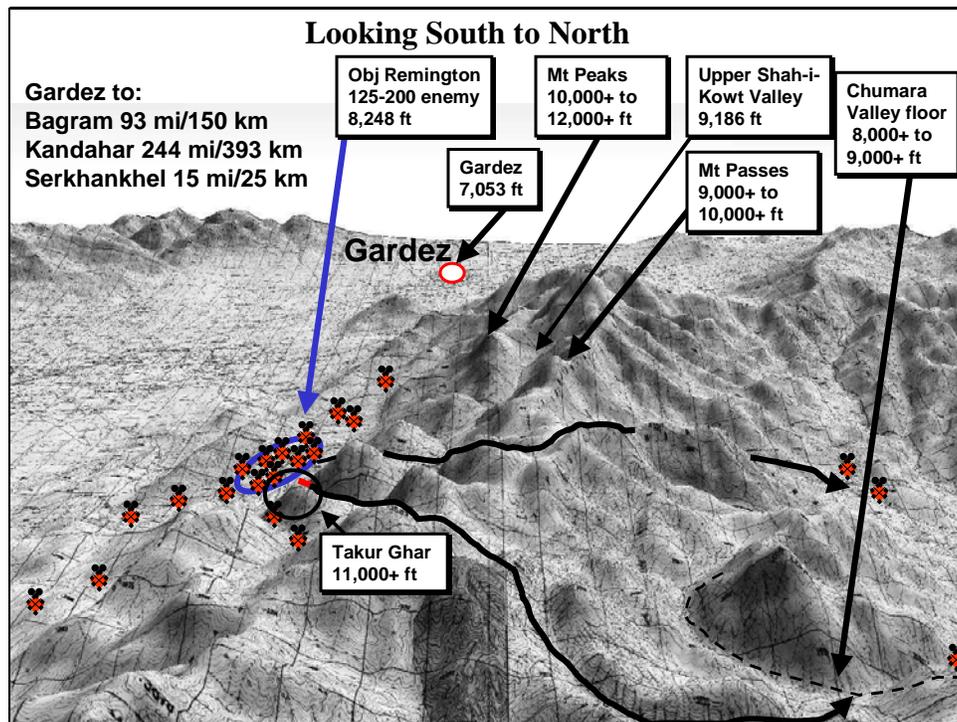


This is a rough timeline for Operation ANACONDA. In essence, it was an SF-conceived operation during which it led several ad hoc bodies of Afghan Military Forces, or AMF, to attack a major concentration of between 200 and 500 terrorists in the Shah-i-Khot Valley from 2-14 March 2002. At the time I was at the HQ of TF Dagger located forward at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan.

Let's now briefly look at the area of interest and area of operations for ANACONDA. The Shah-i-Khot Valley south of Gardez is a valley just to the west of a major mountain range south of Kabul near the Pakistani border in Paktia province to the southwest of the Tora Bora Mountains.



Looking into the valley we can see some key terrain. To the west of the valley is a major ridgeline known as Terghul Ghar, nicknamed the “Whale” by US troops. To the northwest of the valley, along the entrance to the northern end of the valley, is a small ridgeline called little Terghul Ghar, or the “Little Whale.” Both are important pieces of terrain because they cover the best approaches to the valley. In the center of the Shah-i-Khot Valley are the three main villages of Serkhankhel, Babulkhel, and Marzak. These villages comprised Objective Remington during Operation ANACONDA. Much of the valley is at approximately 8,000 feet elevation with the surrounding peaks exceeding 11,000 feet. A three-dimensional map helps you appreciate the terrain.

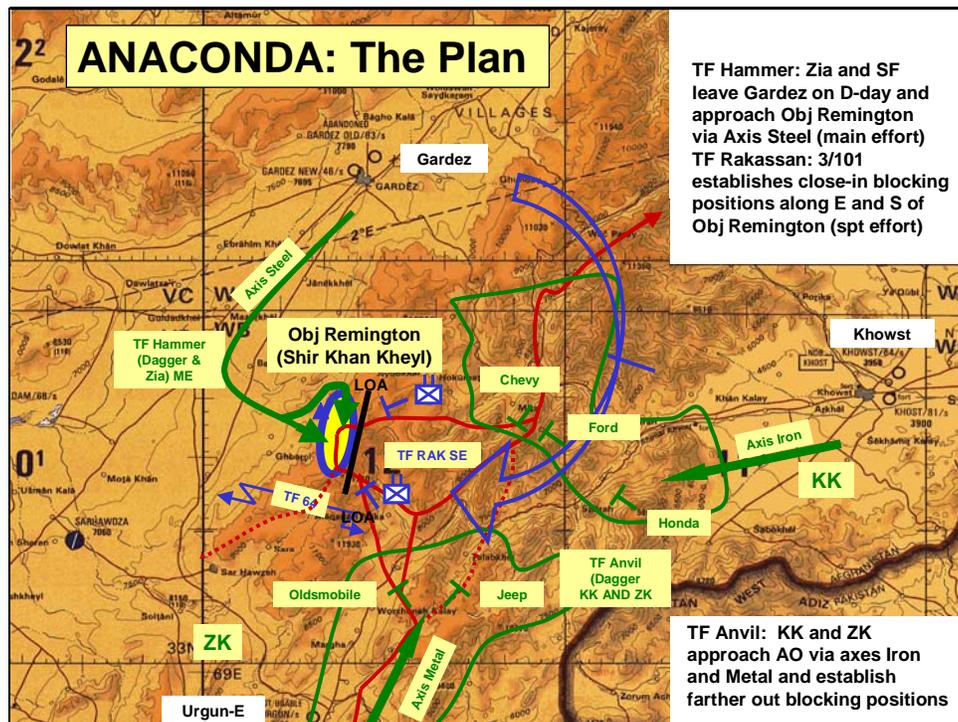


To the east of the valley is a major mountain range pierced by only a few main routes running through the valleys at their base (and dozens of smaller goat paths as well!). At the southern end of this mountain range with excellent observation over the valley and a number of exit routes is a mountain peak called Takur Ghar, the site of the sea, air, land team (SEAL)/Ranger firefight on 3-4 March. It is formidable terrain that makes the area difficult, nearly impossible, to isolate.

The first real confirmation of enemy forces in strength in the Shah-i-Khot Valley did not come from air reconnaissance or other sophisticated collection means but, rather, through the efforts of an SF team on the ground with the radio call sign of Texas 14. Working closely with local Afghan forces, Texas 14 tried to conduct a reconnaissance of the valley in late January, only to be turned back after its own Afghan security forces warned it of a major enemy concentration there.

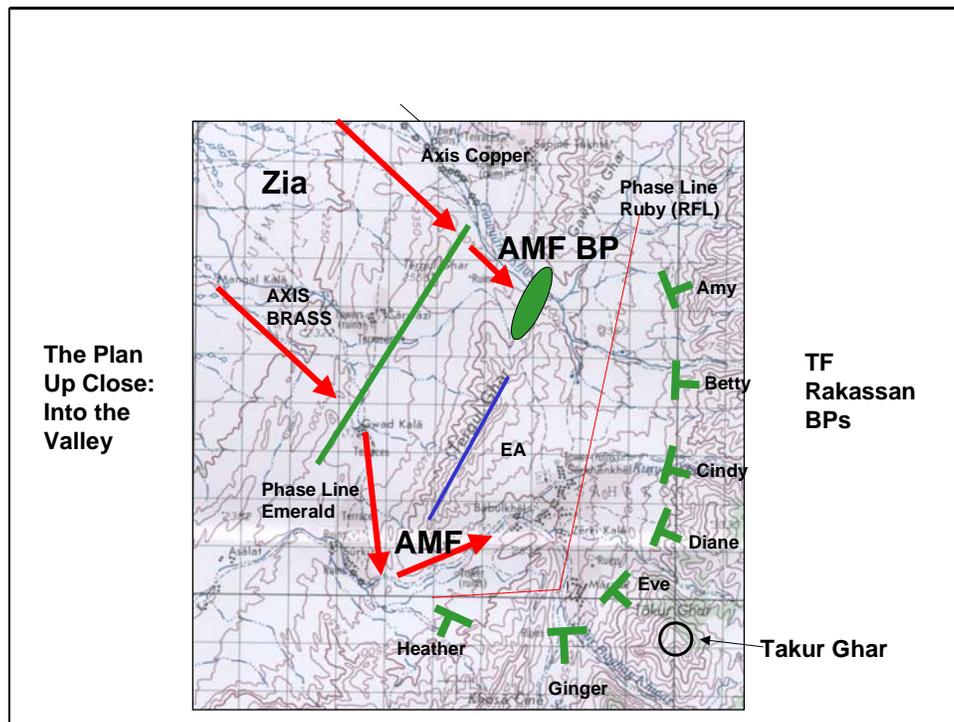
After Texas 14 reported this contact, US intelligence assets began to focus correspondingly on that area. All these assets began to clarify a picture of a major concentration, initially perhaps as many as 150 to 200 foreign fighters in the area. That number would grow to estimates as high as 800 to 1,000 enemy forces.

Initially, TF Dagger considered the option of attacking into the valley using only SF teams leading Afghan military forces trained by them. However, as the number of enemy projected to be in the valley began to climb, the special operations forces planners asked for, and received, additional US conventional units from the 10th Mountain Division and 101st Airborne Division. The plan quickly grew in scope and size. By mid-February, six SF operational detachments, three SF command and control elements, three other special operations TFs, and a US infantry brigade of three battalions were involved.



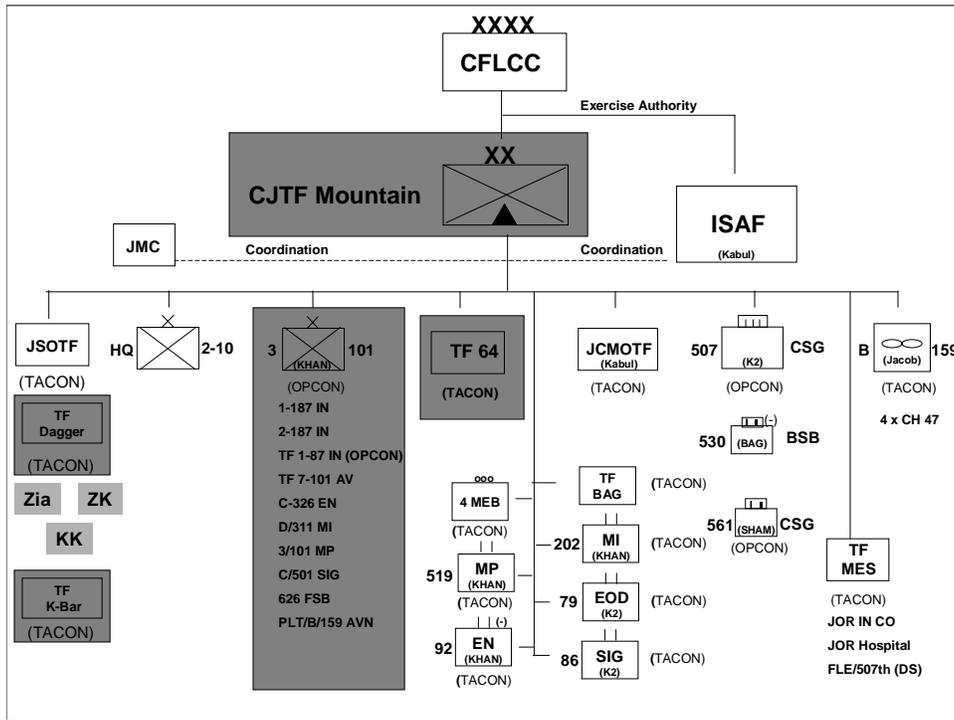
The essence of the ANACONDA plan was to establish an outer ring of blocking positions (BPs) around the valley using SF and Afghan forces (called TF Anvil), then air assault an inner ring of BPs along the eastern inside portion of the valley (TF Rakassan), and finally conduct a main attack with SF and Afghan forces into the southern end of the valley while blocking in the north (TF Hammer). The goal was to hit the enemy hard enough to kill or capture as many al-Qaeda as possible in the valley and squeeze the others out of the valley and get them running into the BPs where they would be eliminated. Those who escaped the trap would be tracked using reconnaissance assets as they moved along the various “ratlines” through safe houses and refuges.

Looking closer at the forces in the valley, we see that at D-1 the two elements of TF Anvil would move from Khowst and Urgun-e. From Khowst would come Kamil Khan’s forces, approximately 300 strong, along Axis Iron. Zakim Khan would come from Urgun-e with another 200 or so troops along Axis Metal. They would establish BPs from north to south code named Chevy, Ford, Honda, Jeep, Dodge, and Oldsmobile.

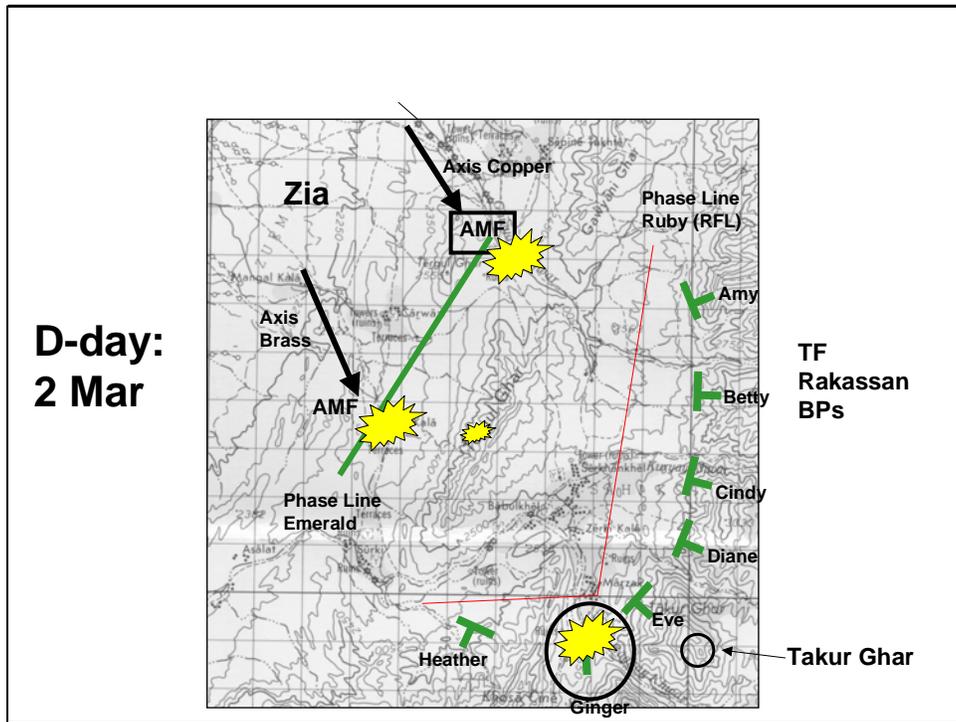


TF Hammer was the main effort. TF Hammer forces would depart Gardez just before H-hour on D-day and drive southwest along route Steel. The force would then divide into two elements and approach the valley along routes Brass and Copper.

One element would proceed along Axis Brass to establish a BP just north of Objective Remington. The other element would move along Axis Copper to Phase Line (PL) Emerald where it would await airstrikes before assaulting and clearing the three villages on the objective: Babul-khey1, Marzak, and Sher-khan-khey1. TF Rakassan would establish BPs at Amy, Betty, Cindy, Diane, Eve, Ginger, and Heather.



Here are the forces that were part of Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Mountain, in command of the operation (darker shading). Here you see TF Dagger forces and, supporting the attack, elements of TF Rakassan, two battalions (-) air assaulting just inside the valley on D-day—2-187 Infantry (-), 3d Bde, 101st Airborne (Air Assault) and 1st Battalion 87th (-) Infantry, 2d Brigade, 10th Mountain Division—with the 1-187th Infantry in reserve. To the south, TF 64 (Australian SF) would conduct special reconnaissance (SR). TF K-Bar (another special operations element) would conduct SR to the east of Objective Remington. All of the SR elements were to spot enemy forces moving out of the valley and assist in bringing in airstrikes to neutralize them.



D-day for the operation was planned for 28 February, but bad weather forced a delay to 2 March. On D-1 (1 March), the TF Anvil elements moved out from Urgun and Khowst, and established the external Afghan BPs.

On 2 March, D-day, TF Hammer crossed the line of departure at 1930Z (2400 local time) and hit the first checkpoint on time. Almost immediately after, however, things began to go wrong. One of the large “Jinga” trucks tipped over, halting the convoy.

A Typical “Jinga” Truck



When the troops and equipment were cross-loaded and the truck moved out again, another got stuck in the mud. It did not extricate itself for several hours. Many of the large trucks got stuck and had to be abandoned. Others were only driven out of the mud by throwing hundreds of combat rations (MREs) under the wheels for traction. Many of the soldiers had to move the remaining distance to PL Emerald on foot.

As the troops approached their attack position on PL Emerald where they were to await the supporting airstrikes, they were suddenly attacked. Suspected mortar hit the lead SF vehicle in the north, wounding three Americans and killing one. Subsequent investigation discovered that the vehicle was hit by friendly fire from a circling AC-130. Two of Zia’s men were also killed and 12 to 15 were wounded. With the whole northern force being around 40 strong, almost half the force was now out of action. The wounded were medevaced, but it took one to two hours to accomplish this and another hour to bring additional AMF forces out of the southern part of the TF to provide security for the remnants of the northern element on little Terghul Ghar. This was complicated because the southern element was also under attack by enemy mortars and artillery.

The deadly rounds and subsequent halt as the situation was reevaluated were fatal to the momentum of the attack. It was obvious that the enemy could observe all friendly movements. The airstrikes also were poorly coordinated and far from impressive. Expecting a hail of bombs, Zia’s men watched as only a handful of bombs hit enemy positions on Terghul Ghar, causing no slackening in enemy mortar and artillery fire. GEN Zia and his men initially held up well, but after hours of bombardment with no way to answer back and ineffective or nonexistent CAS, their morale began to suffer. TF Hammer received only one additional CAS mission and one Apache fire support mission throughout that long day.

CH-47s at Bagram AB in Support of ANACONDA



Meanwhile, TF Rakassan had air assaulted its first lift onto the landing zones, but it immediately began taking fire. A sudden rainstorm prevented the second lift from being launched for several hours. Thus, the positions were at half-strength for some time. Enemy mortars were particularly effective against the 10th Mountain Division's 1-87th Infantry soldiers at BP Ginger. Calls for in-contact CAS from these troops began to drain off the limited air power available to the operation and further limited support to the now-bogged-down "main effort."

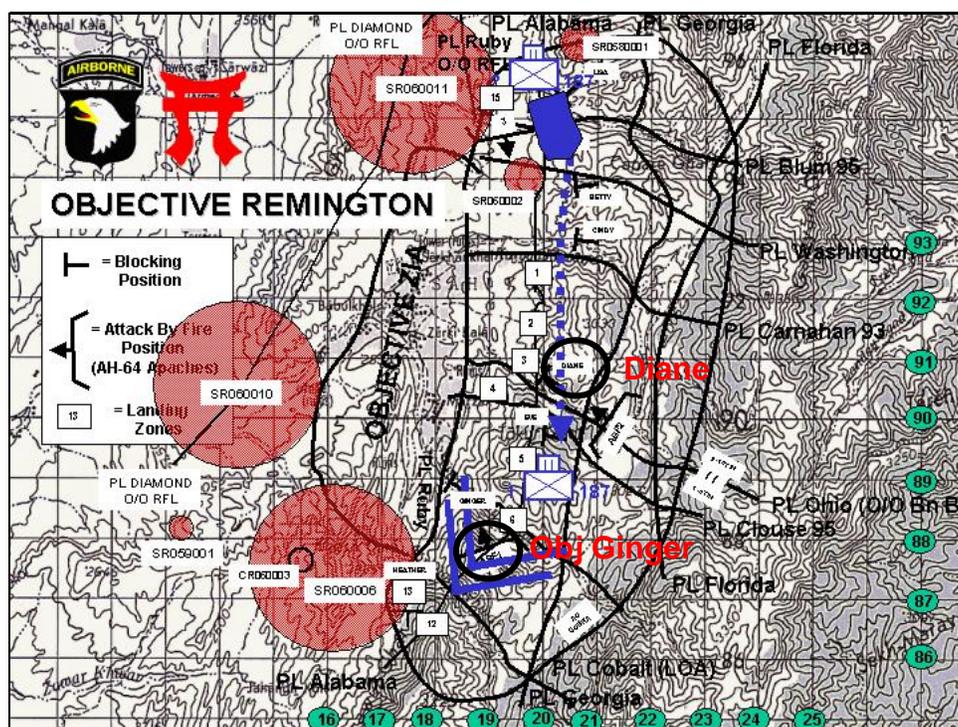
Meanwhile Zia's men suffered more wounded and needed medevac. Morale, although steady, was beginning to suffer. The pinned-down troops stood up to the fire for many hours, but as darkness approached, their position became untenable. The SF commander, in consultation with Commander Zia and the TF Dagger commander, determined that it was time to fall back, regroup, and come back to fight another day. As darkness began to fall, Zia's weary men loaded up on what trucks they had and returned to Gardez.

As Zia's forces pulled back, the main effort shifted to the US units.

101st Airborne and 10th Mountain During ANACONDA



The situation in the valley was somewhat stable by this point. The second lift had brought in additional troops. Five AH-64 Apache helicopters had acquitted themselves well in the fight, flying dozens of hazardous missions into the valley. They attacked enemy troop concentrations, operations, and firing positions and had, as a result, taken heavy ground fire themselves. By the end of the day only one undamaged Apache was flying. With CAS still poorly coordinated and slow and no available artillery support, the Apaches were the one bright spot of fire support during a long day. After hours of bombardment and more than 20 wounded, the 1-87th Infantry soldiers trapped in BP Ginger were pulled out at nightfall, leaving a major exit from the valley wide open. It was never effectively closed.



The night of 2 and 3 March TF Rakassan prepared a new plan to seize the high ground to the east and seal off the valley. This operation began in the early hours of 4 March, but the going was slow. The terrain was broken, and the altitude quickly exhausted anyone who was not acclimated to it. Still, by the end of the day, advanced elements of TF Rakassan had already pushed down as far as BP Diane. Nearly simultaneously, it sent a small reconnaissance element onto the northern portion of the Little Whale to watch enemy movements.

Most of the attention on the battlefield on 3 to 4 March, however, was focused on a firefight on Takur Ghar, a mountain to the southeast of the valley. There had been a botched attempt to insert an SR team on an enemy-held mountain, and a Navy SEAL had fallen out of a helicopter and left to face certain death or capture.

Takur Ghar



A small SEAL force was quickly inserted, but it was driven off and a Ranger QRF was inserted on the mountain. During the nearly 20 hours of the unfolding drama came reports of two helicopters lost, six dead, one missing, and many wounded. Special operations forces operate in a high-risk environment, and missions occasionally go wrong with fatal results. All the men were finally rescued but at the final cost of seven dead.

KIA at Takur Ghar

Neil Roberts—SEAL
John Chapman—AF
Marc Anderson—Ranger
Bradley Crose—Ranger
Mathew Commons—Ranger
Jason Cunningham—AF PJ
Philip Svitak—Avn Gunner



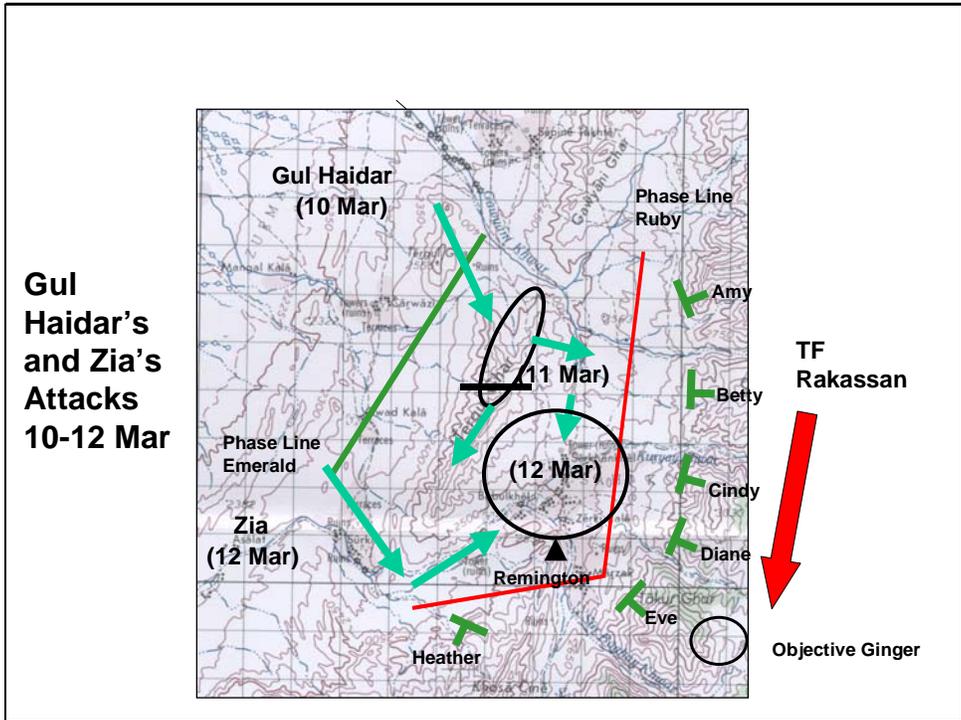
Memorial

Over the next few days TF Rakassan continued to move slowly down the ridgeline from BP Diane to BP Ginger, clearing all the caves and potential enemy positions along the way. Due to the enemy strength in the valley, it became apparent that more than Zia's attenuated forces, by now around 200 strong, would be needed to clear Objective Remington.

**Gul
Haidar's
Armor
and
Mech Force**



Afghan Defense Minister Fahim Khan was contacted. He selected one of his best generals, Gul Haidar, to lead a mixture of Afghan infantry, motorized infantry, and tanks—about 700 soldiers in all—down from Kabul to join the fight.



By 10 March, all of Gul Haidar's elements were in place, and after a quick reconnaissance of the area, Haidar seized the northern half of the Whale. The following day, they moved to the northern portion of the valley for an attack on the 12th.

On 12 March, part of Gul Haidar's force attacked straight down through the valley and moved quickly to clear the villages of Serkhankhiel and Babukhiel. Another element moved from north to south along Terghul Ghar, clearing the ridge, killing at least two enemy soldiers, and discovering many bodies and body parts. Simultaneously, Commander Zia sent his reconstituted force into the valley from the south and began clearing the village of Marzak. The three villages were quickly cleared; the enemy had fled.

Conclusions/Thoughts

SF, with close air support and key ground allies, can be decisive out of all proportion to numbers.

You do not gain without risk.

Artillery: do not leave home without it! (Air power, especially slow and inaccurate, against a dug-in, wily foe, is not enough.)

The conditions in Afghanistan were unique, and the “lessons” learned should be applied carefully to dramatically different countries and situations. (One size does not fit all!)

Well-trained, disciplined professionals can operate well in a fluid environment. (You do not create these people overnight.)

In conclusion, I think we can see that US Army Special Forces, operating closely with allied Afghan units, were decisive in defeating the Taliban and its al-Qaeda allies and liberating Afghanistan. Their high level of training and dedication to duty overcame all obstacles and delivered a heavy blow against terrorism. In this type of mission, SF was clearly the force of choice to achieve dramatic results with only a handful of men. Too much should not be drawn from the Taliban’s easy collapse. We had heavy assistance from our Northern Alliance allies who had their own political aims in mind. These circumstances are so unique that one should be leery of applying a “new model” of warfare wholesale without considering all the unique elements of any other situation. However, special operations forces are true professionals. Operating with a minimum amount of support and guidance in a highly fluid political and military environment, they showed that they can be a valuable combat multiplier.