

The United States Army in Afghanistan

Operation ENDURING FREEDOM



October 2001–March 2002

Introduction

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 dramatically changed the world in which we live. Never had an enemy attacked us on our own soil to such effect. Over 3,000 Americans died that day at the hands of a ruthless, and to some degree faceless, enemy. The terrorist organization known as al Qaeda, perpetrator of the attack, operated in the shadows to take advantage of the freedom and openness that are American hallmarks. Afghanistan, a known training ground and a safe haven for al Qaeda, quickly became the focus of the first military efforts to strike back. Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda's enigmatic leader, believed he and his followers were beyond the reach of American arms in that far-off mountainous land, protected by its fanatical Taliban regime.

Bin Laden was wrong. Most Americans are familiar with the military operation in Afghanistan. In a matter of months, the U.S. Army, Air Force, Marines, and Navy, in a masterful display of joint operations and in concert with our Afghan allies, overthrew the Taliban regime and drove the terrorist al Qaeda into worldwide flight. Our actions in Afghanistan dramatically demonstrated the reach of American power and the strength of American will. The campaign was a stirring beginning to the newly announced Global War on Terrorism.

This pamphlet provides additional detail concerning the role of the U.S. Army in the critical first few months of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan. It tells a story of resolve, of danger and hardship, and of ultimate triumph. It tells of the early introduction into Afghanistan of Army Special Forces, forces ideally suited for this type of mission in such an austere environment. It tells of the synergy of air power and land power working together to achieve national goals. It also shows how conventional and unconventional forces complemented each other's strengths and compensated for each other's weaknesses.

This pamphlet was written by the chief of the Histories Division of the Center of Military History, Dr. Richard W. Stewart, who served in Afghanistan as a historian for Task Force DAGGER. We hope that you enjoy and profit from this brief but dramatic story of our Army in action during the opening days of the Global War on Terrorism.

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The terrorist attacks on America on 11 September 2001 awakened the country from its habitual peacetime slumber. Slow to anger, Americans traditionally spend most of their time pursuing personal goals, each with his or her own version of the American dream. But for many, the events of 11 September quickly burned into their consciousness, changing their lives in ways that only slowly began to register. As the nation mourned, it did so with the realization that sadness would give way to anger, and anger to justice. Almost immediately, in fact, the U.S. armed forces led the way in beginning a new type of war: a war on terrorism. Gradually, all elements of national power were focused on this struggle—intelligence, diplomacy, public health, security, and even financial and economic institutions. The first goal of the new war was discovering who these terrorists were, where they trained, who trained them, and where they lived so that America could destroy them and their infrastructure. The leaders of the United States determined that it was necessary to “drain the swamps” in which the terrorists lived. A partial answer to these questions was quickly apparent: the worst of the swamps that harbored the al Qaeda terrorists was in Afghanistan.

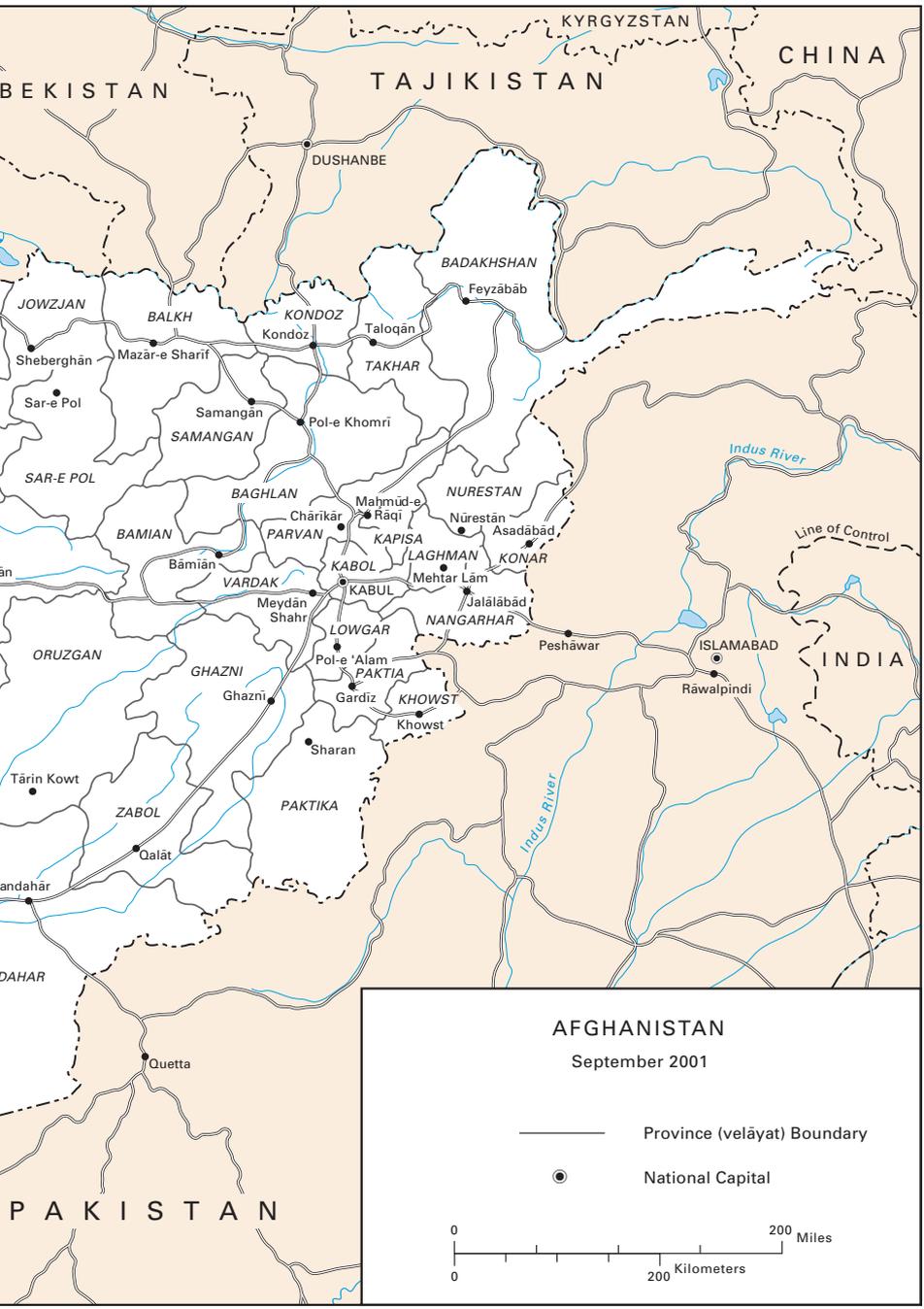
Strategic Setting

Afghanistan by the early twenty-first century was in shambles. Even in the best of times the tribal structure of the country prevented the functioning of a strong central government. The decentralized political structure precluded the creation of a thriving state. Economically, Afghanistan was poor, but until the 1970s it was surprisingly self-sufficient. However, the Soviet invasion and contested occupation from 1979 to 1989 destroyed what political and economic structures were in place. This struggle left an estimated 1.3 million Afghans dead or missing and created approximately 5.5 million refugees. The United States and much of the world community condemned the Soviet Union’s war but did little directly to confront them. However, U.S. intelligence agencies covertly supplied arms and money to the Afghan *mujahadeen*, or holy warriors, and even provided train-

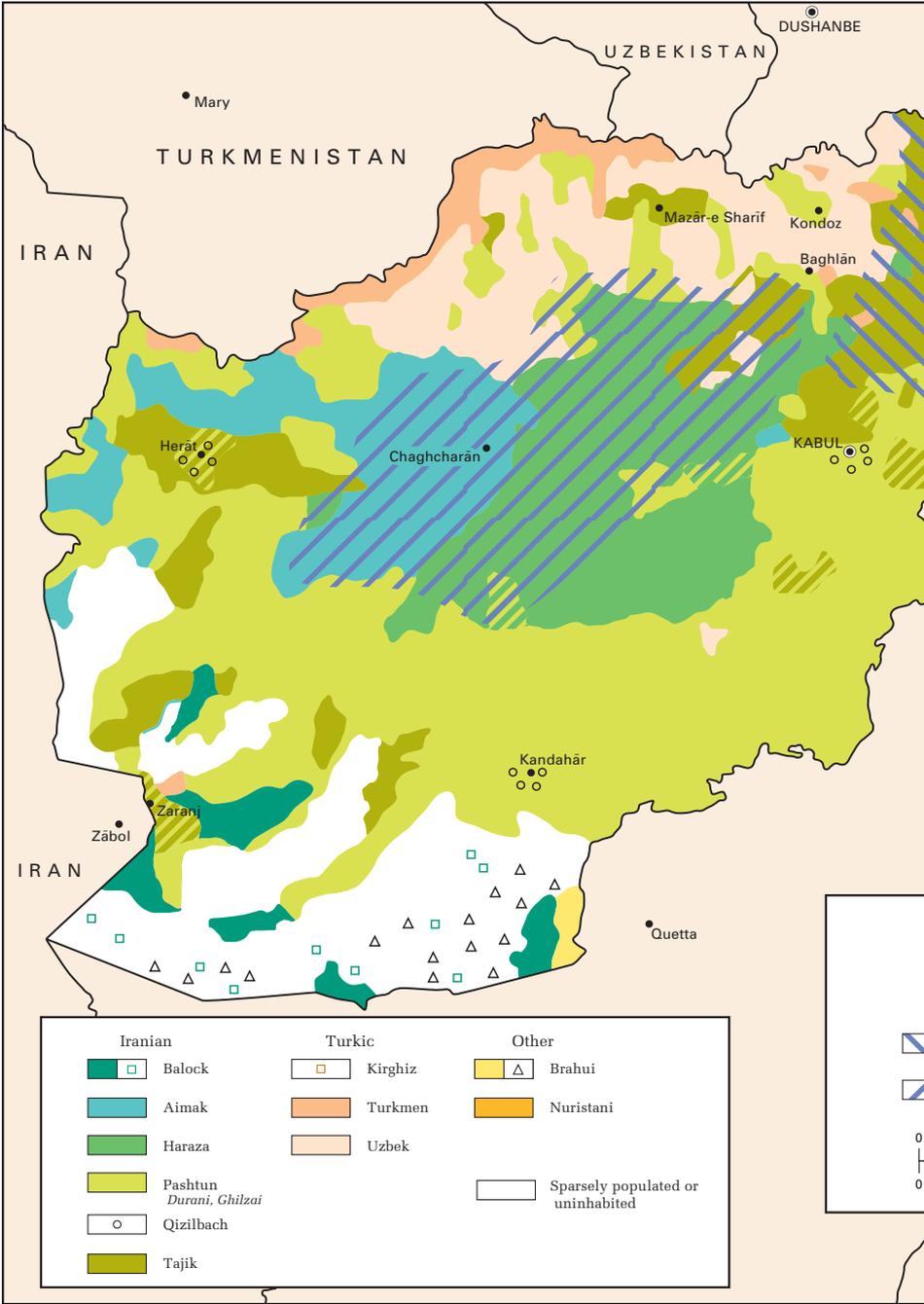
ing in some highly sophisticated arms, such as the very effective Stinger shoulder-fired antiaircraft missile.

With the departure of the Soviets in 1989 and the collapse of the puppet president they left behind, the United States' interest in Afghanistan waned and the country lapsed into near anarchy. The increase in open factional fighting in 1992 continued Afghanistan's time of troubles, leading to the rise of the *Taliban* group beginning in 1996. The Taliban consisted of Muslim fundamentalists who sought to return the country to strict Islamic rule using whatever brutality was necessary in the process. Most of the country was under Taliban control by 2001 except for some small areas held by Northern Alliance forces in the Panjshir Valley northeast of Kabul and a few scattered pockets of resistance in the northwest of the country. Much of the opposition to the Taliban was divided along ethnic and geographic lines. The Northern Alliance was composed mainly of ethnic minorities such as the *Tajiks* and *Uzbeks* from the northern and western parts of the country. (See Map 2.) In contrast, the Taliban drew its strength from the majority *Pashtun* tribes in the southern and eastern portions of the country. Along with the attempt to institute a strict Islamic rule, the Taliban provid-





MAP 1



MAP 2



ed an open haven to some of the worst terrorist groups of the world, including Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization.

After the attacks on Americans in September 2001, the United States quickly uncovered clues as to the identity and organizational affiliation of the suicide terrorists who crashed planes into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. However, knowing that al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks, and that al Qaeda was based primarily in Afghanistan, was one thing. How to attack it was another. Afghanistan is an immense, land-locked country approximately the size of Texas with a population of around 24 million. (See Map 1.) It is a land of massive mountain ranges and remote valleys in the north and east and near desert-like conditions on the plains to the south and west. Road and rail communications nets were minimal and in disrepair. The rough terrain had been one of the major obstacles the Soviet troops faced during their war, and it would provide challenges to any U.S. military effort.

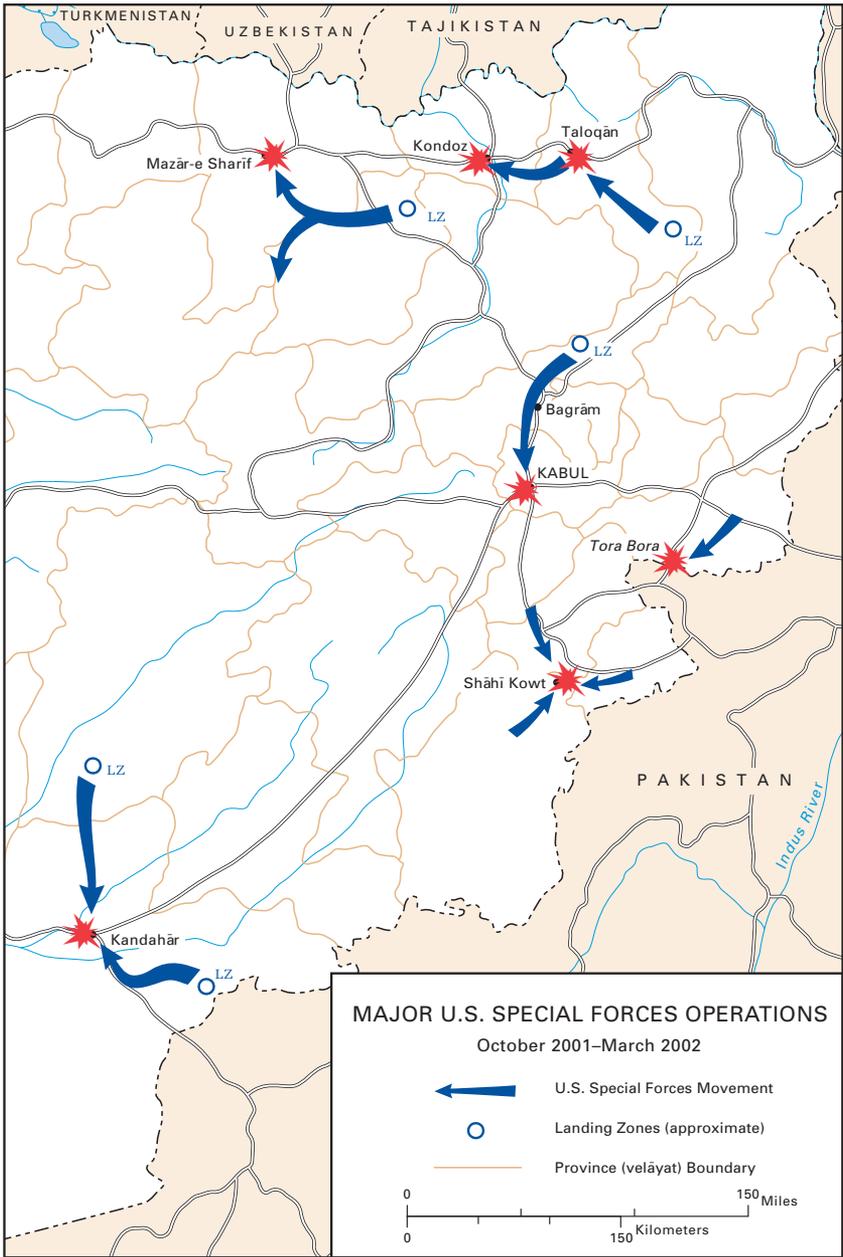
The United States had attempted to attack the terrorists in Afghanistan before. In 1998 the Clinton administration had launched cruise missiles against known or suspected terrorist training camps after terrorists attacked several U.S. embassies.

This handful of cruise missiles, however, did little more than stir up the hornet's nest. Only troops on the ground would be able to locate and kill the terrorists. However, without sea or air lines of communications, the movement of large numbers of conventional troops to the area with the missions of seizing terrain or locating and killing terrorists seemed a nearly impossible task. Reflecting that assessment, both Taliban and al Qaeda leaders seemed smugly safe in their faraway mountain strongholds. Nevertheless, within a month of the September 11th attacks the U.S. Army had deployed forces to Central Asia to confront the terrorists on their own ground. One of the first of these units was the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) from Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The unique talents and skills of this Special Operations unit would be tapped to penetrate this terrorist redoubt and assist the Northern Alliance in overthrowing the Taliban and rooting out the al Qaeda.

Operations

During initial combat operations in northern Afghanistan as part of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Army Special Forces (SF) was tested to a degree not seen since the Vietnam War. With little time to prepare for this mission, SF 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 U.S. air power to bear on Taliban and al Qaeda forces, and change the government of Afghanistan so that the country was no longer a safe haven for terrorists. They accomplished all this, and more, in the space of a few months. While the details of many of their operations remain classified, the general outline is clear.

Army operations in Afghanistan focused first on obtaining a suitable operational base outside the country but close enough to infiltrate Special Forces teams into their targeted areas of operations. Because of earlier contacts with the government of Uzbekistan, this occurred rather rapidly and U.S. forces began arriving at an old Soviet airbase near Karshi Kandabad in south-central Uzbekistan in the fall of 2001. The 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), stationed in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, formed the core of Joint Special Operations Task Force NORTH, called Task Force (TF) DAGGER, under the command of Col. John Mulholland. In addition to the 5th Special Forces Group personnel, the task force included aviators from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), also stationed at Fort Campbell, and Special Tactics personnel from the Air Force Special Operations Command headquartered at Hurlburt Field, Florida. To assist in base



MAP 3

security, and to provide a quick reaction force of heavily armed infantrymen, the 1st battalion of the 87th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division (Light), also deployed to Karshi Kandabad.

Once in place, TF DAGGER was directed to conduct special operations in support of a number of Northern Alliance (NA) commanders in Afghanistan and to work with them to gain their active assistance in overthrowing the Taliban regime. Representatives of other U.S. government agencies who had long-standing ties with many of these organizations served as advance elements for the Special Forces. However, much of the military burden would fall on Army Special Forces and Special Operations aviators. They planned to quickly establish contact with three of the most powerful of the NA faction leaders, Generals Abdur Rashid Dostum, Mullah Daoud, and Fahim Khan. Assisted by U.S. air support, each would be encouraged to expand his footholds in northern Afghanistan and to provide a base for follow-on U.S. operations before the onset of winter. Winter in Afghanistan made mountain passes virtually impassible, and even air support was often adversely affected by the winds and storms of the harsh Afghan climate. For political purposes, the Special Forces teams were divided among the various faction warlords as equally as possible, since the United States did not want to give the impression of favoring one of these long-term rivals, now temporary allies, over the other. This policy impacted on the timetable of inserting teams, with some being held up, at times for days, awaiting the successful insertion of another team into a rival's territory. Afghanistan's inherent tribalism and factional splits could never be ignored despite the common enemy.

The concept of the operation in Afghanistan was to land teams first into the Mazar-e Sharif and Bagram-Kabul areas, followed almost simultaneously by insertions into the Konduz-Taloqan region. (*See Map 3.*) Once these areas were secured, the plan was to move teams to liberate Kandahar, the center of the Taliban movement. Then the focus would shift to a likely area of enemy concentration in the Tora Bora Mountains. DAGGER leaders realized, however, that any success could ultimately lead to the scattering of the enemy forces into even more remote areas.

TF DAGGER launched its first teams into Afghanistan in mid-October. The first twelve-man SF team infiltrated into northern Afghanistan to the south of the key city of Mazar-e Sharif via helicopter on 19 October 2001. This insertion, and the ones that followed, were stories in their own right. The flights were in modified CH-47s, all conducted at night, into mountains up to 16,000 feet high with clouds, rain, and even sandstorms dramatically limiting visibility. The

insertions were highly dangerous even for the best aviators in the Army, the pilots of the 160th SOAR. Despite these risks, all insertions were accomplished without major incident, although there were a number of close calls from the high mountains and enemy ground fire.

After a two-and-a-half-hour hazardous journey through high mountains and extremely poor weather, the first SF team reached its landing zone south of the city of Mazar-e Sharif, where they linked up with the local warlord, General Dostum. Dostum was an old regional power broker who alternately allied himself with and then betrayed Afghans, Soviets, and the Taliban. He was considered a ruthless warlord with a strong power base centered around Mazar-e Sharif. After conferring with him, the team split into two elements to better assist Dostum's scattered forces against the Taliban.

From 19 to 24 October the Special Forces team operated in a split team manner. One element, Team Alpha, rode on horseback north into the mountains near Keshنده Bala along with General Dostum to help him plan the attack on Mazar-e Sharif. The other half of the team, 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 U.S. 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 they would be killed or captured. According to one Special Forces observer, on several occasions he told the team leader "500 of my men can be killed, but not one American can even be injured or you will leave." As a result, the team had to call CAS from a distance of eight to ten kilometers away from the targets, looking across the Darya Suf gorge with weather conditions often hampering visibility. It was extremely hazy most of the time, making it difficult to visually acquire targets even with binoculars and spotting scopes. Eventually, the trust barrier was broken when it became obvious the team could take care of itself. Choosing observation posts (OPs) at their own discretion, often regardless of the element of danger, the men of Team Alpha quickly became more effective.

The massive close air support brought down by Special Forces had a huge and immediate psychological effect on the Taliban, causing panic and fear, and a correspondingly positive effect on General Dostum's men. Starting on 22 October, Team Alpha, traveling on horseback in support of Dostum's cavalry, decisively demonstrated to the Afghans the U.S. commitment to their cause. From an OP near the villages of Cobaki and Oimatan, team members began systematically



Special Forces on Horseback



calling in CAS missions. In one eighteen-hour period they destroyed over twenty armored and twenty support vehicles using close air support. At first the Taliban responded by reinforcing its troops, sending reserves into the area from Sholgara, Mazar-e Sharif, and Kholm. All that did was provide more targets for the CAS aircraft circling overhead and called into action by the SF team on the ground. Numerous key command posts, armored vehicles, troop concentrations, and anti-aircraft artillery pieces were destroyed.

Meanwhile, the Bravo element of the team, also mounted on horseback, moved south into the Alma Tak Mountain range to link up with one of Dostum's subordinate commanders in the southern Darya Suf Valley and prevent the enemy from assisting its forces in the north. They would continue to interdict and destroy Taliban forces in these mountains until 7 November, destroying over sixty-five enemy vehicles, twelve command bunker positions, and a large enemy ammunition storage bunker.

The work of Teams Alpha and Bravo quickly eroded the initial Taliban defensive positions. Many Taliban vehicles were destroyed, and hundreds of troops were killed. The survivors fled for their lives north to Mazar-e Sharif. In pursuit, Dostum's forces began to conduct old-fashioned cavalry charges into the northern Darya Suf and Balkh Valleys. During these attacks SF team members were in the forefront of the action, often on horseback, even though only one member of the team had ever ridden extensively before.

Soon the Northern Alliance troops approached a critical pass just south of Mazar-e Sharif. It was a natural choke point, and the enemy was there in force. Dostum's force could not go farther without massive fire support. Moving over treacherous terrain by horse and foot, SF elements moved into a forward mountain OP, and on 9 November they engaged Taliban defenses on the north side of the pass with close air support. Their efforts resulted in the destruction of 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, they continued to engage Taliban forces with B-52 strikes. It was the heavy bombers that finally broke the back of the Taliban defenders, who now began streaming in retreat to Mazar-e Sharif and beyond.

With the way to victory opened up to him by Special Forces, General Dostum secured the city of Mazar-e 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 Dostum. This triumphal progress into the city ended at the medieval

fortress of Quali Jangi, where Dostum established his headquarters in the eastern entryway. The remaining sections became temporary prisoner holding areas. The fortress had been General Dostum's headquarters when he was in command of the city prior to Taliban rule. More important, the capture of Mazar-e Sharif was the first major victory for the U.S.-led coalition in the war in Afghanistan, giving it a strategic foothold and an airport in northern Afghanistan.

Raid on Kandahar

While the campaign was under way in the north, U.S. forces also struck in the southern part of the country in the heart of the Taliban movement near Kandahar. On the night of 19–20 October Rangers and other Special Operations Forces (SOF) soldiers conducted airborne and air assault operations against several sites in Kandahar. Four MC-130 aircraft dropped 199 Rangers of the 3d Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment (-), onto a desert landing strip southwest of Kandahar, code-named Objective RHINO. Assisted by circling AC-130 Spectre gunships, the Rangers quickly secured their objective. Then the soldiers and attached psychological operations (PSYOP) loud-speaker teams moved toward a nearby enemy compound and cleared it without resistance. Having secured the landing zone, they assisted follow-on helicopter forces of SOF soldiers that had additional raids to conduct in the area. In all, the Rangers and SOF soldiers spent almost five-and-a-half hours on the ground with only a few minor injuries. Although the tactical results of the raid were mixed, the Taliban was shown that U.S. forces could strike anywhere and anytime and that no location in Afghanistan was a safe haven any longer. Later, when U.S. marines landed in that same area on 25 November, they would establish a new base on the Ranger landing zone, called Camp RHINO.

The Capture of Kabul

Simultaneously with the Special Forces team's insertion into the Mazar-e Sharif region, another team infiltrated into northeastern Afghanistan to contact the Northern Alliance forces dug in on the Shamali Plains just south of the entrance to the strategic Panjshir Valley. The situation in this region, only fifty miles north of the capital city, Kabul, had been static for close to five years. Northern Alliance forces controlled an old Soviet air base at Bagram on the Shamali Plains. The opposing Taliban forces could not penetrate the defensive minefields near the base nor attack into the rich Panjshir Valley to the northeast. The valley had been the stronghold of Ahmed Shah Masood, the revered leader of the Northern Alliance assassinated by al

Qaeda agents on 9 September 2001, an act that had almost destroyed the Northern Alliance. The Special Forces teams now sought out local successors, Generals Fahim Khan and Bismullah Khan.

Having infiltrated into Afghanistan during the night of 19–20 October, the team linked up with the two Northern Alliance commanders on 21 October at Bagram air base and began looking for vantage points on the plains to call in close air support. They soon found an ideal position and established an observation post in the old air traffic control tower for the airfield. From that location, they could clearly see the Taliban positions in the Shamali Plains spread out before them and immediately began calling in air strikes on the entrenched enemy. From 21 October through 14 November 2001, the Special Forces directed almost continuous CAS missions against the dug-in enemy. The constant air attacks degraded the Taliban/al Qaeda command and control, killed hundreds of entrenched front-line troops, and disrupted their support elements. General Fahim Khan was encouraged to begin thinking about an immediate move against Kabul while the enemy was in disarray.

The Northern Alliance leaders originally planned a multiday, five-phased operation to take the Afghan capital. However, it soon became apparent to them that their foes were so weakened by U.S. air strikes that operations could be accelerated. When the attack was launched on 13 November, the enemy defenses quickly 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, General Khan's ground forces liberated Kabul without incident. The Taliban and al Qaeda had fled in disarray toward Kandahar in the south and into the supposed sanctuary of the nearby Tora Bora Mountains to the east near Jalalabad. By early December U.S. troops were assisting in a ceremony reopening the U.S. embassy in Afghanistan's capital.

As the enemy abandoned its positions in the northeast and north-west sections of the country, the U.S. focus shifted to the central northern area around Taloqan-Konduz, to the east of Mazar-e Sharif. SF teams had infiltrated into the area on 8 November and moved quickly to link up with General Daoud, a prominent Northern Alliance warlord who had gained fame fighting the Soviet invaders. By 11 November the SF soldiers had established observation posts overlooking the defensive positions around Taloqan and were prepared to call in close air support for Daoud. However, before any air strikes could be arranged, Daoud launched his offensive and his front lines quickly moved out of the OP's line of sight. By the end of the night of 11 November, Taloqan had fallen with little resistance. A major victo-

ry had occurred almost without a fight, based solely, it seemed, on Daoud's new confidence in U.S. support and air power.

After the fall of Taloqan, the Special Forces continued its primary mission of assisting Daoud's combat operations with CAS as he began moving west, toward the city of Kondoz. To ensure nearly continuous air support, the twelve-man SF team split into three elements. On any given day one element would be on or forward of the front lines directing air strikes. A second element would be recovering from its operations the previous day, while a third element would be preparing for its operations the next day. Thus the team established a rotation cycle that enabled them to maintain a round-the-clock air strike capability on enemy positions blocking the advance to Kondoz.

Up to this point General Daoud had met very little opposition from the Taliban. On 13 November he met his first heavy resistance when one of his commanders attacked enemy positions to the west of Taloqan without orders, triggering a Taliban counterattack. After receiving both direct heavy-weapons fire and indirect tank fire, the SF element for that day repositioned to a different OP, called in air strikes on the Taliban, and helped Daoud repel the attack. However, this marked increase in Taliban resistance altered Daoud's plan of attack. Instead of trying to blitz through the Taliban all the way to Kondoz, he entrenched his forces and decided to use heavy U.S. air attacks to weaken the Taliban, either establishing the conditions for a successful attack or forcing them to surrender.

For the next ten days the Special Forces called in air support to pound Taliban entrenched positions in and around Khanabad and Kondoz. Over the course of these operations, SF-directed air strikes destroyed 12 tanks, 51 cargo trucks, 44 bunker complexes, and numerous other vehicles and supply dumps while inflicting losses on the Taliban/al Qaeda of around 2,000 killed or wounded.

By the end of eleven days of intense bombing, the enemy began crumbling and General Daoud captured the nearby city of Khanabad. He next prepared to move directly on Kondoz but decided to try a little diplomacy first, initiating talks with the Taliban leaders in that city. Seeing that their position was hopeless, they agreed to surrender on 23 November. Kondoz, the last Taliban stronghold in northern Afghanistan, was under Northern Alliance control.

At this point the wholesale surrender of the Taliban forces began to cause problems. Over 3,500 Taliban troops surrendered in the Kondoz area, and these prisoners were added to the hundreds more already under Northern Alliance control after the fall of Mazar-e Sharif. The thousands of prisoners from Kondoz were moved quickly,



Special Forces Calling in Close Air Support at Kondoz

without even being thoroughly searched, to join the prisoners of General Dostum in the Quali Jangi fortress in Mazar-e Sharif. The large number of enemy prisoners and their inexperienced handling led to difficulties almost immediately. Most of the prisoners were concentrated in a portion of the Quali Jangi fortress when U.S. intelligence officers started to interrogate them. During this process some 600 of the “detainees” disarmed the guards and took over the prison compound.

The rebellion sparked an immediate crisis. Two U.S. intelligence officers were trapped, one eventually escaping and the other murdered by his captors. In response, nearby SF soldiers organized a team of U.S. and British Special Forces to infiltrate the facility and bring back any friendly personnel held by enemy forces. As they neared the prison, they began taking heavy fire, including RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) rounds exploding in the team’s immediate vicinity. The SF team requested close air support even though it would be in the “danger close” range and there was a possibility that bomb fragments would hit them even if their call for fire was accurate. Before the operation was complete, five U.S. and one British soldier would be wounded by an errant 2,000-pound bomb that landed too close.

Throughout the next three days the SF team exchanged fire with the rebels and used laser designator devices to illuminate their positions for air strikes and nighttime howitzer and 40-mm. cannon attacks from circling AC-130 Spectre gunships. It was during this period that they received notification that Johnny “Mike” Spann, one of the captured intelligence agents, had been killed. The crisis also prompted the first introduction of conventional troops into Afghanistan with the insertion of a small Quick Reaction Force (QRF) of infantry from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, of the 10th Mountain Division operating out of Uzbekistan. The 1st Platoon helped secure the perimeter around the fortress to prevent enemy escapes and was available to provide any additional firepower that might be needed. Concurrently, the company headquarters and the 3d Platoon from C Company secured a landing zone at the Mazar-e Sharif airfield and assisted in the triage and evacuation of casualties. Once the mission had ended, the 1st Platoon remained in Afghanistan to provide security and a QRF in support of the Special Forces forward operating base soon established in that key northern city.

After five days of constantly engaging the prisoners with fire and maneuver, the coalition forces brought the battle to an end only when the last holdout bunkers in the fortress were flooded with water. The remaining prisoners—cold, wet, and hungry—surrendered. Out of the more than 600 prisoners at the facility, about 500 had been killed, reflecting the bitterness of the struggle. Those surrendering included the “American Taliban,” John Walker Lindh, who had joined the movement sometime before 11 September.

During the Mazar-e Sharif and Taloqan-Konduz campaigns with the Northern Alliance forces, Army SF soldiers effectively liberated six provinces of Afghanistan, including the key cities of Mazar-e Sharif, Meymanah, Sar-e Pol, Sheberghan, Heyratan, Auybak, Konduz, Khanabad, Taloqan, and over fifty other towns. To accomplish this feat, they had traveled by horse, all-terrain vehicle, pickup truck, and on foot along hazardous mountain trails, often at night and in all extremes of weather, through hundreds of miles of mountains, gorges, hills, and valleys. They did all of this in about a month with only a few U.S. casualties, while inflicting thousands of casualties on the enemy and completing the destruction of Taliban and al Qaeda defensive positions in the north, including the liberation of Kabul.

With the liberation of most of the northern portion of Afghanistan and the recapture of Kabul, it was critical that the United States begin to take steps to assist the people of this war-torn country. Already the Americans had attempted to blend humanitarian concerns with mili-

tary operations. While the fighting was under way, for example, C-17 cargo aircraft loaded with humanitarian daily rations (special meals without meat products and thus suitable for strict Muslims) dropped hundreds of thousands of food packets from the skies to cut-off refugee camps to mitigate what was feared could become a humanitarian disaster. In addition, PSYOP leaflets dropped in numerous locations offered rewards for fugitive Taliban and al Qaeda leaders, informed the Afghan people about their forthcoming liberation, and warned them of the dangers of unexploded ordnance and mines. Civil Affairs teams with Task Force DAGGER began assessing humanitarian needs even as the fighting was winding down in northern Afghanistan. And, with the capture of Kabul, the Central Command established a Combined Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force (CJCMOTF) to coordinate the efforts of relief organizations in Kabul and to work to establish Coalition Humanitarian Liaison Cells (CHLCs) in many population centers. The work of restoration had begun even while the campaign to retake the remainder of Afghanistan continued.

While Special Operations forces fought alongside the Northern Alliance, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) established the theater architecture to command and control a sustained land campaign. In October 2001 General Tommy R. Franks, combatant commander of U.S. Central Command, designated the U.S. Third Army, or U.S. Army Forces Central Command (ARCENT), to provide command and control for ongoing operations as the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC). Commanded by Lt. Gen. Paul T. Mikolashek, Third Army headquarters had deployed to Egypt just days prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks to provide oversight of the biannual BRIGHT STAR exercise. Upon completion of BRIGHT STAR on 13 November, the headquarters deployed from Egypt to Camp Doha, Kuwait, where it officially assumed responsibilities as the CFLCC on 20 November. CENTCOM authorized General Mikolashek to immediately “direct and synchronize land operations to destroy al Qaeda and prevent the reemergence of international terrorist activities in Combined Joint Area–Afghanistan,” as well as to conduct humanitarian operations and create conditions for a peaceful, stable Afghanistan.

In order for the CFLCC to accomplish this ambitious mission, additional Army support forces were deployed to the Gulf region and Central Asia to support Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. These forces included the 513th Military Intelligence Brigade, the 11th Signal Brigade, the 92d Engineer Battalion (Heavy), the 561st Logistical Task Force, the 507th Combat Support Group (-), and the 59th Military Police Company. Many of these elements had to provide support from

outside of Afghanistan since the Central Command was under pressure to limit the “footprint” of American troops on the ground in that country, in part to avoid looking like an occupying power and repeating the mistakes of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan two decades earlier.

To coordinate support activities at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, in November the CFLCC formed an ad hoc group called Task Force BAGRAM. This task force was organized around the 3d Mobile Liaison Team under the provisional command of Col. Robert Kissel. Kissel’s mission was to establish his headquarters at Bagram, coordinate the repair of the 8,000-foot runway built by the Soviets, and establish a key support base close to Kabul for follow-on missions. BAGRAM joined another task force at Bagram: Task Force BOWIE, commanded by Brig. Gen. Gary L. Harrell. BOWIE was a joint and interagency task force with an intelligence fusion cell reporting directly to the commanding general of Central Command.

The buildup of forces in Central Asia led CFLCC to request further augmentation to position a command and control node closer to the actual fighting. CFLCC asked for the equivalent of a division tactical command post to serve as the CFLCC (Forward) headquarters, which would operate initially from the forward operating base at Karshi Kandabad in Uzbekistan. On 25 November the 10th Mountain Division (Light), stationed at Fort Drum, New York, and commanded by Maj. Gen. Franklin L. “Buster” Hagenbeck, received orders to deploy to Central Asia for the mission. Initially constrained by the number of forces already deployed in Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Persian Gulf and by the force cap in place for the Afghanistan region, the division organized a small, 159-man command post for the mission. On 12 December the 10th Mountain Division headquarters officially assumed duties as the CFLCC (Forward) at Karshi Kandabad.

The mission of CFLCC (Forward) was to command and control Army forces, less Special Operations forces, in the Combined and Joint Area of Operations, Afghanistan (CJOA). General Hagenbeck’s first priorities were to ensure support for ongoing Special Forces operations, to oversee repair of the damaged airstrip at Mazar-e Sharif, and to open a ground line of communications into that key city. Using the few resources available, primarily from the units organized under the 507th Combat Support Group’s logistical task force, CFLCC (Forward) pushed needed supplies into Afghanistan and oversaw the demining and reconstruction of the Mazar-e Sharif airfield by Army and Air Force engineers. The headquarters also worked with Uzbek officials and Afghan General Dostum to open both sides of the Freedom Bridge near Termez, Uzbekistan. The Soviet-built bridge had

been closed since the Afghan civil war in the 1980s and 1990s. This land route provided a critical pathway for the smooth flow of supplies and humanitarian aid from Central Asia into northern Afghanistan. The road was opened by late December. These command and control and logistical steps greatly facilitated the posturing of coalition forces for future operations and for the stabilization of the northern portion of Afghanistan.

Two Approaches to Kandahar

Following the tactical successes in northern Afghanistan, Kandahar, far to the south, was to be the next U.S. objective. Military planners suspected that it would be the hardest city to take. The populous city was a long way from the Northern Alliance strongholds in the north, was of a different ethnic makeup—Pashtuns, not Tajiks—and was the spiritual and political center of the Taliban movement. With few opposition leaders or forces in the area to work with, its capture might take months, or even be delayed until spring. Still, two separate SF elements infiltrated into the region and approached the city from the north and the south, with their supported host nation commanders picking up support all along the way.

The first Special Forces team was inserted north of Kandahar, near the village of Tarin Kowt, on 14 November. There, they linked up with Hamid Karzai and a small number of his followers. Karzai, a charismatic Pashtun tribal leader born near Kandahar, was both pro-western and anti-Taliban, a rare combination. As such, he was vital to U.S. plans for establishing an anti-Taliban front in the region. However, he almost did not survive his first brush with the foe.

On 16 November, in an engagement two days after their arrival, the SF team had to act quickly to save Karzai's resistance group. Fearing Karzai's potential power, Taliban leaders had moved about 500 soldiers north from Kandahar to crush him. In response, Karzai deployed his handful of men near the village of Tarin Kowt but relied heavily on his new U.S. allies to provide close air support. As U.S. planes pounded the approaching Taliban convoy guided by SF teams on the ground, the Afghan opposition fighters rallied and repulsed the Taliban attack. The Taliban, apparently stunned by the air assault, retreated in disarray.

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 crucial, Karzai agreed to move toward Kandahar as soon as possible. Accordingly, his tiny Afghan force, initially little more than thirty-five "well meaning" supporters—a force



Hamid Karzai (Middle Row, Third from Left) and Special Forces

that would eventually grow to an “armed mob” of almost 800 men—began moving southeast around 30 November from Tarin Kowt, 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 weapons, food, and clothing for the growing army. Then, on 2 December, the army moved south toward the village of Sayd Alim Kalay, the site of a critical bridge over a dry riverbed. By that time Mr. Karzai had been notified of his selection as head of the interim government of Afghanistan, making it critical to move quickly to Kandahar and increasing the pressure on the attached Special Forces to ensure that the movement was successful.

Karzai’s forces quickly routed the small force of Taliban soldiers holding the village near the eastern end of the bridge, but they could not take the well-defended bridge itself. For the next two days, despite the steady drone of close air support missions, the Taliban successfully defended the crossing. The tenacious defense was even marked by occasional enemy counterattacks through the dry riverbed in an attempt to gain a foothold on the other side. Each time the enemy

attempted a counterattack, the alert SF team would bring in more air missions and, in conjunction with Karzai's soldiers, drive it back.

On the morning of 4 December Karzai's force began its preparations for an all-out attack to take the bridge. After final coordination with the Afghans, the combined army of Special Forces soldiers and Afghan irregulars loaded onto pickup trucks and drove to battle. Each pickup was packed with a band of Afghan warriors with an assortment of weapons (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, in the words of one SF observer, a combination traveling circus and Somali war party.

The Special Forces team directed air strikes on the enemy-held ridge opposite them, but the enemy responded with heavy and accurate fire on the attacking force and again attempted a flanking counter-attack over the dry gulch. Under SF guidance, the Afghans put direct fire on the attackers and drove them back. Three times the determined Taliban soldiers tried to cross, but each time the fire of Karzai's forces turned them back. Meanwhile, the SF team on the ridge continued to call down punishing air attacks onto the enemy positions. One SF soldier was wounded; but having failed to dislodge the combined SF/Afghan force, the Taliban finally withdrew. That night the Taliban pulled back a few kilometers; the next morning Karzai's forces captured the bridge and established a foothold on the other side.

That next day, 5 December, the U.S. effort suffered a serious setback. While the Special Forces were observing operations from the ridgeline near the bridge and calling in close air support, a stray 2,000-pound Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) bomb landed in the middle of the SF position. The soldiers were literally blown off their feet. Three Americans were killed and dozens wounded, along with many of their Afghan allies. They called for a MEDEVAC and patched up the survivors as they waited. The same helicopters that came in to evacuate the wounded brought in another SF team to fill in for the broken team. The mission went on despite the tragedy, but it resulted in the worst U.S. casualty figure in the war up to that time and the most damaging friendly fire incident.

As the SF teams were recovering from the bomb accident, Karzai's negotiators finalized an agreement for the surrender of the Taliban forces across the river and for the surrender of the entire city of Kandahar. On 6 December the force began moving again toward the now open city.

While Karzai and his SF element were making their way toward Kandahar from Tarin Kowt, another Special Forces team was advancing

on the city from the south with a different opposition group. That team had infiltrated into the Shin Narai Valley southeast of Kandahar near the Pakistan border on the night of 18 November, quickly joining the local anti-Taliban leader, Gul Sharzai. Sharzai, the former governor of Kandahar, had led one of the groups against the Soviets and had been equally unhappy with the Taliban regime. Although he, like Karzai, welcomed the team as tangible proof of U.S. support for his operations, his force was heavily outnumbered by the local Taliban and in a vulnerable position. The SF team moved quickly to provide weapons and food to support his army of close to 800 tribesmen.

Once reinforced, Sharzai also proved amenable to advancing on Kandahar. During the night of 21 November Sharzai sent a delegation led by his brother to meet with the local Taliban representative to negotiate their surrender and ensure safe passage out of the valley for his forces. Unfortunately, the mission proved abortive, with the “truce party” taken under fire by the Taliban. There were no casualties, but Sharzai was forced to change his movement plans to avoid an early, and disruptive, battle.

Instead, his force bypassed the Taliban strongpoint, moving north from the Shin Narai Valley and then west through the Arghastan wadi district to Takht-e Pol located on Highway 4 south of the Kandahar Airport. Believing that intermediate firefights might only disrupt his movement and sap his strength, Sharzai remained fixed on Kandahar and the hope that his governorship might be restored.

On the morning of 22 November the group departed the valley, moving slowly. The convoy consisted of over 100 vehicles of many different types, including pickups, large transport (“jinga”) trucks, and even farm tractors pulling trailers. The movement to Takht-e Pol took a little over two days and was virtually unopposed until the second night. By that time the group had moved into a small, bowl-shaped valley just east of Highway 4, approximately six kilometers from Takht-e Pol. When Sharzai sent a delegation into the town to negotiate for the surrender of the local Taliban, the Special Forces moved two CAS elements forward with the Afghan commander, covering the town from a ridge overlooking the negotiations. The Taliban, refusing to surrender, suddenly ambushed Sharzai’s small security force. Immediately the SF requested air support and used it to break up the ambush, allowing the forward friendly elements to withdraw safely. However, shortly thereafter the Taliban began moving vehicles from Highway 4 to firing positions behind several ridgelines near Sharzai’s force and began to attack with machine-gun and RPG fire. With the SF directing new air strikes against those forces, the Taliban quickly

retreated and, shortly thereafter, abandoned the entire Takht-e Pol area. It took only a few bombing missions to knock the fight out of them.

The next morning, 24 November, Sharzai's forces entered Takht-e Pol with little resistance, severing the main highway between Kandahar and Chaman, Pakistan. Immediately Sharzai established checkpoints to the north and south along the highway. The northern checkpoint was almost in sight of the major airport at Kandahar. The next day that checkpoint received indirect fire from the airport, leading the SF to establish a forward OP on a nearby ridgeline secured by a 100-man friendly Afghan force. During the next week the team was able to overlook the airport and direct air strikes onto the enemy forces operating between the ridgeline and the airfield.

Feeling that the Taliban was too strong and his own forces too weak, Sharzai waited for the air strikes to weaken the enemy. The Taliban countered by firing artillery and rockets onto the ridgeline and the village of Takht-e Pol. The airport appeared heavily defended by ground forces, as well as anti-aircraft artillery and missiles. Nevertheless, relentless air strikes slowly eroded the defenders. During this same week Taliban forces began to move north from Spin Boldak, a small town to the south, along Highway 4 to defensive positions in a large wadi approximately five kilometers from the southern element of Sharzai's army; they never posed much of a threat. They were also probably deterred by the sudden presence of a U.S. Marine Corps force that established a defensive position, nicknamed Camp RHINO, some thirty-five miles southwest of Kandahar on 25 November.

By early December Sharzai had positioned his troops for an all-out attack on the airport. The Taliban probed his forces with a number of small counterattacks from the west, using a series of dry canals to mask their movement. Sharzai's men, supported by U.S. air power, repelled the attackers and even seized a number of enemy positions 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 unexpectedly found no resistance. Then, suddenly, he received a call on his satellite phone informing him that the Taliban had completely evacuated Kandahar as a result of Karzai's negotiations. He immediately gathered his personal security force and, along with a small SF element, sped into the city toward the governor's mansion, his former home. The remainder 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 subsequently confirmed Sharzai as the governor of the city.

Tora Bora

While some SF soldiers were operating around Kandahar, others were pursuing enemy forces elsewhere. 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, some of the most rugged terrain in the world. The terrorists had controlled the area for years, digging hundreds of caves and refuges and establishing their training camps. In addition to being intimately familiar with the area, they had emplaced extensive fortifications and stockpiled weapons and ammunition to fight a protracted defense. With large numbers of well-supplied, fanatical al Qaeda troops dug into extensive fortified positions, Tora Bora appeared to be an extremely tough target.

To make matters worse, the local anti-Taliban forces were even more disorganized than those in other areas. Not only were they divided into mutually hostile factions, but also each faction was deeply distrustful of American aims. However, given the few U.S. troops available in the country, Central Command had no readily available alternative to using Afghan forces for any timely attack on the region. At the time, the U.S. Marines had established only a small forward base at RHINO, south of Kandahar, and only a reinforced company of the 10th Mountain Division was at Bagram and Mazar-e Sharif. No other forces were readily available for use. Central Command and the headquarters of the Third U.S. Army generated numerous plans for the introduction of some U.S. conventional troops into the Tora Bora fight as blocking elements, but none were executed.

The mission fell to Special Forces working with an indigenous Afghan force. The Task Force DAGGER commander directed several SF teams to enter into the Tora Bora region in early December, meet with the local Afghan anti-Taliban commander, Hazrat Ali, and coordinate his attacks on the caves with U.S. airpower.

The forces of Hazrat Ali were a heterogeneous mixture of Northern Alliance soldiers loyal to Ali but whose fighting qualities were somewhat mixed. Yet lack of time and a U.S. policy that dictated the use of indigenous forces in ground operations as much as possible made the use of Ali's forces important. The SF teams were only to provide them advice and assistance with air support, not to lead them into battle. The plan was to send the Afghan forces up into the Tora Bora Mountains to assault al Qaeda positions located in a well-protected canyon. The latest intelligence placed senior al Qaeda leaders, possibly even Osama bin Laden, in that area.

The SF teams moved south out of Jalalabad, planning to set up an observation post along the high ground near the canyon. They were

accompanied by a small Afghan security element to protect them while they were calling down air strikes. The movement up into the Tora Bora Mountains proved slow and hazardous. After a short trip in the ubiquitous pickup trucks, the teams were forced to unload and move forward on foot with burros carrying their packs. Moving into mountains where the altitude varied from 10,000 to 12,000 feet, they progressed slowly over rocky and narrow paths.

Initially, the team set up an OP on the canyon's western ridgeline and immediately began calling down air strikes, forcing the al Qaeda to move away, out of direct sight, into in an even smaller canyon. Another SF team then moved to set up a smaller OP on the eastern side of the ridgeline, giving them direct observation of the new enemy concentration. The two teams then coordinated their air strikes from both sites, leaving the al Qaeda nowhere to turn.

For seventeen straight hours the SF teams rained fire onto enemy positions as the Afghan forces of Hazrat Ali began moving into the canyon. After this preparatory fire they began hitting targets of opportunity over the course of the next several days. The fight continued into the night. Each night, as the enemy forces would light their campfires to try and keep warm, the teams used their thermal imagers and brought in more bombs and fire missions, including a number of attacks by AC-130 Spectre gunships.

The enemy fought stubbornly. Each day Ali's forces would take advantage of U.S. air power and advance into the canyon, and each evening they would fall back. Much of the same 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. Ali's force soon tired of the constant action and relaxed the pressure on the enemy, with U.S. forces and air support attempting to take up the slack. By the time the Tora Bora fighting slowly ground to a halt in mid-December, the SF soldiers had called in hundreds of air strikes, 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. The whereabouts of Osama bin Laden, or even whether he had been in the Tora Bora region in the first place, remained a mystery.

With the capture of Kabul and Kandahar and the destruction of organized resistance in Tora Bora, Afghanistan was now in effect liberated. It had taken fewer than sixty days of concentrated military operations and only a few hundred soldiers to seize the country from the Taliban and its terrorist allies. U.S. Army forces, now augmented with small teams of Civil Affairs personnel and the newly arrived 3d

Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, still faced the challenge of finding an elusive and potentially deadly residual guerrilla force. Army elements increasingly turned to assessing the humanitarian situation in their local areas, coordinating allied humanitarian initiatives such as the establishment of a Jordanian hospital at Mazar-e Sharif, gathering intelligence on al Qaeda and Taliban remnants, and ensuring that liaison was established with the newly emerging Afghan government.

Detainee operations surfaced as another task for CFLCC (Forward) to plan and manage. After the recapture of the Quali Jangi fortress, the prisoners who survived that uprising were transported and jailed with other detainees inside a run-down prison in the town of Sheberghan, west of Mazar-e Sharif. The prisoners were of various nationalities, and CENTCOM wanted them carefully screened to determine whether any key Taliban or al Qaeda leaders had been captured. General Hagenbeck assigned the task to Col. Kevin V. Wilkerson, commander of the 10th Mountain Division's 2d Brigade. Wilkerson and a portion of his staff had only recently joined the headquarters and now set to work planning the mission. Wilkerson quickly formed Task Force COMMANDO, a force that included his headquarters as a command and control element; Capt. Nelson Kraft's Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, for security; and interrogation, medical, and military police elements to screen, handle, and treat the prisoners. The task force flew into the Mazar-e Sharif airfield from 24 to 26 December, procured host nation vehicles for transportation, and convoyed to Sheberghan on 28 December.

Task Force COMMANDO established liaison with General Dostum, set up a hasty base camp near the warlord's headquarters outside the town, and began the screening process. Wanting to avoid any potential for a prisoner uprising similar to that at Quali Jangi, Wilkerson developed strict prisoner procedures to ensure the security of the screening process. For over two weeks Task Force COMMANDO screened the prisoners. Those deemed to have valuable intelligence were evacuated to the temporary holding facility set up at Kandahar, prior to shipment to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for further interrogation. Wilkerson's men accomplished the mission without incident.

Another example of unfinished business from combat operations was the siege of Kandahar hospital. With the fall of the city in December, a number of wounded and captured al Qaeda soldiers had been moved into the hospital for treatment. Having been inadequately screened for weapons by their Afghan guards, once at the hospital a number had pulled out grenades and weapons, taken hostages, and vowed never to be taken alive. Anxious to avoid casualties, the newly

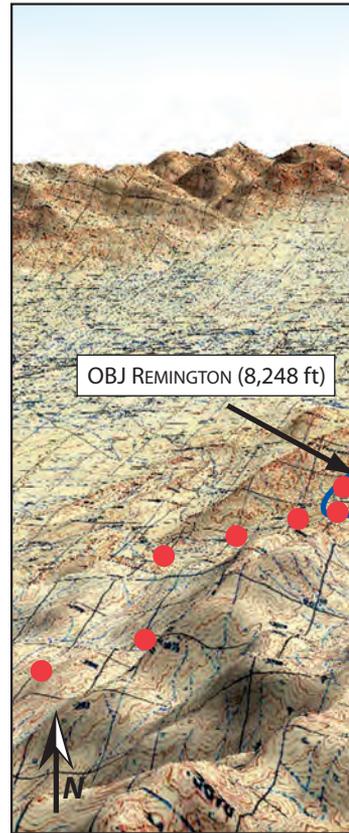
established local government decided to wait them out. The doctors continued to treat the patients, even while the al Qaeda fanatics clutched live grenades to their chests and threatened them. Attempts to starve them out were undermined by Taliban sympathizers who smuggled food into the hospital. After a month the government turned to the local Special Forces team to train a small Afghan volunteer militia group in how to retake the building. Commander Lali, a brave Afghan soldier respected by his men, led the indigenous force. Working closely with Lali's men, the SF helped develop a plan and ran them through a series of rehearsals.

Finally, on 27 January the hospital was closed off and the Afghans moved in with the SF team hovering nearby in support. The initial breach of the hospital wing around 0830 was met with a hail of gunfire, and several of the militia were wounded. Falling back, the operation settled into a stalemate that lasted for nearly twelve hours. The militia, despite five of them being wounded, reorganized and rearmed and, assisted by SF snipers, stormed down a corridor as several of the al Qaeda, true to their threat, used their last grenades to blow themselves up. Those that continued to fight were shot and killed. Six al Qaeda died during the operation, but no Afghan or American soldier was killed. It was a bloody end to the standoff, as all attempts to induce them to surrender had failed. An SF officer remarked at the time: "Up to the last minute, we told every man to surrender. But none of them listened. These Arabs fought to the death." It was, in his words, a "very hard gunfight."

While these loose ends were being dealt with, attention in other parts of the country now turned to locating and destroying concealed al Qaeda and Taliban forces, which was easier said than done. Afghanistan is the size of Texas and has hundreds of square miles of virtually impenetrable mountains and valleys connected by unmapped paths and trails. U.S. forces faced the further problem of what to do with the enemy once they found him. Afghanistan had no army, and it would take time to build one, while U.S. forces numbered fewer than 2,000. The 3d Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division was at the Kandahar airport, replacing the marines; elements of the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, were at Bagram, serving both as a base security force and as a quick reaction force. Any major combat operations would stretch these forces to their limit. Yet, a disciplined and reliable ground blocking force was a vital component of any future attempt to destroy guerrilla concentrations. For example, while the attack on the Tora Bora caves complex in December 2001 had successfully destroyed an enemy strongpoint and cleared hundreds

of caves, many al Qaeda soldiers had slipped away into Pakistan despite an attempt by Pakistani forces to prevent their movement across that border.

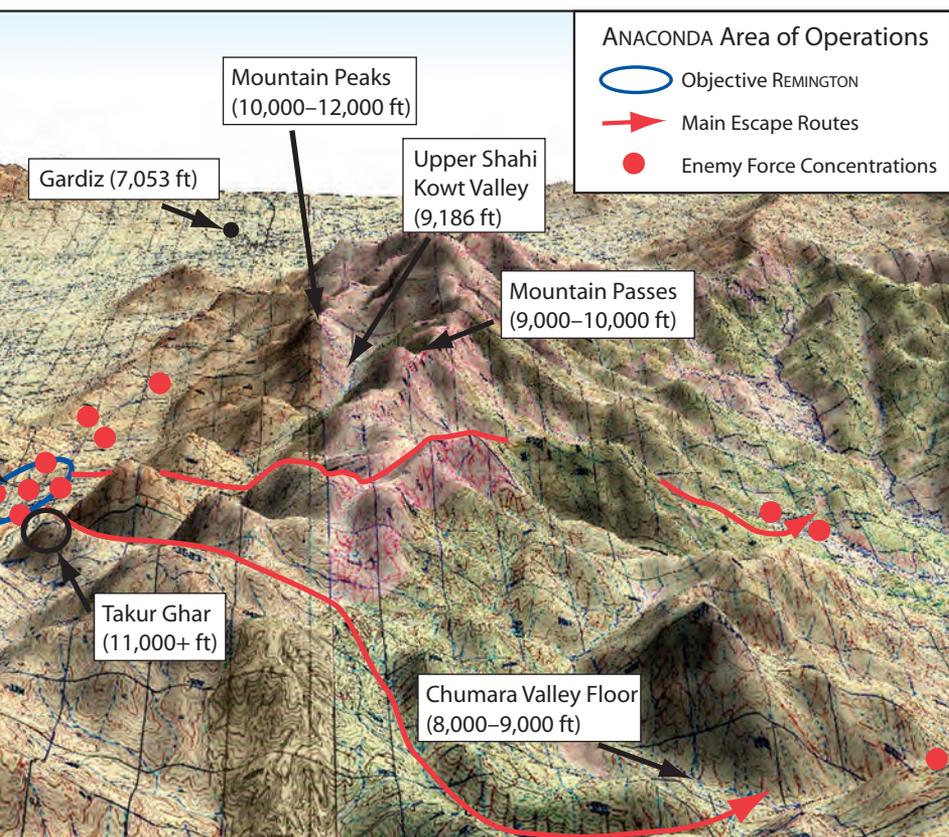
Following the Tora Bora battles, U.S. intelligence began searching for other concentrations of enemy forces. SF elements, including the newly arrived Task Force K-BAR consisting of Navy SEALs (Sea, Air, Land commandos), foreign Special Forces, and elements of the 3d Special Forces Group (Airborne) from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, conducted a series of raids. Soldiers from TF K-BAR and TF DAGGER hit a number of potential enemy locations in the Zawar Kili cave complex, in Deh Rawod, Ali Kheyl, and other locations, mostly in the area south and west of the Tora Bora Mountains. Simultaneously the focus of U.S. intelligence slowly shifted toward this area, in particular the Paktia province and the Gardiz–Khowst–Orgun-e triangle. The people in this area were Taliban sympathizers, reported as tolerating the continued presence of al Qaeda fighters. Indications were growing that there was a major concentration of enemy forces in the Shahi Kowt Valley of this province. The attempt to deal with this enemy force was code-named Operation ANACONDA.



Operation ANACONDA

ANACONDA grew rapidly to include participants from almost every type of American, coalition, and indigenous unit in Afghanistan at the time. The operation was directed at a major concentration of what was thought to number between 200 and 500 terrorists in the Shahi Kowt Valley and was fought from 2 to 19 March 2002.

The Shahi Kowt Valley, south of the city of Gardiz, runs north to south just to the west of a major mountain range about one hundred miles south of Kabul near the Pakistani border. The local terrain determined the conduct of the operation. There were two main approaches to the valley, one from the northwest and the other from the southwest around a major ridgeline just to the west of the valley known as Tergul Ghar, which U.S. troops nicknamed the Whale. Just outside and to the northwest of the valley is a smaller ridgeline called little Tergul Ghar,



FIGURE

nicknamed the Little Whale. These two major terrain features dominated the two approaches to the valley. The valley, approximately five kilometers wide and ten kilometers long, shelters three villages named Shir Khan Kheyli, Babulkhel, and Marzak. These villages constituted Objective REMINGTON during ANACONDA.

Much of the valley is approximately 8,000 feet in elevation, with the surrounding peaks exceeding 11,000 feet. The valley's higher eastern mountain range is pierced by only a few main routes and dozens of smaller goat paths. Near the southern end is a mountain peak called Takur Ghar with excellent observation over both the valley and a number of the exit routes. (*Figure*) All in all, the valley was surrounded by formidable terrain, making the area difficult—nearly impossible—to isolate.

The first real confirmation of enemy forces in strength in the Shahi Kowt Valley had come not from air reconnaissance or other sophisticated collection means, but rather through the efforts of a Special Forces team on the ground with the radio call sign “Texas 14.” Working closely with local Afghan forces, Texas 14 attempted to conduct a ground reconnaissance of the valley in late January, only to turn back after their Afghan security forces warned them of a major enemy concentration.

After digesting Texas 14’s report, U.S. forces began focusing other intelligence assets on that area. Initial results suggested as many as 150–200 foreign fighters in the Shahi Kowt Valley area. Subsequent intelligence estimates would vary widely, with some reports placing the number as high as 800–1,000 enemy combatants in the valley and along the nearby mountain ridges. U.S. surveillance assets also uncovered a number of caves in the valley thought to contain terrorist weapons caches. The various sources of information, however, often proved misleading and contradictory, and no one was really sure of enemy strength in the valley.

Initially, TF DAGGER considered the option of attacking into the valley using only SF teams leading a few hundred Afghan military forces they had trained. However, as the number of enemy projected to occupy the valley began to climb, the Special Forces asked for planners from the conventional units. Quickly the plan grew to include additional troops from the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) and 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). By mid-February a total of 6 Special Forces “A” Teams of 12 men each, 3 SF command and control elements, 3 other Special Operations task forces, and a U.S. infantry brigade of 3 battalions were involved, along with nearly a thousand Afghan Military Forces (AMF) trained by the Special Forces. The planning effort, and command and control of the forces involved in the operation, was assumed by Combined Joint Task Force MOUNTAIN under the command of the 10th Mountain Division commander, General Hagenbeck, on 15 February.

The Plan for ANACONDA

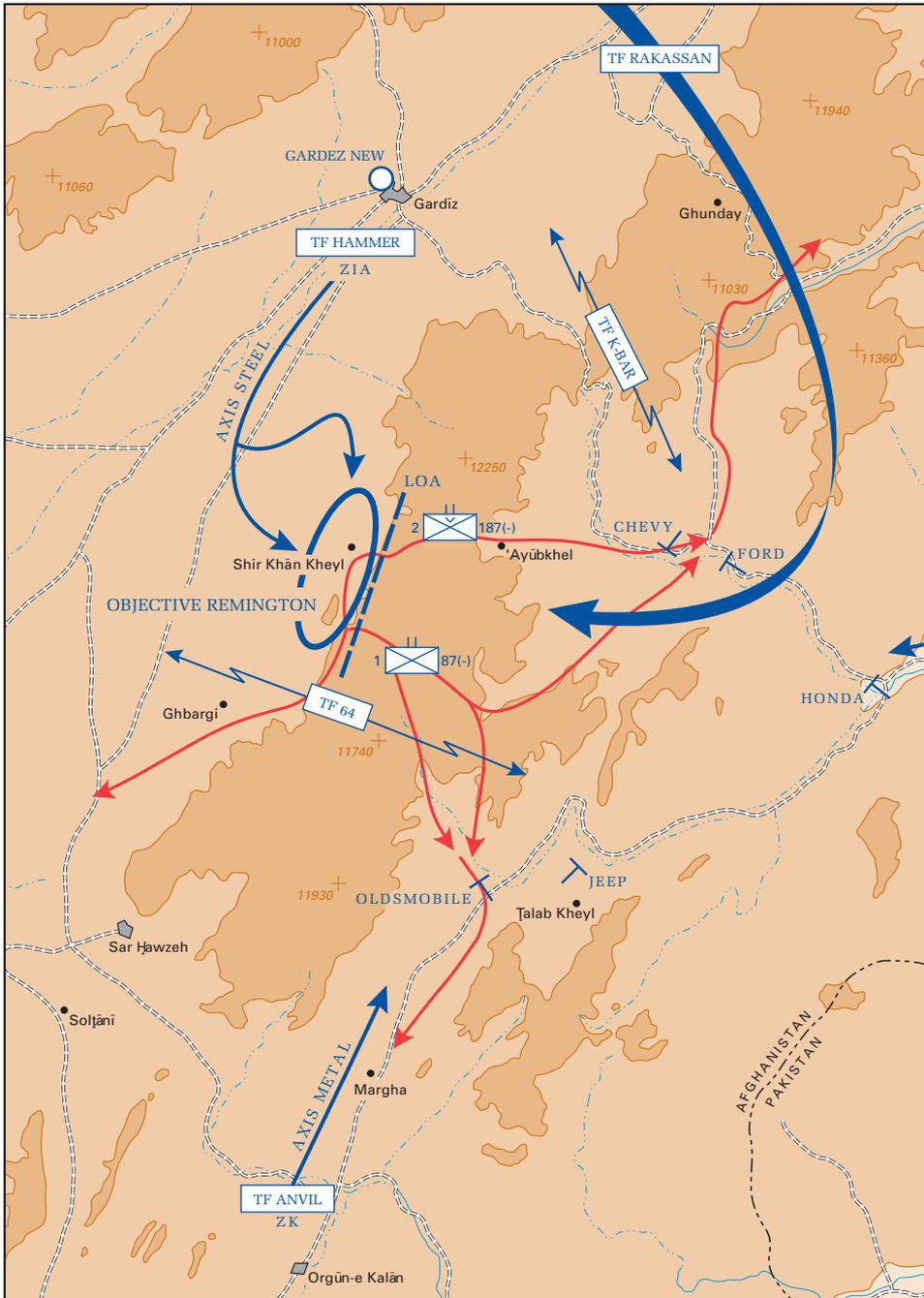
Operation ANACONDA’s scheme of maneuver called for isolation and encirclement of the valley area, followed by converging attacks to destroy al Qaeda forces. A mixture of Afghan militia, U.S. and coalition Special Operations, and conventional forces would establish three sets of concentric rings astride enemy escape routes before the main strike into terrorist defenses in the valley. Around D minus 3, coalition Special Operations forces, including elements of Task Force

64 (Australian Special Air Service) and Task Force K-BAR, would begin infiltrating into surveillance positions located five to seven kilometers from the objective area, where they could observe enemy movement and call for close air support against spotted enemy targets. At D minus 1, about 600 SF-led Afghan forces, TF ANVIL, would move into position along major enemy routes of retreat. (See *Map 4*.) Then, on D-day, the CJTF MOUNTAIN would air-assault elements of the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain Divisions (TF RAKASSAN) into an inner ring of blocking positions along the eastern side of the valley. Simultaneously TF HAMMER, about 260 Special Forces and AMF, would attack around the southern end of the Whale and into the valley as the main effort, while a secondary effort set up a blocking position near the Little Whale at the northern entrance to the valley with about forty AMF and Special Forces soldiers. The goal was to hit the enemy hard enough to kill or capture as many of the al Qaeda as possible and to squeeze the survivors out of the valley into the blocking positions where they would then be eliminated. Those that somehow escaped the trap would be tracked using air and ground reconnaissance assets as they moved along the various “rat-lines” through safe houses and refuges in an attempt to reach Pakistan.

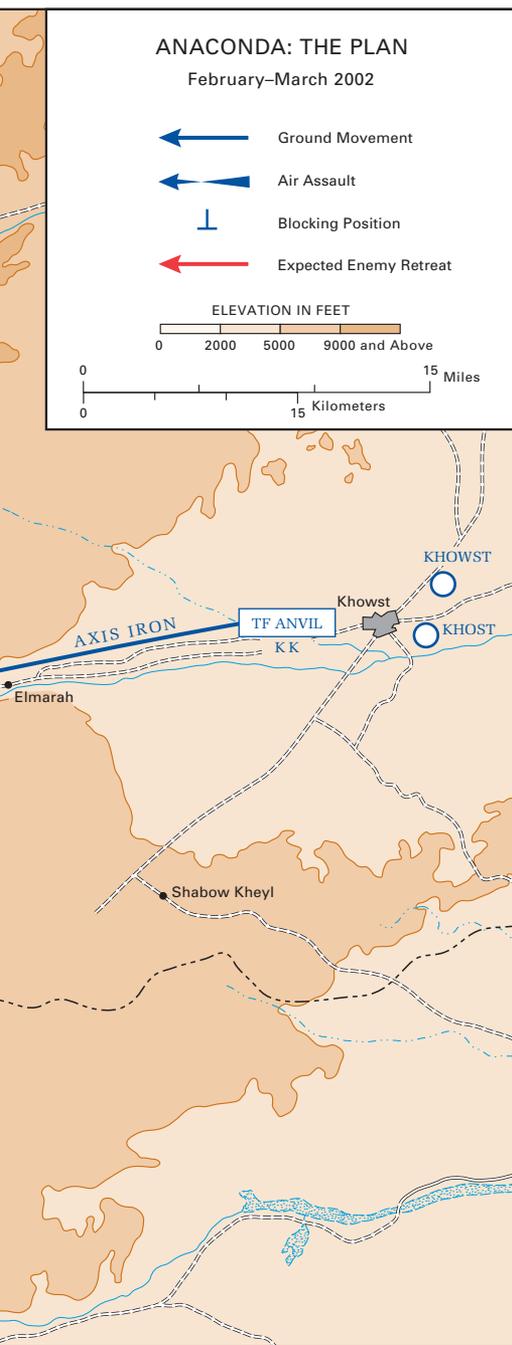
Task Force ANVIL, the outer blocking force, would move from the cities of Khowst and Orgun-e at D minus 1. From Khowst, the forces of Kamil Khan, approximately 300 strong, would travel west along Axis IRON about thirty-five kilometers. From Orgun-e, Zakim Khan’s forces, with another 200 or so fighters, would move about fifty kilometers along Axis METAL. They would establish blocking positions code-named CHEVY, FORD, HONDA, JEEP, DODGE, and OLDSMOBILE that covered the main exfiltration routes out of the valley. (See *Map 4*.)

As the main effort force, Task Force HAMMER would depart Gardiz just before H-hour on D-day and drive thirty-five kilometers southwest along Axis STEEL. The force would then divide into two elements and approach the valley, moving southeast about ten kilometers toward the valley entrances along Axes BRASS and COPPER.

The smaller, northern element of TF HAMMER would proceed along Axis BRASS and stop at Phase Line EMERALD to await the preliminary air strikes on the objective before moving to establish a blocking position just north of the valley. The second HAMMER element was to move along Axis COPPER and similarly wait on Phase Line EMERALD for the supporting air strikes before assaulting and clearing the three villages on Objective REMINGTON: Shir Khan Khey1, Babulkhel, and Marzak. Simultaneously, Task Force

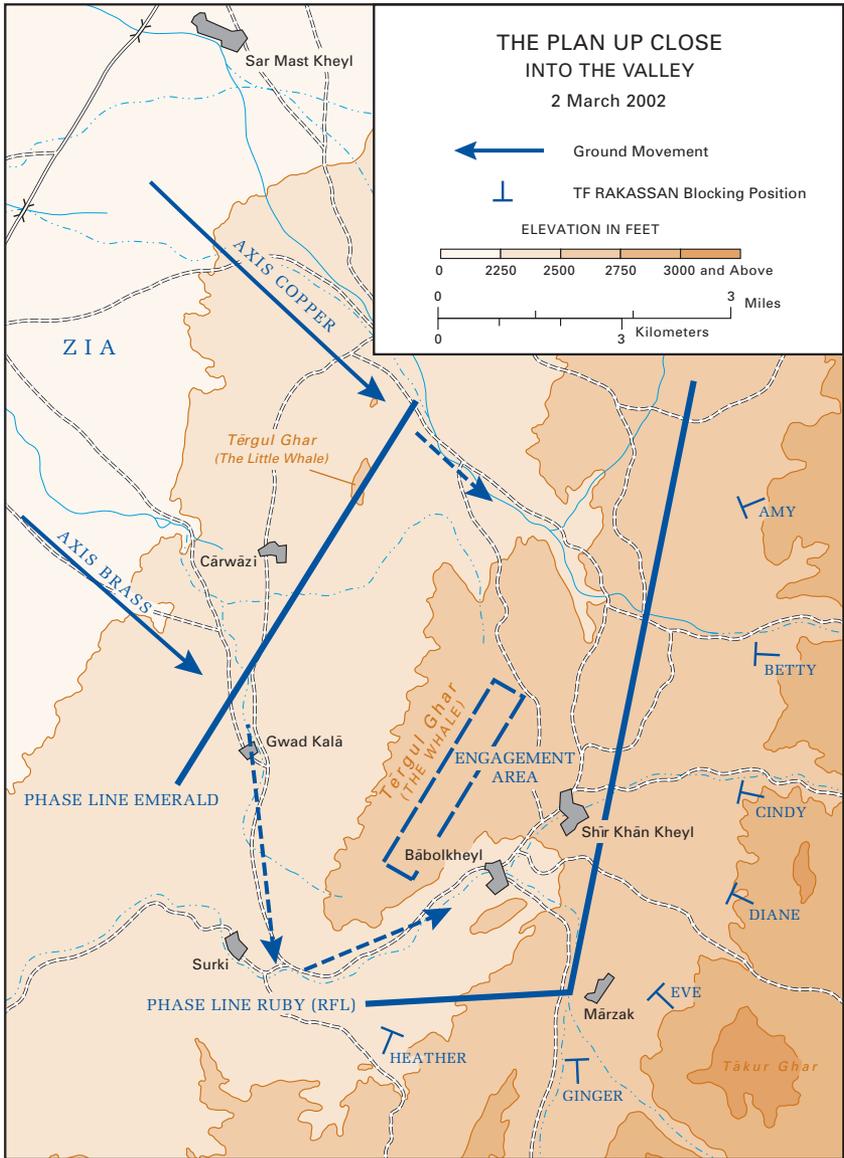


MAP 4



RAKASSAN, consisting of the 3d Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division and the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, would air-assault two battalions (-) into Blocking Positions (BP) AMY, BETTY, CINDY, DIANE, EVE, GINGER, and HEATHER to the east of the valley. (See Map 5.) To assist in watching smaller possible escape routes from the valley, three other U.S. and combined Special Operations task forces would conduct special reconnaissance missions along likely escape trails.

As the time for the commencement of offensive operations grew closer, CJTF MOUNTAIN orchestrated the arrival of the necessary forces and supplies. Beginning on 20 February, a combination of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft moved Task Force RAKASSAN and Task Force 64 soldiers from Kandahar to the forward operating base at Bagram. CJTF MOUNTAIN established its command post at Bagram on the following day and assumed command of all forces for the operation. Concurrently, U.S. logisticians began to build up the necessary supplies, especially fuel for the helicopters, to support the operation. Fuel was particularly difficult to stockpile, since there was a lack of usable ground routes to bring it to Bagram and all of it had to come in by air. Supply personnel



MAP 5

resorted to “wet wing” operations (siphoning fuel directly from aircraft fuel tanks into ground storage facilities) from U.S. Air Force C-17 aircraft to fill fuel bladders at Bagram air base. The CJTF MOUNTAIN staff monitored all movements of forces, coordinated the necessary rehearsals, and watched the fluctuating weather conditions. General Hagenbeck initially set D-day for 28 February but was forced to postpone the start for two days due to inclement weather.

Special Operations forces, meanwhile, had several vital tasks to perform prior to the start of the operation. As early as D minus 11, some Special Operations reconnaissance assets infiltrated into the valley, where they began clandestinely to scout enemy positions. On 27 February the Australians of Task Force 64 moved to the Gardiz area from Bagram and began to infiltrate into reconnaissance positions to the south of the valley. Special Forces soldiers with Commander Zia worked on training their Afghan allies in basic tactics and weaponry. Their training efforts were hampered by constantly changing numbers of recruits, the need to identify and train squad and platoon leaders, and problems in obtaining a timely supply of the necessary equipment, especially weapons, for their troops.

The Operation

On D minus 1, 1 March, the TF ANVIL elements moved out from Orgun-e and Khowst and established the external Afghan blocking positions without incident. However, increased enemy activity in the valley seemed to indicate that the enemy forces were aware that something was afoot.

On D-day, 2 March, TF HAMMER departed Gardiz at midnight local time and hit the first checkpoint along Axis STEEL on schedule. However, as the trucks moved off the main road and onto the muddy track that was the main approach route to the valley, things began to go wrong. One of the large jinga trucks tipped over, halting the convoy. After cross-loading the troops and equipment, the convoy began to move out again, only to have other vehicles become stuck, break down, or tip over. Hours were consumed extricating the vehicles or moving loads from broken-down or stuck trucks onto different, by now even more overloaded, trucks. Some trucks were abandoned and others were only driven out of the mud by soldiers throwing hundreds of combat rations (MREs) under the wheels for traction. Many of the Afghan soldiers finally set out for Phase Line EMERALD on foot.

As the troops approached EMERALD along the northern and southern routes, they were suddenly taken under fire. On the northern approach route, what at first appeared to be enemy mortar fire struck

the lead SF vehicle, killing one American and wounding three others. A subsequent investigation discovered that the vehicle was accidentally hit by friendly fire from a circling AC-130. Two of Zia's men were also killed in that incident, and twelve to fifteen were wounded. With the whole northern force only around forty strong to begin with, almost half that element was now out of action and the rest were under continuing enemy fire. The American and Afghan wounded were evacuated by helicopter, but that took almost two hours; it was at least another hour before additional Afghan forces could be brought out of the southern element to reinforce the northern force. This movement was complicated since the southern element, just short of Phase Line EMERALD, was also under attack by enemy mortars and artillery all during this time.

The deadly rounds and subsequent halt as the situation was reevaluated were fatal to the momentum of the attack. It became obvious that the enemy had good observation posts on the Whale that allowed him to spot all friendly movements. Also, the planned U.S. air strikes that were to assist Zia were poorly coordinated and generally ineffective. Expecting a hail of bombs, Zia's men watched as only a handful hit enemy positions on the Whale, causing no slackening in enemy mortar and artillery fire. Commander Zia and his men initially held up well, but after many hours of enemy bombardment with no way to answer back and ineffective or nonexistent close air support, their morale began to suffer. Due in part to events elsewhere on the battlefield, air support consistently failed to arrive throughout the day. TF HAMMER received only one additional CAS mission and one Apache fire support mission throughout that long day despite its designation as the main effort.

While the drama west of the valley unfolded, TF RAKASSAN began its air assault with the first of two planned lifts of seven helicopters each into its assigned blocking positions. After a pre-assault bombardment of targets along the eastern ridge of the valley, AH-64 Apache helicopters swept down the valley and engaged enemy targets as CH-47 Chinook helicopters dropped off infantrymen at their designated landing zones. From the start, however, the units began taking heavy enemy fire. Nevertheless, the infantrymen of Task Force RAKASSAN immediately moved to occupy their positions and engage the al Qaeda fighters in the valley and in the heights above them. By noon American forces had occupied six of seven assigned blocking positions. However, a sudden shift in the weather blocked a number of the passes between Bagram Airfield and the valley with fog and prevented the arrival of the second lift of troops for several hours. Thus



The 101st Airborne Division as Part of Operation ANACONDA
(Photo by Jim Hollander, © Reuters News Media/Corbis)

the positions were at half strength for some time and under nearly constant mortar attacks.

Enemy mortars were particularly effective against the 10th Mountain Division's 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, soldiers trying to occupy BPs GINGER and HEATHER. The soldiers of Charlie Company began taking small-arms fire as soon as the helicopters had deposited them on their landing zones (LZs). As the 1st and 2d Platoons attempted to move off the LZs toward their designated blocking positions at HEATHER and GINGER, respectively, the enemy opened up with RPG and machine-gun fire. Both platoons were forced to take cover, but the 1st Platoon moved forward and established itself on BP HEATHER. Suddenly, the enemy dropped a succession of mortar rounds onto their position, wounding the 1st Platoon leader, his platoon sergeant, and eight others. Almost half the troops on BP HEATHER were casualties. The battalion 120-mm. mortars accompanying the 2d Platoon were set up and began returning fire but fairly soon ran out of rounds. The 2d Platoon was also being hit; and the Charlie Company commander, Captain Kraft, pulled his men back and put them in a company strongpoint in a nearby crater. This single strongpoint attempted to control both avenues of approach down the



Soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division search for members of al Qaeda and Taliban near the villages of Shir Khan Kheyl, Babulkhel, and Marzak.
(Photo by Joe Raedle, © Reuters News Media/Corbis)

valley that were supposed to be blocked by BPs HEATHER and GINGER.

During the next eighteen hours the soldiers of Charlie Company fought back al Qaeda attempts to outflank them and overrun their position. Conserving ammunition, the 10th Mountain soldiers defeated every attempt but took additional casualties. Lt. Col. Paul LaCamera, commander of 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, and his battalion tactical command post had accompanied C Company on the assault and set up their operations near BP HEATHER. This command post was also hit and suffered six casualties during the course of the day. By the end of the day some twenty-five soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division were wounded, four very seriously. The enemy fire slackened by nightfall, and the light fighters were able to use their night vision goggles to dominate the battlefield.

Much of the enemy fire against the attempt to establish BPs GINGER and HEATHER was coming from the nearby village of Marzak, just to the northwest of the positions. After repeated overflights of the town by unmanned aerial vehicles revealed enemy fighters but no indications of civilians, General Hagenbeck declared the village hostile

and directed air strikes onto the town. A series of bombing runs virtually obliterated the village.

It was soon apparent that the original main effort under Commander Zia was not going to make any headway against the tenacious foe. As darkness approached, the SF commander with Zia's forces consulted with Zia and the Task Force DAGGER commander, Colonel Mulholland; they all agreed 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 onto what trucks they had left and returned to their home base at Gardiz.

As the second helicopter lift finally brought in additional troops to reinforce each battle position early the following morning, the situation in the valley began to stabilize. Five AH-64 Apache helicopters had acquitted themselves well in the fight, attacking enemy troop concentrations, observation posts, and firing positions. However, they also took heavy ground fire themselves; by the end of the day only one undamaged Apache was flying. As Task Force RAKASSAN's commander, Col. Frank Wiercinski, later stated, "The weapon that changed the face of the battle for us was the Apache." Nevertheless, with close air support still poorly coordinated and slow and artillery support not available, the actions of the Apaches were the one bright spot of fire support during a long day. After hours of bombardment and over twenty wounded, the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, soldiers trapped near BP GINGER were pulled out at nightfall, leaving a major exit from the valley open. Reconnaissance assets and air strikes attempted to cover this gap, especially the well-placed special reconnaissance teams of Task Force 64, but it was not the same as maintaining a blocking position in the GINGER valley itself. This region became the focus of several days' bombing attacks in an attempt to deny the enemy exit from or entry into the valley.

The next day General Hagenbeck issued new instructions to guide operations for continuing the attack. Consequently, TF RAKASSAN units prepared a modified plan. The new scheme of maneuver called for RAKASSAN's 2d Battalion, 187th Infantry, to attack toward the heights of the ridge to the east of the valley and begin systematically to clear the ridge of the enemy. The reserve 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry, would air-assault into the northernmost landing zone with the mission of moving from battle position to battle position, north to south, linking up with each position and clearing the ridgeline between positions.

This operation began in the early hours of 4 March, but the going for the soldiers was slow. The rocky terrain was broken, and the alti-

tude quickly exhausted anyone not acclimatized to it. Still, by the end of the day advance elements of TF RAKASSAN had already pushed down as far as BP DIANE and linked up with those U.S. elements still in place from the air assault of 2 March. Nearly simultaneously, Army Special Forces helped Commander Zia launch a small AMF reconnaissance element onto the northern portion of the Little Whale to watch enemy movements in the valley as renewed air strikes hit Objective REMINGTON. In addition, sixteen Apaches from the 3d Battalion, 101st Aviation; five AH-1W Cobras from the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit's Composite Aviation Squadron; and a number of Air Force A-10s flying from bases in Pakistan joined the fight.

The majority of the attention on the battlefield on 3-4 March, however, focused on a firefight on Takur Ghar, a mountain to the southeast of the valley. There, on the night of 3 March, Special Operations had attempted to insert a Special Reconnaissance team nearly on top of what turned out to be an enemy-held position and a Navy SEAL had fallen out of the helicopter as it was hit by enemy fire. The helicopter moved away about eight kilometers before having to set down, but the SEAL was left behind to face certain death or capture. A small SEAL reaction force was quickly inserted to locate him, but an alert enemy drove them off the hill. Then, just before dawn on the fourth, a larger quick reaction force of about twenty-five Rangers inserted into the area aboard two helicopters. One helicopter set down directly on top of the mountain and was taken under fire and disabled, killing three Rangers and an aviation crewman almost immediately. The other helicopter set down several hundred meters away at another LZ with its Ranger load. These Rangers were forced to move slowly up the steep slopes of Takur Ghar as their comrades were engaged in sharp fighting at the top. After several hours the two elements linked up and killed the remaining al Qaeda on the mountain, only to be engaged by enemy reinforcements moving toward the position. During a fierce, daylong fight the Rangers were able to hold onto their positions but suffered from intense enemy mortar and small-arms fire that wounded several more soldiers. The Ranger force located the body of the dead SEAL and established defensive positions to wait for extraction at nightfall. However, the cold during the long day sapped the strength of the casualties; and one of the wounded, an Air Force medic, died. All the Rangers and Special Operations soldiers were finally rescued after darkness fell on 4 March, but at a final cost for the United States of 7 dead: 4 Army, 2 Air Force, and 1 Navy. The fight on Takur Ghar was the most deadly firefight during Operation ANACONDA.

Over the next few days TF RAKASSAN elements continued to move slowly down the ridgeline from BP DIANE to Objective GINGER, an area to the east of the blocking position of the same name, clearing all the caves and potential enemy positions along the way. The al Qaeda fighters the American infantry encountered along the way skillfully used the terrain to mask their positions and movement and employed mortars to advantage but could never muster a coordinated attack of any great size. They tried to reinforce their forces in the valley, but to no avail. As TF RAKASSAN soldiers fought down the eastern ridge, they killed numerous al Qaeda, cleared over 129 caves and 40 buildings, and destroyed 22 heavy weapons emplacements.

Due to the enemy strength in the valley, it became apparent that more than Zia's attenuated forces, by now only around 200 strong, would be needed to clear Objective REMINGTON. The Afghan defense minister, Fahim Khan, was contacted, and 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. Gul Haidar was a battle-tested veteran of the war with the Soviets, and his forces were the closest equivalent of a conventional military force available to the Afghans at the time.

By 10 March all of Gul Haidar's elements were in place near the northern entrance to the valley; after a quick reconnaissance of the area, some of Haidar's men charged and seized the northern half of the Whale ridgeline. With his flank thus secured, Haidar moved his main body of troops into the northern end of the valley on the eleventh.

The next day, 12 March, tanks and armored personnel carriers attacked straight down through the valley and moved quickly to clear the villages of Shir Khan Kheyl and Babulkhel. While Haidar attacked from the north, Commander Zia sent his reconstituted Afghan force into the valley from the south and began clearing the village of Marzak. The three villages were quickly taken, as the enemy had already fled; only two wounded prisoners were captured.

Meanwhile, Task Force SUMMIT, built around the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division, replaced elements of the 101st Division as the main effort and continued the drive south to Objective GINGER. Under the command of Colonel LaCamera, TF SUMMIT reached its objective by the thirteenth and was extracted after only light enemy contact. The next day Task Force COMMANDO, consisting of elements from Colonel Wilkerson's 2d Brigade, 10th Mountain Division; that division's 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry; and the 3d Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, air-assaulted onto the Whale to conduct a series of sensitive site exploitation mis-

sions to locate any remaining enemy or supply caches. This phase of ANACONDA was code-named Operation HARPOON. After TF COMMANDO completed clearing the Whale, it continued exploitation operations into the Objective GINGER and GINGER pass areas. From 13 to 19 March Task Force COMMANDO killed a few remaining al Qaeda, found and destroyed huge caches of weapons and ammunition, and seized a great deal of valuable intelligence from cave hideouts. Meanwhile, CJTF MOUNTAIN targeted a number of intelligence platforms against suspected enemy safe houses in the nearby Naka Valley, some twenty kilometers to the southeast of the Shahi Kowt Valley. Special Operations elements subsequently scouted the valley without finding any al Qaeda. Declaring the entire operation highly successful, General Franks, the commander of Central Command, declared Operation ANACONDA officially over on 19 March.

For the first time in the war, the al Qaeda had indeed stood and fought. They had occupied well-camouflaged, dug-in fighting positions with overhead cover and large stocks of food and ammunition. They had excellent forward observation posts that provided early warning and observation for placing well-targeted mortar and artillery onto any coalition forces coming into the valley. The initial U.S.-led Afghan ground attack failed in part due to poor air support, a lack of artillery, and, most damning, a more numerous and aggressive enemy than anticipated. Despite focusing all available intelligence collection assets, including many highly sophisticated national assets, on a relatively small square of ground in Afghanistan, the United States was still unable to gain an accurate picture of enemy size, strength, and intentions.

Nevertheless, the operation was successful and many al Qaeda were killed. Although estimates of enemy dead varied from a low of 100 to a high of as many as 1,000, an unknown number of al Qaeda probably were able to flee into the surrounding hills and then into safe havens in the Pakistan tribal regions. Still, the enemy had been located, forced into a losing battle, and killed or forced to flee without his large equipment or stockpiles of supplies. In a guerrilla war, that counts for much. The al Qaeda lost many of its most experienced and most aggressive fighters in this operation. Subsequent U.S. troops, including additional Special Forces units and elements of the 82d Airborne Division and XVIII Airborne Corps, have not faced enemy concentrations of this magnitude or aggressiveness to date. Nevertheless, military operations continue in that troubled land, accompanying attempts to ensure political stability and encourage economic reconstruction.

Analysis

U.S. Army forces, operating closely with allied Afghan units, were decisive in defeating the Taliban and their al Qaeda allies and in liberating Afghanistan in a few short weeks in late 2001. The high level of training and dedication to duty of American forces overcame all obstacles and delivered a heavy blow against terrorism. In the earliest phases of the operation, Special Forces was clearly the force of choice to achieve dramatic results with only a handful of soldiers on the ground. When later backed up by the conventional power of U.S. air assets and the air assault and infantry assets of the Army, the mix proved decisive. All of these elements came together in Operation ANACONDA, a major success in locating and defeating remnant forces of al Qaeda. In Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, American military power delivered a fatal blow to the Taliban and their al Qaeda allies for a major victory in the war on terrorism.

Too much, however, should not be drawn from the easy collapse of the Taliban. The United States had heavy assistance from its Northern Alliance allies, who had their own political aims in mind. They were, in essence, a surrogate ground army that proved quite effective when provided some coordination elements and air power assistance. These circumstances are so unique that one should be leery of applying any “new model” of warfare wholesale without considering all the unique elements of any other situation. Nonetheless, the soldiers of the U.S. Army, assisted by the Air Force, Navy, and Marines, proved that the application of discrete military power, regardless of geographical obstacles, could have an impact far out of proportion to the number of forces on the ground. The U.S. Army proved again that it could fight throughout the spectrum of conflict as it moved from unconventional warfare to conventional operations and back again as circumstances warranted. The Army, working with all the services and numerous other governmental agencies, also proved that the United States would pursue its enemies wherever they fled or tried to hide, even to the farthest reaches of one of the most remote countries in the world.

Main Army Elements

Operation ANACONDA

(As Part of Combined Joint Task Force MOUNTAIN)

Task Force DAGGER (Joint Special Operations Task Force)

5th Special Forces Group (Airborne)
Company B, 2d Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation
Regiment (Airborne)
Combat Tactical Air Controllers, Air Force Special Operations
Afghan Military Forces (AMF)
Commander Zia (Task Force HAMMER)
Kamil Khan (Task Force ANVIL)
Zakim Khan (Task Force ANVIL)

Task Force RAKASSAN

3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)
1st Battalion, 187th Infantry
2d Battalion, 187th Infantry
1st Battalion, 87th Infantry (Operational Control)

Task Force COMMANDO

2d Brigade, 10th Mountain Division (Light)
4th Battalion, 31st Infantry
Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (Tactical Control)

Task Force 64 (Australian Special Forces)

Task Force K-BAR (Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force)

Task Force BOWIE (Joint Interagency Task Force)

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Cover: The Hizara Province, Elzie R. Golden, 2003

