

Operation Anaconda

Perception meets reality in the hills of Afghanistan

P. L. Hastert*

The initial encounters between Al Qaeda and the U.S. military taught both a series of lessons that reverberate across the battlefields of Afghanistan today. Both sides entered the fray with preconceived ideas of their enemy – ideas that disappeared on the battlefields of the Shahi-Kot valley. The United States was determined not to repeat the mistakes of the siege of Tora Bora. Their battleplan called for a lightning fast operation using highly mobile U.S. and Afghan forces to envelop the enemy, but failures of intelligence and the fog of war transformed Anaconda into a long, slow struggle against an often invisible foe. Al Qaeda had all the advantages of terrain and defense but was unable to cause the massive casualties they thought would drive the American invaders from Afghanistan. Both sides left the battlefield with valuable lessons that have prevented any similar encounters since silence returned to the Shahi-Kot.

Introduction

In early March 2002 U.S. and Allied forces launched Operation Anaconda to dislodge Al Qaeda forces that had gathered near Gardez in southeast Afghanistan. This would be the first time that U.S. forces had met Al Qaeda trained jihadists in a large-scale encounter and the results did not match either side's preconceptions. Operation Anaconda was supposed to

be a lightning strike by highly mobile U.S. forces against rag-tag Al Qaeda remnants that had escaped destruction during Operation Enduring Freedom. The operation was supposed to be finished in 24 hours, but it took 10 days for the operation to finally wind down.¹

For Al Qaeda the operation came as a shock as well – although U.S. forces occasionally backed off and with-

drew, they continued their assault until Al Qaeda was swept from the battlefield. Anaconda did not proceed as the Americans had planned, but its results have prevented Al Qaeda from again seizing and defending such a large piece of terrain.

The U.S. military had been highly successful during Desert Storm but Al Qaeda judged their competence and willingness to fight based on a series of attacks and confrontations that had occurred in the Middle East over the previous two decades:

- 1983 – Hezbollah bombs the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. U.S. forces pull out a few months later.²
- 1992 – Al Qaeda finances bombing two hotels in Aden where U.S. troops stayed while transiting Yemen on the way to Somalia.³ U.S. troops cease transiting Yemen shortly thereafter.
- 1993 – Bin Laden dispatches advisors to train Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aheed's militia. U.S. forces withdraw from Somalia after the loss of two helicopters and 18 soldiers on 3 October 1993.⁴
- 1995 – Bin Laden associates detonate car bomb outside U.S. Office of Program Management – Saudi Arabian National Guard. U.S. forces are reduced and relocated.⁵
- 1996 – Bomb explodes outside Khobar Towers complex housing U.S. troops in Dhahran Saudi Arabia. U.S. forces in the Kingdom reloca-

* Copyright 2005 from 'Operation Anaconda: Perception Meets Reality in the Hills of Afghanistan' by P.L. Hastert in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Reproduced by permission of Taylor & Francis Inc. <http://www.taylorandfrancis.com>

1 Philip Smucker, *Al Qaeda's Great Escape, The Military and the Media on Terror's Trail* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, Inc., 2004), p. 193.

2 Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc, Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 88.

3 Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda, Casting A Shadow of Terror* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2003), p. 129.

4 Bergen, op. cit., p. 85.

5 Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Inc., 2003), p. 141.



An F/A-18C Hornet is prepared for launch from the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) in a strike against Al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (2001)

(Photo U.S. Navy, G. Messier; collection NIMH)

te to Prince Sultan Air Base in the desert south of Riyadh.⁶

- 1998 – U.S. responds to African Embassy bombing with cruise missile attack.⁷
- 2000 – U.S.S. Cole attacked and nearly sunk in Aden in a major Al Qaeda operation.⁸

Statements of Osama bin Laden

These were not all Al Qaeda operations, but Al Qaeda judged the Ameri-

cans' will to fight based on the results they observed. Osama bin Laden's public statements clearly show his opinion of the United States:

- August 1996 – 'However, when tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American Pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you. Clinton appeared in front of the whole world threatening and promising revenge, but these threats were merely a preparation for withdrawal. You have been disgraced by Allah and you withdrew; the extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear. It was a pleasure for the 'heart' of every Muslim and a remedy to the 'chests' of believing nations to see you defeated in the three Islamic cities of Beirut, Aden and Mogadishu.'⁹

- March 1997 – 'We learned from those who fought there [Somalia], that they were surprised to see the low spiritual morale of the American fighters in comparison with the experience they had with the Russian fighters. The Americans ran away from those fighters who

fought and killed them, while the latter were still there. If the U.S. still thinks and brags that it still has this kind of power even after all these successive defeats in Vietnam, Beirut, Aden, and Somalia, then let them go back to those who are awaiting its return.'¹⁰

- May 1998 – 'By the Grace of God, the [cruise] missiles were ineffective. The raid has also proven that the American army is going down hill in its morale. Its members are too cowardly and too fearful to meet the young people of Islam face to face.'¹¹
- May 2001 – 'Your brethren have taken up your struggle through out East and have come out to fight against Kuffir and the West has been threatened by their rise. The West fears that they (the Mujahideen) shall annihilate their very existence. Much that the West take sustenance in their arms and might, in their hearts of hearts they fear and are scared of them (the Mujahideen)... Unafraid of themight and size of the infidels, an appreciable small number of committed Mujahideen, shall prevail upon them. While they pride on their military resources, the Mujahid take the field through faith and conviction.'¹²

Mutual expectations

Al Qaeda's leader felt the U.S. military was a high tech paper tiger, unwilling to stand and fight. Bin Laden saw that the United States had been forced to withdraw from Beirut, Aden, and Mogadishu when faced with a committed jihadist resistance. Although it's unclear what response Bin Laden expected after the attacks of 9/11, it's likely he expected a U.S. ground force that could be similarly attacked.

Bush's commentary

If Bin Laden had low expectations of the U.S. response, the United States had a similarly low opinion of Al Qaeda. President Bush's second line on the afternoon of 9/11 was 'The

6 Burke, op. cit., p. 140.

7 Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 410.

8 Burke, op. cit. p. 190.

9 Osama Bin Laden, *Al Quds Al Arabi*, August, 1996. Available at (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html).

10 Osama Bin Laden, interview with CNN, aired late March 1997. Available at (<http://www.ishipress.com/osamaint.htm>).

11 Osama Bin Laden, interview with ABC News, aired 2 January 1999. Available at (http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/transcript_binladen1_990110.html).

12 Abdul Sattar Khan, 'Osama urges Ummah to continue Jihad,' 12 May 2001. Available at (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Noahide_News/message/4977).

United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.¹³ That evening in his address to the American people he said, 'The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts.'¹⁴ In his radio address on the 15th he said, 'This is a conflict without battlefields or beachheads, a conflict with opponents who believe they are invisible. Yet, they are mistaken.'¹⁵ In his address to Congress on the 21st he said 'Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime.'¹⁶ The United States continued to focus on Al Qaeda as a terrorist, not a military, force. The public discussion on Afghanistan presented the Al Qaeda camps as terrorist training centers (which some were), not as military boot camps (which they all were).

Airpower attacks

The initial phases of Operation Enduring Freedom came as no surprise to the leadership of the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The heavy reliance on airpower to strike fixed facilities must have been expected after similar attacks on Iraq and Serbia. These strikes generated little movement on the ground and the calls in the western media for a

heavier U.S. presence certainly encouraged Al Qaeda. If U.S. forces could be drawn into Afghanistan in significant numbers it would reorient the conflict from a quasi civil war into a battle against a non-Muslim invader. Unfortunately for Al Qaeda, as more bombing missions targeted the Taliban front lines the Northern Alliance began a rapid advance. The heavy presence of airpower over the battlefield destroyed military equipment, but more importantly it prevented reinforcements from reaching the front and prevented orderly retreats to the rear. By contrast, the Northern Alliance could move rapidly, was well supplied, and had the funds to bribe rival commanders. Frontline Taliban commanders began to see which way the wind was blowing. As they were threatened with personalized bombing missions and cajoled with bribes they began switching sides at what must have been an alarming rate to the Taliban's leadership.

Changing situation

By 13 November, the rapidly changing situation forced Osama bin

Laden to leave Jalalabad for Tora Bora in the White Mountains.¹⁷ Tora Bora had been a focus of U.S. bombing since the conflict began, but the Al Qaeda leadership must have felt the shelters and facilities there would be sufficient to withstand any U.S. assault. Because Tora Bora had remained under the control of the Afghan resistance during the 1980s it is likely that Al Qaeda felt it could be defended against an U.S. onslaught. While the Al Qaeda leadership had withdrawn to Tora Bora, fighting continued to rage across Afghanistan. Kabul had just fallen and the situation remained very fluid in Southern Afghanistan.¹⁸ Kandahar was the spiritual heartland of the Taliban and remained in their grip. U.S. forces on the ground in Afghanistan remained minimal, and none likely would have been sent to Tora Bora even if the United States was aware of Al Qaeda's movement. Clear knowledge of what had happened only came with the arrival of journalists in Jalalabad. Once there, they determined and published details of Al Qaeda's movement to Tora Bora.¹⁹

Al Qaeda's tactical withdrawal

The first U.S. forces arrived in early December to coordinate an Afghan attack on Tora Bora. Simply put, there were not sufficient U.S. forces or facilities nearby to launch an attack



These servicemen were killed in action during Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. Anaconda is an offensive operation supporting Operation Enduring Freedom

(Photo U.S. Department of Defense, J.D. Pyle; collection NIMH)

13 President George W. Bush, Remarks at Barksdale Air Force Base, 11 September 2001. Available at (<http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/01091110.htm>).

14 President George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, 11 September 2001. Available at (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushaddress_091101.htm).

15 President George W. Bush, Saturday Radio Address, 15 September 2001. Available at (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010915.html>).

16 President George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, 20 September 2001. Available at (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>).

17 Smucker, op. cit., p. 55.

18 Ibid., p. 37.

19 Ibid., pp. 54-58.

alone, and the attack's plan depended primarily on airpower to destroy Al Qaeda forces in place. Ironically, as U.S. forces were arriving to coordinate the attack, Osama bin Laden was starting to leave Tora Bora. In spite of the successful resistance against the Soviets in the same area he must have concluded that Tora Bora could not be defended successfully against the Americans. This is a significant (and often overlooked) event; Bin Laden's first line of defense was the Taliban Army, the second line was Al Qaeda's fighters in Tora Bora (based on the anti-Soviet model) and the third line was a tactical withdrawal.

Bin Laden's decision and timing in exercising 'Option 3' were both outstanding. Although Al Qaeda was able to hold out in Tora Bora for many weeks, it suffered heavy losses in personnel. Al Qaeda took advantage of the slow advance to pull out significant numbers of fighters. Many of the Afghans attacking Tora Bora had bonds to the Al Qaeda forces they were 'opposing' and took advantage of the opportunity to get paid by the Americans and the Arabs.²⁰ In February 2003 Osama bin Laden discussed Tora Bora in an audiotape:

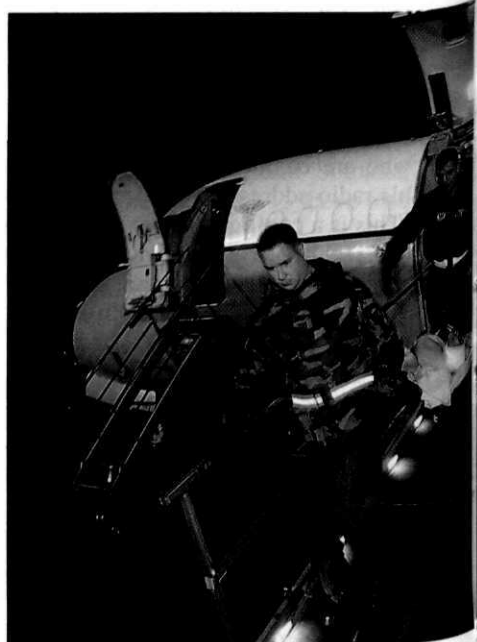
Not a second would pass without a fighter plan passing over our heads day and night... American forces were bombing us by smart bombs and bombs that weigh thousands of pounds and bombs that penetrate caves and other kinds of bombs enter into caves. (...) In addition to the forces of the agents whom they pushed to attack us for a continuous half month. We fought back against all their at-

tacks by the grace of God. And we defeated them every time. They were carrying their injured and their dead. (...) In spite of all that, American forces did not dare to go into our posts. What sign is more than that for their cowardliness and their fear in their claimed stories about their power? The jest of the battle was the extreme defeat for the world alliance of evil.²¹

Tora Bora under U.S. control

Once Tora Bora was under U.S. control it was clear that the caves and facilities were prepared for a long siege with massive quantities of supplies and ammunition. The heavy and accurate U.S. bombing made the resistance tactics from the 1980s (sitting out aerial bombardments in a cave) suicidal in the new millennium. Being well protected reduces the chance of being injured or killed, but when an enemy can bomb 24 hours 7 days only a matter of time until your number comes up. The evidence in the caves showed that many Al Qaeda fighters had wisely withdrawn. Despite Bin Laden's positive spin, Tora Bora's fighters had either been killed (some), captured (few), or were moving away in small groups (most).

After it became clear that the Al Qaeda leadership had escaped from Tora Bora the U.S. media began criticizing the U.S. attack strategy for the faults identified earlier. The heavy reliance on Afghan forces of dubious loyalty, failure to close off all escape routes, and the inability of the Pakistani Military (still on high alert facing off against India) to close the border all drew sharp attention. At the same time some of the limitations that forced a dependence on Afghan forces began to dissipate. U.S. forces began moving into Bagram Air Base north of Kabul (one of the two airports not targeted in Afghanistan) and established a major installation. Conventional Army Aviation helicopter units began arriving, providing mobility and combat firepower. Finally, the Army's XVIII Airborne Corps arrived to establish a forward command and control facility.²² The conventional



Army that had been left out of operations in Afghanistan was now in place and in force.

The Shahi-Kot valley

After their withdrawal from Tora Bora, Al Qaeda was forced to reassemble, reassess, and regroup. Although they had survived to 'fight another day,' the Taliban had lost control of Afghanistan, the United States was exploiting documents found in the cities and Al Qaeda forces were widely scattered. In February 2002 Al Qaeda forces were detected assembling in the Shahi-Kot valley. The valley had been the site of a 1986 assault that had cost the Soviet Army over 400 lives. The terrain, caves, and fortifications that had withstood the earlier assault remained.²³ Shahi-Kot was defensible, close to Pakistan, and close enough to Tora Bora (approximately 130 km) that the scattered troops could be regrouped in short order. It's unclear if Al Qaeda felt they could escape U.S. attention. Based on the slow U.S. response to their retreat into Tora Bora they may have felt that they could delay or avoid detection all together.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

²¹ Osama Bin Laden, New Audio Tape, 11 February 2003. Available at (http://abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/binladen_transcript030211.html).

²² Charles Portman, 'October 7th Marks Year of Strategic Change,' CENTCOM Public Affairs Office. Available at (http://www.centcom.mil/CENTCOM-News/Stories/10_02/1.htm).

²³ Smucker, op. cit., p.157.



Planning the assault on Shahi-Kot

United States Special Operations forces (SOF) began planning on 13 February for an assault on Shahi-Kot with a focus on applying the lessons learned from Tora Bora. It became clear that a large number of conventional Army forces would be required so lead planning shifted to the 10th Mountain Division.²⁴ Operation Anaconda would use Afghan forces (advised and assisted by U.S. SOF instructors) to hammer through the Shahi-Kot valley and drive the Al Qaeda fighters into the obligatory anvil manned by conventional U.S. Army units. Unlike the 'siege' of Tora Bora, the assault on Shahi-Kot would be an active one, with the promise of a relatively quick battle if things proceeded according to plan.

An extremely active reconnaissance effort focused on the valley using the U-2, Predator, and other assets to determine Al Qaeda disposition and numbers in order to identify helicopter landing zones, axis of attack, and so on. In order to 'bait the trap' bombing was kept to a minimum. Although this kept Al Qaeda in the valley it also gave them time to regroup, reequip, and reorganize their defen-

Nine servicemembers and one civilian Canadian reporter were wounded in action in Afghanistan

(Photo U.S. Department of Defense, J.D. Pyle; collection NIMH)

ses. While the United States had their eye on the valley, Intelligence believed Al Qaeda was unaware of the upcoming assault. The U.S. estimates of the number of fighters in the valley varied widely – from 200 to over 1,000. The initial battle plans had been made assuming there would be 200–300 fighters but the estimates climbed to 600–700 as U.S. forces began the operation. It was unclear if the Al Qaeda forces were in 'regroup' mode preparing for a guerilla war, or if they were waiting for a U.S. assault. Because the Al Qaeda force consisted of light infantry the United States was not sure if they were in the valley or positioned in the surrounding hills.²⁵

U.S. infiltration of the valley

Early in the morning on 20 March 2002 the Afghan forces (aided by U.S. Special Operations forces) began moving up the Shahi-Kot valley. As they advanced they came under heavy and sustained fire that killed an American Special Forces adviser and two Afghan troops. Many vehicles were destroyed and the Afghans began retreating back down the valley toward Gardez. Later investigation determined the heavy fire came from an American AC-130 that believed it was engaging an enemy convoy.²⁶ Anaconda's 'Hammer' had been eliminated by friendly fire almost before the operation had begun. Despite this loss, no consideration seems to have been given to adjusting the battle plan.

Twenty minutes prior to the blocking force's infiltration, an airstrike hit Al Qaeda positions.²⁷ This certainly killed some of their forces, but it also alerted Al Qaeda to the upcoming assault. The 10th Mountain and 101st

Airborne Division troops were transported in CH-47 helicopters from Bagram Air Base to the foothills on the eastern side of the Shahi-Kot valley. To prevent a repeat of Tora Bora the troops were to make their way up the hills to a series of blocking positions. It did not work out that way. Some insertions were met with hostile fire, whereas others began taking fire after the helicopters left.²⁸ Small arms and mortars were coming down from the hills where the blocking positions were to be established. The U.S. battle plan was to seize the high ground and shoot down on the Al Qaeda forces being driven down the valley, but now the roles were reversed. The U.S. troops (especially 10th Mountain) were pinned down between Al Qaeda in the high ground above and the cities below.

The Al Qaeda resistance

The Al Qaeda gunners proved to be extremely effective. Although the AH-64 Apache helicopter was identified as the most effective close air support asset,²⁹ five of the six Apaches available to support the operation were knocked out of action by mid-morning. There would be no more attack helicopter support that day.³⁰ The ferocity and capability of the Al Qaeda resistance came as a shock to the Army troops. The Al Qaeda soldiers moved quickly from position to

²⁴ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

²⁶ Eric Schmitt, 'Inquiry Finds American Was Killed by Fire From U.S. Gunship, Not Enemy,' *New York Times*, 29 October 2002.

²⁷ Robert H. McElroy with Patricia Slayden Holis 'Fire Support for Operation Anaconda,' Field Artillery, September–October 2002. Available at (http://sill-www.army.mil/FAMAG/Go_to_War_Primer/OpAnaconda.pdf).

²⁸ Ted Koppel, ABC News Nightline, 8 April 2002. Available at (<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/nightline/Nightline/anaconda020322.html>).

²⁹ McElroy, op. cit.

³⁰ Ann Scott Tyson, 'Anaconda: A war story,' *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 August 2002. Available at (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0801/p01s03-wosc.html>).

position in black tunics and head wraps like Ninjas.³¹ Finally, as night fell, the CH-47 helicopters returned to exfil part of the 10th Mountain Division forces they'd inserted in the early morning.³² Operation Anaconda would continue, but without the 'hammer' or the 'anvil.'

Although the effort to have the Afghan forces drive Al Qaeda into the waiting Americans had failed, the insertion of U.S. troops was having an effect. Al Qaeda fighters had begun streaming into the valley when they heard word of American troops on the ground.³³ Once again, Anaconda had been stood on its head – instead of worrying about Al Qaeda fleeing into Pakistan the operation would shift to targeting Al Qaeda entering from Pakistan. The metaphor shifted from the Hammer and Anvil to the Honey Pot and the Bees. The U.S. and Allied troops would serve as the honey to draw in Al Qaeda.

Observation point Takur Ghar: who strikes first?

In order to effectively strike the reinforcements streaming toward the valley the United States needed to establish surveillance points. Air assets such as Predator were effective when available, but bad weather always threatened (bad weather had delayed the start of Anaconda by two days). A decision was made to infiltrate Special Operations teams to conduct strategic reconnaissance on the various 'ratlines' that traced through the mountains to and from Pakistan. One such post was planned for the top of a peak known as Takur Ghar. The 10,000-ft peak commanded a clear view of the southern approaches to the valley, the town of Marzak, and the 'Whale' – the large ridge that stood on the other side of the valley.

Unbeknownst to the Americans, they had picked their observation point too well. Takur Ghar overlooked the most essential entry and escape route Al Qaeda used.³⁴ Al Qaeda saw the same

advantages and had established a position to observe American activity and shoot down helicopters flying in the valley below.³⁵ Because of heavy snowfall the U.S. forces planning the mission were unaware of any Al Qaeda forces or defenses on Takur Ghar.³⁶ The mission was assigned to a team of Navy SEALs accompanied by an Air Force Combat Controller.

As the MH-47 (Razor 03) approached the helicopter-landing zone at the top of the ridge they observed fresh tracks, goatskins, and a seemingly abandoned heavy machine gun.³⁷ The pilots discussed an abort but it was too late. The Al Qaeda forces, showing good fire discipline, waited until the helicopter was nearly on top of their positions, then opened fire with heavy machine guns and RPGs. ABH1 Neal Roberts was standing at the rear of the ramp preparing to rapidly exit and secure the landing zone after touch down. As the helicopter was hit, hydraulic fluid began spraying on the ramp and the helicopter lurched around to escape from the Al Qaeda bunkers. ABH1 Roberts slipped on the oily ramp and fell 5–10 ft down onto the snowy mountain. Razor 03 crash-landed 7 km away and a headcount confirmed that one man was lost.³⁸

In spite of the heavy resistance encountered, the remaining members of Roberts's team loaded onto a second helicopter (Razor 04) to return to the top of Takur Ghar for a rescue attempt. Razor 04 took heavy fire but all six members of the 'reconnaissance' team were able to exit onto the mountaintop. The team's situation quickly deteriorated as the Air Force Combat Controller was killed and two of the SEALs were seriously wounded. The remaining SEALs made the difficult decision to withdraw down the mountain.³⁹

The unavailing attempt to capture Takur Ghar

Al Qaeda did not have long to wait for another helicopter. A 23-man Ranger Quick Reaction Force (QRF) was dis-

patched from Bagram on board two other MH-47s (Razor 01 and 02) to land on a displaced landing zone. Unfortunately, the helicopter crews never received the word to offset and as the sun began to rise they proceeded to the same landing zone. Neither the crews nor the Rangers knew that Al Qaeda 'owned' Takur Ghar – only that they had been dispatched to assist the SEALs. As they approached the landing zone the SEALs they were sent to assist were already making their way down the ridge.⁴⁰

Razor 01 was the first helicopter to approach the landing zone. Not surprisingly, the Al Qaeda gunners met its approach with machine-gun fire and RPGs from three different directions and shot it down. As the Rangers and crew emerged to establish a defensive perimeter they were met by Al Qaeda fire that immediately killed a helicopter gunner and three of the Rangers. Razor 02 offloaded its part of the QRF further down the ridge and its Rangers began a 2,000 ft climb to reach the rest of their team.⁴¹

Not knowing how long it would take for the rest of the Rangers to arrive, the survivors on top of the ridge began considering an assault on the Al Qaeda position. Four of the Rangers (including their Commander and Senior NCO) began a straight assault

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Smucker, op. cit., p. 179.

34 Ibid., p. 187.

35 U.S. Defense Department, 'Executive Summary of the Battle of Takur Ghar,' 24 May 2002. Available at (<http://www.defense.gov/news/May2002/d20020524takurghar.pdf>).

36 Tommy Franks, DoD News Briefing Transcript, 24 May 2002. (<http://www.centcom.mil/CENTCOMNews/transcripts/20020524.htm>).

37 Bradley Graham, 'Bravery and Breakdowns in a Ridgetop Battle,' Washington Post, 24 May 2002. Available at (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A1951-2002May23?language=printer>).

38 U.S. Defense Department, op. cit.

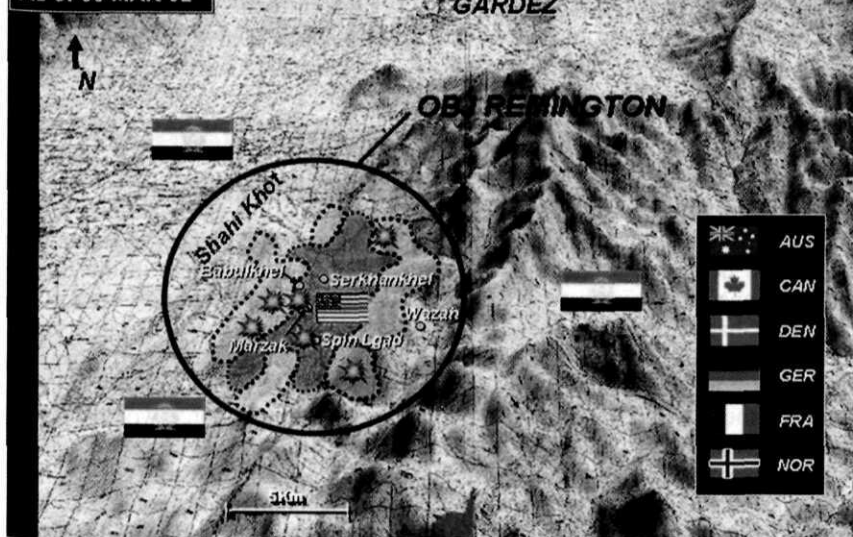
39 Ibid.

40 Smucker, op. cit., p. 189.

41 U.S. Defense Department, op. cit.

Shahi Khot // Operation Anaconda

As of 03 MAR 02



Map of the operation area of Operation Anaconda

(Source U.S. Department of Defense; collection NIMH)

The Americans depended on Apache helicopters to provide support from the air, but quickly lost them as the accurate Al Qaeda gunners took them out of the fight.

Analyzing Operation Anaconda

The SOF insertion on Takur-Gar showed many of the same problems. The insertion team was sized and equipped for reconnaissance – no hostile resistance was expected. After the loss of ABH1 Roberts the surviving members of his team attempted to retrieve him, despite the fact that he had been taken prisoner by a larger force of Al Qaeda or (more likely) had already been killed. The insertion of the first half of the QRF on the same LZ was almost certain to end with a helicopter shot down. Because of a failure in communications the crew did not receive the instructions to insert elsewhere on the ridge and did not know that the SEAL team they were coming to rescue was already retreating down the ridge.

For Al Qaeda the insertion of American forces during Anaconda was a near perfect opportunity. Instead of hunting for Americans they would be delivered directly to their doorstep in vulnerable helicopters. Al Qaeda occupied the high ground containing bunkers, caves, and established firing positions. They were well supplied with ammunition, weapons, food, and water. Yet despite all these advantages they were only able to kill 7 Americans (another was killed by friendly fire) – 6 of which were killed in the

up the ridge but as they advanced they realized that instead of simply hiding behind rocks the Al Qaeda fighters were in well-established bunkers. The Rangers retreated and began depending on a constant barrage of air strikes to keep the Al Qaeda fighters' heads down and prevent them from launching an assault.⁴²

The rest of the QRF reached the top of the ridge at 1030 and began organizing an attack up the ridge. The final assault was anticlimactic – all the Rangers found were dead Al Qaeda. By this time other Al Qaeda fighters were streaming into the area and soon began firing from adjacent knolls and ridges. A combination of direct fire from the ground and bombs and strafing from the air kept the Al Qaeda fighters from reaching too close. Again the 'honey' of Americans on the ground proved a powerful lure to draw out Al Qaeda fighters. As evening approached the Al Qaeda firing began to diminish as the fighters began moving down the mountain towards Pakistan.⁴³ Later that evening four helicopters returned to evacuate the survivors. Seven Americans had been killed and four had been seriously wounded – all but one of the fatalities had been dead within minutes of the crash of Razor 01.

An U.S. slip-up

Anaconda continued on for another two weeks. Instead of a rapid advance to flush Al Qaeda it became a slow slog against small teams of fighters in the hills and the villages. Initially Al Qaeda reinforcements streamed in from Pakistan, drawn in by the opportunity to go toe to toe with the Americans, but over time the flow of reinforcements turned to a flow of fighters withdrawing. Al Qaeda had had enough – the Shahi-Kot belonged to the Americans.⁴⁴

Anaconda must be regarded as a humbling experience for the Americans. Their 'Hammer and Anvil' strategy was destroyed almost before it began, not by enemy action but by friendly fire. The Infantry inserted into the valley did not know how many Al Qaeda forces they would find or where they would find them. The plan to move unopposed into the high ground was doomed to failure because Al Qaeda had already taken the high ground. Instead of shooting down on Al Qaeda they were being shot down at by Al Qaeda. Where they had expected to find a terrorist rabble, the U.S. infantry found a well-trained, disciplined force. Instead of running from Americans they ran toward Americans for the opportunity to fight the infidel.

42 Graham, op. cit.

43 Smucker, op. cit., p. 191.

44 Ibid., pp. 192-193.



A U.S. Army soldier mans a .50 caliber machine gun during a battle in Operation Anaconda. The battlefield is in eastern Afghanistan, south of Gardez in the Shahi Khot mountain range

(Photo U.S. Department of Defense, D. Marck Jr.; collection NIMH)

battle to save an American who was likely already dead.

Why was Al Qaeda's military so unsuccessful? The U.S. troops were equipped with the newest generation of Body Armor. Al Qaeda training camps likely taught to shoot your enemy in the chest where the likelihood of hitting a vital organ is high. Shooting an American soldier in the chest will knock him down and cause a serious bruise but it will not kill him or keep him out of the fight for very long. Mortar shells shot in the midst of the Americans failed to cause a fatality.⁴⁵ The U.S. troops could call on a seemingly endless amount of airpower to rocket, bomb, and strafe their enemies. Even if the airplanes did not kill them, Al Qaeda fighters were forced to keep their heads down or move into shelters during the aircraft assaults. Airpower turns fighters into targets. The constant aerial surveillance discouraged mutual support between Al Qaeda fighters. Attempting to move long distances would only bring attention. Motorized transport would draw aerial bombardment even faster so the Al Qaeda fighters that did move had to do it on foot and use mules to move equipment.

Although the American plan for Anaconda was in shambles almost before

the operation began, they could call on the massive U.S. war machine for backup support in ways in which the Al Qaeda fighters could only dream. When the Army's Apaches were damaged the Marines flew in their Cobras from ships off the Pakistani coast. Replacement Apaches were flown into Bagram a few days later.⁴⁶ To provide more air support a Squadron of A-10 air to ground aircraft were deployed to Bagram. Although some troops were withdrawn from the Shahi-Kot valley under fire, others were inserted in less hostile areas. By comparison the Al Qaeda reinforcements making their way from Pakistan had to travel over 45 km, at least partly on foot, with the constant danger of attracting a bombing or strafing run. Reinforcements did enter the valley, but the number of jihadists who wanted to die as shaheed to an unseen American's bomb eventually dried up. For the Al Qaeda fighter the honey was all too elusive and death all too inevitable.

After Anaconda ended an American spokesman claimed that in killing hundreds of Al Qaeda fighters they had saved hundreds of thousands of lives based on the equation of the 9/11 attacks where 20 terrorists killed 3,000 people.⁴⁷ Such an equation is clearly spurious. The Al Qaeda forces the United States killed in the Shahi-Kot valley were not the same Al Qaeda fighters sent on overseas terrorist missions. They were the Arab, Chechen, and Pakistani foot soldiers that in an earlier time would have been part of Al Qaeda's 055 Brigade, helping the Taliban fight against the Northern Alliance. Anaconda did not destroy Al Qaeda, but it did destroy its illusion of being able to go 'toe to toe' militarily with the Americans. The Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap divided guerrilla war into three stages:

- 1 Very small unit, hit-and-run actions without any attempt to hold territory.
- 2 Continuation of stage one attacks combined with larger units, regimental and below, engaging in

more intense attacks and taking and holding remote terrain as needed.

- 3 Conventional warfare against a weakened enemy who is engaged and defeated.⁴⁸

Enduring Freedom forced Al Qaeda and the Taliban from a stage 3 conflict against the Northern Alliance to a stage 2 conflict against the new Afghan government and American forces. Al Qaeda's defeat in the Shahi-Kot showed their inability to take and hold terrain or operate as larger units and knocked them back to stage 1. Any attempt to hold territory or form a larger military force would bring a strong reaction. Unlike the earlier conflict against the Soviets (to which it's often compared) there are no safe havens along the border and the supplies and institutional support coming from Pakistan are limited. Although there's a seemingly endless supply of young men yearning to be shaheed, you cannot take and hold territory with untrained suicide bombers.

In the end, Bin Laden's troops did not find the cowardly U.S. forces he had led them to expect. U.S. troops prefer a helicopter extraction to a fight to the death, but when forced they proved their ability to hit Al Qaeda hard. Unlike Beirut and Mogadishu, they did not leave until they owned the battlefield. The U.S. troops also found their Al Qaeda opponents to be different than they expected. Instead of terrorists they found a competent, disciplined, well-trained light infantry force, albeit one that could not defeat the nearly limitless capabilities of the U.S. War Machine. Today the two sides continue in an uneasy standoff across Afghanistan, each waiting for the other to withdraw from the field.

⁴⁵ Tyson, op. cit.

⁴⁶ John F. Burns, 'U.S. Adds Troops and Helicopters in Afghan Battle,' *New York Times*, 7 March 2002.

⁴⁷ Smucker, op. cit., p. 193.

⁴⁸ Dr. George Freeman, 'Intelligence Briefing,' 18 June 2003. Available at (<http://globalspecops.com/gwiraq.html>).