

**Executive Summary of the Battle of Takur Ghar**  
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In the early morning hours of March 4, 2002, on a mountaintop called Takur Ghar in southeastern Afghanistan, al Qaeda soldiers fired on an MH-47E helicopter carrying a Special Operations Forces (SOF) reconnaissance element. This fire resulted in a Navy SEAL, ABH1 Neal Roberts, falling out of the helicopter, and began a chain of events culminating in one of the most intense small-unit firefights of the war against terrorism; the death of all the al Qaeda terrorists defending the mountain top; and, sadly, resulting also in the death of seven U.S. servicemen. Despite these losses, the U.S. forces involved in this fight again distinguished themselves by conspicuous bravery. Their countless acts of heroism demonstrated the best of America's Special Operations Forces (SOF) as Army, Navy and Air Force special operators fought side by side to save one of their own, and each other, and in the process secured the mountain top and inflicted serious loss on the al Qaeda.

U.S. SOF had been monitoring for well over a month a large-scale pocket of forces in the Shah-e-Kot valley, southeast of Gardez, Afghanistan. In February, the headquarters for U.S. ground forces in Afghanistan, TF MOUNTAIN, commanded by MG Hagenback, conceived a classic military "hammer and anvil" maneuver—code-named Operation ANACONDA—to clear out this threat. U.S. and Afghan forces in Gardez would push from the West in an effort to clear an area of reported high concentrations of al Qaeda in the western part of the Shah-e-Kot valley. ANACONDA planners believed this maneuver would cause the enemy to flee east into the blocking positions of awaiting American soldiers from the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne

Divisions located in the eastern sector of the valley. Augmenting the conventional forces would be small reconnaissance teams. These teams were drawn from U.S. and Coalition SOF - they included U.S. Navy SEALs, U.S. Army Special Forces, and U.S. Air Force special tactics operators. The plan was to position these reconnaissance (“recce”) teams at strategic locations where they would establish observation posts (OPs) to provide information on enemy movements and direct air strikes against observed enemy forces. This was done in several locations resulting directly in effective airstrikes on observed al Qaeda positions and the death of hundreds of al Qaeda in the Sahi-Kowt area. ABH1 Neil Roberts served in one of these reconnaissance teams.

In war, however, things rarely go exactly as planned - the enemy has a “vote”. Operation ANACONDA proved to be no exception. Rather than flee, these disciplined and well trained al Qaeda soldiers stood and fought, and at times were reinforced – all along a series of draws and trails at the southern end of the valley near Marzak, dubbed the “ratline.” The enemy halted the Afghan forces pushing east toward “the Whale” – a distinctive terrain feature southeast of Gardez – and the Afghan forces then withdrew back to Gardez. Because of a brief period of bad weather and the unexpectedly heavy enemy resistance, only a portion of the TF MOUNTAIN troops inserted into their intended positions on D-Day. Some of those that did insert, fought under intense mortar and small arms fire. SOF, well hidden in their observation posts, used direct fire weapons, and coordinated close air support bombing onto enemy fighting positions. This provided some relief for the TF MOUNTAIN forces, especially in the south at HLZ Ginger east of Marzak. MG Hagenbeck repositioned his soldiers to the northern end of

the Shah-e-Kot valley and attacked the al Qaeda from this direction. As the battle became more fluid, TF MOUNTAIN recognized the need to put U.S. “eyes” on the southern tip of the valley and the “ratline.” They needed additional observation posts near HLZ Ginger to provide surveillance and to call in U.S. air power on the numerous concentrations of enemy forces. A 10,000-foot, snow-capped mountain, named Takur Ghar, appeared to U.S. planners as a perfect location for an observation post. It dominated the southern approaches to the valley and offered excellent visibility into Marzak, two kilometers to the West. The mountaintop also provided an unobstructed view of the “Whale” on the other side of the valley. Takur Ghar was a perfect site for an observation post, and unfortunately, the enemy thought so too. The enemy had installed a well-concealed, fortified force, which included a heavy machine gun perfectly positioned to shoot down coalition aircraft flying in the valley below.

On 2 March, 2002, U.S. forces began planning to insert forces into two observation posts the following night. Two MH-47Es from 2nd Battalion, 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) would insert two teams; one MH-47E - Razor 04, would emplace a team to the north while the other MH-47E - Razor 03, would deploy a team of U.S. SEALs and an Air Force combat controller (CCT) on Takur Ghar. Late the next evening, the two helicopters took off from their base north of “the box,” as the ANACONDA operational area became known to U.S. soldiers.

At approximately 0300 local time, Razor 03, carrying ABH1 Roberts’ team, approached its HLZ in a small saddle atop Takur Ghar. Originally planned to go in

earlier to an offset HLZ, maintenance problems with one of the helicopters and a nearby B-52 strike in support of TF MOUNTAIN delayed the insert. As Razor 03 approached, both the pilots and the men in the back observed fresh tracks in the snow, goatskins, and other signs of recent human activity. Immediately, the pilots and team discussed a mission abort, but it was too late. An RPG struck the side of the aircraft, wounding one crewman, while machinegun bullets ripped through the fuselage, cutting hydraulic and oil lines. Fluid spewed about the ramp area of the helicopter. The pilot struggled to get the Chinook off the landing zone and away from the enemy fire. Neil Roberts stood closest to the ramp, poised to exit onto the landing zone. Roberts and an aircrew member were knocked off balance by the explosions and the sudden burst of power applied by the pilot. As Neil and the crewman reached to steady each other, both slipped on the oil-soaked ramp and fell out of the helicopter. As the pilots fought to regain control of the helicopter, other crewmembers pulled the tethered crewmember back into the aircraft. Un-tethered, Neil fell approximately 5-10 feet onto the snowy mountaintop below. The crew managed to keep the aircraft aloft until it became apparent it could fly no more. The pilots executed a controlled crash landing some seven kilometers north of where Petty Officer Roberts fell off the helicopter. He was now alone and in the midst of an enemy force.

Nobody knows exactly what transpired over the next few minutes on that mountaintop. There were no surveillance aircraft over the mountaintop at the time Roberts fell from the helicopter. Based on forensic evidence subsequently gathered from the scene, we believe Roberts survived the short fall from the helicopter, likely activated

his signaling device, and engaged the enemy with his squad automatic weapon (SAW). He was mortally injured by gunfire as the closed in on him.

Meanwhile, following Razor 03's controlled crash landing, the SEALs did a quick head count that confirmed what they already knew—Petty Officer Roberts was missing. TSgt John Chapman, the team's Air Force combat controller, immediately contacted a nearby AC-130 for protection. A short time later, Razor 04, after inserting its "recce" team, arrived on the scene and picked up the downed crewmen and SEALs, taking them to Gardez. The SEALs and pilots of Razor 04 quickly formulated a plan to go back in and rescue Roberts, despite the fact that they knew a force of heavily armed al Qaeda manned positions on Takur Ghar. An AC-130 gunship moved to Takur Ghar and reported seeing what they believed to be Roberts, surrounded by four to six other individuals. Knowing how the al Qaeda brutally treated prisoners, Roberts' teammates and commanders knew that time was running out on Neil Roberts. Razor 04, with its cargo of five SEALs and TSgt Chapman, departed Gardez and returned to Roberts' last known location on the mountaintop. There were no known nearby, suitable landing zones - other than where Roberts had fallen. Inserting the rescue team at the base of the mountain was not an option – they would lose valuable time making the 2 to 3 hour climb up the mountain. Their only real chance of success was to reinsert in the same proximity of where Razor 03 had taken intense enemy fire.

At about 0500 local time, Razor 04 approached the HLZ atop of Takur Ghar. Despite enemy fire cutting through the MH-47E, all six members of what had been a "recce" element were safely inserted, and the helicopter, although damaged, returned to base. Once on the ground near Roberts' last known location, and using the waning

darkness for cover, the team assessed the situation and moved quickly to the high ground. The most prominent features on the hilltop were a large rock and tree. As they approached the tree, TSgt Chapman saw two enemy personnel in a fortified position under the tree. TSgt Chapman and a nearby SEAL opened fire, killing both enemy personnel. The Americans immediately began taking fire from another bunker position some 20 meters away. A burst of gunfire hit Chapman, mortally wounding him. The SEALs returned fire and threw hand grenades into the enemy bunker position to their immediate front. As the firefight continued, two of the SEALs were wounded by enemy gunfire and grenade fragmentation. Finding themselves in a deadly crossfire with 2 of their teammates seriously wounded and one killed and clearly outnumbered, the SEALs decided to disengage. They shot two more al Qaeda as they moved off the mountain peak to the Northeast - with one of the wounded SEALs taking "point." As they moved partly down the side of the mountain for protection, a SEAL contacted the overhead AC-130—GRIM 32—and requested fire support. GRIM 32 responded with covering fire as the SEALs withdrew.

Back at the US staging base, the Ranger quick reaction force (QRF)—a designated unit on standby for just such situations, was put on alert and directed to move forward to a safe landing zone at Gardez. This was to position them closer to the fight, within 15 minutes response time. The 23-man QRF loaded on two waiting MH-47Es: Razor 01 and Razor 02. Razor 01 carried 10 Rangers, an enlisted tactical air controller (ETAC), a combat controller (CCT) and a Pararescueman (PJ). Razor 02 carried 10 Rangers. Taking off from their base, the QRF had little knowledge about what was

actually happening on Takur Ghar due to very limited communications. As the QRF flew toward Gardez, the embattled SEALs, withdrawing from Takur Ghar, requested their immediate assistance. Headquarters approved the request and directed the QRF to proceed quickly to the problem area and insert their team at an “offset” HLZ - not the same landing zone where Razors 03 and 04 had taken fire. Due to intermittently functioning aircraft communications equipment, the Rangers and helicopter crews never received the “offset” instructions which also hampered attempts to provide tactical situational awareness to the QRF commander aboard Razor 01. Communications problems too plagued headquarters’ attempts to determine the true condition of the SEAL team and their exact location. As a consequence, the Rangers went forward believing that the SEALs were still located on top of Takur Ghar, proceeding to the same location where both Razors 03 and 04 had taken enemy fire.

At about 0545 local, Razor 01 and 02 flew toward the Takur Ghar landing zone. At this point, the QRF was unaware that a squad of al Qaeda fighters, who by this time had already killed two Americans, were poised and expecting their arrival. The sun was just beginning to crest the mountains to the east when Razor 01 approached from the south. On final approach, an RPG round exploded on the right side of the helicopter, while small arms fire peppered it from three directions. The pilots attempted to abort the landing, but the aircraft had taken too much damage. The right side mini-gunner, SGT Phil Svitak, opened fire but was hit by an AK-47 round and died almost immediately. The helicopter dropped ten feet and landed hard on the snow-covered slope of the landing zone. Both pilots were seriously wounded as they crash landed their crippled aircraft.

The helicopter nose was pointing up the hill toward the main enemy bunkers - where TSgt Chapman had been killed. The impact of the crash knocked everyone to the helicopter floor. The Rangers, CCT and the eight-man Chinook crew struggled under intense fire to get up and out of the helicopter fuselage. The rear door gunner and a Ranger opened fire out the back of the aircraft, killing an al Qaeda soldier. SGT Brad Crose and CPL Matt Commons survived the initial landing but were struck and killed by enemy fire as they exited the rear of the aircraft. Another Ranger, SPC Marc Anderson, was hit while still inside the aircraft, dying instantly.

Despite the intense small arms fire, the PJ, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, and another medic remained inside the helicopter and began treating the wounded. At the same time, the surviving Rangers quickly assembled at the helicopter ramp to assess the situation and fix the enemy locations. Using their M-4s, the Rangers killed two more al Qaeda, including an RPG gunner. Using natural rock outcroppings as cover, they began maneuvering to better positions. The Ranger platoon leader formulated a plan to assault the bunkers on top of the hill - but after an initial attempt to do so, he quickly realized he would need a larger force. Instead, the Air Force combat controller worked to get close air support on station. Within minutes, U.S. aircraft began to bomb and strafe the enemy positions, dropping 500lb bombs within 50 meters of the SOF positions. By 7 am local time, the Rangers were no longer in danger of being overrun. They consolidated their position and established a casualty collection point to the rear of the helicopter.

After the shootdown of Razor 01, Razor 02 was directed to move to a safe area and await further instructions. Later, Razor 02 inserted the other half of the QRF with its



force of 10 Rangers and an additional Navy SEAL at an “offset” landing zone, down the mountain some 800 meters east and over 2,000 feet below the mountaintop. The Navy SEAL linked up with the SEAL “recce” element, which was by now some 1000 meters from the mountaintop. The Rangers’ movement up the hill was a physically demanding 2-hour effort under heavy mortar fire and in thin mountain air. They climbed the 45-70 degree slope, most of it covered in three feet of snow, weighted down by their weapons, body armor and equipment.

By 1030 am local time, the men were completely exhausted, but still had to defeat the enemy controlling the top of the hill - a mere 50 meters from their position. With the arrival of the ten men of Razor 02, the Rangers prepared to assault the enemy bunkers. As the Air Force CCT called in a last airstrike on the enemy bunkers and with two machineguns providing suppression fire, seven Rangers stormed the hill as quickly as they could in the knee-deep snow - shooting and throwing grenades. Within minutes, the Rangers took the hill, killing multiple al Qaeda. The Rangers began to consolidate their position on the top of the mountain, which the platoon leader deemed more defensible - and safer for their wounded. The Rangers, Army crewmembers, and Air Force personnel began moving the wounded up the steep slope; it took four to six men to move one casualty – it was a difficult and slow process.

As the soldiers moved the wounded, additional al Qaeda began firing from a small ridgeline some 400 meters to the rear of the downed helicopter’s position. The wounded at the casualty collection point were completely exposed to the enemy fire, as were the PJ and medic tending to them. While the Rangers maneuvered to return fire, enemy fire

struck the Army medic and PJ at the casualty collection point as they worked on their patients. Rangers and helicopter crewmen alike risked their lives, exposing themselves to enemy fire, to pull the wounded to the relative safety of nearby rocks. Once again, the combat controller called in close air support, and a few well-placed bombs and Ranger machinegun fire eventually silenced the enemy fire. Unfortunately, this attack claimed another life. The stricken PJ, Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, eventually succumbed to his wounds. Throughout the ensuing hours, the Americans continued to take sporadic sniper and mortar fire.

The Rangers consolidated their position, moved their dead and wounded to the top of the hill, and waited for a night extraction. The enemy air defense and ground situation in the vicinity of Takur Ghar did not lend itself to another daylight rescue attempt using helicopters. Throughout the day, observation posts on adjoining hilltops, manned by Australian and American SOF, called in fire on al Qaeda forces attempting to reinforce the mountaintop.

At about 2015 local time, four helicopters from the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR extracted both the Rangers on Takur Ghar and the SEALs down the mountainside. Two hours later, the survivors and their fallen comrades were back at their base. A team of experienced medical staff of the 274<sup>th</sup> Forward Surgical Team, operating out of the Bagram airport tower, awaited the eleven wounded personnel. Their quick and professional medical treatment likely saved the hand of a wounded pilot. By morning, all the wounded were headed to hospitals in Germany and elsewhere. Operation ANACONDA would continue for another 19 days. These same units continued to play a decisive role in defeating the

al Qaeda in the largest Coalition ground combat operation thus far in the war against terrorism.

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