



OPERATION **ZUMMARI 241**

Braving Fire Ambushes in Afghanistan

by Charles H. Briscoe

In the high mountainous terrain of Afghanistan favored by insurgent Taliban and al Qaeda fighters, the ‘assault’ helicopter of choice for Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) is the MH-47G *Chinook*. This advanced heavy lift twin-engine workhorse ‘earned its bones’ as a medium ‘lifter’ more than fifty years ago in Vietnam. Upgraded with larger fuel tanks, advanced navigation radar, sophisticated avionics, and proven weaponry, this *Greyhound* bus-sized ‘assault’ helicopter ‘dominates the night skies.’ Capable of aerial refueling to extend its operating range and armed with lethal 7.62 mm mini guns and machine guns, the MH-47G is a formidable ‘war wagon’ on the Southwest Asia battleground, especially when protected by a team of heavily armed MH-60L *Black Hawk* Defensive Armed Penetrators (DAPs). This current operations article substantiates the capabilities and strengths of that advanced heavy lift helicopter in combat, and like the DAP, is piloted and crewed by highly skilled ‘Night Stalkers’ of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR).

This article covering a very short notice air exfiltration of an Afghan *KKA* (counter-terrorist) element and several Commando units in contact illustrates how highly qualified and experienced 160th SOAR aircrews support Army and allied SOF under the worst of combat conditions. Knowing what is required to become a Flight Lead pilot and FMQ (Fully Mission Qualified) pilot and aircrew member and their roles in planning, rehearsing, and executing all aspects of unconventional warfare (UW) missions are critical. Remembering that the primary purpose of the DAP is to protect assault helicopters carrying ground attack forces **to and from** the objective keeps SOF aviation missions in proper perspective. Army SOF Flight Lead pilots, responsible for all planning, must factor the entire mission profile and prepare contingencies. Hence, their view of ground tactical operations covers the full spectrum—into and off the ground force objective(s) and all aspects before, during, and after.

Operation ZAMMARI 241 on 2-3 March 2015 was a US-supported Afghan partner mission to find and to rescue thirty Hazara hostages. The kidnapped were being held captive in two Taliban-sympathetic mountain villages, Shigan and Akhtar, about 40 miles northwest of Kandahar. Both agricultural villages were in the Khak-e-Afghan District of Zabul Province. American Special Forces (SF) Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) 7311 and two other 7th SF Group ODAs were advising and assisting the *KKA* (counter-terrorist) force and two Commando elements (about 240 Afghans) in the search and clearing of the two rural villages where the captives were harbored.²

“This hostage rescue mission was supposed to be a turning point for the Afghan SOF (ANASOF)—Afghans fighting to save Afghans,” related Specialist (SPC) Sean D.T. Williams,* a MH-47G *Chinook* crew chief and M-240 machine gunner, A Company, 4th Battalion.³ The abductors were to be captured or killed. The Afghan SOF forces, carried by 160th *Chinooks* to helicopter landing zones (HLZs) east of the Arghandab River, became decisively engaged on 2 March shortly after moving off the landing zones. Other ANA infantry battalions and their U.S. advisors were flown into HLZs west of the river on 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) CH-47D *Chinooks*. These aircraft were protected by AH-64 *Apache* attack helicopters. The conventional ANA force was the blocking force.⁴ Planners had designated the river as the ‘line of death’ to prevent fratricide between the two helicopter elements.⁵

Afghan SOF elements bore the brunt of the fight. Shortly after the *Chinooks* of the 160th SOAR lifted clear of the HLZs, the enemy surprised the assaulters with a massive volume of fire. The ANA SOF quickly discovered that a dug-in enemy was fighting from well-placed defensive positions linked by trenches. Interlocking machine gun fire across their front thwarted attacks. The enemy was there to fight and did not intend to back off. They were armed with light and heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades



- 1 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) distinctive unit insignia (DUI).
- 2 160th SOAR personnel wear the U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation Command (USASOAC) shoulder sleeve insignia (SSI).
- 3 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) DUI.
- 4 Personnel of the 82nd CAB wear the SSI of the 82nd Airborne Division.

IAW USSOCOM Sanitization Protocol for Historical Articles on Classified Current Operations, pseudonyms are used for majors and below who are still on active duty, unless names have been publicly released for awards/decorations or DoD news release. Pseudonyms are identified with an asterisk. The eyes of personnel in photos are blocked out when not covered with dark visors or sunglasses, except when the photos were publicly released by a service or DoD. Source references (end notes) utilize the assigned pseudonym.



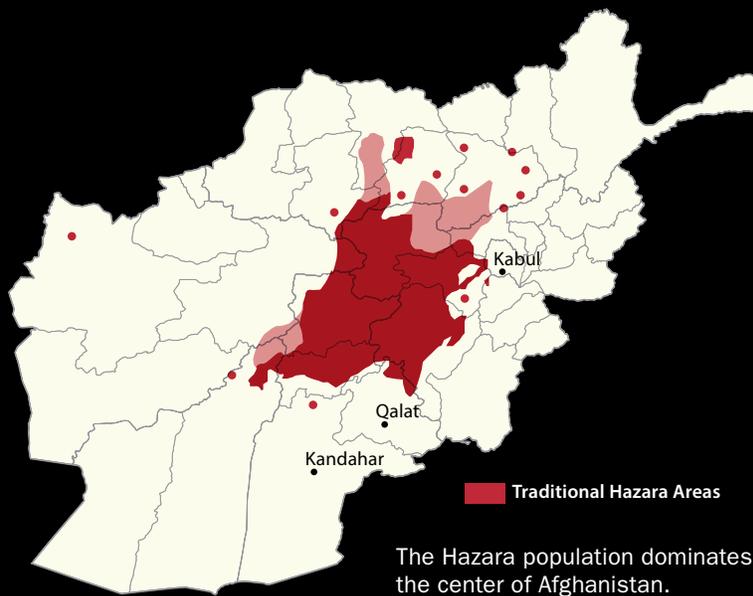
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2

3

The Hazaras

1 An Hazara town street. **2** Two local girls enjoying the Arzu Studio Hope Garden where women sell their rugs and receive literacy classes. **3** A Mullah speaks at a gathering of Hazaras on the final day of Ramadan.



The Persian Dari-speaking Hazaras, numbering almost 3 million, constitute the third largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and consider themselves indigenous. The Hazara are Imami, the Shi'a Muslim majority labeled the 'Twelvers' because they believe in twelve *imams* (divinely appointed, sinless, infallible leader successors of Muhammed). They speak Hazarangī, a Dari dialect, one of the country's two primary languages. The Ismail Shi'a who believe in seven *imams* are referred to as 'Sevensers.' The Zaydi Shi'a who believe in five are called 'Fivers.' In the post-Soviet socialist era, the Hazaras were persecuted and massacred by Sunni Muslim Pashtu Taliban. When the Taliban dynamited the two colossal Buddhas carved into the cliffs (507 and 554 AD) overlooking Bamian, the Hazara heartland, in March 2001, international outrage was vociferous. After the overthrow of the Taliban government in early 2002, the Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara leaders, who had supported American and coalition forces, united to support President Hamid Karzai.¹

1 Walled pathways surround the cultivated fields that were overlooked by huge Buddhas for 1700 years. **2 a-b** Two of these ancient Buddhas overlooked Bamian until March 2001 when Mullah Mohammed Omar ordered their destruction. The Taliban used dynamite to destroy the two Buddhas above the city. Bottom center left (2a) is the taller Buddha in 1963, bottom center right (2b) shows the Buddha after destruction in 2001. **3** Rogue Taliban kidnappers prowl the Hazara villages with impunity.



1



2a



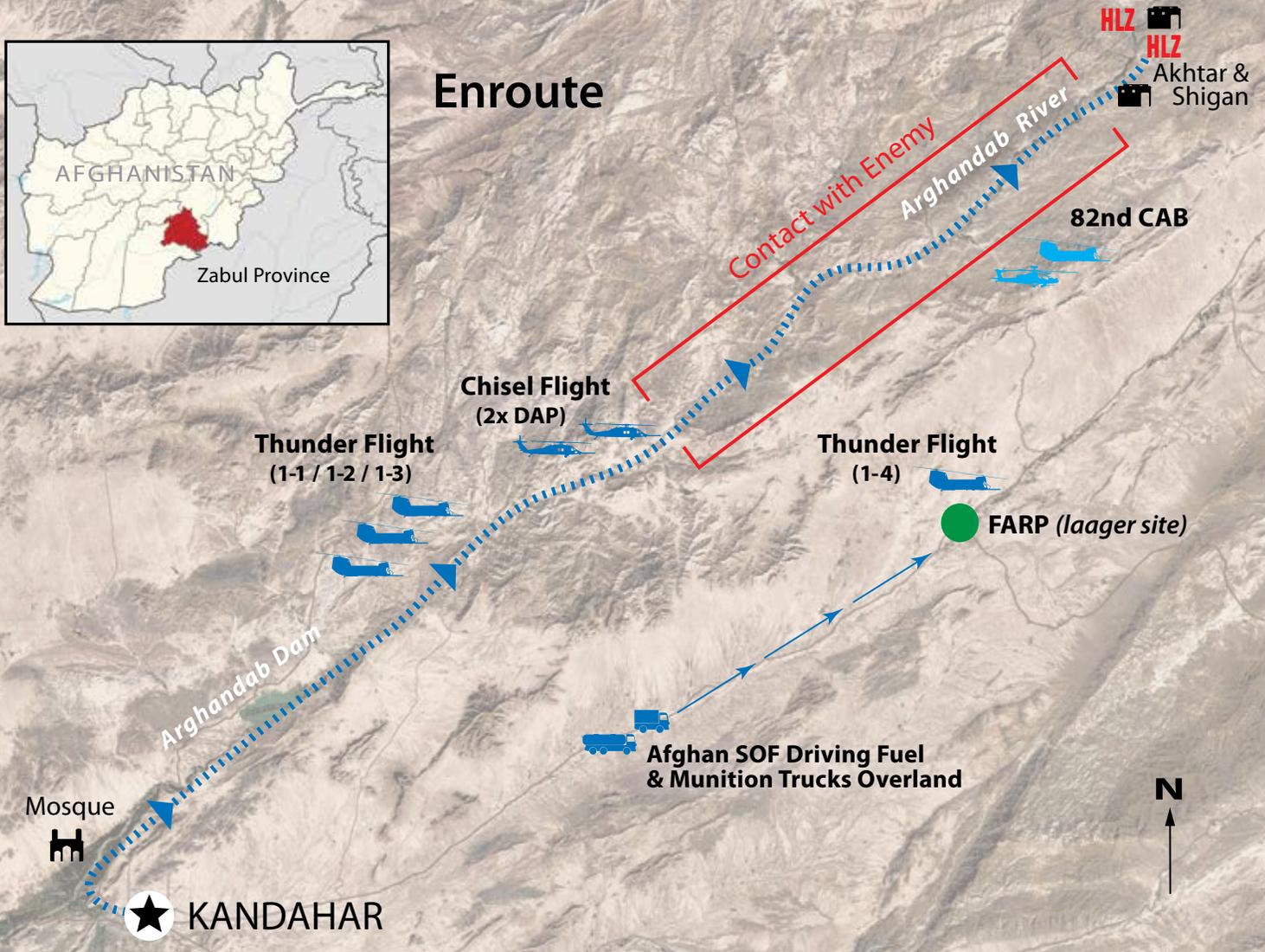
2b



3



Enroute



HLZ East & West Helicopter Landing Zones (HLZ) ● Foward Arming/Refueling Point (FARP)

(RPGs) and had plenty of ammunition. “We knew that our ground force was heavily engaged outside the villages before we cleared the river valley. The radio traffic was heavy,” said CPT David P. Paulson,* the Air Mission Commander (AMC) from 2nd Battalion. “It would be a long night for them.”⁶ Daylight on 3 March ushered in more surprises.⁷

ODA 7311-directed air strikes had disrupted enemy attacks during the night, but highly accurate 82 mm mortar fire, directed by enemy forward observers (FOs) on the canyon heights, commenced at first light. This limited ANA SOF fire and maneuver attempts to break through the enemy’s defenses. Since the rescue had been anticipated to be a short duration direct action (DA) mission, Afghan SOF soldiers carried more ammunition than food and water—a *Power Bar* and a canteen of water per *KKA* man did not

support a prolonged fight. ‘Traveling light,’ most Afghans ‘froze’ that night and they fought hungry and thirsty in the next day’s heat.

Though stalemated at dawn, the enemy force suffered heavy casualties from AC-130 gunships and attack aircraft that systematically rumbled the two villages during the night. While the rescue had been thwarted, the combined forces commander wanted to keep the ANA forces ‘in the fight’ to build morale. With just a few minor wounds after ‘slugging it out’ with a well-trained, determined enemy, confidence grew as the day progressed. Word that ANA troops were ‘holding their own’ against heavily-armed foreign fighters spread quickly through the armed forces. Withdrawal could be concealed by darkness. But, Mother Nature changed that decision.⁸

The forecast of rapidly deteriorating weather by nightfall in the surrounding mountains posed a serious threat to the planned helicopter extractions of the ANA elements. Withdrawal would have to be done in daylight negating the Night Stalkers' strengths in darkness. Worse, the helicopter ingress routes to accommodate the change were reduced by cloud-covered ridges and occluded mountain passes caused by the approaching storm. One channelized corridor remained. It was up the cultivated, narrow (3/4 mile at its mouth) Arghandab River valley which was flanked by steep cliffs—forty miles north of Qalat, the *laager* site adjacent to an ANA base.⁹

Like all river valleys in the arid mountains of Afghanistan, the one containing Shigan and Akhtar was heavily populated with agrarian enclaves. Both villages were composed of clusters of low buildings surrounded by walls. The compound walls corralled livestock at night. Blooming cherry trees that bordered well-cultivated farm plots irrigated by the Arghandab River created a false idyllic setting. The heavily-leafed, pretty flowering trees provided cover for enemy fighters and sympathizers inclined to shoot at low-flying helicopters.

Having scheduled an aerial refuel with AC-130J *Hercules* tankers following the night insertion, the 160th SOAR *Chinooks* (THUNDER Flight) and the two DAPs (CHISEL Flight) were ready for subsequent missions when they landed at the night *laager* site which would be a forward arming and refuel point (FARP) for the 82nd CAB aircraft.¹⁰ To extract the Commando forces from their blocking position on the east side of the Arghandab River, the AH-64 *Apache* attack helicopters and CH-47D *Chinooks* had to be refueled. To improve operations security (OPSEC) Afghan SOF soldiers were driving civilian fuel and munition trucks overland to the *laager* site. Night navigation proved difficult and delayed the convoy's arrival until after daybreak.

After several hours 'standing by' at the *laager* site to cover any emergency missions, the Night Stalkers returned to Kandahar at 0800 hours, 3 March. The FARP convoy had not arrived when they left. "Post-mission aircraft and weapons maintenance and rearming always preceded crew rest.

"The wild card was extracting both Afghan elements if the 82nd aircraft could not be refueled before we launched."

— CPT David P. Paulson*

That's 160th SOP [standing operating procedures]," explained SPC Peter M. Thomas,* crew chief on the left side mini-gun. "The second half of my tour I flew with Mr. Dockery [CW4 Hubert C. 'Cal' Dockery] and Mr. Shelton [CW3 Anthony J. 'Tony' Shelton*]; I knew what they expected."¹¹

Readiness for combat enabled 160th flight teams to quickly respond to engaged ground forces. Daylight extraction of the ANA Commando elements and their American SF advisory teams was feasible, but more dangerous, and required a 'Surge Operations' mode for planning and preparations. "The wild card was extracting both Afghan elements if the 82nd aircraft could not be refueled before we launched. Since the FARP was not established at the *laager* site when we left, we had to plan for 'worst case,'" said CPT Paulson*. "The enemy was not backing off in the Arghandab Valley."¹²

Despite repetitive air strikes well-protected enemy mortars continued to bracket the ANA SOF. The KKA and Commandos hunkered down against the banks of irrigation canals lining the fields around the villages. Since the enemy had been effectively employing its mortars since daybreak to 'pin down' the Afghan SOF, Soviet-made 12.7 mm crew-served DShK heavy machine guns, protected by Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) teams, could serve as antiaircraft artillery (AAA) against helicopters. This was not good news for THUNDER Flight. Radars guiding missile systems could be jammed and the missiles distracted by flares. But line-of-sight shoulder-aimed RPGs and mobile DShKs posed a serious threat. Evasive helicopter maneuvers were the primary defense against them. The AAA threat was one of many contingencies for which the Flight Lead, CW4 'Cal' Dockery, and the AMC, CPT Paulson,* had to plan and coordinate support.¹³

The 'left seat' Flight Lead, CW4 'Cal' Dockery, his 'right seater' FMQ pilot, CW3 'Tony' Shelton,* and the AMC, CPT Paulson,* alerted the THUNDER and CHISEL (DAP) Flight pilots and aircrews. Instead of having several days to plan as they had for their night insertion, the three had only hours to plan and coordinate contingencies with supporting units and commands. Shelton* did flight route planning and rehearsals, Dockery did the

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— SPC Peter M. Thomas*

160th SOAR Pilot & Aircrew Standards & Qualifications Progression

QUALIFICATION		PROGRESSION REQUIREMENTS
Pilot in Command	PC	2 to 3 months (faster for Flight Warrant than Commissioned Officers).
Basic Mission Qualified	BMQ	6 to 9 months to fulfill all requirements before evaluated and certified by a Fully Mission Qualified (FMQ) Instructor Pilot (IP).
Air Mission Commander	AMC	BMQ and 12 to 24 months to fulfill requirements before evaluated and certified by Company (Co) or Battalion (Bn) Standards Officer and Flight Co Commander (Cdr) or Bn Cdr.
Fully Mission Qualified	FMQ	BMQ and 18 to 24 months before FMQ Consideration Board and 1 to 2 months to fulfill requirements before FMQ evaluation & certification by Flight Co Standards Officer & Flight Co Cdr.
Flight Lead Qualified	FLQ	FMQ and 3 to 5 years before FLQ Consideration Board & 9 to 12 months to fulfill requirements & successfully pass FL Evaluation by Regimental Standards Officer during Bn STX (Standards Training Exercise) before certification by the Regimental Commander (RCO).

**Ground assault force leaders should be aware that 160th Flight Leads bring 6 to 7 years' experience 'supporting SOF customers' to the table; FMQs have 3 to 4 years; AMCs have at least a year (FLQ warrant officer pilots often serve as AMCs); and BMQs have almost a year as Night Stalkers. Prior Army aviation experience is relative. Specific training requirements/ events and standards have also been established for the SOAR enlisted aircrew (160th crew chiefs spend 4 to 5 years getting qualified as Flight Engineers) as well as the staff, maintenance, and support personnel.

160th Assessment and Selection (**'Green Platoon'**) training constitutes a **'rite of passage'** and is the **'common denominator'** among Night Stalkers.¹⁴

sequencing and contingency planning, and Paulson* shared the coordination and briefings with Dockery.¹⁵

Contingency plans addressed communications, protective air cap (Coalition Air Force fighters overhead), fire support coordination (Coalition Air Force close air support [CAS] and Army attack helicopters), anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) communications jamming during ingress, holding, and egress along pre-planned routes, selecting alternate landing zones and 'catch up' loiter positions, combat search and

rescue (CSAR), casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), downed aircraft situation and subsequent 'bump' plans for ground forces and aircrews, and refueling—airial and ground.¹⁶

Aloft CPT Paulson,* the AMC, responded to operational guidance and alerts from higher headquarters, reported 'hitting' critical execution checkpoints, and provided situation reports (SITREPs) to the Air Force-led Joint Special Operations Aviation Command (JSOAC) of the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A).

Paulson* was assigned to Army Special Operations Aviation (ARSOA) branch of the JSOAC. As AMC he signed the post-mission after action report (AAR).¹⁷

With their compressed schedule, rehearsals were minimal to afford 3-4 hours of crew rest. Extension of the aircrew day had to be approved by the CJSOTF commander.¹⁸ Details for every contingency had to be nailed down. There were no 'roadside rest areas' in the sky to resolve in-flight problems and prepare for the 'worst case' scenarios. The Flight Lead had to get this done before aircraft lift-off. "There was no turning around. We put them in and we WILL get them out," remarked CW4 Dockery.¹⁹ The aircrews stayed abreast of the ground situation.

The MH-47G aircrews had heard reports that resupply and medical evacuation attempts had failed earlier in the day. "We knew that we'd be going. The only question was 'When?' So, we loaded extra water and MREs [meals, ready to eat] aboard for the ground force. They went in very 'light'

at the FARP. They could extract the Commandos from their blocking positions on the east side of the river valley."²² Complications often wait to step forward.

With enemy mortar fire bracketing the primary (largest) landing zone the American SF advisors wanted all aircraft to use the smaller HLZs closest to their positions. The approaching storms threatened to turn the ground stalemate to the enemy's favor. Extraction had to be done as quickly as possible to avoid losing the momentous gains from the ANA action. The three MH-47Gs would not be 'over grossed' weight-wise by the Afghan SOF and their American advisors, but CW4 Dockery, the Flight Lead, would decide aircraft landing sequence.²³

The CHISEL Flight DAPs were already enroute when the THUNDER Flight lifted off into deceptively clear and sunny blue skies. Seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit seemed hot after several weeks of cold at Bagram. Postcard picture conditions at Kandahar caused Sergeant (SGT) Neal K.

"We knew that we'd be going. The only question was 'When?' So, we loaded extra water and MREs [meals, ready to eat] aboard for the ground force. They went in very 'light' the night before. What we did not do was reload our guns with 'day' ammo. Tracers would have been nice."

— SPC Peter M. Thomas*

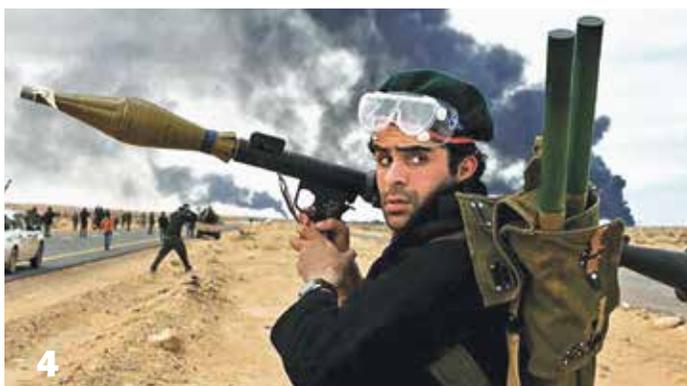
the night before. What we did not do was reload our guns with 'day' ammo. Tracers would have been nice," reflected Specialist Thomas* in hindsight.²⁰

"This was my first daylight 'exfil,'" said SGT Nathan L. Branch,* crew chief and right ramp M-240 gunner on THUNDER One-One. "While resting in the shade at Kandahar, I saw a rainbow directly overhead and took that as an omen for a good day. I came to the 160th in 2012, straight from AIT [Advanced Individual Training] at Fort Eustis, VA. I am a Night Stalker 'baby.' After less than a year in Maintenance [D Company], I was given a flight crew interview and I've been enjoying it ever since."²¹ Branch's* omen for a 'good day' changed meaning as the day stretched into darkness.

Flight Lead contingency plans anticipate 'Murphy's Law,' so CW4 Dockery had the fourth MH-47G divert to the *laager* site to 'stand by' for CASEVAC or CSAR missions. Three aircraft had inserted the ANA SOF the night before after an engine warning light had flared on one *Chinook* during pre-launch 'run-ups.' That proved to a very wise move," said CPT Paulson,* the AMC. "The 82nd CAB *Apache* and *Chinook* crews were standing ready. Their aircraft had been refueled

Konrad,* the Chalk One flight engineer, to think that this "might be a 'milk run' for the lead MH-47G. The first *Chinook* usually caught the enemy by surprise and often slipped by relatively unscathed. Trailing aircraft were easier targets for alert enemy gunners. At least that's how it worked at night," related Konrad.*²⁴ However, using one narrow ingress corridor in daylight and making sequential landings into smaller HLZs made that possibility unlikely. Still, one could hope for the best.

After flying over the mosque at the entrance to the river valley the three MH-47Gs, in a loose staggered trail formation, dropped down 'on the deck' (15-25 feet above the trees). "Based on the thirty to forty people milling around outside the mosque entrance there was little doubt that someone sent a warning," said the AMC, CPT Paulson.*²⁵ "This was reinforced by radio intercepts. They had 'eyes on us,' describing our aircraft, and direction of flight. We were told what weapons they were manning to engage us," said CW4 Dockery.²⁶ The DAPs had pushed straight to the HLZ to clear it for the approaching *Chinooks*. Engaging the heavily armed MH-60Ls apparently was not worth the



1 The Soviet-made 14.5 mm DShK heavy machine gun can be tripod-mounted for easier transport or gun carriage mounted for as anti-aircraft artillery (AAA).

2 The Soviet-made 7.62 mm Deglyanyov RPD 3 light machine gun had a large drum magazine.

3 The Soviet-made 7.62 mm Kalashnikov RPK light machine gun accommodates clip magazines and drum magazines.

4 The Soviet-made, shoulder-mounted RPG can fire 40 to 105 mm rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades.

risk. The MH-47G pilots started ‘bank rocking & rolling’ their big aircraft back and forth down the narrowing valley in elongated ‘S’ patterns.²⁷

CW4 ‘Cal’ Dockery, THUNDER Flight Lead, had programmed AAA communications jamming to begin twenty minutes from the target HLZ. ‘Murphy’ was alive; repeated calls got it turned on 8 minutes ‘out,’” said the Flight Lead.²⁸ Cherry trees in full bloom were swayed by the turbulent airstreams. The *Chinooks’* rotor wash blew flower petals like snowflakes down on the villagers. While rural Afghan men traditionally carry weapons, those below were not treated as threats by the MH-47G mini-gunners and rear M-240 machine gunners unless their gun barrels pointed skyward.²⁹

THUNDER Flight had established radio contact with the Afghan SOF as they entered the valley. The largely illiterate population appeared transfixed by the big, thundering aircraft racing overhead. “We (gunners) were on high alert, tracking ‘potential shooters,’” said SGT Konrad,* the Chalk One flight engineer on right mini-gun. “People were all over the place, but most were curious bystanders, watching ‘the show.’ I spotted a motorcycle with two men that headed north at high speed, but that was not enough to engage. Then, about six minutes ‘out’ from the HLZ, ‘Wham!’ we took what felt like a sledge hammer blow to our belly.”³⁰ In response CW3 Shelton,* the FMQ pilot on the controls, pushed the throttle to max speed.³¹

“A DShK [pronounced ‘Dish ka’] round slammed into the aircraft. The impact noise and subsequent structural vibration as it punched into the fuselage frame caused the ‘back enders’ on One-One (flight engineer and three crew chiefs) to quickly scan 360 degrees around them to see if something had come loose and crashed onto the rear deck—like a poorly lashed tool box. “The noise was really loud, considering that we were all helmeted! All four of us reported no obvious damage to Mr. Dockery,” said SGT Konrad.*³² “The guys in the back have better situational awareness—inside and outside. The elevated cockpit area is a small part of the aircraft. Our view is basically forward, 10 to 2 o’clock, with occasional 9 o’clock and 3 o’clock views during banks and turns,” related CPT Paulson,* the AMC.³³ “During later damage checks at the *laager* site, we discovered a large caliber bullet hole near the No. 1 Fuel Jettison Access panel,” said SGT Konrad.*³⁴ That hit was simply the beginning for THUNDER One-One.

“Seconds later we started getting peppered by small arms and 7.62 mm Kalashnikov RPK and Deglyanyov RPD light machinegun fire. The hits resonated like the sporadic ping-pong of light hail pellets before the onslaught of heavy marble-sized ice that drums down heavily in severe thunder storms. The seriousness hit hard when the ping-pong noises (ricocheting small arm bullets) changed first to sputtering, and then to loud rattling ‘Wop! Wop!’ like the noise heard in the first fifteen seconds when the popcorn starts exploding,” remembered SGT Konrad.* “By then I was so busy engaging targets and passing them to my (right side) M-240 gunner, SPC Williams,* it became

background noise."³⁵ "I saw dust from the mini gun bullets rise up alongside a guy with a Kalashnikov AK assault rifle. Then, I engaged a white-dressed RPG gunner and his assistant who was firing his AK at us from three o'clock. They were no more than fifty feet away," related Williams.* "I knew that an RPG had just been fired when I saw the fireworks 'sparkler' ignite. It was like a 'handful of glitter' thrown into the air. The sparkling came from the rocket propelling the grenade. This is very obvious at night. Insufficient time for the warhead to arm is all that you can hope for," said SPC Williams,* the right M-240 machine gunner.³⁶ "'Chief' Shelton* was 'jitter bugging' (violent evasive flight maneuvers) the 'bird' towards the HLZ at more than 120 knots by then," said SGT Konrad.*³⁷

"Though we were taking the brunt of the fire ambush, all three MH-47Gs of THUNDER Flight were receiving effective ground fire," said CW4 Dockery, the Flight Lead tracking reports from the *Chinooks* and DAPs. "It began with small arms ground fire--7.62 and 5.45 mm Soviet-made AK-47 and AK-74 assault rifles, and escalated as some RPK and RPD light machine guns joined in as RPGs were launched from both sides of the valley. Dust puffs against the cliff walls marked the explosions of RPGs that missed. I believe most shooters were just 'spraying' small arms and light machine gun fire at our belly as we 'rocketed by' overhead."³⁸

"In the rear we felt reverberations through our feet when armor piercing DShK rounds penetrated and rattled off the stringers. But, unless a round hit close to my gun position I only heard dull 'Thunks!' My flight helmet 'cut' most of the noise," said SGT Konrad.* "But, I could see their tracers really well. We were 'invading' a valley where nobody liked us."³⁹ "We had stirred up a hornet's nest," recalled CPT Paulson,* the AMC sitting in the aisle jump seat just behind the pilots. "If the people on the ground weren't shooting at us, they were running to hide in their houses. When the foreign fighters and their 'friends' started shooting it became pure mayhem on the ground."⁴⁰ The THUNDER One-One pilots, AMC, and aircrew focused on spotting obstacles and engaging threats 'passed' over the intercom while staying 'in tune' with the high speed evasive maneuvering.

CW3 Shelton,* 'flying one with the airplane,' registered an enemy fighter in his peripheral vision firing a DShK 14.5 mm heavy machine gun. "He was sitting astride his gun mount blasting away from a cliff side perch. I yelled into the intercom, 'Left gun, left gun, left gun,'" to alert the left side mini gunner, SPC Peter M. Thomas,* and his rear M-240 gunner, SGT Nathan L. Branch,* as I banked hard left," said Shelton.*⁴¹

"When I saw the gun carriage-mounted DShK crammed onto that cliff shelf, I wondered to myself as I began firing at him, 'How in the world had they gotten it up there?' He was positioned between a couple of trees for cover. We were flying so fast that I only got off a short burst," said SPC Thomas.*⁴² CW4 Dockery in the left seat, said, "I saw gunpowder smoke 'rings' puff out of that barrel every time he fired. 'Andy'* rocked the 'bird' over almost forty degrees to assist the gunners."⁴³

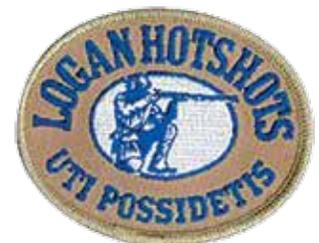
"We got both guns on him before breaking clear," said SGT Branch,* "but we were flying so fast and using 'night ammunition' (no tracers) it was impossible to tell if we were hitting."⁴⁴ "Our warnings alerted Chalks Two and Three to avoid the DShK," said Dockery, the Flight Lead. "We shortly had a DShK round hit up front."⁴⁵

"I thought that we had broken clear until 'Andy' started turning and slowing down to prepare for landing. Then, a loud 'Thunk!' shook the floor under my feet so hard that I instinctively 'knee jerked' them straight up, off the pedals. I banged them against the multi-functional dashboard (MFD equates to an instrument panel). Whether it was that 'old' guy who got us or another DShK gunner was hard to tell. I smelled something burning and instinctively looked down for smoke. The smell was intensifying," said the Flight Lead. "As I was frantically feeling under my butt for blood and looking down around my feet to locate any smoke, that burning smell suddenly dissipated."⁴⁶ "Specialist Thomas* and I glanced towards the cockpit. Seeing no billowing smoke, we went back to firing," said SGT Konrad.* "We were close to the HLZ. It was time to give obstacle warnings and look for enemy threats around the landing zone."⁴⁷

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— CW4 Hubert C. 'Cal' Dockery

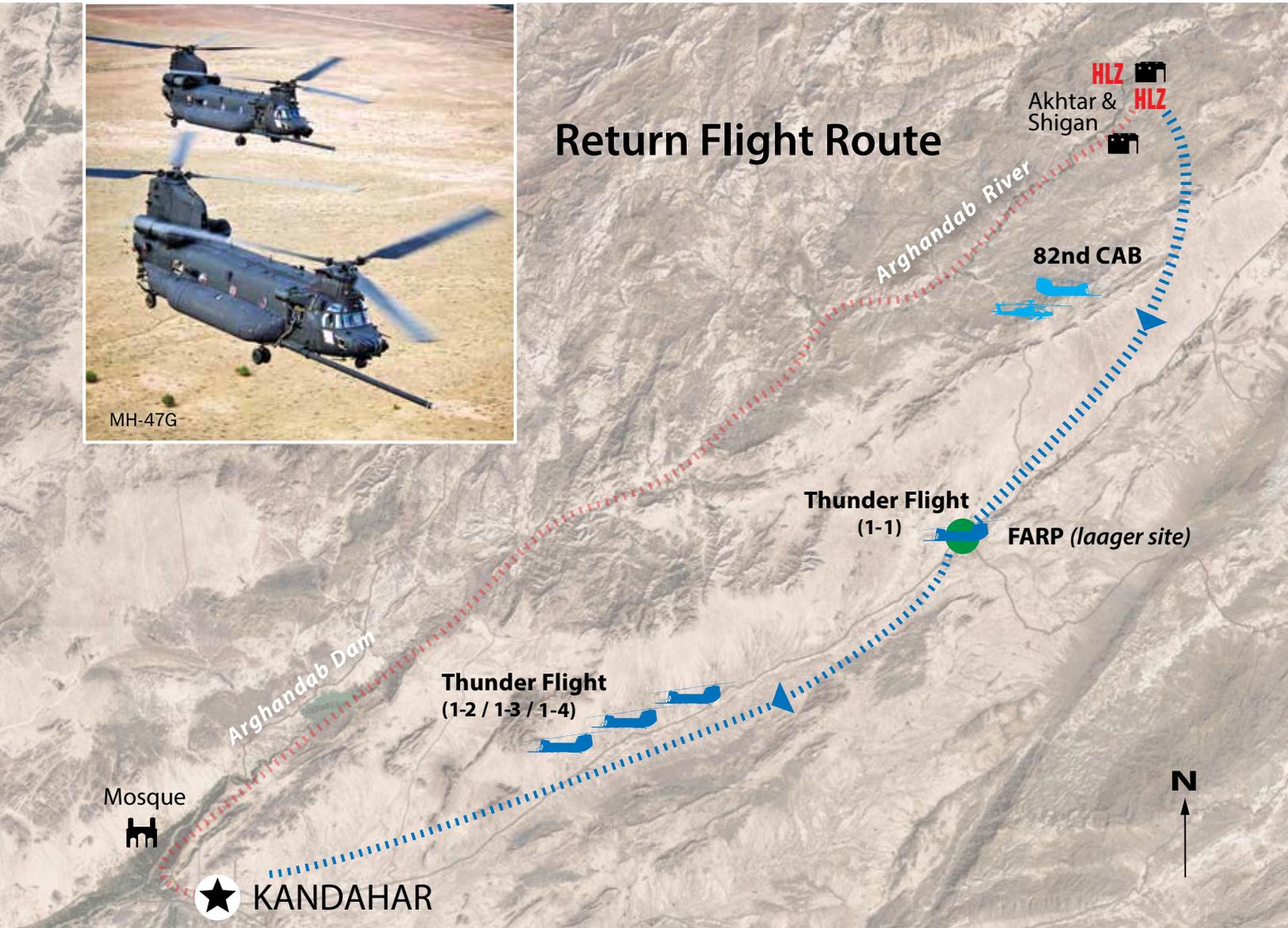
CW4 Hubert C. 'Cal' Dockery had done hairy work before the Army. He paid his tuition at Utah State University with money earned summers fighting forest fires as a Logan Hotshot. In July 2013, nineteen Granite Mountain Hotshots died in an out-of-control wildfire near Prescott, AZ, that burned more than 200 buildings and 8,000 acres.





MH-47G

Return Flight Route



HLZ East & West Helicopter Landing Zones (HLZ)

● Forward Arming/Refueling Point (FARP)

“When we took that hard hit to the cockpit, I spotted a small plateau straight ahead, just beyond the HLZ, but near the ground force, where I could control crash if necessary,” related CW3 Shelton.^{*48} “That round into cockpit area got my attention, but having spotted the ground force, I knew that they could protect us if we crashed,” stated Specialist Thomas,* left mini-gunner.^{*49} “Just seconds after getting the ‘HLZ clear’ from the ‘back ends,’ I banked hard left, ‘button-holing’ 270 degrees with a pedal turn, started reducing power, then flared to ‘hop’ a ditch, and ‘planted four gear’ smack on the HLZ. The crew chiefs dropped the ramp and they jumped out to secure our flanks. SGT Konrad,* the flight engineer, climbed down and made a cursory ‘360’ [degrees] damage check,” said CW3 Shelton.* “In those few moments waiting for the Commandos to load

the cockpit became eerily quiet except for the blaring radios. To me it was like holding your breath in a ‘dead’ zone. I knew Chalks Two and Three were positioning themselves to land as soon as I lifted off. The DAPs were engaging enemy running towards the fight from the northeast.”^{*50}

“Then, we were loaded. As I cautiously began lifting the aircraft, the controls felt a little sluggish. I pivoted the ‘bird’ around and aimed the nose towards a hole in the clouds that were blanketing the valley,” said CW3 Shelton.^{*51} “After we cleared the trees, I heard pops of small arms fire. But not for long, because we were pushing hard for the safety of higher altitude,” said SPC Thomas.* “My view became limited as we shadowed the valley cliff wall on the way out.”^{*52} “Once out of DShK range I reduced our climb to ‘slow and steady’ to minimize strain on the airframe,” said CW3 Shelton.^{*53}

“Looking back down the valley on the way out, it reminded me a little of the Grand Canyon,” remarked SGT Konrad,* the flight engineer and right mini gunner.⁵⁴

THUNDER One-Two and One-Three, using the terrain for cover as they made low angle approaches, flew into the ‘shooting gallery’ fast, one right behind the other. After his ‘shoot up’ CW4 Dockery wanted to minimize exposure. He told both *Chinooks* to land together on the two smallest HLZs.⁵⁵ It was a tight fit for both. Just as CW3 Shelton* had to do, CW4 Randall W. Lawton,* piloting One-Three, ‘skipped’ over a drainage ditch to land. The second MH-47G (One-Two), flown by CW4 John D. MacIntosh,* had MAJ David M. Caldwell,* the 1st Battalion Flight Surgeon, and two flight medics aboard. They took a wounded Commando and an injured, heavily-tattooed Chechen female detainee on board and began treating them. The Chechen ‘Angel of Death’ (ANA SOF nickname for her) was alleged to have been buying children and women for the international sex market. One-Two lifted out and got away clean.⁵⁶ It was different for One-Three.

CW4 Lawton,* flying THUNDER One-Three, was using max torque to lift straight up when he spotted two power lines at tree top level close to his forward rotor tips. To compensate for the low rotor (downward bend) situation at high torque, Lawton* eased the power and made quick flight control adjustments to remain steady. Having recovered his aircraft, Lawton* began a slow turn to lift out. Just when he thought he was clear of the tight HLZ, his aft landing gear snagged the power lines and ripped them away. One-Three began its ascent dragging sixty feet of wire. With their ‘monkey straps’ snap-linked into the aircraft floor, the ramp crew chiefs cleared the wire as the aircraft gained altitude.⁵⁷ It was a ‘Katie, bar the door!’ situation as One-Three accelerated to get beyond DShK range.

As the last *Chinook* (THUNDER One-Three) lifted clear, the DAPs swept the HLZs for heavy machineguns before racing to catch the egressing MH-47Gs. CHISEL Flight protected the three *Chinooks* into the *laager* site. CW3 Shelton* made a precautionary landing to thoroughly check the aircraft. By then it was dark.⁵⁸

As soon as the ground force was offloaded from THUNDER One-One and moving to board THUNDER One-Four, the flight engineer and three crew chiefs did Battle Damage Assessments (BDA) inside and out with flashlights.⁵⁹ The ANA SOF boarded the ‘stand by’ MH-47G (One-Four) to return to Kandahar. After ‘passing’ the BDA report to the CJSOAC with their satellite communications (SATCOM) radio, THUNDER One-One was deemed non-mission capable and was grounded. A Damage Assessment Recovery Team (DART) was assembled for dispatch to the *laager* site. The THUNDER One-One crew secured the MH-47G and sat down to wait in the darkness. They would be ‘backhauled’ to Kandahar aboard the two MH-60L *Black Hawks* carrying the DART and their equipment.⁶⁰

“The next thing we knew THUNDER One-One was alone at the *laager* site. There were a couple of Air Force Pararescue Jumpers (PJs) left behind so that One-Four could carry our

ANA SOF. The *laager* site was ‘sketchy.’ Supposedly ANA were manning the perimeter. Fortunately, we were still pretty ‘amped up’ and stayed awake just talking about the mission,” recalled SPC Thomas.*⁶¹ “I was a qualification [a FARP refueling] short of being FMQ when we arrived in February,” said SPC Williams.* “All of us ‘back enders’ were Night Stalkers ‘Babies.’”⁶² “And, my first ride in a *Black Hawk* was going to be back to Kandahar. That was sweet,” commented SPC Thomas.*⁶³

THUNDER Flight battle damage was significant. During the ten minutes of heavy ground fire, THUNDER One-One had suffered nine large caliber and multiple small arms penetrations in various places. The rotor blades had several bullet holes and numerous edge chips. Daylight revealed innumerable RPG creases and dents and a rash of small arms pepper marks. The most serious damage was caused by the DShK round that penetrated the cockpit belly area (beneath CW4 Dockery’s feet). It slashed through, but did not sever, the two tubes shielding the push-pull control rods. THUNDER One-Three had two armor piercing bullet penetrations and minor wire damage to its rear landing gear. On the positive side of the ledger none of the aircrews had wounded or injured. The two CHISEL Flight DAPs, Nine-One and Nine-Two, tallied five enemy KIA, one WIA, and two unconfirmed KIA.⁶⁴

*“Looking back down the valley
on the way out, it reminded me
a little of the Grand Canyon.”*

— SGT Neal K. Konrad*

“In retrospect, that was the hairiest mission I have ever experienced in the 160th, or the Army for that matter. But, the seamless melding of pilots, aircrews, and maintainers from the different Night Stalker battalions made success without casualties possible. I’m proud to be a member of this winning combination,” stated CPT David Paulson,* the ‘jump seat’ AMC for Operation ZAMMARI 241.⁶⁵ The pre-mission rainbow spotted by SGT Nathan Branch,* left ramp M-240 gunner and crew chief, had truly been a good omen.⁶⁶ “It turned out to be a very exciting day,” said SPC Peter Thomas,* the left mini-gunner and crew chief.⁶⁷

Despite the ANA SOF rescue operation growing from a 30-man ground force to 400+ ANA and advisors in less than 24 hours, the night infiltrations on 2 March 2015 went smoothly. The ANA SOF assault to rescue the 30 Hazara hostages was a couple of days late. During the building clearings sufficient evidence was found to reveal that

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MH-60L *Black Hawk* Defensive Armed Penetrator (DAP).

the hostages had been moved to another location well before the KKA assault. The well-trained and equipped enemy force was not budging from their strong defensive positions. They were ready to fight. CAS through the night enabled the ANA SOF to retain a ‘beach head,’ but well-directed enemy mortar fire commencing at daybreak stalemated the fight. When an approaching major storm threatened to prevent the helicopter withdrawals of the ANA and turn their limited success into major defeat, the 160th SOAR airmen lived up to their motto, “Night Stalkers Don’t Quit (NSDQ)!”

Hammered hard by a fusillade of fire from multiple ground to air ambushes--small arms to heavy machine guns and RPGs-- for more than ten minutes, THUNDER Flight, protected by the DAPs of CHISEL Flight ‘rescued’ the beleaguered ANA SOF troops enabling them to fight again proudly for their country. The six 160th helicopters sustained no irreparable damage. Night Stalker pilots and aircrews from three different battalions planned, coordinated, flew, and fought seamlessly. This is the true measure of a well-

trained ARSOF element. ZAMMARI 241 pointed to a need for more aerial gunnery at higher speeds (90-120 knots) when aircraft are maneuvering to evade enemy fire. The failure to rearm with daytime ammunition can be attributed to fatigue; a simple add-on to the checklists that keep all Night Stalkers ‘at the top of their game, all the time’ will suffice. The confidence of ANASOF was buoyed by American resources—helicopters and CAS—and this action reinforced foreign internal defense (FID) as the primary SF mission in this unconventional warfare (UW) environment. †

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The four ‘backenders’ on THUNDER One-One were all Night Stalker ‘Babies.’

