Special Forces soldier from ODA 511 conducting Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE) of Objective BRIGID. Photographs were taken of the text found on chalkboards for subsequent analysis.

The Raid at Hazar Qadam

Reprinted in part from Weapon of Choice: ARSOF in Afghanistan

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This article incorporates new material into an early account initially published in *Weapon of Choice: ARSOF in Afghanistan*. That book was the first official Army history of that conflict to be published and it established procedures for ‘sanitizing’ combat accounts of classified articles. This updated text and accompanying photos and maps support the USASOC commander’s desire to emphasize early Special Forces experiences conducting counter-terrorist operations in Afghanistan. There remains a wealth of information to learn from those operations.

As the hunt for Osama bin Laden and the al Qaeda leadership continued in Afghanistan through the winter of 2001-2002, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) directed a discrete intelligence-gathering mission that required the long-range reconnaissance and surveillance and urban warfare close-quarters battle skills of Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group (SFG) (A/1/5). This mission was referred to as a sensitive site exploitation (SSE), and it called for the focused search and recovery of enemy personnel, documents, manuals, monies, computers, communications equipment, explosives, weaponry, and related materials that might be of intelligence value.

Commanded by Major (MAJ) Jon West* (pseudonym), A/1/5 was specifically organized, trained, and equipped for this type of mission. The company supported USCENTCOM on particularly complex long-range reconnaissance and
surveillance and direct action (DA) missions—raids and surgical strikes—predominantly in urban or built-up areas. All unit members were highly trained in the skills of close-quarters, room-to-room fighting; long-range surveillance; and sniping.4

Since December 2001, A/1/5 had conducted three SSE missions with marked success. Surprise was so complete and execution so rapid that only two shots had been fired in all three missions—both warning shots prompting immediate surrenders. The company captured nine al Qaeda suspects (detainees); destroyed several tons of weapons and ammunition; and made valuable intelligence finds, including satellite telephones, tape recordings, and encrypted electronic records.5

On 9 January 2002, the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) of USCENTCOM issued another SSE order to U.S. Navy Captain Robert S. Harward, commander, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force–South (CJSOTF-South), then based at Kandahar Airport.6 CFLCC tasked CJSOTF-South to conduct an SSE of two suspected al Qaeda compounds at Hazar Qadam near the town of Oruzgan, 166 km northeast of Kandahar in mountainous Oruzgan Province. The mission, designated “AQ-048,” was to kill or capture any Taliban or al Qaeda personnel and collect material for intelligence analysis.7

The intelligence staff at CENTCOM disclosed two target sites to CFLCC. Each walled compound contained a collection of various-sized buildings. The compounds were surrounded by orchards and farm fields, and the two sites were 1.5 km apart. When the photo interpreters suggested that there might be women and children in the compounds, planners ruled out a ‘kinetic strike’ (aerial bombardment) and directed a ground raid. Because of the size and complexity of the two sites, Captain Harward selected A/1/5 for the SSE mission and attached a New Zealand Special Air Service (SAS) unit.8

MAJ West* decided he would seize both sites simultaneously and divided his company into two assault forces. New Zealand SAS troops were designated as a quick-reaction force (QRF) in the event more combat power was needed. West* would lead Special Forces Operational Detachments Alpha (ODAs) 512, 513, and 514 in an assault of the westernmost site, named Objective KELLY. The eastern compound, designated Objective BRIGID, became the target for ODAs 511 and 516, led by the company operations officer, Chief Warrant Three (CW3) Dwight Ashford.*9

Each force would have sufficient radio operators, explosive ordnance demolition (EOD) experts, interpreters, and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents attached. The FBI agents would select those detainees they wanted for questioning and also assume ‘chain of custody’ responsibility for all evidence collected to ensure admissibility in any subsequent legal proceedings. If necessary, they would also serve as government witnesses in the event of suspects being charged with crimes in a U.S. court.10 At this early stage in the conflict that was still a consideration.

To avoid establishing predictable operational patterns in executing their mission, MAJ West* arranged for helicopters to infiltrate the assault forces at night into separate remote landing zones (LZs) several kilometers (km) away from the objectives. The high-altitude mountain valley LZs were hidden from Hazar Qadam by intervening ridges. Those features also masked the sound of the helicopters as they flew nap-of-the-earth (NOE) routes that skimmed along the bottom of valleys and popped over passes. After landing, Ashford’s mobile force, wearing night-vision goggles (NVGs),

Soldiers from ODA 513 practice breaching compound walls with live explosive charges at a demolition range near Kandahar, Afghanistan.
Above | Sketch map of Objective KELLY, showing terrain and buildings. Some buildings are marked with enemy or equipment encountered and the purpose for the structure. The general scheme of maneuver for the assault on Objective Kelly was: Following infiltration by helicopter about five kilometers to the east, the assault force approached KELLY in three groups and moved to designated breach points (BP1, BP2, BP3). Simultaneous with the assault on Obj BRIGID 1.5 kilometers to the south, all three ODAs breached and then cleared their respective sector. ODA 512 breached BP1 and cleared Sector A, ODA 514 breached BP3 and cleared Sector B, and ODA 513 breached BP2 and cleared Sector C. On order, the assault elements conducted sensitive site exploitation of their respective areas. Fires from an AC-130 were ready to isolate the objective area. The individual buildings were assigned numbers to assist in command and control of the assault forces during the attack and to aid in delivery of supporting fires if needed.

Below | Sketch map showing the relationship of both objectives (KELLY and BRIGID) to each other, about 1.5 kilometers apart.

*Note: The semi-improved road ran in front of both sites.
Objectives KELLY and BRIGID

Above | Sketch map of Objective BRIGID, showing terrain and buildings. Although the original plan was to enter the compound in vehicles, the presence of obstacles at point A caused the force to dismount and move east to breach the compound wall at point B. After breaching the wall, the assault force (ODAs 511 and 516) attacked under fire from buildings 1 and 3. The assault force breached building 1, eliminating the immediate threat while still taking fire. Meanwhile, the support vehicles bypassed the obstacles at point A and entered the compound at point E, where they provided supporting fires. Some enemy escaped to some ruins east of the objective while the assault force seized buildings 1 and 3. Sensitive site exploitation followed.
would drive 6 km on a dirt road to Objective BRIGID in two heavily-armed high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs), or ground mobility vehicles (GMVs). West’s three Special Forces teams, also wearing NVGs, would walk 5 km around a mountain peak to approach their target, Objective KELLY.

The CFLCC commander wanted surveillance teams to have ‘eyes on target’ of AQ-048 well ahead of the raids, in part to confirm the presence of noncombatants (women and children) at the two sites. But three attempts by Marine Corps CH-46 ‘Sea Knight’ helicopters to infiltrate a long-range reconnaissance element failed: the first terminated because of aircraft mechanical problems; the second failed because of heavy icing on the helicopter; and the third aborted on landing when blowing snow ‘whited-out’ the LZ. During a 17 January video teleconference (VTC), the CENTCOM J3 restated his desire to execute SSE mission AQ-048. Soon after, CFLCC ordered the mission to proceed without the desired preliminary surveillance of the target sites.

Continuous changes because of helicopter availability and priorities delayed the mission for five days until the night of 22 January. The KELLY force launched from Kandahar around 2130 hours local time and landed at its offset LZ. In the meantime, while flying to Kandahar to pick up the BRIGID force, the Bagram-based helicopter pilots reported marginal weather near Hazar Qadam that was becoming worse. Based on their estimate, Captain Harward, the commander of CJSOTF-South, decided to postpone the AQ-048 mission for 24 hours. Under a bright moon with broken clouds and Fahrenheit temperatures in the low teens, the KELLY force marched back to its initial LZ for extraction, and the AC-130 ‘Spectre’ gunship already en route to support the raid returned to Masirah Island, off the coast of Oman.

The next night, 23 January 2002, the weather had cleared and the mission was launched again. This time, two Marine Corps CH-53s carried West’s 45-man dismounted KELLY force to its insertion LZ. Three MH-47Es from the 2nd Battalion, 160th SOAR, transported Ashford’s mobile force. Two ‘Chinooks’ carried GMVs and drivers while the third ferried the 26 soldiers who would ride the trucks to Objective BRIGID.

After a quiet tactical march at 17 degrees Fahrenheit and a slow drive under NVGs across terrain 7,000 feet above sea level, the two assault forces arrived at their pre-assault positions right on schedule. Maintaining close communications, the two forces simultaneously moved their security elements into position. However, a deep irrigation ditch just outside the wall of BRIGID forced the assaulters to dismount and approach their entry points on foot. The vehicle drivers and mounted gun teams began hastily searching for a way to bypass or cross the deep ditch. To execute both ‘hits’ simultaneously, CW3 Ashford would have to assault the target without the backup heavy weapons from his GMVs. Understanding the situation, MAJ West concurred.

Having received an ‘up’ from all elements, signifying their readiness to attack, both assault leaders initiated their attacks according to a well-rehearsed sequence of commands: “Stand by . . . I have control. Five, four, three, two, one—Execute!” The three breaching charges on the three entry points were detonated simultaneously on “Execute,” and the assault elements positioned to the side of each entry point stormed into the compound. Within minutes, the assault teams at KELLY had physically overpowered two dozen enemy fighters in the 10 buildings on the compound. One enemy fighter, firing his weapon from a doorway, wounded Staff Sergeant (SSG) Jesse Wilcox in the right foot. As the enemy fighter backed out of the building spraying bullets into the darkness, a security team member killed him with a well-placed shot. Another enemy sentry was killed when he fired on the assaulters.
from outside the compound. These were the only two enemy fatalities at Objective KELLY.\textsuperscript{19}

At Objective BRIGID, a guard opened fire when he spotted Ashford’s\textsuperscript{*} assault teams as they ran through the main gate of the compound to their breach points. His alarm shots prompted several firefights as the assaulters fought their way across the courtyard and into the main building. Once inside, it was close-quarters combat from room to room, and the resistance was stout. Having initially stunned the enemy fighters in the room with flash-bang grenades, the assaulters killed five enemy fighters as two others escaped out windows. When Master Sergeant (MSG) Albert Payle\textsuperscript{*} and Sergeant First Class (SFC) Jon Hsu\textsuperscript{*} burst into another room, an enemy fighter ran out between them. Hsu\textsuperscript{*} spun about and pursued him, shooting him down before he could escape. Alone and wearing NVGs, MSG Payle\textsuperscript{*} faced three enemy fighters surrounding him in the darkened room. He quickly killed two of them with his M-4 carbine before the third jumped him from behind, clawing at his eyes. Payle\textsuperscript{*} using combat jiu-jitsu, threw the enemy soldier over his shoulder, sharply snapping the man’s head to one side. In the darkness, MSG Payle\textsuperscript{*} felt the enemy fighter, even with a broken neck, still grasping at him. He drew his 9mm pistol and fired twice, finally finishing his opponent. As he started to move, Payle\textsuperscript{*} realized that his opponent was still hanging on him, his hand having been caught in his body armor during their struggle. Not all fought as violently or so stubbornly. In the next room, a single enemy fighter dropped his rifle when assaulters charged in. He was quickly subdued and flex-cuffed.\textsuperscript{20}

In the courtyard, after killing several defenders, the BRIGID assault team came under heavy rifle and machine gun fire from some enemy fighters hiding in a pile of rubble adjacent to the main building. Just as things were getting tense, the two heavily-armed HMMWVs wheeled into the compound firing their M-2 .50-caliber machine gun and MK-19 40mm grenade launcher.\textsuperscript{21} The heavy firepower quickly silenced the enemy behind the rubble heap.

But the fighting was not over, even after BRIGID was thought to have been secured. CW3 Ashford’s\textsuperscript{*} Pashtu-speaking interpreter, Marine Corps Corporal (CPL) Colin Bermann,* had come inside the main building to examine some documents. While Bermann\textsuperscript{*} was reading the papers with his small penlight, an enemy fighter, who was thought to be dead, quietly got up from the dirt floor and attacked him with his bare hands. The surprised Bermann\textsuperscript{*} managed to shove his assailant aside. He and an assaulter then killed the attacker with their M-4 carbines.\textsuperscript{22}

With the mission complete at Objective BRIGID, CW3 Ashford\textsuperscript{*} sent a survey team to mark the nearby LZ before he radioed for the waiting helicopters to extract his force. The team reported back that the primary LZ was unusable and suggested the alternate site. However, the walled farmhouse next to that site had not yet been checked, cleared, and secured. Ashford\textsuperscript{*} told ODA 516 to clear the building. The Special Forces team applied an explosive breaching charge to the wall and blew an entry way into the small yard. Inside the farmhouse, they found a family huddled together, frightened by the gunfire and explosions. The assaulters moved them into a windowless room for safety and continued to clear the area.\textsuperscript{23}
ODA 516’s actions reflected the professionalism and character of the Company A soldiers. Minutes before, the detachment was fighting close quarters with the enemy in the freezing darkness. Then, a helmeted and masked assaulter was patiently leading a little girl by her hand to her family. The unit’s reputation had preceded it: the farmer’s wife had been hysterical until the assaulters identified themselves as Ameriki (American). With that one word, the woman regained her composure and quietly guided her children to the safe area.24

At Objective KELLY, MAJ West* knew the operation was a success, as defined by his orders. They had taken 27 detainees; confirmed 16 dead enemy fighters; seized radios and documents; and were about to demolish antiaircraft cannons, mortars, and other weapons and munitions.25 The AC-130 ‘Spectre’ gunships overhead that had covered their assault would soon cannonade materiel that could not be easily removed or destroyed. The entire operation had been completed in less than two hours, but MAJ West* had an inkling of trouble.

As the KELLY force consolidated on its objective, an assaulter brought West* a flag of the new Afghan Interim Authority (AIA) that he found during a search of the site. And, as the shooting died down at Objective BRIGID, CW3 Ashford* radioed West* that one of his assault force found an Afghan national flag inside the compound gate. MAJ West* immediately radioed CJSOTF-South, requesting that USCENTCOM again verify that there were no ‘friendlies’ at Hazar Qadam before he would order the destruction of the captured arms and munitions. The reply was, “No, there are no ‘friendlies’ at that site.”26 As it turned out, this was not quite correct.
The intelligence that indicated Hazar Qadam (AQ-048) was a Taliban or al Qaeda site proved to be dated. It seemed that the Afghan fighters at Hazar Qadam had crossed over to the new AIA government two weeks before the raid. Afghan officials had not reported this. Soon afterward, the Washington Post reported, “U.S. Was Misled in Deadly Raid.” BBC news quoted Afghan leader Hamid Karzai as saying the raid was, “a mistake of sorts,” while simultaneously announcing his intent to rid the country of ‘warlordism.’ Controversy was further exacerbated when the 24/7 news media published the unsubstantiated ‘eyewitness accounts’ of Afghans who claimed to have been present during the attacks. They accused the American soldiers of atrocities against ‘unarmed farmers.’ Anti-American elements had easily duped the 24/7 international news media who ‘ran with the story’ without proof. The fabricated stories were all eventually disproved, but while the official investigation was still under way the New York Times headlined the CENTCOM commander’s remarks: “After January Raid, GEN Franks Promises to Do Better.”

For MAJ West* and his men, no explanation was forthcoming as to why obsolete intelligence at CENTCOM drove the requirement for SSE on AQ-048. The fact that the Afghan men at Hazar Qadam stood and fought, while during all other A/1/5 SSE missions the men simply surrendered or fled, was established. And the fact that the women in the compound at Hazar Qadam, without being told, instinctively held out their hands to be flex-cuffed demonstrated that this group knew well the American SSE procedure for Taliban and al-Qaeda prisoners. MAJ West* felt no regrets about his company’s actions at AQ-048. While not addressing issues of flawed intelligence that led to the raid, USCENTCOM Commander General (GEN) Tommy R. Franks, noted: “American troops, dressed in American uniforms, had returned fire after first being fired upon.” On closing the post-raid investigation, Franks declared: “I find no fault with very highly trained people who went in on the ground, and I find no fault that those very highly trained people killed people who fired at them.”

The Secretary of Defense personally defended A/1/5 after the raid: “It is no mistake at all,” argued Donald Rumsfeld, “if you’re fired on, to fire back.”

Given the parameters of the mission assigned by higher headquarters, the soldiers of A/1/5 performed admirably. When faced with changes in the situation on the ground, I find no fault with very highly trained people who went in on the ground. — USCENTCOM Commander General (GEN) Tommy R. Franks
they were able to fall back on the detailed planning and rehearsed actions. That enabled them to adapt their tactics to meet the threat. Their previous experiences also helped them recognize when circumstances had changed. All of these factors came together in the ‘heat of combat,’ forcing individuals to make ‘snap’ decisions to save American lives and accomplish the mission.

Endnotes

1. Major material extracted from Charles H. Briscoe, et al, Weapon of Choice: ARSOF in Afghanistan (Amended Edition; Washington, DC: GPO, 2016), 235-41. Some corrections, editing, and revisions have been made and new material introduced to bring the story up to date.


3. According to Joint Pub 1-02, DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, March 2017 (Joint Staff; Washington, DC: GPO), 213, on Internet at: http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/dictionary.pdf, accessed on 28 March 2017, “Sensitive Site” is defined as: “A geographically-limited area that contains, but is not limited to, adversary information systems, critical government facilities, and areas suspected of containing high-value targets.”

4. West* and Ashford* Interview.

5. West* and Ashford* Interview.


7. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

8. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

9. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

10. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.” In the early part of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), procedures were still being refined for how best to bring terrorists to justice. At that time, some consideration was still being given to charging captured Taliban or al Qaeda members with crimes and conducting trials within the U.S. court system. In the event of such an instance, Federal law officials sometimes accompanied assault units to provide legal advice and assistance.

11. These modified armored trucks bristled with five M240 7.62mm machine guns and either an MK-19 40mm grenade launcher or an M-2 12.65mm (.50-caliber) heavy machine gun and carried 15 soldiers. They were benignly called ground mobility vehicles (GMVs).

12. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

13. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

14. The company commander was not informed of the reason for the ‘mission abort’ until his return to Kandahar, because at the landing zone, as per his plan, his force had not set up the satellite antenna needed to communicate with CJSOTF-South at Kandahar. MAJ Jon West,* interview with Kalev I. Sepp, 10-11 July 2002, Fort Campbell, KY, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC (hereafter referred to as “West* interview”).

15. The two CH-53 ‘Sea Stallion’ helicopters came from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU).

16. This was the first and only mission where any element of A/1/5 flew in U.S. Army Special Operations MH-47 ‘Chinooks’ in Afghanistan.

17. West* and Ashford* Interview.

18. West* and Ashford* Interview.

19. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

20. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

21. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

22. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

23. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

24. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”

25. Two other enemy fighters died of their wounds shortly afterward. Four of the detainees were found shackled in leg irons. West* and Ashford* Interview.

26. West* and Ashford* Interview; Memorandum, “Narrative After-Action Report of Target AQ-048.”


