

Afghan Ambush: ODA 744 in Afghanistan



by Robert W. Jones Jr.

THE primary mission of the 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) is to provide the full spectrum of Special Forces capabilities in support of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM).¹ However, with the events of 9/11 and the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism, missions and focus areas have expanded for both the Army and its special operations forces. When Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) began, the soldiers of the 7th SFG, and Operational Detachment - Alpha (ODA) 744 in particular, soon discovered that their excellent training and good planning served them just as well in the high deserts of the Middle East as in the lush terrain of Latin America.

Although Afghanistan is 8,000 miles and nine time zones distant from South America, the leadership of 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (2/7th SFG) felt ready and qualified for its new mission. As the battalion conducted an in-depth mission analysis, many similarities between the insurgencies in Afghanistan and insurgencies in parts of Latin America emerged. The “people equation” was similar in both regions: poverty plus drugs plus an insurgency attempting to regain power equals an unconventional warfare environment—whether it is in El Salvador, Colombia, or Afghanistan.²

On 17 July 2002, 7th SFG received the warning order for the deployment of one battalion to replace 2nd Battalion, 3rd SFG in Afghanistan. With a transition date of 1 October 2002, mission planners quickly changed their focus from the SOUTHCOM area to Afghanistan. Units at all levels, from the battalion through the companies to the individual ODAs, initiated a detailed mission analysis to prepare the Special Forces soldiers for the impending deployment.³

The next two months became a whirlwind of preparation for the soldiers. Two primary activities consumed the most time: the integration of new personnel and training. All ODAs received new personnel, some fresh from the Special Forces Qualification Course, while other personnel transferred from within the group or battalion. Some ODAs gained as many as five or six soldiers to bring them up to their full strength of twelve soldiers. All soldiers trained with a variety of vehicles and weapons, including emergency close air support, preparing for the Afghan environment.

The 2/7th SFG’s operational area was in the southern Pashtun-speaking areas of Afghanistan, with the command and control based out of the Forward Operational Base (FOB) 72 located at Kandahar Airfield.⁴ Based on its assessment of this operational area, the Advanced Operations Base (AOB) 740 staff determined a new U.S. firebase was required to combat Taliban insurgents in Helmand Province, located about 120 kilometers west of Kandahar.⁵

The southern portion of Afghanistan was virtually absent of coalition personnel, except for one or two ODAs from 20th SFG that ran sporadic missions to the west, east and south of Kandahar. The AOB 740 assessment showed two potential areas west and south of Kandahar Province to place ODAs. Upon arrival of its

main body, AOB 740 ordered ODAs 744 and 741 to establish the new firebase camp at Gereshk in Helmand Province. While Lashkar Gah was the provincial capital, Gereshk was located near both Highway 1—the primary east-west line of communication (LOC) through the province and the entire southwest part of Afghanistan (Iran to Kandahar to the Pakistani border through Spin Boldak)—and along the





Photo courtesy of ODA 744

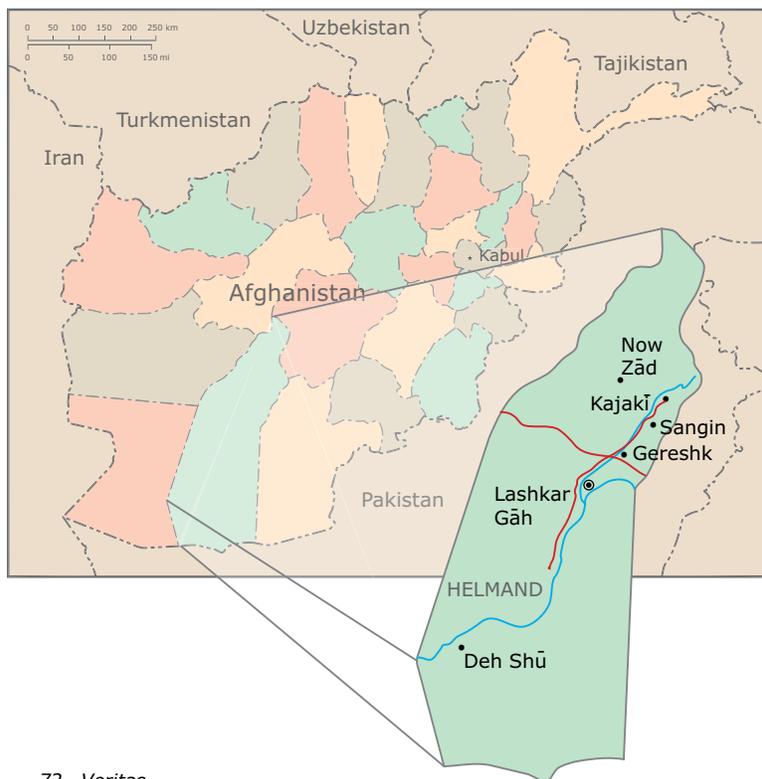
Aerial views of Firebase Gereshk, which measured approximately one mile in circumference.

primary north-south LOC for entry into the central region.

In the last week of October 2002, ODAs 744 and 741 led a convoy of twenty-nine vehicles to the Gereshk firebase site. Heavy construction support for the firebase came from the engineers of the 769th Engineer Battalion (Louisiana National Guard) assigned to Task Force 180. After about three weeks, with the firebase construction completed, the engineers departed. Ultimately, the inner perimeter of the firebase was approximately one-mile in circumference (see Figure 4).

With the establishment of Firebase Gereshk, additional forces were attached to continue the unconventional warfare campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in the province. Firebase Gereshk grew from housing the two 2/7th SFG ODAs to supporting a civil affairs (CA) team and a tactical psychological operations (PSYOP) team. Colocated at the firebase via the Coalition Joint Civil Military Operations Task Force (CJCMOTF), was a civil affairs team from the 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion.⁶ The three-man Tactical PSYOP Team (TPT 24) from the 345th PSYOP Company

Firebase Gereshk was located near the convergence of the two primary lines of communication in Helmand Province, approximately 120 kilometers west of Kandahar.



was attached via FOB 72.⁷ The SF, CA, and PSYOP elements worked together to plan and conduct missions throughout Helmand Province in a balancing act that placed force protection at the highest level. The ODAs conducted a variety of missions from strategic reconnaissance to direct action.

Even as their six-month tour of duty neared conclusion, the soldiers of Firebase Gereshk continued conducting missions. A two-day armed reconnaissance patrol to the Sangin district to show U.S. presence and gather intelligence exemplified a typical mission. In Sangin itself, the Detachment Commander, Captain (CPT) Steve Malloy (pseudonym), made contact with the district chief and the police chief, who expressed interest in getting support for Humanitarian Assistance (HA) projects—most notably repairs to a clinic and a school located in the district.

While CPT Malloy made no promises to the community leaders of Sangin, upon return from the patrol, he coordinated with the CA team leader, Major (MAJ) Jim Bates (pseudonym), to return to Sangin the next day to conduct a civil military operations assessment of the district, establish points of contact, and possibly prepare HA project nominations. All information collected would then be forwarded to the CJCMOTF in Kabul for approval and funding. This was a unique opportunity for the CA team, since threat levels had prevented any assessment in the Sangin district up to this point.⁸

A five-vehicle convoy traveled to Sangin the next day (29 March 2003). The convoy consisted of CPT Malloy and ODA 744, the entire CA team (four soldiers), one PSYOP soldier, and an interpreter. The journey to Sangin, while bumpy, was uneventful.

Upon arrival in Sangin, the CA team met with Hajji Ghul Mohammad, the district chief; Mohammad Wali Khan, the police chief; and the village elders. In the preliminary meeting, the village elders expressed two primary concerns in the district: the condition of schools and a local health clinic. The elders were concerned that other districts had received attention and humanitarian projects, while Sangin had not. In the middle of the meeting, Mohammad Wali Khan excused himself as he received a cell phone call, returning after about fifteen minutes. At the conclusion of the meeting, the group went on an assessment of the nearby school, led by Sergeant (SGT) Bill Nevens (pseudonym) of the CA team.

Midway through the school assessment, CPT Malloy received an urgent radio call from the AOB 740 Commander ordering an immediate return to the firebase in order to prepare to support of an immediate combat engagement in the vicinity of Kandahar. Unbeknownst to CPT Malloy, an operation in another part of Helmand Province had troops in contact. The soldiers hastily concluded the school assessment, apologizing to the community leaders and promising to return to Sangin as soon as possible to complete the mission. The Sangin district chief, Hajji Ghul Mohammad, insisted on escorting the convoy. However, at the edge of town he stopped and made a cell phone call. After what seemed to be a prolonged period of time, he finally said farewell, but before leaving, exchanged cell phone numbers with the CA team leader, MAJ Bates.

The small force began to wind its way back to the pro-

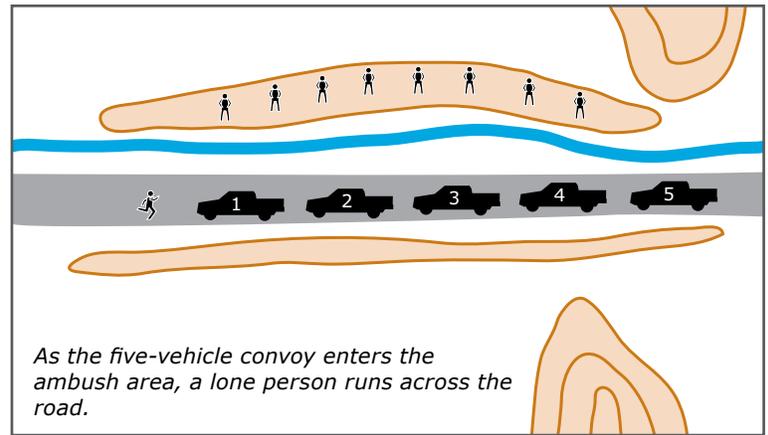
tection of its firebase. After only twenty minutes of driving, several soldiers noticed an Afghani male dressed in green crossing the road from west to east. He did not appear to be in any hurry or overly concerned with the convoy, which was odd, since vehicles usually elicited at least curiosity. Almost instinctively, the soldiers looked in the direction from which the lone Afghani had come and noticed several heads “popping up” on a berm about 150 meters on the right side of the convoy.

Almost instantly, rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) streaked toward the convoy, firing at the lead and trail vehicles. AK-47 and light machine gun fire immediately added to the cacophony of the ambush. An RPG missed the lead vehicle, impacting between the second and third vehicles driven by the CA team, blowing the tailgate from the second vehicle, driven by SGT Thad Santon (pseudonym). The RPG fired at the trail vehicle missed, impacting on a berm next to the road. Meanwhile, the vehicle was hammered with bullets wounding all three of the occupants: Sergeant First Class (SFC) Tim Daniels (pseudonym), Staff Sergeant (SSGT) Jacob Frazier (the Air Force close air controller), and Staff Sergeant (SSG) Orlando Morales. All of the vehicles sustained multiple hits; one of the Hilux trucks had its gearshift shot away, and another truck had over forty separate bullet holes.

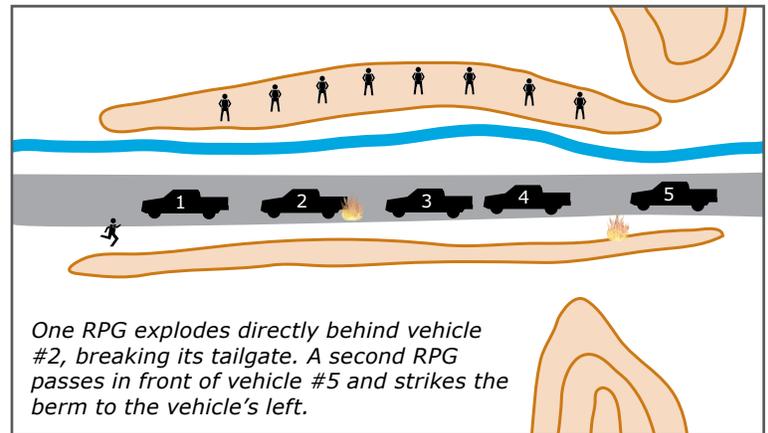
Training, experience, and adrenaline kicked in and, per team procedure, the vehicle drivers raced out of the kill zone. Individual soldiers returned fire at the berm with their personal weapons as they sped out of the kill zone. Moving forward about five hundred meters, the convoy stopped, quickly set up an initial security position, and returned fire at the ambush line. As his soldiers returned fire, CPT Malloy attempted to call in a hasty contact report and get immediate close air support from FOB 72. CPT Malloy and the ODA Assistant Commander, Warrant Officer 1 (WO1) Jude Randall (pseudonym), simultaneously realized that the trail vehicle was missing. Within a few minutes of the initial ambush, WO1 Randall and three other SF soldiers reentered the kill zone to assist their comrades.

To gain fire superiority, CPT Malloy knew he had to achieve communications with his higher headquarters. He exited his vehicle, ripping the satellite communications radio from its mounts. CPT Malloy, a prior service 18E Special Forces Communications Sergeant, quickly attached another antenna and attempted to make communication with AOB 740 (ODA 744’s only 18E had reentered the kill zone). Unbeknownst to CPT Malloy, AOB 740 could receive the transmission, but return communications from AOB 740 could not be received.

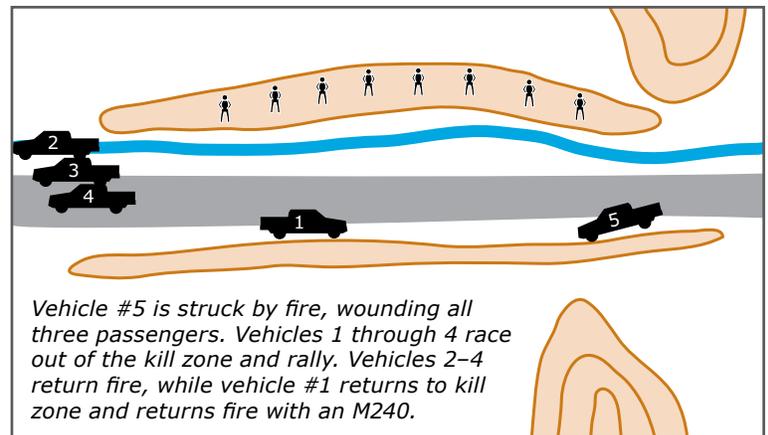
After repeated attempts to establish communications with AOB 740, CPT Malloy rechecked all connections and settings on his radio and reattempted contact with the FOB, unfortunately with the same results. While CPT Malloy inspected his radio and antenna, AOB 740 reported the last known location and direction of movement of the convoy and requested immediate air support. After what seemed like hours in the heat of the fight, “Bushmaster 55” (an Air Force Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft flying thousands of feet high somewhere over Afghanistan) suddenly came up on the net allowing CPT Malloy to



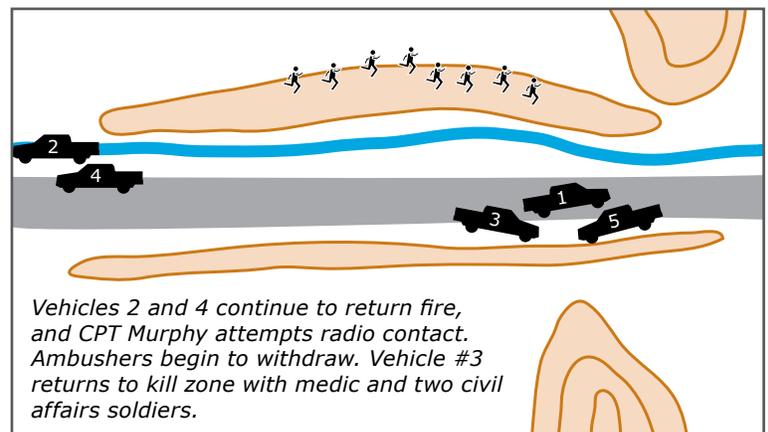
As the five-vehicle convoy enters the ambush area, a lone person runs across the road.



One RPG explodes directly behind vehicle #2, breaking its tailgate. A second RPG passes in front of vehicle #5 and strikes the berm to the vehicle’s left.



Vehicle #5 is struck by fire, wounding all three passengers. Vehicles 1 through 4 race out of the kill zone and rally. Vehicles 2-4 return fire, while vehicle #1 returns to kill zone and returns fire with an M240.



Vehicles 2 and 4 continue to return fire, and CPT Murphy attempts radio contact. Ambushers begin to withdraw. Vehicle #3 returns to kill zone with medic and two civil affairs soldiers.



Photo courtesy of AOB 740



Photo courtesy of AOB 740



Photo courtesy of CAIA 41

The mix of ARSOF vehicles in Afghanistan included Ground Mobility Vehicles (GMVs), and Toyota Tacoma and Hilux trucks, all modified for the harsh environment.

convey the situation to FOB 72. As CPT Malloy worked the communications issue and coordinated for support, the remaining soldiers (two CA, one PSYOP, and two SF) returned fire at the ambushers providing a base of fire.

While CPT Malloy was trying to make communications, the element led by WO1 Randall reentered the kill zone to assist his teammates. Using the largest remaining vehicle in the convoy, the commander's Toyota Tacoma, WO1 Randall, SSG Douglas Rhode (pseudonym), SSG Daniel Crawford (pseudonym), and SSG Samuel Nevis (pseudonym) raced back into the kill zone.

Providing suppressive fire at the ambushers, a second vehicle, a Hilux truck, followed Randall into the kill zone. SSG Vargas (pseudonym), the team medic, and two CA soldiers, bringing an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon and an M203 to the fight, joined Randall's team. Using the Tacoma to block fire at the disabled vehicle, team members continued suppressive fire with an M240 machine gun and multiple antitank AT-4 shots as the medic and WO1 Randall assessed the casualties.

Under heavy return fire and probably realizing aid would soon arrive for the Americans, the ambushers conducted an orderly withdrawal, with the RPG gunners leaving first and then others retreating in pairs through a cut in the hillside and out of the line of sight of the Americans. With the ambush broken, but still receiving sporadic fire, the wounded team members were loaded into vehicles and rushed to the initial security position for further medical aid.⁹

At FOB 72, the operations staff sprung to action with the report of "Team in Contact." The Operations Officer, having just concluded another operation in the area, was almost immediately able to retask air assets to assist the beleaguered soldiers.¹⁰ At the same time, the operations Sergeant Major gathered an eight-man quick reaction force from ODA 751, which was temporarily collocated with FOB 72 waiting for redeployment. The battalion surgeon rode the medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) helicopter in order to provide medical support as soon as possible.

Once all soldiers were at the initial security position, CPT Malloy had to balance security with care for the wounded soldiers. While receiving sporadic enemy fire, the team medic, assisted by several others, cared for the three severely wounded soldiers. CPT Malloy quickly determined that they had to move to a secure place to bring in the helicopter. The convoy quickly moved down the road to an Afghani gas station about five kilometers from the ambush site.

As CPT Malloy continued to coordinate for support, WO1 Randall assumed the temporary role of team sergeant and formed a security perimeter by stopping traffic along the road in preparation for receiving the medical evacuation helicopter and quick reaction force. At this point, the casualties included the team sergeant, the attached Air Force controller, and one of the weapons sergeants, all seriously wounded. SSG Crawford and SSG Rhode cleared and secured the Afghani gas station and the occupants, temporarily detaining them until the evacuation concluded.

To provide overwatch for the small perimeter, two CA soldiers secured a small piece of high ground. The lone PSYOP soldier, SGT Jay Hammer (pseudonym), with

the interpreter, used his loudspeaker to conduct a hasty broadcast to curious Afghans who began to congregate, warning them to “clear the area and don’t interfere.” MAJ Bates set up the landing zone panel about fifty meters away from the vehicles, while several team members continued providing medical care to the wounded.

The first sign of assistance came in the form of an AH-64 Apache gunship blazing in from the west. While the Apache conducted a broad sweep of the area, the helicopter came into view. As the helicopter set down, the 2/7th SFG battalion surgeon rushed to the wounded soldiers. With the additional manpower, the wounded were carried forward and placed on the helicopter within minutes and then evacuated immediately to the field hospital at Kandahar Airfield.

Almost simultaneously with the MEDEVAC, two quick reaction forces arrived. The first, ODA 751 on a Black Hawk helicopter, quickly reinforced the small defensive perimeter. Also coming down the road from Firebase Gereshk to the sound of the guns was ODA 741. Upon hearing the contact report, ODA 741 quickly loaded its vehicles and, after receiving approval from FOB 72, traversed the main route as quickly as possible to reinforce the team. After further reinforcing the perimeter, the ODA 741 commander, CPT Raymond Collins (pseudonym), asked CPT Malloy, “What do you need?” During the ambush some equipment was blown off the vehicles. Volunteering to reenter the kill zone a third time, SSG Crawford guided ODA 741 to the ambush site to recover equipment. Unfortunately, both the enemy and the equipment were nowhere to be found, so they returned to the perimeter.

As the commander on the scene, CPT Malloy faced a difficult decision: with three casualties and all of his vehicles damaged, what was the next move? The immediate decision was simple—return to the firebase, refit, and plan a follow-on operation to Sangin. Then, something odd happened. Within the first five minutes of the ambush, several soldiers reported hearing what sounded like a cellular telephone ringing. In between racing in and out of the ambush area, returning fire on the ambushers, and the adrenaline, everyone simply dismissed the sound as a strange aberration. However, after about a half an hour at the Afghani gas station, MAJ Bates realized his cell phone was ringing almost continuously. He answered and on the other end was the Sangin District Chief, Hajji Ghul Mohammad. “I heard there was an accident,” was his initial statement. As the interpreter translated the call, everyone realized that the local officials had set them up.¹¹

The Americans loaded themselves into the vehicles and returned slowly to the firebase, wary of another possible attack. Word of the ambush preceded the convoy. Soon double or triple the usual amount of people were standing on the street watching as the group traveled through Gereshk. As one SF soldier put it, “It was [a look of] satisfaction almost. The look on their face[s] wasn’t like ‘I hate you.’ It was just a look of ‘that’s what I thought it’d look like.’”¹²

Once at the firebase, everyone began refitting in preparation for a return mission to Sangin. However, FOB 72 ordered ODA 744 to stand down and move immediately to Kandahar. Two Black Hawk helicopters landed two hours later to fly the ODA from Gereshk to Kandahar. Now at half strength as a

result of the casualties, the decision was made to return ODA 744 to the United States, thus ending its Afghanistan tour. SSG Orlando Morales, ODA 744, and SSGT Jacob Frazier, 169th Air Support Operations Squadron, were declared “killed in action” at the hospital at Kandahar Airfield, having succumbed to their wounds despite the valiant efforts of their teammates. SFC Daniels was stabilized at Kandahar, having sustained injuries to one of his kidneys, a perforated diaphragm, and a punctured lung. Other rounds had gone through his right hand and grazed his head, leaving a cut over the left eye. SFC Daniels required six months of extensive physical therapy and rehabilitation before returning to duty at 7th SFG.

Exactly one week later, on 8 and 9 April 2003, a reinforced SF company (including a large detachment of Navy Special Operations Forces), with the 3-504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (of the 82nd Airborne Division) in support, conducted



Photo courtesy of SGT Bill Nevens

The truck driven by SGT Santon which had its tailgate damaged from a near miss by an RPG fired during the ambush.

Operation RESOLUTE STRIKE in Sangin to capture the individuals responsible for the planning and execution of the ambush. The operation was a success—a large cache of weapons and ammunition were seized and destroyed. More than fifty Afghans were questioned, with four flown to Kandahar for further questioning. Additionally, the operation recovered the weapon, sights, night vision devices, and soldiers’ equipment lost during the ambush.¹³ The remainder of 2/7th SFG followed ODA 744 to Fort Bragg, North Carolina by the end of April, its six-month tour at a conclusion.

The soldiers of 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group left Afghanistan having made their mark in the Global War on Terrorism with sweat and blood. These quiet professionals quickly adapted to the operational environment by integrating new soldiers into ODAs and staff, training on vehicles, and adapting to the Afghan culture, yet at the same time bringing with them the skills obtained from their experience in Latin



Photo courtesy of CPL Keith Klewe, 109th Mobile Public Affairs Det.

A critical care nurse with the 438th EAES, holds SFC Daniels' (pseudonym) hand while she reassures him on his flight to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany.

America. As the Global War on Terrorism continues, units within United States Army Special Operations Command will adapt and change to new situations throughout the world. 🇺🇸

Endnotes

- 1 "7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Annual History Review, 2001," 7th Special Forces Group, ARSOF Archives, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Lieutenant Colonel John Donahue, Commander, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (FOB 72), interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 29 May 2003, Fort Bragg, NC, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 When deployed a special forces battalion establishes a Forward Operational Base (FOB) that is a command, control, and support base using organic and attached resources. (Field Manual (FM) 3-05.20, Special Forces Operations, June 2001, 4–5).
- 5 When deployed, a special forces company establishes an Advanced Operational Base (AOB) that is a command and control base using organic and attached resources. In this case Company A, 2/7th SFG is AOB 740. FM 3-05.20, Special Forces Operations, June 2001, page 4–5.
- 6 The 403rd Civil Affairs (CA) Battalion (USAR) is based in Mattydale, NY. A Civil Affairs Team A normally consists of six soldiers. During OEF, about forty soldiers from the 403rd CA Battalion were attached to the 450th CA Battalion and assigned to various locations throughout Afghanistan in support of special operations and conventional units.
- 7 The 345th Psychological Operations Company (USAR) is based in Dallas, TX.
- 8 Civil Affairs Team 10, 403rd Civil Affairs Battalion (Major Jim Bates (pseudonym), Specialist John Mundell (pseudonym), Sergeant Bill Nevens (pseudonym), and Sergeant Thad Santon (pseudonym)), interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 7 August 2003, Fort Bragg, NC, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 ODA 744B (Warrant Officer 1 Jude Randall (pseudonym), Staff Sergeant Douglas Rhode (pseudonym), Staff Sergeant Vargas (pseudonym), and Sergeant First Class Williams (pseudonym)), Company A, 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 21 May 2003, Fort Bragg, NC, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Major Mike Simpson (pseudonym) (S-3) and Captain William Baker (pseudonym) (S-2), 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones Jr., 28 May 2003, Fort Bragg, NC, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 11 Civil Affairs Team 10 interview.
- 12 ODA 744B interview.
- 13 Jim Wagner, "Resolute Strike Brings In Ambush Intel, Equipment," <http://www.defendamerica.mil/articles/apr2003/a041103e.html>.

Blast from the Past



LIBERTY LEAFLETS—Kennedy Center psychological warriors distribute leaflets to Santo Domingo citizens to explain why U.S. soldiers are serving in their country. These leaflets bear a portrait of President Johnson with the caption reading "Enpro de la libertad"—For Liberty. Thousands of these propaganda leaflets have been distributed in the Dominican Republic.

