

Everyone Can Take Pride in This Fight:

ODA 163 in Afghanistan



by Charles H. Briscoe

USSOCOM PAO guidance on current operations dictates the use of pseudonyms for SOF majors and below. Those individuals identified by true name in previously published news articles are the exception.

IN the morning of 11 April 2005, al-Qaeda-associated militia ambushed an Afghan military convoy escorting General Khil Baz, former 25th Infantry Division commander, to Gardez. The ambush occurred northwest of the village of Barak Kalay on the Khowst-Gardez road, near the pass. Rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) and small-arms fire stopped the Afghan Security Force (ASF), inflicting minor damage on the vehicles. The 45-man ASF dismounted and returned fire, but were unable to maneuver against the well-positioned attackers. The steep, rugged terrain found in this area adjacent to the Pakistan border was popular for “hit and run raids and ambushes.”¹ General Baz quickly called for assistance using his satellite telephone.

U.S. Army Special Forces ODA 163 and a Khowst Provincial Force (KPF) platoon located at Chapman Airfield were the chosen Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-Afghanistan) QRF (Quick Reaction Force). The two forces were ready and closest to the ambush site. Nearby at Fire Base Salerno UH-60 Black Hawk and AH-64 Apache helicopters from Task Force (TF) Sabre were on alert.² A rapid response enabled the QRF to find, fix, and engage the ambush perpetrators several kilometers from the ambush site. The enemy was caught by the lead element of the reaction force before it could escape and a fierce firefight erupted. Air Force Close Air Support proved ineffec-

tive against enemy positions hidden in the scrub vegetation on the reverse slopes of steep, narrow fingers that dropped down into deep ravines. Fighting in the rocky, mountainous terrain at 8,200 feet was tough. After three hours of heavy fighting, thirteen al-Qaeda-associated militia fighters were dead; three Americans and one KPF Afghan were wounded.³ This joint Coalition QRF mission was well directed by the SF ODA detachment commander using appropriate coordination, control, and support provided by all levels of command.

The 30 May 2006 *Army Times* article, “There Was a Lot of Shooting: Soldiers Honored for Heroic Assault During Clash in Afghan” by Michelle Tan, briefly synopsised the three-hour action. It focused on two ODA 163 soldiers and a 23rd Special Tactics Squadron (STS) airman who were awarded Silver Stars and a Bronze Star for Valor.⁴ That synopsis did not do justice to this multi-faceted, complex action. The purpose of this article is two-fold: to provide “the rest of the story” on an action effected by an experienced, well-trained SF team (supported by a courageous Black Hawk aircrew), and to highlight a

UH-60 Black Hawks of TF Saber were used to transport the ODA 163 QRF.



1st Special Forces Group beret flash.



General Khil Baz.



Khowst Provincial Force (KPF) shoulder patch.



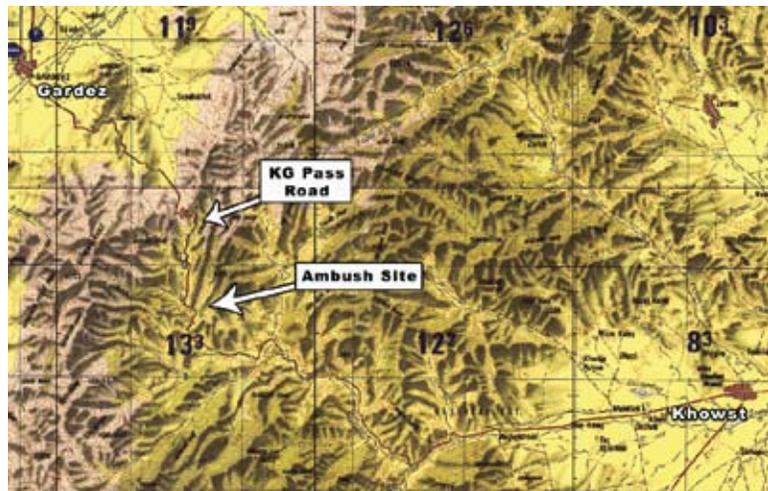
well-executed mission by the 1st Special Forces Group (SFG) during its first Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) rotation in Afghanistan.⁵

Appreciating and understanding the harshness of the steep terrain, factoring how close the fighting was, the limited visibility between combatants on the ground—the enemy, SF team, KPF, and Navy SEAL platoon—corresponding actions, and the experience of the ODA are critical to understanding what happened when, and why. Thus, a sequential presentation of the events that lays out the actions by the various higher headquarters will be used to reconstruct a very complicated fight and the appropriate responses. This narrative focuses on ODA 163.

Team members, as well as higher commanders and staff, explained their Afghanistan missions and their specific roles during the QRF fight on 11 April 2005. In this combined action, SF and joint commanders at all levels coordinated staff actions appropriately to support the action without imposing on the ground commander directly involved commanding the fight.⁶ The smooth support rendered by all levels illustrates why this particular Coalition joint action is important to the Force. Prior to discussing the details of the 11 April 2005 action, it is important for context to know the background of the 1st SFG's involvement in OEF-Afghanistan, its mission, and its pre-deployment preparations and training.

The decision by U.S. Army Special Forces Command that 1st SFG would provide its 2nd Battalion to support the CJSOTF in Afghanistan was made on 7 June 2004. When Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Kirk H. Nilsson, a twelve-year 1st SFG veteran, assumed command of the 2nd Battalion two weeks later, he knew they were going to Afghanistan in December to support the 7th SFG. Colonel Jeffrey D. Waddell, the 7th SFG commander, assigned his 1st Battalion the OEF mission in Regional Command (RC) South and West. While the staff prepared the campaign plan, the 2/1 SFG ODAs focused on critical skills needed to survive on the battlefield—ground mobility

Afghanistan map depicting Khowst, Gardez, and Ghazni in relation to Kabul, the capital, and Kandahar to the south-west.



Topographical map showing Khowst–Gardez road, ambush site, and approximate direction and mileage to Chapman Airfield.

vehicle crew-served weapons fire and maneuver, 81mm mortar refresher, communications, and tactical medical training. The high-desert, mountainous area of Yakima, Washington, proved ideal.⁷

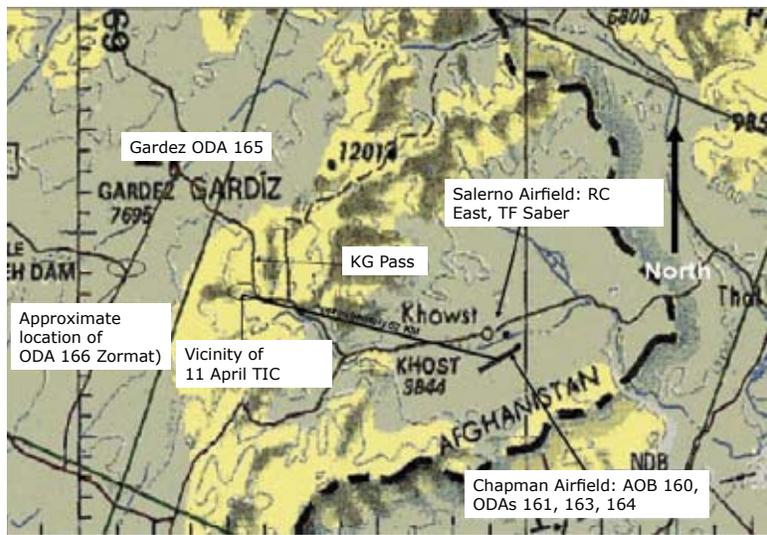
After the August 2004 site survey, the 2/1 ODBs focused on their specific areas of operations. ODB 160 had the Khowst–Gardez bowl (the center sector) while ODB 140 concentrated on the northern sector of RC East. “The battalion training scenarios were built to concentrate on a lot of collective tasks simultaneously,” stated LTC Nilsson. “As it happened, the requirement to field an ODB for a late-September Combined Training Center rotation meant that A Company (ODB 140) was the last 2/1 element deployed to Afghanistan.”⁸

To cover the area of operations of RC East properly in accordance with Joint Task Force 76 (JTF-76) guidance “to get SOF [special operations forces] on the border areas,” Colonel Waddell realigned CJSOTF forces. 2nd Battalion, 1st SFG [Forward Operating Base (FOB) 12] would command three AOBs (advanced operating bases): two organic and Company C (AOB 730) from the 7th SFG. In this way, a single commander could focus on RC East and the Pakistan border areas. Based on the number of ODAs, team strengths, and special skill levels, Nilsson assigned the center sector—the Khowst–Gardez area—to Company C, 2/1 SFG (AOB 160).

The 25th Infantry Division Artillery, or TF Thunder, the conventional force in RC East, had positioned 105mm artillery in two-gun sections on/near the SF bases and a battery of 155mm artillery to support the Afghan border control posts (BCPs). The regional commanders supported provincial reconstruction teams with missions to promote local governance and stimulate infrastructure rebuilding.⁹ When the ODAs were operating in areas or BCPs beyond the fire base artillery fans, 155mm two-gun sections were often “jumped” by helicopter to cover the gaps in coverage.¹⁰

For the CJSOTF, this was an economy-of-force decision. Since infiltrations could not be prevented, they could at least deny sanctuary. The BCPs reduced freedom-of-maneuver to larger enemy forces intent on massing to attack. Instead of a 360-degree fight, the engagements

**Pseudonyms have been used for all military personnel with a rank lower than lieutenant colonel.*

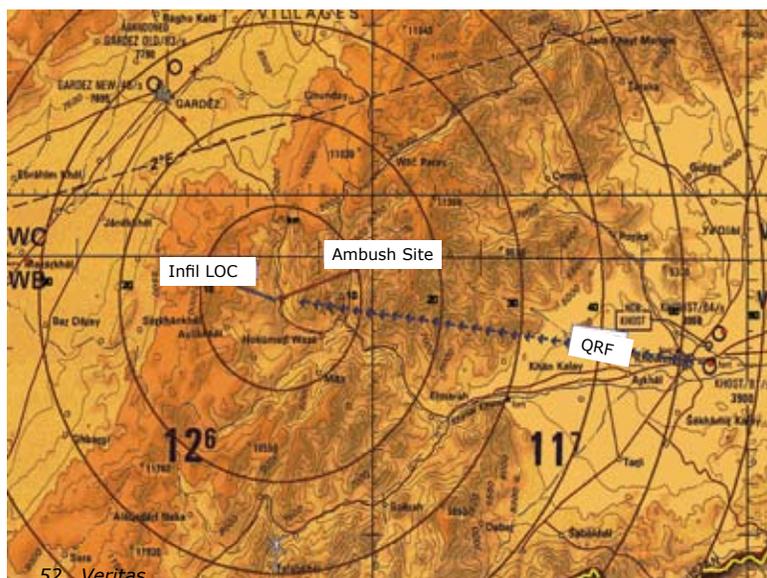


Topographical flight map revealing high mountain range between Khowst and Gardez, ODA 165, ODA 166, Troops in Contact (TIC) site, Salerno Airfield, and Chapman Airfield.

would be more like 180-degree fights on the Afghan border. This meant very active vehicular patrolling by the ODAs during the winter months.¹¹ Operating in the harsh winter weather common in the mountainous border region became routine for the ODAs based around Fire Base Chapman.

ODB 160 had the largest sector, containing the Afghan border control posts that had received attacks the most often. Major Jack Spartan* had hoped to use General Khil Baz to help stand up an effective paramilitary force to secure the border areas.¹² Since ODA 163 responded to attacks on BCP 6, the model for future Afghan posts, it initially assumed the FOB QRF for the border and then the entire Khowst–Gardez area. Despite the fact that ODA 163 had been in-country for four months, it rehearsed QRF actions weekly, and was “spun up” fifteen times for missions not executed. Due to those factors, Master Sergeant (MSG) Paul Cooper, team sergeant, constantly stressed immediate action drills, scheduled

Aviator flight map showing Chapman Airfield in relation to ambush site on Khowst–Gardez road and the infiltration site of the QRF (ODA 163+).



firing to maintain weapons battle sights, practiced artillery and close air support direction, and inspected individual equipment for readiness. Having worked in the Khowst–Gardez area on a previous deployment, Cooper and his ODA commander, Captain (CPT) Brett Dandridge*, worked out a solid “game plan.”¹³

Every BCP, village, and city in their assigned sector had been visited multiple times, each time accompanied by the local commander of the Afghan Security Forces (ASF). “We put a ‘host nation face’ on everything that we did,” said MSG Cooper. “We got our Civil Affairs teams to fund wells and schools and arranged Medical Readiness and Training Exercises. In conjunction with these, we became familiar with the terrain and improved our situational awareness. By riding armed aerial reconnaissance flights, we were able to select multiple routes to and from BCPs. As a result, we located the Taliban and al-Qaeda LOCs [lines of communication] in our zone.”¹⁴ Perimeter security for the fire bases and the QRF mission entailed training up ASFs for their defensive and offensive roles.

Recruiting, training, and organizing local ASFs and training KPFs to support a QRF were implied ODA 163 missions. A day-long mini-selection course reduced the mostly illiterate fifty candidates down to the best thirty. Then, a mile run, followed by an obstacle course, identified those recruits who had the most heart and intestinal fortitude to finish training. Some cursory background checks determined honesty and integrity. During “basic training,” personnel were regularly rotated through leadership positions to identify the platoon and the squad leaders. The leaders received more pay than the privates. The smartest recruits received medical and demolitions training and were awarded “proficiency” pay and “bonuses” for outstanding jobs. These incentives leveled the economic playing field between ASF and KPF soldiers.¹⁵ The ODA 163 “game plan” was to have the ASF and KPF well trained before the spring thaws came in March, when stay-behind al-Qaeda and Taliban militia fighters were normally resupplied to conduct guerrilla operations in the warmer months.

Having been “spun up” fifteen times before, individual QRF equipment was pre-positioned and ready when CPT Dandridge was summoned to the ODB operations center by MAJ Spartan. Every man carried two basic loads of ammunition for the QRF mission. They also wore Level 4 body armor. With “Go” bags carried onboard the helicopters, the ODA could operate independently for twenty-four to thirty-six hours.¹⁶

“Mobility and maneuver were part of every fight,” said MSG Cooper. “The team was quickly assembled and alerted. While they ‘kitted up’ and checked weapons, CPT Dandridge and I waited for the execute order in the Ops Cen [operations center].”¹⁷ KPF with advisors and interpreters “rounded out” the QRF. UH-60 Black Hawk and AH-64 Apache aircrews at nearby Fire Base Salerno had begun pre-flight checks of their aircraft.

The ODB 160 commander, MAJ Spartan, knew that

General Khil Baz was a friend of Coalition forces and that when working with Afghan forces, rapid responses to calls for assistance were important to garner loyalty and build confidence. After discovering that the conventional TF Thunder QRF at Fire Base Salerno was not readily available, and knowing that response time was critical, Spartan queried ODA 165 as to its ability to do the mission. It was only thirty miles away from the ambush site. Captain Jerry Harkins*, the ODA commander, responded that based on road conditions and steep terrain, it would take his element two hours to drive through the mountains to the ambush site.¹⁸

MAJ Spartan then called FOB 12 because the ambush was outside ODB 160's battle space. As the request sped up the chain of command (from FOB 12 to the CJSOTF-Afghanistan to JTF-76), it was fortunate that JTF commander, Major General Jason Kamiya, happened to be visiting Fire Base Salerno. Though the ambush site was in the battle space of the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment (3/3 Marines), Kamiya assigned the mission to the SOF QRF. They already had forces postured to execute. TF Thunder and 3/3 Marines would be in support.¹⁹ In the short time it took to gain approval (less than twenty minutes), FOB 12 had alerted the Fire Base Salerno helicopters and close air support "on station" of a potential mission.²⁰

Planeside at Chapman Airfield, Dandridge and Cooper briefed the QRF with the details of the mission. "We were to find, fix, and destroy the enemy ambush force. We got the usual 'pump' that came with 'action outside the wire.' The team always went out prepared . . . expecting a firefight," said Staff Sergeant (SSG) Matthew Marco*, the junior 18C engineer.²¹ As rehearsed, ODA 163 divided into two elements and boarded the Black Hawks; the KPF elements followed.²²

In the first aircraft, CPT Dandridge would stay airborne for command and control while the second helicopter carrying Chief Warrant Officer 2 (CW2) Anthony C. Stencill*, the detachment executive officer, and MSG Cooper landed first to investigate. By the time the UH-60s lifted off from Chapman Airfield, two A-10 Warthogs and the two Apaches were already en route to the ambush site thirty minutes away. When the Black Hawks were fifteen minutes out, the AH-64s provided an exact grid location for General Baz's convoy on the Khowst-Gardez road (easy to spot by the Jinga trucks stacked up on both sides of the ambush site) and reported no sign of attackers in the immediate area.²³

Lacking communications with General Baz, CPT Dandridge directed CW2 Stencill to land near the stalled convoy. He was to confirm that Baz was alive, ascertain whether or not he wanted a ride out of the mountain pass, and collect specifics on enemy exfiltration routes. Dandridge would overwatch the meeting from his aircraft and pass up-to-date information to AOB 160 and FOB 12. All higher commands closely monitored the situation.²⁴

General Baz gave more than a direction where the enemy withdrew—he identified the exact finger that the enemy had used and the amount of time that had

elapsed since the ambush. Baz declined a ride saying that "he had to demonstrate to everyone that he was still 'the man' in the valley." Other than bullet holes in a few trucks, the Baz convoy was relatively unscathed. Based on these specifics, Air Force Technical Sergeant (TSgt) Bradley Reilly [Combat Control Team] called the A-10s (BOAR 01 and 02) and AH-64s (CARDPLAYER) to narrow their search patterns on enemy egress routes heading southwest.²⁵ Considering the steepness and severity of the terrain, and the time elapsed since the enemy's withdrawal, the helicopter-borne QRF had a chance to catch the escaping enemy fighters. The chase was on!

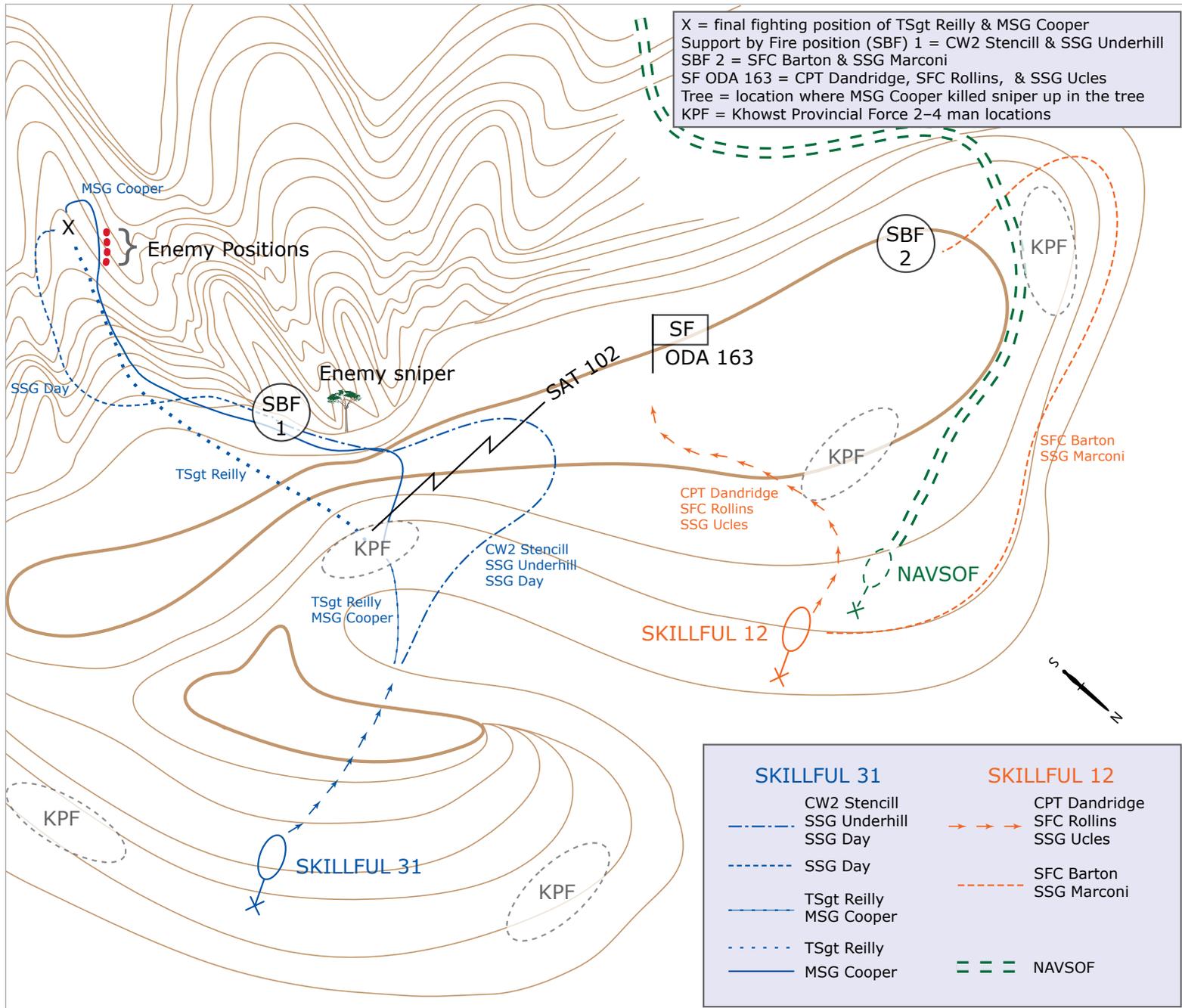
Five minutes after the Black Hawks left the ambush site, one of the AH-64s sweeping the area reported spotting three personnel carrying AK-47s and RPGs. They were walking in a draw using the vegetation to conceal their move. Since this was a very complex fight in very rugged and convoluted mountainous terrain, the following is a visual image of what CPT Dandridge saw as he approached the target area from the north:²⁶

*A large exaggerated "C-shaped" flat butte that was slightly tilted down to the west was the dominant terrain feature. There was a shallow bowl in the "cup" of the "C" between arms. Numerous steep, narrow-ridged fingers with rocky ravines in-between dropped from the south side of the butte. The high-desert, rocky, mountainous terrain (8,200 feet) had scrub evergreen vegetation scattered about and rock outcroppings and abutments along the ridges and crests. The suspected al-Qaeda militia fighters had been spotted near the top arm of the "C."*²⁷

CPT Dandridge had the pilots of his Black Hawk, SKILLFUL 12, cautiously overfly the suspected area to confirm the sighting. Dandridge told CW2 Stencill to prepare to land offset of the suspected enemy. Stencill's pilots, in the Black Hawk SKILLFUL 31, literally blew

A-10 video showing a southwesterly view of the exaggerated "C"-shaped butte with slight depression ("cup" of the "C") between the arms as seen by Chief Warrant Officer Anthony Stencill and Captain Brett Dandridge as they approached in their helicopters. Stencill will be landed offset of the enemy sighted on the reverse slope of the "C's" bottom arm while Dandridge, coming in second, will land on the reverse slope of the "C's" top arm.





Sketch map prepared by ODA 163 and Dr. Charles H. Briscoe—not to scale—depicting approximate positions.

one fighter's blankets off to reveal an AK-47 and several RPG rounds at his side. The door gunners were trained on the suspect.²⁸

Suspicious confirmed, CW2 Stencill had SKILLFUL 31 land on the reverse slope of an adjacent hilltop (north reverse slope of the bottom arm, parallel to the ridge with a single aircraft wheel on the hillside), while requesting that the AH-64s engage the enemy fighter with the RPG rounds.²⁹ SKILLFUL 31 hovered while Stencill, MSG Cooper, TSgt Reilly, Staff Sergeant Jubal Day (team medic), Staff Sergeant Nate Underhill*, and seven personnel from the KPF element jumped down (eight to ten feet) to the ground and established 360-degree perimeter security. As the UH-60 lifted off, one enemy fighter jumped up and sprayed the landing site with automatic AK-47 fire.³⁰ "With rounds coming in, that helo blew out of the LZ [landing zone]," remembered Cooper.³¹ Dandridge,

above, quickly relayed: "Troops in Contact (TIC)."³² The fight was on!

As the detachment commander searched for a place to land his helicopter, Cooper, Reilly, and four Afghans fired and maneuvered south and slightly east as Stencill, Day, Underhill, and the remaining KPF started moving and clearing the western flank of the bottom arm of the "C" using the available scrub brush as cover. Enemy machinegun fire concentrated on the military crest of that arm. As Cooper's force swept through a depression on the reverse slope of the finger (the shallow bowl in "cup" of the "C"), it noted the still-warm remains of several cooking fires. Before sweeping the left of the front ridge (upper arm of the "C"), Reilly requested that AH-64s make several 30mm chain gun runs along the crest. After receiving Stencill's initials (because their attacks would be "Danger Close"), the two Apaches com-



Aerial view of the front crest of butte overlooking the southerly finger where Technical Sergeant Bradley Reilly and Master Sergeant Paul Cooper engaged the enemy moving down to the south. Note the scrub vegetation that afforded the enemy some cover while moving off the butte to the south.

menced to attack with cannon and rockets. The gun runs started small fires along that crest.³³

The smoke provided cover, but the fires started by the Apaches dictated directions of maneuver during the assault to clear the left part of the front ridge (top arm of the “C”). As MSG Cooper crested the hill, a machine-gun opened up on him. Fortunately, the gunner was firing high. As he dropped to the ground, Cooper pulled out a grenade and threw it toward the enemy position. After detonation, Cooper jumped up to assault forward, killing the enemy gunner with his M-4 carbine. As MSG Cooper was relaying a quick report to CW2 Stencill, SKILLFUL 12 was flaring to insert CPT Dandridge and his element to the west of Stencill and Cooper on a small hillock (reverse slope of the upper arm of the “C”). Cooper and two KPF Afghans were securing the eastern half of the front ridge line. They provided overwatch as TSgt Reilly and two KPF Afghans investigated a sighting further down a southerly finger to Cooper’s left front.³⁴

Meanwhile, CW2 Stencill, SSG Day, SSG Underhill, and the remaining KPF had cleared the western portion of the forward ridgeline. As Stencill and Underhill started to shift west to close on MSG Cooper, the two of them began receiving heavy enemy fire from due east, south, and southwest. Since “the heaviest amount of machine gun fire was pouring in from the east,” said Stencill, “we held up behind a small rock outcropping at the crest of the hill. Day and the remaining Afghans were to our rear covering the northeast and north.”³⁵ (See top right photo.)

The very convoluted and twisted, steeply-ridged fingers (almost like a crow’s foot) extending south were further distorted by numerous large rock formations with scrub evergreen vegetation protruding from them (see photo bottom right). This combination made pinpointing enemy firing positions very difficult and virtually impossible targets for the AH-64s. When the Apaches were not making gun runs in front of the QRF positions,



Chief Warrant Officer Anthony Stencill and Staff Sergeant Nate Underhill support-by-fire (SBF) position at the top of the southerly finger looking down on Reilly and Cooper’s location.

the enemy fire would immediately intensify. The heavy bombs carried by the A-10s were rather ineffective in the steep, mountainous terrain. The close proximity of the combatants and natural camouflage negated 30mm gun runs by the jets. They remained in orbit high overhead, providing imagery and communications links to Bagram Airbase and Chapman Airfield.³⁶

MSG Cooper, TSgt Reilly, and their KPF Afghans were searching and clearing the eastern sector while CW2 Stencill and his element were still pinned down by heavy enemy fire. This was the situation to his left front (east) when CPT Dandridge, along with Sergeants First Class (SFCs) Steven Rollins* and Daniel Barton*, SSGs Mark Ucles* and Matthew Marco and seven KPF personnel off-loaded SKILLFUL 12 above a slight knoll to the east. SSG Marco remembered: “As we jumped down from the hovering Black Hawk, it wasn’t the usual drop. We threw up a quick perimeter, kneeling and facing out. I couldn’t see much. CPT Dandridge, SFC Rollins, and

KPF soldier joining a compatriot at the SBF position of Stencill and Underhill looking down the convoluted finger—the site of most fighting on 11 April 2005.





Rocky abutment on the southerly finger. MSG Cooper ran around right side (left) heading for cover while TSgt Reilly, wounded in the foot on top, jumped off and headed straight for the nearest cover below.

SSG Ucles moved out to clear the left side and top of the knoll [right front crest is the majority of the top arm of the "C"]. SFC Barton, the Afghans, and I proceeded to clear to the rear. Then, we worked around the right side and up along the crest to tie into the detachment commander. In the process one of the KPF was wounded in the leg and lower back. Both were grazing flesh wounds. I bandaged him up and he rejoined his fellows. Our element spread out to cover the right flank of the knoll.³⁷

"I saw tracers below us coming from the enemy positions just before we landed," said Dandridge. Twenty plus minutes after receiving the TIC call the Apache gunships reported their fuel status BINGO, requested back-up, and headed back to Fire Base Salerno, some thirty flight-minutes away.³⁸ The volume of enemy fire always appeared to slacken whenever the AH-64s made gun runs along the reverse slope of the ridge. However, as soon as they pulled off the objective into orbit to await another call, the well-hidden enemy fighters would "pop up" from rock-hardened, camouflaged positions and resume the fight with greater intensity.³⁹

"Shortly after the Apaches departed CW2 Stencill called to report that he had two wounded Americans to his left front (south southwest) who, though just seventy-five to one hundred meters down on a southerly pointing finger, could not be seen by him. All that Stencill could see was a heavy volume of fire being exchanged where they were. He could not get down to their location. He was receiving too much fire."⁴⁰ Soon, the fight became more complicated.

"The probing action got us into a bigger engagement," said MSG Cooper. "As fire erupted on the finger below I spotted a guy up in a small tree shooting in that direction. I engaged him with my M-4 and shot him until he quit moving. Firmly wedged against the branches he didn't fall out like they do in the movies. Then, seeing no further threats to my immediate front, I swung back to Brad (Reilly) who was firing into a clump of brush

lower down on the opposite side of the finger. His two KPF Afghans had pulled behind him and taken cover. Realizing that Reilly was exposed and alone, I called to SSG Underhill, my wingman, to tell him that I planned to move down and back Reilly up. Picking my route I ran down into a shallow bowl just behind Brad and then slipped up alongside him."⁴¹ "Like a dart Paul was gone and out of sight," recalled Underhill. "I didn't hear what he said because my ears were ringing from the heavy gunfire but I swung my attention to that side."⁴²

TSgt Reilly, spotting an enemy fighter about thirty feet away, moved down the finger and shot him. As Reilly and the two KPF pressed forward they engaged two more enemy. A firefight ensued and Reilly's KPF quickly sought cover. When MSG Cooper joined Reilly, the two pinned down the enemy to their front, killing one of them. Then, the proverbial "chit hit the fan" as the volume of fire intensified from several directions. Downhill, forward, and separated from the main element, and under heavy fire, Cooper knew that they had to find cover real quick.⁴³

"The nearest protection was a small clump of scrub evergreen bushes and rocks on the left side of the narrow ridge about fifty feet further down the finger. The enemy was on the reverse slope on the right side of the finger. Withdrawing up the bare finger was not a good option," remembered MSG Cooper. "After telling Brad [Reilly] to lay down some fire, I bolted for the scrub trees and then swung to the right when I spotted a rock cliff-like outcropping that had an eight-foot drop. I wasn't prepared to play 'Superman' wearing body armor."⁴⁴

Cooper said, "I was spotted just as I passed the rock outcropping. I felt a round glance off the front of my chest plate and knew that they had me zeroed. I was running full tilt, and just as I reached the edge of the scrub, a burst of fire caught me in the upper legs. It was my momentum and adrenalin that got me past the front of the scrub bushes before my legs collapsed. Still, somehow in falling I managed to 'button hook' down

The wounded Cooper "button hooks" left around the scrub evergreen and scrambles up behind it, opposite the enemy positions.



and behind the rocks and bushes—out of the line of fire. I knew I was hit bad, but I had to return fire to cover Brad. I needed my tourniquet and had to burrow in close to the rocks and scrub trees to avoid getting hit again.” TSgt Reilly, intent on firing into the enemy position, saw Cooper get hit but lost sight of exactly where he went.⁴⁵

Now, alone and exposed, Reilly bolted for the nearest cover—where Cooper had headed. “Seeing the eight-foot drop-off along the direct approach to the scrub trees and rocks, I dropped down on my back in a slight depression on the top of rock cliff. As I looked around at my ‘cover,’ I saw that my feet were exposed. Then, a round from a short burst of enemy fire hit my right foot. It instinctively jerked away as if touched by a buzz saw. Realizing that they had me pinpointed, I scrambled up and jumped off the rock abutment. Adrenalin pumping, I headed for the scrub trees and rocks [the best available cover and fighting position] less than twenty feet away. I didn’t know where Paul [Cooper] had gone after getting hit. Forgetting my foot, I took off running in a low crouch toward the shelter.”⁴⁶

Reilly came crashing behind the near side of the scrub trees and rocks like a baseball player sliding into third base—slamming into the semi-conscious Cooper. “That snapped me back to consciousness,” said MSG Cooper. “Reilly said that he was hit. I chuckled and said, ‘me too,’ and told him that I needed tourniquets applied. While I fumbled mine out, Brad began returning fire at the enemy just across the narrow ridge—twenty feet away at most.”⁴⁷

Knowing that there were four enemy advancing toward them, Reilly decided that “the first order of business was to get the guy who had shot them. He was very close and a decent shot. I spotted the two KPF Afghans to my right rear and motioned for them to shoot at the enemy. After an initial burst of AK-47 fire by one KPF drew an enemy fusillade, it took a lot more hollering to get them to fire again. Then, one of the KPF raised and fired a burst of PKM machine gun fire at them. This

Top of the rocky abutment. Reilly is wounded while seeking cover to left of pointed rocks in the center.



Cooper is lying on the flat rocks, burrowed up close to the scrub evergreen when Reilly comes “sliding into him” from the lower right “like a baseball player going for third base.”

prompted the best enemy shooter to raise up. I shot him in the head. It was a small victory. I told Paul that I just got the guy who shot us.”⁴⁸

“Following that announcement, Reilly grabbed my CAT [Combat Application Tourniquet] and applied it to the nearest leg with the entry wound, not realizing that the bullet had exited my right leg. That was the most serious problem. I had shifted it underneath me to apply some pressure. I knew that I was bleeding out because I kept drifting in and out of consciousness. As luck would have it, Brad did not have a tourniquet,” said Cooper.⁴⁹

TSgt Reilly requested an SF medic because he realized that his “medic skills were not going to pay the rent... Paul began coaching me through the treatment of his wounds. I had never done any live-tissue stuff before and was a little overwhelmed by the injuries . . . I chose the left leg since it was completely opened up and I could see down into it. For the holes in his right leg, I used a Curlex [bandage] and just tried to hold pressure on the holes.”⁵⁰

Since Reilly had called for assistance, CPT Dandridge looked to his medic, SSG Day, to provide help to the two wounded men embattled on a razorback finger 150 meters away.⁵¹ CW2 Stencill, a former 18D medic, was pinned down by gunfire directly above Cooper and Reilly and had been fighting his natural instinct to rush down and deal with the medical emergency below him. SFC Underhill reminded him several times that he was now the second in command, not the team medic.⁵² Since Dandridge had no communications with SSG Day, it was Stencill (above and to the right of Reilly and Cooper below) who called Day and two KPF Afghans up to his position. He reiterated the commander’s stipulation that it had to be voluntary. He explained that MSG Cooper needed medical attention badly. Then Stencill pointed down to where he thought Reilly and Cooper were located, indicating the reverse left side of the southerly finger. He asked SSG Day if he could skirt around to the left, drop down into the ravine, and come up behind the two wounded

Americans from below.⁵³

With all of his movement, pointing, and gesturing, Stencill attracted enemy fire to his position. Despite that, Day nodded his head and took off at a trot toward a small bowl that led into the ravine; the two KPF followed close behind.⁵⁴ "The scene was straight out of the movies," said CPT Dandridge. "As Day stood up, he came under such a heavy barrage of fire that no one could see him. He fired several magazines and moved out. PKM and AK rounds kicked up a dust storm all around as Jubal [Day] and the Afghans disappeared down into the adjacent bowl."⁵⁵

TSgt Reilly did have his radios. In between shooting and treating Cooper, he passed medical conditions to CPT Dandridge above. Guided by Reilly's directions, CW2 Stencill and SFC Underhill lobbed grenades down the hill toward the enemy positions. At one point, desperate for help, Reilly asked Dandridge to pull everyone back so that he could call in the A-10s to attack the enemy in the ravine. Knowing the difficulty that the jet fighter bombers would have identifying friendlies in the convoluted and steep terrain, the detachment commander denied the request.⁵⁶ This call was monitored by the A-10s and the UH-60s orbiting overhead.

The Black Hawk crews knew that two wounded Americans were separated from the main element and only one of them was keeping the four enemy fighters at bay. The enemy had a PDK machinegun. The heavy volume of fire being directed at the positions closest to Cooper and Reilly prevented any ground reinforcement and delayed medical help getting to them. The desperate situation prompted the pilots in the loitering SKILLFUL 31 to take action.⁵⁷

Realizing the two wounded and isolated Americans would be quickly overrun when the enemy "bum rushed" them, Chief Warrant Officer 3 (CW3) Chris Palumbo and CW2 Steven Burr, piloting SKILLFUL 31, radioed that they were going to try a CASEVAC (casualty evacuation). "When you hear the desperation in that voice on the radio, someone saying that they need you there, you kind of feel helpless," said Palumbo. "You could see the bad guys. I wasn't going to leave our guys bleeding on the side of the hill."⁵⁸

CW3 Palumbo told SKILLFUL 12 to assume a high hover and tell Fire Base Salerno to prepare to accept wounded. Then, they swooped down to establish a blocking position between Reilly and Cooper and the enemy. At one point, enemy fighters ran underneath the helicopter as it searched for the embattled Americans. It took a couple of low passes before the crew managed to spot Reilly "kind of buried under a rock." Dropping down to twenty feet, the right gunner, Specialist Four (SP4) John Irick, could only see Reilly, but Palumbo spotted several enemy fighters in the trees rushing up toward them from the backside of the finger.⁵⁹ MSG Cooper remembered seeing the belly of the Black Hawk almost on top of him.⁶⁰

SP4 Ryan "Rick" Pummill, the crew chief and left door gunner, was able to fire straight down into two enemy

positions directly opposite Reilly and Cooper by leaning out over his M-60D machinegun. As he rained down a fusillade of bullets, every enemy fighter in the vicinity responded back in kind. Cooper, Reilly, and several ODA 163 soldiers watched as the rounds "dusted and sparked" off the armor-plated belly of the Black Hawk as Pummill and the enemy slugged it out. Then SP4 Pummill, hit in the face by shrapnel from a floor plate shattered by an armor-piercing round, was knocked back into the aircraft. When CW3 Palumbo heard Pummill cry out, "I'm hit," he yanked on the collective to lift the UH-60 up, spun it left while nosing it down, and tore away down the finger out of range. The crewmen were shouting so loudly that they did not need their intercom system.⁶¹ The two pilots realized that their first effort was not enough to keep the enemy off the two wounded Americans. A CASEVAC was clearly out of the question.⁶²

Well clear of hostile fire and with SP4 Irick, the right door gunner, reporting that Pummill was not seriously wounded, CW3 Palumbo loop-rolled the UH-60 and roared back into the fight, positioning the helicopter so Irick could engage the enemy from the right side of the helicopter. Irick, firing straight down again, clearly dominated the shootout this time. But "we took a buttload of bullets," recalled Palumbo. "The armor-piercing ones were zipping through the floor of the aircraft pretty good. It felt like sand being thrown against the back of my helmet. The rounds were exploding behind our heads and the fragments were splattering the backs of our helmets."⁶³ TSgt Reilly provided his view: "They were so close that I could see the pilot's eyes. Enemy ground fire was sparking off the rotors and belly but they just stayed there until the threat was gone."⁶⁴

After expending nearly 1,800 rounds of 7.62 ammunition, Palumbo radioed that his machineguns were empty. He was also low on fuel and suspected hydraulic leaks because the helicopter was beginning to respond sluggishly. SKILLFUL 12 loitered in overwatch close to the contact site. To avoid setting the damaged SKILLFUL 31 down near the firefight, Palumbo and Burr "milked it back to Salerno." More leaks sprang out while refueling and the pilots shut the helicopter down. The tough Black Hawk had withstood at least thirty-one small-arms hits during the crew's fight to prevent a determined enemy from overrunning two wounded Americans.⁶⁵ The brave actions of SKILLFUL 31 distracted the enemy fighters enough to enable SSG Day and two KPF Afghans to cross open areas unscathed and to get below Cooper and Reilly undetected.⁶⁶

When SKILLFUL 31 left, TSgt Reilly refocused on keeping the enemy fighters at bay. Whenever Cooper regained consciousness and raised his head to talk, Reilly pushed it back down under cover. He was repeating the drill when SSG Day emerged behind him. The two KPF joined their compatriots about ten to twelve feet behind Reilly. Day dropped his aid bag, knelt down, and began checking the team sergeant. Quickly determining the bullet that left the "shark-bite sized" exit wound had actually broken

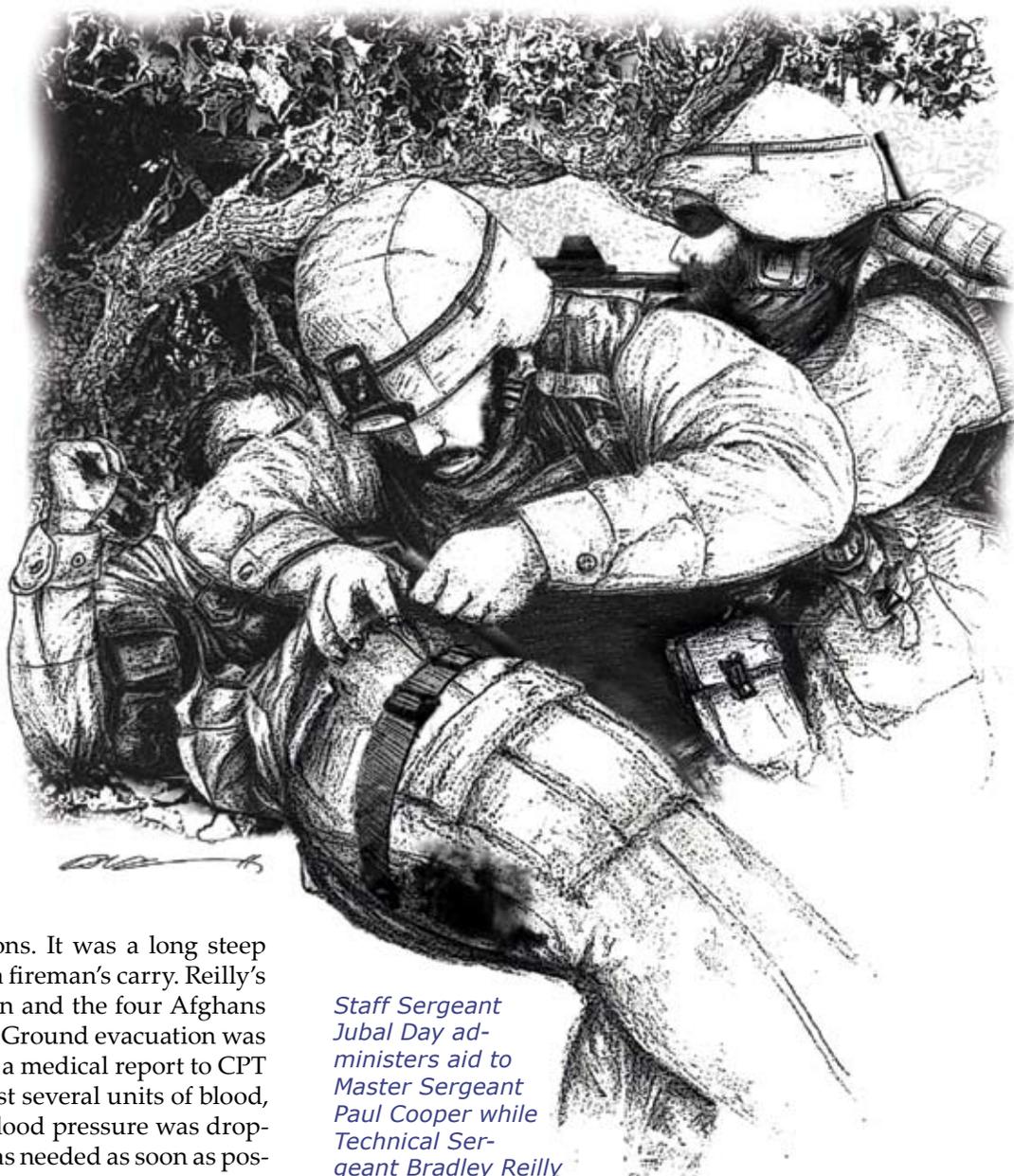
his right femur in half, causing massive internal bleeding, Day pressed his knee down hard into Cooper's groin while he applied a CAT to stop the arterial bleeding. "That little maneuver brought me up for air," said Cooper. "After Day checked my tourniquet, Reilly gave me some morphine. Then, Jubal inserted a nasal trumpet and methodically bandaged up my wounds."⁶⁷

Focused on the task at hand, Day ignored Reilly's constant warnings to keep his head down while he worked on MSG Cooper. Fifteen minutes later, the two had reinforced their position with the team sergeant's helmet and body armor and Cooper was ready for evacuation. Reilly repositioned the KPF to cover the flanks, putting the PDK gunner near Cooper's head. Then Reilly sat on his wounded foot to reduce the bleeding.⁶⁸

SSG Day evaluated his options. It was a long steep uphill climb to move Cooper in a fireman's carry. Reilly's foot would also slow them down and the four Afghans would have to cover their move. Ground evacuation was quickly cast aside. Reilly passed a medical report to CPT Dandridge: MSG Cooper had lost several units of blood, was unconscious, and his blood pressure was dropping. A helicopter MEDEVAC was needed as soon as possible.⁶⁹ The AOB and FOB staffs had already coordinated that request and were working on some replacement AH-64s and helicopters to carry in reinforcements.

Unknown to MSG Cooper and TSgt Reilly, several actions had already been initiated in response to the TIC report. MAJ Spartan had ODA 165 establish a blocking position on the Khowst-Gardez road just south of the ambush site to check all vehicles for fleeing enemy fighters ("squirters"). ODA 164 at Chapman Airfield was alerted to reinforce ODA 163.⁷⁰ ODA 166, on patrol in the Shah-e-khot Valley near Zermat, was the closest ("ten to twelve miles as the crow flies") to the firefight, but a mountain range 8,000-foot high effectively blocked it. The pass selected for its roadblock location was so remote and obscure that the team hired two children to show them where the pass was. The "road" on the map proved to be merely an animal trail with no signs of recent use. After advising the AOB of this situation, the team pulled back into the nearest village (Jichay) and established a blocking position.⁷¹

Having been directed to support the operation, LTC Norman Cooling, the 3/3 Marines commander, had mar-



Staff Sergeant Jubal Day administers aid to Master Sergeant Paul Cooper while Technical Sergeant Bradley Reilly provides covering fire.

Illustration by Dan Telles.

shaled a platoon of Marines and mounted them in eight vehicles. This element would establish another blocking position on the road just south of the ambush site and it was to be vectored into position by MAJ Spartan.⁷² "With everybody and his brother monitoring the fight, all listeners quickly became aware that CPT Dandridge had control of the situation. He was rock steady and calm on the radio. We realized that we could help him best by just working out his requests," said SFC Darren Goff*, the daytime operations noncommissioned officer in the AOB.⁷³ Spartan knew that the detachment commander had his hands full with multiple units in support, some which operated on different communications nets. He did a "fantastic job," said the AOB commander.⁷⁴

The FOB staff was coordinating artillery fire support, "racking and stacking" close air support, and arranging MEDEVAC, replacement AH-64s, and UH-60s to carry reinforcements through the CJSOTF and JTF at Bagram Airbase. The AOB to FOB message traffic was shifted to secure computer links and the FOB to CJSOTF traffic

was diverted to Red telephones to give ODA 163 satellite priority for operational command and control. "I was confident in the leadership of that detachment," said LTC Nilsson.⁷⁵

The airfield at Fire Base Salerno was a beehive of activity as relief was organized and properly sequenced to fly into the contact site. A pair of AH-64s were launched first. UH-60s, SKILLFUL 26 and 24, carrying seven U.S. Navy SEALs, accompanied DUSTOFF 53, a Black Hawk from the 68th Medical Company, to Chapman Airfield. It had become standard practice for the DUSTOFF aircraft to pick up an SF medic and an SF "shooter" to assist with defense during missions. First Lieutenant (1LT) Samuel Osborne*, the physician's assistant, and AOB Sergeant Major (SGM) Matthew Patton* climbed aboard DUSTOFF 53.⁷⁶

Some ODA 164 soldiers, the AOB operations officer, CW3 Jason Golden*, and KPF Afghans filled SKILLFUL 26 and 24.⁷⁷ The seven Navy SOF personnel, fully "kitted up" for combat, had been en route to Salerno for FRIES (Fast Rope Insertion-Extraction System) training when the platoon commander overheard the TIC reports. Navy Lieutenant (LT) Michael McGreevy convinced the TF Sabre watch officer to include his SEALs in the QRF. They were "off to the sound of the guns" instead of being left behind to watch their aircraft fly away.⁷⁸ CW3 Golden proved to be a big help, but the primary interest of CPT Dandridge was getting the MEDEVAC helicopter in and out safely.

Dandridge wanted to suppress enemy fire to the maximum extent possible during the MEDEVAC. It had been seventy long minutes since he had requested a MEDEVAC. Thus, when DUSTOFF 53 radioed in, "Two to three minutes out," ODA 163 and the KPF began firing and throwing everything they had—M-4 carbines, PDK machineguns, AK-47s, 40mm grenade launchers, and hand grenades— at known enemy positions in the valley in a sustained effort to suppress enemy fires.⁷⁹ Having received three different grid locations for the location of Reilly and Cooper, it took DUSTOFF 53 two "go-arounds" to confirm the right finger.⁸⁰ CW3 Travis White*, the flight mission commander in the left seat, quickly realized that they had to use the hoist with "jungle penetrator" to effect the rescue attempts—a dangerous and time-consuming maneuver. Considering the winds and best escape route if hit by enemy fire, White positioned the nose of his Black Hawk down the finger. This exposed the hoist and penetrator to the ravine from where the most enemy fire had come.⁸¹

SP4 David Perelli*, the crewchief, would lower the medic, SSG Michael Conrad*, armed with a 9mm Beretta pistol and a SKEDCO litter strapped to his shoulder and seated on the three-bladed penetrator, down to the ground. Even with TSgt Reilly guiding the helicopter up the narrow slope toward him, DUSTOFF 53 initially lowered SSG Conrad thirty-five feet down the reverse slope, only to discover that it had put him down on a dead enemy fighter. Conrad, heart pounding and giving frantic arm signals, was quickly reeled back up. Then,

CW3 White continued advancing up the ridgeline.⁸²

This time White waited until TSgt Reilly, directly underneath the helicopter, told him to lower the penetrator. Conrad came down again, unseated, and slipped the SKEDCO off while 1LT Osborne, SGM Patton, and SP4 Perelli up above scanned the immediate area for enemy fighters.⁸³ With the MEDEVAC on site, CPT Dandridge added the circling AH-64s and the loitering A-10s to his fire suppression plan. The A-10s orchestrated the "stacked up" aircraft to fly continuous parallel 30mm gun runs well clear of the ridgeline while pounding the valleys beyond with rockets. It was effective and DUSTOFF 53 reported only sporadic, ineffective fire around them.⁸⁴ On the ground, the two medics scrambled to get Cooper on the SKEDCO.

"They slid me onto a SKEDCO and then carried me to a large flat rock to strap me in. I felt like I was lying on a sacrificial altar. Day reinserted the nasal trumpet. In their haste to get me out of there, they misrouted two straps on the SKEDCO. When the hoist was activated, the tag line was jerked out of Conrad's hands and the SKEDCO went vertical. I began to slip down and out. The top chest strap tightened on my throat. I jerked my arms free and, crossing them, grabbed the sides as they reeled me up. Then Osborne and Patton were manhandling me into the aircraft. That was scary for me, but terrifying for everyone," remembered MSG Cooper.⁸⁵

While Osborne examined Cooper, SSG Conrad and TSgt Reilly were hoisted up on the penetrator. The airman took a side back seat to give the medics plenty of room to work.⁸⁶ By this time the pilots had been hovering over the site for fourteen minutes.⁸⁷ "We must have been covered with some miracle force field," said CW3 White afterward. "Our aircraft and crew were never hit by enemy fire."⁸⁸

As soon as DUSTOFF 53 cleared the danger zone, Osborne tried to start an IV on Cooper but his veins had gone "flat." Then the two medics began applying an improvised splint on the gunshot-fractured femur. With SSG Conrad pulling on Cooper's feet, they used "good old manpower" to apply the splint.⁸⁹ The pain was so terrific that Cooper snapped to consciousness, sat bolt upright, and ripped out his nasal trumpet. By then the MEDEVAC was so close to the Salerno Forward Surgical Team site that it did not matter. TSgt Reilly refused a litter and with help hobbled to the triage area.⁹⁰ The fight was over for Cooper and Reilly, but it was still ongoing back at the contact site.

While DUSTOFF 53 was pinpointing MSG Cooper and TSgt Reilly, CPT Dandridge landed SKILLFUL 26 and 24 in the bowl area behind his positions. When SFC Underhill saw the SEALs disembark, he did not recognize their unusual helmets. He asked CW2 Stencil, "Who is that?" His answer was, "I think that they're on our side." Underhill responded, "Tell them where we are because I don't want to get shot by friendlies."⁹¹ Both aircraft had been warned during their approach that ODA 163, the KPF Afghans, the AH-64s, and the A-10s were laying down

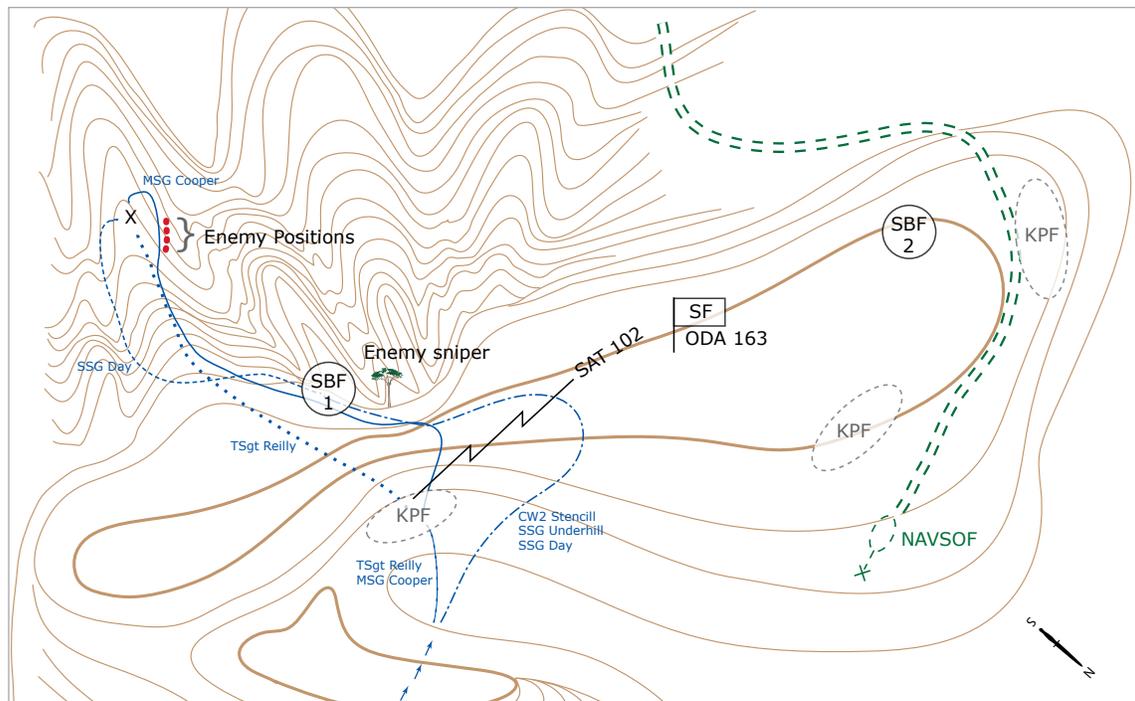
heavy suppression fire on all suspected enemy areas to afford DUSTOFF 53 some protection. The SEAL radios were not compatible with those used by ODA 163, but CW3 Golden had brought communications links for that contingency.⁹²

Dandridge suspected that there was at least one enemy fighter alive and directed LT McGreevy and his element to conduct a sweep to the east and down through the ravine in front of his positions. The Navy platoon leader detached a three-man element to serve as an airborne reconnaissance force (with snipers aboard one UH-60) above and in front, as he led the remaining SEALs and three KPF Afghans down into the ravine to start the directed sweep. The second helicopter carrying ODA 164 and ODB personnel and some KPF Afghans established a blocking position beyond the ravine being swept by the SEALs in an attempt to catch any “squirters.”⁹³

That action resulted in the emplacement of four blocking positions (including the 3/3 Marines) around the contact site. ODA 165 had expanded the search of vehicles to the villages near the ambush site, looking for wounded and questioning inhabitants. Earlier, they had talked with an Afghan CNN “stringer” in the blocked traffic, who had overheard a radio report in Khowst. Apparently, he headed to “the sound of the guns looking for a story.”⁹⁴

In the meantime, SSG Day, the medic, and the four

KPF soldier sitting behind SBF position reveals the steepness of the rugged terrain and vastness below affording multiple escape routes for enemy “squirters” breaking contact.



Sketch map prepared by ODA 163 and Dr. Charles H. Briscoe—not to scale—depicting the appropriate routes of the NAVSOB reaction force.

KPF Afghans climbed back up to the ODA command post. “Day asked me where he was needed. The man was calm, cool, and covered with blood. I told him to check on the wounded KPF Afghan and away he went without saying a word,” said CPT Dandridge.⁹⁵ ODA 165 requested the sensitive site exploitation (SSE) mission and the ODB granted it with the stipulation that ODA 165 be clear of the pass before sunset. When the SEALs reported “all clear” and began withdrawal back up the ravine to the contact site, ODA 165 was cleared to remove its roadblock and begin the SSE. At an altitude of 8,200 feet, climbing out of the ravine in the tough mountainous terrain took the SEALs nearly forty-five minutes. “It was a five steps, take a rest, five steps, take a rest; terrible terrain,” said Boatswain Mate Second Class (BM2) Mack Brown*.⁹⁶ Navy LT McGreevy reported to CPT Dandridge that they had perceived no fire being returned from the enemy encountered during the sweep. They had already been previously killed in action, or had been killed by the grenades and gunfire of his element as it advanced through the valley.⁹⁷ One of the heliborne SEAL snipers reported a kill on the far side of the ravine.⁹⁸ As ODA 165 came forward to conduct the SSE, CPT Dandridge organized the helicopter exfiltration from the contact site.

Having worked the now-stopped traffic up and down both sides of the ambush site on the Gardez–Khowst road, ODA 165 located a wadi that went toward the ravine behind the contact site. “We had the police chief and some village elders with us to help identify dead fighters. The police chief pointed out where the Soviets had mined the area. By following the wadi, we got within a half mile of the contact site. Then, with our ASF on either flank, we walked into the narrow ravine, pausing to investigate the adjoining ravines, until we estimated that we were below the major contact site. Then, we divided up into groups to climb up the ravines and fin-



PKM machinegun in the ravine below the reverse slope enemy position opposite Reilly and Cooper. Note the rocky, rugged terrain.

gers leading to top. It wasn't until we got near the crests that we began finding enemy bodies—nine of the twelve counted by the SEALs—and military equipment strewn about. As we began recording the SSE information, there was a commotion," said CPT Jay Huske*.

One of the ASF had spotted an Afghan coming down a draw toward them and several of the ASF grabbed him. This was less than thirty minutes since the exfiltration had started at the top. Although the man was wearing clean clothes, he was otherwise dirty and wore heavily dust-coated sandals. His reason for being there was to collect a debt owed by an uncle. The local Afghans accompanying ODA 165 claimed not to know him. The elders were more interested in burying the dead before sundown. The man was detained. When the SSE was complete, he was delivered to Gardez for interrogation.⁹⁹

By then, all U.S. and Afghan security forces directly involved in the contact had returned to Chapman Airfield and the forces in blocking positions were returning to their home bases. The AOB debrief finished in time for the members of ODA 163 to get over to Fire Base Salerno to see a stabilized MSG Cooper (after five pints of blood) and TSgt Reilly before the two were flown to Germany. The wounded KPF Afghan returned to duty in a week.¹⁰⁰

In summary, a well-equipped, tough, and determined group of al-Qaeda-associated militia fighters was eliminated. There were thirteen confirmed enemy killed in action. Many wore U.S. Army BDU jackets, load-bearing ammunition vests, and sturdy hiking shoes. They carried an FM radio with extra batteries and binoculars. Also captured were eight AK-47 assault rifles, two SVD sniper rifles, two PKM machineguns, and two RPG-7s with substantial ammunition. An experienced, well-trained, and well-led SF team carried the day on 11 April 2005, at 8,200 feet in the rugged mountains of Khowst-Gardez, Afghanistan. During several subsequent QRF missions, ODA 163 acquitted itself well.

The success, however, on 11 April 2005, was achieved by a well-coordinated combined joint operations team

effort at all levels by all four U.S. defense forces and Afghan security forces. "Everyone contributed to the fight and performed their roles like professionals," said LTC Nilsson, FOB 12 commander. "In my opinion, the battalion fought the fight very well. The FOB rated 1 percent of the credit, the AOB rated 10 percent, and ODA 163 merited 89 percent for this one. ODA 165 got an honorable mention for the SSE. But the real heroes in the action were the pilots and aircrew of SKILLFUL 31."¹⁰¹

SSG Jubal Day, TSgt Brad Reilly, and CW3 Chris Palumbo were awarded Silver Stars for their valorous actions. Various other decorations were recommended. Three Navy SEALs involved in this action were later killed during Operation RED WINGS on 28 June 2005.¹⁰² ♣

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- 96 Boatswain Mate 2 Mack Brown*, classified interview by Richard Green, 20 April 2005, Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL.
- 97 NSWTU-AFG OPSUM; PMR ODA163.
- 98 Silver, Green, and Partin, "Operation ENDURING FREEDOM: Troops in Contact in the Khowst Province, 11 April 2005 (S)," 43.
- 99 Huske interview. The detainee was "connected." He was a principal Taliban leader's mullah's son and associated with a madrassa in Pakistan. Working with the police to circulate photos of the dead al-Qaeda-associated militiamen among village elders, ODA 165 confirmed that many of the enemy killed in action were from the local area.
- 100 Dandridge interview 2.
- 101 Nilsson interview.
- 102 Silver, Green, and Partin, "Operation ENDURING FREEDOM: Troops in Contact in the Khowst Province, 11 April 2005 (S)."