

# OPERATION MEDUSA

## Regaining Control of Afghanistan's Panjwayi Valley

By Kenneth Finlayson and Alan D. Meyer

*\*In keeping with USSOCOM Policy, Special Operations Soldiers Major and below and the operational objectives in this article have been given pseudonyms.*

**I**N September 2006, the "Desert Eagles," 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group (3rd SFG), operating as Task Force-31, fought to drive Taliban forces out of the strategically important Panjwayi Valley, 35 kilometers southwest of the city of Kandahar, Afghanistan. Operation MEDUSA was designed to push the Taliban out of their traditional stronghold. The subsequent failure of the NATO/ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) to retain control of the strategic valley after Operation MEDUSA enabled the Taliban to return in the late fall. In January 2007, another campaign, Operation BAAZ TSUKA, was required to drive the Taliban out of the valley again. This article focuses on the action of C Company, 1/3rd SFG that ousted the Taliban from the Panjwayi during Operation MEDUSA. Operation BAAZ TSUKA, will be presented in a future Veritas article.

The city of Kandahar and Kandahar Province have always played a significant role in Afghanistan's history. The province's fertile valleys make it one of the "bread-baskets" of the country. The ancient city of Kandahar

has been an important population and trade center since the time of Alexander the Great.<sup>1</sup> The British repeatedly occupied Kandahar in a succession of Anglo-Afghan Wars lasting from 1830 to 1870.<sup>2</sup> During the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1988, Kandahar was a center of Mujahideen resistance against the Soviet Army. There was heavy fighting in and around the city until the Soviet withdrawal.<sup>3</sup> Kandahar is widely considered to be the birthplace of the Taliban, the radical Islamic militant group that gained control of Afghanistan in 1994.<sup>4</sup> It was their final redoubt before U.S. and Afghan forces drove them from power in December of 2001.<sup>5</sup> This city, the province capital, has great symbolic meaning to the leadership of the Taliban's fiercely dedicated fighters.

Kandahar is more than just symbolically significant in the continuing fight for southern Afghanistan. It is "the key to central and northern Afghanistan. And Panjwayi is the key to Kandahar."<sup>6</sup> The Panjwayi District, beginning 35 kilometers southwest of the city encompasses





*MAJ Jamie Hall\* AOB-330 commander, briefs his men prior to commencing operations in the Panjwayi. The focused preparatory training of the "Desert Eagles" in the U.S. paid great dividends during Operation MEDUSA.*



*Special Forces soldiers with a Taliban newsletter. Intelligence collected on Taliban intentions led to Operation MEDUSA.*

the Arghandab River valley. The river is part of an extensive watershed that creates a broad, fertile region in the desert of southwest Afghanistan. The valleys provide natural lines of communication

between Kandahar and Taliban safe havens in Pakistan. Residents of Panjwayi raise grapes, corn, and other crops making it the breadbasket of Kandahar and the surrounding country.<sup>7</sup> The 3rd SFG soldiers were returning to a familiar place.

The "Desert Eagles," (TF-31), were no strangers to Afghanistan. The battalion was starting its fifth rotation in the war-torn country since U. S. Special Forces (USSF) helped the Afghan Northern Alliance (in the north) and Anti-Taliban Forces (in the south) drive the Taliban from power in late 2001. Many veterans were returning for their third, fourth, and even fifth combat tours. Many had first-hand experience in the Panjwayi. Prior to leaving Afghanistan in early 2006, the 1/3 SFG company commanders were assigned operational areas for their next rotation.<sup>8</sup>

The Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) was led by Colonel (COL) Edward M. Reeder and his 7th Special Forces Group staff when the 3rd SFG returned in August 2007. COL Christopher K. Haas, 3rd SFG commander, assumed command of the CJSOTF shortly after Operation MEDUSA commenced. The CJSOTF-A is a multi-national command with special operations forces from twelve countries including Canada, The Netherlands and the United Arab Emirates, that directed special operations in Afghanistan in support of NATO/ISAF. ISAF is the UN-mandated force under Security Council Resolutions 1386, 1413 and 1444. 1/3 SFG was returning to the same area of operations (AO) it had from June 2005 to February 2006.<sup>9</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Donald C. Bolduc, the 1/3 SFG commander, focused on operations to reduce the Taliban strongholds and sever their connection with the local population. Following up on previous rotations, LTC Bolduc began his security assistance strategy by improving the combat capability of the Afghan government forces. Repetitive collective training was key to building up the Afghani's confidence in themselves.<sup>10</sup> Bolduc's intent was to "balance security with development and 'nest' the capabilities of SOF [special operations forces] with those of the conventional forces (NATO/ISAF)."<sup>11</sup> The summer of 2006 at Fort Bragg had been dedicated to preparing for the next rotation in August.

Major Jamie Hall\*, C Company, and the other company commanders took maximum advantage of the opportunity. Hall's training plan was decentralized down to the operational detachments, who concentrated on weapons firing, driver training, communications training, and medical live tissue training (for treating battlefield wounds).<sup>12</sup> Hall held weekly updates with his team commanders to review intelligence updates received from Afghanistan to refine tactics and respond to new developments.<sup>13</sup> He made sure that all of his 18Fs (the Special Forces Operations & Intelligence NCOs) had the time and resources they needed to conduct detailed area studies. As a result, C Company 1/3 SFG was ready to "hit the ground running." And they had to because Operation MEDUSA kicked off just days after they arrived.

Afghan Northern Alliance forces, with the help of U.S. Army Special Forces and coalition airpower, had cleared this region of the Taliban in early 2002. However, in the years that followed, control of the Panjwayi had gradually been lost. By late summer 2006, NATO/ISAF



3rd SFG Flash



10th MTN Division SSI



87th Infantry Regt. DUI



25th Artillery Regt. DUI

units entering the area were regularly attacked by 100 or more fighters. The impetus for Operation MEDUSA was increasing evidence that the Taliban were massing for a major offensive against the city of Kandahar. Canadian Brigadier General David A. Fraser, the NATO/ISAF commander, developed Operation MEDUSA to disrupt the planned attack and restrict Taliban access to the “the key to Kandahar,” the Panjwayi. Operation MEDUSA was designed to open Highway 1, stop the Taliban advance on Kandahar, and clear the Panjwayi Valley of insurgents.”<sup>14</sup> LTC Bolduc had been closely monitoring NATO/ISAF plans from Fort Bragg. Though the Desert Eagles would arrive in Afghanistan just days before the operation was scheduled to commence, he thought that MEDUSA was important to the embattled country’s future and he committed to support it.<sup>15</sup> Bolduc knew his SF teams were prepared to operate in the valley.

Panjwayi’s topography favored dismounted operations. The thickly clustered farms and fields provided excellent cover and concealment. The relatively large rural agrarian population was generally passive. Taliban fighters easily blended in among them. Most of the “roads” were just centuries-old foot paths through small, heavily vegetated orchards, vineyards and fields, protected by sun-dried mud walls as hard as concrete. Interspersed throughout were “grape houses” described by Sergeant First Class (SFC) Carl Freeman\* of ODA 331 as “2-story huts with mud walls 2-3 feet thick. They have 6-8 inch slits in the walls for racks to hang the grapes and they are natural bunkers.”<sup>16</sup> The terrain was especially difficult for mounted troops, more so for NATO/ISAF units that relied on armored personnel carriers (APCs) and tanks for protection.

Elements of 1/3 SFG (TF-31) began arriving in-country on 22 August 2006.<sup>17</sup> TF-31 was to “conduct consolidation operations (defined as the combining of elements to perform a common function, in this case USSF and NATO/ISAF) to establish, maintain, or regain control of key population centers and lines of communication in the regions, provinces or districts.”<sup>18</sup> The TF-31 “heavy



*AOB-330 prepares for the movement across the Red Sand Desert. Crossing the desert allowed the unit to infiltrate undetected behind the Taliban.*

lifting” was to be done by the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. A Company, 3rd SFG, (5 ODAs) was going to Zabel Province, and B Company (5 ODAs) to Oruzgan Province. C Company (6 ODAs) was responsible for Kandahar Province and would support Operation MEDUSA.<sup>19</sup>

MAJ Hall’s initial SOF task force for MEDUSA consisted of Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs) 331 and 326 from B Company because four C Company ODAs, 332, 333, 334 and 335 were conducting missions in Farah, Gereshk, Herat, and Shindand respectively. Hall’s small company headquarters, Operational Detachment Bravo 330 (ODB-330), had a Special Operations Team-Alpha (SOT-A) attached to provide signal intelligence and electronic warfare support. Afghan National Army (ANA) “companies” worked directly with each ODA. The ANA “companies” were thirty-man units armed with AK-47 rifles, RPK machine guns, and RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) launchers.<sup>20</sup> On 26 August 2006, ODB-330 departed Kandahar Airfield to begin its infiltration of Area of Operations (AO) FALCON\*. ODA

*This view of the Panjwayi Valley shows how compartmented the agrarian region is and the difficulty of conducting mounted operations.*





*The GMV was the primary troop-carrier vehicle for the Special Forces soldiers of TF-31.*



*Crossing the Red Sand Desert in convoy, ODA 336 interspersed the ANA Ford Ranger pickup trucks with their GMVs.*

336, which had just arrived from Fort Bragg, would join the task force on 3 September.<sup>21</sup>

MAJ Hall chose to avoid the well-watched Highway 1 leading straight from Kandahar into the Panjwayi Valley. He elected to move south down Highway 4 towards Spin Buldak, then turn west and north across the trackless Red Sand Desert to slip unnoticed into his operational area.<sup>22</sup> "I wanted to quietly infiltrate the enemy's battle space before they knew we were coming."<sup>23</sup> The 60-mile desert route proved to be daunting. "It was like driving across Mars," said MAJ Hall.<sup>24</sup> "It was very arduous. Often we had to stop and unload the vehicles to free them. In 120° heat, it was a testament to intestinal fortitude," said Staff Sergeant (SSG) Don Ring\*of ODA 331.<sup>25</sup> The task force, with its Ground

Mobility Vehicles (GMV) and Ford Ranger pickup trucks carrying the ANA, struggled against shifting sands, sixty-foot dunes, and deep ravines for four days.<sup>26</sup> While ODB-330 slipped into the AO, the concurrent movement of the NATO/ISAF elements eliminated any chance of surprise.

The obvious start of operations was further exacerbated on 30 August when Asadulah Khalid, the governor of Kandahar Province, warned the local populace in a radio broadcast that NATO/ISAF units were coming to search the Panjwayi for enemy combatants. His intent was to give the local population a chance to leave before the impending battle. It worked. MAJ Hall's elements, now through the Red Sand Desert and observing from a prominent ridge on the south side of AO FALCON, described the exodus of the thousands of civilians streaming from the area.<sup>27</sup>

SFC Peter Carney\*, ODA 336, said: "We watched people walk out just like you would see in [the movie] *The Ten Commandments*. They were on donkeys, on carts... walking out, on camels...they were all old men, women, and children."<sup>28</sup> SFC Brett Keith said "We estimated several thousand leaving."<sup>29</sup> The SF veterans knew that the older boys and able-bodied men had been recruited, often against their will, to fight with the Taliban. Carney had his ANA troops set up an informal checkpoint and collect information. He told them, "Don't get on [harass] the people, just ask some simple questions: why are you leaving, what's going on, just very general questions." The refugees answered openly: "The Taliban say there's going to be a very big fight here."<sup>30</sup> The Taliban were also telling the civilians to leave the valley.<sup>31</sup>

Operation MEDUSA's main effort would be made by TF Aegis, made up of the 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group (1st RCR BG) with an attached mounted reconnaissance platoon of Danish soldiers and a company of ANA troops.<sup>32</sup> The Canadian battalion was equipped with LAV-III (light armored vehicles). The LAV-III is a Canadian-built, eight-wheeled vehicle with heavier armor than the U.S. military's Stryker. It mounts a 25mm cannon and carries six infantrymen inside with a three-man crew.<sup>33</sup> The battalion was supported by four M-777 155mm towed howitzers of E Battery, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery.<sup>34</sup> The Canadian forces started moving on 2 September.

The NATO/ISAF plan was to have the 1st RCRBG travel down Highway 1, conduct a deliberate river crossing from the south of the Argendab River and assault Objective OSPREY\*. The Canadian's used preplanned heavy artillery and air strikes as they advanced cautiously down the road. On 3 September, an IED (Improvised



*ISAF SSI*



*Royal Canadian Regimental Crest*



*Royal Canadian Horse Artillery Crest*



*Danish Jydske Dragenregiment Crest*

Explosive Device) killed four Canadian soldiers in a LAV and the main effort stalled on the south side of the river. Taliban forces facing the Canadians numbered around 200. For the next three days, heavy fighting prevented the Battle Group from advancing across the river to OBJ OSPREY.<sup>35</sup> Hall's SF task force deep in the Taliban rear changed that situation.<sup>36</sup>

On 3 September, SF and ANA troops approached Objective HAWK\*, the 3,000 foot hill known as Sperwan Ghar that was the last of four Named Areas of Interest (NAIs) assigned by NATO/ISAF to reconnoiter and secure. Thus far, with the exception of challenging terrain and a few inconclusive enemy contacts during their infiltration through the Red Sand Desert, the movement had been relatively uneventful. The best available intelligence prior to the commencement of operations estimated the Taliban strength in the valley to be 60-80 fighters.<sup>37</sup> This estimate proved to be woefully incorrect, as more than 800 Taliban eventually engaged the Coalition forces.<sup>38</sup> The mission of Hall's SF task force was to secure the southern flank of the NATO/ISAF main effort.<sup>39</sup>

The morning dawned clear and bright with the promise of another sweltering day in the Panjwayi. Three ODAs, together with infantry troops from the ANA, moved forward to secure Objective HAWK. Two detachments (ODA 331 and ODA 336), their ANA counterparts and MAJ Hall's GMV moved forward to reconnoiter Sperwan Ghar. The GMVs were leading. ODA 326 remained in reserve as the Quick Reaction Force (QRF). From the hilltop, the SF soldiers and their ANA allies would be able to observe and provide supporting fires north across the Arghandab River valley.

Within a few hundred meters of the hilltop, the lead GMV opened fire when they saw Taliban fighters repositioning RPGs. SFC Brett Keith\* from ODA 336 summed up what happened next: "We walked into a hornet's nest. They were waiting for us."<sup>40</sup> The insurgents rained small arms and RPG fire on the task force from three sides. MAJ Hall immediately radioed "Troops



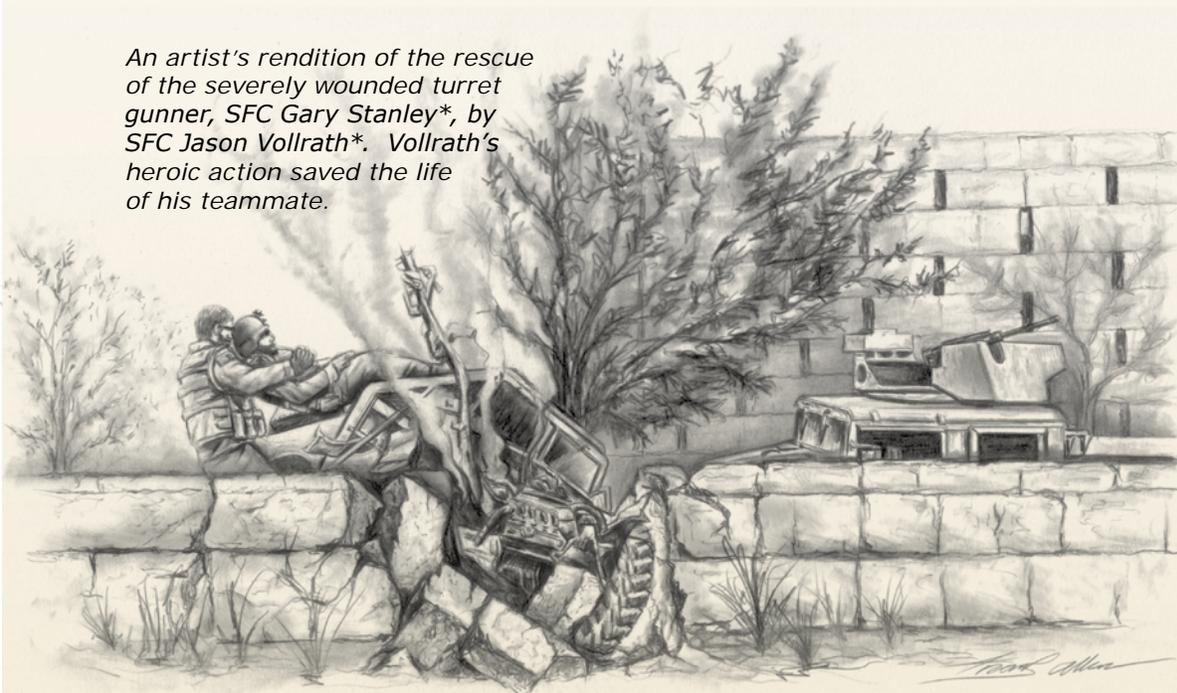
*With a GMV in overwatch, Special Forces and Afghan National Army troops gather at the foot of Sperwan Ghar. It was near here that an IED destroyed a GMV.*



*A UH-60 Black Hawk medical evacuation helicopter created a dust cloud landing near Sperwan Ghar.*

in Contact" to TF-31 and requested close air support (CAS). As Hall recalled afterward, "Within 20 minutes of the start of the fight we were running out of ammunition."<sup>41</sup> Both the SF and ANA troops quickly fired their basic load of ammunition in the intense engagement. The two lead teams broke contact with the enemy and fell back to link up with the QRF. The

*An artist's rendition of the rescue of the severely wounded turret gunner, SFC Gary Stanley\*, by SFC Jason Vollrath\*. Vollrath's heroic action saved the life of his teammate.*



*A Special Forces medic treats a wounded team member. Three SF soldiers and one ANA soldier were wounded and evacuated during the initial assault on Sperwan Ghar.*



A Special Forces soldier fires his M-240B machine gun at Taliban fighters moving toward Sperwan Ghar. From the hilltop, the Special Forces teams could suppress enemy movement in the valley below.



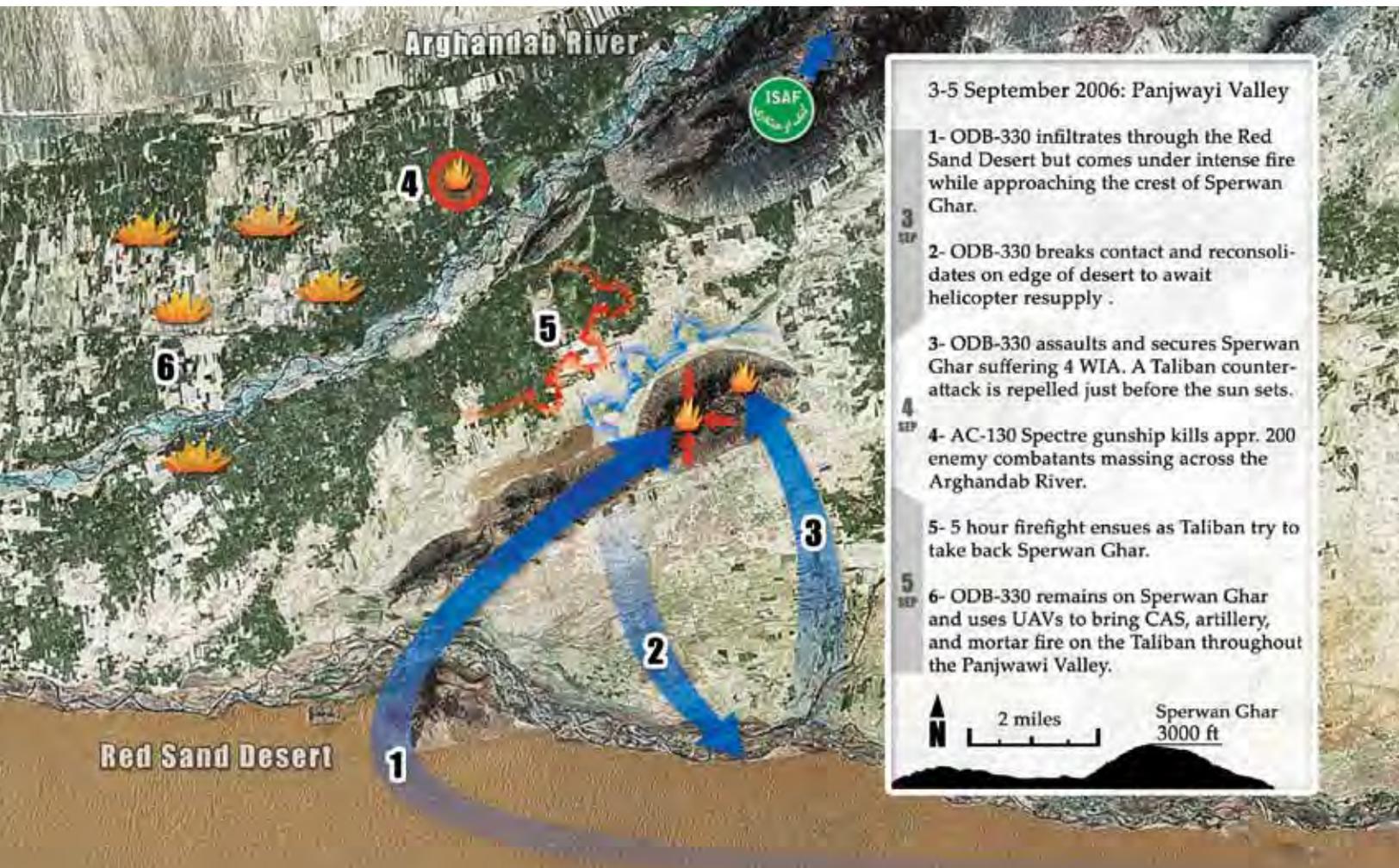
A U.S. Air Force AC-130H Spectre. Firing 40mm and 105mm cannon, the Spectre is a devastating CAS weapons platform at night.

entire task force re consolidated at the edge of the desert to await an ammunition resupply by helicopter. Amazingly, despite the ferocity of this first firefight, there were no friendly casualties.<sup>42</sup> That night, MAJ Hall ordered ODA 333 to occupy a nearby hill, Ma'sum Ghar, and provide overwatch of Objective Osprey\* north of the Argendab river and the rest of the valley.

CPT Martin Bolling\* and ODA 333 were airlifted to Ma'sum Ghar from Gereshk on the morning of 4 September for what proved to be an eight-day stint on the hill. "We were air lifted in by British CH-47's and the ANA ran us

up the hill in their trucks. We did a battle hand-off with the Canadian Special Operations Forces guys who were there. The Canadians left three snipers with us. Our mission was to take charge of CAS north and south of the Argendab. We had heavy action the first few days, and then it died off as the Taliban pulled out," said CPT Bolling.<sup>43</sup> The ability to bring in accurate CAS would be critical to the operations of the SF task force.

Early on 4 September, Hall's resupplied task force again attempted to take Sperwan Ghar. With Coalition CAS in support, the ODAs attacked the hill, with ODA 326 in the





*From their position on high ground overlooking the valley, the Special Forces teams employed Close Air Support to drive the Taliban out of Panjawi.*



*The eight-wheeled LAV-III was the primary Canadian troop carrier. It had difficulty maneuvering in the restricted terrain of Panjaywi.*

lead, followed by ODA 331 and 336. The ANA moved behind their respective ODAs. As enemy fire intensified, the ANA soldiers dismounted and began attacking up the hill. One Afghan soldier stepped on a “toe-popper” anti-personnel mine. When Major Hall halted his GMV to call for a MEDEVAC (Medical Evacuation) helicopter, a GMV from ODA 331 passed his vehicle to bring in the wounded man.

As the vehicle moved up the road, it was struck by a command-detonated IED. Most of the troops riding in this vehicle had dismounted moments earlier. Still, they were knocked down and several wounded by the blast. The driver was blown clear, but the turret gunner, SFC Gary Stanley\*, was severely wounded and trapped with his legs inside. SFC Jason Vollrath\*, leapt out of his GMV and sprinted to the wreck. Vollrath dragged Stanley to safety as heat from the burning GMV caused the mortar rounds and other ammunition stored inside to explode. After extinguishing his comrade’s burning clothes (and his own), Vollrath carried the injured Stanley to safety while under heavy enemy fire. All told, the ANA mine casualty and the three seriously wounded SF

soldiers were evacuated by helicopter. SFC Vollrath, who sustained burns to his hands and arms while heroically rescuing SFC Stanley, refused to leave the fight.<sup>44</sup>

The American SF and the ANA continued their assault and pushed the Taliban off the hill. By the end of the day, Hall’s task force “owned” Sperwan Ghar, but the Taliban were not ready to relinquish this key terrain. Just before sunset, while the ODAs and ANA were preparing defensive positions for their first night on the hilltop, the Taliban mounted a counterattack. Hall’s men repelled the assault, killing four of the enemy in the process. Later that night, task force members, now reinforced with elements of the TF-31 headquarters “Jump TOC” (forward-deployable Tactical Operations Center) who had flown in by CH-47 helicopter, worked with U. S. Air Force AC-130 Spectre gunships to kill approximately 200 enemy combatants who were massing on the north side of the Arghandab River.

The fighting resumed on 5 September. “The day after we took the hill, we had a sustained gunfight of about four or five hours,” said SFC Brett Keith. “By that time guys were just filling in gaps, moving and executing without being told.”<sup>45</sup> With a commanding observation point on top of Sperwan Ghar and with UAVs (Unmanned Aerial

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*“You gotta be aggressive, ...I’m not saying aggressive stupid.”*

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Vehicles) providing real time intelligence, the task force was able to bring devastating CAS, artillery and mortar fire on the Taliban throughout the valley. By the end of the day on 5 September, the Taliban quit trying to retake Sperwan Ghar and stayed north of the river. A “tactical snapshot” of the battle for Sperwan Ghar summed up the action: 20 Enemy Killed in Action (KIA) by Direct Fire; 200 Enemy KIA by Indirect Fire (mortar, artillery, and CAS directed by SF elements); one ANA soldier and ten USSF troops Wounded in Action (WIA).<sup>46</sup>

According to the original MEDUSA plan, by occupying Sperwan Ghar, MAJ Hall’s task force accomplished its assigned tasks. But, as the old military axiom goes, “no plan survives first contact.” This proved true for the NATO/ISAF units. Shortly after a Canadian mechanized infantry company conducted a deliberate crossing of the Arghandab River on 5 September, an enemy ambush disabled one of the LAV-IIIs and wounded several soldiers inside. This prompted the commander to halt his advance and establish a defensive position. “The Canadians had only moved 500 meters past their line of departure when they got hit,” said SSG Zeke Henry\* of ODA 331 observing from a blocking position on the south side of the river.<sup>47</sup> Isolated on the north side of the river, the company could not reach Objective



Afghan National Army troops in a Ford Ranger pickup. Each ODA had an ANA company attached during Operation MEDUSA.

*"...You get them on the run, and you've got 'em."*

to the Taliban. The units from most NATO/ISAF nations (with a few exceptions, including the U.S. and a handful of other countries) typically responded to any IED or enemy ambush by stopping and establishing a defensive perimeter. Ironically, as the SF soldiers pointed out, this "cautious" tactic made the now-stationary unit even more vulnerable. SFC Peter Carney from ODA 336 said: "They [the insurgents] only have so much logistics...most of them only carry a few magazines. So when you first get hit, you come up with a quick basic plan, then you maneuver on them. Once you get them on the run, you've got them...because you [prevent] them from going back to their caches and getting more ammunition."<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, he warned, halting to establish a defensive perimeter gives the enemy a chance to come up with a plan, put in more IEDs, and reinforces their initial success. "You gotta be aggressive," Carney maintained. "And I'm not saying 'aggressive stupid.' Just keep moving...I've said it once, I'll probably say it three more times...you get them on the run, and you've got 'em."<sup>50</sup>

OSPREY, located directly across the Arghandab River from Objective HAWK and Sperwan Ghar.<sup>48</sup>

With the Canadians halted, Hall offered to clear the remainder of Operation MEDUSA's objectives. The conduct of the NATO/ISAF main effort highlights a common complaint voiced by troops from TF-31's Desert Eagles. NATO/ISAF soldiers were for the most part ready and willing, but in the end unable, because of limitations placed on them by their higher commanders and national governments – to aggressively take the fight

**6-11 September: Panjwayi Valley**

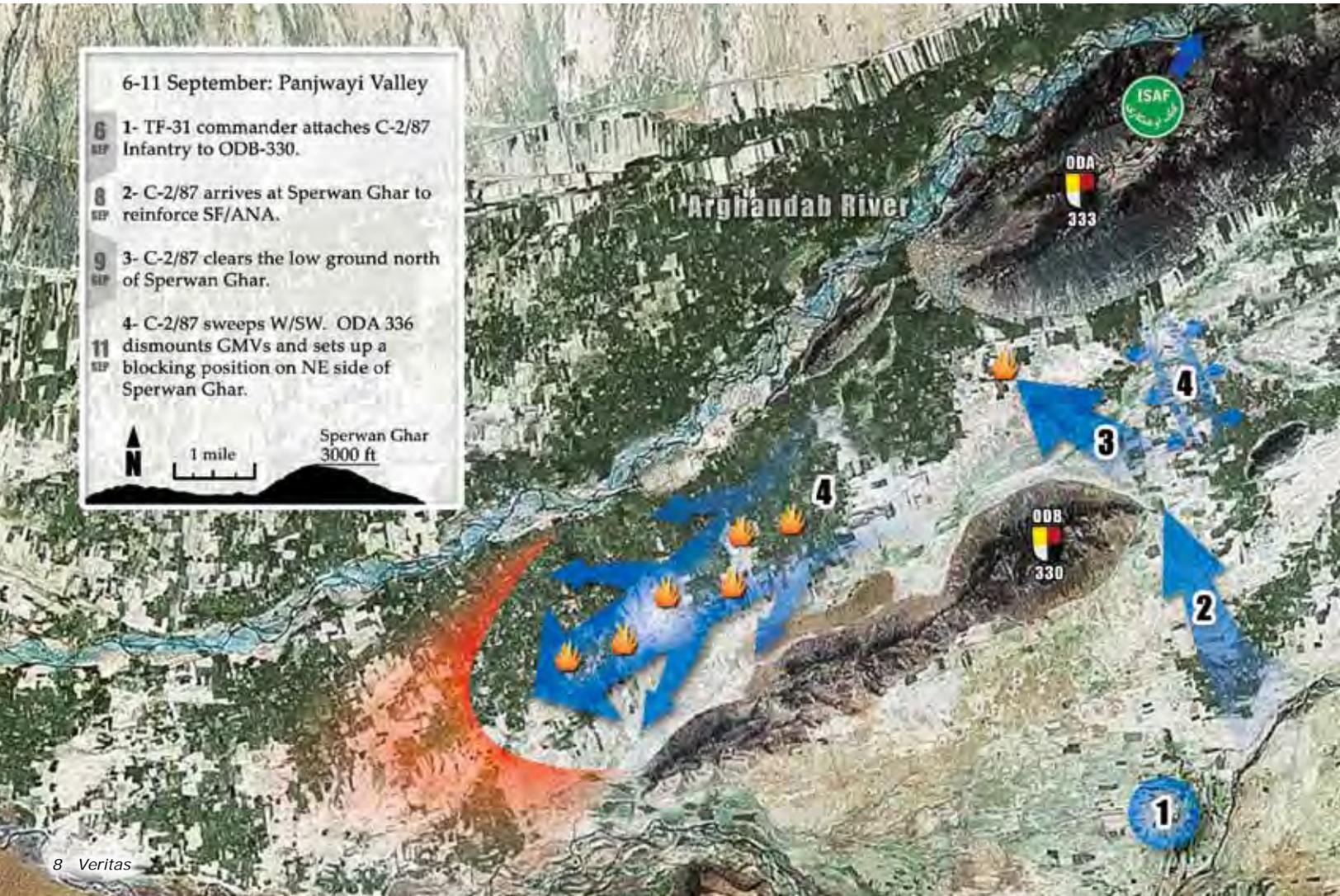
**6 SEP** 1- TF-31 commander attaches C-2/87 Infantry to ODB-330.

**8 SEP** 2- C-2/87 arrives at Sperwan Ghar to reinforce SF/ANA.

**9 SEP** 3- C-2/87 clears the low ground north of Sperwan Ghar.

**11 SEP** 4- C-2/87 sweeps W/SW. ODA 336 dismounts GMVs and sets up a blocking position on NE side of Sperwan Ghar.

1 mile  
Sperwan Ghar  
3000 ft





*Team Comanche supported the Special Forces Task Force with two M-119 105mm howitzers. The 1st Platoon, A-5/25 Artillery provided direct supporting fires during Operation MEDUSA.*

With the Canadian unit bogged down on the far side of the Arghandab River, the Taliban, strengthened by a steady stream of incoming fighters from outside the valley, turned their attention to the SF task force on Sperwan Ghar. The task force responded with accurate and continuous well-directed CAS from their vantage points on Sperwan Ghar and Ma'sum Ghar.<sup>51</sup>

By 6 September they had stopped the Taliban. However, if Hall's men left the hilltop to pursue, they risked



*Troops of the 2/87th Infantry, 10th Mountain Division patrol the Pakistan border. C Company 2/87 was attached to AOB-330 for Operation MEDUSA.*

losing control of the dominant terrain. The TF-31 commander, LTC Donald Bolduc, fixed this problem by requesting a U.S. infantry company team with artillery that he attached to ODB-330.<sup>52</sup> The company was OPCON (Operational Control) to the ODB-330 commander.<sup>53</sup>

On 8 September, Team Comanche, composed of Company C, 2nd Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, was sent to reinforce the SF/ANA success



*A Coalition AH-60 Apache helicopter provides Close Air Support. The ability of the Coalition to provide almost continuous CAS was key to routing the Taliban in Panjwayi.*

near Sperwan Ghar. The next day, on 9 September, the company, commanded by Captain Steven Helm and mounted in up-armored HUMVEES, joined the fight by clearing the low ground on the north side of Sperwan Ghar. CPT Helm positioned one 60mm and one 81mm mortar with the ODB on Sperwan Ghar and positioned his two attached 105mm howitzers of the 1st platoon, A Battery, 5/25th Artillery, 10th Mountain Division, four kilometers south of Sperwan Ghar in direct support.<sup>54</sup>

“We left Kandahar the morning of the 7th to link up with the ODB south of Sperwan Ghar. Our mission was to clear Objective HAWK north to the Argendab River,” said CPT Helm. “On the 8th there was a prolonged battle that pushed the enemy across the river.”<sup>55</sup>

In the clearing action, MAJ Hall’s task force suffered its only KIAs during Operation MEDUSA. A U.S. ETT advisor (Embedded Training Team) and three ANA soldiers working with Team Comanche were killed during combat. Approximately 40 enemy personnel were killed by Team Comanche and CAS.<sup>56</sup> The fighting continued sporadically on the 9th and 10th.

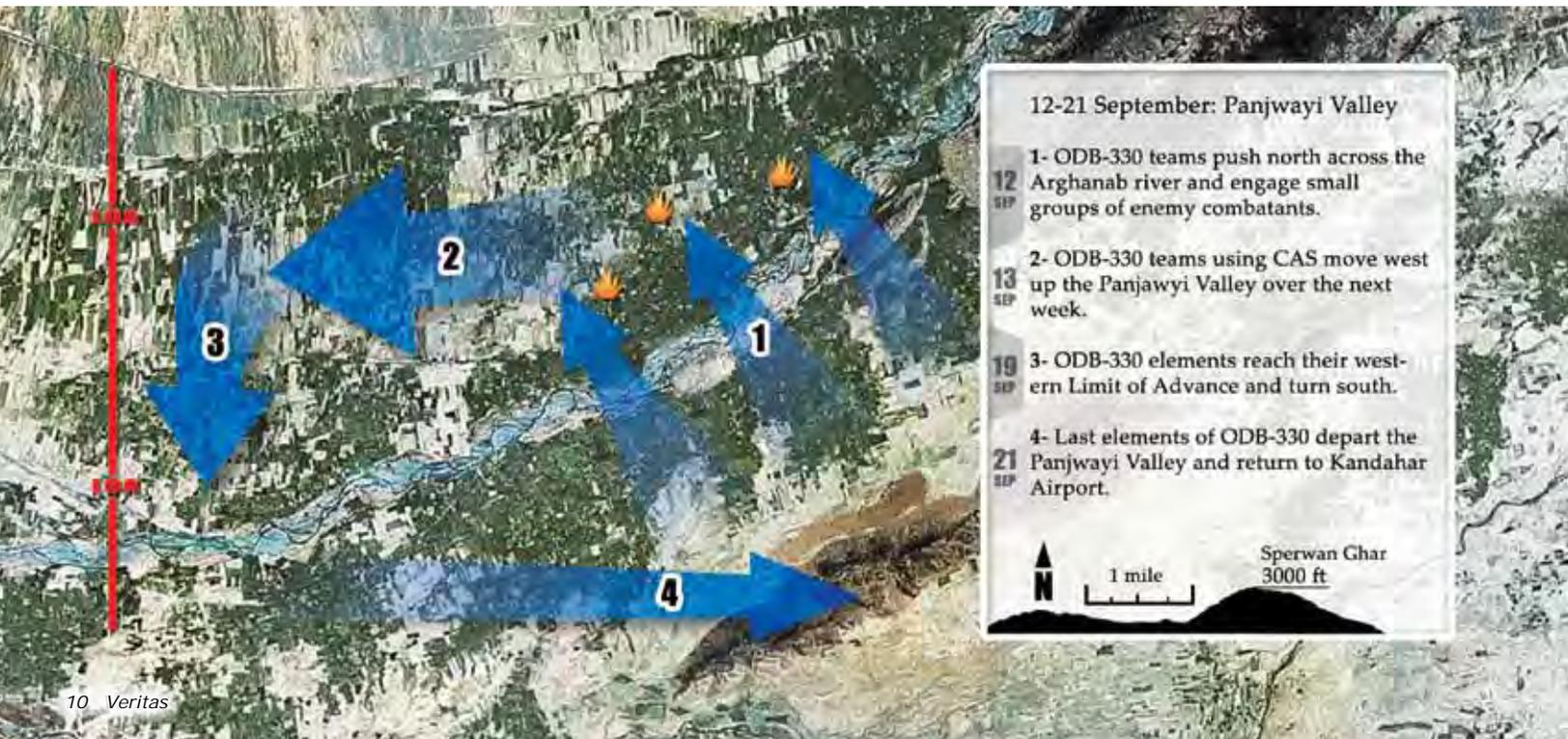
11 September was a busy day for Major Hall’s task force. While the 10th Mountain Division troops swept west-southwest through the densely-vegetated low ground between Sperwan Ghar and the Arghandab River, Hall told Captain Bart Scanlon’s\* ODA 336 and their ANA company to establish a blocking position several kilometers northeast of Sperwan Ghar. Hall hoped that Scanlon’s men could interdict any Taliban fighters entering or exiting the area being cleared by the U.S. infantry. ODA 336’s mission turned out to be far easier said than done.

Time and again Captain Scanlon’s element encountered terrain impassable for vehicles. “MAJ Hall wanted the blocking position set up as soon as possible” said Scanlon.<sup>57</sup> The team leader had two options: continue trying to find a route that would accommodate his vehicles, or move

forward dismounted and leave his heavy fire support, mortars and .50 caliber machine guns, behind with the vehicles. Reluctantly he chose to dismount. Leaving SFC Carney with ten ANA soldiers to guard the vehicles, CPT Scanlon and the rest of his team and 20 ANA troops pressed forward on foot. “The terrain was very restricted. We did about a 2 kilometer dismounted movement, but we couldn’t see anything. We halted in a complex of grape houses [storage sheds] which is where we got hit,” said Scanlon.<sup>58</sup> A fierce fire fight ensued and the ODA was only able to break contact when U.S. Navy F-18 Hornets from the USS Enterprise, called in by ODA 333, strafed the Taliban with several low-level runs.<sup>59</sup> ODA 336 then returned to Sperwan Ghar.

On 12 September, ODB-330, ODAs 326 and 331, C-2/87 infantry, two companies of ANA troops, and a United Arab Emirates (UAE) Special Operations detachment, pushed north across the Arghandab River to secure Objective OSPREY. There they found weapons, radios, and cell phones on the objective, indicating that the Taliban had left in haste. “The resistance was light and sporadic,” said CPT Helm, the C-2/87 commander. “We had to clear all the buildings dismounted, and the vegetation and the irrigation ditches made it slow going.”<sup>60</sup> SFC Dan Sterling\* and SFC Freeman of ODA 331 accompanied the infantry company to help with the ANA. “Once we crossed the river, we helped spot the targets as the infantry guys worked their way through the irrigation ditches and grape arbors. The vegetation gets up to ten feet high.”<sup>61</sup>

The decision to allow Hall’s troops to cross the Arghandab River was a major change in plans for Operation MEDUSA. Hall’s combined task force continued to move west during the following week, securing one MEDUSA objective after another. Along the way, the SF troops picked out potential locations for permanent checkpoints that, if properly manned



**12-21 September: Panjwayi Valley**

**12 SEP** 1- ODB-330 teams push north across the Arghanab river and engage small groups of enemy combatants.

**13 SEP** 2- ODB-330 teams using CAS move west up the Panjwayi Valley over the next week.

**19 SEP** 3- ODB-330 elements reach their western Limit of Advance and turn south.

**21 SEP** 4- Last elements of ODB-330 depart the Panjwayi Valley and return to Kandahar Airport.

N  
1 mile  
Sperwan Ghar 3000 ft



*From the summit of Ma'sum Ghar, members of ODA-333 overwatch the Panjwayi. From this vantage point, they could bring in CAS on the Taliban forces anywhere in the valley.*



*A resupply from a CH-47D Chinook. The HSC of TF-31 was able to keep the forces in the field supplied for more than twenty days during continuous operations.*

and patrolled by friendly forces, would prevent Taliban infiltrators from returning.

By 19 September, Objectives CONDOR\*, OWL\*, and RAVEN\* were cleared and Hall's task force had reached its western Limit of Advance (LOA). Taliban forces had stopped fighting and were withdrawing westward. "Most of the locals in the area were out and happy to see the patrol. Some people expressed appreciation for driving out the Taliban," said SFC Peter Carney.<sup>62</sup> The goals of Operation MEDUSA had been achieved. ODB-330 was credited with killing more than 500 enemy combatants and driving an entrenched Taliban force of more than 800 fighters from the region while suffering minimal friendly casualties.<sup>63</sup> Effective CAS fires were instrumental in routing the Taliban. "AC-130 fires proved to be decisive in dealing with the Taliban stronghold," said the operational summary at the end of MEDUSA.<sup>64</sup>

On 21 September, after four weeks of continuous combat operations, the last TF-31 units departed Panjwayi and returned to Kandahar Airfield to refit before heading out to conduct missions in other parts of southwest Afghanistan. C-2/87 returned to Kandahar and the last ODA to leave the valley, ODA 336, closed with the rest of the task force in Kandahar. "We started the mission as a screening force on the south side of the river. We never expected to be knee-deep in .50 cal brass," said SSG Zeke Henry of ODA 331.<sup>65</sup>

An often overlooked, but essential part of Operation MEDUSA was the impressive logistical support. SFC Peter Carney of ODA 336, spent more than three weeks on the ground in Panjwayi ("twenty-three days of 120 degree weather without a shower...I smelled *good*," he joked), had nothing but praise for the TF-31 support troops based at Kandahar Airfield. "We were only supposed to be out there for four days, not twenty-three," Carney said.<sup>66</sup>

Members of the TF-31 Headquarters and Support Company (HSC), commanded by Captain Patrick Trembly\*, met each ODA as it returned from Panjwayi. HSC's



*An Afghan National Army unit worked with each ODA during Operation MEDUSA.*

Support Detachment personnel cleaned and performed maintenance on every GMV as well as on all individual and crew-served weapons brought in from the field. They collected dirty uniforms and did laundry for the teams. Each ODA had a "hootch" (living area). They found snacks, towels, clean P.T. (physical training) clothes, shower shoes, soap, and sundry items waiting on cots. Trembly's soldiers arranged things so that the combat-weary ODA members could totally relax. As MAJ Cary Wentworth\* the TF-31 Assistant S-3(Operations Officer) said: "All you have to do is wash your body. You have P.T. clothes and flip flops to walk around in until your clothes are clean."<sup>67</sup>

Everything that Hall's task force needed for this extended operation, prepackaged Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs), water, fuel, ammunition, and replacement weapons had to be packed, palletized, and flown in. Hall said "we kept having guns going down...just your normal stuff anytime you're shooting like we were."<sup>68</sup> Most supplies arrived by CH-47 helicopter, but U. S. Air Force C-130s also made several resupply airdrops into

the AO. In the latter stages of Operation MEDUSA, five ODAs, five companies of ANA troops, and an infantry company team were being resupplied daily. SFC Carney said: "A lot of them didn't sleep, just like we didn't... Man, I wanted to get up and kiss every one of them."<sup>69</sup> For the infantry company, the support exceeded what they had received on previous operations.

Major Cary Wentworth, said: "During the battle we 'mermited' hot chow out to them on two occasions. [Mermites are insulated containers used to transport food to troops in the field]. On the first occasion, the 10th Mountain company first sergeant was totally surprised. He said: 'We did Operation MOUNTAIN SWEEP and were out in the field for sixty days and ate MREs the whole time.' Major Hall swears that the second time we brought mermites out to them, the first sergeant had tears in his eyes." said Wentworth.<sup>70</sup> The performance of Team Comanche justified first-class support.

"We really appreciated what the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain troops brought to the fight. Those guys did a phenomenal job. It was a good marriage between conventional forces and SF," said MAJ Wentworth.<sup>71</sup> LTC Bolduc called Team Comanche "an impressive group; a good company."<sup>72</sup> The ODA NCOs were more to the point: "They saved our a\*\*. We worked well with them...just like clockwork," said SFC Peter Carney.<sup>73</sup>

Operation MEDUSA made news around the world, but the press focused on the NATO/ISAF units. They neglected to mention that a handful of SF soldiers, one company of U.S. infantrymen from the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, and four companies of the ANA ended up doing most of the actual work.<sup>74</sup> However, not everyone was blind to their contributions. In an official letter of recognition dated 30 September 2006, Canadian Brigadier General David A. Fraser, overall commander of Operation MEDUSA, wrote:

I want to express my personal thanks to the Soldiers and officers of United States Army Special Forces Task Force 31 for their recent efforts as part of Operation MEDUSA ... The personal courage demonstrated time and time again by the soldiers of Task Force 31 was remarkable, and I stand in awe of their mission focus, offensive spirit, and dedication...You are true warriors and epitomize the traits expected from the Special Forces community.<sup>75</sup>

The success of Operation MEDUSA in driving the Taliban from the Panjwayi District shows how a well-planned training program translates into success on the battlefield. SFC Peter Carney said: "The key to it was that we already knew the whole situation before we got there. That comes from the train-up we did [at Fort Bragg] between one rotation and the other."<sup>76</sup> The ability of the Special Forces teams to effectively employ their ANA troops in the fight and bring devastating CAS against the enemy throughout the valley made ODB-330

the "combat multiplier" that ultimately achieved victory in Operation MEDUSA.

The intense combat operations of Operation MEDUSA inflicted heavy casualties on the Taliban and prevented their planned attack on the city of Kandahar. In the weeks that followed, the failure of NATO/ISAF to maintain a security presence in the valley caused the 1/3<sup>rd</sup> SFG to return a few months later to clear the insurgents from the same locations. As a result, a second campaign, Operation BAAZ TSUKA, was conducted to regain control of the valley. In December, the Desert Eagles would return to the Panjwayi. ▲

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*Alan D. Meyer is a Special Forces Major in the U.S. Army Reserve and has spent most of his military career in various Active, National Guard, and Reserve special operations units. He earned his MA in history from the University of Delaware in 2000 and is currently finishing his PhD at that institution. Major Meyer joined the USASOC History Office in 2004, and this is his second article for Veritas.*

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*Kenneth Finlayson is the USASOC Deputy Command Historian. He earned his PhD from the University of Maine, and is a retired Army officer. Current research interests include Army special operations during the Korean War, special operations aviation, and World War II special operations units.*

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## Endnotes

- 1 The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, translated and edited by Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2002), 6-8.
- 2 Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, (New York: Vintage Press, 2001), 186-87.
- 3 Grau and Gress, 31-33.
- 4 Kaplan, 143.
- 5 Charles H. Briscoe, et. al., *Weapon of Choice: ARSOF in Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003), 182-183. Depending upon which source one consults, the Taliban has many "birthplaces." According to a *Time* magazine article, the Dar-ul-uloom seminary in the Indian farming town of Deoband is "the spiritual home of the particular brand of Islam practiced by the Taliban." Michael Fathers, "At the Birthplace of the Taliban," *Time*, Friday, September 21, 2001, available online at <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,175913,00.html> (accessed July 31, 2007). However, most available sources identify either the city of Kandahar or the Maiwand district in Kandahar Province as the birthplace of the Taliban, and virtually all acknowledge Kandahar city as the site of the Taliban's last stand in 2001. Janu O. Tamayo, Scott Canon, and Martin Merzer, "Taliban to Surrender Last Stronghold," Knight Ridder News Service, Friday, December 7, 2001, available online at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4196/is\\_20011207/ain10752212](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4196/is_20011207/ain10752212) (accessed July 31, 2007); and Hugh Graham, "Two Small Villages Key to NATO Strategy," *Toronto Star*, September 6, 2006.
- 6 There are multiple westernized spellings for virtually every place name in Afghanistan. For example, in the source quoted here, Panjwayi was spelled "Panjawai." Throughout this article, the author chose a single spelling for each place name, and to avoid reader confusion has altered direct quotes (including this one) to reflect this single spelling.
- 7 Graham, "Two Villages Key to NATO Strategy"; Sergeant First Class Peter Carney\*, ODA 336, interview by Major Alan D. Meyer, 3 May 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files,

- Fort Bragg, NC; Major Christopher Wentworth\*, interview by Major Alan D. Meyer, 3 May 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 Lieutenant Colonel Donald Bolduc, 1st Battalion, 3rd Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe and Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 14 September 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 9 Bolduc interview.
  - 10 Bolduc interview.
  - 11 Bolduc interview.
  - 12 Major Jamie Hall\* C-1/3 SFG interview by LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr. and Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 20 November 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 13 Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007; Master Sergeant Terry K. Schmidt\*, interview by LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr. and Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 20 November 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 14 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette and Strategy Brief for Panjwayi/Pashmul," USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, N.C slide 7.
  - 15 Bolduc interview; Curlew\*, 18, 80; Wentworth\*, "Breaking the Afghan Insurgency," 12; and Wentworth\* interview.
  - 16 Sergeant First Class Carl Freeman\*, ODA 331, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson and LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 30 November 2007, Fort Bragg, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 17 Carney\* interview.
  - 18 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette and Strategy Brief for Panjwayi/Pashmul," USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 4. **The Department of Defense definition of consolidation operations is derived from: [www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/c/01210.html](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/c/01210.html).**
  - 19 Bolduc interview. Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette and Strategy Brief for Panjwayi/Pashmul," USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, 2.
  - 20 Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007.
  - 21 Carney\* interview.
  - 22 Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007.
  - 23 Major Jamie Hall\* C-1/3 SFG interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe and Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 22 September 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 24 Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007.
  - 25 Staff Sergeant Don Ring\*, ODA 331, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson and LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 30 November 2007, Fort Bragg, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 26 Curlew\*, 15-16; and Wentworth\*, interview; Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007; **"Humvee" is a popularized spelling for the U.S. military's HMMWV, or Highly Mobile Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle.**
  - 27 Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007.
  - 28 Carney\* interview.
  - 29 Sergeant First Class Brett Keith\*, ODA 336, interview by Major Alan D. Meyer, 10 May 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, N.C.
  - 30 Curlew\*, 15; Carney\* interview.
  - 31 Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007; Schmidt\* interview.
  - 32 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette and Strategy Brief for Panjwayi/Pashmul," slide 8, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 33 Stephen Priestly, "Passage to Panjwahi – Canadian Tanks Go to Afghanistan, Leopard Tanks Shake Up the ISAF Armoured Vehicle Mix," September 2006, <http://www.sfu.ca/casr/ft-isaf-armour2.htm>.
  - 34 D:\MEDUSA\1RCR in Afghanistan; Op MEDUSA - A Summary.htm.
  - 35 Schmidt\* interview.
  - 36 Curlew\*, 15; Wentworth\* interview.
  - 37 Schmidt\* interview.
  - 38 Schmidt\* interview.
  - 39 Staff Sergeant John Curlew\*, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) Public Affairs NCO, "The Battle of Sperwan Ghar," Soldier of Fortune, March 2007, 14-15; Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette and Strategy Brief for Panjwayi/Pashmul," slide 12, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Wentworth\* interview.
  - 40 Keith\* interview.
  - 41 Hall\* interview, 22 September 2007.
  - 42 Curlew\*, 15; Carney\* interview; and Wentworth\* interview.
  - 43 Captain Martin Bolling\*, ODA 333, interview by Major Alan D. Meyer, 11 May 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 44 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette," slide 12; Curlew, 16, 18; Wentworth\* interview.
  - 45 Keith\* interview.
  - 46 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette," slide 12; Curlew\*, 18; and Wentworth\* interview.
  - 47 Staff Sergeant Zeke Henry\*, ODA 331, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson and LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 30 November 2007, Fort Bragg, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 48 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette," slide 12; and Wentworth\* interview.
  - 49 Carney\* interview.
  - 50 Carney\* interview; ODA 333, group interview by Major Alan D. Meyer, 11 May 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Wentworth\* interview.
  - 51 Hall\* interview, 20 November 2007.
  - 52 Bolduc interview; Hall\* interview; **Note: the original request from Major Hall\* was for an infantry battalion.**
  - 53 Curlew\*, 18; Wentworth\* interview; and telephone conversation between Major Jamie Hall\* and Major Alan Meyer, 1 August 2007, interview notes in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 54 Captain Steven Helm, C Company 2087th Infantry, telephone interview by LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 23 August 2007, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 55 Helm interview.
  - 56 Curlew\*, 18; Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette," slide 13; Hall\* interview, 11 May 2007. **Note that slide 13 is incorrectly labeled "08 SEP 06" in the original source; the correct date for the actions depicted on that slide (9 September 2006) was confirmed during oral history interviews with Hall\* and ODA 333.**
  - 57 Captain Bart Scanlon\*, interview by Major Alan D. Meyer, 3 May 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 58 Scanlon\* interview.
  - 59 Scanlon\* interview, Hall\* interview 20 November 2007.
  - 60 Helm interview.
  - 61 Sergeant First Class Dan Sterling\*, ODA 331, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson and LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 30 November 2007, Fort Bragg, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 62 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette," slides 16-19, 21; Carney\* interview; and Wentworth\* interview.
  - 63 **Final statistics for TF-31 during Operation MEDUSA: 3 enemy combatants captured and 515 KIA; 10 USSF WIA; 1 U.S. ETT KIA (ETTs are non-Special Forces U.S. military advisors embedded with the ANA); 6 ANA WIA; and 3 ANA KIA.** Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette," slide 17. **According to another source with access to reliable data, "The Taliban sustained losses not seen since the early stages of the war with 562 confirmed enemy dead, validated through AC130 Spectre [sic] footage and first hand accounts."** From Wentworth\*, "Breaking the Afghan Insurgency," 12.
  - 64 Operational Summary, "SOTF-31 Vignette," slide 15.
  - 65 SSG Zeke Henry\*, ODA 331, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson and LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 30 November 2007, Fort Bragg, digital recording in the USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 66 Carney\* interview.
  - 67 Wentworth\* interview.
  - 68 Hall\* interview, 22 September 2007.
  - 69 Carney\* interview.
  - 70 Wentworth\* interview.
  - 71 Wentworth\* interview.
  - 72 Bolduc interview.
  - 73 Carney\* interview; and Wentworth\* interview.
  - 74 ODA 333, group interview.
  - 75 Brigadier General David A. Fraser, excerpt from 30 September 2006 letter to TF-31, as quoted in Curlew, 18, 80.
  - 76 Carney\* interview.