

THE UNTOLD WAR

## Fierce Fight in Afghan Valley Tests U.S. Soldiers and Strategy

■How Operation Anaconda became the biggest infantry battle in the war on terrorism, costing the lives of eight Americans

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BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan --

And before sunrise, when two Chinooks rumbled into a mountain site east of Ginger to insert special operations teams and supplies, they encountered heavy fire.

One helicopter pulled out successfully, but the other, carrying a team of Navy SEALs, was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade that apparently ruptured hydraulic lines inside the cargo bay.

As the chopper veered to escape, Petty Officer Neil C. Roberts, 32, of Woodland, Calif., slipped off the rear ramp and fell to the ground.

A Predator observation aircraft flying overhead provided distant commanders with real-time video of Roberts being captured.

"We saw him on the Predator, being dragged off by three Al Qaeda men," Hagenbeck said later.

But the men and crews aboard the two Chinooks did not. They set down not far away to assess damage. Only then did they realize that Roberts was gone.

What happened during the next 12 hours or so remains cloaked in confusion, but official reports and other sources suggest the following sequence of events:

The helicopter that had been hit appeared too damaged to fly, so its crew and 10 SEALs crowded into the other chopper. It climbed to safety just as Al Qaeda fighters closed in.

At a nearby village, the surviving helicopter shed all its passengers except a small assault force and returned to the original area to search for Roberts, who, unknown to the rescuers, was already dead.

Meanwhile, Anaconda's commanders were organizing a larger rescue effort. Before long, the area where Roberts fell turned into a battle within the battle.

In addition to the assault force returned to the scene by the original surviving helicopter,

other units arrived--bringing with them a storm of air power but also the seeds of greater heartbreak.

As dawn approached, two Chinooks moved to within a mile or so of where Roberts had been lost, but they fell into an apparent ambush. Both offloaded their Special Forces teams under heavy fire. One bird pulled away; the other was disabled.

A large number of enemy fighters began to converge as the Special Forces scrambled to set up defensive positions.

The Special Forces teams inflicted heavy casualties on their attackers, driving them back again and again with the help of air power.

But six more Americans died, apparently hit in the opening minutes of the firefight.

As daylight came and the fighting raged too hot for rescue helicopters to venture in, 11 more were wounded.

A small team of Australians in a mountain observation post could see enemy forces massing for an assault. The Australians helped call in airstrikes but were in no position to join the fight.

For more than 12 hours, U.S. jet fighters, AC-130 gunships and attack helicopters flew in almost nonstop combat. They attacked exposed enemy fighters again and again, attempting to create a cordon of fire around the Americans trapped with the downed helicopter.

But they were constrained by their repeated need to refuel and by the fact that enemy fighters were often so close to the U.S. perimeter that airstrikes would have risked hitting friendly forces.

Gradually, the aerial pounding and the fire from U.S. ground troops began to tell. In the early evening, almost 18 hours after the first helicopter was hit, three helicopters dashed in to evacuate the beleaguered men.

It would be the bloodiest episode in Operation Anaconda, and it showed the price of relying on helicopters and the policy of retrieving dead and wounded soldiers no matter the risk.

To the Army, what happened was part of war: a tragic but acceptable loss.

"The guys in these units understand they will take casualties. You wouldn't find anyone in the Army who believes six or seven casualties makes an operation unsuccessful," one officer said.

"I hope we're getting over that idea in America," the officer added. "I don't think anyone

in the Army expects bloodless victories."

As for the rescue and retrieval policy, Hagenbeck said bluntly: "Each life taken from us is absolutely terrible. We mourn each one, and for their bravery in a noble cause, we honor them. And I will tell you the soldiers that went in, they went in to get a buddy out. And we will always do that."

### **The Tide Turns**

It was Tuesday, March 5, D-day plus 3. Some planners had thought Operation Anaconda would be over.

Instead, the enemy had just crippled two helicopters and killed seven more of the U.S. armed forces' toughest fighters on a scrap of mountain ground.

But there would be no more such losses by U.S. or coalition forces in this battle, nor, in all likelihood, would they again face an enemy capable of mounting such an attack.

Even with the enemy reinforcements that intelligence analysts believed had slipped into the Shahi Kot valley from neighboring areas, U.S. firepower was inflicting casualties the enemy could not withstand.

Back in February, Col. Gray said, U.S. commanders had pondered what might happen if Anaconda did not follow the expected script and the enemy decided to stand its ground and "fight American soldiers toe-to-toe."

It was a possibility the planners felt they could adjust to. And when the battle turned out just that way, Gray said, it "played exactly to the strengths of the American military. "

"We have all the resources in terms of air power and intelligence to bring to bear against him," he said, "and the enemy simply made a very, very bad mistake."

Anaconda would stretch into the following week, as U.S. and then Canadian forces worked their way through lingering pockets of resistance and checked myriad caves. But Anaconda was essentially over.

The arguments would go on over body counts, the vulnerability of helicopters, the need to avoid "hot" landing sites and more.

So far as advocates of a lighter military were concerned, however, the new Army and its air power allies had carried the field.

The proof, as they saw it, was the scene that greeted 1st Lt. Joe Claburn, 25, of Montgomery Ala., on Thursday, March 7--D-day plus 5--when he flew over the Whale on a resupply mission.

Below him, he said, were "American after American in position along the ridge line. We overflowed all these American units.

"It was a great sight."

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#### ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is one in an occasional series chronicling untold stories from the war in Afghanistan. This story was written by Richard T. Cooper, with reporting by Geoffrey Mohan and Rone Tempest from Bagram Air Base and John Daniszewski from the Shahi Kot valley.