

PERISCOPE®

Operation Anaconda: What the Pilots Saw

AT APPROXIMATELY 3 a.m. local time on March 4, Razor 3, piloted by Chief Warrant Officer "Al," roared out of the darkness and set down at Objective Ginger, on a ridgeline near the battlefield. His cargo of Army, Navy and Air Force operators was tasked with calling in airstrikes on Qaeda troops attacking 101st Airborne soldiers nearby. As soon as they touched down, "the place lit up" with rocket and machine-gun fire. A door gunner was wounded; the chopper's hydraulic and electrical systems shredded. Al threw the 60-foot-long Chinook helicopter into the air, heading south, when the crew shouted the horrifying news: "A guy's out!" A Navy SEAL, Petty Officer Neil Roberts, had somehow fallen out of the chopper. "I turned around to go get him," said Al. "That's when the controls locked up." Al couldn't pick up the lost man. He limped south, looking for a safe landing zone, and calling on a battery-powered radio to his wingman to rescue Roberts. But the radio wasn't working. Last week Al and his comrades from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment gave NEWSWEEK this exclusive account of what happened to them in Operation Anaconda.

It took wingman chief "Jason," in Razor 4, 45 minutes to reach Al's chopper. With reports of Qaeda troops converging on their position, Razor 4 loaded everyone onboard and returned to a Special Forces base near Gardez, dropping off Al and his crew before returning to Ginger with the operators to look for Roberts. When Razor 4 hit the LZ they were met with heavy machine-gun fire, but they dropped off the team before hobbling back to base. On the ground, a firefight



ON THE WAY TO WAR: A Special Forces Chinook piloted by 'Al' over Afghanistan

with Qaeda forces broke out. Air Force Special Operations Combat Controller Sgt. John Chapman was shot and killed. Two other Chinooks, Razors 1 and 2, loaded a quick reaction force of Rangers and headed to the battlefield. Razor 1 roared into Ginger about 6:30 a.m., and in the morning light it was easy for Qaeda fighters to hit the huge black chopper as it neared the ground. The 20-ton Chinook belly-flopped onto the snow. "Everybody around me got hit," says the mission commander, Chief Warrant Officer "Don." "The two pilots in front of me were wounded, one door gunner was wounded. The other, Phil Svitak, was killed. Three Rangers were killed right then." The surviving Rangers dashed out the back and took up positions in the snow, firing on the guerrillas only 25 yards away. Razor 2, with another team of Rangers, approached the besieged Americans, but, says Al, "the team on the ground told him don't go into that LZ, or you're not coming out." The pilots dropped off their Rangers nearby, and the troopers hiked up the

mountain to link up with their comrades. No one could get out. Enemy fire was too heavy. The Americans were cut off from rescue, but were not forgotten. An AC-130 gunship stayed overhead, raining fire on the enemy positions until it was almost out of

fuel, and Air Force jets bombed throughout the day. As the Americans ran low on ammunition, they returned to the crashed chopper to scrounge for more. Air Force medic Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, treating a wounded man, was shot; he later died. As the afternoon went on, Qaeda resistance lessened. By evening three Chinooks got in to evacuate the Americans, their wounded and seven dead. Among them was Neil Roberts, the man they came to save. His body was recovered during the battle for what the men who fought there call Roberts Ridge.

COLIN SOLOWAY