

At least 40 American soldiers were wounded and eight were killed this week in the largest battle since U.S. troops were deployed to Afghanistan five months ago

‘Leave No Man Behind’

The ultimate sacrifice: Bands of American soldiers, dropped into the high mountains of Afghanistan, fought tenacious enemies along rugged valleys and ridgelines. Some of them died, but all came back from the battle zone

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March 18 issue — Sgt. John Chapman had been driven once from the battlefield, but he went right back. Shortly before dawn on Monday, March 4, the Chinook helicopter carrying Chapman and a small reconnaissance team came under heavy fire as it tried to land high in the Afghan mountains. Riddled with bullets, the chopper limped to a safe landing zone. Chapman and his team jumped into a second chopper and returned to base—but only to regroup. Soon they were flying back into danger—to recover the body of a Navy SEAL, Petty Officer Neil Roberts, who had fallen from the chopper in the first landing attempt. Chapman’s squadron officer told his family what happened next:

THE TEAM, A HALF dozen of America’s toughest Special Operators, jumped out of the plane into a hail of bullets. Chapman laid down covering fire as his buddies tried to set up a defensive position behind some rocks. As he blasted away at the enemy, he was shot several times in the chest. He died fighting so his comrades would live. Before the day was done, five more of his comrades would perish: Sgt. Bradley Crose, Pfc. Matthew Commons, Spc. Marc Anderson (all Army Rangers), Sgt. Philip Svitak (a flight engineer) and Airman Jason Cunningham, a “pararescue” jumper.

American soldiers do not abandon their dead and wounded on the battlefield. For Special Operators, the elite soldiers chosen to play the riskiest roles in combat, the warrior’s code is a question of honor. For Eugene Chapman, John’s father, the mantra is a source of pride and solace. “It’s a given. You do not leave your comrades behind,” Chapman told NEWSWEEK. The military’s Special Operators are generally not young firebrands. Many, like Roberts and Chapman, are family men in their 30s. After more than a decade as an Air Force combat controller, trained to drop behind enemy lines to call in airstrikes, Chapman had been ready to pack it in to spend time with his two young daughters. Then America went to war in Afghanistan. “He said that as a father, he wanted to stay home,” explained his sister Lori. “But

as an American, as a Special Ops guy, he wanted to go. He knew it was something he had to do.”

IN HARM’S WAY

Chapman’s sense of commitment, while noble, was unsurprising in the band-of-brothers world of America’s elite Special Forces. More remarkable has been the willingness of the top brass to send soldiers like Chapman in harm’s way. In recent years there has been a growing murmur from friend and foe alike that the United States dares not fight its wars from below 15,000 feet. America’s hasty retreat from Somalia after 18 American soldiers were killed in a botched raid in 1993 emboldened Osama bin Laden to strike ever closer until he hit the American homeland. The Bush administration wants to send a different signal. By throwing more than a thousand U.S. ground troops at a large but undetermined force of Qaeda and Taliban fighters holed up in the Shahikot Mountains, President George W. Bush and his war commanders clearly intend to show they are willing to lose lives to fight terrorism.

Operation Anaconda pales next to the bloodbaths of World War II like Tarawa and Iwo Jima, which cost thousands of GI lives. But for young Americans who know combat mostly from trips to the Cineplex, the battle scenes described last week by wounded soldiers were all too real, raw and shocking in their intensity. “Black Hawk Down” and “We Were Soldiers” are vivid, but fiction cannot begin to capture the true face of battle. The action began (as most real battles do) in fear and confusion. Most of the men had never been under fire before. They were fighting in below-freezing temperatures at dizzying altitudes against a dug-in enemy that would rather die than surrender. Unprepared for the enemy’s ferocity, some men panicked. But many more fought bravely.

The assault did not go as smoothly as planned. Intelligence had estimated enemy strength at 200 fighters. It now appears that the real number was closer to 800 men. H-Hour was supposed to be dawn on Saturday, March 2, but the enemy did not wait to be attacked. The first explosive blasts lit up the darkness as a column of Afghan soldiers milled around a staging point in the early-morning hours, waiting for orders from their U.S. Special Forces minders to move out. “They knew we were coming,” said Said Wahidullah, 35, an Afghan soldier. “We didn’t know Al Qaeda has so many people in caves and weapons.” Reeling back under mortar and rocket attack, the Afghan column stumbled into a second ambush to the rear. One American—Chief Warrant Officer Stanley Harriman—and three Afghan soldiers were killed and some 40 wounded.

ON TOP OF THE ENEMY

Undaunted, American forces pressed on with the dawn raids. Chinook helicopters landed units of U.S. light infantry at the foot of the mountains. The American soldiers were supposed to be a “blocking force,” intercepting enemy soldiers fleeing before the advancing column of Afghans—the same force that had been ambushed a couple of hours earlier down in the valley. American intelligence had apparently miscalculated. One company of about 80 men of the 10th Mountain Division landed almost right on top of the enemy. “We came under fire immediately, it was all over the place,” recalled Sgt. Robert Healy. “I don’t think they were looking for us, but when they heard the aircraft, they came running.” Sgt. David Smith remembers a mortar attack as soon as his platoon gathered outside the chopper. “We all got hit at the same time,” he says. The Americans ran to escape—right into a mortar round going off. “All of us fell like dominoes,” Smith said. “It was crazy.” Nine members of his platoon were dropped with shrapnel wounds. Sgt. William Sakisat took a hit in the left hip. “It was like somebody hit me with a baseball bat,”

he says.

Some young troopers went into battle cocky. “When we first took cover we were laughing,” says Spc. Wayne Stanton, 20, whose laughter may have been more nervous than real. “The first few rounds were so wild we just thought it was harassment fire.” But then “the first guys got hit.” Said Stanton: “I started getting scared.” The tables quickly turned; Al Qaeda became the taunters. “We could hear them laugh at us,” said Stanton, who was wounded in the leg. “They were 2,000 feet above us. Our small arms couldn’t reach them up there.” (“They waved at us,” recalled Sergeant Smith.) Sgt. Robert McCleave, a forward observer in charge of fixing targets for air support to attack, crept out of the wadi, the dry streambed where he had taken cover, to get a better look. He saw enemy soldiers streaming along the ridge. “There were more of them, and the next thing you know, we see them coming up over the eastern ridge as well. It was like someone blew a horn and called all their buddies.”

The enemy fire grew more and more intense. “They would all come out on the ridge and shoot at us with everything they got,” says McCleave. “Then they’d run back down to the other side of the ridge to their caves and come up about a half hour later with fresh ammunition.” The mortar hits were becoming more precise. “They’ve been fighting in this terrain for 20 years,” says Stanton. “They’ve been playing with their mortars so long they know exactly where to shoot. They’ve got a grid in the back of their heads. For us, it’s all unfamiliar.”

American air power arrived—“fast movers,” F-16 and F-18 jets, and slower but more deadly Apache helicopters, AC-130 gunships and A-10 attack planes firing machine guns and rockets. The air bombardment brought only a brief respite. After retreating into their caves, the enemy fighters would re-emerge and resume the onslaught.

‘WHERE’S OUR BACKUP?’

The trapped Americans called for helicopters to pull them out. “But they never came,” says Stanton. “It was too hot.” The men would see the choppers come over the hill, draw enemy fire and wheel away to safety. “We were all thinking: where’s our backup, where’s our backup?” said McCleave. Ammo was running low. The men were cold, exhausted, woozy from the altitude, stunned. “We thought we’d be taking a shoe off and swat a bee, not knock down a hornet’s nest,” says McCleave, who was bleeding from wounds in the thigh, arm and fingers as he huddled under a poncho.

Darkness saved the Americans. The enemy tried to draw them out by provoking them to exchange tracer rounds, which glow in the dark. But the enemy’s own tracers allowed the American AC-130 gunships to zero in and silence most of the enemy machine guns and mortars. Lumbering Chinook helicopters began arriving to lift out the wounded. The last Americans did not take off until nearly midnight. The toll: 27 wounded or injured. “It amazes me that none of us died,” says Sgt. Taji Moore. As he lay, bleeding and pinned down by enemy fire, Moore had observed something curious: several of the enemy soldiers were holding up the bright orange cloth flags normally used by American forces to ward off friendly fire by attacking aircraft.

He wondered at the enemy’s level of preparation. “It was almost like we were set up,” he told NEWSWEEK.

The American attack plan may have been compromised by spies. The proxy Afghan soldiers used by the Americans are not famous for loyalty or discretion. But the rocky first day of Operation Anaconda did not force the Americans to back off. Responding to the pleas of battlefield commanders, the U.S. Central Command poured in more troops and helicopters in the next few days. Overhead, B-52s and other warplanes dropped hundreds of precision-guided bombs. About 700 enemy fighters have been confirmed dead on the battlefield, a high-level commander told reporters (such estimates have proved unreliable in the past). “We are killing these guys in bucketloads.”

HARD LANDING

The greatest test of bravery came on the third day of the battle. The details are not yet clear, and some accounts are conflicting, but it appears that American soldiers were willing to take extraordinary risks to reclaim one of their own. At about 5:30 on Monday morning, a pair of Chinook helicopters flew into the mountains to insert a reconnaissance team. As it landed, one of the choppers was hit square on the nose by a rocket-propelled grenade. The grenade apparently did not explode, but as small-arms fire peppered the aircraft, the Chinook quickly took off again and limped, leaking hydraulic fluid, to a “hard” landing about a half-mile away. There, the Special Operations team discovered that one of its men, Navy SEAL Petty Officer Roberts, was missing. Had he been hit or somehow fallen out of the chopper in the chaotic aborted landing? Had he just been left behind?

The incident had been captured on camera, in real time, by a Predator drone flying high overhead. Back at headquarters at Baghram air base outside Kabul, top officials had watched in horror as three enemy fighters dragged off Roberts—who must have survived at least briefly, because he had time to flip on his rescue beacon. A rescue team was quickly dispatched to get him back. The next sequence of events is a little murky, but it appears that a second chopper of reinforcements was also set down a mile or so away from the first rescue team. The second chopper was reportedly greeted by a hail of gunfire and had to make a hard—in effect, a crash—landing. During the course of a long and vicious day, the two teams linked up and fought to stay alive until they were extracted after nightfall. The body of Petty Officer Roberts was recovered. The cost: six dead, 11 wounded, out of perhaps two dozen rescuers.

Operation Anaconda was meant to make up for past mistakes. While not admitting failure in so many words, the Pentagon was clearly chagrined that a force of Afghan irregulars—for all intents and purposes mercenaries hired by the CIA—had been unwilling or unable to close the noose around bin Laden and the Qaeda leadership in the Tora Bora cave complex at Christmastime. All through the winter, U.S. intelligence had watched and waited while Qaeda and Taliban fighters regrouped in the Shahikot Mountains, some 80 miles southwest of Tora Bora. When the enemy had massed enough to become a target, the United States struck by land and air. Only this time units of the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain Division joined with Afghans to try to flush out the enemy—and then block their escape. American officials warned last week that it would be days before the enemy could be mopped up in this battle—and that other bloody battles are sure to follow.