

Excerpted from the Sydney Morning Herald

High praise for diggers who helped save stricken Americans

Date: 09/03/2002

By Craig Skehan, Defence Correspondent

Australian special forces troops in Afghanistan have been in intense firefights with al-Qaeda forces and played a crucial role in the rescue of Americans whose helicopter came under attack, it was disclosed yesterday.

Amid snow and sub-zero temperatures, the fighting has been the fiercest that Australians have been involved in since the Vietnam War.

As the first picture of the elite Australians troops involved in the fighting was released, Brigadier Duncan Lewis, Commander Special Forces, said yesterday that they had been responsible for large numbers of enemy deaths by calling in US air strikes.

In response to media questioning, Brigadier Lewis said there was "no evidence" to suggest that the Australians had called in any air strikes which had resulted in civilian deaths.

As well as helping to cut off enemy escape routes, the Australians have been assigned the difficult and dangerous task of trying to locate al-Qaeda leaders.

Brigadier Lewis, in a special briefing on Operation Anaconda, said heavy fighting was expected to continue for several days, but that "mopping up" could take weeks.

He estimated that up to half of about 1,000 al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters had been "eliminated" from the battle in eastern Afghanistan, but enemy forces were still dug into a tunnel complex in the Shahi Valley.

Australia has 150 special forces soldiers in Afghanistan and Brigadier Lewis said about 100 had been directly involved in the latest fighting, which is continuing at altitudes of 3,500 metres or more.

He said an Australian patrol, which was involved in surveillance and reconnaissance, had played a key role in rescuing the US troops whose helicopter was forced down by rebel fire on Monday.

The helicopter's landing was aborted when a soldier fell out and was later found to have been killed. A second helicopter involved in an attempt to recover the soldier was hit by ground fire and had to land nearby, where it came under renewed attack.

Six US soldiers were killed and 11 wounded, but 25 US soldiers were able to continue fighting.

"The survivors in the downed aircraft were soon surrounded by al-Qaeda fighters and the force continued to resist determined enemy efforts to kill or capture them throughout the day," Brigadier Lewis said. Australian observers had then co-ordinated air strikes to prevent the al-Qaeda forces over-running the survivors.

"The combined actions of the Australian patrol and the US airpower was devastatingly effective, and has been acknowledged by US commanders as being critical to the survival of those US soldiers," Brigadier Lewis said. Australians were also part of the rescue team. Last Saturday, two Australian liaison officers came under attack with US forces until they could be pulled out to safety. The Australian special forces had relayed information to headquarters while they were under mortar and machine-gun fire.

The same day, an Australian patrol with coalition forces came under heavy fire in which three Afghans and an American were killed. "The Australian troops, despite the extreme danger, coolly observed and later reported several al-Qaeda, previously unidentified positions, and subsequently those positions were engaged and destroyed," Brigadier Lewis said.