

# OPERATION BOA: A Counterfactual History of the Battle for Shah-i-Kot

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*Counterfactual: pertaining to, or expressing, what has not in fact happened, but might, could, or would, in different conditions.*

—Oxford English Dictionary

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PHOTO: U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) CPL Jose A. Aguilera, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit, Special Operations Capable, provides security as a USMC CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter prepares for a mission in support of Operation Anaconda, in Afghanistan, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, 10 March 2002. (USMC, SGT Nathan J. Ferbert)

**T**HIS ARTICLE IS COUNTERFACTUAL, but is based on accounts of Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan. Although intended to last only 72 hours, Operation Anaconda took place from 2 to 16 March 2002. It was a coalition attempt to clear Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces from the Khowst-Gardez region in Afghanistan before they could organize a spring offensive against the interim Afghan government of Hamid Karzai. Anaconda involved special operations forces (SOF) from the United States and six other nations fighting alongside about 1,400 conventional U.S. ground troops in a complex, high altitude, non-linear battlefield. The battle between U.S. troops and Taliban/Al-Qaeda was the largest ground engagement of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and took place at elevations over 10,000 feet.

This article describes how an Anaconda-like operation *might* have occurred by applying employment lessons from earlier phases of OEF as well as lessons from the actual event. This narrative is one of many possible versions and benefits from the clarity of hindsight and the clarifying direction of joint and service doctrine. The lessons of Operation Anaconda are not merely academic. The U.S. lost eight brave warriors and numerous others were wounded during more than two weeks of intense fighting. The authors hope this story and its approach to learning honor the brave Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines who fought heroically in the Shah-i-Kot Valley in March 2002.

## December 2001: OEF Lessons Learned Conference

In December 2001, U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Army personnel from bases, ships, and command centers throughout the Middle East met at the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain for a lessons-learned conference. (*This is counterfactual. In reality, although U.S. Air Forces, Central Command hosted a Tactics Review Board, there was no Joint Forces Command-wide hotwash of OEF ops.*)

The attendees had just completed months of planning, controlling, and fighting in OEF, a SOF and air-centric offensive to take down Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network and culpable Taliban theocracy in Afghanistan. The campaign had been a swift and overwhelming success, but like every military operation, there were lessons to be learned. These Soldiers, Sailors,

## ACRONYMS

<b>ACCE</b>	air component coordinating element
<b>Aco</b>	airspace control order
<b>ASOC</b>	air support operations center
<b>AAGS</b>	Army Air-Ground System
<b>A2C2</b>	Army airspace command and control
<b>BCD</b>	battlefield coordination detachment
<b>BP</b>	blocking positions
<b>C2</b>	command and control
<b>CAOC</b>	combined air operations center
<b>CAS</b>	close air support
<b>CFACC</b>	coalition forces air component commander
<b>CFLCC</b>	coalition forces land component commander
<b>CJTF</b>	Combined Joint Task Force
<b>CSAR</b>	combat search and rescue
<b>FAC-A</b>	forward air controllers-airborne
<b>HUMINT</b>	human intelligence
<b>ISR</b>	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
<b>JFC</b>	Joint Forces Command
<b>JIC</b>	joint intelligence cell
<b>JSOA</b>	joint special operations area
<b>LZ</b>	landing zone
<b>QRF</b>	quick reaction forces
<b>SOCC</b>	special operations component commander
<b>SOLE</b>	special operations liaison elements
<b>TACP</b>	tactical air control party
<b>TAD</b>	tactical air direction
<b>TAC</b>	terminal air controller
<b>TACS</b>	Theater Air Control System
<b>TAGS</b>	Theater Air-Ground System
<b>TOT</b>	time-on-target

Airmen, and Marines spent four days in Bahrain assessing OEF operations from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul and Kandahar and identifying key areas for improvement in planning and execution. They also debriefed recent operations from the Spin Ghar and White Mountain ranges, better known as Tora Bora. The warfighters identified two primary lessons from the first few months of OEF: 1) the importance of joint component coordination in planning and execution; and 2) the necessity of dedicated and capable ground troops to block Taliban/Al-Qaeda egress routes.

The ground component of SOF and Marines in close coordination with the air component had performed spectacularly in OEF. One of their success enablers was the use of first-rate communications systems, laser designators, and precise coordinate-generating equipment for targeting. These lessons were not lost on the Army's conventional ground-force planners attending the Bahrain conference.

The conference also highlighted the importance of having highly trained Airmen work closely with ground forces to deliver airpower where and when



U.S. Army, SPC David Marck Jr.

**Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division, scan a ridgeline for enemy movement during Operation Anaconda in March 2002.**

it was needed. Attaching a USAF combat controller to every OEF SOF A-Team had enabled close coordination across a dynamic, nonlinear battlefield. With their in-depth knowledge of both airpower and special operations, these combat controllers ensured air support during the first months of OEF. However, the coalition forces air component commander (CFACC), land component commander (CFLCC) and special operations component commander (CFSOCC) all agreed that upcoming OEF stabilization operations would use more conventional ground forces. In the event that these forces were challenged, they would need an increased level of air support and thus a more robust Theater Air-Ground System (TAGS). Both the CFLCC and the CFACC directed their staffs to build plans for bringing the Army Air-Ground System (AAGS) and the Air Force Theater Air Control System (TACS) to full capability in the near future. *(This is counterfactual. There was no evidence of a perception that future operations would require full TAGS capability. On 23 February 2002 when the CFACC was first briefed on Anaconda five days before the operation's planned start date, the CFACC began to piece together the Air Force's portion of the TAGS, called the Theater Air Control System).*

### **Late December 2001: Focus on Shah-i-Kot**

While the Bahrain conference progressed, the Joint Force Commander's (JFC's) multi-spectral intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets persistently stared down on Afghanistan,

making it the most imaged piece of real estate on the planet. National assets, E-8 JSTARS, RC-135s, U-2s, EP-3s and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) combed the valleys and roadways near Tora Bora. They revealed, and human intelligence (HUMINT) confirmed, numerous Taliban and Al-Qaeda survivors of Tora Bora moving towards Gardez in the Paktia province. The JFC's chief of intelligence, the Central Command J2, estimated that approximately 1,500 to 1,800 enemy fighters were converging on the Shah-i-Kot valley in the Arma Mountain range in the same terrain that stymied Alexander the Great, the British, and most recently, the Soviets. It appeared Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters intended to stave off the American military from these mountains as well. That estimate was more than enough to spur the JFC to action.

## **5 January 2002: JFC Established CJTF Pinnacle**

With President Karzai leading a new Afghan government and with the enemy on the run, the JFC saw a tremendous opportunity to kill or capture large numbers of Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters, and perhaps even a few high value targets, at Shah-i-Kot. At the same time the JFC and his staff were in the initial stages of political, operational, and logistical planning for a possible Iraq campaign. The JFC wanted to keep significant pressure, focus, and resources on Afghanistan and knew any operation into the Arma Mountains would be led by SOF and supported by air and conventional ground forces. With this in mind, the JFC established Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Pinnacle under the command of CFSOCC to focus specifically on the mission at Shah-i-Kot. The JFC's initial order established CJTF Pinnacle's mission and a joint special operations area (JSOA), assigned forces, and defined supported and supporting relationships with the other component commanders. CJTF Pinnacle was now the primary focus of the OEF forces.

*(This is counterfactual. The JFC's 5 January 2002 FRAGO directed the CFLCC—not CFSOCC—to develop a concept of operations to kill/capture the forces believed to be gathering near Gardez. The FRAGO did not establish a CJTF or define the area of operations (AO). Most important, the FRAGO did not establish clear supported or supporting relationships with the component commanders.)*

## **6 January 2002: Operation Boa Planning Begins**

CJTF Pinnacle set up operations at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. The move from Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, Uzbekistan, not only moved the CJTF staff closer to the operation, but also avoided the problems of mounting political tension between the Uzbek and American governments. Each of the force components sent personnel to Bagram to form CJTF Pinnacle's joint staff. CFSOCC, now the CJTF Pinnacle commander, sent experienced O-6s and small staffs as Special Operations Liaison Elements (SOLEs) to both the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) and the CFLCC's headquarters.

*(This is counterfactual. Contrary to joint doctrine, the CFLCC established CJTF Mountain on 13 February 2002, commanded by the 10th Mountain Division Commander. Contrary to joint doctrine, there was no J-staff for the JTF. There was also no significant change in liaison officer manning until a few days prior to execution.)*

CJTF Pinnacle's second order of business was to resolve the disparity between varying enemy force estimates and intentions. The CJTF/J-2 stood up a joint intelligence cell (JIC) at Bagram and, working closely with the entire joint force intelligence community, built a collection and analysis plan to focus ISR forces on a 70-square-mile area. On 23 January 2002, the refined JIC estimate confirmed the earlier highest estimate of 1,500 to 1,800 fighters. Additionally, HUMINT sources believed Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces intended to stay and fight for the Shah-i-Kot valley by holding key high ground and transit routes to their bases in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area. The high enemy estimate and its intention to stay and fight were catalysts for Pinnacle planners to choose the "heavy" option for their nascent campaign plan, taking shape as Operation Boa. *(Counterfactual. In reality, the discrepancy between enemy force estimates was never resolved and little work was done to build a plan if the enemy chose the most dangerous course of action—staying and fighting.)*

By 1 February 2002, planners saw Operation Boa as a large force operation requiring significant coordination, integration and synchronization of the unique capabilities of each combined force component. Most important, with the first large-scale use of conventional ground forces, CJTF Pinnacle and

the component commanders clearly understood the need for comprehensive joint planning and execution, the likes of which had not yet been required in OEF. The first step was to identify requirements. (*Counterfactual. 23 February 2002 was the first time the CFACC was briefed on the extent of the air component support required for Anaconda, scheduled to begin five days later on 28 February 2002.*)

Two narratives influenced CJTF planners in the requirements phase. First, allied Afghan ground commanders relayed stories about the Soviet Union's experience in Shah-i-Kot, where the mujahedeen drew 200 to 250 Russian soldiers into close combat and stoned them to death. To avoid this scenario, planners wanted to use overwhelming force from air and ground forces. CJTF Pinnacle planners estimated that 200 SOF, 1,600 conventional ground troops, and 1,000 allied Afghan troops supported by 24/7 close air support (CAS) coverage were needed for Boa. The introduction of 12 A-10s and 24 AH-64s, along with 1600 conventional troops would strain the old Soviet base and its support structure to the limit. (*Counterfactual. The eight available AH-64s were actually tasked by CJTF Mountain as emergency CAS only. Also, A-10s were initially based in Kuwait and then forward deployed to Bagram four days into the operation.*)

Bagram's precious ramp space would also be needed to support the airlift cycles required to deliver personnel, ordnance, equipment, and fuel for Boa. (*Counterfactual. Because there was inadequate joint component coordination and planning, the logistics requirements to support the air operation were not planned for. Only the ingenuity and flexibility of the joint warfighters made the operation possible.*)

The second narrative that heavily influenced CJTF Pinnacle planners was the success of SOF and airpower during the first months of OEF. SOF teams had refined this working relationship to a deadly art but lacked the blocking power to cover the Shah-i-Kot escape routes. The conventional ground force had the manpower and firepower to block the escape routes but needed to resolve several coordination and equipment issues to fully integrate with the air assets. The component commander's plan for a robust TAGS now paid off. Using that plan, CJTF Pinnacle requested additional personnel and equipment from the JFC. For the Army, building up the



U.S. Air Force

**A U.S. Air Force controller during Operation Anaconda.**

AAGS meant ensuring the command and control, air traffic control, airspace management, and fire support coordination pieces of Army airspace command and control activities were fully functional. (See Army FM 3-52, *Army Airspace Command and Control in a Combat Zone*, 1 August 2002, Chapter 2.) The CFLCC ensured that the assigned division and brigade Tactical Air Control Parties (TACPs) were in theater and ready for Boa and that the Battlefield Coordination Detachment (BCD) at the CAOC was correctly sized and trained.

Although many parts of the TACS were fully functional during the first months of OEF, the CFACC's part of the robust TAGS plan required three key changes. First, the CFACC established an air support operations center (ASOC) at Bagram to coordinate air support requests and conduct time-sensitive targeting within the joint special operations area (JSOA). (See Air Force Doctrine Document 2-1.7, *Airspace Control in the Combat Zone*, 13 July 2005, 37.)

Second, the CFACC sent an Air Force general officer to CJTF Pinnacle's headquarters as the head of an air component coordinating element (ACCE) tasked with integrating air and space operations within the CJTF and the overall joint force. The AACE focused on exchanging current intelligence, operational data, and support requirements with the CJTF staff, and on coordinating CFACC requirements for airspace coordinating measures, joint fire support coordinating measures, and close air

support. (See Air Force Doctrine Document 2-1.7, *Airspace Control in the Combat Zone*, 13 July 2005, 31.)

The final requirement for the TACS was a fully functional air request network integrated with the components of the Air Force TACS and Army AAGS. The CFACC worked closely with the CFLCC and CJTF Pinnacle to ensure TAGS organization. Personnel and communications infrastructures were in place by 17 February 2002. (*Counterfactual. The CFACC did work closely with CFLCC and CJTF Mountain to get the best TAGS possible after 23 February 2002.*)

The air-ground concept of operations, while not new to CJTF Pinnacle, called for ground commanders to submit air support requests through their assigned tactical air control parties to the air support operations center at Bagram, which would prioritize and coordinate with the CAOC in Saudi Arabia to provide airpower. Due to the high terrain in the JSOA, the ASOC would need help from JSTARS for C3 and air request relay. Terminal air controllers and forward air controllers-airborne (FAC-As) would control assigned aircraft and give weapons release authority within the JSOA for CAS and defensive fires. Preplanned strikes for air interdiction targets would be cleared through the CENTCOM target approval board. (*Counterfactual. CAS C2 and weapons release procedures were not thoroughly understood by all Anaconda players and had not been tested in such a robust combat environment prior to Anaconda.*)

By early February 2002, CJTF Pinnacle and the component commanders had refined the enemy estimate, determined force and logistics requirements, drafted a new airspace control order and started augmentation of the TAGS. (*Counterfactual. None of this was done by early February 2002.*)

With this critical planning and C2 infrastructure in place, CJTF Pinnacle planners turned their attention to the detailed concept of operations (CONOP) for Operation Boa.

## **Boa CONOP Refinement**

CJTF Pinnacle planners, working closely with component staffs, developed the following CONOP for Boa:

“Seven days prior to Boa’s H-Hour, ISR assets conduct intelligence preparation of the battlefield, combing the Shah-i-Kot Mountains to find and fix

enemy concentrations, mortar positions, and likely escape routes. Using this information, planners determine the best SOF insertion points and task ISR assets to monitor for enemy activity prior to the insertion. UAVs form an outer cordon to search for leakers heading east from Shah-i-Kot.

“The SOF insertion takes place 24 hours prior to initial airstrikes at H-Hour. SOF teams observe the entire list of preplanned targets Shah-i-Kot valley and relay any additional targets to JSTARS, ASOC, and CAOC. CAS assets are airborne during the SOF infil and CSAR forces are on alert at Bagram. After insertion, AC-130s remain over the objective at night then pass the mission to A-10s before sunrise to keep CAS firepower over SOF teams in the Boa JSOA.

“At H-Hour, air interdiction strikes begin on 53 JFC-approved targets to reduce the risk to U.S. troops if the enemy chooses a defense in depth, the most dangerous enemy course of action. . . .”

(*Counterfactual. Only seven of 66 approved targets were approved for pre-infil airstrike due to the CFLCC’s desire to conduct sensitive site exploitation. Half of the planned pre-infil airstrikes did not occur because un-briefed ground forces directed the aircrews to abort their bomb runs.*)

“Although the JFC approved 66 targets for pre-infil bombing, CJTF Pinnacle will conduct sensitive site exploitation on 13 of the 66 targets. The targets include enemy encampments spread over a large area, pinpoint firing positions, cave entrances, and landing zones. GBU-31 joint direct attack munitions (JDAMs) can strike most of them. Some can be destroyed by airburst M117s and dispenser munitions, but a few require the greater penetration of the 5,000-pound GBU-28 or the near-horizontal entry provided by laser-guided GBU-24s. To safely accomplish the strikes in minimal time, aircraft comply with strict time-on-target (TOT) windows, operating altitudes, and egress routes. Strike aircraft check-in with AWACS to get major situation updates (e.g., weather delay, aircraft fall-out, target changes) then get pushed to JSTARS for the real-time Boa JSOA update immediately prior to their attack runs on the interdiction targets. If SOF teams are not in pre-briefed positions, or need to add or remove a target, SOF representatives onboard JSTARS inform the CAOC and the ASOC via the SOLE. The CAOC retains control of

the strike aircraft until the end of the TOT window.

“The next movement in Operation Boa is the Afghan army force’s move to Phase Line Emerald west of “the Whale,” the western boundary of the Shah-i-Kot Valley. The Afghan hammer force, accompanied by U.S. SOF with TACPs, is the main effort of Operation Boa. The hammer force separates into a north and a south component and holds at Phase Line Emerald until the air interdiction strikes are complete.

“The first weapons are laser-guided bombs from F-15Es on 12 mountainside caves to kill Al-Qaeda/Taliban fighters and close the entrances with laser-guided bombs. AC-130s monitor the cave strikes and engage enemy leakers attempting to escape. B-52s destroy enemy encampment areas with airburst JDAMs, Wind-Corrected Munitions Dispensers, and strings of M117s. U.S. Navy fighters and USAF F-16s employ JDAMs on enemy fighting positions and airburst JDAMs on insertion LZs immediately prior to the air assault. At the end of the 30-minute TOT window, the strike force moves out of the immediate area to refuel and await follow-on CAS tasking from the forward air controllers (FACs). Ground commanders assume weapons release authority and the ASOC gains control of the CAS aircraft marshaled in the JSOA after the air interdiction TOT window.

“After 30 minutes of airstrikes, blocking forces from the 101st Airborne Division and 10th Mountain Division air assault into seven landing zones on the eastern upslope of the Shah-i-Kot valley and move to designated blocking positions (BPs). A-10s and AH-64s escort the force to the LZs and, along with AC-130s, provide CAS. The AH-64 Apaches remain in radio and visual contact with the insertion helicopter force until they egress clear of the JSOA. The AC-130s remain overhead the SOF forces while the A-10s assume FAC-A responsibilities and establish communications with the terminal air controllers at each BP. With the “anvil” force in place and with airspace, communications, and FAC-A control established, the Afghan “hammer” force executes a pincer tactic around the north and south ends of the whale and moves to contact in the vicinity of three known

U.S. Marine Corps, CWO2 William D. Crow



**A Minnesota Air National Guard C-130 Hercules aircraft waits to be unloaded on the airfield at Bagram, Afghanistan in support of Operation Anaconda, 11 March 2002. A U.S. Air Force C-17A Globemaster III is parked in the background.**

enemy encampments in the valley. This main attack will force the enemy to stay, fight, and die, or attempt escape into the deadly fire of the BP forces and CAS.

“U.S. and coalition SOF will form an outer cordon along choke points to the east of Shah-i-Kot valley and the seven BPs. Paired with terminal air controllers, these forces will engage enemy forces who escape the main effort and bypass BPs. Combat operations will terminate when the Shah-i-Kot valley is cleared of enemy fighters and secure. Operation Boa should last no more than one week.”

### **Deception Plan: Operation Python**

With a new TAGS system established for CJTF Pinnacle, new U.S. conventional ground troops operating new equipment in an extremely tight airspace structure and a new aircraft carrier on station, commencing Operation Boa from a “cold start” was an operational risk that CJTF Pinnacle and the component commanders wanted to mitigate. They needed a mission rehearsal for their significantly more capable and complex joint fighting force prior to facing 1,500 seasoned fighters at Shah-i-Kot. (*Counterfactual. There was no mission rehearsal and no deception plan. Operation Python is purely fictional.*)

They also realized this rehearsal presented them with a triple opportunity. First, the rehearsal would use the exact personnel, equipment, timeline, airspace, and TAGS structure as Boa. It would expose the task force to mountainous operations and allow evaluation of the Afghan ally’s responsiveness and the overall soundness of the Boa plan. Second, the

rehearsal would be part of a comprehensive deception plan designed to inject ambiguity about the time and location of Operation Boa. The purpose of the plan was to draw forces and focus away from Shah-i-Kot, induce a false sense of security at Shah-i-Kot, and shorten the enemy's reaction time when the real operation was discovered. Third, the rehearsal would be a real-world operation north of Jalalabad on Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan to look for small pockets of Taliban/Al-Qaeda. The Jalalabad operation would be called Operation Python.

## **18 February 2002: Operation Python Execution**

The pre-infil ISR results for Python resulted in two changes to the plan. First, the air assault landing zone was moved due to increased activity detected in a nearby village. Several cave entrances were also marked for exploitation due to infrared signature and detection of communication signals. High mountain wind turbulence delayed the SOF insertion for five hours but proceeded well after the delay. However, the pair of AC-130s assigned to cover the SOF infil were already airborne on a normal OEF air traffic operations (ATO) cycle, resulting in a requirement to hand off the infil coverage to other AC-130s and to conduct extensive airborne coordination between the aircraft and C3 nodes. The new AC-130s established communications with the SOF teams and then handed off coverage to A-10s out of Bagram before daybreak.

The Python airspace structure was specifically designed to constrain strike aircraft in preparation for Boa. Interdiction targets for Python were limited to the air assault LZs, which were easily hit. Although not planning to engage other targets, remaining strike aircraft flowed into the Python AO on assigned timelines and altitudes to exercise airspace control measures. While deconfliction issues arose due to strike platforms' varying turn performance in tight airspace close to the Pakistan border, these issues were resolved quickly.

The CH-47 troop carriers departed Bagram with their escorting AH-64s to the Python AO. A-10s waited over the Python AO for the conventional force as Predator drones and AC-130s focused their sensors on the LZs. Unfortunately, one soldier was injured at the second LZ and required extraction from the area by combat search and rescue (CSAR) and Medevac forces. All joint tactical air control-

ler (JTAC) communications were established with A-10 FAC-As and the ASOC pushed strike aircraft to cycle through the different FAC-As and JTACs through the Python AO on simulated, and a few real-world, 9-line CAS attacks. The A-10s and JTACs had to sort through several instances of "who owned which aircraft when" but the air control plan worked well through the day.

After an hour of air control, the SF-supported Afghan force began their move southward. The SF officers assigned to the Afghan force knew that Python was a prelude to Boa and a post-Tora Bora evaluation of the Afghan force. AC-130s established contact with the Afghan force as it moved into the Jalalabad valley. After two days of movement-to-contact and additional air control, the Python force was extracted back to Bagram. Lessons would be rolled into the Boa plan that was scheduled in less than two weeks.

Operation Python resulted in some sporadic engagements with Taliban who had uncharacteristically fled north to Jalalabad after Tora Bora. The operation enabled all players to build their situational awareness about Operation Boa's operational timeline and relative position of friendly forces in the JSOA. (*This is counterfactual. These lessons were learned during and after Anaconda.*)

More importantly, Operation Python had verified the basic logistics and coordination of the Boa plan and highlighted stress points within the tight airspace and C3. Several problems with the TAGS were identified and fixed, including adding tactical air direction (TAD) frequencies so each JTAC had a discreet TAD; clarifying rules of engagement for air interdiction strikes with SOF in close proximity; refining the roles and responsibilities of the AWACS, JSTARS, ASOC, and CAOC during mission execution; and specifying how CSAR and quick reaction forces would be tasked and controlled.

## **2 March 2002: Operation Boa Execution**

CJTF Pinnacle and component commanders were ready to execute Operation Boa on 28 February 2002. The ISR force had intensely imaged the JSOA for the preceding seven days, focusing on target and LZ locations. The intelligence preparation of the battlefield confirmed the enemy estimate and gave planners high confidence in the location of

enemy forces, likely escape routes, firing positions, and cave entrances. Operation Boa was delayed two days due to adverse weather in the Shah-i-Kot Mountains. SOF team infiltration proceeded on schedule with AC-130 coverage. The teams observed the area and the 53 interdiction targets, and reported back to JSTARS that all targets were cleared for interdiction strike. The SOF-supported Afghan hammer force moved as planned and held at Phase Line Emerald.

At H-30 minutes, F-15Es hit all 12 caves with one requiring immediate restrike due to a weapon malfunction. All pre-planned LZs, enemy encampments, and fixed fighting positions were hit as well. However, one of the airburst JDAMs failed to detonate on an LZ, forcing the use of an alternate LZ due to unexploded ordnance.

At H-Hour, the strike force flowed out of the area as the blocking force infil began. AH-64s swept over the LZs in front of the Chinooks while Predator UAVs, A-10s, and AC-130s monitored the infil from directly overhead. One CH-47 aborted a landing due to unexpected ground fire. Fortunately, both the Predator and AC-130 located the firing position, which was neutralized by the AC-130 and AH-64s. After a 10-minute delay, the CH-47 returned to the LZ and uneventfully disembarked troops. At another LZ, a ranger was injured fast-roping into rough terrain. As in Python, a Medevac team was called to extract the Soldier. A-10s escorted the Medevac H-60 into the LZ and monitored the extraction.

Although all JTACs established radio contact with the A-10 FAC-As, one JTAC radio lost its crypto load, requiring calls in the clear using pre-briefed code words. Several A-10s responded to calls for suppressing fire and the ASOC pushed Navy attack aircraft and a B-52 to work with FAC-As and JTACS. Most targets were enemy mortar tubes, which were quickly located through night vision goggles and infrared sensors and engaged by air assets.

With the anvil force in place, the Afghan hammer force executed the double-envelopment. During this maneuver, they called for fires from airstrikes. Pressured from both the north and south, many Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces attempted to flee eastward out of the valley. Airstrikes engaged and killed scores of them before they reached the

blocking positions. Those that reached the blocking forces along the exit routes were captured or killed. A few enemy troops who knew the terrain well attempted to escape via remote donkey trails or “rat lines” leading through the valley. With SOF eyes and an ISR umbrella scanning every square foot of the Shah-i-Kot valley, these fighters were spotted and engaged by the outer cordon of SOF and CAS airstrikes. In one instance, a B-52 aborted its bomb run 10 seconds prior to release when a civilian airliner flew directly under its bomb release point. The CAOC staff worked with civilian air traffic control authorities to re-route traffic around the JSOA enabling the bomber to reattack the enemy fighters after a 10-minute delay.

#### 4 March 2002: Objective Gilligan

As the Afghan hammer force was mopping up the last fighters in the three valley villages, and the outer cordon SOF were killing and capturing leakers, a SOF team was inserted at Objective Gilligan, a southern Shah-i-Kot BP. *(This part of the narrative is loosely based on the actual events on Robert's Ridge, also known as Objective Ginger or Takur Ghar.)*

Several cave entrances on this mountain were in the group of 13 reserved targets because intelligence sources believed there was a high probability of high-value Al-Qaeda leadership hiding there. Twenty-four hours of persistent ISR coverage showed significant enemy activity near the planned infil point so the SOF team inserted lower on the ridge and moved by foot. *(The initial SOF team landed high on the ridge, unaware of intel given to the CJTF Mountain HQ hours earlier showing significant enemy activity in the area.)*

Throughout the night, moderate-to-heavy fire from small arms, Dishka machine guns, and mortar attacks was quelled by the bravery and effective tactics of the SOF team, an embedded JTAC, a ranger quick reaction team and Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines air assets that provided CAS around the clock. By noon on 5 March 2002, Objective Gilligan was secured, dozens of the enemy were killed, and several were captured. Unfortunately, one U.S. SOF Soldier was killed in action and eight other U.S. Soldiers were injured.

Operation Boa continued for two more days as small pockets of fighters were killed or captured,



and sensitive site exploitation was conducted. Helicopters extracted the anvil force back to Bagram. The Afghan hammer force left a small company to hold the valley as the rest of the Afghan forces returned to Gardez.

## Conclusion

Operation Boa was a tactical and operational success. The commander's objective was attained: hundreds of Al-Qaeda and Taliban troops, including several top lieutenants, were killed and scores were taken prisoner. Although no high-value targets were discovered, several key pieces of intelligence were gathered that aided CJTF Pinnacle in follow-on operations.

The initial key to success was the establishment a Joint Task Force with a clear command structure and well defined supported/supporting relationships that ensured unity of command. Establishing liaison and coordination elements (SOLE, ACCE, ASOC,

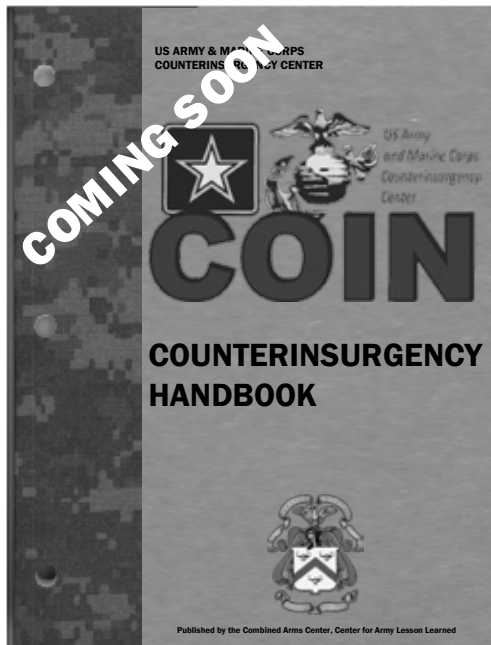
BCD, etc.) at the JTF and component headquarters ensured clear communication and unity of effort for both planning and execution. Standing up a JIC and focusing ISR ensured refinement of disparate intelligence assessments and established accurate estimates of enemy strength and intentions.

The combined planning effort built a universally understood CONOP, utilizing overwhelming force to engage worst-case enemy strength, tactics, and intentions. By employing a new theater air ground system with a new conventional ground force in a constrained airspace structure, the Operation Python mission rehearsal increased JTF command and control capabilities, interoperability, situational awareness, and confidence while also serving as a key part of an integrated deception plan. In the end, weeks of JTF planning, close coordination, and employment had developed a confident, capable, and synergistic joint air and ground team for Operation Boa. *MR*



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