

Bravery and Breakdowns in a Ridgetop Battle

By Bradley Graham

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First of two articles

A call had come in to headquarters just before daybreak: A Navy SEAL team was taking fire on an Afghan mountain ridge and needed help. As they raced in helicopters toward the site, Capt. Nathan Self and his platoon of Army Rangers were excited about the prospect of engaging al Qaeda. They'd spent more than two months in Afghanistan without a firefight.

They didn't know how many enemy fighters to expect. They didn't know exactly where the enemy might be. They didn't know exactly where the SEALs were, either. They did know that they were losing the advantage of darkness, flying by dawn's early light.

Two U.S. helicopters already had taken fire while trying to land on the ridge during the previous three hours, and two U.S. soldiers had been killed. Around 6:15 that morning, March 4, Self's chopper, a black, 52-foot Chinook, reached the ridge and started to descend.

The chopper was still about 20 feet off the ground when a rocket-propelled grenade slammed into its right engine, knocking it out. Enemy machine-gun fire ripped through the fuselage. Bullets started punching holes in the cockpit glass.

The chopper shook and dropped, landing hard enough to send the Rangers and aircrew sprawling across the floor. Within seconds, four men on the helicopter were killed, and the survivors were fighting for their lives.

By day's end, a seventh soldier, an Air Force search-and-rescue specialist, would bleed to death as Self's appeals for urgent evacuation were rejected by his superiors, who wanted no more daylight rescue attempts.

What became a 17-hour ordeal atop a frigid, desolate and enemy-ridden mountain ridge cost seven American lives, more combat deaths than any U.S. unit had suffered in a **single** day since 1993, when 18 Rangers and Special Operations soldiers died in battle in Mogadishu, Somalia. How the operation was conducted revealed serious shortcomings in U.S. military coordination and communication in Afghanistan. How it unfolded highlighted the extraordinary commitment of American soldiers not to leave fallen comrades behind: The entire episode spiraled out of an attempt to rescue a **single** SEAL, who had fallen out of the initial helicopter and was quickly shot by the enemy.

The firefight at Takur Ghar mountain came on the third day of Operation Anaconda, a three-week-long U.S. sweep against al Qaeda and Taliban forces in the Shahikot valley in eastern Afghanistan. The Mogadishu battle nine years ago

precipitated the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia. This one, Pentagon officials credit with reinforcing the Bush administration's commitment to pursue the war even in the face of U.S. military casualties. Efforts are underway to award some of the military's highest decorations for valor to those who fought on the mountain.

Even so, the circumstances that led to the firefight on the ridge have been subjected to extensive review in the Special Operations Command, which has responsibility for some of the elite U.S. military forces, including the Navy SEALs. Special Operations commanders ran the star-crossed rescue effort.

Close examination of the effort indicates that U.S. intelligence sources failed to detect enemy fighters on the ridge, leaving commanders to assume it was safe. Even after learning otherwise, U.S. military officials dispatched the SEALs back to the ridge where they had first come under fire, rushing them headlong into another ambush. Self and his Rangers then ended up going to the same spot unaware, because of communications equipment glitches, that the SEALs had retreated from the ridgetop.

An AC-130 gunship that could have provided covering fire for the Rangers was pulled from the scene just as they arrived because rules prohibited use of the low-flying, slow-moving warplane during daylight. An unmanned Predator drone took live video of the unfolding battle, giving commanders at the operation's command post at Bagram air base about 100 miles to the north and as far away as U.S. Central Command in Tampa real-time images of the firefight. But little of the information it initially gleaned was passed to the troops.

The episode has prompted some changes within Special Operations intended to improve communications and the flow of information to rescue teams. Commanders also have taken steps to promote closer coordination between conventional and Special Operations units in Afghanistan, which have separate chains of command.

This account is drawn from extensive interviews with the Rangers, who are back in the United States, as well as Air Force air controllers, Air Force para-rescuemen, and the Army helicopter crews who flew the Special Operations team and Rangers to the ridge. The chopper crews asked that only their first names be used; one Ranger requested his name be withheld.

Those who survived the battle are reluctant to criticize the decisions of superiors. But some senior military officers familiar with the rescue operation have raised questions about how it was managed. Could aircraft have attacked the al Qaeda positions before the rescuers set down? Could the communications glitches that hampered the rescue effort have been avoided? Could the Rangers have been dispatched sooner, allowing them to maintain the advantage of darkness?

"Instead, it was the shootout at the OK Corral in the broad morning light," one Ranger officer said.

'A Dominating Piece of Terrain'

The first signs of trouble came about 3 a.m., when an MH-47E Chinook carrying Navy SEALs and an Air Force Special Operations combat controller tried to land on a ridge on the eastern side of the Shahikot valley, on a mountain the U.S. military dubbed "Ginger."

U.S. military commanders launched Operation Anaconda on March 2 against members of al Qaeda and their allies in the Taliban militia. It was still winter in Afghanistan's forbidding eastern mountains, where night-time temperatures dipped into the twenties and the snow on ridgelines was knee-deep.

Military planners had intelligence that enemy forces were concentrating in the Shahikot valley. The plan was for friendly Afghan troops to lead an assault from the northwest, pushing the enemy fighters into U.S. blocking positions along the eastern ridge.

Instead, the Afghan advance stalled and the eastern ridge itself was found to be teeming with al Qaeda fighters. As U.S. 10th Mountain Division troops tried to get into position to seal off valley exit routes in the south, they came under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire from around Ginger.

Elements of the 10th Mountain regrouped with plans to insert additional forces north of Ginger and move south to attack. At the same time, on the night of March 3, U.S. commanders sought to gather a firsthand picture by placing a reconnaissance team on the ridgetop.

"It was a dominating piece of terrain, and if we had observation up there, it gave us a 360-degree look across several trails as well as Shahikot," explained Army Maj. Gen. Franklin L. "Buster" Hagenbeck, who was commanding Operation Anaconda from his headquarters at Bagram.

The ridgetop, at 10,200 feet, was thought to be uninhabited. U.S. warplanes had repeatedly bombed the area, and overhead surveillance had produced little sign of life on top. Commanders chose a reconnaissance team of seven Special Operations troops, all but one of them Navy SEALs, to go to Ginger.

Helicopter maintenance problems and a B-52 bomber strike that night forced a delay in the reconnaissance mission. This raised concerns that the SEALs, who were to be dropped off at the base of the mountain and climb to the ridgetop, might not make it up before daylight. A decision was made to fly them directly to the top.

The Chinook carrying the reconnaissance team, code-named Razor 3, left a staging area in Gardez with a second helicopter, Razor 4, which was to drop another Special Operations team elsewhere in the valley and then rendezvous with Razor 3 for the return trip. The choppers were flown by the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, a special Army unit known as the Night Stalkers. Its pilots are accustomed to operating on covert missions behind enemy lines. The 2nd Battalion of the 160th had been in Afghanistan since October, flying some of the war's most sensitive missions.

"Before we went in there, the plan was for an AC-130 to recon the area and make sure it was all clear," recalled Alan, the pilot of Razor 3. "With a recon mission like this, you don't want to land where the enemy is."

The helicopter touched down in a small saddle near the top of the ridge, and the SEALs moved into position at the rear door to get off. At the head of the line was Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts.

The chopper's crew reported the presence of a heavy machine gun about 50 yards off the nose of the aircraft. But the gun appeared unmanned, a not uncommon sight in Afghanistan, whose mountain ridges and caves are littered with seemingly abandoned tanks and antiaircraft guns. The SEALs announced they were leaving.

At that moment, machine-gun fire erupted from several directions, ripping into the chopper. A rocket-propelled grenade came flaming in from the left, tearing through the cargo bay and exploding.

"I saw a big flash," said Jeremy, a crew chief. "By the time I got my senses back, we were flying down the mountain."

Dan, the crew chief on the rear right, shouted to the pilot: "We're taking fire! Go! Go! Go!" The pilot applied full throttle, but the grenade had short-circuited the aircraft's electrical power and damaged its hydraulic system. The machine-gun fire had punctured oil lines and wires. The chopper wobbled and jerked as it lifted off.

As it lurched, Roberts went flying off the back ramp.

Alexander, one of the chopper's rear crew chiefs, tried to grab him. But Alexander lost his own balance on the ramp, slipping on draining oil and hydraulic fluid. He dangled off the edge, saved only by his safety harness. Dan yanked him back inside.

The pilot, thinking an engine was out, sent the chopper into a dive, hoping to gain airspeed. Quickly realizing both engines were working, he leveled the chopper and tried to climb.

"The thing was shaking like a washing machine out of balance," he recalled. "There were holes in the rotor blades, and the hydraulics were doing some funny things."

Told that Roberts had fallen out, the pilot tried to turn back. But with no hydraulic fluid, the controls locked up. Dan, having just hauled Alexander to safety, grabbed the handle of a hand pump and started furiously pumping spare quarts of hydraulic fuel into the system.

"The controls came back," the pilot said. "I leveled it out and said, 'Sorry guys, we're going to have to abort.'"

The Chinook limped north, its controls briefly freezing twice more as the crew desperately looked for a place to land in the valley below. With its radio out, Razor 3 could not contact Razor 4, which was beginning to wonder why its buddy was a no-show at the rendezvous point. Razor 3 finally came to rest at the north end of the valley, about four miles from the ridgetop. crew members were not even sure they were out of the battle zone.

The SEALs and aircrew got off the chopper to take up fighting positions. Mike, the flight engineer, grabbed a picture of his 2-year-old as he got off, wondering whether he would ever see his child again.

Razor 3 soon received word that Razor 4 was on the way to pick them up. It arrived within 30 to 45 minutes. The two teams discussed returning immediately to Ginger to rescue Roberts, but with the crew of Razor 3 also on board, Razor 4 would be too heavy to reach the ridge. Leaving the Razor 3 crew on the valley floor while Razor 4 ferried the SEALs

back also would not work: Reports were coming across the radio of enemy forces about 1,200 yards away and closing in fast.

So the only option was to go to Gardez, drop off Razor 3's crew, then take the SEAL team in Razor 4 to hunt for Roberts.

Two of Razor 4's crewmen had gone over to Razor 3, which was about 60 yards away, to do a final sweep of the aircraft. Suddenly in a rush to leave after getting word of the enemy fighters nearby, those on Razor 4 tried, using laser signals and other means, to get the attention of the crewmen on the other helicopter -- in vain.

"It was just a moment of pure panic," the pilot of Razor 4 recalled.

Lifting off in a hover, Razor 4 landed in front of Razor 3, loaded the other crewmen and hustled to Gardez. There, it dropped off the other crew and -- with the SEALs and Air Force Tech. Sgt. John A. Chapman, the air controller, on board -- set out back to Ginger, and Roberts.

'This Is Going to Hurt'

At Bagram air base outside Kabul, the command staff was trying desperately to gather some sense of Roberts' condition and location. U.S. military officials say no one knows exactly what transpired during the next few minutes on the ridge. There were no surveillance aircraft over the mountain at the time Roberts fell from the helicopter.

Based on forensic evidence subsequently gathered from the scene, officials with the U.S. Special Operations Command concluded that Roberts survived the short fall, likely activated an infrared strobe light and engaged the enemy with his M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon, a light machine gun known as a SAW.

"He was there moving around the objective for a period of time, at least half an hour," Hagenbeck said. An AC-130 gunship moved over the area and reported seeing what the crew believed to be Roberts surrounded by four to six enemy fighters. As a Predator drone arrived to provide a video picture, the strobe light went out.

Hagenbeck says the imagery taken by the drone appeared to show him being taken prisoner. "The image was fuzzy, but we believe it showed three al Qaeda had captured Roberts and were taking him away around to the south side of Ginger and disappearing into a tree line," Hagenbeck said. "That was 15 to 20 minutes before the first rescue team arrived."

The review by Special Operations Command concluded that Roberts was shot at close range. His SAW was found near his body with blood on it, along with other evidence that he had been able to fire some shots. Some ammunition remained in the gun, suggesting it had jammed.

It is unclear just how much information commanders were relaying to Razor 4 as it sped Roberts' comrades back to Ginger. Uncertain about Roberts' situation, the rescue team approached the ridgetop cautiously, resolved not to fire wildly lest they hit the stranded SEAL.

The pilot of Razor 4 had never flown into a hot landing zone. The briefing he had received from Razor 3's pilot gave him some confidence that he wouldn't be caught by surprise. He figured all he had to do was put the chopper on the ground long enough to let the SEALs dash out.

About 40 feet above the ground, the pilot saw the flash of a machine-gun muzzle off the nose of the aircraft. "I thought, 'Oh, this is going to hurt,' " he said. "And then the second thought was, 'How do I get myself into this?' But we had to go. We had to put these guys in."

Rounds of gunfire started hitting the aircraft, "pinging and popping through," in the words of one crew chief.

Hagenbeck, watching the Predator's pictures, saw Razor 4 land and the SEALs and Chapman rush off toward the enemy positions. He had little view of the enemy fighters, who were hidden under trees, dug into trenches and obscured by shadows.

"They didn't take cover, they just started moving immediately to where they thought that Roberts was located, right off the nose of the helicopter," Hagenbeck said of the U.S. commandos. "They moved straight out and took withering fire and they returned it as well."

The most prominent features on the hilltop were a large rock and tree. According to the Special Operations Command review, Chapman saw two enemy fighters in a fortified position under the tree. He and a nearby SEAL opened fire, killing both fighters.

The Americans immediately began taking fire from another bunker position about 20 yards away. A burst of gunfire hit Chapman, mortally wounding him, the review said. The SEALs returned fire and threw grenades into the enemy bunker directly in front of them.

As the firefight continued, two of the SEALs were wounded by enemy gunfire and grenades. The SEALs decided to disengage. They shot two more al Qaeda fighters as they moved off the mountain peak to the northeast, according to the official review.

As they moved down the side of the mountain, a SEAL contacted the AC-130, code-named Grim 32, and requested fire support. The gunship responded with covering fire.

As the SEAL team battled, Capt. Self and the 19 other Rangers in the "quick reaction force" took off from Bagram in two Chinooks -- code-named Razor 1 and Razor 2 -- and headed for Ginger, about an hour away. It was shortly after 5 a.m.

'You Have This Dilemma'

The Rangers left Bagram with only sketchy information about where they were headed and what they were to do. Initially, they had been told only that a helicopter had been hit by enemy fire and forced to land; later, they learned that

someone had fallen out. A lightly armed infantry unit, the Rangers specialize in behind-the-lines evacuation and reinforcement missions. They work frequently with SEALs and other Special Operations teams.

More specific guidance arrived as the Rangers flew toward the scene. They received orders to link up with the embattled SEALs and extract them, along with the commando who had fallen. Beyond that, many details were lacking.

"You have this dilemma: Hold guys on the ground longer so they know exactly what they're going to do, or push them ahead so we can affect the situation sooner," said Self, 25, a Texas native and West Point graduate who had commanded the platoon for 17 months. "A quick reaction force is never going to know everything that's going on. If they did, then they wouldn't be quick."

At headquarters, commanders tried to notify the Rangers that the SEALs had retreated from the ridgetop and to direct the helicopters to another landing zone further down the mountain. Due to intermittently functioning aircraft communications equipment, the Rangers and aircrew never received the instructions, according to the official review. Communication problems also plagued headquarters attempts to determine the true condition of the SEAL team and its exact location.

"As a consequence, the Rangers went forward under the false belief that the SEALs were still located on top of Takur Ghar and proceeded to the same location where both Razors 3 and 4 had taken enemy fire," the review said.

Nearing the mountain, Razor 2 went into a holding pattern. Self flew ahead on Razor 1 with his "chalk," nine young men in body armor over desert camouflage fatigues. In Afghanistan since December, the platoon -- Part of Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 75th Infantry Regiment -- had been scrambled a number of times, but it had not seen combat in the country, or anywhere else.

"The force flew to the place they knew the folks were in trouble," said a senior officer who monitored the battle. "They didn't know where the enemy or the Americans were. They were committed relatively blindly."

As they approached the landing site, the Rangers quickly found out how blind they really were. A rocket-propelled grenade knocked out the right engine, and enemy gunmen opened up on the damaged chopper.

Sgt. Philip J. Svitak, one of the forward gunners, fired a **single** burst of his 7.62mm gun from the copter's right side before being struck and killed. The other forward gunner, a flight engineer named David, was hit in the right leg.

"It basically just pissed me off," David said. "And I just pushed the trigger on my minigun and started sweeping fire on the left. I didn't know where the fire was coming from, I just knew we were taking fire. I wasn't going to let that happen without shooting back."

The chopper slammed to the ground. David collapsed in a corner and used a lanyard from his 9mm pistol to tie a tourniquet on his leg. He knew it was broken -- every time he tried to move it, the whole thing would twist.

Bullets were zooming through the cockpit glass. A round shattered one of the pilot's legs below the knee, another knocked off his helmet. The pilot, Chuck, popped open his emergency side door and flopped onto the snow. A bullet or fragment ripped a chunk out of the left wrist of the other pilot, Greg. Another bullet cut into his thigh. He staggered out of the cockpit toward the rear of the aircraft, holding his wrist as it spurting blood.

The incoming machine-gun fire was turning the aircraft's insulation into confetti. An RPG shot through the right forward window, hit a high-altitude oxygen console on the wall and started a fire.

"It's chaos at that point. Nobody has a grip on what's going on," said Cory, the chopper's medic. "I took three rounds in the helmet. It knocked me down," he recalled. "I was on my back. Somehow the impact caused a small laceration in my eyebrow. But it was bleeding a decent amount. I was on my back, and the blood was running down my face, and it took me a second to gain my senses and I realized I was okay."

Sean, the crew chief on the right rear side, shouted to Cory, "You need to put that fire out." But the forward fire extinguisher was missing. Brian, the other rear crewman, passed an extinguisher forward. Cory put out the fire, but the rest of the chopper was pure hell. The air was laced with smoke and bullets, and the enemy seemed to be everywhere.

In 15 years in the service -- including combat in Panama in 1989 and the Persian Gulf in 1991 -- Cory had never seen fighting so intense.

'I Saw the Tracers'

The Rangers were supposed to exit down a back ramp in an order they had practiced countless times. Those on the left would assemble outside on the left side of the chopper. Those on the right would assemble right.

But the moment had turned into a mad scramble to get out in whatever order they could. One Ranger, Spc. Marc A. Anderson, was shot and killed while still in the helicopter. Two others -- Pfc. Matthew A. Commons and Sgt. Bradley S. Crose -- were gunned down on the ramp.

At 21, Commons was the youngest in the group, with a reputation as a good-humored, enthusiastic soldier. Crose, 22, a leader of one of the platoon's four-man teams, was a quiet professional. Anderson, 30, was a former high school math teacher who had awed his fellow Rangers with his knowledge of weaponry. Now they were dead.

The surviving soldiers peeled off in different directions, wheeling around in the knee-deep snow, scurrying for cover behind whatever rocks they could find and firing on enemy positions.

The enemy was concentrated in two spots 50 to 75 yards away, looking down on the chopper from dug-in, fortified positions atop the ridgeline. Two or three fighters were shooting from the left rear side of the Chinook -- at about the 8 o'clock position. Staff Sgt. Raymond M. DePouli, the first Ranger out, began blasting away at them with his M-4 assault rifle.

"I saw the guy shooting at me, I saw the tracers. I got hit in my body armor," said DePouli, a squad leader. "I turned and dumped a whole magazine into him. Then I just got down prone . . . to make sure nothing else came over the hill."

Another cluster of enemy fighters was behind a boulder and under a tree to the front of the helicopter, off to the right at about 2 o'clock. They were firing machine guns and RPGs at the Americans. One slammed near the right side of the copter.

Spc. Aaron Totten-Lancaster, a long-distance runner considered the fastest in the battalion, took shrapnel in his right calf. Shrapnel also cut a wound in Self's right thigh and put a small hole in the left shoulder of Air Force Staff Sgt. Kevin Vance, a tactical air controller attached to the Ranger unit.

Another RPG soared over the Rangers' heads, skipping off the helicopter's tail. Self could see the torso of the man who fired it suddenly exposed above a boulder. DePouli, moving around from the other side of the helicopter, saw him, too, and shot him in the head.

Nearly all the Rangers were hit. A machine gun belonging to Spc. Anthony Miceli got shot up. A bullet slammed into helmet of Staff Sgt. Joshua Walker, another team leader.

Only Pfc. David Gilliam, the newest member of the platoon, avoided a hit to either his body or his equipment. He had jumped to the right side of the chopper, then scrambled to reassemble scattered ammunition belts for his M-240B heavy machine gun.

Self thought that the bullets flying past sounded different from what he had expected, almost like a clicking instead of a crack. The smell, too, was something he hadn't imagined, a mixture of cedar from the trees dotting the ridgeline, fuel, gunpowder, metal, sweat, blood and something faintly like strawberries. It all seemed so strange. "You see something happening and it doesn't seem real," Self said. "We understood we were getting shot. But it just seemed like a bad movie."

Disorienting and frightening as the first intense minutes of combat were, a sense of anger and indignation quickly took hold.

"Who do these guys think they are?" Walker shouted. He bounded forward, firing his M-4 and taking up a position behind a rock on the chopper's right side. Self and Vance joined him.

Totten-Lancaster started to move toward them. "I didn't really know I had been hit until I got up to run and couldn't," he said. His right leg disabled, Totten-Lancaster rolled several yards to the rock.

Slightly behind this group and farther to the right, DePouli and Gilliam, the machine gunner, took cover behind another rock. There they found the bullet-ridden body of an enemy fighter with an unused RPG.

Miceli, the seventh surviving Ranger, remained on the left side of the chopper, guarding that flank.

Several Rangers tried hurling grenades toward the enemy position about 50 yards away, but the farthest they could throw was about 35 yards. Enemy fighters heaved fragmentation grenades at the Rangers, only to have them land short, their explosions muffled by the snow.

The Rangers enlisted two of the helicopter crew members in the fight. Don, the air mission commander, and Brian, a rear crew chief, were told to fetch more ammunition from the helicopter, as well as an M-203 grenade launcher that Commons had been carrying when he was shot on the ramp.

"I'd like to say we were out of our element, as we're aviation and the Rangers are ground guys," said Don, a 26-year veteran. "So when they tell us, 'We need you to do this,' I'm in their element, I'm going to listen to what they say."

With the Rangers providing covering fire, the two crewmen dashed back and forth to the chopper. But the thin air quickly left them spent.

"I found it easier to roll across the snow," Don said. "If I could roll within 10 feet of them and throw it, I would."

For all the surprise and confusion of the early minutes, the Rangers fought by the book. Reacting to the attack, they sought cover and returned fire. Next, their training taught them to try to take the fight to the enemy, to look for flanking positions and consider avenues for assault.

On the right, the terrain dropped off steeply, ruling out a move that way. On the left was high ground. Moving there would leave them exposed to enemy fire.

"That's when we made the decision that the only way to assault would be straight at them," Self said.

Gilliam was told to provide covering fire with his heavy machine gun. Brian was assigned as assistant gunner -- "AG" for short -- to feed ammunition belts into Gilliam's M-240B. "I didn't know what he was talking about when he said AG," Brian said. "Then he explained it to me, and I said, 'Okay, I can do that.' "

As Gilliam opened fire, Self, DePouli, Walker and Vance charged, guns ablaze, grenades at the ready. Halfway up the hill, about 25 yards from the enemy, Self spotted a fighter pop his head from around a tree.

"All I could see was from chest up because he was dug down into the ground," Self said. "He shot at us and then disappeared."

Self suddenly realized that the enemy fighters were better protected than he had thought, shielded by a built-up cover of leaves, logs and branches. An assault on such a fortified position would require more than four soldiers.

"Bunker! Bunker! Bunker!," he shouted. "Get back."

The Rangers retreated to the rocks.

'We Were Spectators Watching'

Watching Predator imagery of the Chinook's landing, military commanders in Bagram were stunned by the ferocity of the ambush.

"It was gut-wrenching," Hagenbeck said. "We saw the helicopter getting shot as it was just setting down. We saw the shots being fired. And it was unbelievable the Rangers were even able to get off that and kill the enemy without suffering greater losses."

Although Hagenbeck was the senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan with responsibility for much of Operation Anaconda, he did not control the Ranger mission. That authority fell to Air Force Brig. Gen. Gregory Trebon, who ran a separate unit overseeing special operations. Trebon's command post also was at Bagram, but set apart from Hagenbeck's. A liaison officer who reported to Trebon sat next to Hagenbeck. Trebon declined to be interviewed.

"Literally, we were spectators watching," Hagenbeck said. "We did not know what the [SEAL] rescue squad on the ground had been reporting. I still don't know to this day what they reported to the commander here and what was transmitted to the Rangers on board the helicopter -- whether they said there's no other way to get here, or if they said we can suppress the enemy fire, or if they said we're going to lose some guys but it's the only way to do it. We were just looking at a screen without any audio to it."

While the Rangers were in the firefight, a Special Operations combat controller traveling with them, Air Force Staff Sgt. Gabe Brown, set up a communications post about 25 yards behind the helicopter, down a slope and behind a rock. He established a radio link with the SEALs.

That was how Self and his team got the news: The SEALs they had come to rescue were not even on the ridgetop any more. They had moved some distance down the mountain before the Rangers had arrived.

"They had two wounded, and I was led to believe they were going to stay" down the mountain, Brown said. "I believed they were holed up for the duration of the day."

Brown worked furiously to make contact with U.S. fighter jets in the area, frustrated by communications glitches. About 20 minutes after the chopper crashed, he managed to reach headquarters and ask for air support. Controllers gave him additional frequencies for talking with the incoming jet fighters.

"We have F-15s inbound on station," Brown shouted.

The first question for the besieged ground force was: bombs or bullets? Should the jets start unleashing bombs or begin with 20mm cannon fire? The Rangers decided on bullets, to minimize the chance of getting hit themselves.

After emptying their cannons in several runs, the F-15s were joined by a pair of F-16s, which had been about 180 miles away over north-central Afghanistan when the call came to go to Ginger. Swooping over the ridgetop, the F-16s unloaded 1,000 rounds.

But the enemy bunker continued to menace the Rangers, so the order was given for bombs. With Brown working the radio, and Self and Vance shouting back targeting adjustments based on where the bombs were hitting, the ground team tried to walk the bombs toward the bunker.

The first bomb, a 500-pound GB-12, dropped down the hill behind the helicopter. The next struck on the ridge crest, in front of the chopper. The third scored a direct hit on the bunker, splitting a tree.

Piloting the lead F-16, Air Force Lt. Col. Burt Bartley, commander of the 18th Fighter Squadron, was uneasy about how close to their own position the ground troops were calling for strikes.

"When I dropped one of those bombs, the ground controller said, 'Whoa, you almost got us with that one. Can you move it a little closer to the tree?' " Bartley said. "And in my mind, and what I called to my wingman was, 'No, I can't.' In my mind, that was as close as I dared get or I would kill him."

Military rules allow ground troops, under exceptional circumstances, to authorize airstrikes inside standard safety limits.

"If it's that close, they generally ask for the initials of whoever is in charge on the ground," Self said. "I was passing my initials over the radio because we were dropping that stuff within 50 meters of us."

The airstrikes suppressed the enemy fire and took out one critical bunker. But at mid-morning, the ridgetop was still in enemy hands.

Fire and Cold

Inside the helicopter, Cory, the aircrew medic, and two Air Force para-rescuemen -- Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham and Tech. Sgt. Cary Miller -- tended to casualties in the cargo bay.

The wounded included three members of the aircrew: Chuck, the pilot, who had been pulled around to the back of the helicopter after being shot in the leg and falling out his cockpit door onto the snow; Greg, the co-pilot, who had received a tourniquet to stop the bleeding from his left wrist; and David, the flight engineer, who had been shot in the leg.

Cory kept the casualties on the aircraft to try to shield them from enemy fire and from the cold. He knew that anyone who had lost a significant amount of blood was more susceptible to hypothermia. But the cargo bay was itself still a fire zone. From their elevated vantage off the nose of the aircraft, enemy fighters could see into the right side of the aircraft and shoot at anyone moving. "So the only way we could move was to crawl on our bellies," Cory said.

The enemy shooting subsided after the bomb dropped by the U.S. jet hit the bunker, and Cory shifted the wounded to an area behind the helicopter. All three had suffered life-threatening injuries, but the bleeding had stopped, and Cory considered their conditions stable. Even so, they needed more extensive care, and Cory was eager to get them evacuated.

"We knew at that point that until we took the hill, there was no way they could get out of there," said Don, the air mission commander.

For that, the Rangers would have to wait for more help, which was on its way.

NEXT: Climbing to the rescue

Ranger Capt. Nathan Self, whose platoon had not been in a firefight in Afghanistan. Spec. Anthony Miceli, whose weapon was hit by enemy gunfire on the ridgetop. Air Force Staff Sgt. Kevin Vance, an air controller, was wounded in shoulder. Ranger squad leader Staff Sgt. Raymond M. DePouli, left, who was first out of the Chinook; Pfc. David Gilliam, who managed to get out of the helicopter without being hit, and Spec. Aaron Totten-Lancaster, a long-distance runner wounded in the right calf. Army Chinook helicopters are used to transport U.S. troops from their bases in pursuit of Taliban and al Qaeda fighters and munition stores in the mountains. The Ranger mission was controlled by Air Force Brig. Gen. Gregory L. Trebon, located at Bagram air base but in separate quarters from the Operation Anaconda commander. In the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, a Navy SEAL watches U.S. forces destroy munitions captured from al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

 **Comments**