An act of courage

Surrounded by death, a young pararescueman chose to save lives — and lost his

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BAGRAM AIR BASE, Afghanistan — They call it the Battle of Roberts Ridge.

The 15-hour firefight cost more American lives — seven — than any other engagement to date in the war against terrorism. It was named after the first American to die amid the snowy, 10,000-foot mountains of eastern Afghan-istan.

But so many troops performed with such extraordinary courage during that long night and day that it could easily have been named after any one of at least a dozen men. This is the story of the March 4 battle and one of those heroes.

Surprise attack

It was approximately 3 a.m. March 4 when an MH-47E Chinook, code-named "Razor 3," approached Takhur Ghar mountain, known to U.S. forces as "Objective Ginger." The mountain dominates the southern end of the Shah-e-Kot Valley, and the dug-in al-Qaida forces there had proven impossible to dislodge in the 48 hours since U.S. troops had launched Operation Anaconda.

Riding in the back of the Chinook were a handful of Navy SEALs moving to a position where they could observe a series of cave complexes where al-Qaida fighters were concentrated. No place offered a more commanding view of the Anaconda battlefield than the top of Takhur Ghar.

But as the pilot from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment brought the Chinook in to land, the helicopter was met with a fusillade of enemy machine gun and rocket-propelled fire that severed vital hydraulic lines. The pilot jerked the helicopter up and away without inserting the SEAL team.

It was then that the crew realized that in the chaos one of the SEALs — Petty Officer 1st Class Neil Roberts — had fallen out of the helicopter.

With the controls seizing up, it was all the pilot could do to limp north about four miles to a safer, flatter part of the valley, where he put the helicopter down.

Back at the U.S. headquarters at this sprawling air base, the night crew in the operations center maneuvered a Predator unmanned aerial vehicle to monitor the movements of Roberts. What they saw was profoundly disturbing. Within minutes of falling from the helicopter, Roberts was captured and taken away by al-Qaida guerrillas.

Maj. Gen. F.L. "Buster" Hagenbeck, the commander of all U.S. forces in Afghanistan, approved the urgent request from the remaining SEALs on Razor 3 to return and look for their buddy.

"The reputation of these guys and how they treat prisoners is pretty much known," said an Army official in Bagram. "We did not want to leave one of our people behind."

Forty-five minutes after Razor 3 had made its forced landing, another MH-47E — "Razor 4" — landed beside the damaged Chinook. Razor 3's crew and remaining SEALs climbed aboard the good aircraft, which flew to a U.S. base at Gardez, 15 miles away. There Razor 3's crew got off, and the Chinook sped back to the valley. Aboard were five SEALs and Tech. Sgt. John Chapman, an Air Force combat controller.

As the Chinook approached Ginger, the troops aboard received constant updates on the whereabouts of the enemy fighters who had captured Roberts. Razor 4 landed near where they believed him to be. Enemy fire again met the helicopter, but this time the crew managed to offload the special operators and fly off.

Meanwhile, leaders at Bagram ordered the quick reaction force to launch. On the flight line, the twin rotor blades of two more MH-47s — "Razor 1" and "Razor 2" — slowly began to turn. On board Razor 1 were about 15 Rangers, as well as an Air Force enlisted tactical air controller, or ETAC, a pair of Air Force combat search- and-rescue pararescue jumpers and another Air Force special operations combat controller.

Sitting on the Chinook as it flew south into the heart of enemy territory was Senior Airman Jason Cunningham, a 26-year-old para-rescue jumper on his first combat mission.

'He was all about saving lives'

Cunningham was a bright-eyed kid from New Mexico who always had a smile on his face. Married with two children, he had only been a pararescue jumper for eight months, but his infectious enthusiasm had already made him popular with his fellow PJs. Even among the highly trained professionals of the special operations world, Cunningham's dedication to his job stood out.

"He had more motivation than any one man should have," said Scott, one of Cunningham's pararescue colleagues. "He was all about saving people's lives." For security reasons, Scott did not want his full name used.

The two years of grueling schooling it takes to earn the pararescueman's badge requires an airman to become skilled at dealing with mental and physical stresses few others could endure. The washout rate can be as high as 90 percent.

Cunningham personified that endurance.

The pararescuemen arehoused in the ground floor of the Bagram airfield tower building. Fifteen yards down the corridor are the expert field surgeons of the 274th Forward Surgical Team. It wasn't long before Cunningham's hunger to improve his medical skills had propelled him down the corridor. Soon he was spending a couple of hours every day with the medical staff, learning by doing under their tutelage.

"Every time we had a casualty event he was always the first one here offering to help," said Dr. (Maj.) Brian Burlingame, the surgical unit's commander. "His enthusiasm was just genuine to the core, which was what endeared him to us. He was like a little brother."

One of the outcomes of Cunningham's time with the surgical team docs was a decision to start sending the pararescuers out into combat with blood for transfusions. The use of blood in the field is a controversial topic, according to Burlingame.

"Blood is an FDA-controlled substance," he said. "It's very, very regulated." Special training, not to mention lots of paperwork, is required before medics are considered qualified to administer blood in the field. After Cunningham and Burlingame started talking, all the pararescuers here took the classes and filled out the paperwork.

"We then pushed blood forward with [Cunningham's] group," Burlingame said.

Despite his hard-core attitude, Cunningham had never been in combat, and he yearned for a chance to do his job in that most demanding of environments. As the first two days of Anaconda passed without him being sent forward, his frustration was palpable.

"There were two things he was really passionate about: medicine and shooting," Scott said.

Now, as the Chinook soared toward the heart of enemy territory, Cunningham was going to have an opportunity to put both skills to the test.

Another surprise

On Ginger, the al-Qaida fighters had executed Roberts, and the SEALs' rescue mission had become a desperate fight for their own lives. As he called in close air support to keep the enemy at bay, Chapman was cut off from the SEALs. He was later found dead.

By the time Razor 1 approached Ginger, the sun was rising. The rescue force had lost the advantages of surprise and darkness. The enemy was waiting. Heavy machine gun, Kalashnikov and grenade fire erupted from the snowy mountainside as the helicopter came in to land. At least one rocket-propelled grenade hit the aircraft in the tail rotor. With the helicopter still 80 feet off the ground, bullets shattered the cockpit glass. A round smashed one pilot's thigh bone, another knocked his helmet off. To his right, a bullet or fragment ripped a silver-dollar-sized hole in the other pilot's wrist, while yet another tore into his thigh.

Seriously damaged, and with its pilots barely able to control it, the Chinook hit the ground hard, just below the peak of the ridge. Miraculously, no one was seriously hurt in the crash landing.

But the helicopter — and the troops inside — were now taking heavy fire from a series of well-protected al-Qaida positions 100 to 200 meters up the slope. As rounds peppered the aircraft, the Rangers ran off the back ramp into a hail of fire. Two or three dropped immediately, dead or badly wounded. The pilot with the broken leg popped his door open and flopped out into the snow.

As the Rangers on the ground sprinted for cover, the Chinook's door gunners laid down a base of fire with their 7.62 mm miniguns. Then those watching the action via the Predator feed back in the operations center saw the left door gunner — Sgt. Philip J. Svitak — fall from his perch and lie motionless in the snow.

"He's a black dot on the ground," said a senior NCO who watched part of the Predator tape. "He's dead. You just keep looking at him, and a minute's gone, and another minute's gone. You sit there [watching] and your heart sinks."

When it was clear that the "landing zone" was in fact a free-fire zone, Razor 2 was waved off without dropping off its Rangers.

But the surviving members of the quick-reaction force on the ground were putting up a fight. A Ranger M-203 grenadier quickly destroyed the nearest al-Qaida position, but not before an enemy fighter there had launched a rocket-propelled grenade at the downed Chinook. That guerrilla then walked almost nonchalantly back to another fighting position, where he picked up another grenade and fired it at the helicopter.

Operating in 'a bullet sponge'

The quick reaction force's medical personnel, including Cunningham, another PJ who was a technical sergeant, two Ranger medics and a 160th medic, had their hands full. The Chinook's cargo area became the casualty-collection point.

It was in there that Cunningham went to work, putting into practice all that theory he had absorbed, and doing so in the most difficult circumstances imaginable. He was trying to save lives in the back of a helicopter at the top of a bitterly cold mountain, under constant fire from enemy forces that had him and his colleagues surrounded.

Just when things seemed as if they couldn't get worse, the forward compartment of the helicopter caught fire.

"The helicopter's a bullet sponge after it gets shot down, because it's just a great big target," Scott said.

As Cunningham and the 160th medic worked inside to staunch their buddies' bleeding, the enemy fire increased. Incoming mortar rounds bracketed the Chinook, landing within 50 feet of the helicopter's nose.

About four hours after the helicopter hit the ground, Cunningham decided the cargo compartment had become too dangerous for his patients. Using a small sled-like device, Cunningham dragged the wounded troops to a safer spot away from the aircraft. In doing so, he crossed the line of enemy fire seven times.

The quick-reaction force had landed perhaps 330 feet from a well-fortified enemy command post at the top of Ginger. Enemy fighters in one bunker were raining accurate fire on the U.S. troops. As the mortar fire intensified, the quick-reaction force commander decided to assault the bunker, and Cunningham volunteered to join the attack. But the senior pararescueman held him back, because the force had taken more casualties and Cunningham's medical skills were needed.

The Rangers gave it their best shot, but the assault stalled in the deep snow. However, the bunker — and the fighters inside it — did not survive for long. A U.S. jet destroyed it, one of countless occasions that day when pilots flying close air support missions came to the rescue of their colleagues on the ground.

"When our guys cried for help, everybody in the theater answered," Scott said.

Those servicemen here familiar with the battle speak in awed tones about the quality of the close air support provided by the Air Force during the battle. When the fight started, it was an AC-130 gunship circling overhead that was keeping al-Qaida heads down with devastatingly accurate fire from its 105 mm howitzer. Then, as daylight forced the slow-moving gunship to retire, fast-moving, high-flying F-15E Strike Eagles and F-16 Fighting Falcons picked up the slack, hurling bomb after bomb onto enemy positions with pinpoint accuracy.

The enemy's movements forced Cunningham and the 160th medic to move the casualties to a second and then a third location outside the helicopter, exposing themselves to enemy fire. During the last movement, the 160th medic was shot twice in the abdomen.

Shortly thereafter, at 12:32 p.m., Cunningham's luck ran out. An enemy round hit him just below his body armor as he was treating a patient. The bullet entered low from the right side and traveled across his pelvis, causing serious internal injuries.

"Untreated, you die from that," Scott said.

Cunningham must have known he was in serious trouble. But despite his worsening condition, he continued to treat patients and advise others on how to care for the critically wounded. One of the two blood packs he had brought saved a badly wounded Ranger. The medics gave the other packet to Cunningham himself, whose life was slowly flowing out in a red stream onto the white snow.

Back at the surgical unit, word of the situation on the mountain was seeping back. “We’d heard that one of the 160th medics was hit, and one of the PJs severely wounded,” Burlingame said. If a medevac helicopter could get in and pick up the wounded, there was time to save Cunningham.

“The combat controller wanted so bad to say the LZ was cold so they could bring in a helicopter to evacuate the wounded, but he couldn’t,” Scott said. In the early afternoon, leaders directed that no more rescue attempts be risked until darkness. It was a decision made to save lives, and it probably did. But it sealed Cunningham’s fate.

As the hours in the snow lengthened, Cunningham grew increasingly weak from loss of blood. Seven hours after he was hit, the other medics began to perform CPR on Cunningham. They continued for 30 minutes, until it was clear nothing more could be done. There were other lives to save. At about 8 p.m. on March 4, Jason Cunningham became the first pararescue jumper to die in combat since the Vietnam War.

As night fell, the level of enemy fire ebbed. The determined close air support from the Air Force, combined with the Rangers’ and SEALs’ own expert marksmanship, had done their job. Hagenbeck later said 40 to 50 enemy fighters died in the battle.

As air power pounded the enemy positions on Ginger, the sky filled with MH-47s. Three landed and lifted the survivors — and the dead — from the mountain. Seven American corpses were carried away in the bellies of the helicopters.

Back at Bagram, the medical staff was preparing for mass casualties. Word had come through that Cunningham was among the dead, but information on casualties up to that point in the war had been notoriously unreliable.

When the casualties arrived, Burlingame and the other doctors went to work in the operating room. All the wounded troops Cunningham and the other medics had treated in the battle survived.

As head of the surgical team, Burlingame also was responsible for filling out the medical paperwork on the deceased.

One by one, the doctor unzipped the body bags. As he methodically noted the likely causes of death (most had died instantly or almost instantly from bullet or fragmentation wounds), he found himself slightly relieved that each corpse wasn’t Cunningham’s.

“I was hoping against hope that he’d survived,” he said. Then he unzipped the last body bag and found himself staring at Cunningham’s lifeless face. It was too much, even for the experienced trauma surgeon, and he broke down.

“This was probably the least professional moment of my career,” he said. “It was a very, very difficult moment.”

Sharp though the pain of Cunningham's death was to those who knew him here, they also know that he is one of the main reasons Burlingame only had seven, not 17, body bags to open.

Cunningham's chain of command has written him up for the Air Force Cross, an award second only to the Medal of Honor. In the supporting documentation, it says: "As a result of his extraordinary heroism, his team returned 10 seriously wounded personnel to life-saving medical care."

Of the 21 Air Force Crosses awarded to enlisted airmen since the medal was created in 1960, 11 were presented to pararescuemen.

Cunningham's colleagues console themselves with the knowledge that their friend died doing the job he loved.

"He was right in the thick of it, doing it right up to the end," Scott said. "Jason was right where every PJ wants to be. He was where guys needed him, and he was saving lives."