

KILLED IN ACTION

By Jonathan Weisman
USA TODAY

The first airmen to die in combat since the Persian Gulf War fell on the deadliest day for U.S. forces in Afghanistan so far.

They died on a bleak mountainside as they and their comrades were surprised by enemy fire and their survivors shouted into their radios for air support.

Two airmen, four soldiers and a Navy SEAL died as they fell under enemy fire in two separate helicopter assaults on March 4. Ten other Americans were injured, some seriously, in fierce fighting in the allied air and ground offensive code-named Operation Anaconda.

The bloody battle pitted several hundred al-Qaida and Taliban soldiers against a handful of U.S. troops from the 1,000 operating near the town of Gardez in eastern Afghanistan. U.S. military officials say Anaconda, which began March 1, is the largest military operation since the 1991 Gulf War and the biggest light-infantry bat-

Two airmen among those killed in the United States' bloodiest day in Afghanistan

tle since the Vietnam War a generation ago.

Two Army MH-47 Chinook helicopters were disabled by enemy fire. It was the first time American helicopters were brought down in Afghanistan. Nearly 14 hours after they came under fire, 21 U.S. special-operations troops, and the remains of their seven fallen comrades, finally were whisked off the bleak, coverless mountainside where the fighting took place.

Among the dead were Air Force combat controller Tech. Sgt. John

A. Chapman, 36, and pararescuer Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham, 26.

Chapman, a 17-year Air Force vet, was a combat controller assigned to the 24th Special Tactics Squadron at Pope Air Force Base, N.C. The Air Force Special Operations Command unit works closely with its Army counterparts from adjacent Fort Bragg. Cunningham was a member of the 38th Rescue Squadron at Moody Air Force Base, Ga.

Cunningham was remembered at a ceremony March 7 at Moody, where his commander, Maj. Vincent Savino, said the fallen airman was hit by machine-gun fire as he treated wounded soldiers and darted out of a helicopter several times to pull others to safety.

"He spent his whole life preparing for that one moment," Savino said. "He was a great man. I know several soldiers who are alive today because of him."

"He was the very man you'd want with you in combat," said Staff Sgt. Craig Clark. "I'm a better person because of his example and friendship."

The deaths of Cunningham and Chapman came less than two weeks after two other pararescuemen, Master Sgt. William L. McDaniel II and Staff Sgt. Juan M. Ridout, died in the Feb. 22 crash of an MH-47E Chinook helicopter in the Philippines.

The Army soldiers who died March 4 were Spc. Marc A. Anderson, 30; Pfc. Matthew A. Commons, 21; Sgt. Bradley S. Crose, 27; and Sgt. Philip J. Svitak, 31.

Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts, 32, a Navy SRAL, fell from one of the Chinooks when it was hit and was later killed.

The battle in the mountains around the Shah-e-Kot Valley will be remembered as a testament to heroism: A bloodied, outnumbered band of U.S. troops held off a determined al-Qaida force on frigid, rocky terrain at least 8,000 feet above sea level. Call it "Black Hawk Down" in the snow.

Details of the firefight and rescue were sketchy as of March 7. This account is based on briefings by Pentagon officials and military officers at U.S. Central Command and Army Special Operations



Tech. Sgt. John A. Chapman, 36

Chapman, of Waco, Texas, was a combat controller and a good athlete. He leaves behind a wife and two daughters.



Senior Airman Jason D. Cunningham, 26

Cunningham, a pararescuer and trained combat medic from Camarillo, Calif., also had a wife and two daughters.



Navy SEAL Neil C. Roberts, 32

A Woodland, Calif., native, Roberts leaves behind a wife and 18-month-old son. He joined the Navy after graduating from high school in 1987.

Command, both based in Tampa, Fla., and on interviews.

American and Afghan troops fighting in the wider operation concede that U.S. forces, which number nearly 1,000 troops, might have been unprepared for the resistance they have met from al-Qaida forces. Rather than retreat as they had done in previous battles, the al-Qaida forces holed up in mountain passes and cave complexes apparently decided to stay and fight to the death.

That apparent miscalculation by the allied forces proved deadly on March 4. At 6:30 that morning, Afghanistan time, a Chinook helicopter outfitted to carry commandos into action flew into heavy fire as it ferried a special-operations team to a mountainside drop zone. Once there, they had planned to search for al-Qaida forces hidden in the folds of the mountains.

The Chinook found the enemy sooner than expected. Machine-gun fire and what was believed to



Army Spc. Marc A. Anderson, 30
Anderson, a Ranger from Brandon, Fla., was a career math teacher and track star. He joined the Army to pay off school loans.



Army Sgt. Philip J. Svitak, 31
Svitak, a flight engineer from Joplin, Mo., had a wife and two young sons. His mom said he was out to make a difference in Afghanistan.

SHAH-E-KOT VALLEY

Surrounded by rugged, snow-covered peaks, the valley was infested with al-Qaida troops.

- Area of U.S. ground operations
- Al-Qaida positions attacked by U.S. and coalition air strikes
- Special Forces, allied Afghans blocking escape routes
- Approximate location of incidents involving each team



Sources: Army Times research, Earthview Cartographic (www.cartographic.com)

NATHANIEL LEVINE, TIMES STAFF

be a rocket-propelled grenade forced the helicopter down.

Twenty-one commandos from the Air Force, Army and Navy poured out of the helicopter into a hail of al-Qaida bullets. In the ensuing firefight, six Americans were killed. Ten of the remaining 15 were wounded.

The survivors scattered and scrambled for cover, but there were no trees, only rocks, said Rear Adm. Craig Quigley, a Central Command spokesman. As they crouched behind rocks under heavy fire, the commandos screamed into their radios for air support.

At a mobile command post an unknown distance away, U.S. commanders watched the battle unfold from cameras mounted on RQ-1 Predator unmanned reconnaissance aircraft far overhead. They could see what one Pentagon official called "a large number of enemy forces" advancing.

Within minutes, F-15 Eagles and F-16 Fighting Falcons were on the scene, pounding al-Qaida positions and trying to drive back the enemy. AC-130 gunships, which fly at lower altitudes, soon joined the fight. According to reports from the area, they strafed al-Qaida positions with their M102 150 mm howitzers and 25 mm Gatling guns, which indicates the gunships were AC-130U

Spookys. Spooky gunships are assigned to the 16th Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, Fla.

The gunships must have been a welcome sight, one Pentagon official ventured on March 5. An F-15 can launch a powerful bomb, but an AC-130 can loiter over the scene for hours.

Second helicopter hit

At 3 a.m., about 3½ hours before the helicopter was forced down, two other Chinooks had landed to drop off another reconnaissance team to scout for al-Qaida fighters. One of those Chinooks was hit immediately by a rocket-propelled grenade. In a tremendous stroke of luck, the grenade did not explode. Both Chinooks took off hastily and flew out of the battle zone to a safe landing area.

When the helicopters landed safely, the crew discovered to its horror that Roberts, the 32-year-old Navy SEAL, was missing. He apparently fell out as the Chinooks retreated from the hostile fire. The Chinook that had not been hit by the grenade returned to the scene to drop off six commandos on a rescue mission. Their orders: Find Roberts, then back up the crew of the downed Chinook on the mountainside.

"An American, for whatever reason. See ASSAULTS next page



Army Sgt. Bradley S. Cross, 22

Cross, a Ranger from Orange Park, Fla., was based at Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Ga. He was a military kid; his dad is retired Navy.



Army Pfc. Matthew A. Commons, 21

Commons, a Ranger from Boulder City, Nev., was an honors student in high school and a soccer player. He was the youngest of the ones killed.

behind."

The search for Roberts became, tragically, a recovery mission, not a rescue. Marine Maj. Ralph Mills said Roberts died of a bullet wound after surviving a fall from the helicopter.

A reporter quoted military officers as saying that a Predator recorded footage of al-Qaida soldiers killing Roberts.

"We saw him on the Predator being dragged off by three al-Qaida men," said Maj. Gen. Frank Hagenbeck, commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

The rescue crew found Roberts' body, then made its way over rugged terrain to the battle still under way between the 15 surviving commandos and an al-Qaida force estimated in the dozens.

Pentagon officials marvel that the two U.S. squads actually met up. It was unclear how long that took, how many hours the battle lasted and how many enemy troops were killed.

In the larger operation, the enemy death toll is far higher, military officials in the region said March 5. Hagenbeck said then that hundreds had died.

For the rescuers, the return trip carried the grimmest cargo of the war so far: the seven dead and 11 injured commandos.

The American dead arrived March 5 at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, aboard a C-17 Globemaster III, their flag-draped coffins met by an Army, Navy and Air Force honor guard. The remains were then flown to Dover Air Force Base, Del.

Chapman's older sister, Lori McQueeney of Windsor Locks, Conn., got the sad news from their mother. She spoke of her brother in the present tense. "He's a cutup. He's a card," she said. "He's the life of the party."

He was married and the father of two girls, ages 3 and 5.

Cunningham started his military career in the Navy with the idea of becoming a SEAL, then had a change of heart and set his goal on earning an Air Force pararescueman's badge, the former Navy petty officer told Airman magazine two years ago.

"I didn't want to kill people. I want to save them," Cunningham recalled while in the midst of the pararescue course. "I have a wife, a daughter and another on the way who've sacrificed a lot for me to be here. They are counting on me, and I'm going to earn it [the pararescue badge] for them." □

Staff writer Bruce Rolfsen and Jonathan Ewing and Elliott Minor of the Associated Press contributed to this report.