ArmyTimes.com
April 18, 2002

Fierce Battle Produces Heroism On A Legendary Scale

By Sean D. Naylor, Times staff writer

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 in the war against terrorism. It was named after the first American to die amidst the snowy, 10,000-foot mountains of eastern Afghanistan.

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

A fusillade of fire

It was approximately 3 a.m. March 4 when an MH-47E Chinook, code name "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.

A handful of Navy SEALs were riding in the back of the Chinook, moving to a position where they could observe a series of cave complexes in which 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 only 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 Roberts' movements. 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 parajumpers, or PJs, 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 PJ on his first combat mission.

A passion for his work

Cunningham was a bright-eyed kid from New Mexico who always had a smile on his face. Married with two children, he had been a PJ for only 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 PJ colleagues. "He was all about saving people's lives." For security reasons, Scott did not want his full name used.

The PJs are housed on 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 FST docs was a decision to start sending the PJs 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 PJs 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," said Scott.

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.

'The Chinook hit the ground hard'

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, Tech. Sgt. John 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 RPG fire erupted from the snowy mountainside as the helicopter came in to land. At least one RPG 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 back in the operations center, watching the action via the Predator feed, 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 an RPG at the downed Chinook. That guerrilla then walked almost nonchalantly back to another fighting position, where he picked up another RPG and fired it at the helicopter.

The senior NCO was amazed at how casually the guerrillas seemed to move between their positions. "I just couldn't believe the audacity," he said. "Nobody ran except our guys."

Putting theory into practice

The QRF's medical personnel, including Cunningham, the other PJ (who as an E-6 was two ranks senior to Cunningham), 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 all that theory he had absorbed into practice 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 a hundred meters from a well-fortified enemy command post at the top of Ginger. Enemy fighters in one bunker in particular 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 PJ 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 gun ship circling overhead that was keeping al-Qaida heads down with devastatingly accurate fire from its 105 mm howitzer. Then, as the daylight forced the slow-moving gun ship 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.

'Bring the fire closer'

Most of the fire was called in by the special operations combat controller, call sign Slick 01. It fell on his shoulders to make sure the pilots flying several thousand feet above the ridge put their bombs on the enemy positions, not on the U.S. troops nearby. Some of the bombs were dropping as close as 100 meters to the U.S. troops, yet there is no indication that there was a single friendly fire injury.

In the course of battle Slick 01 was wounded, but he kept calling in strikes.

Air Force Lt. Col. Burt "Divot" Bartley, commander of the 18th Fighter Squadron at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, piloted one of the first fighter jets to respond. When his F-16 Fighting Falcon came screaming on scene, he said, "There was not a lot of time to mess around. I could tell by the controller's voice — it sent a chill

down my spine."

What he could also hear on the radio was Slick 01 emptying magazine after magazine at nearby enemy soldiers.

The combat controller reported targets as "danger close" to his position. Bartley said Slick 01 reported the enemy as being "2 helicopter lengths" from his position.
That's roughly 120 feet.

Then Slick 01 told him to bring the fire closer still.

"At one point, he told me 'Whoa! That was a good shot! Now bring it in a little closer to the tree.' But in my mind, I couldn't," Bartley said. To bring that
500-pound bomb any closer would have meant certain death for Slick 01.

The combat controller knew and acknowledged that, according to Bartley. That bomb was never dropped, however. Instead, Bartley and a two-ship team of
F-15E Stike Eagles from the 4th Fighter Wing laid bombs on the northwest side of the ridge, where a little crest protected the U.S. forces. Together, the four fighter
jets laid 2,000 20 mm rounds on enemy forces approaching through trees on the other side of the ridge.

But Bartley has no doubt that Slick 01's actions that day are deserving of the nation's highest military honor.

If the controller's actions "don't warrant the Medal of Honor, then I'd be surprised to know what it takes to get it."

"It was the most incredible close-in close air support I've ever seen," said a senior Air Force pilot who observed the gun camera film from the jets that delivered the
close air support.

Even with all the support from the sky, the situation on the ground was perilous.

"For the next two hours it was just a running firefight," said Scott. "The enemy kept trying to outflank them."

'A red stream onto white snow'

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 on each occasion 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.

As an exceptionally well-educated medic, Cunningham must have known he was in serious trouble. But despite his worsening condition, he continued to treat patients, and to advise others on how to care for the critically wounded. All those hours studying under the guidance of the doctors were now paying dividends, as was his decision to bring blood supplies. One of the two blood packs he had brought saved a badly wounded Ranger. The other 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 only a medevac helicopter could get in and pick up the wounded, there was still 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, the young PJ 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 PJ 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 and the Rangers and SEALs' own expert marksmanship had done their job. Hagenbeck later said 40 to 50 enemy fighters died in the battle.

With the darkness came salvation for the beleaguered American troops. 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 that Cunningham and the other medics had treated in the battle survived.

‘In the thick of it — right to the end’

Then Burlingame went to the tent in front of the tower building in which the dead had been laid in their body bags. As head of the surgical team, Burlingame had the responsibility for filling out the medical paperwork regarding the deceased.

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

"I was hoping against hope that he’d survived," he said. Then he got to the last body bag, unzipped it 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 why 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 ten seriously wounded personnel to life-saving medical care."

His 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."

Air Force Times Managing Editor Lance Bacon contributed to this story.