



The Afghan Air War

An Air Force
Association
Special
Report



Report Documentation Page

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Dr. Rebecca Grant is president of IRIS Independent Research in Washington, D.C., and a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association's Aerospace Education Foundation. She is also a contributing editor to Air Force Magazine, the journal of the Air Force Association. Her professional research interests center on joint doctrine and airpower employment in joint campaigns.

On the front cover: A B-52 in Operation Enduring Freedom. USAF photo by MSgt. Greg M. Kobashigawa.

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The Afghan Air War

By Dr. Rebecca Grant

September 2002

“The truth is, this will be a war like none other our nation has faced.”

—Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, Sept. 27, 2001¹

¹ Donald H. Rumsfeld, “A New Kind of War,” *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2001.

The Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., changed forever the way Americans viewed national security. For the United States Air Force and its partners in joint airpower, too, the attacks and resulting Global War on Terrorism erased distinctions between fighting “over there” and the defense of the United States. American strategy will be affected for decades to come.

The large-scale US response to an act of terrorism was a first for the American military. Operation Enduring Freedom, the US overseas response, was in its most intense phase in the period October 2001 through January 2002, but it was not a massive air war. The sortie count from its start on Oct. 7 through the final takeover of Afghan cities was half that of Operation Allied Force in 1999 and nowhere near the effort of the Gulf War in 1991. Air Force pilots flew some of the longest missions in history, but the success of the campaign was never seriously in question.

What made Enduring Freedom unique was that, in a war unlike any other, joint airpower was able to respond on command in a harsh and politically complex environment. Airpower set the conditions for the coalition campaign and achieved success from the first night onward. Airmen took it all in stride. They conducted a campaign that, initially, filled the pundits with doubts, but they made it look routine, adapting to tactical constraints and bringing precise firepower to bear wherever needed, despite the obstacles.

The overarching US Global War on Terrorism does not fit neatly into the cause-and-effect calculations of international politics. Military force mingles with diplomacy, international financial sanctions, cyber-defense, law enforcement, and many other forms of response. It is in part the by-product of several regional security policies, from the effort to contain Iraq to the US relationship with Israel. It is directly a product of the emergence of a non-

national group—al Qaeda—ideologically bent on destruction in service of a cause defined only by itself.

This war is colored by religious and philosophical beliefs in a way seen in no other American war—save possibly the Civil War. Its complexity is enough to spark longing for the harrowing but at least comprehensible problems of the Cold War, with its blocs of East and West. It is a consequence of the late 20th century’s spread of global culture and of the misuse of the technologies of jet airliners and the Internet which normally serve a constructive purpose. The Global War on Terrorism will be a fact of life for a long time yet.

Before Sept. 11: The Phantom Menace

For many decades now, Americans have experienced the traditional form of terrorism, but they only got a first taste of multifatality superterrorism in 1983. US troops were sent as part of a multinational force policing Lebanon after the Israeli invasion in June 1982. On Oct. 23, 1983, a truck bomb prepared by Islamic terrorists killed 220 US Marines, 18 Navy sailors, and three Army soldiers in their barracks at the Beirut airport. Another attack on the same day killed 63 French troops who were also part of the multinational peacekeeping force. The October 1983 bombings were preceded by an attack on the US embassy in Beirut on April 18, killing 58 and followed by a truck bomb in the US embassy compound in Kuwait on Dec. 12. Reprisals included ineffectual naval gunfire against targets in Lebanon.

Even after the experience of Lebanon, conventional wisdom held that terrorist attacks were not militarily significant. They might be horrible and politically disruptive, but their punch would be too weak to dent the military armor of a superpower. The problem of terrorism was shuffled off as a lesser included case in the realm of guerilla warfare and low-intensity conflict.

The first terrorist attack at New York City’s World Trade Center, on Feb. 26, 1993, stood out as a frightening



Long after the attack, the ruins of the World Trade Center still smolder. The twin towers and other buildings were demolished by the Sept. 11 attacks, which killed more than 3,000 from the US and other countries.

anomaly. Six were killed and approximately 1,000 were injured from a bomb blast in the parking garage of one of the Twin Towers. The terrorists, who were fundamentalist Muslims, were caught.

The next significant event was the April 19, 1995, terror bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Traced to Timothy McVeigh and accomplices, the immense attack did not seem to be part of a pattern. Still, the Oklahoma City bombing was a turning point for the US government. It came at a time when other evidence was beginning to reveal disturbing new trends. A month earlier, in March 1995, a Japanese cult released the nerve agent sarin on five subway trains in Tokyo. Casualties were few, but the attempt at a mass attack signaled what a determined group working inside a nation might be able to accomplish.

The White House released its first formal policy on countering terrorism on June 21, 1995. President Clinton signed Presidential Decision Directive 39, titled “US Policy on Counterterrorism.” PDD-39 became the benchmark US statement, declaring, “It is the policy of the United States to deter, defeat, and respond vigorously to all terrorist attacks on our territory and against our citizens or facilities, whether they occur domestically, in international waters or airspace or on foreign territory.”² The directive went on to state that terrorism was a threat to national security as well as a criminal act and that the United States would “deter and pre-empt” terrorists and give them no quarter. Specific instructions

for federal agencies underscored the need to make personnel less vulnerable.

A final section of PDD-39 included the proviso: “The United States shall give the highest priority to developing effective capabilities to detect, prevent, defeat, and manage the consequences of nuclear, biological, or chemical (NBC) materials or weapons use by terrorists.” PDD-39 led to the commissioning of a group to review the vulnerability of critical infrastructure—not just physical locations but cyber assets as well.

Then, in the mid- and late 1990s, terrorism grew from being a relatively small “cost of doing business” in foreign lands to a serious, quasi-military danger, at least to US forces abroad. On June 25, 1996, a truck carrying a bomb was backed up to a barracks at the Khobar Towers complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where it was detonated. The explosion, later estimated to have a force equivalent to 20,000 pounds of TNT, killed 19 USAF airmen and injured scores more. Rumors of a connection between the bombing and exiled Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden circulated at the time, but no one established a definitive link.

After Khobar Towers, force protection became a paramount concern for deployed units and their commanders. New directives from the Joint Staff mandated that commanders complete a force protection course before taking up overseas assignments.

However, the next blow fell on diplomatic installations. On Aug. 7,

² PDD-39, June 21, 1995. The directive was partially declassified in 1997.

1998, massive truck bombs hit US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, within minutes of each other. In Nairobi, the terrorist driver backed up to the embassy's rear parking lot; the explosion killed 291 people, including 12 Americans, and injured 5,000 more. At Dar es Salaam, the truck bombers tried to penetrate one of the two vehicle gates, but the lucky presence of an embassy water truck blocked the way, and the explosives went off 35 feet from the building. The force of the blast propelled the filled water tanker three stories into the air, noted a State Department review, but it also helped absorb some of the blast, leaving the toll at 10 dead and 77 injured. State found there was no tactical warning of the attacks.

Intelligence sources quickly fingered Osama bin Laden's organization. "Rarely do numerous sources converge so uniformly and persuasively as they have in this instance," explained a senior intelligence official speaking on background.³ On Aug. 20, Clinton launched Operation Infinite Reach. US attack submarines fired Tomahawk Land-Attack Missiles at two targets linked to bin Laden's terror network—a training camp in Afghanistan 60 miles south of Kabul and the Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, Sudan. The Shifa plant was known to produce a precursor to the chemical weapon agent VX. As justification, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Henry H. Shelton, said, "Osama bin Laden's network of terrorists was involved in the planning, the financing, and the execution of the attacks on the US embassies."⁴

The 1998 attacks catapulted bin Laden to the top of Washington's list of international threats. With an estimated net worth of about \$250 million, the Saudi renegade was able to set up an autonomous terrorist organization. As a senior intelligence official explained in 1998: "He has a very intricate financial infrastructure. He has networks on every continent almost. He has an infrastructure that's very, very replete

with capability, people, money. This is not someone who is wanting of resources or capability to acquire things."⁵

The East Africa bombings revealed bin Laden's brand of multifatality terrorism to be a serious threat, but formulating a strategy for a war on terrorism was exceedingly difficult. Nothing about it fit any existing models for how America could ensure its security.

CIA Director George Tenet regularly updated Congress on the terrorist threat. As he said in February 1999, he had "not the slightest doubt" that bin Laden, his worldwide allies, and his sympathizers were planning further attacks against US targets. "Despite progress against his networks," warned Tenet, "bin Laden's organization has contacts virtually worldwide, including in the United States." He went on to add that bin Laden had stated unequivocally "that all Americans are targets." Tenet said, "Bin Laden's overarching aim is to get the United States out of the Persian Gulf, but he will strike wherever in the world he thinks we are vulnerable." The CIA, he concluded, was anticipating bombing attempts with conventional explosives, but kidnappings and assassinations also were possible.

The next bin Laden attack came on Oct. 12, 2000, in the Arabian nation of Yemen. A huge explosion blew a hole in the hull of the USS *Cole*, a Navy destroyer, as she was mooring at Aden port to refuel. The bomb blast made clear that bin Laden's terrorist network was still active. Seventeen US sailors died and three dozen more were injured. For three days, the surviving crew fought damage below the waterline, sudden losses of electric power, and breached drive-shaft seals that threatened to sink the ship. Whatever the 1998 US strikes in Afghanistan and Sudan had accomplished, they had not eliminated the bin Laden network or deterred it from attacking.

While American military forces and diplomats abroad had a new adversary, the idea of a foreign-backed terrorist

³ DOD background news briefing, Aug. 20, 1998.

⁴ DOD news briefing, Aug. 20, 1998.

⁵ DOD background news briefing, Aug. 20, 1998.



attack on American soil remained a vague and distant-seeming fear—although scattered warning signs were emerging. CIA Director Tenet testified in February 2001 that “the threat from terrorism is real, it is immediate, and it is evolving.”⁶ Tenet went on to speculate that “as we have increased security around government and military facilities, terrorists are seeking out softer targets that provide opportunities for mass casualties.”

Defending America at home became a theme of sorts in the presidential campaign of 2000, building on a collection of fears about missile proliferation, weapons of mass destruction, and the increasing abilities and cunning of terrorists such as those who targeted the World Trade Center in 1993. “Once a strategic afterthought, homeland defense has become an urgent duty,” said the future President, George W. Bush, in a September 1999 campaign speech.

For the most part, however, the focus was on possible ballistic missile attack. Terrorism was seen as a small-scale threat. While bin Laden’s earlier attacks put the spotlight on threats to forces and American diplomats and civilians overseas, nothing had yet shaken the sense of security at home.

In December 1997, the National Defense Panel placed “homeland defense” first in its section on meeting national security challenges in 2020. The panel listed many elements ranging from border and coastal defense to terrorism, information warfare, defense against ballistic and cruise missiles, and

attacks on critical infrastructure. “The primary reason for the increased emphasis on homeland defense is the change, both in type and degree, in the threats to the United States,” explained the panel.

Two years later, the Hart-Rudman Commission’s Phase 1 report delivered in 1999 took a much stronger tone, establishing homeland security as a potential top priority mission. “America will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland and our military superiority will not entirely protect us,” stated the commission’s Phase 1 report. The commission foresaw no peer military competitor, but a rise in states, terrorists, and other disaffected groups who could acquire and use Weapons of Mass Destruction. “Americans will likely die on American soil, possibly in large numbers,” said the report.

Yet the increasing attention to homeland defense was not tied to any specific threat indications. Based on progress in Weapons of Mass Destruction and ballistic missiles, the threat, shadowy as it was, appeared to be five to 10 years off. An FBI report stated in 1998 that a WMD terrorism threat was “still considered low in comparison to the threat from conventional terrorist tactics, such as bombings, shootings, and kidnappings.” The Hart-Rudman commission talked about an attack in the next quarter of a century.

Then came Sept. 11, 2001.

September 11th: The Massacres

At 8:40 a.m. on that day, the Federal

American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon at 9:38 a.m. on Sept. 11. The area of the building it hit had been recently renovated, and many personnel had not yet moved back into their offices. Newly installed anti-terrorist measures—blast-proof windows, steel reinforcement, Kevlar shielding—helped contain the damage.

⁶ George J. Tenet, testimony before Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Feb. 7, 2001.

An F-15 Eagle from the Massachusetts Air National Guard's 102nd Fighter Wing at Otis ANGB, Mass., flies a combat air patrol mission over New York City for Operation Noble Eagle.



USAF photo by Lt. Col. William Ramsey

Aviation Administration alerted air controllers at NORAD's Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS) in Rome, N.Y., that there was a problem of some kind on American Airlines Flight 11, which earlier that morning had taken off from Boston's Logan Airport bound for the West Coast. NEADS notified the air defense unit at Otis ANGB, Mass., on Cape Cod, and two F-15 fighters prepared to launch to go take a look. Thus, the first US response in the war on terrorism fell to two Air National Guard pilots sitting on alert on that bright, clear morning on the US east coast.

Just five minutes after the FAA alert, at 8:45 a.m., Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center at the tip of Manhattan. The Otis fighters did not get airborne until 8:52 a.m. By that time, the North Tower was engulfed in a huge fireball and was spewing thick black smoke into the air.

The F-15s streaked toward New York City. Soon thereafter, however, at 9:03 a.m., a second aircraft, United Airlines Flight 175, slammed into the WTC South Tower. When that occurred, the F-15s still were 71 miles—about eight minutes flying time—from New York. The strike on the South Tower cleared away all doubt about whether the US was in danger. It demonstrably was under attack, and the F-15s established a Combat Air Patrol over New York.

Warnings about other suspect airliners soon emerged. "By this time, we were watching United Airlines Flight 93 wander around Ohio," recalled Brig. Gen. Larry K. Arnold,⁷ then-commander of the NORAD air compo-

ment, 1st Air Force, which is based at Tyndall AFB, Fla. Then came a report—which turned out to be false—that a Delta flight had been hijacked in the Cleveland area. Arnold was trying desperately to find airborne fighters in that part of the country.

Amidst the confusion, Arnold said he scrambled two ANG F-16s—home-based in Fargo, N.D., but temporarily assigned to Langley AFB, Va. They took off at 9:30 a.m. and headed for Washington, D.C., but were about eight minutes out when, at 9:38 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77 plowed into one side of the Pentagon, setting it ablaze. The Langley F-16s took up station for a Combat Air Patrol over Washington.

UA Flight 93 had taken off from Newark International Airport en route to San Francisco, then, over Ohio, it turned back east and for nine minutes disappeared from the FAA's radar track. Meanwhile, two Washington, D.C., Air National Guard F-16s, alerted by the Secret Service, also set up a CAP over Washington. Office workers streaming out of government buildings from Capitol Hill to Foggy Bottom heard their sonic booms.

NORAD now had clearance for the fighters to engage the wayward airliner if it neared the capital. According to Arnold, the plan was for the D.C. or Langley F-16s to intercept Flight 93 and be prepared to take further action if it approached Washington. Then, with the airliner about 200 miles from D.C., the passengers of Flight 93 fought back against the terrorists on board and took the airliner into the ground in Somerset

⁷Eric Hehs, "Conversation with Major General Larry Arnold, Commander, 1st Air Force, Tyndall AFB, Florida," *Code One Magazine*, First Quarter 2002.

The first 12 Hours

What follows is a chronology of events on Sept. 11. Eastern Daylight Time is used throughout.

- 8:40 a.m. FAA notifies NORAD's North East Air Defense Sector of problem with American Airlines Flight 11 (Boston–Los Angeles).
- 8:43 a.m. FAA notifies NEADS of problem on United Airlines Flight 175 (Boston–Los Angeles).
- 8:45 a.m. First hijacked aircraft, AA Flight 11 crashes into north tower of World Trade Center.
- 8:46 a.m. Fighter scramble order given at Otis ANGB, Mass.
- 8:52 a.m. Two F-15 fighters airborne.
- 9:03 a.m. Second hijacked aircraft, UA Flight 175 slams into WTC south tower.
- 9:24 a.m. FAA notifies NEADS of problem on AA Flight 77 (Washington Dulles–Los Angeles) and UA Flight 93 (Newark–San Francisco).
- 9:24 a.m. Fighter scramble order given at Langley AFB, Va.
- 9:30 a.m. Two F-16 fighters airborne.
- 9:30 a.m. In Florida, President Bush says events of the morning are result of an “apparent terrorist attack.”
- 9:38 a.m. Third hijacked aircraft, AA Flight 77 hits Pentagon, setting it ablaze.
- 9:40 a.m. FAA halts US flight operations, orders aircraft to land.
- 9:45 a.m. White House workers evacuate the building.
- 9:57 a.m. Bush departs Florida for Barksdale AFB, La.
- 10:00 a.m. WTC south tower collapses.
- 10:03 a.m. Fourth hijacked aircraft, UA Flight 93 on a heading to Washington, D.C., crashes in Pennsylvania.
- 10:10 a.m. Part of Pentagon collapses.
- 10:24 a.m. FAA diverts all inbound trans–Atlantic flights to Canada.
- 10:28 a.m. WTC north tower collapses.
- 10:45 a.m. US evacuates all federal buildings in Washington, D.C.
- 11:02 a.m. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani orders evacuation of New York City, south of Canal Street.
- 12:15 p.m. The INS imposes highest state of alert on borders.
- 1:04 p.m. Bush, at Barksdale, addresses nation, puts military on worldwide alert.
- 1:48 p.m. Bush departs Barksdale for Offutt AFB, Neb.
- 2:30 p.m. FAA bans commercial air traffic until further notice.
- 4:30 p.m. Bush departs Offutt for Andrews AFB, Md.
- 5:20 p.m. WTC Building 7 collapses.
- 6:40 p.m. Rumsfeld holds news conference, says DOD is functioning.
- 6:54 p.m. Bush arrives at White House.
- 8:30 p.m. Bush addresses the nation, declares US will pursue those who planned and executed the attacks and nations harboring them.

County, Pa., preventing an attack on another US target.

Federal officials immediately ordered the grounding of all nonmilitary aircraft flying in US airspace. Exactly 3,181 tracks were in the FAA's database at 10 a.m. By midday, the skies over America were quiet. The threat was not gone, however, and the US scrambled to put together defenses against further attack. The first line of defense came from fighters, tankers, and E-3 AWACS, which patrolled the skies around the clock.

President Bush was in Florida on the morning of Sept. 11 and was flown out at 9:57 a.m. Officers at 1st Air Force pulled an AWACS, with its full suite of communications gear, closer to the President's route of flight as Air Force One flew first to Barksdale AFB, La., and then pressed on to Offutt AFB, Neb. Combat Air Patrols went into place over major cities and other sites. Within 18 hours, more than 300 military aircraft were airborne. USAF active, Guard, and Reserve units pitched in, while Navy and Marine Corps aircraft joined the patrols. Aircraft carriers *USS George Washington* and *USS John F. Kennedy* were dispatched to New York City.

Over the next several weeks, keeping US skies safe became a monumental new task. "We have made a number of adjustments in the Combat Air Patrols," Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said Sept. 27. "We do have aircraft on strip alert at any number of places around the country."⁸ The 1st Air Force surged from a total of just 14 aircraft sitting alert at seven sites, to an operation that rivaled an expeditionary deployment in commitment of people and resources. NATO airborne early warning aircraft deployed to the US to help absorb the workload. Navy E-2 Hawkeyes and Customs Service P-3s augmented the surveillance tracks. Air Force aerial refueling aircraft units kept the whole operation in action.

Mid-September 2001: Forging the Response

The shock and grief of Sept. 11 prompted national security fears

markedly different from anything faced in generations. Even in Washington policy circles, no one anticipated anything like the Sept. 11 attack. "We've always said the more likely threat was a rental truck or a tanker truck or a suitcase or a ship in a harbor," said one Congressional staffer in October 2001.⁹

For a long time, the threat of catastrophic terrorism appeared to be a problem for the future. Its outline was shadowy, its profile was incomplete, and its likelihood seemingly small. By the time the second airliner hit the South Tower, however, terrorism had a face, and that face belonged to none other than Osama bin Laden.

On Sept. 11, Shelton, the JCS Chairman, was just two weeks away from retirement. He was aboard a military aircraft two hours out of Andrews AFB, Md., and en route to a NATO meeting when he got word of the attacks. Shelton recalled, "I was thinking, 'This is a big one.'" He added, "There was no doubt in my mind. When I heard the second plane had hit, I knew that wasn't an air traffic control problem or just a pilot problem." Shelton ordered his airplane to turn around and return home. "We came back right over the World Trade Center," he noted, "and could see, even from that altitude, the devastation, the smoke that was coming up. It was obvious it was going to be horrible."¹⁰

The suddenness and the form of the attacks came as a thunderous strategic surprise. In the aftermath, it was hard to come up with a blanket counter-terrorism policy. One thing, however, was certain: the attacks of Sept. 11 left the entire nation yearning for a chance to strike back.

American military forces went on alert. The pilots of USAF's B-2 stealth bombers, located at Whiteman AFB, Mo., went into crew rest almost immediately after receiving word of the attacks. So did USAF tanker and airlifter crews. "We believe that acts of war have been committed against the American people," Secretary of State Colin Powell said on Sept. 12, "and we will respond

⁸ DOD news briefing, Sept. 27, 2001.

⁹ Quoted in Thom Shanker, "For Rumsfeld, A Reputation and a Role are Transformed," *New York Times*, Oct. 13, 2001.

¹⁰ Shelton, "The Larry King Show," Oct. 1, 2001.



accordingly.”¹¹ However, it took time for the Bush Administration to formulate its strategy. Eventually, however, the US focus was drawn inevitably to Osama bin Laden’s nest—Afghanistan. It had offered the Saudi terrorist safe harbor since 1996.

Task 1 was to assemble international support for the effort to destroy that nest. Prime Minister Tony Blair announced Britain would stand “shoulder-to-shoulder” with the US. Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, a rogue nation, enjoyed little international backing. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, two of the few nations having diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, withdrew their recognition of the Taliban government on Sept. 22 and 25, respectively. Senior US officials consulted with regional powers such as Pakistan and big

¹¹ Powell, State Dept. briefing, Sept. 12, 2001; Task Force Enduring Look Chronology.

Diego Garcia
2,500 miles from
Afghanistan

¹² Rumsfeld interview with Charles Gibson, "Good Morning America," Oct. 2, 2001.

¹³ DOD news briefing, Sept. 18, 2001.

¹⁴ DOD news briefing, Oct 23, 2001.

powers such as China, which pledged nonmilitary cooperation. President Bush froze al Qaeda financial assets on Sept. 24, a move later backed by the United Nations in a special resolution.

The US made it clear that, if the Taliban would hand over bin Laden and his criminal henchmen, Afghanistan might be spared attack. Repeated US requests went nowhere, however. Finally, on Sept. 28, a special delegation of nine senior Pakistani religious leaders, deputized to make a final appeal, went to Afghanistan. They asked again for the Taliban to turn over bin Laden. The answer was no.

Thus, the die was cast. Going after bin Laden and his terrorist network depended on breaking the Taliban's control over Afghanistan. As Rumsfeld bluntly remarked, "The only way to deal with that kind of a problem is to liquidate or root out those terrorist networks."¹² The Pentagon chief said, "Terrorists do not function in a vacuum. They don't live in Antarctica. They work, they train, and they plan in countries."¹³ As later explained by Rear Adm. John Stufflebeem, a DOD spokesman: "There has been an arrangement ... between Osama bin Laden and [Taliban leader] Mullah Omar for some time. They are mutually supportive."¹⁴

The first step in reducing the terror threat would be to eliminate al Qaeda main bases in Afghanistan. For the US and its allies, planning for a new operation—at first codenamed Infinite Justice—faced a number of obstacles. Afghanistan had the look of a quagmire. After its 1979 invasion, the Soviet Union was ensnared in a protracted, ultimately unsuccessful war against the Afghan mujahedeen. Afghanistan was landlocked, meaning there was no easy access from the sea. Afghanistan's rugged terrain was home to about 25 million people, many of them sympathetic to Islamic extremists. Ten years of war with the Soviet Union left the country in the hands of tribal warlords, who fought amongst themselves and sucked others into their disputes.

In this setting, the Taliban initially attracted public support because it pledged to halt the fighting, end corruption, and build a pure Islamic state. The actual result was oppression, austerity, and the decay of basic government functions. Women were forced to wear the all-concealing burkha and soccer-stadium executions and amputations terrorized citizens. Although the Taliban in 2001 controlled about 80 percent of Afghan territory, Afghanistan was not at peace. By one estimate, 76,000 people

An airman preps a Joint Direct Attack Missile, one of the new generation of precision guided munitions used extensively in Afghanistan.



US Navy photo by SSgt. Shane Curumo



died as the result of internal fighting between 1992 and 2000. As many as 2.5 million Afghan refugees were living in Pakistan.

The Afghan military had once been well-equipped with Soviet tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, rocket launchers, and short-range surface-to-surface missiles. As many as 100 MiG-21s and MiG-23s remained in Afghanistan, as did assorted armed and utility helicopters. SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missiles plus an unknown number of Stingers, SAM-7s, and SAM-14s rounded out the inventory. Much of this equipment was old and in serious disrepair. It was difficult to estimate exactly what sort of resistance the Taliban could muster.

The primary opposition to Taliban rule came from the Northern Alliance, a loose coalition of irregular forces under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Masood, a

charismatic and highly innovative guerilla leader, former Afghan President Burhanuddin Rabbani, and Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, leader of the National Islamic Movement. The Taliban controlled most major cities, but the mountains belonged to factions of the Northern Alliance. In the summer of 2000, a major Taliban offensive had put pressure on Masood, but the so-called “Lion of the Panjshir” was able to resist and survive.

Battle lines in Afghanistan were never permanent. Smaller groups often switched loyalties back and forth between the Northern Alliance and Taliban. Then the Northern Alliance suffered what was intended to be a fatal blow. Bin Laden must have anticipated that the US would strike back against Afghanistan. On Sept. 9, 2001, Masood was assassinated by al Qaeda terrorists posing as a news camera crew. The loss of Masood weakened the leadership of the Northern Alliance at a critical moment.

Somewhere in the days after Sept. 11, the Bush Administration decided that teaming with the Northern Alliance, even without Masood, offered the best hope for “liquidating” the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Inserting any US military forces into

the region would require cooperation from Afghanistan’s neighbors. They were a complicated group. Afghanistan bordered nations whose names must have made planners shudder: China, Iran, the now-independent republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and on-again, off-again US ally Pakistan.

Washington was lucky in two respects.

First, many important regional actors had an interest in smacking Muslim extremists. China and Pakistan were worried about the emergence of radical Islamic groups within their borders. Uzbekistan was already dealing with its own insurgent terrorist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, whose leader, Juma Namangoni, threatened to launch a holy war against Uzbekistan’s government. In 1999, the threat to the region was such that Russia first began hosting a counter-terrorism exercise, code-named Southern Shield. Included were forces of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Additionally, France, China, and Turkey were sending aid to the region.

Second, the US military already had been running small exercises in the region since the late 1990s. In 2000, the US provided \$10 million in aid to

An airman throws the one millionth Humanitarian Daily Ration from a C-17 aircraft over Afghanistan. USAF airlifters began airdropping HDRs Oct. 7 as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.



USAF photo by Mannie Garcia



Uzbekistan border units battling terrorism and the drug trade.¹⁵ A thin network of mutual interest was already in place, and the horror of Sept. 11 strengthened it enough to provide a basis for planning.

Late September 2001: The Strategy Develops

The US was ready for a war on terrorism, but what would that war look like? “In the past, we were used to dealing with armies and navies and air forces and ships and guns and tanks and planes,” Rumsfeld said. “This adversary is different. It does not have any of those things. It does not have high-value targets that we can go after. But those countries that support them and give sanctuary do have such targets.”¹⁶

The Infinite Reach strikes of 1998 sought to disable bin Laden’s training camps, but, after the Sept. 11 massacres in the United States, the war campaign would have to do much more. US forces needed to find bin Laden and his top lieutenants and break Taliban control over Afghanistan. With the world on notice that America intended to respond, US military forces had to act fast, before the terrorists and their supporters had time to disperse, dig in, or disappear.

Assembling forces in the area was the first step. The US already had established a modern, top-of-the-line nerve center, called the Combined Air Operations Center, or CAOC—in the Persian Gulf region. This would be used to direct all facets of the coming air campaign. Moreover, some Navy war-

ships were in place in the northern Arabian Sea. The aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* and its battle group had begun their return to the US after six months at sea but turned back on station after hearing of the attacks. Beyond that, everything for the war in Afghanistan had to go in by air. USAF’s Air Mobility Command began putting in place an air bridge of tankers to refuel inbound aircraft. For the first time, the air bridge out of the United States ran in two directions, east and west, converging on Central Asia.

Early October 2001: The Campaign Begins

Enduring Freedom began on Oct. 7, 2001. Gen. Richard B. Myers, the Air Force officer who had only recently succeeded Shelton as JCS Chairman, announced the action at an Oct. 7 DOD news briefing. He said, “About 15 land-based bombers, some 25 strike aircraft from carriers, and US and British ships and submarines launching approximately 50 Tomahawk missiles have struck terrorist targets in Afghanistan.” At the same briefing, Rumsfeld outlined the operation’s goals, which were broad and ambitious but also cautiously worded to hedge against a commitment to a long campaign. They were:

- To make clear to the Taliban that harboring terrorists carries a price.
- To acquire intelligence to facilitate future operations against al Qaeda and the Taliban.
- To develop relationships with groups in Afghanistan that oppose the Taliban and al Qaeda.
- To make it increasingly difficult for

All three Air Force heavy bombers—B-52s, B-1Bs and B-2s—saw action in Afghanistan. This photo shows a lineup of MiG fighters and a cargo airplane at Herat airfield in Afghanistan after US precision attacks. No enemy fighters came up to challenge US warplanes.

¹⁵ *The Military Balance 2001*, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

¹⁶ DOD news briefing, Sept. 18, 2001.

Four B-52H bombers taxi for take off on strike missions against al Qaeda terrorist training camps and Taliban military installations in Afghanistan on Oct. 7, 2001, the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom.



USAF photo by SrA. Rebecca M. Luquin

the terrorists to use Afghanistan freely as a base of operation.

■ To alter the military balance over time by denying to the Taliban the offensive systems that hamper the progress of the various opposition forces.

■ To provide humanitarian relief to Afghans suffering oppressive living conditions under the Taliban regime.

Rumsfeld denied that bin Laden individually was a target in the initial strikes. “This is not about a single individual,” said the Pentagon chief. “It’s about an entire terrorist network and multiple terrorist networks across the globe.”

Rumsfeld was not promising to track down bin Laden or win the war on terrorism in one blow. Instead, the Administration viewed Enduring Freedom as an operation that would create proper conditions for sustained antiterrorist and humanitarian relief operations in Afghanistan.

On Oct. 7 and 8, strikes by Air Force bombers and Navy fighters hit Taliban air defense sites, airfields, military command and control centers, and other fixed targets near major cities and installations. The first order of business was to “remove the threat from air defenses and from Taliban aircraft,” Rumsfeld said on Oct. 7.

“We need the freedom to operate on the ground and in the air and the targets selected, if successfully destroyed, should permit an increasing degree of freedom over time,” he added. The attacks by US and British forces knocked the stuffing out of the

Taliban’s small air force. “The aircraft, to our knowledge, did not leave the ground,” said Rumsfeld.¹⁷

“The problem is not the Afghan people,” explained Rumsfeld. “The problem is the al Qaeda organization and the Taliban that have been closely linked and supporting, and they are creating enormous damage in the world, and they have to be stopped.”¹⁸

Humanitarian relief missions began that same night as two C-17 airlifters carried out a long-distance air drop of humanitarian daily rations. A DOD official later cited the Taliban as a major impediment to international relief efforts in Afghanistan. He declared, “They’ve taxed UN World Food Program deliveries. They’ve seized UN and [International Red Cross] vehicles and warehouses in Mazar-e Sharif. They’ve taken over most UN vehicles and facilities in Kandahar. They’ve stolen aid trucks, beaten drivers, and persecuted Afghan aid workers. They’ve transported troops in vehicles with US–UN markings, and they have systematically prevented food distribution into areas not under Taliban control.”¹⁹

Air strikes to eliminate air defenses and other key targets were a logical first step, given the success of airpower in the conflicts of the 1990s. But Rumsfeld took pains to point out that a few days worth of strikes would not topple the Taliban. “We have to have a clear understanding of what is possible in a country like that,” Rumsfeld said. “That country has been at war for a very long time. The Soviet Union pounded it year after year after year.

¹⁷ Rumsfeld interview with NBC-TV’s Katie Couric, Oct. 8, 2001.

¹⁸ Rumsfeld interview with ABC-TV’s Charles Gibson, Oct. 2, 2001.

¹⁹ DOD news briefing on humanitarian assistance, Nov. 15, 2001.

Much of the country is rubble. They have been fighting among themselves. They do not have high-value targets or assets that are the kinds of things that would lend themselves to substantial damage from the air.”²⁰

Rumsfeld and Myers did not show their cards but hinted at a more intricate phase to come. “We have to create the conditions,” said Rumsfeld, “for a sustained effort that will assist those forces in the country that are opposed to Taliban and opposed to al Qaeda, and we have to do it in a variety of different ways. We have to dry up their bank accounts. We have to bring political, diplomatic pressure to bear on them. We have to bring economic pressure to bear.”

It was plain from the outset that Enduring Freedom was not going to unfold according to a predetermined strategy. The Gulf War air campaign of 1991 pounded Iraqi forces for 38 days as the US “tried to set conditions” for hostilities, Myers noted in a late October briefing. “Then,” he went on, “we had a ground component that went in and finished the job. You shouldn’t think of this [the war against terrorists] in those terms.”²¹ Echoing that point was Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the Army officer who served as commander in chief of US Central Command and thus the war’s top military figure. “It’s been said that those who expect another Desert Storm will wonder every day what it is that this war is all about,” said Franks.²² “This is a different war. This war will be fought on many fronts simultaneously.”

October’s oblique comments by civilian and military officials offered hints of the process under way in this “different war.” First, since it was a campaign against terrorist networks, part of the strategy was to take steps to hunt down key individuals and learn more about al Qaeda’s structure and any plans for future operations. The search for top Taliban and al Qaeda leaders became a war within a war, rarely discussed, but yielding an occasional glimpse into a subterranean level

of complexity quite different from recent US operations.

On a larger scale, unseating the Taliban was to be the work of the Northern Alliance, backed up by US airpower. The Northern Alliance—always a loose grouping—was not instantly ready for coordinated air and ground offensives. Aid ranging from ammunition to horse fodder had to be flown into theater and air-dropped to the Northern Alliance forces. Trained US special operations teams and air controllers had to link up with assigned elements of the Northern Alliance.

Airpower led the way in both lines of operation.

The mechanics of airpower for Enduring Freedom were different from recent conflicts. Distance was a major challenge. Navy fighters flew 700 miles one-way from their carriers to their CAP stations. Bombers coming from the British-owned Indian Ocean atoll of Diego Garcia faced a 2,500-mile one-way trip.

For airmen, the war shifted rapidly from strikes against pre-planned targets to a combination of pre-planned and flexible targets. “After the first week, the pilots didn’t know what targets they’d be striking when they launched,” said Vice Adm. John Nathman, former commander, Naval Air Forces, Pacific Fleet.²³ As emerging targets came to dominate the tasking, the key was to keep fighters and bombers on station over Afghanistan long enough to get good targets for their weapons.

To cope with these requirements, Navy aircraft carriers worked under a new and different kind of operational concept in the Afghan air war. Previously, exercises focused on a single carrier generating combat power—a reflection of the Cold War emphasis on each carrier being able to survive and operate alone. Enduring Freedom saw several aircraft carriers combining forces to generate the required effort. The USS *Enterprise* was joined by four more carriers. USS *Kitty Hawk* shed all but eight strike aircraft from the air

²⁰ DOD news briefing, Oct. 8, 2001.

²¹ DOD news briefing, Oct. 22, 2001.

²² CENTCOM press conference, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Oct. 30, 2001.

²³ Author’s discussion with Vice Admiral Nathman.

wing to make room on the deck for Special Operations Forces helicopters. Some of *Kitty Hawk's* fighter units pulled temporary duty at Diego Garcia to provide air cover for the bomber base on the island.

Typically, two aircraft carriers on station swung into a day/night rotation to keep up the pace. The results were impressive. Naval aircraft flew a little more than half the total sorties and 70 percent of the strike sorties. With all-precision air wings, the strike fighters averaged two aim points per aircraft per sortie—a monumental shift from the mass force packages of Desert Storm. A full 93 percent of the Navy strike sorties delivered precision-guided ordnance.²⁴

“We’re more precise than we were in the past,” explained Adm. Vern Clark, the Chief of Naval Operations. “The specific comparison to Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm is we simply have developed more precision capability than we’ve had in a dozen years. And this operation is all about that kind of precision.”²⁵ Gen. John P. Jumper, the Air Force Chief of Staff, concurred with Clark. “We have come a long way from 10 years ago [Operation Desert Storm], when we had to fly ATOs [Air Tasking Orders] out to the aircraft carriers,” Jumper later said.²⁶

Once on station, the air component became a roving strike force positioned over the battlespace to provide prompt, precise firepower on demand.

For the fighters—including land-based Air Force fighters launched from the Gulf region—a standard mission was to take off and fly to an assigned engagement zone. The fighters might orbit, waiting on the most recent information synthesized from a variety of sources, to be passed on to the strike aircraft. The main obstacle for continuous fighter coverage was distance. The need to fly more than 500 miles inland, strike, and recover within the intricate deck cycle time of the carrier’s operations created a major challenge.

Bombers suffered less from range limitations and soon shouldered the

major part of the job. After the initial two days of strikes, Whiteman’s B-2s were not used again, since the air defenses in Afghanistan did not pose a threat to conventional bombers if they stayed above the altitudes for such man-portable SAMs and anti-aircraft fire as might be left. But other bombers were cast in starring roles.

Eighteen B-52s and B-1s deployed forward to Diego Garcia. Typically, officers in the Combined Air Operations Center could count on four sorties per day from the B-1s and five from the B-52s. Both the B-1 and B-52 now carried GPS-guided Joint Direct Attack Munitions. For the first time in combat, these bombers followed the lead of the B-2s in Allied Force in 1999 and linked into the net of updated information to take new target coordinates in real time. Bombers generally did not have their entire load of weapons designated for fixed targets. Instead, bomber crews headed for their first pre-planned targets and then were on call to be redirected to other targets. Jumper called the use of the B-52 against emerging targets in a close air support role transformational. Those sorties, he said, would normally have been flown by attack aircraft such as the A-10.²⁷

While USAF bombers and Navy fighters were shifting gears, another very unusual type of air war was just getting under way. A clandestine air war used unmanned vehicles, satellites, and other intelligence sources to track time-sensitive targets—of which the most tempting and critical were the Taliban and al Qaeda officials on the campaign’s most-wanted list.

Time-sensitive targeting went by several names. Originally dubbed “flex targeting” during Allied Force in 1999, the process was also nicknamed “time-critical targeting.” It could be used for attacking any moving or moveable target of high importance, especially one that through electronic emissions, communications, or other telltale signs gave only brief, elusive indications of its location. In the Kosovo war, time-sensitive targets were more often

²⁴ Lisa Troshinsky, “Navy Pilots Set Flying and Target Records in Afghanistan,” *Navy News and Undersea Technology*, Jan. 22, 2002.

²⁵ Clark, CSPAN Interview, Dec. 4, 2001.

²⁶ Thomas Ricks, “Bull-s Eye War: Pinpoint Bombing Shifts Role of GI Joe” *Washington Post*, Dec. 2, 2001.

²⁷ Jumper, remarks at AFA’s February 2002 symposium in Orlando, Fla.



military equipment such as SAMs. In 2001, the most time-sensitive targets of all were people such as Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban's principal spiritual leader.

There was another twist. In February 2001, the Air Force had successfully test fired Hellfire missiles from a Predator UAV. The CIA appropriated the capability and used Predators to fire at, as well as track, key targets in Afghanistan.

The targeting of these time-sensitive targets, no matter how exciting, had to conform to the laws of war as dictated by the Geneva Conventions. Strict adherence to the rules of war served to eliminate any possibility of being justifiably accused as a war criminal down the road. CENTCOM long had employed lawyers from the military's Judge Advocate General Corps as experts on the laws of war. In Desert Storm, for example, the lawyers got a chop on pre-planned targets. However, getting approval for time-sensitive targets was harder. Not only did intelligence sources have to produce coordinates in time for them to be relayed to a command center and then on to a strike aircraft, but also somewhere along the line, the target might have to be approved. No commander wanted to be caught out attacking a carload full of Afghan civilians when the target was al Qaeda fighters. Restaurants, private homes, civilian-style vehicles all posed nightmarish ID problems, especially under time pressures.

Early in the campaign, US operators in this clandestine air war believed they had Mullah Omar in their sights. As

reported by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker*,²⁸ a Hellfire-armed Predator was patrolling the roads south of Kabul on the first night of the war. According to Hersh, "The Predator identified a group of cars and trucks fleeing the capital as a convoy carrying Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader." The CIA controller had to refer the shoot-don't shoot decision to "officers on duty at the headquarters" of CENTCOM in Tampa, Fla.

Hersh reported: "The Predator tracked the convoy to a building where Omar, accompanied by a hundred or so guards and soldiers, took cover. The precise sequence of events could not be fully learned, but intelligence officials told me that there was an immediate request for a full-scale assault by fighter-bombers. At that point, however, word came from General Tommy R. Franks, the CENTCOM commander, saying, as the officials put it, 'My JAG'—Judge Advocate General, a legal officer—'doesn't like this, so we're not going to fire.' Instead, the Predator was authorized to fire a missile in front of the building—'bounce it off the door,' one officer said." Hersh added that "an operative on the ground" later confirmed that Omar and his guards were in the convoy tracked by the Predator.

Whatever the reality, the story revealed that the coordination required for tracking and killing a time-sensitive target was not a smooth process. Rumsfeld even offered a hint of confirmation of the story. In response to a question about Mullah Omar, he told reporters on Oct. 9: "There were some

Members of the 11th Reconnaissance Squadron, Indian Springs AFAF, Nev., perform pre-flight checks on a RQ-1 Predator prior to a mission Nov. 9, 2001. Unit members deployed to operate and maintain the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles used in Afghanistan.

²⁸ Seymour M. Hersh, "King's Ransom: How Vulnerable are the Saudi Royals?" *The New Yorker*, Oct. 22, 2001.

Nighttime, covert insertion, and extraction of special operations units are the specialty of MH-53J Pave Low III helicopters, which have crisscrossed Afghanistan during Enduring Freedom. They fly lights-out, as seen in this night vision view from the gunner door of another Pave Low. A machine gunner from the 16th Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field, Fla., mans his mini gun as he searches for threats while his aircraft refuels.



USAF photo by TSgt. Manuel Trejo

elements outside of one of his compounds that probably were targeted.”

Target approval remained a delicate process throughout Enduring Freedom, giving rise to speculative press stories about who grants approval and why and how often authorization was held back. The need for target approval by Franks and levels above him sometimes slowed the campaign. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, CENTCOM often overrode the CAOC's calls for strikes on newly identified targets. This reportedly provoked one officer to declare, with heavy sarcasm, “It's kind of ridiculous when you get a live feed from a Predator and the Intel guys say, ‘We need independent verification.’”²⁹

Mid-October 2001: Danger and Dissatisfaction

News stories such as these cast a pall over Enduring Freedom at a time when the air war was shifting from the short period of strikes on fixed targets to the hunt for Taliban military targets. As yet, cracks in the Taliban's control of Afghanistan were not evident.

Coalition achievement of air supremacy was followed by a brief interval of seeming inactivity; serious Northern Alliance ground operations did not start up right away. To many pundits, this came across as a sign of failure. Within days, questions about the inability of airpower to eliminate al Qaeda's centers of resistance filled the press. Columnist William Arkin, calling the effort “sparse to the extreme,” lamented the slow, plodding pace of the

campaign after just one week.³⁰ By the end of October, disenchantment had spread far and wide. “The initial US air strategy against Afghanistan is not working,” University of Chicago professor Robert A. Pape declared in the *Washington Post*.³¹ “We appear to be escalating toward a sustained air campaign to bomb that country for as long as it takes to topple the Taliban regime,” Pape fretted.

Part of the discomfort came from an intense desire for revenge, but part was also based on a classic misreading of the purpose of airpower, conditioned by selective history and inflamed by the uncertainties of the Afghanistan campaign. Pape, an academic in the field of strategic bombing, judged the operations in Afghanistan by the yardstick of how leaders might react to bombing of fixed strategic targets. In this war, it was like expecting Mullah Omar to capitulate because of hard blows on an SA-3 site. Despite repeated efforts by Rumsfeld, Myers, and other Pentagon officials to explain that this war was different, the reflex desire to blame airpower surfaced again.

Pape was not alone in his doubts about airpower. In an attempt to remedy what “ailed” Enduring Freedom, many recommended committing US ground troops in substantial numbers. Mackubin T. Owens, a professor of strategy and force planning at the Naval War College, Newport, R.I., estimated the job would take 35,000 to 40,000 US troops.³² Former Pentagon official Daniel Goure upped the ante, projecting a need for at least 250,000 troops.³³

²⁹ Ricks, “Target Approval Delays Cost Air Force Key Hits,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 18, 2001.

³⁰ William M. Arkin, “A Week of Air War,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 14, 2001.

³¹ Robert A. Pape, “The Wrong Battle Plan,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 19, 2001.

³² Mackubin T. Owens, “The Case For Ground Troops,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 31, 2001.

³³ Ronald Brownstein and Paul Richter, “Critics Say Airpower Alone Won't Suffice,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 31, 2001.

Even al Jazeera, the tendentious Arabic language television news channel based in Qatar, questioned Myers as to why there had been a delay between achieving air superiority and progress by ground forces.

The cacophony eventually prompted Franks to say publicly that the war was “not at all a stalemate.”³⁴ Rumsfeld even prepared a public statement (released on Nov. 1, 2001) reminding Americans that the US in the past had fought and won long wars and that there was no possibility of instant victory.

The unspoken charge was that continuing the bombing campaign would be an exercise in senseless destruction to prove a point, while, in the end, it would take conventional ground forces to do the job properly. Scattered collateral damage incidents—such as a hit on a warehouse—fueled more complaints. The common view of the peanut gallery was, as Owens argued, “It’s doubtful the opposition forces can win without substantial help.”

Owens was dead on about the Northern Alliance’s need for help but wrong about the source. Help was about to arrive, in a spectacular form, from CENTCOM’s joint air component.

Late October 2001: Ready for the Push

For all of the hand-wringing about the progress of the air war, operational success always hinged mainly on the strength of the linkage between air and ground forces. Rumsfeld said, “We feel that the air campaign has been effective. The fact that for a period we did not have good targets has now shifted, because we are getting much better information from the ground in terms of targets. Also, the pressure that has been put on fairly continuously these past weeks has forced people to move and to change locations in a way that gives additional targeting opportunities.”³⁵

The Taliban and al Qaeda were feeling the pressure. While supporting the Northern Alliance push against the Taliban, the joint air component was

also busy with attacks on the network of mountain caves that might be sheltering al Qaeda forces. “We use all-source intelligence to try to refine where they’re at, either as individuals who may be there or as storage facilities,” remarked Stufflebeem.³⁶ “And, when we feel comfortable that we have a known facility or we suspect that it has been used, then we strike it.” Stufflebeem went on to say that al Qaeda did not any longer appear to be active in Afghanistan, given the continuous military pressure. As he put the situation, “We have taken away their ability to use their training camps. We have taken away their known infrastructure. We are striking at the caves that we have learned that they utilize or have utilized. So we believe that we are chipping away at al Qaeda.”

By late October, the coalition had in place all of the pieces needed for rapid success on the ground. Rumsfeld said that “a very modest number” of US troops were in Afghanistan to coordinate air strikes and provide logistic support to the Northern Alliance. An unnamed Bush Administration official also explained, “The new thinking is to take those cities that are within reach of Northern Alliance forces without waiting any longer to be sure we can control in advance all the risks of postwar factional rivalries.”³⁷

Myers, in his interview with al Jazeera, explained the tactical concept for the next phase of operations. “For several days now we’ve had US troops on the ground with the Northern Alliance,” he said. “Their primary mission is to advise [and] to try to support the Northern Alliance with air strikes as appropriate. They are specially trained individuals that know how to bring in airpower and bring it into the conflict in the right way, and that’s what they’re doing. We think that will have a big impact on the Northern Alliance’s ability to prosecute their piece of this war against the Taliban.”

The campaign was approaching a turning point. Some 300 Special Operations Forces members, divided into

³⁴ CENTCOM briefing, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Oct. 31, 2001.

³⁵ Rumsfeld interview with Cokie Roberts, ABC-TV’s “This Week,” Oct. 28, 2001.

³⁶ DOD news briefing, Nov. 5, 2001

³⁷ *International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 31, 2001.

small teams, were in place, with about 200 of those in the north and the other 100 or so in tribal groups in the south. The first step for each team, of course, was to build trust and relationships with the leaders of the Afghan group to which they had been assigned. The teams went into Afghanistan after careful preparation. In the politically charged environment of the Northern Alliance, the assignment of teams no doubt had to respect and take into account the status of each faction's warlord. It would never do to send one warlord a captain and the other a sergeant. Such niceties might be viewed with contempt in the tightly knit world of SOF teams, but they likely affected the process of getting the teams in place. As Powell noted, "You had a first-world air force and a fourth-world army, and it took a while to connect the two."³⁸

Once in place, the SOF teams and the CAOC's provision of "on-call" airpower proved to be the right operational concept for unseating the Taliban. The ability to call in air strikes on precise coordinates gave the Northern Alliance the boost in firepower needed to break the Taliban strongholds. At one Pentagon briefing, Myers showed gun-camera film of air strikes hitting two tanks and an artillery piece. Another news briefing featured film of a B-52 strike on Taliban fielded forces. Air-ground coordination was working: Controllers operating with the Northern Alliance were helping to bring precise firepower to bear on individual targets, and directing bomber strikes against concentrations of troops.

Early November 2001: The Rout Begins

In the first week of November, air strikes concentrated on Taliban and al Qaeda forces and military equipment near Mazar-e Sharif and Kabul, two major cities. Aircraft on Nov. 4 dropped two gigantic BLU-82 15,000-pound bombs on Taliban troops, with a telling effect. Stufflebeem said, "If the Northern [Alliance] is feeling emboldened or ready to make moves, then that means

that it [the bombing] has had the intended effect."³⁹

Move they did. By Nov. 6, Northern Alliance forces had captured villages around Mazar-e Sharif. Shulgareh fell on Nov. 7 and on Nov. 9, the Northern Alliance claimed Mazar-e Sharif itself. Taliban spokesmen admitted they had left the city but whitewashed it as a withdrawal for strategic reasons.⁴⁰

The CAOC kept producing bombs on target and the Northern Alliance started rolling up the Taliban. A stunning demonstration of the new technique at its best came when a B-52 bomber put ordnance on target within 20 minutes of a call for assistance. Northern Alliance forces on horseback came across a Taliban military outpost with artillery, barracks, and a command post. The outpost was not engaged in combat at the time, but Northern Alliance identified it as a stronghold. The commander requested an air strike on the target within the next few days. However, the target lay in a location with engagement zones already established. A US forward air controller on the ground with the Northern Alliance forces contacted the CAOC, which passed the target to a B-52 overhead—19 minutes after the initial call the B-52 dropped its load on the enemy.

Backed by that kind of airpower, the Northern Alliance pressed the pedal to the floor, and the allegedly stalemated war accelerated into high gear. Over the course of a week, the alliance, with its on-call American airpower overhead, took town after town. Taloqan—center of a major battle in summer 2000—fell on Nov. 11. The Northern Alliance announced the liberation of Herat on Nov. 12. These opposition forces soon were making plans to recover the capital, though both Bush and Powell had initially expressed qualms about besieging Kabul.

Mid-November 2001: Victory Achieved

US uncertainty did not stop the Northern Alliance. The morning of Nov. 12 saw the beginning of the end for the Taliban's control of Kabul. B-52 strikes

³⁸ Powell interview with *Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 2001.

³⁹ DOD news briefing, Nov. 5, 2001.

⁴⁰ All references in this para from TFEL chronology.

pounded Taliban lines around the capital in the morning. By late afternoon, Northern Alliance armored forces were moving down the Old Road toward the city with infantry sweeping through former Taliban positions. Fleeing Taliban fighters discarded their equipment and their dead and ran for their lives. The air strikes around Kabul also killed bin Laden's deputy, Mohammed Atef.

On Nov. 13, the Northern Alliance's United Front forces took control of Kabul and began to set up police control of the city. Rumsfeld admitted US special forces teams were already in Kabul to work with the new conquerors. "Every day," he said on Nov. 13, "the targeting and effectiveness [of the air attacks] has improved, and that has clearly played a critical role in killing Taliban and al Qaeda troops."⁴¹

Elements of the Taliban were now in headlong flight southward to the sparsely populated areas controlled by Pashtun tribes. "Where we can positively identify Taliban as such, we are pursuing them," said Stufflebeem. However, Stufflebeem admitted, it was difficult in the southern part of Afghanistan, west of Kandahar, to be able to positively identify what may be southern Pashtun tribes or Taliban troops on the move.⁴²

Thus, in the space of only two weeks, the coalition broke the Taliban's grip on Afghanistan. Franks summed up the progress to date on Nov. 15: "We in fact have the initiative. ... We have said that it's all about condition-setting followed by our attaining our objectives. The first thing we did was set conditions to begin to take down the tactical air defense and all of that. So we set conditions and then we did that. The next thing we did was set conditions with these Special Forces teams and the positioning of our aviation assets to be able to take the Taliban apart or fracture it. And we did that."⁴³

Bush himself summed up the meaning of the action in Afghanistan in a major Dec. 11 speech at the Citadel, Charleston, S.C. "Afghanistan," he said, "has been a proving ground. ... These past two months have shown that an innovative doctrine and high-tech weaponry can shape and then dominate an unconventional conflict. ... This combination—real-time intelligence, local allied forces, special forces, and precision airpower—has really never been used before. The conflict in Afghanistan has taught us more about the future of our military than a decade of blue ribbon panels and think-tank symposiums."

⁴¹ DOD news briefing, Nov. 13, 2001.

⁴² DOD news briefing, Nov. 14, 2001.

⁴³ DOD news briefing, Nov. 15, 2001.

USAF combat controllers in Afghanistan made do with local food and transportation but still relied heavily on computers to analyze targets. Global Positioning Satellite devices were crucial to the mission.

DOD photo



The successes of November also highlighted the coalition effort behind Enduring Freedom. Senior officials said from the start that some nations would cooperate openly, while others would help in secret. The coalition put together for the war on terrorism did not have the military grandeur that comes with deployment of tanks and fighters in the desert. However, it actually matched—and in some ways surpassed—the power of the Desert Storm coalition. It was not a host of nations leaping on the bandwagon for a major offensive, as was the case in 1990–91; this time, the coalition nations pledged support for an open-ended war, with no clear markers of success. Allies delivered their political backing, military forces, humanitarian aid, and vital logistical support for little or no recognition or glory.

Italy sent its only carrier battle group to the North Arabian sea. Australia deployed fighters for Combat Air Patrol missions at Diego Garcia. Nations like Georgia and Azerbaijan simply offered “whatever necessary” to support Enduring Freedom. By the end of November, some 50 nations were providing support to Enduring Freedom. Twenty nations had representatives at Central Command in Tampa, where Franks met with them regularly to discuss plans, pass intelligence, and provide operational summaries. It was a two-way street. Rumsfeld commented that “one of the important aspects of what they’ve provided also is intelligence and that has contributed significantly to the pressure that exists on terrorist networks, not just in Afghanistan, but elsewhere around the globe.”⁴⁴

Coalition nations soon formed the bedrock of the peacekeeping forces and security assistance forces for Afghanistan. Britain, a major participant in combat operations through Tomahawk cruise missile strikes and aircraft support, also took the lead for the first peacekeeping operations. Canadian forces arrived early and deployed more than 3,000 personnel to support the operations. Special operations forces

from many countries, including Britain, Australia, Canada, and Denmark joined in later phases of the operations. France deployed ground forces, Mirage fighters to Kyrgyzstan, and its carrier battle group, whose aircraft flew strike missions. Germany sent special forces and personnel to train the Afghan police force. Among other contributions, Greece sent an engineering company; Jordan a mine-clearing team. A Korean ship transported building materials to Diego Garcia. Norway and the Netherlands scheduled F-16 deployments. Russia joined in the humanitarian assistance effort. Spain and Sweden sent C-130s. Turkish naval vessels joined NATO’s counter-terrorism force in the Mediterranean. The “floating coalition,” as Rumsfeld once called it, was no textbook alliance, but as these nations linked arms they formed a powerful force against global terrorism.

Late November/December 2001: The Three Tasks

Meanwhile, the swift, mid-November collapse of the Taliban left the forces of Enduring Freedom facing three main tasks in the months ahead:

- Conquest of the last remaining Taliban strongholds, such as Kandahar, the spiritual capital of the Taliban movement.

- Initial reconstruction of civilian government and infrastructure in Afghanistan.

- Elimination or capture of the scattered remnants of al Qaeda and Taliban, including the leaders.

With peacekeeping duties beginning and with the Taliban collapsing so quickly, the pressure was on to finish the rout. The Northern Alliance took its hot pursuit of the Taliban and al Qaeda south to the remaining strongholds of Taliban power near Kandahar and Kunduz.

However, after the mid-November fall of Kabul, several conflicting goals made the next phase of operations intricate and dangerous. Fighting at Kunduz was intense. Franks said there might be 2,000 to 3,000 Taliban and al Qaeda

⁴⁴ CENTCOM news briefing, Nov. 27, 2001.



fighters in the fray, and he described Kunduz as “heavily infested ... with some of the more hard-core people.”⁴⁵

Operations to “liquidate” the Taliban contingent at Kunduz petitioned the Northern Alliance to arrange a surrender and safe passage for foreign fighters. Mirroring their concern, President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan made it known he wanted Pakistani nationals fighting with the Taliban to be allowed to return to their native country. On Nov. 20, the Northern Alliance halted operations at Kunduz to allow three days of negotiations on such matters.

DOD officials were well aware of the problems of completing the destruction of the Taliban or even gauging what remained of their forces. Al Qaeda forces were stuck, but the Taliban fighters had options. “They can go across a border and wait and come back,” Rumsfeld said Nov. 15. “They can drop their weapons and blend into the communities. They can go up in the mountains, in the caves and tunnels. They can defect—join the other side—change their mind, go back.”

On Nov. 20, more than 1,000 Taliban fighters surrendered to the Northern Alliance. Six days later, Kunduz was occupied. About a week later, on Dec. 4, Kandahar fell.

In addition to taking the Afghan towns, the Afghan and US forces faced a grim task of searching sites that might have links to Weapons of Mass Destruction. “The first thing that we did was take a look at all of the intelligence feeds that we have had over a pro-

longed period of time, over the last two or three months, to get the potential locations of WMD-related efforts,” Franks said at the Nov. 15 briefing. Several days later, Franks announced: “We’ve identified more than 40 places which represent potential for WMD research or things of that sort.”⁴⁶ Each was to be systematically checked.

The second task—restoring civil order and starting the rebuilding process—gained some strength from the momentum of the Northern Alliance’s victories and the ongoing humanitarian relief operations.

In no small part, Enduring Freedom was a different kind of war because of the success of relief operations taking place in the combat zone. Allied Force in 1999 saw massive relief efforts for 600,000 Kosovar refugees who had fled to Albania. Enduring Freedom cast a new mold by delivering food—Humanitarian Daily Rations—and other supplies starting the very first night. The HDRs were described by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph J. Collins as “a safe, vegetarian, non-culturally sensitive meal that has everything you need, unless you need taste.”⁴⁷ An average daily airdrop delivered 35,000 HDRs. Sometimes the number went as high as 70,000. By Nov. 15, the number of rations delivered had exceeded the 1.5 million mark.

Close cooperation between military and non-governmental organizations “enabled the war and a major humanitarian operation to go on at the same time,” said Collins. “In fact, in the first week of November, before the apparent

Cargo is unloaded from a C-17 at Bagram airfield in Afghanistan as an airman keeps watch. USAF elements maintained nearly round-the-clock airlift operations in the region.

⁴⁵ DOD news briefing, Nov. 15, 2001.

⁴⁶ DOD news briefing, Nov. 27, 2001.

⁴⁷ DOD briefing on humanitarian assistance, Nov. 15, 2001.

collapse of the Taliban, UN World Food Program deliveries doubled the pace of their October deliveries, and their October deliveries had been a record for the past few years.”

Getting a new government in place was a major task. By late December, Hamid Karzai was selected to serve as an interim ruler. “What a difference three months makes,” Rumsfeld reflected during a press conference on Dec. 27.⁴⁸ He said that before Sept. 11, “Afghanistan was a reasonably safe haven for terrorists,” but now “the Taliban have been driven from power. Their leaders are on the run.”

The third task entailed mopping up on a grand scale. Though Afghanistan was no longer under Taliban control, the country was not entirely free of Taliban or al Qaeda, either. Only a fraction of top leadership had been killed in battle or fallen into the hands of the Americans. A conventional war might have ended with the fall of major cities and elevation of the Karzai government. The war on terror had to continue.

Enduring Freedom began to focus on tracking leadership, remaining troops concentrations, and strong points. As Franks had said Nov. 15, “The Taliban is not destroyed as an effective fighting force from the level of one individual man carrying a weapon until that individual man puts down his weapon.”⁴⁹ Last fall, DOD officials repeatedly explained that the US still had to find and get al Qaeda and the Taliban, specifically the leadership.

The new phase of operations included deploying ground troops and using expeditionary air bases inside Afghanistan. By Nov. 27, US Marines were on the ground at Kandahar air base. Over the next several months, coalition air and ground forces worked together on a series of raids to eliminate the rest of the Taliban and al Qaeda. Hovering over it all was the hope of finding bin Laden himself—or, at least, gaining new clues as to his whereabouts. “He’s an elusive character,” Stufflebeem said.⁵⁰

Franks had said CENTCOM was closely watching both Kandahar and an area to the south, near Tora Bora. A Taliban ambassador announced in mid-November that bin Laden and his family had relocated to parts of Afghanistan not controlled by the Taliban. Then, on Dec. 9, coalition forces attacked a cave complex near Tora Bora in the White Mountains. Despite intense air strikes and an attack by the Northern Alliance, the battle did not round up all al Qaeda. Marine Gen. Peter Pace, Vice Chairman of the JCS, said on Dec. 12, “There are multiple routes of ingress and egress, so it is certainly conceivable that groups of two, three, 15, 20 could [be] walking out of there.”⁵¹

“I would think that it would be a mistake to say that the al Qaeda is finished in Afghanistan at this stage,” said Rumsfeld on Dec. 19.⁵² He noted that some of the Taliban fighters had “just gone home, dropped their weapons—these are Afghans—and they’ve gone back to their villages and said, ‘To heck with it. I’m not going to do anything.’” He speculated that some Taliban had just drifted into the mountains and villages, but added, “Al Qaeda do not drift into the villages, particularly. They’re still in some pockets. They’re still fighting, in some cases. Some have gotten across borders. A lot have been killed. A good number has been captured most recently. And they are dangerous and armed and have more difficulty blending into the Afghan villages or mountains, because, in many cases, they don’t know the language; in many cases, they just don’t fit in; and, in many cases, they’re not wanted.”

January/February 2002: Downshifting

The hunt continued after the dawn of 2002, with CENTCOM launching several operations targeted at small groups of al Qaeda fighters. CENTCOM staged one large attack around a camp complex at Zhawar Kili in January 2002. By February, after the first 120 days of the war, the Air Force had flown more than 12,600 sorties, of which 5,500 were air

⁴⁸ DOD news briefing, Dec. 27, 2001.

⁴⁹ DOD news briefing, Nov. 15, 2001.

⁵⁰ DOD news briefing, Nov. 2, 2001.

⁵¹ DOD news briefing, Dec. 12, 2001.

⁵² DOD news briefing, Dec. 19, 2001.



An Air Force Reserve Command A-10 attack aircraft at Bagram airfield in Afghanistan was one of many AFRC and Air National Guard aircraft supporting Enduring Freedom.

refueling sorties. Air Force bombers and fighters dropped more than 7,000 tons of bombs and other munitions and logged 74 percent of the tonnage dropped, most of it being precision-guided weapons. Then, the air war downshifted a bit. Though the volume of air strikes tapered off, the joint air component still provided reconnaissance and surveillance, which proved to be a vital element in the ongoing hunt for the terrorists.

Meanwhile, back in America, Operation Noble Eagle had not slackened. By December, the Combat Air Patrols over US cities had produced nearly 10,000 sorties. Feb. 3, 2002—a typical day—saw 140 aircraft flying CAP in the United States. (From Sept. 11, 2001 through June 30, 2002, NORAD vectored fighters on CAP to chase aircraft 462 times—a sevenfold increase over the 67 “unknown riders” in the same period a year earlier.)⁵³ To carry out this and other tasks, the Air Force had mobilized a steady-state force of about 37,000 members of the Guard and Reserve.

Then, in February, intelligence detected a concentration of Taliban and al Qaeda fighters in the Arma mountains. CENTCOM began deliberate planning for a new operation. CENTCOM’s plan for eliminating al Qaeda pockets would be a “movement to contact” as Franks later termed it. Instead of forming a single, traditional front line, the objective was to take key positions and form a screen around several known caves, compounds, and other al Qaeda strongholds. Then, the

enemy was expected to flee before the advancing Afghan forces and into the arms of US and other forces positioned to catch them. Myers was briefed on the upcoming assault during a visit in late February. Maj. Gen. Buster Hagenback, who drew up the initial plan for the operation, contended it would be wrapped up in about 72 hours. The plan had a name: Operation Anaconda.

March 2002: The Anaconda Surprise

Under Franks’s command, Anaconda began March 1. Trucks carried Afghan troops plus US and coalition special forces toward the small town of Sirkankel. The encirclement did not go as smoothly as planned. Heavy fire stalled the convoy, and one American soldier was killed by a mortar shell that hit his truck. Al Qaeda fighters were dispersed in small groups of as few as three men and as many as 20. Some sheltered in the cave system while others occupied prepared positions on the mountain ridges. As coalition forces later found, the strong points were well supplied with weapons brought in over the preceding months. The al Qaeda were indeed herded together—but they were ready for a fight.

Worse, the coordination with the Afghans was not working. One US detachment poised near a small al Qaeda compound expected a supporting attack from the forces of Afghan Warlord Zia Lodin, but called in airpower instead. The al Qaeda “kind of hit us by surprise at first, south of the compound, and moved up,” said Lt.

⁵³ Leslie Miller, “Military Jets Scrambled Seven Times as Often as They Were Before Sept 11,” Associated Press, Aug. 13, 2002.

Charles Thompson, “but aircraft blew up about a platoon-sized element.”⁵⁴

For US forces, the worst was yet to come. On March 4, a total of seven Americans died in fierce mountain fighting at an altitude of about 10,000 feet during attempted helicopter insertions near a mountaintop called Takur Gar. A senior defense official said, “The original plan was supposed to be Afghan led and US supported. After the early difficulties, it ended up becoming US led and Afghan supported.”⁵⁵ The other change entailed fighting al Qaeda in place instead of blocking and trapping them as they fled, as expected from their behavior at Tora Bora. “We ended up having to fight the war in the area where the enemy was, rather than get them to run into choke points,” the senior official added.

The new approach relied far more on US forces and on airpower to help draw out al Qaeda. By Sunday, bombers, fighters and gunships were stacking up in the area estimated by the Pentagon to be only about 70 square miles—about the size of the District of Columbia. On March 10, A-10s from Pope AFB, N.C. moved forward, flying combat sorties within 15 hours after receiving its mission notification. The A-10s tallied 36 sorties in a 10-day period. Two A-10

pilots, Lt. Col. Edward Kostelnik and Capt. Scott Campbell, were credited with killing more than 200 al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in a single mission, according to their squadron commander, Lt. Col. Arden Dahl. “After that night, all the al Qaeda and Taliban and their buddies were on the run,” Dahl said. “They just got swacked.”

Of his seven days in battle, Army Lt. Chris Beal said: “We were hailed on, snowed on, shot at, and mortared at, but we did the right thing at the right time. After a lot of close air support came in, anything that moved was killed by our birds [helicopters] or snipers.”⁵⁶

Franks later said he was not surprised by the intensity of the fight. “I think anytime you have a whole bunch of people in uniform moving into an enemy area in order to attack objectives, there will certainly be places within this area where we’ll encounter very, very substantial resistance.”⁵⁷ As Franks explained it, troops had to be inserted to gauge the strength of al Qaeda. Franks said “we will almost never have perfect intelligence information and so what we do is we take the information that we have and we move in to confirm or deny the presence of the enemy forces that we suspect.” Franks admitted he “would not

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Mohan and Esther Schrader, “Back at Base, Troops Say Afghans Failed Them,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 2002.

⁵⁵ Ricks and Bradley Graham, “Surprises, Adjustments and Milestones for US Military,” *Washington Post*, March 10, 2002.

⁵⁶ Pamela Constable, Peter Baker, “US Pulls 400 Troops from Afghan Battlefield,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2002.

⁵⁷ Franks interview with Sam Donaldson, March 10, 2002.

“Pugs”, an F-15E Weapons System Officer, preflights his strike fighter prior to a mission over Afghanistan.



USAF photo by MSgt. Dave Nblain

downplay the possibility” that his forces “got into a heck of a firefight at some point that they did not anticipate.”

When Operation Anaconda ended, coalition forces were in control of the mountain heights, but many of the enemy evidently had escaped and the US had sustained its highest casualty count in the war.

Afghanistan’s Cloudy Future

Just as NATO’s Allied Force freed Kosovo from the depredations of Slobodan Milosevic, the Enduring Freedom campaign extirpated the brutal, backward Taliban regime and gave Afghans the chance to build a better future. A bright future and economic prosperity are not assured, however. The assassination of one of Afghanistan’s vice presidents on July 6, 2002, pointed out that achieving stability will not be easy. Afghanistan may never be a model democratic state or a how-to guide for economic development. However, the Northern Alliance’s victories under the aegis of US military power stabilized the country.

“Truth be told, the security situation in Afghanistan is reasonably good,” said Rumsfeld on Aug. 15, 2002.⁵⁸ “There’s one region where there is difficulty—southeast of Kabul. But throughout the rest of the country, in Mazar and Herat, Kandahar, Kabul, the situation is reasonably stable.”

Credit goes to joint US military forces and more than 50 allied nations who have provided troops, aircraft, supplies, logistic support and assistance of other kinds. As Rumsfeld said, “We have US Special Operations teams embedded with regional forces, and they are really able to counsel restraint and communicate with each other and create situational awareness that contributes to a more secure situation. We also have civil affairs teams that are in most of the regions, digging wells, rebuilding schools, bridges, roads and hospitals.”

Rumsfeld went on to say that the security situation in Afghanistan today is “the best it’s been, probably, in close

to a quarter of a century”—since a series of coups and counter-coups that led to the Soviet invasion in December 1979 and a 10-year occupation. “Afghanistan has a transitional government with a popular mandate,” said Rumsfeld. “It’s no longer a safe haven for terrorists. Humanitarian aid is flowing. Women are able to work. Children are back in school. And executions in soccer stadiums have stopped. Over a million refugees have returned to the country. They’re voting with their feet, and the country has been liberated.”

The Impact of Airpower

Ever since the Gulf War, US strategy debates have tended to stumble over the issue of whether large-scale maneuvering by land combat forces with tanks and artillery are essential to success in battle. The early criticisms of airpower in Enduring Freedom brought that argument to the table once again. In mid-October, it scarcely seemed possible that the hard work of routing a wily and experienced Taliban force on its own turf could be accomplished by Afghans [and Americans] on horseback, a few hundred highly-trained US airmen, soldiers, and sailors on the ground, and 50 to 100 strike sorties per day ingressing from distant bases.

Yet this is exactly what happened. The Air Force and Navy, using precision laser-guided and satellite-guided munitions, made every strike count. With a minimum of collateral damage and bloodshed, the air strikes enabled the Northern Alliance to overcome the Taliban’s numerical advantage and their supply of tanks, artillery and vehicles and retake the 80 percent of Afghanistan once controlled by that oppressive regime. At the same time, the air component mounted a major humanitarian relief effort and delivered nearly all materiel to surrounding bases by air. It proved the validity of a concept: US and allied airpower can work efficiently with local ground forces to accomplish the combatant commander’s objectives. While this will not be the solution for every

⁵⁸ DOD news briefing, Aug. 15, 2002.

In 2002, select USAF aircraft began displaying this “Let’s Roll” nose art designed by SrA. Duane White. It features the words said by Todd Beamer as he and other passengers moved to fight for control of United Airlines Flight 93 before it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania on Sept. 11, 2001.



USAF photo by ATC Joshua Strang

potential campaign, it is now beyond dispute as a proven model for coalition operations.

“It would be a mistake for one to look at Afghanistan and think about it as a model that would be replicated,” said Rumsfeld on Dec. 24, 2001.⁵⁹ Indeed, coalition forces benefitted from the relatively primitive air defense environment and the lack of a well-trained, state-run military. The threat may not be as easy to overcome the next time around.

In another sense, though, Afghanistan offered convincing proof that airpower is flexible enough to take the lead in many different types of conflict. US airpower enabled Northern Alliance forces to take back control of their own country, and did it in under two months. The war on terrorism will demand action in many forms on many fronts. Afghanistan demonstrated that the United States, by committing its joint air forces, even in an uncertain tactical environment, can enable American-led forces to dominate and prevail.

“There have been battles fought in Afghanistan for centuries,” said retired Vice Adm. Arthur Cebrowski, who serves now as Director of the Pentagon’s office of force transformation. “I don’t think any of them have

seen the speed, results, and the speed of effect that we have here.”⁶⁰

In *Enduring Freedom* and *Noble Eagle*, the US joint air component offered a wide array of options which proved to be the essential framework for very different types of action. The opportunities that lie ahead depend on the nation’s making the most of air and space power without letting the dead weight of antiquated doctrine and the diversion of off-kilter debates drag down its effectiveness.

Conclusion

For America and its allies, the war on terrorism continues, at home and abroad.

Homeland security is becoming a major pillar of national security policy. The national plan has not yet been defined fully. However, events of the past year have shown that homeland security is not possible without air sovereignty. All told, *Noble Eagle* generated more than 30,000 sorties in less than a year. The Total Air Force stepped up to the mission of constant airborne CAPs and the need to surge for specific threats. “Fighter units that continue to have this tasking need to be properly resourced with the number of aircraft to perform the mission and to meet their other commitments,”

⁵⁹ “Keeping America Mighty,” *Business Week*, Dec. 24, 2001.

⁶⁰ Cebrowski quoted in “Afghanistan: First Lessons,” *Janes Defence Weekly*, Dec. 19, 2001.

commented outgoing 1st Air Force commander Arnold.⁶¹ The air sovereignty mission puts an even higher demand on AWACS personnel, stressing a force already used hard in years of expeditionary deployments. Over time, maintaining airspace sovereignty and posturing to meet advanced threats—such as cruise missiles—will become part of the Air Force’s long-range planning framework, impacting modernization, training and force structure. Homeland security is a new reality for the AEF.

Changes in military tactics and operations will be matched by long-term political and strategic change. Restoring American security is not straightforward or simple. It will require new diplomatic frameworks. It will require close cooperation with the “floating coalition” that makes success possible in a Global War on Terrorism. It will require a sound military strategy that brings America’s advantages to bear and unsheathes the power of American airpower in joint operations.

Winning the war on terrorism depends on many victories yet to be won. The successful campaign in Afghanistan is only the first step, “the beginning of a long campaign to rid the world of terrorists,” said Bush in February 2002. The Taliban are out of business, and the next objective is to “run down al Qaeda and the rest of the terrorists, and maybe give them a free trip to Guantanamo Bay.” The president added, “Another objective is to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.” He clearly had Iraq’s Saddam Hussein in mind.

Rumsfeld said that, while the response to terrorism is a different kind of war, “one thing is unchanged: America remains indomitable. Our victory will come with Americans living their lives day by day, going to work, raising their children, and building their dreams as they always have—a free and great people.”⁶² Airpower will be there all the way. ■

⁶¹ Eric Hehs, “Conversation with Major General Larry Arnold, Commander, 1st Air Force, Tyndall AFB, Florida,” *Code One Magazine*, First Quarter 2002.

⁶² Donald H. Rumsfeld, “A New Kind of War,” *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2001.

Military members render honors as fire and rescue workers unfurled a huge American flag over the side of the Pentagon during rescue and recovery work following the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. A hijacked commercial airliner, originating from Washington, D.C.'s Dulles International Airport, was flown into the southern side of the building facing Virginia Highway 27.

