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Operation Anaconda 1

Personal Experience Paper

Operation Anaconda

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OEF, Operation Anaconda, Afghanistan, 03/07/2002-08/22/2002

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21 September 2006

Class #57

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Abstract

After 9/11, America sent in its first combat Soldiers after the regime that was responsible for an attack on America that will forever shape history. TF Rakkasan was some of the first Soldiers called to strike back at the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. During Operation Anaconda, the AH-64A Apache helicopter shaped the battlefield. Attack Helicopters sustained extensive damage, but proved that it was an agile, mobile, and lethal combat multiplier. The ability to deploy an Attack Helicopter Battalion within 36 hours allowed JTF Mountain the flexibility to continue to suppress and eliminate Al Qaeda and Taliban forces.

Table of Contents

- I. Context
- II. Deployment of Task Force Rakkasan
- III. Operation Anaconda
- IV. Deployment of Task Force Attack
- V. Operations at Bagram Airbase
- VI. Lessons Learned

Context

On November 15th, 2001, CSM William Allen assumed duties as the Brigade Command Sergeant Major for the 159th Aviation Brigade. I was serving as the 1SG for the maintenance company, D Co, 3-101st Avn Regt. As the senior tenured 1SG, I assumed duties as the Acting Command Sergeant Major for 3rd Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment. I later learned that the inbound CSM would not arrive until March, 2002. I served as the Command Sergeant Major during the deployment phases to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). In January, 2002, our battalion prepared and deployed an Attack Helicopter Company to support TF Rakkasan during OEF. Our unit had a little previous experience. Several of the senior pilots had experience flying AH-1 Cobras during the Gulf War. B Co, 3-101st Avn Regt had just returned from Kosovo in November, 2001. They had the most operational experience at the time of the deployment. The continuity of leaders was stable. Only two company commanders changed command before or during our deployment through OEF. The Apaches ability to fly at high altitudes, and carry lethal ordnance that can destroy enemy fortified positions made it a weapon of choice for field commanders for all operations during OEF.

Deployment of Task Force Rakkasan

TF Rakkasan consisted of the 187th Infantry Regiment, and the 3rd Brigade Combat Team from Ft. Campbell. The TF deployed in several phases. TF Rakkasan was part of JTF Mountain commanded by MG Hagenbeck. Joint Task Force (JTF) Mountain (10th Mountain, 101st Abn Div (AASLT), Special Operation Forces (SOF), and Coalition Forces) set-up several staging bases in Pakistan and Uzbekistan to allow SOFs to launch attacks against Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. The SOF quickly gained several strategic strongholds within Afghanistan with the assistance with local Afghan Northern Alliance defiant to the Taliban. For the first time in history, a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) found themselves deep within a landlocked country securing the Kandahar airfield. JTF Mountain started moving into Afghanistan. Alpha Company, 3-101st Avn Regt, consisting of eight AH-64A Apaches and a maintenance support team from D Co, 3-101st Avn Regt, deployed on January 19th, 2002. A Co was part of the air combat power attached to TF Falcon. Rounding out TF Falcon was the headquarters of 7-101st Avn Regt, CH-47 Chinooks, UH-60 Blackhawks specializing in Command and Control, Medevac, and Air Assault capabilities. As TF Rakkasan relieved the MEF in Kandahar, C-17s carrying the air combat power of TF Falcon started landing at Kandahar. The base was hit hard during the SOF phase, driving the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces from Kandahar. TF Rakkasan literally scratched out a Forward Operating Base (FOB) from nothing. In the following days, A Co provided airbase security, as a Quick Reaction Force(QRF). The first major operation since JTF Mountain occupied Afghanistan was about to begin.

Operation Anaconda

Intelligence and reconnaissance showed that Al Qaeda forces were beginning to crossover from the Pakistan border. They were well dug into the maze of tunnels situated throughout the mountains of eastern Afghanistan. Operation Anaconda began on March 1st, 2002, with the infiltration of SOF into Shah-i-Kot valley in Eastern Afghanistan. The operation was to conduct military operations against Al Qaeda and Taliban, and eliminate their last known stronghold in Afghanistan. On March 2nd, elements of JTF Mountain took off from Bagram Airbase. As the Soldiers were inserted into key points of the battlefield, they immediately took fire from enemy positions situated high above in the intricate cave systems throughout Afghanistan's mountain ranges. It was difficult to pinpoint enemy positions raining down mortars, Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs), and heavy small arms fire. Every JTF Soldier would tell you, that if it wasn't for the AC-130 gunships and AH-64A Apache Helicopters, the enemy would have inflicted severe casualties on the US and Coalition Forces. Six AH-64As went into the battle, and two Apaches remained in Kandahar for QRF. The A Co pilots encountered and engaged in some of the fiercest fighting. Within the first hour, two of the Apaches had sustained severe damage to their weapons systems that rendered them virtually non mission capable (NMC). The pilots of the NMC aircraft continued to fly through the valley in front of the other Apaches and drew the fire of the enemy. Their brave tenacity enabled the other Apaches to acquire the enemy targets, and eliminate them. The Apaches continued to fly mission after mission to support the ground troops. They would remain on station for as long as possible, expend their ordnance, fly to the Forward Arming Refuel Point (FARP), rearm, refuel,

and return to the fight. Each aircraft sustained airframe or weapons systems damage. At the end of the day, two Apaches that received the most damage were used for parts to repair the other Apaches. There were still four Apaches in the fight. One of the Apaches at Kandahar was immediately sent up to Bagram to reinforce the fleet. The aircraft were battered, but quick and decisive Battle Damage Assessment Repair (BDAR) procedures repaired the other four Apaches. Operation Anaconda was officially over on March 18th, 2002, but fighting ended on March 4th, 2002.

Deployment of Task Force Attack

As a result of the fierce fighting, and the impact of the Apaches on the battlefield, the remaining elements of 3-101st Avn Regt received orders to deploy on March 4th, 2002 as part of TF Rakkasan. To move the rest of an Attack Helicopter battalion, and all its assets would require serious joint cooperation. In 27 hours, the first C-17 took off from Ft. Campbell with 2 AH-64As, and 2 pallets of Rockets and 30mm ammunition. In the next three days, 12 additional C-17s, and 3 C-5s loaded the assets of the 3-101st Attack Battalion bound for Kandahar, Afghanistan. Stops were made in Frankfurt, Germany for refuel, and then onto Kandahar. On March 7th, 2002, the first C-17 landed in Afghanistan. Every C-17 was unloaded within 45 minutes, and every Apache was reassembled within 4 hours. As two Apaches prepared to complete their maintenance operational checks, another C-17 landed with two more Apaches and equipment to download. The maintenance support from TF Falcon can never be measured or quantified. Maintainers worked for 18 hours, collapsed in their beds and were back up in 4 hours to continue reassembling. As a set of Apaches were assembled, they were sent forward to

Bagram to strengthen the air combat power. Operation Anaconda continued. On March 14th, 2002, the last assets of 3-101st Avn Regt closed on Kandahar airbase.

Operations at Bagram Airbase

As 3-101st Avn Regt settled into operations at Kandahar, our new CSM arrived March 14th, 2002. I resumed my duties as the maintenance company 1SG. The Apache forever proved that it was a formidable weapon system. During this phase of OEF, most of the fighting was taking place in the eastern mountain ranges bordering Afghanistan and Pakistan. Split-base operations (SBO) were necessary to quickly and decisively engage the enemy. The battalion would cycle out 10 Apaches a month at a time. As the D Co 1SG, I would rotate maintenance and armament personnel to service and maintain these aircraft. The weather was much harsher in Bagram. The elevation at Kandahar was around 3,300 feet, but the elevation at Bagram was over 6,000 feet high. Winds would routinely reach 50 mph. Several times, our FARP personnel would receive small arms fire in the Khowst and Gardez eastern regions. 3-101st Avn Regt participated in 16 operations and flew over 6,000 aircraft hours during OEF from January 20th to August 22nd, 2002.

Lessons Learned/Insights

You are only as good as the equipment you bring. Even though our TF was engaged in combat operations, and the flow of replacement parts was improving, PMCSs are important! We fought, sustained, and maintained with the equipment we deployed with. Generators are the lifeblood of your sustainment operations. Our unit ran generators for almost 4 months, until Prime Power generation was installed on the airbases. Plan on Split-Based Operations (SBO). SBO are an essential planning tool for commanders to engage the enemy during several operations simultaneously. Refer back to the first sentence. Having redundancy is great, but if your back up equipment is NMC, you are limiting the capabilities of your unit. Training that was vital to prepare for combat operations, included Combat Lifesaver, and Field Sanitation. These two courses can literally save lives, and improve the confidence of your Soldiers as they prepare for combat deployment. Movement of troops and equipment was only done by CH-47 or C-130. Pallet load training would have been an invaluable lesson for all the equipment and parts we shipped in theater. I can't count all the times loads were gigged from shipment. Order carpenters kits. They are invaluable to quality of life sustainment.