



# Afghan adventure

the conclusion

By Lt Col Robert Seaberg, Laughlin AFB, Texas

**Editor's Note:** *This is the final part of a three-part series. When we left off last month the author and his party just received word they would have to stay on the mountain in hostile territory at least another 6 hours.*

Did I mention that it was cold? The temperature was well below freezing now that the sun was down, and ice started forming in the plastic water bottles. It was time to drink it or wrap it up inside my bag. The Marines started joking that all the helicopter (helo) would find is a bunch of popsicles, and I began to think they were right. Shivering is a wonderful thing, you can get a full body workout in one place, and I was feeling it. I thought about the Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) I had stashed in my bag, but I wasn't hungry. I figured, if the helo didn't make it, I'd probably need it in the morning.

The Marine OIC (Lt) decided to move us off of the ridge and into a valley that had a much better landing zone for a night pick up. Also, it would be safer since everybody and their brother saw us on the ridge all day. He left a fire team on the ridge to protect our flank, and we followed the bulk of the Marine Quick Reaction Force (QRF) as it descended to the valley below. When we reached the valley, there were a few berms the snipers could use to lay behind in firing position. The locals could still see us because it was dusk, and the closest house was only about 200 meters away.

Behind us was a relatively flat spot that looked good for a helo pick up, and to our advantage, there were mountains behind that. The Lt pointed out a few observation posts on the ridgeline above us, and then showed the three of us Air Force folks a little depression about 6-feet wide and 2-feet deep and told us to stay near it. He said, if we started taking direct fire, it was the best place for us to go to because it might provide a little cover.

I looked at my 9mm Beretta and realized if we did get into a firefight, I was going to be just an observer. I was then pretty glad to be surrounded by Marines with M-16s, M-60s, 40mm grenade launchers, and M-72 Light Anti-Tank Weapons. At that moment,

I began to think I would feel a lot safer if I knew how to use their weapons, and we ought to get checked out on them before we deploy.

We all hunkered down on the ground to keep a low profile as dusk faded into night. Suddenly, a quick burst of machine gun fire came from the ridgeline above us, and everyone turned and pointed their weapons, looking through their scopes to find the origin. The Lt commented it was probably just the Afghan National Army goofing off on top of the mountain. As the tension eased, I figured it was a good time to say my prayers; so I asked God for the wind to stop, the weather to get better back home, and if this was the end, let me go at peace.

It was dark by 6:30 p.m. and the lights came on in the village ahead of us. The city calmed down a bit as folks went inside for the evening. The call to prayer came over the loudspeakers again in the town for "after sundown prayers," and the village area we were in got silent as folks prayed and then ate dinner. The Lt pulled out his thermometer (infrared night scope), checked out the landscape and ridgelines, and passed it down the line to us curious Air Force folks. I scanned the open area behind us and could see the bright images of the recon team about 100 meters away, as they walked the landing zone looking for mines and anything else unsafe. A ridgeline scan showed nothing. Good, no Taliban.

Things were looking better for us as I remembered it was Friday evening here, which is like our Sunday at home. So, all the good Taliban were in the mosque. I scanned the village below, and everything was peaceful. Suddenly there was a flash that caught everyone's attention. Another flash and we could see a thunderstorm popping up to the east. I don't know how thunderstorms form when it's below freezing, but I figured it was going to be the perfect capstone to my Afghan adventure. What else could happen? We didn't hear any thunder, and the storm appeared to be be-

hind the next mountain range, where we hoped that it would stay for the next 3 hours. The Marines started to get comfortable with the situation, and there was a bit of muffled conversation going on, but we all stayed low and thought about getting out of there.

I noticed the wind stopped, but it was still cold, probably about 28 degrees or colder. I lay on my back with the bag of airplane parts under my head, and looked at the night sky. It was clear and pitch-black above us, and I could see Orion's belt and a million other stars. What a beautiful sky. I heard a jet overhead. Maybe a B-1 or an A-10, but I knew it was ours, and that was comforting. I noticed at least 10 shooting stars, and other than the occasional flashes of lightning, it was a calm night. I started to think about how fortunate I was to see it. I could've fallen asleep, but I wasn't about to close my eyes because I darn sure didn't want to miss the helicopter.

At 9 p.m. the radio operator told us Bagram's weather was clear, but there wouldn't be enough moonlight till 10:45 p.m. for the helos flying on Night Vision Goggles. We were feeling pretty good because we made it this far, and I believed we wouldn't freeze before the helo pick up. We heard another burst of machine gun fire from above us, saw red tracers impact the next ridge, and ricochet skyward. The Lt said that red tracers

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were friendly bullets, and the Afghan's could shoot all they wanted as long as they didn't shoot at us.

"Great, at least we'll know what color bullet kills us," I thought to myself.

The Lt commented it was probably some good hashish being passed around, and there was a side bet that one of them couldn't hit a rock near us. If we needed to protect ourselves, we had enough firepower to take out the post, but it was better not to use it.

It was 10:45 p.m. when we got word two CH-47s, capable of holding

about 30 troops a piece, launched from Bagram. Everyone was excited at the news, and the Lt pulled the flank guard off the ridge, sent a squad to mark the landing zone with chemical light sticks, and told us to hang with the troop leader for the second chopper. It was his responsibility to count everyone going on the chopper to ensure no one got left behind, and so, the three of us Air Force guys gathered our stuff and followed the troop leader around like puppies. The only thing worse than being stuck out overnight in hostile territory with a bunch of Marines would be being stuck out overnight in hostile territory without them.

We heard the choppers, but couldn't see them until they were silhouetted against the city lights below.

The first chopper came in low, filling the air with 100 mph dust. (Glad I brought my goggles!) It landed and picked up the first half of the Marines, as the second chopper approached slowly and then flew over us. I noticed that the dust kicked up into the blades created electrostatic sparks like St. Elmo's fire. It looked like 100,000 fireflies flying in formation at supersonic speed. The second chopper approached again, lower this time.

The blades looked like they were below our position, and for a moment, I had a tinge of fear that we might get sliced and diced, but then I noticed all of the sparks going around in formation, and thought to myself: "This looks pretty cool. I guess my last memory is going to be a good one."

The blades got to within 50 feet of our position when the helicopter started to spin around looking out of control, and I started thinking that we were dead men. It suddenly stopped



with its back end pointing at us, and touched down on top of the berm, with its ramp open. This guy was good.

The troop leader tapped me, and I ran through the flying dust and

scrambled aboard the chopper. It took less than a minute for all of us to get aboard and close the back ramp. Looking through the gunner's door, I could see the first chopper take off, and as soon as he was by us, our chopper took off. The breeze blowing through his door was chilly, but I didn't care because it afforded an unrestricted view of Kabul as it went to sleep. We were on our way back to Bagram at 11:15 p.m. — 14 hours after we got off the Blackhawk.

What did I learn? First, I now have a profound respect for the young troops that do this stuff day in and day out. Secondly, helicopters are pretty cool, so I'll never dog a helo driver again, and third, I thank God I'm in the Air Force!

Seriously, there are many lessons to take away from this story. I can sum them up with be prepared and be flexible. I had no idea when I reported for work that day I would spend the rest of it hiking on a rugged mountainside, in hostile territory, investigating an aircraft accident. Remembering to bring appropriate clothing made the difference between comfort and potential cold weather injuries.

Regardless of my immediate preparation, the real work happened before my deployment. Taking advantage of all available training, like self aid buddy care, weapons qualifications, law of armed combat and special driving qualifications such as humvee or heavy equipment, is important to prepare us all for the situations we may find ourselves in when deployed. Our deployments are joint operations and it is important to be trained on the capabilities of the forces you will work with. Finally, being physically fit is an imperative. There is no crash course in cardio conditioning or 50-pound rucksack carrying. So get your training and be ready for anything. Maybe you too will have an Afghan adventure. 