Eighty percent of the time, American airmen received their targets only *after* they had taken off.

An Air War Like No Other

By Rebecca Grant

USAF photo by SrA. James Harper

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OPERATION Enduring Freedom marked the first time the US military responded to an act of terrorism with a large-scale, sustained, conventional-force operation. The war on the Taliban and al Qaeda was most intense from October 2001 through January 2002, when it featured mostly air and space power.

It was not, however, a massive air war; the sortie count from its start through takeover of major Afghan cities was about half that of Operation Allied Force in the Balkans in 1999 and nowhere near that of the Gulf War in 1991.

What made OEF unique was that joint airpower was able to respond on command in a harsh, politically complex environment. The airpower component set the conditions for a coalition campaign and achieved success from the first night onward, adapting to tactical constraints and bringing precise firepower to bear. Indeed, 80 percent of the targets struck by US airpower were "flex targets"—those given to pilots en route.

The Sept. 11 attacks came as a thunderous strategic surprise. It took time for the Bush Administration to formulate its response. Soon, however, US attention was drawn to Osama bin Laden's nest, Afghanistan. Its Taliban rulers had offered the Saudi–born terrorist a safe harbor since 1996. Thus, the first step in

USAF photo by SSgt. Shane Cuomo

An airman prepares a precision guided bomb during Operation Enduring Freedom. After dropping a portion of their loads, USAF's B-1Bs, such as this one, and B-52 bombers were on-call for emerging targets.

reducing the terror threat would be to eliminate al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.

The primary internal opposition to Taliban rule came from the Northern Alliance, a loose coalition of irregular forces under the leadership of various Afghan strongmen. Somewhere in the days after Sept. 11, the Bush Administration decided that teaming with the Northern Alliance offered the best hope for "liquidating" the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

It was also clear that 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.

The Buildup Begins

The US soon began assembling forces, however. The Air Force already had established a modern, top-of-the-line nerve center, called the Combined Air Operations Center, or CAOC, in a Persian Gulf state. This center would be used to direct all facets of the coming air campaign. Moreover, some Navy warships 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.

OEF began on Oct. 7, 2001. Gen. Richard B. Myers, the Air Force officer who had only recently become Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, announced the action. 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."

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," Defense Secretary Donald H. 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.

Humanitarian relief missions began on the first night of the war. Two C-17 airlifters carried out a long-distance airdrop of humanitarian daily rations.

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. ... 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."

It was plain from the outset that OEF 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."

"A Different War"

Echoing that point was Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the Army officer commanding US Central Command and thus the war's top military figure. "It has been said that those who expect another Desert Storm will wonder every day what it is that this war is all about," said Franks. "This is a different war."

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. Another was to unseat the Taliban.

The Northern Alliance, always a loose grouping, was not ready for coordinated air and ground offensives. Aid ranging from ammunition to horse fodder had to be flown into the theater and air-dropped to alliance forces. Trained US special operations teams and air controllers had to link up with assigned elements of the Northern Alliance.

The mechanics of airpower for OEF were different from those seen in other recent conflicts. Distance was a major challenge. Navy fighters flew more than 700 miles one way from their carriers to their com-

bat 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 preplanned targets to a combination of preplanned 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 B. Nathman, then commander, Naval Air Force, Pacific Fleet.

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. OEF saw several aircraft carriers combining forces to generate the required effort. USS *Enterprise* was joined by four more carriers. USS *Kitty Hawk* shed all but eight strike aircraft from the air 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.

Naval aircraft flew about 75 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.

"We are more precise than we were in the past," explained Adm. Vern Clark, the Chief of Naval Operations, during an interview with C-Span.

Gen. John P. Jumper, the Air Force Chief of Staff, concurred with Clark. "We've come a long way from 10 years ago [Operation Desert Storm], when we had to fly ATO [Air Tasking Orders] out to the aircraft carriers," Jumper told the *Washington Post.*

Roving Strike Force

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—land-based Air Force fighters in the Gulf region and carrier-based naval fighters—a standard mission was to take off and fly to an assigned engagement zone. There they might orbit as the most recent information was being synthesized from a variety of sources before being passed on to the strike aircraft. The main obstacle to continuous fighter coverage was distance.

The need to fly more than 700 miles, strike, and recover within the intricate deck cycle time of the carrier's operations created a major challenge.

Bombers were less affected by range limitations and soon shouldered the major part of the job. After two initial days of strikes, the B-2 stealth aircraft flying from Whiteman AFB, Mo., 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. Other bombers were cast in starring roles. The Air Force deployed 18 B-52s and B-1s from the US to Diego Garcia. Officers in the CAOC generally could expect 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.

These bombers, like the B-2s in Allied Force in 1999, received new target coordinates in real time by linking directly to the net of updated information. Rarely was a bomber's entire load of weapons destined for preplanned targets. Once a bomber crew completed its preplanned assignment, it would remain airborne and on-call for 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.

While USAF bombers and Navy fighters were shifting gears, another, highly 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.

Flexible Targeting

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 indications of its location. In the Kosovo war, time-sensitive

US Army photo by Sgt. Todd M. Roy

Special forces on the ground in Afghanistan included airmen, such as this master sergeant at far right. USAF combat controllers called in strike aircraft as targets were identified.

USAF photo by SSgt. Ricky A. Bloom

An Air Force Reserve Command A-10 pilot waits for the signal to launch at Bagram air base in Afghanistan. A-10s provided close air support in the rout of Taliban and al Qaeda forces during Enduring Freedom.

targets were more often 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.

Months earlier, the Air Force had successfully test-fired Hellfire missiles from a Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle. 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 important, 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 an airman being accused, down the road, as a war criminal.

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 preplanned targets. However, the handling of time-sensitive targets was harder.

Not only did intelligence sources have to produce coordinates quickly enough that could be relayed to a command center and then on to a strike aircraft, but also the target might have to be approved. No commander wanted to wind up attacking a carload full of Afghan civilians when the target was al Qaeda fighters. Restaurants, private homes, and civilian-style vehicles all posed nightmarish ID problems, especially under time pressures.

Early in the clandestine air war, US operators believed they had Mullah Omar in their sights. As reported by Seymour M. Hersh in *The New Yorker,* a Hellfire–armed Predator was patrolling the roads near Kabul on the first night of the war. Hersh asserted, "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 Central Command in Tampa, Fla.

Hersh went on: "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 front 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 precise facts, the story revealed that the coordination required for tracking and killing a time-sensitive target was not smooth.

Delicate Process

Target approval remained a delicate process throughout OEF, 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 denied requests from the CAOC to strike 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.' "

Such stories cast a pall over OEF 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 superiority 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 centers of resistance filled the press. By the end of October, disenchantment had spread. "The initial US air strategy against Afghanistan is not working," University of Chicago professor Robert A. Pape declared in the *Washington Post.*

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.

Attempting to remedy what supposedly "ailed" OEF, many recommended committing US ground troops in substantial numbers. Mackubin T. Owens Jr., a professor of strategy and force planning at the US Naval War College, Newport, R.I., estimated the job would take 35,000 to 40,000 American troops. Former Pentagon official Daniel Goure upped the ante, projecting a need for at least 250,000 troops.

The cacophony prompted Franks

to say publicly that the war was "not at all a stalemate." Rumsfeld even prepared a public statement (released last November) 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.

Help Arrives

The common view of that contingent was, as Owens argued, "It's doubtful the opposition forces can win without substantial [US ground force] help." Owens was dead right 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.

For all of the hand-wringing about the progress of the air war, operational success always hinged mainly on establishing a 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."

While supporting the Northern Alliance push against the Taliban, the joint air component was also busy with attacks on a network of mountain caves that might be offering shelter to al Qaeda forces.

A Pentagon spokesman declared 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."

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 positioned to help coordinate air strikes and provide logistic support to the Northern Alliance.

Myers went on to explain 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 who 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 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. Powell noted in a *Washington Post* interview, "You had a First World air force and a Fourth World army, and it took a while to connect the two."

Once in place, the SOF teams and the CAOC's delivery 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 Al-

The Area of Operations

liance were helping to bring precise firepower to bear on individual targets and directing bomber strikes against concentrations of troops.

First Towns Fall

In the first week of November 2001, air strikes concentrated on Taliban and al Qaeda forces and military equipment near Mazar-e Sharif and Kabul, the capital. Aircraft on Nov. 4 dropped two gigantic BLU-82 15,000-pound bombs on Taliban troops, with a telling effect. The Northern Alliance went on the attack, and by Nov. 6, its 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.

The CAOC kept directing 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 bombs on target within 20 minutes of a call for assistance. Northern Alliance forces, who were riding on horseback, discovered a Taliban military outpost with artillery, barracks, and a command post. Although the Taliban force was quiet at the time, the Northern Alliance commander identified the outpost as a stronghold. He asked for coalition aircraft to strike the target within the next few days. A USAF combat controller notified the CAOC, and since the target lay in an already established engagement zone, the CAOC alerted a B-52 overhead. The B-52 struck the outpost 19 minutes after the initial call.

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 on-call American airpower overhead, took town after town. Taloqan fell on Nov. 11. The Northern Alliance announced the liberation of Herat on Nov. 12. Opposition forces soon were making plans to recover the capital.

The morning of Nov. 12 saw the beginning of the end for the Taliban's control of Kabul. B-52 strikes 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 a key bin Laden deputy, Mohammed Atef.

On Nov. 13, the Northern Alliance took control of Kabul and began to set up police control of the city. Elements of the Taliban were now in headlong flight southward to the sparsely populated areas controlled by Pashtun tribes.

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."

Bush Was Impressed

President Bush himself summed up the meaning of the action in a Dec. 11 speech at The Citadel. "These past two months have shown that an innovative doctrine and high-tech weaponry can shape and then dominate an unconventional conflict," he said, noting that "this combination—real-time intelligence, local allied forces, special forces, and precision airpower—has really never been used before."

The swift, mid–November collapse of the Taliban left the forces of OEF 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 the 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.

On Nov. 20, more than 1,000 Taliban fighters at Kunduz surrendered to the Northern Alliance. Six days later, Kunduz was occupied. By early December, Kandahar fell.

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. OEF cast a new mold by delivering Humanitarian Daily Rations and other supplies starting the very first night. The HDRs were described by Joseph

USAF photo by TSgt. Joe Springfield

UAVs such as this RQ-1B Predator were star performers as US forces tracked time-sensitive targets and then relayed the data to airborne strike aircraft. Some 80 percent of the targets struck were given to pilots en route.

J. Collins, deputy assistant secretary of defense for peacekeeping and humanitarian affairs, as "a safe, vegetarian, nonculturally sensitive meal that has everything you need, unless you need taste." An average daily airdrop delivered 35,000 HDRs. Sometimes the number went as high as 70,000.

Pursuing the Bad Guys

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 had fallen into the hands of the Americans. A conventional war might have ended with the fall of major cities and elevation of the government of interim Prime Minister Hamid Karzai. The war on terror had to continue.

OEF began to focus on the tracking of 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." Last fall, DOD officials repeatedly explained that the US still had to find and get al Qaeda and the Taliban, specifically the leadership.

This new phase of operations included deploying ground troops and using expeditionary air bases inside Afghanistan. Over the next several months, coalition air and ground forces worked together on a series of raids against Taliban and al Qaeda remnants.

Hovering over it all was the hope of finding bin Laden himself, or at least gaining new clues as to his whereabouts. 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, in early December, coalition forces attacked a cave complex near Tora Bora in the White Mountains.

USAF photo by A1C Joshua P. Strang

An F-16 fighter displays the "Let's Roll" nose art, commemorating the victims and heroes of the Sept. 11 terror attacks. In mid–October, some doubted the ability of airpower to rout the Taliban, but they were proved wrong.

Despite intense air strikes and an attack by US forces and the Northern Alliance, the battle did not round up all al Qaeda.

"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. 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.' "

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 OEF brought that argument to the table once again. In mid–October, some doubted it was possible to rout a wily and experienced Taliban force on its own turf especially with 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 launched 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 85 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 potential campaign, it is now beyond dispute as a proven model for coalition operations.

Afghanistan offered convincing evidence 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 Afghanistan 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 prevail. ■

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