

44 Hours

By Daniel L. Haulman

Operation Enduring Freedom opened with the longest bombing missions ever flown.



USAF photo

The US response to the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, was delivered swiftly. While the World Trade Center in New York still smoldered, the US began Operation Enduring Freedom—the campaign to take from al Qaeda its bases in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and put the terror group permanently on the run.

The campaign began with strikes from B-2 bombers of the 509th Bomb Wing, flying directly from their home base at Whiteman AFB, Mo. These missions, some lasting in excess of 70 hours, were the longest combat bombing missions in history.

The last of the small fleet of 21 bombers had recently been delivered, and the bat-wing aircraft had only seen

action in one previous conflict, 1999's Operation Allied Force in Yugoslavia. Then, as in Afghanistan, they operated from Whiteman, capitalizing on their 6,000-mile unrefueled range.

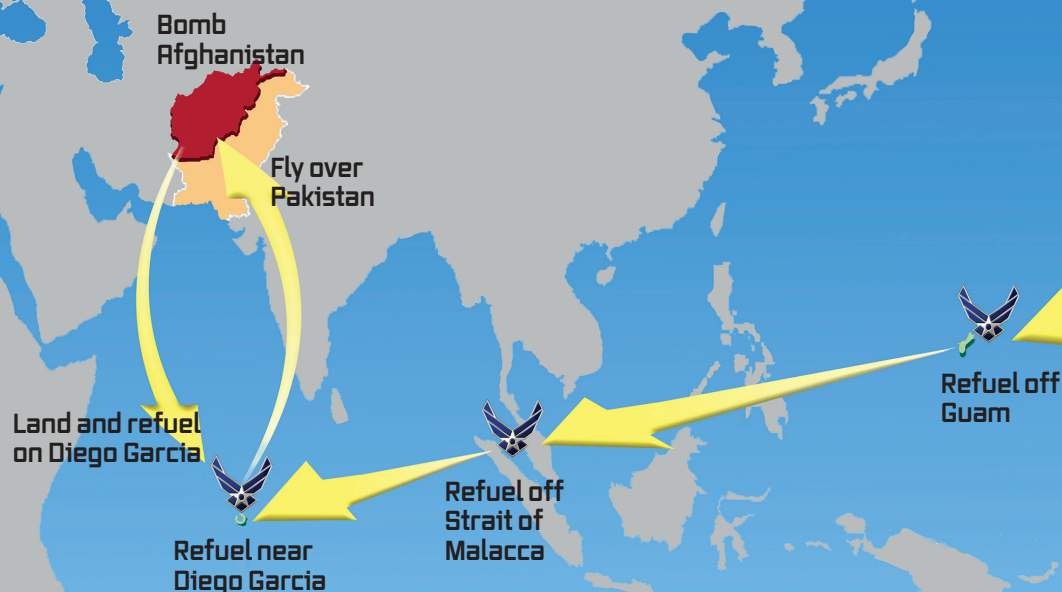
The weapon of choice for the B-2s was the extremely precise, satellite guided Joint Direct Attack Munition, or JDAM. Each B-2 could carry up to 40,000 pounds, or 20 tons, of bombs in its twin weapon bays. The bombs could be dropped from very high altitudes.

The B-2s, designed to be hard to find with radar and other sensing devices,

were painted dark gray to allow them to hide in the night sky. Each had a crew of two pilots, who would take turns sleeping on a folding lounge chair stretched out in the back of the cockpit, next to the jet's toilet.

At an AFA Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies event on Capitol Hill this past October commemorating the 15th anniversary of the start of OEF—and specifically the B-2 strikes that paved the way for the campaign—retired Lt. Gen. David A. Deptula said the stealth bombers were chosen to spearhead the war because of the threat.

A B-2 is refueled by a KC-10. B-2s from Whiteman AFB, Mo., opened the OEF bombing campaign in Afghanistan in 2001.



Though the Afghan air defense system was “not the world’s best,” in the aftermath of 9/11, its radars, surface-to-air missiles, and fighters still posed a potentially lethal threat to coalition aircraft. They had to be taken out.

The B-2s offered long range, a large payload, and stealth, allowing them to accomplish the surprise destruction of anything the Taliban could put up to challenge coalition airpower.

Deptula, who now heads the Mitchell Institute, said that when the 9/11 attacks occurred, he was directing the Air Force’s piece of the Quadrennial Defense Review, but he was quickly reassigned to run US Air Forces Central Command’s Combined Air Operations Center. It fell to him to recommend to CENTCOM air chief Gen. Charles F. Wald and CENTCOM commander Army Gen. Tommy R. Franks how to start the war.

“It took us less than 30 days” to plan and launch a “fully fledged air campaign” against the Taliban and al Qaeda, Deptula said, and the B-2s were “ideally suited” to conduct the initial strikes.

REFUELING

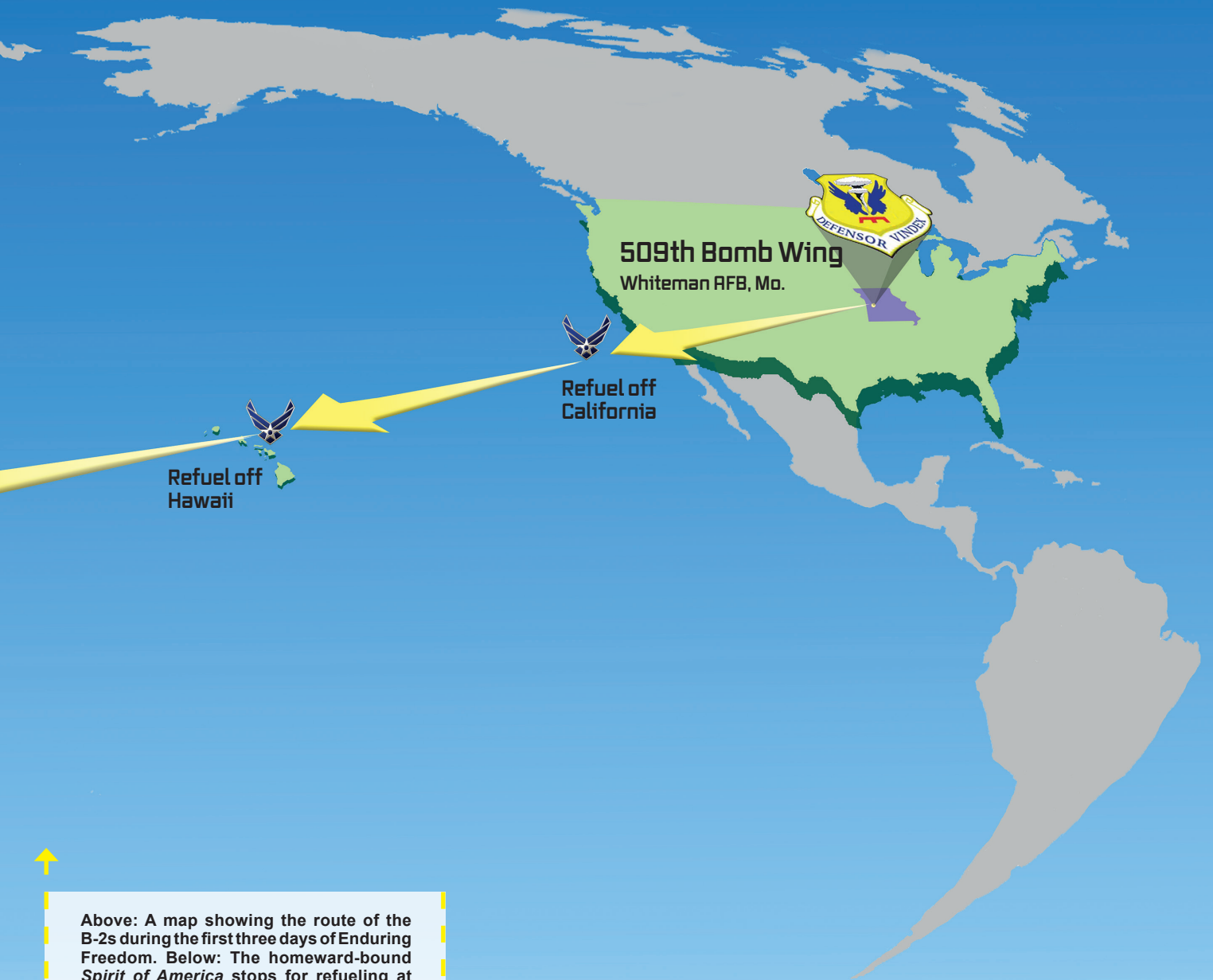
The B-2s at Whiteman belonged to the 509th’s operations group and its 325th and 393rd bomb squadrons. Brig. Gen. Anthony F. Przybyslawski commanded the wing. At the time, strategic bomber organizations were assigned to Air Combat Command; they have since been reorganized under Air Force Global Strike Command.

The B-2s would have to be refueled in the air several times in order to reach their targets on the other side of the world, so they depended on KC-135 and KC-10 tankers from organizations that included the 60th and 349th air mobil-

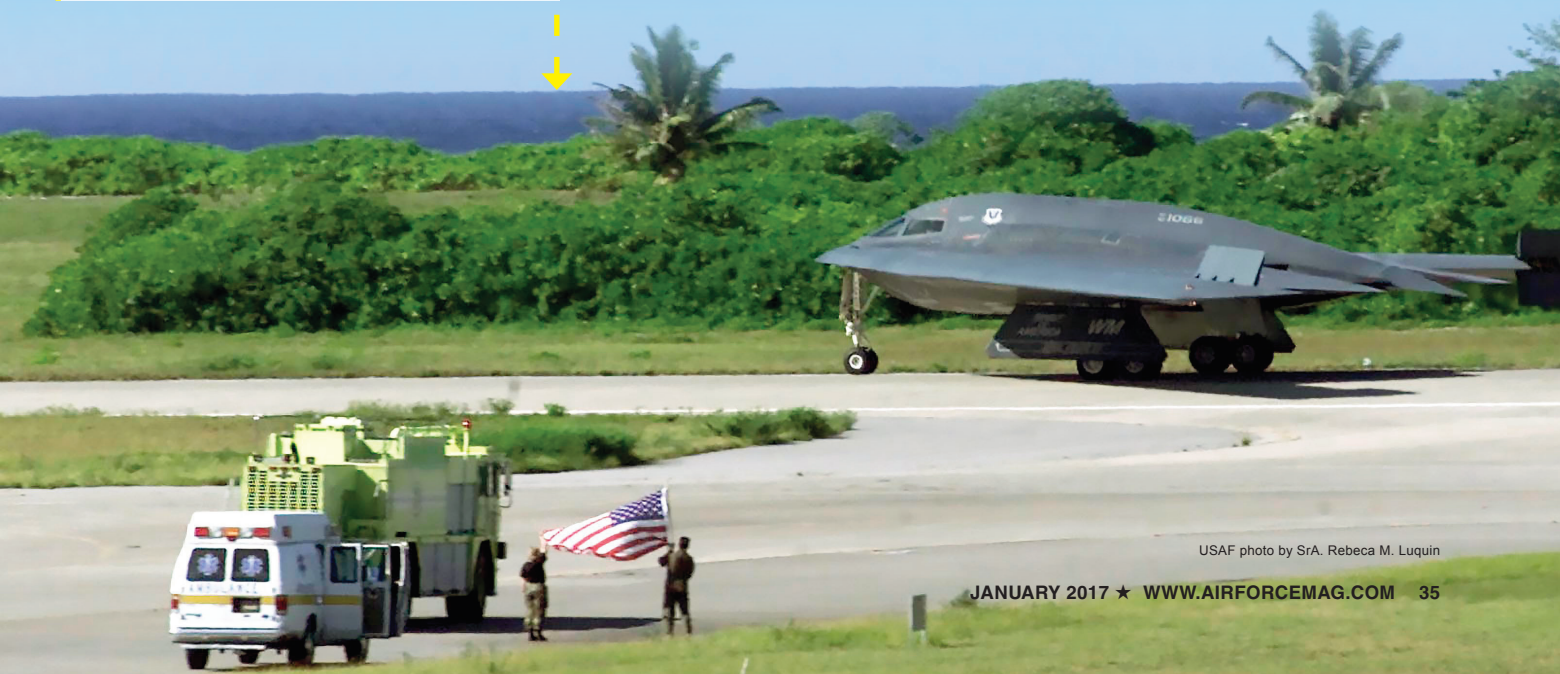
ity wings at Travis AFB, Calif., and the 319th Air Refueling Wing from Grand Forks AFB, N.D. The air refueling operations were coordinated through the 618th Air Operations Center, assigned to 18th Air Force.

The shortest air route between Whiteman and Afghanistan would have been over the North Pole and across Russia, but such missions would have been impossible in 2001. Despite the end of the Cold War, Russia wasn’t likely to approve of armed US strategic bombers overflying its heartland, even if the targets were in Afghanistan.

Moreover, if the US had notified Russia of its mission, the word may have made its way to Taliban leaders, destroying the element of surprise and putting the mission at risk. Flying eastward across the Atlantic and then across Eurasia was the second shortest in terms of distance, but the



Above: A map showing the route of the B-2s during the first three days of Enduring Freedom. Below: The homeward-bound *Spirit of America* stops for refueling at Diego Garcia during the longest bombing raid in history—over 44 hours of flight time. All six B-2s that participated flew missions of more than 40 hours.



USAF photo by SrA. Rebeca M. Luquin



USAF photo by SrA. Orly N. Tyrell via National Archives

Airmen process through a mobility line on Sept. 21, 2001, at Barksdale AFB, La., before setting out for Operation Enduring Freedom.

need to inform the countries being overflown would similarly risk the loss of surprise.

For operational security, President George W. Bush authorized the B-2s to fly west, across the Pacific. No one expected that.

Six B-2 bombers started the war, their missions spread out across the first three nights of the operation.

From Oct. 7 to 9, two B-2s took off from Whiteman every night. They generally flew the same route, refueling first over the coast of California before starting across the Pacific.

The second refueling occurred near Hawaii in the central Pacific.

Over Guam, the bombers had their third refueling.

The fourth took place near the Strait of Malacca in extreme Southeast Asia, while the fifth and final inbound refueling took place near the British island of Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean. After that, the bombers struck their targets in Afghanistan.

The only foreign country the bombers had to cross on the way to Afghanistan, taking the Pacific route, was Pakistan. After the air strikes, and with another refueling over the Indian Ocean, the B-2s landed on Diego Garcia.

Now-retired Brig. Gen. Jonathan D. George, who was the 509th's op-

erations group commander, said wing pilots had long since anticipated that the B-2s would be asked to fly globe-girdling missions without any en route stops. Speaking at the Mitchell event in October, he said they had been practicing missions of increasing lengths in the simulator, some in excess of 50 hours, so the call to attack Afghanistan was neither unexpected nor did it require any new thinking about long-endurance missions.

While the B-2s may not have needed any bases between Whiteman and their targets, the tankers did. For the record-breaking flights, such bases were available in the continental US, in Hawaii, in Guam, and at Diego Garcia. The tankers based at Diego Garcia also refueled the B-1s and B-52 flying subsequent missions between that island and Afghanistan.

SPRIT OF AMERICA

The missions on those three nights targeted Taliban and al Qaeda radar installations, airfields, air control facilities, enemy aircraft, and enemy training camps. The precise JDAMs—still relatively new in the inventory—had an accuracy within 10 feet.

The third of the six missions, on the second night, proved to be the longest bombing sortie in history. Maj. Melvin G. Deaile and Capt. Brian Neal crewed the B-2 named *Spirit of America*. Ahead of them were more than 30 hours of flying time just to get into the target area.



USAF photo

An airman uses Combat Track II, a system used to reprogram JDAMs when target priorities change.

As now-retired Col. Tony Cihak, one of the B-2 pilots who flew during those three nights of missions said at the Mitchell event, “We took off for the second night’s missions before the war was on, ... before the first night had even happened.”

Like the two B-2s that flew the previous night, they took the Pacific route. Deaile and Neal took turns sleeping, but were both at the controls at crucial points along the flight, such as their connections with the tankers. As they approached Afghan airspace, the sun was going down, and to fight sleepiness—the crossing of the Pacific alone had taken 24 hours—they had been given “go pills” by the flight surgeon to remain awake.

During the long transit, targets had changed, and nearly three-fourths of the aimpoints for new targets had to be fed into the computers and bombs.

Neal, now a colonel and commander of the 482nd Fighter Wing at Homestead ARB, Fla., told the Mitchell audience the most surprising thing about the B-2 missions in OEF was “their dynamic nature.” He expected more set-piece bomb runs, but it was typical in those three nights to strike or restrike targets that had not been planned back at Whiteman. Reprogramming the JDAMs, using a system called Combat Track II, required thousands of keystrokes. It’s considered clumsy by today’s standards,



but it was so new then that it had only been available to B-2 crews for a few months, Neal said.

After penetrating Afghan airspace, Deaile and Neal dropped 12 of their 16 JDAMs, spending about two hours over the country. Some of the targets required multiple passes, so the B-2 could create a 3-D image of that attack area with its synthetic aperture radar, to make a more precise drop.

They then headed out, connecting with a tanker and set a course—they thought—to land at Diego Garcia.

However, the CAOC called and asked if they were willing to go back in over enemy territory and use their remaining bombs. The crew agreed and spent another 90 minutes over Afghanistan, releasing four more weapons, before making for Diego Garcia.

After another aerial refueling, Deaile and Neal had to orbit the island as a B-52 was ahead of them. They finally touched down after being aloft 44 hours and 20 minutes.

Their mission was done, but *Spirit of America* was not. With 18 B-1s and B-52s already based at Diego Garcia, there simply wasn't enough room for B-2s or their maintenance crews to operate from the island. When the jet landed, its engines were kept running while the aircraft was serviced. It was refueled, new oil was poured into the engines, the toilet was emptied, and fresh food was put aboard, as was a different two-man crew, flown ahead for just this purpose. The new pilots got onboard, and just 45

minutes after the bomber landed, it took off and flew back across the Indian and Pacific oceans, across the western US, all the way back to Whiteman. When *Spirit of America* finally landed, it had been operating more than 70 hours without an engine shutdown.

During those three days, all six B-2s flew comparable missions lasting about 70 hours. The mission that Deaile and Neal flew happened to be the longest before landing. None of the aircraft experienced engine problems or had to abort or divert.

KNOCK DOWN THE DOOR

The B-2 strikes, coupled with Tomahawk missile attacks launched by Navy vessels in the Indian Ocean, destroyed key Taliban and terrorist air defense facilities at the very start of Operation Enduring Freedom. These missions cleared the way for more vulnerable bombers, such as the B-1s and B-52s operating from Diego Garcia, joined by Air Force fighters based in other parts of the Middle East, and Navy attack jets flying from carriers in the Indian Ocean. Some of the fighter missions lasted upward of 18 hours.

Deptula said the “knock down the door” missions flown by the B-2s on the first three nights of OEF illustrate the need for the new B-21 bomber. Like the

L-r: Missouri Sen. Christopher Bond, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Missouri Rep. Ike Skelton, and Brig. Gen. Anthony Przybyslawski at Whiteman AFB, Mo.

B-2, it is about “providing options to the President,” said Brig. Gen. Jim Dawkins Jr., a B-2 pilot at the time who is now on the Joint Staff. Should the US need to launch attacks on any target on Earth, no matter how comprehensively defended, in a short period of time, while operating directly from US soil, the B-2s—and someday the B-21s—will be available to do the job, he said at the Mitchell event.

The strategic bombing missions allowed the US and its coalition partners in OEF to have complete control of the skies over Afghanistan. Not long after the operation began, those skies were safe enough for American transports to begin delivery of huge amounts of aid and supplies to parts of northern Afghanistan, where the indigenous Northern Alliance could begin to assert its own control over the country, toward evicting both the Taliban and the al Qaeda terrorists they harbored. The longest bombing missions in history were some of the most successful, demonstrating the swift global reach of American aircraft and aircrews—an object lesson for current and future adversaries. ★

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