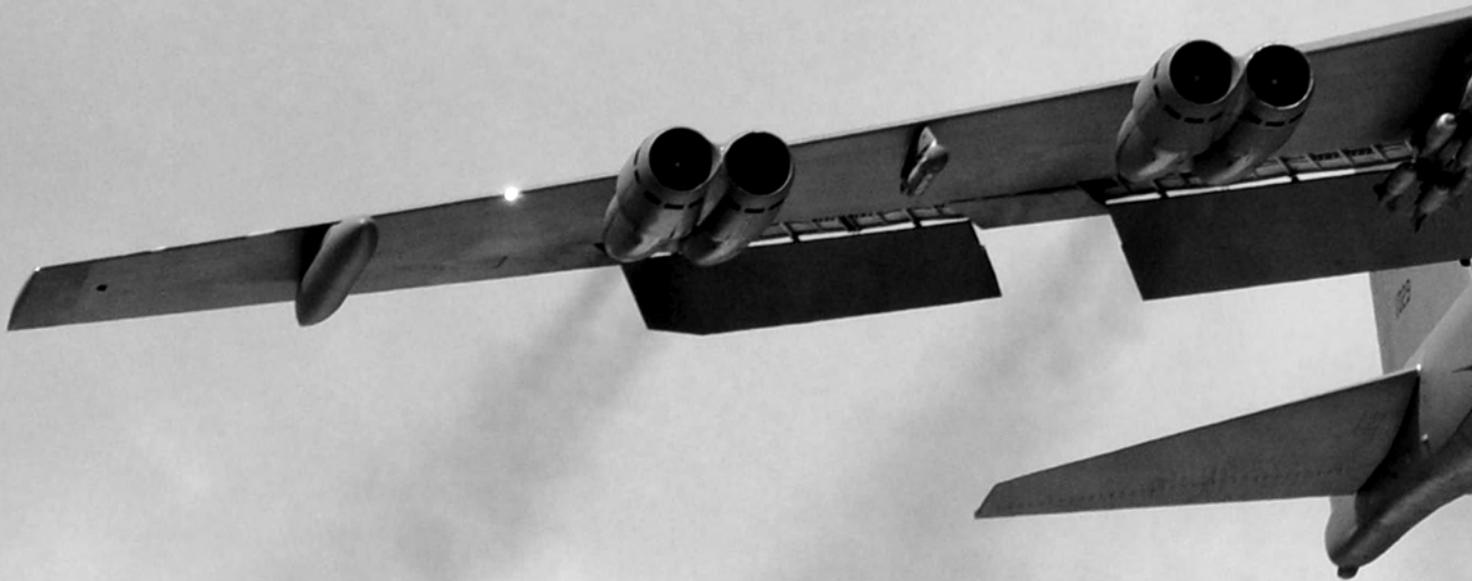


“TEN SECONDS TO IMPACT”
THE B-52 AIR STRIKE AT
BAGRAM, AFGHANISTAN,
NOVEMBER 12, 2001





Forrest L. Marion

(Overleaf) A B-52 flew from Diego Garcia to Afghanistan to provide some close air support in 2001. (USAF photo.)

In the weeks immediately following the surprise attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, the United States prepared to strike the Taliban-controlled country of Afghanistan that acted as the support base for the al Qaeda terrorist group. Although the Taliban controlled some 90 percent of the countryside, there were still pockets in the far north where anti-Taliban partisans resisted. The main anti-Taliban group had been led by Ahmed Shah Massoud, the “Lion of Panjshir,” of Tajik ethnicity and supported by Tajikistan, until his assassination by al Qaeda on September 9, 2001. Led by Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld’s vision of combining air strikes with a small ‘footprint’ on the ground consisting mainly of special operators capable of working with anti-Taliban indigenous forces, the U.S. Air Force’s 720th Special Tactics Group (720 STG) expected to play a major role. Based at Hurlburt Field, Florida, the 720th group consisted mainly of combat controllers, pararescuemen, and special operations weathermen, highly-trained Airmen that usually operated in denied or hostile areas as part of a joint special mission team or task force. Moreover, the new Air Force chief of staff, Gen. John P. Jumper—whose first day on the job was September 11—compared Afghanistan with the 1999 Kosovo conflict. General Jumper stated that if special operations forces (SOF) forces would have proven valuable in Kosovo, it was “absolutely imperative . . . that you start with people on the ground” in Afghanistan. And for the Air Force, that meant Special Tactics.¹

Within hours of the September 11 attacks, then-Col. (later, Brig. Gen.) Robert H. “Bob” Holmes, the 720 STG commander, began preparing to deploy the group’s headquarters and squadrons to the theater of operations. Holmes recognized the importance of “planting the 720th [Special Tactics] flag firmly in the middle of the combat theater.” By November, he established his headquarters at Masirah, Oman, with elements of four squadrons deployed. In his joint role, Holmes also served as deputy commander, Joint Special Operations Task Force–South (K–Bar), and in December he moved the 720 STG headquarters to Kandahar, Afghanistan. One element of the 720th led by Capt. Michael J. “Mike” Flatten “was instrumental in the USMC’s historic Task Force 58 deployment into Objective Rhino in the Afghan desert” and in its subsequent move to Kandahar.²

On the night of October 7/8 (local time), the U.S. military response, Operation Enduring Freedom, began. For the first two months of the operation, although U.S. Navy carrier-based aircraft conducted about 75 percent of all strike sorties, a nearly equal percent of the tonnage dropped came from USAF



aircraft, particularly heavy bombers. By October 15th, combat controller William C. “Calvin” Markham arrived at Karshi-Khanabad (K-2) airfield, Uzbekistan, to the north of Afghanistan. The husky 6’ 1” Special Tactics member from Waukesha, Wisconsin, augmented a U.S. Army Special Forces (SF) team, Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) 555, whose primary task was to identify ground targets in support of operations against the Taliban regime. Initially encountering resistance to his joining the detachment, Markham was welcomed with open arms when 555’s team sergeant recognized his “swim buddy” from a SOF SCUBA course twelve years earlier, thereby establishing the credibility and rapport so critical to joint special operations. On the night of October 19/20, two Army SOF MH-47E helicopters belonging to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment inserted ODA 555 into a site in Afghanistan’s Panjshir Valley north of Bagram Air Base. Bagram was some thirty miles north of Kabul. Meanwhile, another Special Forces team, ODA 595, was inserted the same night into an area south of Mazar-i-Sharif, in north-central Afghanistan. The two SF teams, detachments 555 and 595, thus began operations inside Afghanistan on the first night that U.S. forces had ‘boots on the ground’ as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. In an interview in 2007, Master Sergeant (later, Chief Master Sergeant) Markham described how the team’s specific mission determined which member would be the lead:³

You have a twelve-man team and each person . . . brings a ‘piece of the pie’. . . . If this [had] been a

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Forrest L. Marion graduated from the Virginia Military Institute with a B.S. degree in civil engineering. He earned an M.A. in military history from the University of Alabama and a doctorate in American history from the University of Tennessee. Since 1998, Dr. Marion has served as a staff historian and oral historian at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Commissioned in 1980, he retired from the U.S. Air Force Reserve in 2010. This article was developed from an unpublished manuscript on the history of Air Force Special Tactics, 1953-2003.

(Left) U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. Jumper. (USAF photo.)

(Right) The runway at Bagram, with a C-17 ready for takeoff. (USAF photo.)

TEAM 555 MEMBERS BEGAN WORKING WITH THE CIA AND WITH NORTHERN ALLIANCE COMMANDERS TO SELECT TARGETS FOR AIRSTRIKES



sniper mission, the sniper on the team would have been the key guy. If this [had] been an engineering project for blowing up a bridge, the engineer would have had it. If this [had] been something medical . . . the medic on the team would have had it. But this particular mission was close air support [CAS], so that was my piece of the pie.

In other words, because of the particular nature of ODA 555's assignment, its lone USAF augmentee, Markham, was unquestionably the team's "key guy."

Markham recalled that during his brief stay in Uzbekistan, some wanted to make the U.S. troops "look like locals" in the Central Asian area of operations:⁴

So they went out and bought these Uzbek civilian clothes, but . . . it is basically like that Saturday Night Live skit with Dan Aykroyd and Steve Martin, and that is how the Uzbeks dress. It was kind of like disco and Dance Fever. They had these tight polyester pants with bellbottoms and these big furry jackets. I just thought to myself, "This is not the way to go." I went . . . and pulled out my rough civvies. I had Columbia pants, my Rockley hiking boots, my REI cold weather gear with the fleece and the wind-stopper jacket over it. Everybody said, "Oh you are going to stand out, and you are going to look like an American." As soon as we got into the Panjshir Valley [Afghanistan], the first guy that walks up to us . . . [says] "Would any of you guys like some sausage?" So right away we knew that we were in friendly territory. . . . [He] had on some Rockley hiking boots and Columbia pants . . . an REI button shirt and fleece, and a ball cap and it had "Fire Department of New York" on it!

In February 2002, a *Washington Post* article noted, "From the night they infiltrated, Team 555 members began working with the CIA and with Northern Alliance commanders to select targets for airstrikes." The ODA's first priority was to destroy the Taliban's forces near Bagram airfield, where the Taliban and Northern Alliance had faced off for between three and five years on account of the Taliban's inability to "penetrate the defensive minefields near the base," according to a U.S. Army study. Soon after arriving in Afghanistan, on October 21, Markham found himself in the control tower at Bagram looking out incredulously at Taliban forces spread out just east of the runway as he prepared to call in air strikes against them. "As a certified air traffic controller," he quipped, "there is no better place to be than in the tower." The Alliance forces held the tower and the west side of the airfield. Sergeant Markham recalled: "It was just surreal and the most un-tactical place to be, and it went against all of my training and my learning. But it just ended up being where we could affect the most damage to the enemy because we had the biggest field of view from there." On that day at Bagram, Markham controlled some six flights of F/A-18 Hornets, with two to four aircraft per flight. All of them carried laser guided bombs (LGBs). He estimated the Taliban's losses at five hundred, probably more Taliban than the Northern Alliance had killed in years. Markham added, "We completely annihilated that whole front line that they had just east of the airfield."⁵

After clearing Bagram of Taliban forces, Markham's team set about clearing the thirty-mile stretch between the airfield and the capital, Kabul, to the south. Markham had at his disposal a variety

The forbidding landscape of Afghanistan. (From the Briscoe collection, courtesy of the author.)



555 SPLIT INTO TWO SECTIONS AND POSITIONED THEMSELVES AT OBSERVATION POSTS SITUATED LESS THAN TWO MILES APART

of Navy and USAF aircraft, mainly F-18s, but also F-14 and F-15 fighters; B-52 and B-1 bombers, and AC-130 gunships. In order to “service all the targets,” 555 split into two sections and positioned themselves at observation posts situated less than two miles apart. From their vantage points, using high-powered binoculars, they could see “small columns of men walking ridge lines, cooking fires burning near trench lines, artillery and mortar pieces and tanks glistening in the afternoon sun. . . . Sometimes they saw black-shrouded figures, which they took to be al Qaeda members.” Whenever Markham identified a potential target, he contacted the combined air operations center near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where the request was “vetted” in an effort to ensure civilians or certain prohibited sites remained undamaged. Alluding to Markham without naming him, the *Post* writer credited a combat controller from the 720 STG with teaching the ODA “how to call in close air support using binoculars, a laser target designator, Global Positioning System devices and other equipment.” In the SF tradition, the team lived and worked closely with the indigenous forces, building relationships and trust. Markham recalled many days when his hosts shared the traditional Afghan meal of goat and rice, a fare of which he eventually grew tired.⁶

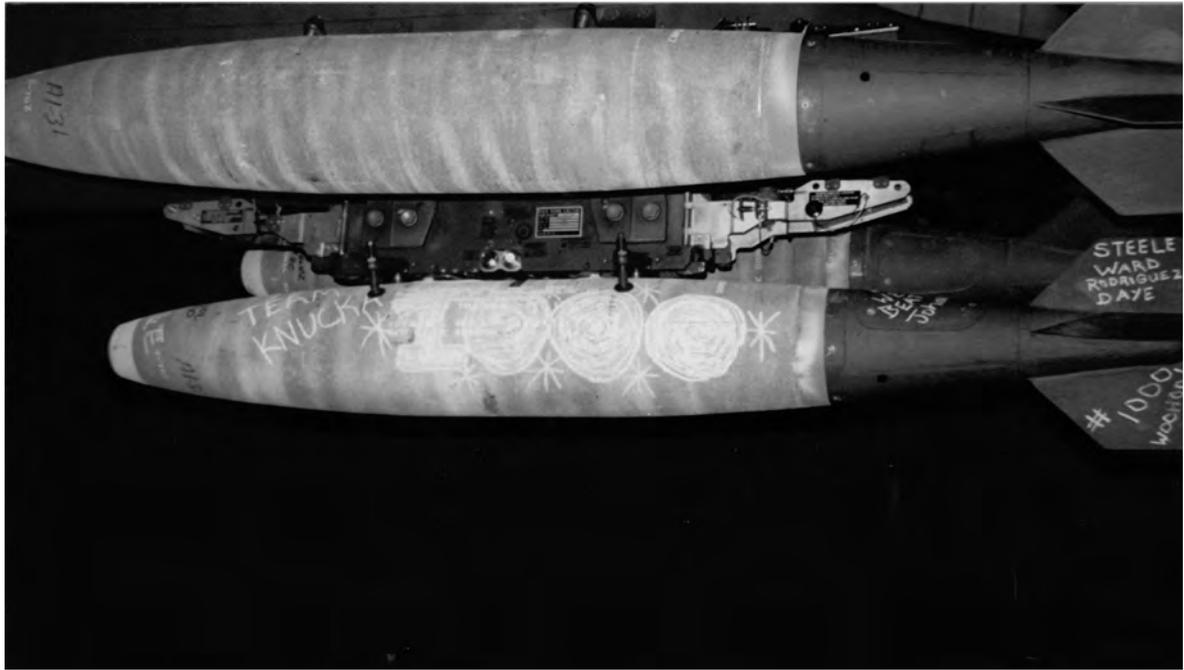
By the first week in November, the numbers of U.S./Coalition aircraft available for close air support (CAS) were on the rise. But some U.S. Army elements were disinterested in USAF combat controllers directing their air support. Markham recalled one incident in which a battalion commander was told by his soldiers, “We don’t need a com-

bat controller, we can do this job ourselves.” Although in one sense the assertion was true, it was a wasteful approach. Markham commented,⁷

They were wasting aircraft. When an aircraft . . . got frustrated . . . they knew right away, hey, come on down to Bagram. I was open seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day and I will get rid of your bombs for you. . . . Our call sign was Tiger-Zero-Zero-One and they were Tiger-Zero-Zero-Two. . . . [CAS aircraft] would come down and [say], “What is the deal with Tiger-Zero-Zero-Two?” “Well,” I said, “they should have a combat controller with them.”

By the second week of November, the Northern Alliance planned an offensive near the town of Bagram. The Taliban, meanwhile, sought to counter the move. Initially, Markham anticipated a significant amount of dedicated air support. Just prior to the offensive, however, he was chagrined to learn that his air support would be minimal. Markham likened it to showing up “to a gunfight with a knife.” On the morning of November 12, 2001, Northern Alliance forces lined up on the north side of the main east-west running road at Bagram. The larger, better-armed Taliban forces, several thousand strong, were situated on the south side of the twelve-foot wide dirt road. The Taliban began firing antiaircraft guns, artillery, mortars, tanks, and small arms, producing significant casualties among the Northern Alliance. It was clear the Taliban were preparing to overrun their adversaries. At one point, one of the Northern Alliance generals jumped on top of Markham to protect him from the Taliban

The 1000th Mark-82 bomb loaded by Scotty Briscoe's B-52 squadron in Diego Garcia, late 2001. After the mission on 12 November, during which that particular bomb was employed, Briscoe gave the fuze pin to Markham. (Photo courtesy, Scotty Briscoe.)



[MARKHAM] WAS SORELY DISAPPOINTED WHEN TOLD THAT THE BOMBER WAS CARRYING ONLY "DUMB" BOMBS

[HE] ASKED FOR A STRING OF ALL FORTY-FIVE OF THE FIVE HUNDRED-POUNDEERS ALONG THE TALIBAN'S FRONT LINE

fire. When the surprised combat controller asked what was going on, the general said that if he were killed, another would take his place. But if Markham was killed, the airplanes "would not come." That simple, sobering analysis was quite correct. And at that particular moment, Tiger 01, whom the Northern Alliance called the "minister of air," needed emergency CAS. A lone B-52H bomber, call sign "Rocky 61," contacted "Tiger 01," and offered its assistance.⁸

The B-52 had flown north from its base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean loaded with (unguided) five-hundred-pound Mark-82 bombs, often called "dumb" bombs, rather than the standard mix of Mark-82s and (guided) JDAMs (Joint Direct Attack Munitions, or GBU-31s). The standard load was twenty-seven Mark-82s consisting of three racks of nine loaded internally; and twelve JDAMs attached to pylons, six under each wing. But on November 12, for unknown reasons the B-52 responding to the call carried no JDAMs. Rather, its bomb load was forty-five Mark-82s, including nine under each wing. In an interview in 2008, the radar navigator, "Scotty" Briscoe, recalled both the urgency in Tiger 01's voice and the seriousness of his request, in addition to being able to hear gunfire in the background. After Tiger 01 determined the B-52's bomb load, Briscoe recalled, one of the first things he said was, "I need a two-thousand-meter string of bombs." Briscoe thought to himself, "Wow, that is over six thousand feet . . . what has this guy gotten himself into?" Markham wanted the string on a two-two-zero-degree course just to the east of the main dirt road running from Bagram to the southwest. Although he kept his thoughts to himself, Markham had expected JDAMs. He was sorely disappointed when told that the bomber was carrying only "dumb" bombs, especially given his team's desperate straits. But with no alternative, Markham, positioned on a rooftop near the road for

a vantage point, asked for a string of all forty-five of the five hundred-pounders along the Taliban's front line. The bomber crew realized the desperate situation as well. "We knew whoever we were talking to on the ground was in pretty bad shape," according to Briscoe, "otherwise they wouldn't be calling for unguided bombs from forty thousand feet only about five hundred yards from their [own] position!"⁹

Even more disconcerting to Markham, the B-52 crew would have to make adjustments for the strong winds. In 2008, Lieutenant Colonel Briscoe described the challenges of dropping unguided bombs especially from high altitudes:¹⁰

Everything was focused on maintaining the proper ground speed and the proper heading, because if your ground speed gets off and if you don't have the proper throttle setting then your spacing [between each bomb in the string] changes. . . . So we spent a lot of attention on our headwind/tailwind component to make sure ground speed was good. The other thing was zeroing in our heading. When you drop unguided weapons, the only thing that you can control is the release point and that has to be as accurate as possible. Once you release the weapons it is pure physics and wind.

To assist his crew with an easily identifiable initial point, or IP, for the bomb run, Briscoe chose Bagram airfield, some fifteen miles northeast of Tiger 01's position, clearly visible from the air.¹¹

Tiger 01 was in a "danger close" situation, meaning that his own position was in danger of being struck if the bombs were even slightly off the target. His team expected the Taliban's assault at any moment and so was anxious for the drop. Briscoe completed his calculations and checked them with the other navigator. The forty-five bombs were set to fall in a string one hundred twenty feet apart along

Markham and friends (left-to-right) Shawn Delaney, Calvin Markham, Scotty Briscoe, Phil Fluhr, in northern Wisconsin, undated. (Photo courtesy, Calvin Markham.)



THE AIR STRIKE ENDED THE TALIBAN'S ACTIONS AT BAGRAM

the Taliban's front line. Banking over Bagram airfield, the aircraft commander (AC) started the run-in on a two-two-zero-degree course. Briscoe contacted Tiger 01 and told him they were inbound from the IP. Briscoe recalled that several minutes later, he completed the checklist for the drop and everything looked good. At about twenty seconds prior to the drop, he heard, "Rocky 61, Tiger 01, have you guys dropped yet?" The AC responded, "No, Tiger 01, we are about fifteen seconds out, why, what's wrong?" At precisely fifteen seconds the huge bomb bay doors opened automatically. Briscoe recalled those moments:¹²

Here we are and the bomb bay doors are already open, and we are fifteen seconds to release . . . and Tiger 01 comes back on the radio and says, "Well, I'm just not used to seeing you over my shoulder like that." I was still confident that we had everything set and ready to go. . . . So at eight seconds to release the aircraft commander called "Withhold," which is our code word to stop the bomb run. I hit a couple of switches and we stopped the bomb run with about six seconds to go.

The huge bomber immediately started "a big, right hand turn" back toward Bagram. Though frustrated for the moment, Briscoe knew his AC had made the proper call.¹³

The aircraft commander called Tiger 01 and reported, "We are off dry," meaning they had not released any weapons. Markham relayed his concern that it had looked as though the bomber was flying over his position. Reassured by the AC that

the bomber had to drop from "seven miles back" and that the bombs would actually *overfly* his position prior to hitting the ground, Tiger 01 came back, "Roger that, cleared hot." Six minutes later, Rocky 61 was again on its run-in. Briscoe made sure that the pilot did not cut the turn too short, so as to allow enough time to complete the checklist and "zero out" the heading from the IP inbound. This time the bomber gave a sixty-second-out call and Markham repeated, "Cleared hot." Calvin Markham recalled the several minutes that followed:¹⁴

I gave him "cleared-hot," and it took [one minute] from the time he dropped them to when they hit. I said, "Hey, just give me a ten-second countdown because that way . . . we can at least say 'hey, it was great knowing you' or whatever." He gave us that ten second countdown and I rolled over on my back and I did not see anything. . . . Then it was a five-second countdown and just then I see these objects . . . falling out of the sky. . . . I turned my head and laid it on the side of the roof, and right exactly where we told them to put them, [the bombs] hit. Then this devastating explosion started going off. . . . It was like the A-bomb just went off. . . . We all stand up . . . and the dust settles and there is not one gunshot going on at all. Then all of a sudden . . . the Northern Alliance . . . started cheering. . . . Then they started rushing . . . thousands of Northern Alliance guys started moving across this road.

Briscoe, who of course could not see what was actually transpiring on the ground, recalled it was exactly 55 seconds from bomb release to impact—

after which the B-52 crew did not hear from Markham for at least 30 seconds—a tense wait.¹⁵

Scenes somewhat similar to that which Markham described were echoed by another combat controller in December 2001. Michael C. Stockdale of the 24th Special Tactics Squadron was attached to an Army special mission unit south of Jalalabad, Afghanistan, on the Pakistani border. His unit accompanied a group of anti-Taliban fighters through the mountains; Stockdale handled their close air support needs. In an interview in 2007, Sergeant Stockdale commented, “It was phenomenal to see the difference in their [the anti-Taliban fighters] aggression and their will to fight as soon as planes checked in and started dropping bombs where they wanted them. They started rushing.”¹⁶

On November 12, only minutes after Briscoe’s B-52 dropped its bombs and prepared to depart the area, Markham suddenly came on the radio: “Rocky 61, great hits, great hits, absolutely great hits!” With extreme understatement, Briscoe surmised, “Whatever we had done, it solved their problem and he was quite a bit happier about it.” In fact, Markham’s SF team members were so appreciative that a few days later when they recovered two U.S. flags from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul—abandoned since 1989—they gave one to Markham.¹⁷

In fact, the air strike ended the Taliban’s actions at Bagram: “all enemy action ceased,” one

report stated. The official battle damage assessment from Tiger 01 credited Briscoe’s B-52, Rocky 61, with over 1,200 “enemy killed by air.” From shortly after the strike until the next day, November 13, Northern Alliance forces drove their jam-packed trucks literally “from the trench lines at Bagram” into the capital of Kabul. The Taliban had fled the city. The *New York Times* reported, “. . . the Taliban left Kabul as they arrived five years ago, fading away in ghostly fashion at the dead of night, in their pickup trucks, with all the weapons they could carry.” It was barely three weeks from the start of ground operations in OEF. An Army SOF publication later summarized that on the ground, the unconventional warfare campaign in Afghanistan was directed by a very small number of specialists: about one hundred thirty Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations soldiers “and a handful of Air Force special tactics [combat] controllers.” Although the fighting in Afghanistan ebbed and flowed for more than a decade, accompanied by changing U.S./allied objectives and attitudes, the November 12, 2001, air strike near Bagram and the subsequent capture of Kabul provided an important early success in Operation Enduring Freedom and encouraged many Americans, friendly Afghans, and allied partners for some months regarding the longer-term prospects in Afghanistan.¹⁸ ■

NOTES

1. Forrest L. Marion, “The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air Force, 1989-2009,” *Air Power History* 57 (Sum 2010), p. 27; Charles H. Briscoe, et al, *Weapon of Choice: U.S. Army Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2003), p. 95; Rebecca Grant, *The First 600 Days of Combat* (Washington: IRIS Press, 2004), Jumper quote on p 49. Massoud was known as the “Lion of Panjshir” for his fierce and successful resistance against the Soviets in the Panjshir Valley during the 1980s. An excellent source for details on Massoud and his resistance is Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).
2. Note, draft manuscript review, Brig Gen Robert H. Holmes (USAF, Ret.), Aug 8, 2011; email, Lt Col Michael J. Flatten, USAF, to CMSgt Wayne G. Norrad (USAF, Ret.), Oct 11, 2012, copy in AFHRA/OH files.
3. Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan: War Fighting, Intelligence, and Force Transformation* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS] Press, 2002), p. 145; Intvw, F. L. Marion, oral historian, AFHRA, with MSgt. William C. Markham (USAF), Jul 16, 2007; Caspar W. Weinberger and Wynton C. Hall, *Home of the Brave: Honoring the Unsung Heroes in the War on Terror* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006), pp. 67-76; Dana Priest, “In Air War, Huts And Hard Calls,” *Washington Post*, Feb 20, 2002, p. 1; *Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001-March 2002*, CMH Pub 70-83-1, at www.history.army.mil/brochures/Afghanistan/Operation%20Enduring%20Freedom.htm#p14b, pp. 14-15 (Oct 18, 2013). Apparently, ODA 595 did not have a combat controller with the team. Seemingly, ODA 555 was short by one member (or Markham replaced one soldier); the normal authorized strength of an ODA was twelve, but Markham referred to a total of twelve men on 555’s

team including himself (rather than thirteen total).

4. Markham intvw.

5. Priest, “In Air War, Huts And Hard Calls”; Markham intvw; *Operation Enduring Freedom, October 2001-March 2002*, pp. 14-15.

6. Priest, “In Air War, Huts And Hard Calls”; Markham intvw.

7. Markham intvw.

8. Markham intvw. For clarification, note that in the interview Markham referred to November 14 as the date; in fact, it was November 12.

9. Intvw, F. L. Marion, oral historian, AFHRA, with Lt Col “Scotty” Briscoe (USAF), Apr 24, 2008; Markham intvw; Discussion, Lt Col “Scotty” Briscoe (USAF) with Marion, Apr 24, 2008. Briscoe recalled his aircraft was at Flight Level 390, or 39,000 feet above sea level.

10. Briscoe intvw.

11. Briscoe intvw.

12. Briscoe intvw; Markham intvw. Briscoe did not recall Tiger 01 stating “danger close,” but regardless, the situation was grave enough for the term to apply.

13. Briscoe intvw.

14. Briscoe intvw; Markham intvw.

15. Email, Briscoe to Marion, Nov 15, 2013.

16. Intvw, F. L. Marion, oral historian, AFHRA, with MSgt Michael C. Stockdale (USAF), Jul 16, 2007.

17. Briscoe intvw; Markham intvw.

18. Briscoe, *Weapon of Choice*, pp 102-103; Air Medal citation, Capt “Scotty” Briscoe, May 3, 2004, copy in AFHRA/OH files; email, Briscoe to Marion, Nov 15, 2013; John F. Burns, “The Taliban Fade Away, But Remain A Threat,” *New York Times*, Nov 14, 2001; William Branigin, “Alliance Asserts Control Over Kabul,” *Washington Post*, Nov 14, 2001, p 1. Afghanistan’s second-largest city, Mazar-i-Sharif, fell to the Northern Alliance on November 10.