

AIR FORCE COMBAT CONTROLLERS AT WAR by John D. Gresham

*This article was first published in **The Year in Special Operations**: 2006 Edition*

October 2001 – McDill AFB, Florida - Okay ... here is the problem. It is October 2001, just five weeks since the terror attacks of September 11. The enemy is located in one of the most remote and isolated places on the planet, America has only a limited ability to support a handful of troops on the ground, and their only friends are a rag-tag collection of insurgent groups that



has been on the losing end of a civil war for almost five years. The terrain is barren and the mountain passes are as high as 19,000 feet at the saddle. Winter is just weeks away, and the American people expect a response.

Air Force combat controllers gear up for a night-fire exercise at a forward-deployed location supporting Operation Enduring Freedom. Combat controllers conduct and support special operations' missions under clandestine, covert, or low-visibility conditions. U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Jeremy T. Lock.

“These single Americans - these combat controllers - had the power to conjure lightning bolts out of the sky...what happened in Afghanistan is one of the most extraordinary stories in military history...”

– Mark Bowden, author, Black Hawk Down

So what happens?

After just 49 days, and with less than 300 sets of American boots on the ground, the forces of al-Qaeda and their Taliban hosts were completely routed, only a single American CIA officer was killed as a result of enemy action, and Afghanistan was on its way out of a generation-long nightmare. It was and remains one of the most impressive and successful insurgency campaigns in history, comparing with even the achievements of Genghis Khan and Mao Zedong.

So what did America do that worked so well in 2001? The CIA Field Operations Teams and Army Special Forces (SF) Operational Detachments Alpha (ODAs or “A-Teams”) were the same basic units that had existed for almost 50 years. What was it that made those 300 sets of American boots so effective that they could do what nobody else had done in Afghanistan in centuries of trying? ***It was, in a word, precision.***

NOTE: This online-only information was added to the CCT history after publication of *The Eye of the Storm – A history of Combat Control Teams*.

Targeting: The Key



One of the most famous images to emerge from the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom: Then-Staff Sgt. Bart Decker, a combat controller is photographed on horseback with Northern Alliance forces. U.S. Army photo.

Aircraft-delivered precision guided munitions (PGMs) date back to World War II, when the Germans first used radio-controlled bombs and missiles to attack Allied warships and shipping.

By 2001, American armed forces had a wide variety of PGMs, using laser, infrared (IR), electro-optical (E/O), and GPS-based guidance systems. In addition, American airpower doctrine had fully accepted the use of PGMs, having used more guided weapons during Operation Allied Force in 1999 than so-called “dumb”/iron bombs.

PGMs, while accurate and highly effective, do have challenges to their successful use. The biggest of these is accurate targeting, without which PGMs are simply an expensive waste. This became clear during the 1990s, and the U.S. military spent vast amounts of money building intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (ISR) systems ranging from satellites to unmanned aerial vehicles. But like ISR technologies, the art and science of camouflage also advanced in the 1990s, and the Afghans had become masters as a matter of basic survival. Clearly what were needed were more terrestrial ISR assets that could see under and around whatever “window dressing” men might emplace on potential ground targets.

Enter the USAF combat controllers (CCTs).

Pathfinders to Special Tactics

The origins of the USAF CCT program date back to when the United States Army began to experiment with airborne warfare just prior to World War II. One of the early problems that was encountered was being able to accurately drop units of battalion size into drop zones without them being scattered due to navigational error or weather difficulties. Trained air traffic controllers were needed on the ground, with the proper equipment and radio gear to guide the transport aircraft full of paratroops onto their targets.

The American solution was the creation of the Pathfinders, made up of specially-selected and trained airborne troops dropped ahead of the main landing forces. These became the nucleus for what would become one of the most elite communities in the American Special Operations Forces (SOF) community; the Air Force combat controllers. ^{See Note 1}



Air Force combat controllers and other SOF personnel watch a string of bombs strike a ridgeline in Afghanistan. U.S. Army photo.

By the late 1990s, what had become known as USAF Special Tactics had evolved into a compact force of just a few hundred personnel with a great deal more capability than simply guiding airborne troops to safe parachute landings. In fact, the Special Tactics community had three major sub-specialties, including

pararescue jumpers (called “PJs”) for combat search and rescue, combat weathermen, and the CCTs. All were trained in a grueling, two-year course that is the equal of anything that Navy SEALs or Army Rangers have to endure. For the CCTs, this includes acting as air traffic controllers on unprepared airstrips, fulfilling their original pathfinder mission for parachute drops, and also operating as forward observers for targeting artillery and airstrikes.

While Special Tactics personnel are quite capable of operating on their own, CCTs have often been seconded to other SOF communities to add their unique capabilities into the team mix. This has been especially true with the Army Special Forces, whose 12-man ODAs have had CCTs attached going back to Vietnam. The best of the CCTs, after a minimum of three years’ experience, are allowed to become Enlisted Tactical Air Controllers, and part of the specialized Tactical Air Control Parties. Only a few dozen of these superb personnel are assigned to work with SOF teams from other services, including SF, Rangers, and Navy SEALs. Assigned to the 720th Special Tactics Group at Hurlburt Field, Fla., they are a little known and deadly addition to any SOF team that deploys downrange.

Off to War

Almost as soon as the second hijacked 767 struck the South Tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, CCTs began to report to their bases and pack their gear. Spread around the world in Special Tactics Squadrons, these men would provide the lightly armed SF teams that would go into Afghanistan a number of services that would turn them into world-class killing machines. Small initial cadres of CCTs were assigned to Joint Special Operations Task Force – North (JSOTF-N), which became known as Task Force Dagger and was based at Karshi-Khanabad (called “K2”) Airfield in Uzbekistan and commanded by then-Col. John Mulholland, commander of the 5th Special Forces Group (5th SFG). Quietly, 5th SFG ODAs teamed with the individual controllers, and by mid-October they were ready to deploy for battle. Bad weather, however, hampered their deployment into Afghanistan for almost a week.



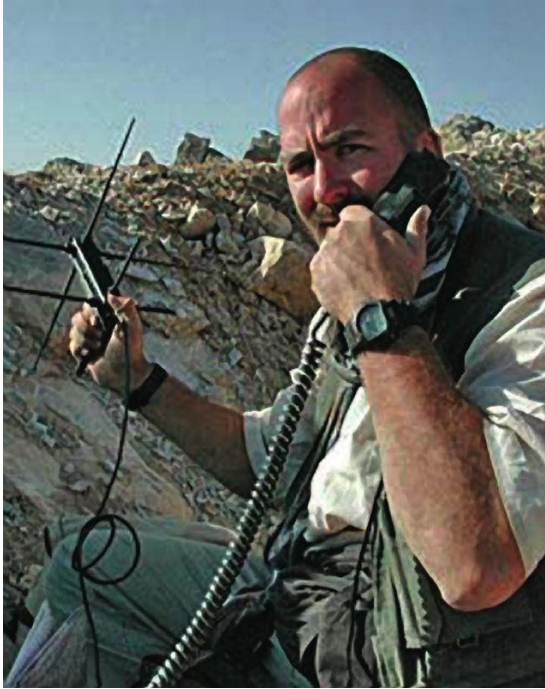
CCTs illuminating targets for air strikes with SOFLAMs. U.S. Army photo.

Then, on Oct. 19, 2001, the weather cleared and the first A-Teams were delivered by helicopters into Northern Afghanistan. First on the ground was ODA 555 (called “Triple Nickel”), which included then-Staff Sgt.

Calvin Markham, a 12-year veteran CCT. Markham could pass for an NFL middle linebacker or professional bodybuilder with little effort. Gentle and soft-spoken, he had no idea he personally was about to change the face of modern warfare when he stepped off the helicopter into the darkness near Bagram Airbase north of Kabul.

Met by CIA field operations personnel and representatives of the Northern Alliance insurgency, they were taken to meet their new partner in war: Gen. Babajohn. One of the warlords who had taken over after al-Qaeda assassinated Gen. Masood on Sept. 9, he was responsible for the Northern Alliance forces north of Kabul. There the lines between the Taliban/al Qaeda forces and those of the Northern Alliance had been static for almost three years, with neither side able to do substantial damage to the other. In fact, after just a few days of bombing in early October, U.S. air planners thought that they were out of targets in Afghanistan. That was about to change radically.

Taking Markham and the rest of ODA 555 to the abandoned control tower at Bagram Airfield (the facility had been bombed out during the initial stages of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afganistan [OEF-A] by U.S. fighters and bombers) on Oct. 21, Babajohn began to point out an array of targets, from command bunkers to artillery pits and tanks, to the team. Realizing that they had a view of enemy forces that was unavailable to the high-flying UAVs and satellites above, the team ran to get Markham’s radios and targeting equipment and set him to work. Calling back to the American air command center, Markham asked if there were any armed aircraft nearby that needed targets. Told he would have all he wanted within 30 minutes, the young CCT set down to a long day’s work while aircraft were redirected to the Panjashihir Valley.



Then-Staff Sgt. Calvin Markham in Afghanistan in 2001. U.S. Air Force photo.

Commenting on the initial engagement later, Markham said, “And when he came up on the radio, the pilot was ... really surprised that he was talking to American forces on the ground in Afghanistan. And then it was like ‘wow,’ we’re going to put some bombs onto the target!” Setting up his laser designator, called a “SOF LAM,” Markham laid the beam on the first target (a tank), checked his coordinates, and cleared the fighter “hot” to drop the weapon. Less than 30 seconds later, the target blew up in a massive explosion following a direct hit by a PGM.

As spectacular as the explosion was, the reaction of Babajohn and the Northern Alliance soldiers was even more surprising to the Americans. The Afghans around Markham and Team 555 went wild with joy, raising victory yells and praying to Allah. All had waited years for such power to be theirs, and knew from that moment on that final victory over the Taliban and al-Qaeda would be theirs. For Markham and the rest of his CCT brethren, it was just the first of thousands of such weapons they would guide in what would become “the long war” against terrorism.

Thinking back on it later, Markham commented, “It [was] very intense. The first 10 days was really incredible. ... We had every aircraft available to us. ... Everybody wanted to get into the fight! We were like 7-11 ... we stayed open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Whatever aircraft wanted to come to us, we would work them ... F-18s, F-14s, F-15s, F-16s, bombers ... just whatever was flying, we were putting bombs on targets.”

Masterpiece: The Battle of Mazar-e Sharif

While Markham was destroying everything within sight of the Bagram control tower, other CCTs were getting into the fight and making their own contributions. Up at Mazar-e Sharif, ODA 595 had been inserted to help work with the most powerful and famous of the Northern Alliance warlords: Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum. Hardened by decades of battle with a reputation as a cruel and relentless warrior, Dostum and his Northern Alliance fighters would try to take the first major strategic target from the Taliban in 2001, the airfield at Mazar-e Sharif. Like Bagram, Mazar-e Sharif had been contested for years with little movement on either side, until the arrival of the Special Forces.

Attached to one of the SF teams was Master Sgt. Bart Decker, another 18-year USAF veteran and one of the finest CCTs in the business. Previously, he had supported landing operations at K2 during the buildup prior to the first SF insertions into Afghanistan. Now, along with his SF

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brethren and Dostum, Decker rode from their insertion point to Mazar-e Sharif astride a tiny Afghan pony with a wooden saddle and an Afghan rug for padding. When they arrived on Nov. 8, 2001, the team found the Northern Alliance front lines under a heavy bombardment from some Taliban artillery pieces. Quickly setting up his radios and SOF LAM, Decker contacted another CCT who was working with a B-52 loaded with 1,000-pound GBU-32 JDAM PGMs. Using a small handheld GPS receiver to chart the coordinates of the individual Taliban guns, Decker passed the information up to the B-52 bombardier/navigator, who programmed the weapons for release. The results were staggering. Decker reported, “Right after that B-52 the shelling stopped. . . . You could see wreckage and human carnage. . . . and with 9/11 on your mind, I don’t think that there was a lot of remorse about it.”

Thanks to Decker and other CCTs, it took only days of this bombing to weaken the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Mazar-e Sharif enough for Dostum’s Northern Alliance fighters to successfully assault the airfield and town. Suddenly in full retreat, horse- and truck-mounted ODAs with CCTs helped the Northern Alliance chase the enemy forces all the way to Bagram and into Kabul, where Markham was still carrying out his daily regime of precision targeting.



Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, center, with American SOF personnel. U.S. Army photo.

On Nov. 14, Markham and his “Triple Nickel” teammates got pinned down during a vicious firefight and were almost overrun. Sgt. Andy Kubick, another CCT working back at JSOTF-N headquarters on K2, was helping Markham get aircraft stacked overhead and into position to provide firepower to fend off the Taliban

assault. The radio circuits became confused, and at one point Markham and Team 555 went off the air. Finally, however, the two CCTs got a B-52 into position for a dangerous option: a “danger close” attack with GPS-guided JDAM bombs.

Markham remembered, “There were times before when I had thought things were bad and we might not make it out, but this time I was thinking, ‘This is really bad!’ We prayed, because it was all coming in on us. You fall back onto your training . . . and you have to be able to communicate on that radio. . . . That is our job. Then Gen. Sharif [another Northern Alliance leader] and his men jumped on top of me and my teammates, putting themselves between us and the enemy fire. I’d never used B-52s in a ‘danger close’ airstrike before, and that basically changed the war for us right there. The devastation was amazing!”

Asking later why Sharif and his men had shielded them with their own bodies, Markham recalled the general saying, “Well, if something happened to him or one of his commanders, someone else would take over. But if something happens to you or your teammates, the Taliban will go back on the offensive, raping and killing everything all the way to Uzbekistan.”

The CCTs were that important to the OEF-A war effort.

Into the Future

Just 25 days after their arrival, ODA 555 with Markham helped lead the Northern Alliance forces into Kabul in the midst of a massive victory celebration. While it would take another three weeks, by early December, ODAs with CCTs had broken the Taliban and sent their remnants into the mountains along the Afghan/Pakistani border. In just 49 days, they had done what the Russians, British, and so many other invaders had failed to do: take Afghanistan. For their actions during OEF-A, Markham and Kubik were awarded Silver Stars; and his peers named Decker Combat Controller of the year.

The success of the CCTs in OEF-A has meant a busy time since 2001. Realizing the amazing synergies of SOF teams with CCTs, every major military operation since then has been led by these 21st century warriors. In Iraq, they were in the Karbala Gap and the Battle of Debecka Pass, doing their vital work ahead of conventional forces. So successful have their services been that new SF soldiers being trained at Fort Bragg are now being given the same kind of radio and controller training as the CCTs, so that their special skills can be leveraged across the entire U.S. Army SOF community. Meanwhile, the CCTs continue to stay in the fight, doing their vital jobs in the Global War on Terrorism.



Note 1: Here is a fact often overlooked by military historians: The U.S. Army Air Corps (USAAC and later USAAF) commandeered the Pathfinder-role near the end of World War II, citing problems with U.S. Army Pathfinder communications and navigational skills. In earlier WWII operations, the US Army Pathfinder teams had induced errors that were reflected in poor airdrop results. The USAAC/USAAF was bearing the responsibility for poor performance and decided to take corrective action.

In late 1944, the USAAC formed nine air-traffic-control-qualified, Combat Control Teams (CCT) for the final push into the German heartland. For the airborne invasion of Germany, a total of four American and one Canadian Airborne Division drops were planned. The first was the airdrop of the U.S. 17th Airborne Division and the Canadian Airborne Division in **Operation Varsity**. Two CCTs were infiltrated across the Rhine at a drop zone near the Wesel, Germany. A second reinforcement (Varsity) drop was planned, along with two more - **Operation Arena** drops - 100+ miles deep into Germany. The three follow-on drops were cancelled by General Eisenhower, crediting the first Varsity drop as a resounding success. (*CCT - The Eye of the Storm Author*)

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