

THE WAR ON TERRORISM – From the Sgt Mac’s Bar Collection

30 November 2001 - Kabul, Afghanistan - TSgt Calvin Markham, was one of the first 13 American servicemen to set foot in Afghanistan. Defense planners estimated it would take six months to liberate Kabul. Thanks largely to Markham’s 175-plus precision airstrikes, it took only 25 days.

The front lines between Taliban and Northern Alliance forces had been drawn for nearly three years along the Panjshir Valley, with the Taliban holding areas in and around Kabul. What the planners didn’t expect was the pinpoint of the close air support (CAS) called in by Combat Controllers! Sergeant Calvin was the first Air Force Special Tactics to be attached to a U.S. Army Special Forces team during this operation. “We arrived in country around mid-October and was the only team operating behind enemy lines for the first two weeks,” said Calvin. “I have worked with SF’s in the past and knew several of them from previous scuba training, so we came together quickly as a unit.” “We knew what our mission was – to help the Northern Alliance break through the Taliban lines and liberate the capital.



Combat controllers Calvin Markham (left) and Joseph O’Keefe (right) are the bookends for this group of U.S. Army Special Forces and Afghan militia warriors.
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The first day of the operation would signal the start of what is reported to be the longest sustained close air support operations conducted by Combat Controllers. “We set up an observation post in a mountain ridge overlooking the Taliban.

The valley was literally filled with enemy tanks, personnel carriers and military compounds. Working with the Northern Alliance leadership, the target was selected – a command and control building,” said Calvin. “I called in the first CAS and a U. S. military fighter arrived over the area and dropped his ordnance and hit the building.”

Photographs of the CAS in progress. (Courtesy Sgt Mac’s Bar)



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*.

That first strike not only made an impression on the Americans, it made an impact on the Northern Alliance forces working with this Special Operations Force (SOF) team. “I wouldn’t say they mistrusted us initially. But there was a certain sense they weren’t sure how we could help them. After that first CAS run, the wall was broken and they seemed to realize we were there to help them.”

As he and the team continued the CAS calls, the resistance from the Taliban forces waned and Northern Alliance gained ground. Then, as Northern Alliance began its offensive, the enemy struck back! “We were on top of a two-story building when they began attacking. The gunfire was intense. Then, they turned the guns on us. It was like large, flaming footballs flying at our position. The buttons on my uniform were getting in the way of me getting low enough. All I kept thinking was I needed aircraft. I grabbed the radio and called for immediate CAS.”

As the SOF team got down on the roof for cover, a Northern Alliance officer moved over to the Controller’s area. The officer pushed in front of TSgt Calvin, shielding him from the attack. Later, through an interpreter, he told the Controller why he did it. “He said if something happened to him, he knew someone else would step in to take his place in the fight. But if something happened to me the planes could not come and destroy the targets.”

The aircraft did come – U.S. Navy and Air Force fighters and bombers – and the offensive continued. The next day, 25 days after the first call for ordnance, the Northern Alliance moved into the capital. After ensuring the city was secure, the SOF team headed to the American Embassy that had been evacuated in 1989. Before fleeing the city, the Taliban had used the building as a staging area.

“We gained access and one of the first things I saw was an American Flag. It was on top of a pile of straw. Someone had tried to destroy it; the straw burnt and there were ashes all over the flag. When I picked up the flag, it was untouched – not a burn mark on it. With the help from a teammate I secured the flag by carefully folding the Stars and Stripes. I present that flag to my unit after I got back to the States.

“It was amazing. It was a great feeling knowing we’d made the mission happen, and made it happen in 25 days.

I’ve trained what seems my whole life for the chance to do a mission like this, one that tests your skills and training.

I said it before; we did this mission for America.”

While his SEAL teammates worked in the quiet mode, SSgt Eric took the lead in making all the noise.

He was one of two Combat Controllers embedded with the SEAL’s during operation Enduring Freedom.

Climbing around the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, the SOF team was tasked with a sensitive exploration mission to search and secure caves in the Zawar Kili area of the country. “My mission was to handle all the close air support calls and provide the ground-to-air interface between the team and aircraft.” “Our team was tasked to search known or suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda compounds, including more than 50 caves and above ground sites.”

He and his teammates were flown into the region in helicopters during January. “We were supposed to be in the area for about 10 hours, and it turned into a nine-day mission.” The exploitation began about mid-point of a valley, with the joint team setting off on foot patrol. “We walked up and down the mountainside checking

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anything we came across. Though the coalition forces had bombed the area before we arrived, we had no guarantees all the Taliban and Al Qaeda troops had fled. “We treated everything as hostile. With so many caves and tunnels to hide in, we didn’t take any chances. We had aircraft in our area in case I had to call in emergency CAS or needed to pull out. The aircraft also kept an eye out in front and behind us for any moving vehicles or people.

Though the joint team did not find any people hiding in the caves, what they did find was a major storage and hiding area for Taliban forces. “Inside the tunnels we found caches of munitions, communication systems, fuel storage rooms, classrooms, living quarters and filing cabinets filled with paperwork. As each cave and compound was secured and vital information removed, the SEALs’s EOD specialist would blow-up the larger munitions inside in an attempt to collapse the site. “After the first day, we went back and found the caves were not completely destroyed.



The CAS I called in on the site were making an impact, but not sealing the entrances. Many of the caves were lined with concrete and steel. Our team commander told us to figure out how to make the sites inaccessible.”

Combat Controllers shown left to right are Billy White, Marcus Millard, and Calvin Markham.

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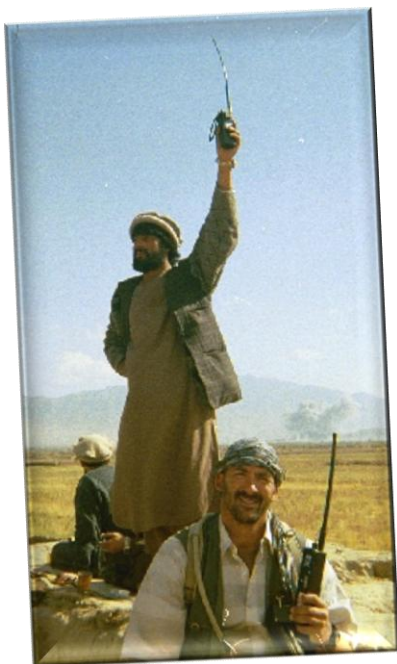
With no maps that reflected all the caves, the task would fall to the extensive training we had in land navigation and CAS. “The first obstacles were the fact that we didn’t have a detailed map. When you’re talking a pilot on to a target, you have to understand from his perspective that the mountains and desert all looks similar.” Relying on a compass, a GPS, notebook and pen they set out on the task of creating maps of the caves. “To get exact coordinates and the layout of the cave, we had to create a sketch for each site. It took hours of pacing off the inside and outside of the caves to get good data so we give exact data to the pilots. We gave each cave a number then plotted its height on the mountainside, noted any surrounding obstacles, then began pacing off the inside of the tunnels – the slopes, the direction it was dug in, the turns... We tried a few different bombing runs; bring the bombs in at different angles to get the best possible attack on the sites. After a few runs, we found the best attack was to crack the entranceway and then a second bomb to collapse the site.” The double-bomb drop worked perfectly. “The impact was incredible. We had one run that literally blew the cliff line down over the entrance. We secured and destroyed every cave, and ensured they would be inaccessible to anyone again.”

“We had to contend with the mountainous terrain and the weather elements, as well the fact we went in with just enough supplies to last a day and would up staying nearly 10 days. I have done a lot of real world missions and training exercises in this type of scenario, so I was better prepared for the challenge.

We went into the area with just the essential gear, traveling as light as possible. Going as light as possible meant “rucking” up mountains with more than 100 pounds of gear. We had all the communications gear and air traffic control equipment needed to do CAS calls, as well as providing the ground-to-air interface with the aircraft. Our training in CAS and our land navigation skills helped ensure if the Taliban or Al Qaeda ever tries to gain access to those caves again, they need some heavy equipment just to find the front door.

MSgt Bart Decker (shown at right) remembers riding on horseback to the top of the highest peak south of Mazar-e Sharif in northern Afghanistan in November, 2001 and watching the Taliban flee in pickups and four-wheel drives, their headlights illuminating the only road out of town to the east. It was almost too easy. (Courtesy Sgt Mac’s Bar)

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Flicking on his GPS receiver, Bart calculated coordinates for either end of the narrow stretch of highway and radioed them to B-52 bombers and F-16 fighters loitering overhead. Then he watched; horse by his side, as bombs rained down from the sky, striking the vehicles and killing their occupants with devastating precision. Decker is an Air Force Special Operations combat controller an unlikely super-warrior. His core skill is air-traffic control and his most potent weapon a GPS receiver available at the average electronic store. Yet, in a war driven by precise information about the Taliban and Al Qaeda targets, Bart and other combat controllers, embedded in Army Special Forces A teams, emerged as pivotal figures in the fusion of U.S. targeters on the ground with precision strikes from the air, the conflict’s most important tactical innovation.

Afghan militia worked closely with Combat Controllers and other U.S. Military Special Forces units to deliver a deadly blow against Al Qaeda and the Taliban militia that sheltered the terrorist network in Afghanistan. Calvin Markham is shown with radio in hand. (Courtesy Sgt Mac’s Bar)

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An Afghan militia leader who has fought against the Russians and with the Americans said the air-ground coordination was the key to the victory by U.S.-led Northern Alliance forces last year against Al Qaeda and the Taliban militia that sheltered the terrorist network. “The people with Special Forces controlling the jets are very effective – they really know what they are doing,” he said. “It was American aircraft that broke the front line of the Al Qaeda.”

U.S. Air Force Awards of the Silver Star

*for
Conspicuous Gallantry
in Action in the
Global War on Terrorism*



MARKHAM, WILLIAM "CALVIN"

Citation: The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star Medal to William "Calvin" Markham, Master Sergeant, U.S. Air Force, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action while serving with the 23d Special Tactics Squadron in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, near Kabul, Afghanistan, from 14 October to 30 November 2001. On 21 October 2001, within forty-eight hours of the detachment's arrival in Afghanistan, Sergeant Markham planned, organized, and led a close air support reconnaissance mission to within two kilometers of the Taliban front line in order to identify potential observation posts from which his team could execute missions. Almost immediately upon arrival, Sergeant Markham's team came under direct enemy fire from tanks, mortars and artillery. Despite heavy incoming fire, in which numerous rounds impacted within fifty to seventy-five meters of his position, Sergeant Markham instinctively and successfully directed multiple close air support sorties against key Taliban leadership positions, command and control elements, fortified positions, and numerous anti-aircraft artillery sites. Throughout this highly successful mission, Sergeant Markham skillfully directed multiple air strikes involving over one hundred seventy-five sorties of both strategic and attack aircraft resulting in the elimination of approximately four hundred and fifty enemy vehicles and over three thousand five hundred enemy troops. The resulting close air support operations were decisive in supporting the Northern Alliance ground offensive, which resulted in the successful liberation of the capital city of Kabul and led to the eventual surrender of hundreds of al Qaeda and Taliban ground forces. Master Sergeant Markham's valor and calmness under enemy fire were a constant source of inspiration to his detachment and General Fahim Khan's Northern Alliance forces. By his gallantry and devotion to duty, Sergeant Markham has reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.
Home Town: Waukesha, Wisconsin



Silver Stars Awarded – Courtesy Sgt Mac’s Bar

July 3, 2003 – Hurlburt Field, Florida - During an awards ceremony on July 3rd, Markham and others were awarded the Silver Star Medal for actions in Afghanistan.

TOP PHOTO – In the foreground are three CCT recipients of the Silver Star. Combat controllers pictured left to right are: TSgt Andy Kubik, TSgt Calvin Markham, and SSgt Gabriel Brown.



LEFT PHOTO – Shown left to right are Dr. Roche, Secretary of the Air Force, Markham and Lt. General Paul Hester, Commander Air Force Special Operations Command.



RIGHT PHOTO – AF Secretary Roche presents Silver Star Medal to Markham.



Here is a close up of the three CCT Silver Star recipients. Combat controllers pictured left to right are: TSgt Andy Kubik, TSgt Calvin Markham and SSgt Gabriel Brown. The Captain pictured at left is Nathan C. Green, a 16th SOS, AC-130H Aircraft Commander who is credited with regularly saving the ass of combat controllers and SF operators during his tour in Afghanistan.
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