

Osama bin Laden's trail went cold right as al Qaeda's leadership, being pummeled by airpower, appeared to be trapped in a mountain fortress.

Tora Bora

By Rebecca Grant

The battle of Tora Bora in December 2001 may have been a lost opportunity to catch Osama bin Laden. But it was definitely the moment when Operation Enduring Freedom shifted from a fast-moving, US-led rout of Taliban forces to a tricky counterinsurgency war.

The consensus view of Tora Bora's outcome was captured by a November 2009 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report: "On or around Dec. 16, [2001] two days after writing his will, [Osama] bin Laden and an entourage of bodyguards walked unmolested out of Tora Bora and disappeared into Pakistan's unregulated tribal area," read the report, overseen by Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), a longtime critic of the Tora Bora operation.

Exactly how bin Laden got into Pakistan is a mystery even after his death. The intelligence reports from the time were constantly shifting and often contradictory. The US has never definitively determined whether bin Laden was actually at Tora Bora during the now-famous battle, and even top US military commanders feel he was probably—but not definitively—there.

Bin Laden and Taliban forces had planned for some time to make a stand at Tora Bora. Beginning on Oct. 7, 2001, US-led

airpower and special operations forces teamed with various Northern Alliance factions to topple Taliban control of Afghanistan's northern cities. The fall of Kabul on Nov. 13 collapsed Taliban control across Afghanistan, but al Qaeda and Taliban elements spread throughout the country as the government crumbled.

Dispersed Taliban and al Qaeda elements presented the coalition with a new challenge. "Our interest," said then-Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, "is to capture or kill all the al Qaeda and prevent them from escaping into other countries or other locations in Afghanistan where they can continue their terrorist activities."

Of course, it was no surprise OEF had the potential to turn into a guerilla war. "When you go back and take a look at the history of how they have fought tactically, it's been predominantly a guerilla-style war done from hidden positions," Rear Adm. John D. Stuffbeem explained to reporters that Nov. 14.

However, the rapidly evolving situation in Afghanistan left US Central Command with very little sense of how many al Qaeda and Taliban remained. Afghan fighters had the option of simply going home—or taking up new fighting positions.

A US Army Chinook helicopter offloads coalition forces high in the mountains of Afghanistan during a hunt for Osama bin Laden. Caves honeycombed the Tora Bora complex, and al Qaeda's leader knew them well.



Many al Qaeda were not natives, however, and had come to Afghanistan from places such as Saudi Arabia and Chechnya and now had to surrender, hide, or flee.

Bin Laden's Options

For bin Laden, the end of Taliban rule left him few options. Cities were slipping out of Taliban hands, and roads were subject to attack from the air. This left the mountains—with their sheltered access to Pakistan—as a preferred choice for any sizeable group of terrorists sticking with bin Laden.

The 9/11 mastermind began to plan his next move, and it led straight to Tora Bora, less than 10 miles from the Pakistan border.

During Afghanistan's long war with the Soviet Union, CIA money helped build up the cave complex at Tora Bora for use by Afghan resistance fighters. Maps originally designated the area Tora Gora, but for unknown reasons CENTCOM and others redesignated it Tora Bora in December 2001.

Few knew the complex better than bin Laden himself. A US Senate report contended that in the late 1980s, bin Laden had assisted with many of the construction projects such as building the rough road from Jalalabad to Tora Bora and supervising excavation of the connecting tunnel system within the caves.

Bin Laden made more improvements to the Tora Bora hideout after leaving Sudan for Afghanistan in 1996. He "began expanding the fortress at Tora Bora, building base camps at higher elevations for himself, his wives, and numerous children and other senior al Qaeda figures," said the Senate report. A report in *The Guardian* stated bin Laden "used much of his personal fortune to enlarge and equip these caves for use as a military stronghold."

On Nov. 10, 2001, bin Laden rallied a crowd at an Islamic center in Jalalabad. "The Americans had a plan to invade, but if we are united and believe in Allah, we'll teach them a lesson, the same one we taught the Russians," bin Laden told hundreds of fighters during his speech.

It was to become the last public address in person by bin Laden—and the last certain confirmation of his whereabouts for nearly 10 years.

On that night, bin Laden circulated in the audience, handing out cash gifts. Later, a resident reported seeing bin Laden "standing in front of our guesthouse at 9 p.m.," just before the beginning of the nightly BBC radio Pashto-language news broadcast. Others saw bin Laden make an appearance at a mosque, surrounded by bodyguards. He then headed out of



DOD photo

Special operations forces sight targets. In the end, the fight for Tora Bora, though intense, would involve just handfuls of ground personnel.

Jalalabad in a vehicle convoy bound for the mountains, with several hundred followers with him.

"They were scornful and in a hurry, and sat there on a stoop, dividing up the fighters and assigning them to different caves," recounted eyewitness Malik Osman Khan, who was a village elder in Garikhil. "Our people were terrified, because we thought the planes would hit the Arabs as they stopped in our village. We sent the women and children into another village for their own safety."

Bin Laden's retreat to Tora Bora was characteristic of al Qaeda's leader. For all his intensity, he was not the kind of leader willing to risk his own life or that of his kin in pursuit of his ideals, nor was he a solo player. Bin Laden hid out but kept his family and security entourage with him.

The move to Tora Bora was not a step toward martyrdom but a stopgap while he figured out what to do next.

Hands Full

Meanwhile, CENTCOM had its hands full monitoring several locations chock full of Taliban and al Qaeda.

Top of the list was Kandahar, still in Taliban hands at the time. Reports suggested that some Taliban and al Qaeda were fleeing into the city and then moving south. "A good many of these people who surrendered and turned in their arms and then left, and a number of the other Taliban, ended up just fading into the villages and the mountains and they're still there and they're still armed," Rumsfeld said on Nov. 30.

Operations to take Kandahar continued until Dec. 7, 2001. Kandahar was especially important for several reasons. Mullah Mohammed Omar, a Kandahar area native credited with founding the Taliban in Afghanistan and in September 1996 with taking over Kabul and install-

ing Taliban rule across the country, was thought to be there. Stufflebeem said Dec. 10 the Pentagon had no indications that Omar had left the Kandahar area.

On the outskirts of the city was another major political figure waiting to emerge. Hamid Karzai was slated to take over as interim head of state, and his forces had taken the town of Tarin Kowt in mid-November. By Dec. 1, they were 30 miles from Kandahar.

Special operations forces directed air strikes for a two-day battle with the Taliban. Karzai was so close he was injured in the face from an off-target bomb that killed three members of the Afghan-US team.

Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz compared the endgame at Kandahar to "people deciding, like rats, to leave a sinking ship. But we didn't have the whole perimeter of the ship guarded." As a result, approximately 1,000 marines went to work combing Kandahar for the Taliban and al Qaeda.

All this loomed large as CENTCOM evaluated its options for Tora Bora. Special Forces teams were already operating near Tora Bora, as was a CIA-led team working under the name Jawbreaker. Now, it was time to bring airpower to bear.

The first call was for intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance. Predators had surveyed the Tora Bora area as early as Oct. 9 and air strikes had hit the caves.

CENTCOM Commander Gen. Tommy R. Franks confirmed the US was watching two areas closely: Kandahar and the area between Kabul and Khyber. This zone included the Jalalabad area and Tora Bora.

CENTCOM tasked a Global Hawk unmanned reconnaissance aircraft. The UAV system—with just four aircraft in existence at the time—racked up an impressive combat record. Its infrared, radar, and electro-optical sensors allowed coverage at night and through bad



weather. The Global Hawk's 30-hour-plus mission endurance made it perfect for Tora Bora and the evolving situation in Afghanistan.

"Around the end of November we started looking at the Tora Bora mountain region because we had indications there from a variety of sources that said Tora Bora was where the bad guys were," said then-Maj. David Hambleton, who was a Global Hawk liaison officer at the combined air and space operations center.

Battle Joined

The real fight for Tora Bora would be intense but involve just handfuls of US personnel on the ground. The special operators of Task Force Dagger had forces committed to other locations around Afghanistan. The most they could offer was to augment the Jawbreaker team that had been tracking bin Laden around Jalalabad.

Nor were regular forces available. Any decision to pull marines from Kandahar and deploy them around Tora Bora would have sacrificed the hunt for Mullah Omar—the Taliban leader—and the task of dealing with the large fighting concentrations around Kandahar.

The only immediately feasible option was Rumsfeld's preferred template of having small SOF teams and airpower support allied Afghan fighters. The decision not to employ a larger US force is controversial to this day.

On Dec. 2, more than 100 strike aircraft hit targets near Kandahar and Jalalabad.

That same day, CENTCOM began its move. A SOF team of about 13 personnel codenamed Cobra 25 traveled to Jalalabad to recruit Afghan forces under the command of two warlords, Hazarat



US air strikes hit the caves repeatedly for more than two weeks. In one strike, a 15,000-pound "Daisy Cutter" bomb—delivered by a C-130—struck a target at the cave complex and the earth shook for miles around.

Ali and Haji Zaman. This loose "Eastern Alliance" was to move into Tora Bora under US direction.

"We moved up with this Eastern Alliance army with large embedded Special Forces and CIA, and they called in air to support our positions [and] closed tunnel openings," Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Michael P. DeLong, Franks' deputy at CENTCOM, later told *National Review*.

The idea was that Ali and his people would lead the way. "These were high mountains," said DeLong. "The [Afghans] knew how to get there without being seen from some positions, so going with them was by far the best way to go."

For the next six days, Cobra 25 surveyed positions and called in air strikes. Afghan security elements provided protection. On Dec. 8, CENTCOM added another special operations task force, with 50 more special operators, and a small British element linked up as well.

"To the best of our knowledge, he has not left the country," Air Force Gen.

Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said Dec. 9. Specifically, senior US leadership believed bin Laden to be holed up in Tora Bora.

As the air strikes intensified, a 15,000-pound "Daisy Cutter" bomb, so large it had to be delivered by C-130, hit a target in the complex and reportedly shook the terrain for miles.

"The al Qaeda forces are still holed up in caves in the Tora Bora area. There still has been fierce fighting to defend their cave entrances, and we have still been providing strikes, as requested by the opposition groups and coordinated by our forces that are with them," said Stufflebeem Dec. 10.

Warlord Ali was ready to move into Tora Bora. For a brief time it looked like success was imminent. That afternoon, Afghan fighters reported they had surrounded bin Laden. Ali plucked two SOF operators from the coordinating team to accompany him and rushed his forces forward.

Another 33 special operators prepared to move up to support Ali, but to no avail. Ali's forces took fire as soon as they probed al Qaeda's positions. The Afghans immediately retreated, leaving the first two US commandos to wind their way back to friendly positions during the course of the night.

As a US Special Operations Command history later put it, Ali's soldiers' "fighting qualities proved remarkably poor."

The only good outcome was that the two SOF operators abandoned by Ali now had detailed reconnaissance of al Qaeda mortar and gun positions. Once back to relative safety, they used this information to work alongside the Cobra 25 combat controller and call in 17

straight hours of air strikes. They were as intense as the US and allies could muster.

Global Hawk planners at the CAOC got new orders to “go VFR [visual flight rules] direct straight up to Tora Bora and start taking pictures,” recounted Hambleton. Strike aircraft and AC-130 gunships honed in as well.

What if enemy fighters tried to escape, as had already happened just days before at Kandahar? Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had forces on the border to attempt to block escapes from Afghanistan to Pakistan.

But the task was exceedingly difficult. “It’s a very complicated area to try to seal, and there’s just simply no way you can put a perfect cork in the bottle,” Rumsfeld conceded Dec. 11.

The plan was to prompt the Afghan forces to destroy bin Laden’s hard-core fighters in the caves.

The only way to get Ali to hold terrain was to commit more SOF personnel, however, so special operators drove in trucks as far as they could then continued on donkeys to carry their gear. The Afghan forces pulled back from their positions every night. It was Ramadan, and the troops were fasting by day and feasting after sundown.

Fortunately for US forces, al Qaeda opposition kept lighting campfires to keep warm at night. SOF teams used optics and thermal imaging to bring in even more air-delivered firepower.

Air strikes chipped away at the complex, but the US still had only about 50 men committed. The teams controlling air strikes were finding thermal imaging so effective they could pull back from forward positions. The two Cobra 25 teams withdrew by Dec. 14. That night, Ali’s forces at last held the terrain they’d taken during the day.

Then the assault paused.

The Taliban “had clearly changed their strategy to one of survival,” Lt. Gen. Maxwell C. Bailey, commander of Air Force Special Operations Command, later explained. “They had ceased resistance. The bad thing was that once they ceased armed resistance,” Ali’s and Zaman’s anti-Taliban forces also ceased attacking.

The Afghan forces insisted on a quiet battlefield for several hours, with the explanation that al Qaeda had decided to surrender and needed an opportunity to come down from the mountains and turn in their weapons.

In reality, the pause gave the hard-core fighters still holed up time to run. “This tribal area was sympathetic to bin Laden,” DeLong later wrote. “He was the richest



DOD photo

Special Forces personnel surround future Afghan President Hamid Karzai (middle row, third from left). Karzai was wounded in a two-day battle with the Taliban near Kandahar.

man in the area, and he had funded these people for years.”

Ali declared Tora Bora a “victory” on Dec. 17 and the last SOF operators departed the area on Dec. 19. They estimated they had killed about 250 terrorists, but it was obvious that many had slipped away. Pakistani soldiers said they captured as many as 300 fighters who fled Tora Bora, Franks testified later.

Ground Action Post Mortem

Almost immediately, critics used Tora Bora to make a case that the battle was a missed opportunity where ground forces should have been used.

The controversy simmered for years and reached full flower with scholarly articles asserting a force of as little as 1,000 troops could have been placed in the 14,000-foot mountains to envelop Tora Bora.

Few thought so at the time, however, and Rumsfeld’s policy for OEF was firmly set on using US airpower with very light ground forces.

The Bush Administration had for many reasons been loath to put US ground forces into Afghanistan. Logistics, the risk of alienating Afghanistan’s population, and even the long shadows of Soviet mistakes in the 1980s all made for reluctance to commit ground forces.

“We deliberately did not plan an operation in Afghanistan based on putting in 100,000 or 150,000 American troops along the model of the Soviets,” Wolfowitz said in June 2002.

A big US-led ground attack at Tora Bora was never a serious option. For one, Franks only had about 1,300 soldiers, marines, and Special Forces in Afghanistan at the time of Tora Bora. They were spread across 17 locations. “We didn’t have the lift” to get them to the fight, DeLong later told lawmakers.

Policy considerations mattered, too. According to DeLong, it was Franks’ objective to ensure Afghanistan was peaceful in the run-up to elections expected to bring in Karzai as leader.

Mop-up efforts continued for some time. Rumsfeld told the *Baltimore Sun* at the end of December searches of the now-empty cave complex could go on through much of January 2002.

One thing was certain though. When bin Laden vanished in December 2001, it ensured that the hunt for him and the mission to destroy al Qaeda in Afghanistan would drag on.

But the next time allied forces engaged a significant concentration of al Qaeda terrorists, in Operation Anaconda, CENTCOM was determined that US ground forces would lead the way. ■

Rebecca Grant is president of IRIS Independent Research. She has written extensively on airpower and serves as director, Mitchell Institute, for AFA. Her most recent article for Air Force Magazine was “Enduring Freedom’s New Approach” in the October issue.