

**TSgt. John Chapman earned the Air Force Cross for his heroism in the mission to recover Navy SEAL Neil Roberts.**



# To the Top of Takur Gar

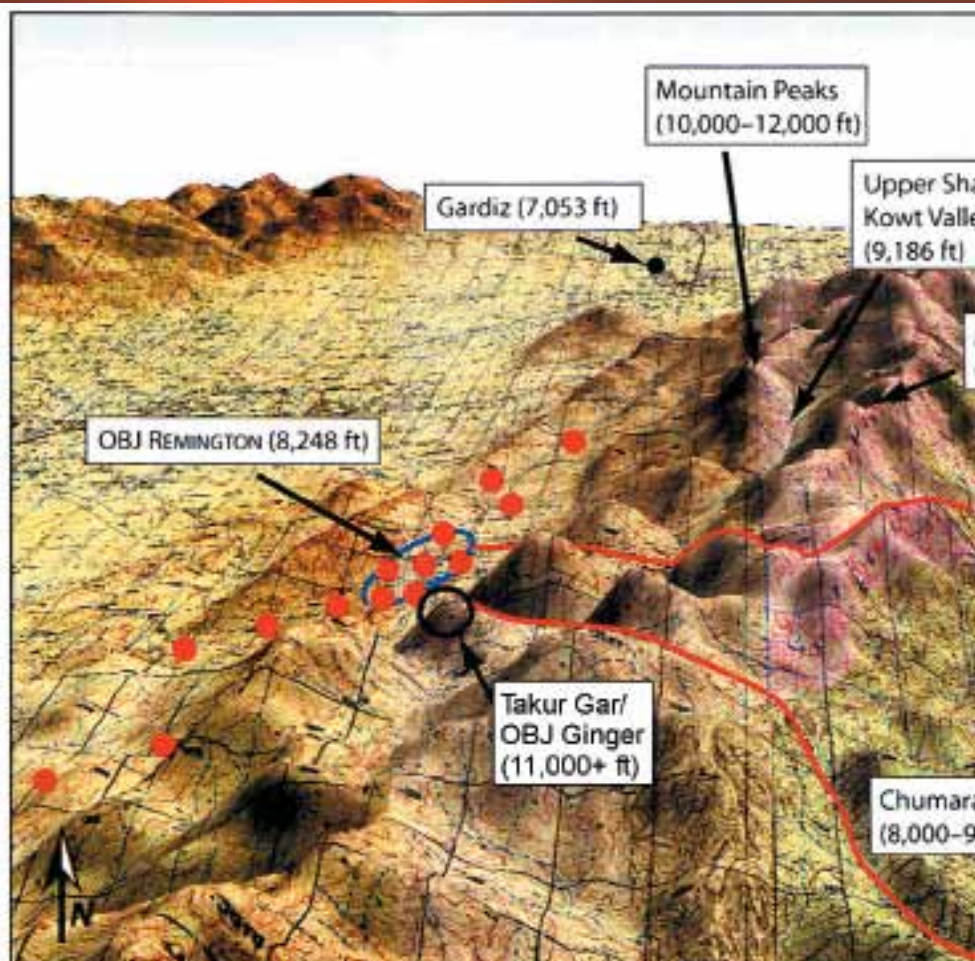
By James Kitfield

**T**he night was frigid as the MH-47E Chinook approached Objective Ginger, a knife-like ridge that ran along the spine of an 11,000-foot mountain called Takur Gar.

It was March 4, 2002, and the US military was heavily engaged in Operation Anaconda, rooting out remnants of al Qaeda holed up in a series of cave complexes and bunkers lacing the hill-sides of the Shah-e-Kot Valley, in the eastern highlands of Afghanistan. The joint special operations reconnaissance and targeting team inside the helicopter knew Objective Ginger represented valuable high ground with a commanding view of the entire Anaconda battlespace.

The al Qaeda fighters secretly dug in atop Takur Gar knew it, too.

As the Chinook—dubbed Razor 3—approached the snow-covered landing zone, Air Force TSgt. John Chapman, a combat controller, and the Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) team he was accompanying felt a mixture of cold air and engine backwash pouring through the open rear





Chapman, deployed from the 24th Special Tactics Squadron out of Pope AFB, N.C., immediately went to work. He quickly established communication with an AC-130 gunship, directing it to provide the team with close air support. He also had to determine how secure the immediate area was. "These actions limited the exposure of the aircrew and team to hostile fire," Chapman's Air Force Cross citation reads. He also requested and coordinated a helicopter to extract the stranded team, and requested the AC-130 join an unmanned MQ-1 Predator already searching for Roberts.

Informed that al Qaeda fighters had already captured Roberts and taken him away, Chapman and the SEAL team made a fateful decision. They decided on the spot to retrieve their fallen comrade Roberts. They were going back up to the top of Takur Gar.

Before the aircraft could touch down, machine gun fire erupted and the thud of impacts raked the fuselage. Then came an explosion and a sickening lurch as a rocket-propelled grenade scored a direct hit, severing hydraulic lines and severely damaging the helicopter.

The pilots from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment veered sharply away from the hot landing zone and struggled to get the aircraft back under control, scanning the terrain through night vision goggles as they searched for some place to bring the crippled helicopter down. Even before they could land at an alternate site, the entire team realized that in the chaos and confusion, one of the SEAL team members—Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts—had been knocked from the helicopter and had fallen into a hot landing zone under control of the enemy. Thus began a sequence of events that led to the deadliest military engagement in the war on terrorism up to that point, involving countless acts of heroism and, ultimately, the death of seven US troops.

The special operators were soon on the ground after the aborted first run, having landed on a flat patch of hillside roughly four miles away. They were now faced with a mission that had crushing new urgency.

*Left: An Army map shows the mountainous terrain where the Battle of Roberts Ridge was fought. Above: TSgt. John Chapman and a Navy SEAL team went back to Takur Gar to retrieve a fallen comrade.*

This choice at the impromptu landing zone was not out of the ordinary for the gung ho combat controller, but it would lead to his becoming one of only five enlisted airmen since Vietnam to earn the Air Force Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor in the recognition of "extraordinary heroism" in combat.

### Fateful Decisions

John A. Chapman grew up in Windsor Locks, Conn., a small town of 12,000 situated on the Connecticut River. Early on, he showed the athleticism and nerve that would earn him "All State" in diving three out of his four years in high school, and make him a standout on the soccer team. To his tight-knit family and circle of friends, he seemed to personify the "All-American Boy," a happy-go-lucky athlete with an easy smile and winning manner.

After a short stint at the University of Connecticut, Chapman enlisted in the Air Force in 1985 seeking adventure. When he didn't find enough of it working in front of computers in the 1987th Information Systems Squadron, he volunteered for the elite combat control team (CCT) career field, beginning the grueling year-long combat controller







*Chapman in Afghanistan. John Chapman's father said that his son knew the career path he had chosen was a dangerous one.*

training program at Lackland AFB, Tex. He was not heard to complain about the lack of adventure in his life thereafter.

The storied combat controller career field grew out of a disastrous mass airborne assault on the island of Sicily during World War II. Roughly 700 paratroopers were mistakenly dropped out at sea over the Mediterranean, and many of the aircraft involved nearly flew into each other. Given the obvious need for more accurate airdrops during airborne campaigns, the US Army created the "Pathfinders," scouts and recon specialists who would find their way to an objective before the main assault forces and provide visual guidance, with flares, high-powered lights, and smoke pots, to inbound aircraft and jumpers.

When the Air Force became a separate service in 1947, the Pathfinders went with the air arm to provide the nascent service expertise in air traffic control and navigation for airborne operations. The Pathfinders were later renamed combat control teams.

### To Afghanistan

MSgt. Ron Childress was an instructor at the CCT school when Chapman arrived. "Generally, I tend to remember

guys for one of two reasons: Either they are real good or real bad. John Chapman was one of the real good ones," he said in an interview. "I liked that he was a quiet, unassuming guy, but with that cocky attitude that all good combat controllers have. We became good friends."

Not even a gifted and committed athlete like Chapman found CCT training easy. There was the highly technical Combat Control Operator Course in air traffic control, air navigation, and communication procedures. There was a rigorous, weeks-long course at the Air Force Survival School at Fairchild AFB, Wash., where Chapman and his classmates received instruction in how to survive on their own in harsh climates and conditions. At the Army's Airborne School at Fort Benning, Ga., Chapman learned basic parachuting skills necessary for infiltration behind enemy lines. Pope's Combat Control School instructors taught Chapman and his teammates small unit tactics, fire support, demolition, and land navigation.

After initial training, combat controllers go on to the graduate-level Special Tactics Advanced Skills Training, which includes training in free fall parachuting at the Army Military Free Fall Parachut-

ist School at Fort Bragg, N.C., as well as the Air Force Combat Dive Course, taught at the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center in Panama City, Fla.

To earn the signature red beret of an Air Force combat controller, Chapman had to complete one of the most rigorous training regimes in the entire US military. Each combat controller is an airpower-savvy commando who can run, jump, or swim with members of any other special operations unit and act as their conduit for close air support, air insertion and extraction, and other airpower functions. "I remember putting some combat controllers through some tough scuba training, and an observer asked me, 'What are you trying to do, train them to be SEALs?'" Childress said. "And my answer was, no, I'm training them so that they don't slow the SEALs down."

Chapman persevered through this extraordinarily difficult training course, becoming one of only seven members of his training class to graduate into combat control. Besides mastering skills such as establishing aircraft landing zones and parachute drop zones and calling in ordnance from ground-attack aircraft, Chapman ultimately became

a military free fall parachutist, a static line jumpmaster, and a military scuba dive supervisor.

“John loved his job. We all did, because no combat controller thinks he actually works for a living,” said Childress, speaking of the adventure and camaraderie that goes with the combat control badge and motto, “First There.”

“For John and me and all other combat controllers, the coolest part of the job is you can watch Fox News and know where you’re going to be sent tomorrow,” Childress said. “We even used secret code words with our wives that alerted them to turn on the television to see where we were going to deploy.”

Then the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks occurred. Chapman, his wife, Valerie, and daughters, Madison and Brianna, were stationed at Pope at the time. No one had to hear a code word to turn on their televisions, nor guess that Chapman and the rest of the 24th STS were likely to deploy to a landlocked country of towering mountains, verdant river valleys, and vast deserts called Afghanistan.

### The Mission

Less than an hour after Razor 3 made its forced landing, Chapman and the five SEALs were picked up by another MH-47E helicopter. It dropped off Razor 3’s crew at a staging area at Gardez and sped back to the top of Takur Gar. The pilots received updates on the suspected whereabouts of the al Qaeda fighters who had taken Roberts prisoner. As the helicopter approached the selected landing zone it was still dark, but once again the US team began taking enemy fire. This time the pilots were able to set the helicopter down, at least long enough to offload the commandos. Chapman and the SEAL team were alone in the dark and bitter cold, on a mountain swarming with al Qaeda fighters.

Chapman and the team immediately found themselves in another ambush, with blistering automatic weapons fire pouring in from multiple directions. Chapman shouted into his radio over the din of the firefight, trying to call in close air support to keep the enemy at bay while the SEAL team assaulted an enemy position. Seeing that the team was effectively in a kill zone—taking enemy fire from three directions—Chapman advanced on a dug-in enemy position, firing his weapon. He and a SEAL killed two of the al Qaeda fighters in the process. When he reached the



**Petty Officer 1st Class Neil Roberts, a Navy SEAL, fell from a helicopter because of enemy fire and was executed by al Qaeda terrorists.**

enemy position, Chapman turned his fire on a second enemy machine gun nest which was raking the SEAL team and exchanged fire with the al Qaeda fighters at close range.

With the enemy momentarily distracted by Chapman’s assault, the leader of the SEAL team broke contact and retreated down the mountain with two wounded team members. The sun was just rising over Takur Gar by the time the SEAL team repositioned down the slope.

### Roberts Ridge

At that moment, a rapid-reaction rescue force of Army Rangers arrived in another MH-47E. The would-be rescuers wound up in a similarly compromised position, however, because their Chinook was quickly forced into a crash landing after being hit by enemy fire. As the Rangers scrambled out of the downed helicopter, four were killed and others were wounded. Another USAF combat controller assigned to the Rangers, SSgt. Gabriel P. Brown, took cover behind a rock and used his radio to call in close air support. But since the al Qaeda fighters were in such close proximity to the downed helicopter, he waded off an aircraft from a bombing run with 500-pound bombs, instructing it to strafe the enemy positions instead (eventually, a precision guided bomb destroyed the main al Qaeda bunker).

In the intense, 15-hour firefight that ensued on Takur Gar, seven US service

members were killed in action, including SrA. Jason D. Cunningham, an Air Force pararescue jumper who exposed himself to enemy fire numerous times while treating the wounded, before being shot and killed. Cunningham would also receive the Air Force Cross for what became known as the Battle of Roberts Ridge. Unbeknownst to the rescuers, al Qaeda fighters had executed Roberts.

By the time night fell on March 4, close air support and the determined fighting of the joint special operations team of Army Rangers, Navy SEALs, and Air Force combat controllers and pararescuemen had driven the al Qaeda fighters off Roberts Ridge. US commanders estimated between 40 and 50 enemy fighters were killed in the firefight.

Chapman was found where he had succumbed to numerous wounds after exchanging fire at close range with the al Qaeda machine gun emplacement. Two dead enemy fighters lay nearby. The leader of the SEAL team who was able to evacuate his wounded down the mountain later credited Chapman with saving the lives of his entire rescue team.

For his actions at Roberts Ridge, Chapman was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross on Jan. 10, 2003. “Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, aggressiveness in the face of the enemy, and the dedication to the service of his country, Sergeant Chapman reflects the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force,” his citation reads.

To mark the occasion, his father, Gene Chapman, sent a letter to the commander of the 24th STS, Lt. Col. Kenneth Rodriguez. “Over the years on hunting trips and anytime we were able to sit and chat, [John] let me know that though he couldn’t talk about it, it was a dangerous path he had chosen,” Gene Chapman wrote. “I told him I thought of all you folks as heroes. ...

“We may look at what John did and say he is a hero, but then we are not one of his team or the other teams that go in where angels wouldn’t tread,” the elder Chapman wrote. “John is proud to be part of you, and if you could ask him right now, he would tell you what he did was for his family, friends, and the teams he worked with,” his father continued. “Most of all, he did what he did for his country.” ■

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