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Not A Good Day To Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda

Army Times reporter and author Sean D. Naylor discusses his latest book, “Not A Good Day To Die -- The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda.”

Sean D. Naylor: Thank you very much for that kind introduction and thank you all for taking time out of your life to come and hear me talk. I hope you think it was worth it in an hour or two’s time. I am here to talk to you this evening about “Operation Anaconda.” Operation Anaconda was an important battle fought some years ago now. So it’s worth starting this talk, just answering that question – “what was Operation Anaconda?”

Well, it was America’s first battle of the 21st century fought in the early half of March, 2002. It was the largest battle fought by U.S. troops in Afghanistan up to that point. Indeed, it was the largest battle fought by U.S. troops since Operation Desert Storm. It was the highest altitude battle ever fought by American soldiers. And it was the last best opportunity to destroy much of the al Qaeda leadership and what might be termed “al Qaeda’s guerrilla army” in that part of the world. It was an opportunity that was in part squandered – squandered not so much by the Colonels and Generals and troops on the ground and in the air, in and over Afghanistan, but by a series of decisions taken by their bosses in the Pentagon and the U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida. Those decisions, which I shall outline here, resulted in Operation Anaconda being fought by a bifurcated and hopelessly confused and confusing command structure sitting on top of a force that was lacking much of the lethality and combat power desired and requested by its Commanders.

But to figure out why the United States chose to wage its largest set-piece battle in the generation under such conditions, I need to take you back to the winter of 2001-2002. At this stage of the war, so now we are talking January-February timeframe in 2002, U.S. forces, allied with the Northern Alliance, had overthrown the Taliban government and taken over Kabul. But the senior al Qaeda leaders and thousands of their troops remained in the field. They had retreated to mountain lairs in Eastern Afghanistan at Tora Bora, which everyone has heard of, and after Tora Bora was subjected to a ferocious aerial bombardment, the Shah-i-Kot Valley.

Just to orient you here, this is obviously Afghanistan, this is Kabul here, and Tora Bora is around here, this is the town of Gardez here, and 10 kilometers south of Gardez is the Shah-i-Kot Valley. Bagram Air Base is up here, about an hour and a half, two hours’ drive on fairly bad roads north of Kabul. This is Pakistan here, obviously Iran over here.

So you’ve got thousands of al Qaeda fighters and most of their senior leadership still concentrated in this area. Curiously however, by early 2002, senior U.S. Commanders in

the Pentagon and at Central Command were behaving as if the war was all but over. Now this might strike you in retrospect as odd, given that it was al Qaeda that it declared war against the United States and had so recently killed 3000 of its citizens on 9/11. The only reason that we were fighting the Taliban at all was because they had failed to turn over al Qaeda when that was demanded of them after September the 11th.

It was as if, having been brought up in an age, when seizing an enemy's capital and deposing his government equated to victory, U.S. strategists failed to grasp that such measures did not signify the end of the war, even the end of the war in the Afghan theatre, against the trans-national guerrilla force like al Qaeda, which had no capital to siege. Indeed, one of the mistakes that U.S. Commanders in their plan has made in the run up to Operation Anaconda was to fail to distinguish sufficiently between the war against the Taliban and the war against al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan.

These two enemies were very different. The Taliban's army was ethnically based, drawn almost exclusively from the Pashtun tribes of southern and eastern Afghanistan. The Pashtun area of Afghanistan is very roughly down here, down here, like this and then it crosses into Pakistan, and all of this area here is essentially sometimes known as Pashtunistan. Now these Pashtun fighters were steeped in the traditional Afghan codes of warfare. These traditions included changing sides, surrendering en-masse or simply departing the battlefield and returning to their farms when defeat seemed inevitable. There are relatively few "Custer's Last Stands" in intra-Afghan warfare. By the time U.S. Special Forces and CIA operatives entered Afghanistan to link up with the Northern Alliance, the Taliban had already been significantly weakened as a military force by the withdrawal by Pakistan of its military intelligence troops who had provided the Taliban with much of their tactical and operational expertise. That left the Taliban as something of a paper tiger when the combination of U.S. Special Operations Forces, CIA Operatives and the Northern Alliance army, all enabled by the precise lethality of U.S. and allied air power drove south from the Hindu Kush Mountains to strip the Taliban from the field.

Al Qaeda was different. It had thousands of men under arms in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Taliban's 55th Brigade, regarded as its best combat force, was in fact an al Qaeda combat organization seconded to the Taliban. Al Qaeda's fighters, drawn from the Gulf Arab states, Central Asia and Chechnya, were professionals. They were well armed and have been reasonably well trained in al Qaeda's Afghan camps. They were also very highly motivated to fight Americans. There would be no mass surrenders by these men. And they had no homes to which to return. These were men willing to die for their cause. They had come to Afghanistan to learn the skills of Jihad and now the Americans had arrived on their very doorstep. The prospects for Jihad could not be better. When Kabul fell, these al Qaeda fighters withdrew to the mountain secessionists of eastern Afghanistan. These were strongholds that they knew well, deep in the Pashtun heartland. The residents of which had provided much of the Taliban's army had benefited from Osama bin Laden's generosity and whose Pashtunwali code of honor obliged them to shelter their guests.

In short, destroying al Qaeda, in this environment, was always going to be a much more difficult and challenging proposition than defeating the Taliban in maneuver warfare on the plains north of Kabul. But while some U.S. planners realized that rooting out al Qaeda from its mountain fortresses might require a different approach from that taken against the Taliban, U.S. Commanders opted to stick with the same formula of locally recruited militia, Special Operations Forces and Air Power that had worked so well for them thus far. One problem with this approach was that the leaders of the Northern Alliance were too busy seizing the reins of power in Kabul to be bothered with the difficult, dirty job of going after al Qaeda in the mountains. The Northern Alliance men also knew that its ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks from the northern provinces of Afghanistan, they would be viewed as an invading force in the Pashtun provinces. So the Americans were forced to recruit and train-up, at short notice, a hodgepodge of Pashtun militias for the biggest, toughest battle of the war.

Now there were other options on the table. The U.S. military maintains, at great expense, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), a helicopter-borne force designed specifically to move large numbers of infantry over difficult terrain when no good road network is available. It would have been the ideal force for this fight. But other than a drastically downsized brigade of two infantry battalions and a relative handful of helicopters, it was kept back in the United States. It's useful to ask why at this point, well, three reasons. First, as we have seen, U.S. Commanders had fallen in love with the Special Ops local militia precision air power formula and did not fully understand that it would not work as well against the al Qaeda forces sheltering in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan as it had against the Taliban forces on the plains north of Kabul.

Second, there was an obsession at Central Command, and in the Pentagon, with not deploying large conventional forces to Afghanistan. Such an approach was viewed as one that would only repeat the mistakes made by the Soviets in the 1980s war there. This view seemed to discern no difference between the Soviet strategy of deploying a 140,000 troops into Afghanistan to wage a Scorched-Earth campaign whose aim was to impose an unpopular, alien, morally bankrupt form of government on an unwilling population at the point of a bayonet and the potential U.S. strategy of deploying perhaps another 10,000 to 15,000 troops into Afghanistan to provide the combat power necessary to destroy al Qaeda, who were by no means universally popular, even in the Pashtun areas.

Now the third reason, the 101st was not deployed to Afghanistan, was that U.S. Commanders had already switched their focus to preparing for the war they knew or suspected was coming in Iraq. The 101st was needed for that war and so was not committed to Afghanistan. In its place, the Pentagon sent a downsized headquarters from the 10th Mountain Division, which at the time was the most stretched, stressed division in the Army. It already had about half of its division headquarters deployed to Kosovo at the time. But when that headquarters minus, from the 10th Mountain Division, deployed to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in February 2002, its planners were told while that their first mission was to destroy the al Qaeda forces that were gathering in the Shah-i-Kot Valley, the operation that would become Anaconda, they were only allowed to use forces already in theatre to do that.

U.S. leaders had imposed an extremely tight cap on forces deployed to Afghanistan for the reasons just outlined. They forbade the deployment of any artillery, traditionally the biggest killer on the battlefield, and only grudgingly allowed the deployment of a single company of eight Apache attack helicopters. That left commanders and staffs in Afghanistan to plan the operation with fewer forces than they would have preferred. These problems were compounded by several major miscalculations on their part.

They underestimated the number of enemy fighters in the valley, believing that to be 150 to 250, when in fact they were upwards of a 1000. This is the Shah-hi-Kot Valley here, just to orient you. There are three fairly small villages on the valley floor here. You've got a finger of territory that pokes up into the valley from the south. This is looking south to north. This hump-backed massive that forms the western edge of the valley was nicknamed 'The Whale' by U.S. troops because of its shape, and then you've got some fairly intimidating mountains here, the tallest of which, a mountain called Takur Ghar, which is this one here, would later play an important role in the battle.

So, U.S. Commanders thought that there were going to be about 800 civilians in these villages on the valley floor. There turned out to be none. As I said, they thought it would be about a 150 to 250 enemy fighters, probably on the valley floor as well. There were probably closer to a thousand. They thought the enemy fighters would be in the villages. In fact, they were, in large part, occupying the high ground here, and on the Whale, dug in, in those positions in good defensive positions. And they thought that the enemy fighters would be armed with little more than a few heavy machine guns. In fact, the al Qaeda forces in the Shah-i-Kot had at their disposal an artillery battery, recoilless rifles, rockets and numerous mortars. Most importantly, U.S. Commanders expected the enemy to either surrender or a cut and run because that is what had happened up to this point in the war because they were mostly fighting Taliban fighters.

Well, in fact, the enemy in this case stood and fought hard and well. The plan for Operation Anaconda was thus drawn up and executed by a gaggle of different task forces that Central Command had thrown together at virtually the last moment to fight the biggest battle of the war. Inevitably, frictions and suspicions arose. And the plan that emerged was the result of compromise between different task forces with competing agendas, rather than the product of a single clear vision. Despite the participation in Anaconda of three battalions of highly trained U.S. light infantry from the 101st and 10th Mountain Divisions, the main effort in the Anaconda plan was to beat 300 Afghan militiamen with only a couple of weeks' training by U.S. Special Forces under their belt. They were to drive into the Shah-i-Kot Valley from the west. They were going to come down here. There is a road from Gardez. Gardez is sort of up here. They were going to come down that road, turn off, come down here. By the way, the road was more like a wretched dirt track, which was one of the problems, then into an even worse wretched dirt track coming this way, come around here, sweep around here and then they were going to help. The Afghans were going to help the Americans figure out who were the civilians and who were the al Qaeda fighters here.

The idea was that the al Qaeda fighters would then surrender or try to escape to Pakistan via passes, out of the valley to the east and the south, down here or through these passes here. To prevent that from happening, U.S. infantry would air assault into the foot of the ridgelines along here, on helicopters, and establish blocking positions in the passes to seal those egress routes. That was the plan.

What actually happened was that the Afghan column never made it to the valley. It was halted by al Qaeda fire out here, to the west. But even though that was the main effort of the attack on the infantry, at least officially, was only the supporting effort of the attack. And even though these guys were stalled and haven't made it into the valley, the infantry air assault went ahead anyway. When the infantry landed on the valley floor, the troops found themselves in isolated pockets under heavy fire from a well-equipped enemy ensconced in the high ground. In those first hours, things looked fairly dire, especially if you were one of the infantrymen, trapped down here, pinned down by a plunging al Qaeda fire from the high ground.

Fortunately, U.S. forces did have a secret weapon at their disposal. The secret weapon was not some high-tech gizmo, but it was three teams of Special Operators totaling 13 commandos from Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, the Air Force's 24th Special Tactics Squadron and one or two other highly classified units. Two days ahead of Operation Anaconda's D-Day, these 13 men had crept through thigh-deep snow over frozen mountain ridges, to penetrate al Qaeda's lines of defense. That's what it looks like. That's what these guys were getting into. Largest enemy concentration possibly on the planet, at least in terms of al Qaeda, and their mission was to somehow get through all of the al Qaeda positions and get on the inside of the al Qaeda force, get into the heart of the enemy, into the enemy's lair, if you like, and do so without a single one of those teams being compromised. Now, to do that, one Delta Force team even rode in all-terrain vehicles that had been specially rigged with infra-red headlights and engines that ran super quietly.

I don't have to say but I will. I mean, this was an extraordinarily dangerous mission. If any of the teams had been compromised, Operation Anaconda would have been over before it began. But they all made it in. They did so by taking the most difficult, arduous routes that they knew al Qaeda's fighters would be unlikely to monitor. The team on ATVs even rode through a minefield, not deliberately, I should add. When they finally reached the high ground, around the valley, one team made a momentous discovery, and this was a SEAL Team Six team that was coming up this finger here. Right where they wanted to establish their observation post, there was an al Qaeda heavy machine gun post already there with a five men team and they handily took some photographs so that I'm able to illustrate this in my speech seven years later. This is one of the photographs taken by the SEALs while they were in their hide site reporting back to their headquarters at Gardez which is where these three teams had come out of a safe house, really a safe compound - a safe castle, in Gardez.

That's a DShK heavy machine gun there. As you can see, that area really dominates that part of the valley. That's the al Qaeda's team tent there - guys blissfully unaware that

some of America's finest are snapping photographs of them at that very moment. That machine gun was in a position from which it could have shot down every helicopter flying into the valley. I'll show you why. Machine gun was about here. All the helicopters, each CH-47 Chinook with 40-odd inventory men on it which is going to fly up this passage here, land here, here, here and here. So, you can imagine what one heavy machine gun having to shoot into these lumbering helicopters at a range of, you know, a couple of 100 meters maybe at most, what kind of damage that could have done. It's worth bearing in mind that every national overhead asset that the United States has had flown over that valley and missed that machine gun. If that SEAL team hadn't made it into the valley, Operation Anaconda would probably have ended in disaster before the first troops were on the ground. Instead the SEALs together with an Air Force AC-130 gunship took out that position as the air assault force was in the air heading towards the valley. This is what that camp looked like after the SEALs and the Air Force were done with it. Bad day at black rock.

Now, on that first day of brutal combat when Anaconda hung in the balance, those three teams, the only Americans to hold the high ground, I know somebody out there thinking "except for the Air Force." which is a reasonable point. Those teams play a crucial role in calling in close air support to keep the al Qaeda troops at bay. In fact, those teams also played a critical role in preventing a humiliating American withdrawal from the battlefield. In mid-afternoon, the mountain headquarters was on the verge of ordering all of its troops to prepare for helicopter extraction from the valley because from the center of the battle that the task force mountain commander, Major General Hagenback, was getting... it sounded like things were just going to hell on the valley floor. Now, after listening to our radio conversation that appeared to indicate that Hagenback had reached a decision to pull out, Delta Force Lieutenant Colonel, Pete Blaber, who commanded the three Special Operations teams from a compound in Gardez, about 10 kilometres north of the valley, called his Deputy. Blaber's Deputy was located right by Hagenback side in the task force mountain headquarters in Bagram. Blaber told his Deputy that pulling out would be a huge mistake.

His three teams held much of the key terrain in the valley and were decimating the enemy with air strikes that they were calling in. Regardless of what the conventional force commanders decided, Blaber said that his teams would stay in position at least until the next day. This was quote, "the battlefield opportunity of a lifetime." He said in his message and he added "that he intended to keep on killing the enemy until there was no more killing to be done," and that's pretty much the phrase that he used. Blaber's Deputy who was a Delta Force Major related that message to General Hagenback who then haggled with his most senior advisors before deciding that instead of pulling out all of his forces, he would merely extract those pinned down in the southern end of the valley here by helicopter once darkness closed in to give them some protection and then would reinforce success – that was the phrase used – up here, in the northern end of the valley where they didn't appear to be as much enemy resistance.

Having avoided catastrophe on the first day, U.S. forces on the second and third day slowly recovered from their reverses. They did so by using air power to a much greater

extent than planned. The realization, the slow dawning realization on that first day that there were in fact no civilians in the area at all, allowed allied aircraft to plaster the well here and to flatten the village of Mazag, which is down here, where there was a fairly significant concentration of al Qaeda fighters. But U.S. ground forces made no real attempt to maneuver to a position of advantage over the enemy forces. Then in the early hours of March 4th, another battlefield crisis arose. Blaber's small Special Operations Force, named Advanced Force Operations (AFO), worked for a separate Special Operations chain of command that did not fall under General Hagenbeck and Task Force Mountain. That was a Special Operations task force called Task Force 11 and it ultimately answered the Joint Special Operations Command.

Blaber's immediate boss was an Air Force Special Operations Brigadier General called Greg Trebon. Trebon's headquarters was on Masirah Island, off the coast of Oman, but he himself was located for this fight at Task Force 11's forward headquarters in Bagram. At this stage of the fight, Trebon decided to send additional SEAL team six elements straight down from Bagram and into the valley immediately. This was a decision that ignored weeks of careful preparation that the original teams had spent immersing themselves in the topography, the military history and the tactics, techniques and procedures of the local fighters in that region. They had spent weeks preparing for this mission and some would say they had spent their whole careers preparing for it. The success, however, of those three teams had only wetted the appetite for Task Force 11's main force of SEALs to get in on the action.

Army Special Operators would later say that to the folks at Bagram and at Masirah Island, where the Task Force 11 joint operations center was located. The success of Blaber's three teams made the battle look no more difficult than a video game, just as simple as getting a team in on the high ground, lazing some targets, bombs coming in and destroy the targets easy. Of course, that was a mistake and conclusion on the part of the operators at Bagram. A series of mistakes, misjudgments and miscalculations on the part of the SEALs resulted in a SEAL team trying to insert by a helicopter onto the top of Takur Ghar Mountain to establish an observation post there. Takur Ghar was the highest spot in the valley. This is Takur Ghar Mountain right here. It dominated the valley. So, not surprisingly, the enemy had already occupied that position. Now, as the Special Operations MH-47 Chinook helicopter came in to land on the top of that mountain that night, the al Qaeda fighters on the mountain top took it under fire. And one of the SEALs fell out before the badly damaged helicopter could limp away. That set in motion a chain of events that ended with another helicopter being shot down on top of the mountain and a small force of Rangers, Aviators and Airmen fighting a no-hold bar pitched battle on that snowy peak while the Task Force 11 headquarters tried to micro-manage the fight from a desert island 1100 miles away.

The fight on Takur Ghar Mountain was complex, confusing and to this day, still very controversial within the Special Operations community. It featured extraordinary heroism on the part of Rangers, Army Aviators, SEALs and not least Air Force Special Operators including Jason Cunningham and John Chapman who both gave their lives in the fight. It was an extraordinarily complex fight for one that involves so few individuals on the sharp

end. And it would make your brain hurt for me to sit here now and in 10 minutes try to explain all the misunderstandings and decisions and who thought who was where, when that ended up with helicopter after helicopter flying to the top of this mountain even though every helicopter that showed up at the top of the mountain got badly shot up.

I mentioned controversy. I'll touch on at least one aspect of that briefly. Air Force Technical Sergeant John Chapman was part of the SEAL force that initially went back to the top of the mountain to try to rescue the guy who fell out of the helicopter whose name was Neil Roberts. The SEALs were able to disembark their helicopter, immediately got involved in a vicious firefight with the al Qaeda fighters. Chapman went down. SEALs assessed that he was dead. They were already taking other casualties. They needed to get off the mountain quickly and they did so. Later it came to light some Predator footage that suggested that somebody was still on top of the mountain after the SEALs left fighting the al Qaeda fighters. That was either some kind of what would be called in the U.S. Military a red-on-red fratricide incident, al Qaeda fighters fighting each other, or it was John Chapman fighting all alone up there.

The blip on the Predator screen that was fighting the al Qaeda fighters was eventually killed by one of them after killing another with an expert rifle shot. John Chapman's body was right found where that blip showed up. That's become a very controversial episode inside the U.S. Special Operations community for reasons I am sure you can understand. And it's worth pointing out that the SEALs are absolutely adamant that Chapman was dead when they left the top of the mountain. It would be remiss of me not to mention at this point that there is a fantastic exhibit on the Takur Ghar fight here, and so if you want to get more of a sense of it, and hear some of the voices of the Airmen who fought on top of it, you can do that. I would highly recommend you do that.

Now, the combat on Takur Ghar lasted all day. Once darkness fell, a heli-borne rescue force pulled the survivors and the fallen off the mountain. That was the last major ground combat of Operation Anaconda. Nevertheless, the Operation officially dragged on for another two weeks in part because of a desire to bring another Afghan force into the valley to claim the victory. The original Afghan force had decided they didn't want any part of this after the first night. That's not entirely true. They did show up again but there was higher level political maneuvering to get more of an official, provisional Afghan National Army Force down with tanks and so that took a week or two of haggling to arrange. For the loss of eight men, seven of whom died in the fight on Takur Ghar. U.S. and Allied Forces probably killed 200 to 300 enemy fighters using a combination of small arms, machine guns, mortars and especially air strikes.

But Anaconda could not be called anything like a complete success. The aim of the operation spelled out in General Hagenback's mission statement was "to destroy the al Qaeda forces in the Shah-i-Kot Valley," destroy them. But hundreds of al Qaeda fighters slipped away and are now in Pakistan protecting Osama bin Laden and fomenting trouble on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border. Nevertheless, Operation Anaconda could have been a lot worse as well were it not for the daring and the skill displayed by the troops on the ground and in the air.

So, what lessons can we learn or in most cases re-learn from Anaconda? That's the first – know your enemy. Now, this seems like conventional wisdom, I know, and when I give variations on this talk at military staff colleges, this slide shows-up and there is a whole bunch of eyes rolling to the back of their heads and I see from guys. I can almost hear them as one... I see a big speech bubble forming over their heads – “we're sophisticated you know, Majors and Lieutenant Colonels. We don't have to be told this. This is a military cliché. This is conventional wisdom.” Well it is. That's true all except for the point about maybe they need to be reminded of it. Because like a lot of conventional wisdom, it is grounded in truth to which many military commanders and their staffs paid lip service but little else in Anaconda and I suspect some more recent operations. It is important to know your enemy in the strategic sense. Are you fighting Taliban or are you fighting al Qaeda and what are the differences between the two? And in the operational and tactical senses, how is the enemy dispositioned? What are his principal weapon systems? How many fighters can he call upon? What is his most likely course of action? In their planning for Operation Anaconda, U.S. forces got the answers to all of these questions completely wrong.

Know your friends – the coming together Pashtun militia force that was to be the main effort for Anaconda was nowhere near as capable as even the northern alliance, let alone a western military force. Yet the Anaconda plan required that column to travel down a terrible dirt track in non-tactical vehicles in the dead of night and then to function like a U.S. force in terms of synchronization, phase lines and so on. The Special Forces Offices who were in charge of advising that Afghan force would later say that and acknowledge that this had been a major mistake. Think twice before you plug and play.

Plug and play in the early years of this decade became the catchphrase to describe the perceived advantages of the U.S. Army's switched to modular brigade size formations. Now, that transformation to a brigade-based force has much to recommend it, but there are big risk in any organizational design that assumes that units can be pulled out of one organization with whom they train day in and day out and have established the bonds of trust and confidence and understanding so crucial in combat, and then get plugged into another organization without any decrement in effectiveness.

It is vital to always bear in mind that at its heart warfare is a human endeavor. The eye in the sky is not all seeing. Now, I have already explained how every national asset at the United States disposal from the CIAs MI-17 helicopters to Predator UAVs, spy planes and satellites missed that machine gun on the finger. But there were other examples of U.S. troops' over alliance on overheads census. None more so than when the SEALs decided to fly straight to the top of Takur Ghar Mountain in part because an AC-130 gunship had cleared it by flying over the mountain and reporting, erroneously, that there were no enemy there. Just because you can't see what you are looking for in a photograph or on a video screen, that does not mean it's not down there on the ground. High tech is not all that. I realize that I'm taking my life in my hands. Briefing a slide like that at the headquarters of the Air Force's Material Command. But hear me out before you string me up.

Again and again in Operation Anaconda, high tech systems failed at crucial times. One example included the navigation system on the same AC-130 that did so well destroying the machine gun nest that the SEALs had discovered. Its navigation system then failed and with tragic consequences. As the gunship mistook small Special Forces an Afghan element that was arriving west of the Whale and setting up a little off-set blocking position as an enemy force, because it thought it was looking on a completely different bridge square on the battlefield because its navigation system had failed and after clearing this fire mission multiple times through multiple chains and of course each time it said, "Is it okay to fire this?" everybody said, "Yes," because they knew there were no friendly forces at the grid reference that was being given by the aircraft. They opened fire and they killed one Special Forces' Warrant officer and a couple of Afghan allies.

Another failure of high technology that had tragic consequences was the failure of the satellite radios on the Special Ops MH-47 helicopters involved in the Takur Ghar battle. That was a failure that forced some of America's finest warriors to fly blind into a battle field. Joint-ness has its limits. There is a certain width of political correctness about the military's commitment to joint-ness. Again like plug and play, you know, I mean, joint-ness is a good thing to do normally, and this is not me preaching for Stove Piped Commands and so forth and so on. But just like the plug and play principle that I referred to a couple of minutes ago, when pushed to extremes, this principle has a *reducto ad absurdum* quality about it.

Most notably in Anaconda, as I mentioned Task Force 11 was commanded by an Air Force one-star, an officer who was a very accomplished pilot but who lacked the background and training to command and control complex, high risk, Special Operations missions on the ground. At a critical moment in the Takur Ghar fight, when disaster could still have been averted, General Trebon took him on control away from Pete Blaber who is by this point down in the valley and gave it to his headquarters on that desert island off of Oman, a decision that would only exacerbate the confusion that swirled around the top of that mountain.

Another example of joint-ness run amuck was Task Force 11's decision to give so many of the Special Reconnaissance missions to Navy SEALs who are extraordinary warriors, but particularly at that point in the war against al Qaeda, just didn't have the same depth of background in those areas that some Army Special Operators could.

Patton's three principles of war – Pete Blaber, the AFO Commander, the Delta Force Lieutenant Colonel, lived and preached what he called Patton's three principles of war – audacity, audacity and audacity. I have to tell you that I don't know where Colonel Blaber got that from, but I spent not weeks, but certainly hours looking for Patton's three principles of war and couldn't find them anywhere, but they are great principles to have despite that.

Now, Colonel Blaber had to bug his chain of command just to make those Reconnaissance missions happen. But without them, Operation Anaconda might well have been a strategic defeat for the United States. Imagine if at that point in the war

against al Qaeda if you'd had finally the big battle against al Qaeda and the first thing that happened is that two Chinooks full of 75 or 80 American troops crashed, burning to the ground. The al Qaeda guys come out with their video cameras and a week later, it is on YouTube or whatever YouTube was called back then.

Always trust the guy on the ground. Pete Blaber followed this rule when his SEAL element discovered that machine gun nest and they radioed back for guidance. He basically told them, "You do what you think is right, attack when you think is the right time." They went ahead and did that. General Hagenback also trusted the guy on the ground. He was about to pull all of his troops out of the Shah-i-Kot, and then Blaber, a guy who technically wasn't even in his chain of command radioed back and said, "I think that would be a bad idea. I think this is the battlefield opportunity of a lifetime, there's a lot more killing to be done. Things are not as bad as they seem to you right now." And Hagenback said, "You know what, this guy is very experienced. He is closer to the action than I am. I am going to trust his judgment." General Trebon unfortunately did not. He took command and control of the fight away from Pete Blaber just as the Takur Ghar fight was about to disintegrate or about to sort of spiral down into disintegration. That was a decision he would later come to regret. That's my understanding. And he decided not to send a rescue force in under daylight to pull a range of Quick Reaction Force which included some of those brave Airmen I was talking about off the top of Takur Ghar despite insistence from both the Platoon leader who was in-charge on that mountain top and the insistence from one of Blaber's three reconnaissance teams that had eyes directly on the mountain top that the landing zone was now secure. Trebon was understandably still very concerned by the fact that every helicopter that had flown up there so far had the gut shot out of it. So, he didn't trust the guy on the ground. And unfortunately, there are certainly those who are on that mountain top who feel that that decision cost the life of an Airman who tragically bled to death in the snow while they were waiting to be rescued.

Now, I should say here that it sounds like I'm being a little hard on Trebon. What I am really trying to be hard on, if anything, is the system that set him up for failure. He did the best he could. There's nobody in Operation Anaconda, on the American side, on the allied side, who wasn't doing the absolute best that he thought he could do every moment of the fight, making the best decisions that he could, very often in a sleep-deprived state with absolutely crushing life and dead pressures. Knowing that if you make this decision a lot of people might die and if you make this decision somebody is certainly going to die. I mean, I wouldn't wish that sort of a dilemma on anybody. Trebon did the best he could. He probably should have never been put in that position without a better background to prepare him for it.

Combat-focused training saves lives. Again this is more conventional wisdom. "Oh, yeah, train the way you fight." How many times we heard that? I see that in the professional military audiences that I lecture. But it's amazing how many commanders in garrison particularly at this stage of our recent military history did not seem to make combat training their focus. Now again and again when the chips were down in Operation

Anaconda, training took over for troops in what would otherwise have been very dire straits indeed.

Final lesson learnt – troops won't let you down. You think back to 2000-2001 timeframe. There was a lot of hand ringing back then. This was sort of pre 9/11 that the generation that fought World War II was finally passing from the stage – the greatest generation as they became termed. Implicit in much of that conversation was the notion that today's generation of young Americans wasn't fit to lace the boots of their forefathers. I would respectfully argue that nothing could be further from the truth, and I would say that this was clear even during Operation Anaconda, not to mention the seven years of fighting we've had since then. In Anaconda, in circumstances that would have broken weaker soldiers and weaker units, U.S. troops from light infantry to SEALs to Delta Force operators to Apache pilots to Special Ops Airmen, all proved themselves in extraordinarily difficult situations that were largely not of their making.

So, in closing I would remind you that every day there are Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan performing with similar quiet heroism. Today's generation of young Americans is living up to the high standards set by their forebears. They have earned our pride and they deserve the best tactical, operational and strategic leadership we can give them.

I thank you all for your time and your patience and I look forward to your questions.

[END]