Major General Franklin L. Hagenbeck,
Commanding General, 10th Mountain Division (Light), Fort Drum, New York,
and Commanding General, Coalition Joint Task Force Mountain in Afghanistan

AFGHANISTAN

Fire Support for Operation Anaconda

By Robert H. McElroy, Fort Sill Public Affairs Specialist,
with Patrecia Slayden Hollis, Editor

Major General Hagenbeck was the commander of ground forces in Afghanistan for the 17-day combat Operation Anaconda (February-March), part of Operation Enduring Freedom. The purpose of Operation Anaconda was to dig pockets of al Qaeda forces out of intricate caves in the rugged terrain of the Shah-e-Kot Valley in Afghanistan.

Basically, US forces consisted of some 40 Special Forces soldiers; about 1,200 infantrymen with 60-mm, 81-mm and 120-mm mortars from the 10th Mountain and 101st Divisions; 24 Army cargo, utility and attack helicopters; and Air Force, Marine and Navy aviation assets. In addition to Afghanistan, coalition nations contributing forces were Canada, England, Germany, Australia, Norway and New Zealand. (This interview was conducted 4 June.)

Q To set the stage for your discussion of fire support in Operation Anaconda, what were the cultural and environmental conditions and enemy like in Afghanistan [see the map on Page 8]?

A In terms of the terrain, one analogy I use is that if you flip a dinner plate over and then add the Hindu Kush Mountains down through the middle, it is akin to what Afghanistan looks like. The altitude of our headquarters at Bagram Airfield is about a mile high.

The Shah-e-Kot Valley floor where we fought had an altitude ranging from 7,000 to 8,000 feet. The valley was ringed by the rugged Turgal Gar Mountains that have an altitude of 11,000 feet in some places.

We called the eastern part of the valley the "Eastern Ridge" and the western part had a terrain feature we called "The Whale." It was very complex terrain, difficult and steep.

The Eastern Ridge had more than 100 caves dug in throughout the ridgeline. The enemy went from what appeared to be small fighting positions to the complex caves; the largest cave we found was about 30 meters deep in an inverted "V" and then went right and left another 30 meters each. That cave was filled with weapons and ammunition caches.

Afghanistan has very few roads or even good trails. To get around in Afghanistan, you need to be part mountain goat.

When the Northern Alliance fought in the first couple of months of the war, substantial numbers of the enemy surrendered. Later, during Operation Anaconda, the al Qaeda soldiers who were left were combat veterans, the hardcore who wanted to fight. Except for a handful of Afghanis, the foreign al Qaeda were virtually all we found in those caves.

The al Qaeda declared a Jihad—a holy war—calling on the villagers to kill all Americans in the first three days and into the fourth day of the operation. Anaconda was finally the set-piece battle they had been waiting for.

They thought the battle was going to be a "mirror image" of their fight with the Soviets. The Shah-e-Kot Valley is the area in which the Afghanis had fought and won decisively against the Soviets on two occasions. The al Qaeda came to the valley eager to fight and kill Americans.

This was good because we didn't have to chase so many down after the operation. Once we realized they were coming at us, it was easier to determine specific targets and maneuver our forces.

The al Qaeda came out of the cave complexes to fight American infantrymen and then ducked back in when they heard "fast movers" overhead [fixed-wing attack aircraft]. We found mortar base plates that were cemented in, allowing the al Qaeda to move tubes easily in and out of the caves. They already had registered their mortars on the key pieces of terrain and other features throughout the valley.

The weather was harsh. Just before Operation Anaconda, it was snowing and sleeting with some light snow at Bagram. Down at the lower elevations, it was raining so hard I had to delay D-Day for two days.

The temperatures during the first three days of the operation ranged from a high of 60 degrees Fahrenheit to a low of zero with a wind chill the first night of minus 20. So the temperature, in effect, dropped 80 degrees in 24 hours.

The rough terrain and weather had an impact on our targeting. It was very difficult for our overhead ISR [intelli-

gence, surveillance and reconnaissance] platforms to identify the cave complexes. So it took "boots on the ground" to find the caves. The shadows, alone, precluded our discovering a cave until our soldiers were almost on top of it.

The Afghanis are a fiercely independent and autonomous people. There's a lot of tension among the tribes—the only time they seemed to coalesce is to fight a foreign invader, such as the Soviets.

The Afghanis are worn out after 23 years of war and happy to let us kill the al Qaeda. But we can't let the al Qaeda put out a misinformation campaign that we are "invaders." The "clock is ticking." They are going to want us out of there.

Q *If you had, had 10th Mountain Division M119 105-mm howitzers in Afghanistan, would you have used them in Operation Anaconda?*

A In retrospect, we didn't consider bringing in 105s because I knew we could accomplish the mission without them. With the limited number of assets we brought into Afghanistan, it was clear we could capitalize on our mortars as well as on the Army, Air Force, Marine and Navy aviation assets.

Around the first of February, we got the warning order that something might evolve, and so we started doing the legwork—but the impending operation was far from solidified. I had established my TAC [tactical command post] forward. I went ahead and jumped my TAC and main [command post] up to Bagram and joined them on the 17th—11 days before D-Day.

That's when I got my first briefing on courses of action. We laid out the troops and other assets available, and I knew we could accomplish the mission. The fact that I did not have 105s never became contentious.

So the question, "Would I have used 105s?" is hypothetical. But I will tell you that the trade-off I would have had to make the first day would have precluded me from using 105s. In that terrain, my choice would have been to either airlift in soldiers with their mortars or 105s.

So the next question is, "Why did I use Chinooks [CH-47 cargo helicopters] to bring the troops in rather than Blackhawks [UH-60 utility helicopters], which I also had available?" It was because of the altitude…the constraints on the lift capability of helicopters at that altitude.

In addition, on Day One, we still did not know exactly what anti-aircraft defensive systems the al Qaeda had. We suspected they had Manpacks. We knew they had RPGs [rocket-propelled grenade launchers]. To sling a 105 underneath a CH-47 and try to set it down in very rugged terrain, to include slinging in the ammo after it, would have been very difficult and dangerous.

Then the question becomes, "Well, why couldn't you have 'offset' the 105s—have brought them into another position, not necessarily the top of a mountain, but a position from which they could shoot across the valley—The Whale was one of those places?" My answer is that we were in the "wild, wild west." I would have had to take combat assets to provide security for the battery. I would have had to dedicate Apaches or other "birds" and probably infantry troops to secure that battery until I knew exactly what we were up against.

So there would have been trade-offs which, again, I didn't face because we didn't have 105s in country.

Let me make something clear: I *always* want organic fire support systems—*always*. And at that point, I had mortars. If I'd had 105s, because of the terrain and the lack of road systems, I would not have brought them in on the first day.

The British have some 105s in Afghanistan now, and we have slung load those howitzers all over the country. But they didn't come in during Operation Anaconda. In fact, they have not participated in combat and have had limited opportunities to shoot on the Pakistani border.

Q *How effective were your mortars in Operation Anaconda?*

A They performed *superbly*. Generally, within two rounds, the mortars were ready to fire for effect.

All mortar missions were observed missions—we had Field Artillery FIST [fire support team] personnel at the platoon, company and battalion levels. They were professionals—quick, responsive and calm while processing fire missions.

In the 10th Mountain's 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry [1-87 IN], the battalion's companies kept the 60-mm mortars for immediate engagements while the battalion kept the 81-mm mortars and two 120-mm mortars, the latter to provide flexibility to move them around for reinforcing fires. The rest of the 120-mm

mortars were in "general support," providing full coverage north and south.

Q *What's the most challenging part of combat operations in Afghanistan?*

A Unquestionably, the harsh environmental conditions—they had an impact on the flying piece. Picture a Chinook sling-loading assets at night in limited illumination with the dirt and dust flying all around. I think the Afghanis invented darkness. Sometimes there was no ambient light. Our NVGs [night-vision goggles] don't work well without a little ambient light.

Our helicopters had to fly in brownout conditions with rocks and rugged terrain beneath them—very few flat places to land on. When the illumination was low, I was hesitant to fly helicopters at night. I saw some *great* piloting in this operation.

Q *How important is it to have ground-based indirect fires capabilities for the close fight?*

A Indispensable, absolutely *indispensable*. But let me start by making a bigger point. After Operation Anaconda, I was asked why I didn't have a bombing campaign in the Shah-e-Kot.

The answer is, again, because of the rugged terrain, the cave complexes and the limited target sets—air campaigns are most effective against "fixed" targets.

Early on, there were few, if any, fixed targets we could identify as being high-value. We templated a couple. We did have an air strike about 20 minutes before the first air assault into the valley.

We knew the enemy's "center of gravity" was inside the caves where his soldiers and logistics were. But we did not know how much C^2 [command and control] he had inside that valley.

I did not want to attack the dozens and dozens of cave complexes arbitrarily without having some sense of what was in them. As it turned out, many were empty while some had people, some had munitions and some had documents in them. So, without knowing what was in those caves, we did not want to have air strikes on them until we could assess them.

The al Qaeda soldiers would hear fixed-wing aircraft overhead and quickly duck into the caves, protected from most airdropped munitions. So to get them, we had to put a JDAM [joint direct attack munition] inside the cave. But you only have so many of those precision munitions.

Because of the altitude, Chinooks [CH-47 cargo helicopters] were used to bring the troops and equipment in rather than Blackhawks [UH-60 utility helicopters].

To keep the enemy from ducking back into their caves, we used mortars and machineguns to kill them outright, when we could, or suppress them. We got a number of kills with close air support [CAS], but they were primarily because our mortars and machineguns kept the al Qaeda from getting up and running back into the caves.

Q *What did you use for CAS and how effective was it?*

A The most effective close air support asset we had was the Apache [AH-64 attack helicopter], *hands down*.

The Apaches were extraordinary—they were lethal and survivable. We had six in the fight with two left flying at the end of the first day. They were so full of holes—hit all over, one took an RPG in the nose—I don't know how they flew.

But the maintenance guys from the 101st fixed every one. They got those helicopters back up and flying. The detainees later said the Apaches were the most feared weapons on the battlefield—the helicopters were on top of them before they knew what was happening. The Apaches came as close to "one shot, one kill" as you can get.

Our next most effective CAS assets were the A-10s in the daytime and AC-130s at night. They were great.

We also had F-16s and F/A-18s [fighter aircraft] and B-52s [bomber aircraft] providing CAS. For the most part, they carried JDAMs and some dumb bombs.

Our fixed-wing pilots faced some procedural and maneuvering challenges. They had a very small view of the target

Afghanistan has very few roads or even good trails. To get around in Afghanistan, you need to be part mountain goat.

areas from their cockpits—about the size of a postage stamp. (The Navy and Marine Corps fighter pilots routinely flew as low to the ground as they could to achieve the effects, even when it was below what was deemed minimum safe distance. They were *terrific*.)

The Air Force had to work through airspace management—aircraft were stacked up to the ceiling and could only be flown in, in a few numbers.

And then the angle of attack in the complex terrain made it even more difficult for the pilots. Certainly they had some close support successes. But the bulk of their successes were against fixed targets, such as when our ground troops identified a cave we wanted taken out.

Later on the first day and into the second day, when I declared two of the villages in the Shah-e-Kot Valley as targets [Marzak and Barbakul], the aircraft leveled them—we had taken hostile fire from the villages and flown Predators [unmanned aerial vehicles] over them to confirm their activities.

The aircrafts' precision munitions were most effective against those fixed targets. We used precision munitions on known enemy intersections of infiltration and then exfiltration.

But for the first three or four days, we faced "fleeting" targets. By the time the AWACS [airborne warning and control system aircraft] handed a target off, the Air Force said it took 26 minutes to calculate the DMFI [desired mean point of impact], which is required to ensure the precision munition hits the target. Then the aircraft had to get into the airspace management "cue." It took anywhere from 26 minutes to hours (on occasion) for the precision munitions to hit the targets.

That's okay if you're not being shot at or the targets aren't fleeting—such as the SUVs [support utility vehicles] the al Qaeda used for resupply. When the SUVs stopped to unload and if they stayed in one place long enough, the fixed-wing aircraft would slam them.

We really worked to find ways to kill fleeting targets the first three or so days. Honestly, we weren't that successful.

The al Qaeda moved small groups around the battlefield—each had three to five men with rifles on their backs, maybe blankets. During the daylight, we watched them on the Predator. At night, when these groups heard a Predator or AC-130 coming, they pulled a blanket over themselves to disappear from the night-vision screen. They used low-tech to beat high-tech.

The groups floated onto the battlefield with individual soldiers separated by 10 to 15 meters. They moved out like a squad or fire team. The al Qaeda did not present large target sets.

Then the enemy soldiers stopped at a way station with a huge underground complex to resupply. That complex had a very steep angle of attack, incredibly difficult for our pilots to hit. Later, when we were able to bomb that complex, it burned and exploded for 11 hours.

All mortar missions were observed missions—Field Artillery FIST personnel were at the platoon, company and battalion levels. They were professionals—quick, responsive and calm. *(Photo by MAJ Bruce E. Stanley, XO, 1-87 IN)*

Q *What mix of munitions would you like to see in future battles?*

A The mix of munitions is a function of METT-T [mission, enemy, terrain, troops and time available]. Ideally you want precision, but it really boils down to wanting responsive, effective fires.

I'll underscore that point by saying this—a ground force commander does not care about the number of sorties being flown or the number and types of bombs being dropped and their tonnage. Those statistics mean nothing to ground forces in combat. All that matters is whether or not the munitions are time-on-target and provide the right effects.

Q *During Operation Anaconda, what was your organization to conduct targeting and coordinate and deconflict fires and effects?*

A We had the ASOC [air support operations center] with Air Force personnel, primarily out of Saudi Arabia, and my "FSE" [fire support element] headed by my DFSCOORD [deputy fire support coordinator]. The DSFCOORD was my "go to" guy. He kept us on schedule and set up our battle rhythm with targeting—the entire process was doctrinally correct. I think that paid off.

We were designated CJTF [Coalition Joint Task Force] Mountain. It consisted of everything in Afghanistan: elements of the 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne Divisions; the JSOTF [Joint Special Operations Task Force], which was mainly the 5th Special Forces Group, Black Special Ops (this group reported to the CINCENT [Commander-in-Chief of Central Command]) and Task Force K-Bar/Coalition.

At the height of the battle, we had 200 fire support coordinating measures [FSCM] at one time. We opened and closed them routinely. The bulk of the FSCM were NFAs [no-fire areas] and RFAs [restrictive-fire areas]. In addition to tracking our infantrymen and small Special Forces teams on the battle-

field, we had to track personnel from "other agencies"—and you can interpret that any way you want to.

Battle tracking was a huge challenge; it was tedious, but productive. The good news is that during Operation Anaconda, we didn't have a single fratricide.

Q *What capabilities or procedures would you like to see on future battlefields?*

A Ground commanders always will need and want all-weather, organic, indirect firepower (artillery) that can provide timely, accurate (precision) and effective fires, regardless of the environmental conditions. We had good weather during Operation Anaconda and could fly our helicopters and aircraft to provide fire support. We were very lucky.

A couple of times when the ceilings dropped, we had limited air coverage. But by that time, it was several days into the fight and we had hurt the enemy badly enough. The ground force needs a highly lethal, all-weather indirect fire capability organic to the force.

We need long-haul communications. If we're going to fight on a noncontiguous battlefield spread out over a large area as we did in Afghanistan, then long-haul coms is critical—the Shah-e-Kot Valley was about 120 kilometers of mountainous terrain away from my headquarters.

We had to depend on TACSAT [tactical satellite] for long-haul communications. That meant we had to link all our helicopters and fixed-wing assets to TACSAT.

For command and control, I had challenges communicating with my brigade commander on the ground and his battalion commander. Operation Anaconda quickly became a platoon fight led by platoon leaders. From that perspective, it was very decentralized. This was not a "push-to-talk" war.

We have a huge procedural and training issue we've got to work through with our Air Force friends. Because of the complexity of their precision munitions, they will not shoot JDAMs without either a GFAC [ground forward air controller] or ETAC [enlisted terminal attack controller] calling them in. There are not enough GFACs or ETACs in their inventory to support every ground maneuver element. And as I said, this war became platoon fights separated by distances in very rugged terrain with too few ETACs to go around.

Let me illustrate my point. On the first day of the operation, one platoon of 1-87 IN fought all day. That platoon happened to have the battalion commander and an ETAC in it. That night, the ETAC was extracted. For the next 24 hours until we could get the ETAC reinserted, not even the battalion commander could call in precision-guided munitions. What happens if the ETAC is injured and has to be MEDEVACed [medically evacuated] or is killed?

We need training and certification for our observers to call in JDAMS—any precision munitions or air support—to be universal observers, if you will. Our Field Artillery leaders, both in the 10th and the 101st Divisions, knew this would be an issue and worked hard to try to get their observers certified.

We have to be careful about employing UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles]. I would characterize the view UAVs provide as "looking through a soda straw." You have to be careful to direct that view at what you need to see.

The UAV operator needs to be sitting next to the ground tactical commander. In this instance, he was sitting in Saudi Arabia. At times the UAV moved out of an area we wanted to look at, and we had to go through channels with a request to redirect the UAV's search. During the fight, the higher headquarters controlling the UAV adhered to that request, but we lost a target or two before we could redirect the UAVs.

Sometimes higher headquarters controlling the UAVs has a fixation on watching the close fight. It is human nature to want to look at who is being shot at. But sometimes the headquarters needs to back that UAV off to look at the deeper fight, to look at reinforcements coming in—which we did, but we also met resistance at times.

My inclination was to look at the bigger picture all the time to see how I could influence the fight. Occasionally, we had more than one UAV up at a time and could look at both the close and deep fights, but that was not true throughout the fight.

I'd like a lightweight counterbattery radar—not so much for the battle at Shah-e-Kot Valley, but for subsequent fights. In the Valley, we mostly fought mortars that tended to direct lay. We did destroy five D-30s near The Whale that were used to fire on helicopter landing zones. Down along the Pakistan border, we took some rounds from what we think were D-30 howitzers and other systems. The total number of howitzers we actually destroyed was about eight. We also found a few more howitzers in caves.

I had a Q-36 Firefindar radar at Kandahar Airfield and was prepared to move it into the valley once we had secured an area for it. But because we were experiencing very little indirect fire, I chose not to insert it.

Q *What message would you like to send Field Artillerymen stationed around the world?*

A Tell the Field Artillery School to keep doing what it's been doing—we have some smart young officers and NCOs here in Afghanistan who have really made a difference.

Tell them I love 'em.

Major General Franklin L. Hagenbeck took command of the 10th Mountain Division (Light) and Fort Drum, New York, in August 2001, the same division in which he had served as Chief of Staff and G3 and commanded the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry. In December 2001, he deployed to Afghanistan as the Commander of the Coalition Joint Task Force Mountain and served as the ground tactical commander during Operation Anaconda. In his previous assignments, he was on the Joint Staff as the Deputy Director for Politico-Military Affairs for Global and Multi-Lateral Issues and Western Hemisphere in the Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate (J5) and, later, the Deputy Director of Current Operations (J33), both at the Pentagon. Among other assignments, Major General Hagenbeck was the Assistant Division Commander (Operations) in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and Director of Officer Personnel Management in the Total Army Personnel Command, Alexandria, Virginia. He also commanded the 3d Training Brigade at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He holds an MBA from Long Island University, New York, and a MS in Exercise Physiology from Florida State University. He has a Bachelor of Science from the US Military Academy at West Point.