

# SPECIAL FORCES AND HAMID KARZIA

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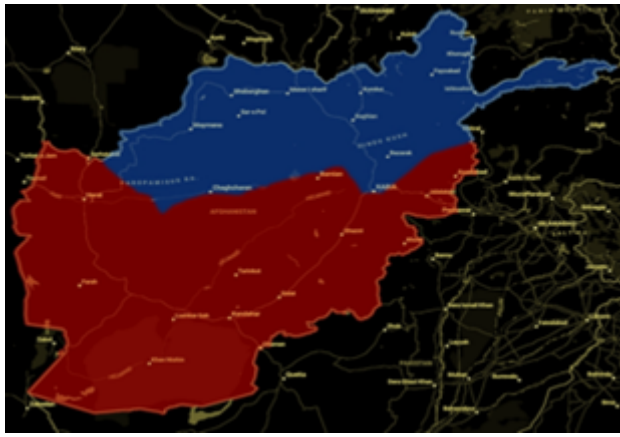
SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN (November – December 2001)

By: James G. Fausone, Esq.

# SPECIAL FORCES AND HAMID KARZIA SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2001



BY JAMES G. FAUSONE, ESQ.



Not all missions are created equal. Some are

small but important. Others are loud and leave an impression. This is a story of 11 Green Berets at the start of the Afghan war that took on an audacious mission to assist an Afghanistan diplomat in organizing Pashtun Afghans in the south of the country to overthrow the foreign Taliban overlords. This operation, involving Special Forces ODA 574, had it all, stealth, intrigue, chaos, success, and a horrible ending. The latter is why no movie will ever be made of this mission, but is an important part of the story.

### **Post 9/11/01**

After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, there was no doubt that President George W. Bush was going to do everything possible to avenge that humiliation. Ultimately, the military action was going to lead to Afghanistan and a search for Osama Bin Laden (OBL), financier and mastermind of the attacks. OBL was known to be in the Afghan mountains and crossing freely into Pakistan as needed. Al-Qaeda had found safe haven in Afghanistan which was ruled by the Taliban.

The Taliban, also known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, had a philosophical affiliation with Al-Qaeda. It started when fighting the Soviets (1979-1989) was priority one. The Soviet invasion caused international repercussions, including President Carter having the US boycott the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. The Soviet Union went to war over fear that the growing Muslim population threatened Soviet control of Central Asia. After the Soviets pulled out, Afghanistan was in turmoil trying to settle on leadership of the nation which was very tribal in nature. The Taliban emerged in 1994 out of the Afghan Civil War and largely consisted of students from the Pashtun areas of east and south Afghanistan, who had been educated in traditional Islamic schools. Under the leadership of Mullah Omar, the Taliban's government was opposed by the Northern Alliance militia, which seized parts of northeast Afghanistan and maintained international recognition as a continuation of the Islamic State of Afghanistan.

During their rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban enforced a strict interpretation of Sharia, or Islamic law, and were widely condemned for massacres against Afghan civilians, harsh discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities, denial of UN

food supplies to starving civilians, destruction of cultural monuments, banning women from school and most employment, and prohibition of most music. The Taliban committed cultural genocide against Afghans by destroying their historical and cultural texts, artifacts, and sculptures. That five-year harsh reign resulted in many Afghan nationals breaking faith with the Taliban and hoping for a political and military change. The Taliban held control of most of the country until the United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. To understand the US Army strategy in 2001, the tribes, territory, and terrain must be understood.

It was the harsh reign of the Taliban that had different tribes or factions of the nation looking for new directions and alliances. The Northern Alliance had a long history of fighting to shake off the yoke of the Taliban. Each northern warlord wanted to be in charge of its territory. The northerners were ethnically not Pashtun. The Northern Alliance, officially known as the United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, fought the Taliban which was made up of many foreign fighters. In an oversimplification, Pashtuns are generally Sunni Muslims. The Northern Alliance was primarily Uzbek and Tajik nationalities.

The US had a natural ally in the north. The Northern Alliance had come together to fight first the Soviets and then the Taliban. It was willing to work with the US to win back the country from the Taliban government. The result of this partnership has been spectacularly captured in books, movies, and documentaries. The US Army Special Forces that infiltrated northern Afghanistan found themselves riding horses with the Northern Alliance. That image of the US Army cavalry captured the nation. Doug Stanton's acclaimed book "Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of US Soldiers Who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan," and the movie "12 Strong" have kept the story alive.

The US did not have a natural ally in the South. That was going to require creating a fighting force and supporting Afghan leadership. Of less acclaim is the work done by US Army Special Forces in the South at the same time. No old west cowboy horse riding was involved, and a horrible event dampens the story.

### **Green Berets and the Insertion**

The Afghanistan War, which lasted twenty years, was different from the start. The US efforts in Afghanistan were projected as self-defense as that country had become a breeding ground for terrorists wanting to inflict harm on the US. There was no history of a strong central government. This was not going to be a conventional war.

A conventional war involves the military forces of two nation-states. It also was not classical guerrilla warfare involving irregulars in fast-moving, small-scale actions against a nation's regular military. Afghanistan was to be "unconventional warfare"

focused on US supporting Afghan nationals against the Taliban. The US had complete air dominance but needed tribes and a government to shut down the safe haven for terrorists.

This type of warfare called on the insertion of Special Forces that had been trained for and used unconventional methods to train, equip, and advise locals who opposed their government. They aid native fighters, to ultimately cause a hostile government to capitulate. Tactics focus on destroying military targets while avoiding damage to civilian infrastructure.

The distinction of Special Forces compared to Special Operations is also critical to understanding the role of the Green Berets in Southern Afghanistan. Special Operations refers to all units assigned under the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), which includes U.S. Naval Special Warfare, Air Force Special Operations Command, Army Special Operations Command, and Marine Special Operations Command.

That means everyone from Air Force Combat Controllers to Navy SEALs to Army Rangers are referred to as special operators.



Special Forces (SOF) is a proper noun that refers to a very

specific unit in SOCOM. Special Forces soldiers wear a distinctive green beret. No other entity in the U.S. military is called Special Forces. The Green Beret Foundation explains “The United States Army Special Forces, or the Green Berets, are America’s premier special operations force. The tip of the spear in the United States’ fight against diverse enemies worldwide, Green Berets are experts in unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, foreign internal defense, reconnaissance, direct action, hostage rescue, and other strategic missions.”

As the war planners considered how to be engaged in Afghanistan it was clear Special Forces would assist the Northern Alliance fighting force. The plan in Southern Afghanistan was more nuanced. This was in part because there were in exile Afghan nationals who claimed to have support in the nation including the last king of Afghanistan Mohammad Zahir Shah, Crown Prince Ahmad Shah, academics, politicians, and diplomats.

The US government was in contact with exiled Afghanistan leaders looking for someone to work with and support. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was busy making connections and spinning its web. One of the principals that the CIA was supporting

was Hamid Karzai. He was born in 1957 and obtained a Masters in International Relations from Himachai Pradesh University in 1983. He found himself as a fundraiser

and community organizer in the late 1980s.



Those experiences

resulted in a stint as a Deputy Foreign Minister until an arrest for spying as a result of visiting foreign embassies. In July 1999, Karzai's father, Abdul Ahad Karzai, was shot dead early in the morning while returning home from a mosque in Quetta. Reports suggest that the Taliban carried out the assassination.

Following this incident, Karzai took over as Khan of the tribe and decided to work closely with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, which was then led by Ahmad Shah Massoud. Karzai spent 2000 and 2001 traveling Europe and the US gathering contacts, funds, and support for the anti-Taliban movement. September 11, 2001, changed lives all around the world including Hamid Karzai's. As an English-speaking Afghan, he was a regular media voice. Karzai began urging NATO states to purge his country of Al-Qaeda. He said in a BBC interview, "These Arabs, together with their foreign supporters and the Taliban, destroyed miles and miles of homes and orchards and vineyards ... They have killed Afghans. They have trained their guns on Afghan lives ... We want them out."

The CIA and the US had identified Hamid Karzai as their man-to-back in southern Afghanistan. He promised that the Pashtun people were ready to rise up and shake off the Taliban and chase out Al-Qaeda. Every US military branch wanted in on the coming war. It was obvious that participating was how careers and promotions were made, Junior officers wanted to move up the ranks and Majors wanted to be Colonels, it is just human nature. Ultimately, the question of how to get Karzai on the ground to mobilize the people was turned over to the Special Forces, the Green Berets.

## **ODA**

Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 574 was a Special Forces team of 11 soldiers from the U.S. Army's 5th Special Forces Group that was part of Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan (OEF-A) in 2001. ODA 574 was given the mission to infiltrate southern Afghanistan, coordinate with Hamid Karzai and his Pashtun fighters, advise and assist Karzai's forces, and destabilize and eliminate the Taliban regime.



These men were highly trained and resourceful. They

were also husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. These small units have personnel such as weapon specialists, intelligence, tactical engineering, communications and medical. In a small team the bonds are strong, not only with the men but also the families. This team relished the opportunity to go in the country.

This mission lasted from November 4, 2001, until December 5, 2001. In a short month, ODA 574 cemented an early victory in Afghanistan. Karzai was key to building a coalition of Pashtun nationals to fight and reassert control of the country. As Karzai wrote in a 2003 Time Magazine article:

*“Once Washington agreed to back me against the Taliban, I left for Afghanistan. I didn’t think about being captured or killed-I just went. That was in early October 2001; I was in Quetta (Qatar) at the time, with my family. I told everyone that I was going to a friend’s memorial service in town. I didn’t even tell my wife what I was really up to. I only said that if I weren’t back in a few days, it was because I was busy and she shouldn’t worry. She was surprised, of course, but I didn’t give her the opportunity to discuss my trip. I hurried away.*

*At the border, I met with three trusted friends. They had two motorbikes and a couple of handguns. I put on a salwar kameez and an Afghan-style turban. We simply rode into Afghanistan on the main highway.*

*First, we stayed in a village near Kandahar’s airport; then we moved to a house in the middle of town. That evening, American bombs began to fall around us. The war had begun. My cousins arranged for a taxi, an old Toyota station wagon, to take us into central Afghanistan. We stayed with a clergyman for several nights in the village of Tarin Kowt. His brother was a Taliban judge. In the afternoons, the brother would have tea with me and defend the Taliban.*

*Yet he never told them I was staying in the house. That’s when it sunk in that the Taliban were on the run, that Afghans wanted change.”*

The challenge for the US Army, and ODA 547, was to support this internal effort with a small footprint. The Afghans had to be recruited, trained, armed, housed, fed, and taught tactics and communication protocols. It was a tall order that could not be accomplished overnight. The command did not want significant support unless Karzai

could recruit 300 fighting men. On the ground, the absurdity of that requirement was faced by ODA 574 when it was realized that no town could feed and house such a large group. While Karzai could talk to various tribes and village leaders and obtain promises of support, it would not result in a garrison of 300 fighters. Karzai insisted to the CIA and Army brass that when called the men would appear based on the commitments he had received.

It was up to Capt. Jason Amerine of ODA 574 to triangulate policy, tactics, and reality when working with Karzai, CIA, and military brass. Amerine had developed a solid working relationship with Karzai built on trust and consultation. Karzai was an English speaker and often translated meetings between local leaders and Capt. Amerine. The Captain consulted Karzai when making military decisions. These mutual political and military decisions, including who to trust, where to stay, and even when and who to shoot or bomb, resulted in a bond between Amerine and Karzai.

The plan was simple enough, move south from Tarin Kowt to Shawali Kowt and then to Kandahar. The control the Kandahar would result in the control of the second-largest city in the country after Kabul. The city is also the spiritual center of the Taliban. Kandahar is the seat of power in Afghanistan as the supreme leader and his spiritual advisers are based there. Kandahar has therefore been called the de facto capital of Afghanistan, though the Taliban maintained Kabul is the capital. Kandahar is one of the most culturally significant cities of the Pashtun community and has been their traditional seat of power for more than 300 years. It is a major trading center for sheep, and natural goods like cotton, wool, silk grains, fruit, and tobacco. Karzai insisted that the Pashtun people were ready to rise up and take back Kandahar.



Karzai needed American support by way of the CIA and

the US Army. Captain Amerine was the right combination of brains, brawn, and compassion to work with Karzai. He was a 1993 graduate of West Point with a Bachelor of Science in Arabic. He had spent time in the infantry including assignments with the 442nd Infantry, Fort DeRussy, Hawaii; 5/87th Infantry, Fort Davis, Panama; and the Joint Security Force Company, Pan Mun Jom, Republic of Korea.

In 1998, he was selected to attend the Special Forces Detachment Officer



Qualification Course. Upon graduation, he was re-branched from the Infantry to Special Forces and was given command of ODA 572 (Operational Detachment A-Team) at Ft. Campbell as part of 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) and later took command of ODA 574.

His mental sharpness was on display post-Afghanistan. He went on to receive a Masters degree in International Affairs from the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M in 2003. In 2004, Amerine was assigned as an assistant professor of International Relations in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. He later served as an assistant professor of Arabic in the Department of Foreign Languages. Following his assignment at West Point, Amerine worked as a strategist at the United States Pacific Command where he focused on military policy issues related to China and the Pacific. He was then assigned to the Army Staff at the Pentagon where he led a team of strategists who focused on global issues including hostage policy and the recovery of SGT Bo Bergdahl; who was convicted of desertion in Afghanistan, received a loss of rank and pay, and was given a dishonorable discharge. Later a federal judge changed the military judge's decisions on technical grounds.

Karzai, who was highly educated, recognized another intellectual in the midst of a blossoming war and he developed a special bond with Armine. The chaos of those early days in November 2001 are captured in Eric Blehm's book, "The Only Thing Worth Dying For – How Eleven Green Berets Fought for a New Afghanistan."

After arriving in the country, the Green Berets by Black Hawks and Karzai by motorcycle, the first task was for Karzai to meet tribal leaders and obtain pledges of support, men, and weapons. This loose coalition was built based on Karzai's reputation and assurances that the Americans would support the effort.

### **The Battle of Tarin Kowt**

The first real test of this loose coalition was the battle to take the city of Tarin Kowt. In response to the approach of Karzai's force, the inhabitants of the town of Tarin Kowt revolted and expelled their Taliban administrators. Karzai then traveled to the city to meet with the town elders. While he was there, the Taliban marshaled a force of 500 men to retake Tarin Kowt. Karzai's small native force plus ODA 574 which included a USAF Combat Controller Tech Sergeant Alex Yoshimoto, were deployed in front of the town to block their advance. Relying heavily on close air support directed by Yoshimoto, the American/Afghan force managed to halt the Taliban's advance and drive them away from the town in mid-November 2001. The first important victory set the stage for Karzai to recruit more men as he had proved the support of US forces.

Amerine's men had a singular focus – fight, survive and advance. Staying focused became much harder as the success resulted in higher command determining that adding battalion staff to the area was advantageous. In reality, it simply added command structure and confusion. As the decisions were being made to add battalion staff, and ODA 574 was not asked if this was advisable, world representatives were meeting in Germany to support an interim leader of Afghanistan. The UN meeting selected Karzai to be the interim leader. His safety and security became even more elevated for the Americans.

With a Lieutenant Colonel and a Major now on the ground, Amerine was no longer the ranking officer and his existing relationship with Karzai had to be rearranged. The additional brass meant decisions took longer to make and at time battalion staff made decisions Armerine would not have made. The battle hardened SOF felt that the brass was not warranted, but they simply did not want to miss out on the war. However, war is what one is trained for and on which careers are built.

On November 30, the Afghan/American Coalition left Tarin Kowt to begin advancing on the main objective, Kandahar.

### Onto Shawali Kowt

The geography set the location of the next pitched battle with Taliban forces on the march to Kandahar. The stress of the fighting and constant vigilance took its toll. The men were exhausted and sleep deprived. ODA 574's medic succumbed to the pressure and failed to perform to the unit's standards. He had previous combat stresses that resurfaced and Amerine had to make the decision to replace him. Careers and friendship are made and broken in the crucible of combat.



The Battle of Shawali Kowt took place near

the Arghandab River. On December 2, 2001, after a pitched street-by-street battle, the Green Berets and Afghan Freedom Fighters captured the town of Shawali Kowt but could not gain control over a bridge over the Arghandab River, a gateway to the

Taliban spiritual center of Kandahar. That night, the Taliban forces launched a major counterattack, triggering a retreat by the Afghans. Over the next eight hours, the American forces defended against the retreat. U.S. Air Force Sergeant Alex Yoshimoto, the combat controller, orchestrated numerous air strikes from a variety of fighters and bombers, thwarting the Taliban charge and forcing the enemy to retreat. The value of the Air Force's firepower and ability to maintain flight overwatch cannot be overstated. The use of F18s, F14s, A10s, B52s, and refueling tankers from around the world was an edge that cleared roads and scattered the enemy. It is air power that allowed a small group of Green Berets and undisciplined Afghan troops to beat back the battle-hardened Taliban fighters.

One of the constant challenges in those early days was to sort out the validity of local intelligence from the Pashtun troops and Taliban fighters that switched sides. False information and dubious leads of where the Taliban were located escalated. Once it was clear that American air power could flatten houses, structures, and vehicles it should have become clear that some tribes were just trying to settle old scores.

As ODA 574 drew up plans to retake a small hill that gave a strategic advantage for controlling a small but important bridge, bad intel was flowing into the battalion command. A claim that a cave was where Taliban forces were hiding out became the topic of discussion and observations for the brass. Amerine was busy coordinating a plan to re-take that hill that the battalion brass had it give up the night before.

The battalion brass had decided to have the Air Force bomb a cave where it was claimed that the Taliban were holed up. A number of runs by F18s failed to hit the cave, missing the mark. There was a question whether the coordinates being provided from the ground were off. A B-52 had a 2000-bound JDAM bomb available, even though such had not been used in close air support previously. The combat controller developed new coordinates for the ordinance that was selected, but in reality, he had little training on the weapon system. Not wanting to disobey an order to "destroy that cave," he did his best rather than tell command he was not certain of the coordinates he was providing. A low battery warning on the instrumentation appeared, causing a change of the batteries. There was no recalibration of the instrument. The Afghan and American troops, some who had assembled to watch the fireworks, were about 2000 yards east of the cave, supposedly a safe distance. The cave coordinates were relayed and the B52 dropped the bomb.

### **Oh My God!**

The coordinates provided the B52 were simply wrong and not the cave. Instead, the JDAM explosion shook a nearby hill, known as the Alamo, where 50+ Afghans, most of

the 15-member headquarters staff, and 11 men of ODA were positioned. The hill became a wasteland. The air became superheated, a strong wind arose, and dust was everywhere. The call for medic rang out and the cries of those injured began to be heard when the noise subsided, and hearing returned.

As a search and rescue began, the American and Afghan munitions began to cook off adding to the fiasco. Amerine soon provided a SITREP and the wheels began turning to provide medical rescue and fighting support was mobilized. The quick reaction team was in Uzbekistan, at the former Russian air force base known as K2, and efforts at JBAD to mobilize started. It would take hours to reach the men of ODA 574.

The blast killed three members of ODA 574-Master Sergeant Jefferson Davis, Sergeant First Class Daniel Petithory, and Staff Sergeant Brian Cody Prosser-who became the first U.S. soldiers to die during the War in Afghanistan, and it was under friendly fire. Fellow U.S. soldier Mike McElhenney lost his arm and Gil Magallanes suffered a severe traumatic brain injury, while Amerine caught shrapnel in his leg. Official numbers say that 27 Afghan militia also lay dead, although Amerine estimates it could have been as many as 50. Some men had simply been vaporized in the blast.

The horrors of friendly fire had caused more damage than the enemy. Fortunately, Hamid Karzai was not on the hill that day. He survived with only a small cut from flying glass from the explosion. Karzai did lose Afghan fighters, local leaders and tribal friends.

As the casualties were lifted out and replacements arrived, the larger mission to get Karzai into Kandahar continued. The Taliban in Shawali Kowt surrendered. The march to Kandahar continued and it fell to the Afghan militia and American advisers on December 6, 2001. One can only hope that the Army had the introspection and recognized the multiple mistakes made causing such loss of life on the way to Khandhar. The war continued, but not for ODA 574.

## About the Author

*Jim Fausone is a partner with **Legal Help For Veterans, PLLC**, with over twenty years of experience helping veterans apply for service-connected disability benefits and starting their claims, appealing VA decisions, and filing claims for an increased disability rating so veterans can receive a higher level of benefits.*

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[Korean War](#)

[World War II](#)

[World War I](#)

[Civil War](#)

[Spanish American War](#)

[Mexican-American War](#)

[War of 1812](#)

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