



This is What You Signed Up For

The Attack on Ayn Sifni

by Kenn Finlayson

THE small village of Ayn Sifni occupies a strategic location on the main road north of Mosul, close to the Green Line that indicates the political boundary between greater Iraq and Kurdish territory to the north. In order to confront the Kurdish forces to the north, the Iraqi 108th Regiment, 8th Infantry Division maintained two battalions of occupying troops in the traditionally Kurdish village.² The liberation of Ayn Sifni by U.S. and Kurdish forces would open the route to Mosul and protect the Kurdish lines of communication.

Since arriving in Bashur on 23 March, Captain (CPT) Gary Caldwell (pseudonym) and his Special Forces (SF) team had linked up with other 10th Special Forces Group (SFG) personnel and Kurdish forces in the vicinity of Ayn Sifni. The well organized Kurdish *supays* (battalions) occupied positions on the ridgelines north of the village and maintained constant surveillance of the occupying troops. The *supays* rotated personnel from the ridgelines in thirty-day increments, as they had done for a number of years. From these positions the Kurdish forces could muster two hundred fighters in 30 minutes, and six hundred in 2 hours.³ As events in Iraq unfolded and the strategic value of the village was revealed, 10th SFG commanders and their Kurdish counterparts developed a plan to attack and seize Ayn Sifni.

Two weeks on a steady diet of potato

soup, rice, bread, and tea did little to dampen the ardor of the SF Operational Detachments–A (ODAs) working with the Kurdish forces. Originally deployed to the area as hunter–killer teams against Iraqi armor, the American troops easily transitioned to their new mission. In an effort to drive the Iraqis out of Ayn Sifni with minimal engagement, the ODAs initiated an orchestrated bombing campaign against the Iraqi units left in the village.⁴ Unfortunately, lack of dedicated aircraft hindered the effectiveness of the bombing campaign, and in one instance allowed an entire Iraqi battalion to load up on buses and trucks in broad daylight and pull out of the area unscathed.⁵ After that,

The streets of Ayn Sifni reflect the damage sustained as the coalition forces swept through the village during the battle.





Team members call for close air support during the battle of Ayn Sifni. The ability to quickly bring in U.S. air power was a decisive factor in many of the battles.



Hill 003 provided observation of the village from the northwest. The dead space immediately west of the village was unobservable, a fact that favored the defenders.



Special Forces team personnel observe the village of Ayn Sifni from the high ground to the north.

intelligence estimates put the remaining Iraqi force strength in Ayn Sifni at two platoons.⁶ In order to open the road to Mosul, Ayn Sifni would have to be neutralized.

SF Advanced Operational Base (AOB) 050—comprised of ODAs 051, 055, and 056—focused on the liberation of Ayn Sifni. The AOB established a program of reconnaissance that concentrated on the areas north and west of the village, and provided, with one exception, good observation of the objective. On the southeast side of the village, low ground prevented direct observation by the teams, and they were unable to maneuver to a position to see into the dead space. South of Ayn Sifni, the main road out was under observation all the way to the intersection with the main highway. The groundwork had been laid for an offensive against the village.

On 5 April, word came that the Kurds were advancing along the Green Line and that Ayn Sifni needed to be taken to facilitate the movement on Mosul. The deployment of forces against Ayn Sifni on 6 April required that the SF teams split and link up with the various elements of the *supay*. ODA 051 commander CPT Michael Dawson colocated his team with the commander of the 12th *Supay* and three hundred *Peshmerga* warriors on the east side of the village. Dawson considered the upcoming operation to be the culmination of a mission that began more than a month earlier with a tension-filled land infiltration and a stressful personal security detail.⁷ After three weeks of intensive training with his Kurdish allies, Dawson was finally in a position to see the fruits of the team's labor.

In the area north of the village, four members of ODA 056, part of ODA 051, and a *Peshmerga* 82mm mortar platoon established an observation post (OP). Further to the west, a *Peshmerga* section of heavy weapons was teamed with ODA 055. The two weapons elements were to begin firing on Ayn Sifni thirty minutes before the commencement of the ground attack, allowing for the element in the east to infiltrate into the village.

Calmly advancing through the hail of fire, Ritter and his men, aided by the close air support of the recently arrived F-14s and FA-18s, scattered the Iraqi forces pinning down the bulk of the troops on the hill.

Behind the high ground on the west side of town, ODA 056 (minus those on the north side OP) accompanied three hundred *Peshmerga* as they began moving toward the top of the

hill. The significance of the unobservable dead space soon became evident; a fusillade of fire erupted as the force crested the hill.⁸ Pinned down on the hill, CPT Caldwell and the *Peshmerga* took to the ground to avoid the intense fire. The ODA 056 soldiers on the northern OP worked to bring in close air support to relieve the pressure on the men pinned down on the hill, while ODA 051 and the three hundred *Peshmerga* of the 12th *Supay* began to attack Ayn Sifni from the east. Heavy fighting continued for more than four hours as the estimated two platoons of Iraqis turned out to be more than three hundred troops.⁹ The original plan for an assault from the east, supported by fires from multiple locations, dissolved into a multipronged attack from three separate directions.¹⁰

On the western edge of the hill NE of town, Sergeant Major Scott Ritter led 150 *Peshmerga* off the hill and into a ravine running towards the low ground on the edge of the village. Calmly advancing through the hail of fire, Ritter and his men, aided by the close air support

of the recently arrived F-14s and FA-18s, scattered the Iraqi forces pinning down the bulk of the troops on the hill. This action opened up the west side of the village to the assault.¹¹

Once the Iraqi position engaging the hill was reduced, the *Peshmerga* forces swept into the village. The *supay* commander insisted to CPT Dawson that they halt and plan the next stage of the assault. After considerable discussion, Dawson managed to convince the Kurdish commander that the forces needed to sweep to the southern edge of the village, and consolidate their position before stopping to plan further.¹² The assault force soon reached the southern edge of Ayn Sifni and began to consolidate. At this point, the Iraqi forces launched a counterattack.

The Iraqi forces south of the town approached in trucks, dismounted from their vehicles, and advanced across an open field toward the village. The counterattack force employed 82mm mortars to cover its assault. The *Peshmerga* forces reacted quickly, and met the attack with mortar and machine gun fire from the protection of the buildings on the edge of village. The Special Forces troops contributed to the fight by employing their .50 caliber sniper rifle to deadly effect.¹³ The counterattack failed, and the Iraqi force retreated.

The ability of the Peshmerga forces to rapidly coalesce in substantial numbers never failed to impress the Special Forces teams.



In the village itself, the *Peshmerga* conducted a house-to-house search for stay-behinds, and to collect abandoned military equipment. CPT Caldwell noticed that the Kurds were very selective about which houses they entered. Houses with unlocked doors were not touched during the sweep, while any locked doors



The rough and ready Peshmerga forces proved to be a reliable ally for the coalition. In the background, captured Iraqi troops are rounded up.

were kicked in and the house subjected to an intensive search. When he inquired about the selection procedure, Caldwell was told that the Kurdish residents of the village had been told in advance to leave their doors unlocked when the *Peshmerga* entered the village. By default, any locked doors belonged to the occupying Iraqi forces. Caldwell noted with interest the ability of the Kurds to pass information in and out of the occupied village without compromising the mission.¹⁴

The liberation of Ayn Sifni opened the way for the coalition move on Mosul. In the course of the battle, 33 Iraqis were killed, 54 wounded, and 230 taken prisoner. Friendly losses amounted to a single *Peshmerga* fighter killed. The Iraqi weapons that were captured explained the enemy's ability to bring heavy fire on the troops on the northeast hilltop: five 82mm mortars, one D20 artillery piece, two 37mm and one 57mm air defense artillery weapons, and one 73mm recoilless rifle, in addition to numerous machine guns ranging in caliber from 7.62mm to 23mm.¹⁵ In the end, the Kurds recovered control of a traditionally Kurdish village, allowing them to begin the process of reintegrating

the Kurdish population. For the soldiers of 10th Special Forces Group, the battle of Ayn Sifni proved to be another successful example of SF's ability to live, train, and fight with indigenous populations—exactly what CPT Dawson and his teammates had signed up for. 📌

Endnotes

- 1 Master Sergeant Patrick Quinn, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenn Finlayson, 25 June 2003, Fort Carson, CO, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Captain Gary Caldwell, (pseudonym), B Company, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenn Finlayson, 24 June 2003, Fort Carson, CO, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Master Sergeant Patrick Quinn, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenn Finlayson, 24 June 2003, Fort Carson, CO, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 Caldwell interview, 24 June 2003.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Captain Michael Dawson, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, interview by LTC Robert Jones, 25 June 2003, Fort Carson, CO, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 8 After Action report, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, Fort Carson, CO, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Captain Gary Caldwell, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Kenn Finlayson, 25 June 2003, Fort Carson, CO, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Sergeant Major Scott Ritter, B Company, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, interview by Dr. Charles Briscoe 3 July 2003, Kirkuk, Iraq, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 12 Dawson interview.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Caldwell interview, 25 June 2003.
- 15 After Action report.