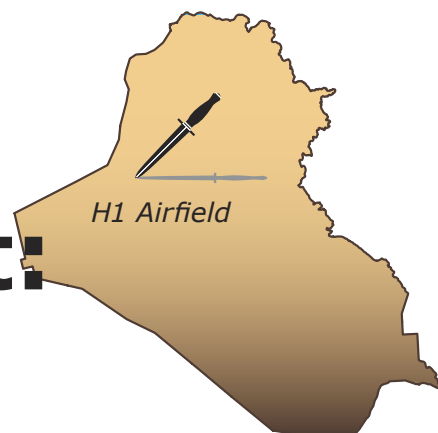


The Jump at Objective Serpent:

3/75th Rangers in Iraq



by Robert W. Jones, Jr.

“The best thing about Rangers is that we can do anything.” SSG Jack Barker (pseudonym), Squad Leader, A/3/75th Rangers

PERHAPS one of the most fearful experiences a soldier can have is to jump into enemy territory at night. Third Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, conducted two night combat parachute jumps during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) in order to seize two critical airfields in the western part of Iraq. While less publicized than the later air assault of the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Bashur Airfield, the Ranger combat jump to seize the H1 Airfield (known as Objective Serpent) provided one of the first forward operating bases deep within Iraqi territory.

The Rangers did not deploy to Iraq haphazardly. Their actions on the ground were the result of months of preparation. The training focus in the United States centered on a regimental-sized jump to seize Saddam International Airport, later renamed Baghdad International Airport (BIAP). The 75th Ranger Regiment conducted two airfield seizure rehearsals: the first on Dekkar Airstrip at Fort Benning, Georgia; and the second, Exercise Savage Strike, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in February 2003. The Fort Bragg rehearsal included practicing clearing heavy equipment from a runway, a task taught and facilitated by B Company, 27th Engineer Battalion.

In the first week of March 2003, the Rangers deployed to the Middle East. Two weeks later, A Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment (A/3/75th), received a

warning order to seize Objective Serpent (H1 Airfield). The order arrived the same day that 3rd Battalion was busy supporting C Company’s jump on Objective Roadrunner, a small desert landing strip in western Iraq. A/3/75th took responsibility for the mission to take Objective Serpent and immediately went into the planning mode. Over the next few days, soldiers at all levels conducted rehearsals and made preparations for the assault.

Three C-17s full of Rangers took off in the darkness of 27 March 2003, headed for the deserts of western Iraq. The first two-thirds of the 4½-hour flight was uneventful, but approximately two hours out from the objective, the aircraft took some enemy antiaircraft fire. During the remainder of the flight, the C-17s took evasive maneuvers, “jinking” to avoid fire. Stoically enduring the bumpy ride, the Rangers began jump preparations when they felt the plane suddenly descend from 30,000 feet to 500 feet. The descent coincided with the ten minute warning to get ready to jump, which caused some problems as the Rangers attempted to stand up while struggling against the effects of gravity. Anticipation increased when the jump doors opened and filled the interior of the aircraft with cold, dry, desert air.

In the crowded troop compartment of one C-17, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Jack Barker felt that the aircraft had hardly slowed

down at all as the aircraft continued to jink. As if to confirm his observation, the Ranger standing next to Barker fell down and yelled in pain as he seriously injured his knee.¹ The grounded Ranger was moved out of the stick for the return trip to medical care. The effect on the Rangers of the rapid descent and evasive maneuvers was exacerbated by the unusual weight of their rucksacks and jump gear. In order to prepare for multiple combat contingencies, each Ranger carried approximately 280 to 350 pounds in his rucksack—everything from ammunition to extra radio batteries. Exiting the aircraft would be a relief to many. As one squad leader shuffled to the door, he observed that the anchor line cable was only two feet from the deck because of the jumpers' weight on it as they attempted to stay on their feet.²

Jumpmaster Sergeant First Class Ronald Redmond (pseudonym), 3rd Platoon Sergeant of A/3/75th, led the Rangers in his plane through the jump commands and then the Ranger Creed, a 3rd Battalion tradition carried on from their combat jumps into Panama during Operation JUST CAUSE, and later at Objective Rhino in Afghanistan during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM.³ Commands reviewed and creed recited, the Rangers were ready to jump.

The jump light flashed green and the Rangers exited the aircraft without incident. As each man entered into the uncertainty of the cold, dark, Iraqi desert night, his fate depended on the wind, gravity, and, in some cases, luck. SSG Barker had just enough time to lower his rucksack before he executed a parachute landing fall. Almost immediately, he heard the telltale noise of someone landing to his right, and knew from the sound that the newcomer was hurt. After securing his gear, Barker moved toward the noise. He quickly discovered that the unlucky Ranger had blown out his knee on a patch of hard rocky sand with large jagged rocks intermittently sticking out of the ground. Barker called in the injury to the medics, and verified that the Ranger was stable and did not have any other injuries before continuing with his mission.

Barker's platoon leader, First Lieutenant David Hess (pseudonym), exited the aircraft without a problem, but hit the ground with a numbing jolt. He felt somewhat disoriented, but began to secure his equipment in what he thought was just a few minutes after landing. However, when Hess came up on the platoon's radio net, his radio operator told him it had been about twenty minutes since they'd jumped. Shaken, but not out of action, Hess rejoined his platoon.⁴



The 27 March 2003 Ranger assault on H1 Airfield provided coalition forces with a forward operating base in the deserts of western Iraq. The assault force met no resistance on the airfield, and accompanying engineers were able to use their air-dropped equipment to clear abandoned armored vehicles from the runway.

Recovering as quickly as possible from the jump, the Rangers moved quickly to their designated assembly areas. Although prepared for an enemy force on the drop zone, they noted no tracer fire or enemy activity. Even the Rangers' night vision goggles (NVGs) revealed little in the dense darkness. SSG Barker could

make out dark spots throughout the area, but no detail. Later, he discovered that these were rocks, piles of sand, or the rusted hulks of armored vehicles used to block the runway. As SSG Barker moved up the runway toward his platoon's assembly area, he noticed equipment the Iraqis had used to block the runway.

Accompanying the Rangers was a heavy drop of engineer equipment and the same engineers from B Company, 27th Engineer Battalion, who had participated in the rehearsal at Fort Bragg. The engineer equipment landed badly, so the first task for the engineers was to get their

equipment into operation in order to clear the runway for the follow-on air land forces.

Although there was no enemy gunfire, the radio net was filled with status reports—mostly injuries, including several from Barker's

squad. One of SSG Barker's SAW (squad automatic weapon) gunners, a former Marine named Derek, came on the radio and very calmly stated that he may have broken his ankle upon landing in a patch of jagged rocks. "Broken" was an understatement. Using the infrared light on his NVGs, SSG Barker saw that Derek had an open compound fracture just above the ankle, so severe the bones had punctured through his boot, pants, and chemical protective suit. Barker called in the casualty report to the platoon sergeant, and requested one of the "quads" (four-wheeled vehicles) that had been heavy-dropped specifically for casevac (casualty evacuation). The quad soon arrived and took Ranger Derek to the casualty control point.

Once gathered in their platoon assembly areas, the Rangers moved to their assigned objectives. In the case of 3rd Platoon, their objective was a series of bunkers that turned out to be several cement slabs that had once been used as taxiways for fighter jets. With no visible enemy threat, they moved to their final security points on the perimeter of the battle position. From their battle positions, the Rangers watched as the engineers worked feverishly to clear the runway for follow-on air land forces. Their perseverance and hard work paid off and within five hours the airstrip at H1 was operational.

The first plane to land at H1 was the casevac bird (an

MC-130). Besides Specialist Derek, A/3/75th had sustained between seven and ten other casualties, including several broken legs, feet, and a badly sprained back. As the casualties were evacuated, their sensitive items and duties were consolidated and redistributed. In the case of one squad, a team leader and the SAW gunner, the squad's two senior Rangers were evacuated. The next ranking Ranger was a private first class (PFC) nicknamed "Ozzy," a nineteen-year-old from Chino, California, who had been in the Army less than a full year. He was one of the newest soldiers in the squad,

with less than six months as a Ranger, but with a previous deployment experience to Afghanistan, where he had distinguished himself. He remained the team leader for the remainder of the tour in Iraq.⁵

Months of training and days of Rang-

er planning at home and in theater came to fruition in the early morning hours of 27 March 2003. The jump into Objective Serpent was a relatively small operation in the scope of the war in Iraq; however, it was a critical part of the overall campaign in the western desert of Iraq. H1 Airfield became a mission support site (staging area) for other operations across the western half of Iraq, including the B/3/75th assault on Hadithah Dam. 🇺🇸

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Endnotes

- 1 Staff Sergeant Jack Barker (pseudonym), A Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 22 October 2003, Fort Benning GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Sergeant First Class Ronald Redmond (pseudonym), A Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 22 October 2003, Fort Benning GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Staff Sergeant Lamont Lawson (pseudonym), A Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 22 October 2003, Fort Benning GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 3 Barker interview.
- 4 Captain David Hess (pseudonym), A Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by LTC Robert W. Jones, Jr., 22 October 2003, Fort Benning GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 Barker interview.