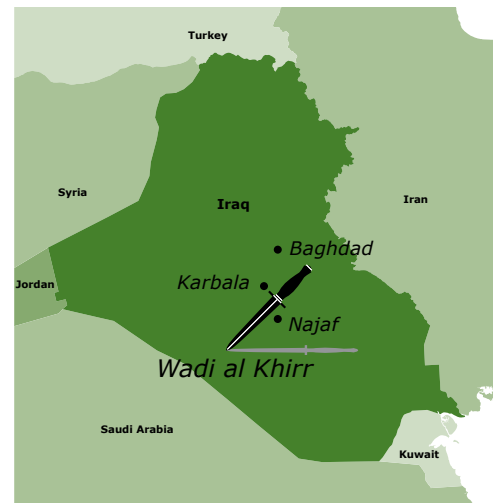


Infiltrating Wadi al Khirr Airfield



by Robert W. Jones Jr.



Wadi al Khirr Airfield is located in the barren desert 240 kilometers southwest of Baghdad. The airfield was key to getting Special Forces teams on the ground ahead of the ground invasion north through the Karbala Gap.



IN the battle area of the western desert of Iraq, the 5th SFG looked for ways to help shape the battlefield for conventional forces attacking toward Baghdad. Once the ground war began, Central Command's plan was to keep the Iraqis off balance by hitting them hard and fast with armored and mechanized ground forces. Ahead of the conventional forces juggernaut, the Special Forces operators planned to support the maneuver forces with ODAs conducting deep reconnaissance of strategically important areas and making contact with anti-Saddam resistance groups. The challenge for SOF planners was how to insert the ODAs rapidly and efficiently deep into Iraq using a limited number of aircraft in order to support Central Command's plan.¹

The SOF planners knew that Air Force MC-130 aircraft were required for any deep infiltration mission. The immediate problem was locating a suitable desert landing strip that met both the Air Force landing criteria and the Army's mission requirements. MC-130 Combat Talons were capable of landing on unimproved runways, but they needed a stretch of reasonably flat, firm, and open ground at least 3,500 feet long and 60 feet wide. The Air Force also insisted that runway conditions be validated on the ground by trained and qualified Air Force controllers. The Army's mission required that the infiltration be accomplished well before the conventional forces began their attack, that the landing strip be near the Karbala-Najaf area, and that the infiltration site be away from known enemy concentrations.²

The mission to find such a place was given to Major Boyd Sinclair* and ODB 570. He was told to develop a primary and an alternate plan to establish an advanced operating base at a desert landing strip deep within Iraq. The desert landing strip would be used to infiltrate ODAs and other SOF teams for missions in support of conventional forces. His detachment needed to be prepared to receive the first ODAs within twenty-four hours of verification, and continue to operate the landing strip for up

**Pseudonyms have been used for all military personnel with a rank lower than lieutenant colonel.*



AOB 570 relied on Toyota Tacoma pickup trucks and small all-terrain vehicles for its infiltration mission in the western desert.



ATVs loaded down with combat gear gave AOB 570 versatile mobility in the desert around Wadi al Khirr.

to forty-eight hours. When the last teams were on the ground, Sinclair's base would exfiltrate on the last aircraft. The forces available for the operation included Sinclair's ODB 570 under its operational designation of AOB 570, ODA 574, and four Air Force combat controllers from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron (STS). The detachment was on a tight time schedule—all mission preparations had to be completed in anticipation of launching as early as the night of 17 March.³

AOB 570 was fortunate to have a highly qualified and experienced Air Force combat control team from the 23rd STS assisting in the planning for the operation. Three members of the team were veterans of Afghanistan with first-hand experience operating desert landing strips. The savvy controllers cautioned that simple dirt landing strips tend to become badly rutted after only a few landings, and the mission profile for this operation called for multiple aircraft and multiple sorties.⁴

The experienced judgment of the Air Force controllers caused the team to look for existing hard surface landing strips that might be useable. Unfortunately, the intensive bombing campaigns of Operation DESERT STORM and the post-Gulf War enforcement measures in the Southern No-Fly Zone left most of the existing flight strips in Iraq severely cratered or otherwise damaged. However, after a careful analysis of existing imagery and some additional low-level, high-quality photos provided by British Tornado reconnaissance aircraft, the team felt that the abandoned Iraqi fighter base at Wadi al Khirr might meet the mission needs.⁵

Wadi al Khirr Airfield, located 240 kilometers southwest of Baghdad, was built in the 1980s by Yugoslav contractors and had a single 9,700-foot long runway. At one time, the air base had twelve hardened aircraft shelters, but bombings during DESERT STORM had reduced them to piles of rubble.⁶

The 23rd STS reasoned that between the main runway and a parallel taxiway, a suitable landing strip could be pieced together. For the Special Forces, Wadi al Khirr was reasonably close to the key Karbala-Najaf area, and the only known enemy facilities in the vicinity of the airfield

were Iraqi border posts nine miles away.⁷

Once it had selected a primary site for the desert landing strip, the AOB had to plan and coordinate the myriad of details that make all the pieces of a joint operation fit together. Deep penetration SOF aircraft were limited—in the opening days of the war, competition for air assets was keen. Thus, getting the AOB to Wadi al Khirr was one of the first issues to be addressed. Both ODA 574 and the 23rd STS team were high altitude–low opening qualified, which made parachute entry an option offering a degree of economy in air assets. However, lessons learned from DESERT STORM made a convincing case that in a desert environment, dismounted Special Forces teams were at a distinct disadvantage if compromised. The planners decided to use Air Force MH-53J helicopters to infiltrate the twenty-six AOB 570 soldiers and airmen, as well as five nonstandard vehicles (NSVs) and four all-terrain vehicles (ATVs).⁸

The days before AOB 570's infiltration were long and filled with critical tasks as the soldiers prepared themselves and their equipment for action. The soldiers checked and packed equipment, configured load plans, planned air and ground routes, coordinated fire support, scheduled aircrew briefings, and finalized communications plans. Each soldier and airman was involved in the planning, and through a series of brief-backs, each man knew the plan well enough to meet any contingency. Finally, the soldiers and airmen conducted detailed rehearsals for key parts of the plan to validate the concept of operations. On 17 March, AOB 570 was standing by, ready to go.⁹

No mission is conducted in a vacuum, and this mission was no different. In large campaigns such as IRAQI FREEDOM, multiple operations planned for the same time periods often competed for the same assets. In such cases, the commander must decide which of the competing missions is the most critical to the overall success of the campaign. In IRAQI FREEDOM, the "lynch pin" for SOF deep infiltrations was the availability of aircraft. During the same time period that AOB 570 planned to fly into Wadi al Khirr, U.S. Navy SEALs planned to conduct



Wadi al Khirr is strategically located within reach of major areas of Iraq—most notably Najaf and the Karbala Gap.

an air assault onto the Al Faw peninsula to seize and protect the strategically important oil infrastructure there. Both the AOB 570 and the SEAL operations planned to use U.S. Air Force MH-53s; however, there were only enough aircraft to support one mission. The Al Faw mission got the resources and the Wadi al Khirr mission was put on hold.

Decisions in war often have a ripple effect. The delay in air assets caused FOB 52 (2nd Battalion, 5th SFG) to scramble for another means to infiltrate ODA 551, which had a time-sensitive, special reconnaissance mission in the Karbala area critical to the 3rd Infantry Division's scheme of maneuver. The 3rd Infantry Division had imagery and signal intercept data, but the division commander wanted eyes on the target to provide him with ground-truth intelligence. Consequently, ODA 551 flew to H-5 Airfield to link up with 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR, for infiltration into Iraq on its MH-47Ds. As ODA 551 flew to H-5, AOB 570 waited for a ride into Iraq.¹⁰

After two nights of waiting at the forward operating base, AOB 570 finally received the order to execute on 19 March. The mission used five Air Force MH-53Js, with a sixth for Combat Search and Rescue support. The AOB loaded five NSVs and four ATVs into the Pave Lows, and then distributed the personnel among the aircraft, paying particular attention to make sure that the four air controllers were on different aircraft. The controllers were critical to operating the landing strip; without at least one of them on the ground, the whole mission would have to be aborted. As always, the AOB had a "bump plan" establishing priorities for every person and major item of equipment in case one or more aircraft became inoperable. In the event of the failure of one of the aircraft, the

most important people and equipment could quickly be shifted to the remaining aircraft and the mission could continue. After the AOB was loaded, one of the helicopters did indeed develop an electronics problem that could not be resolved. The load on that aircraft was transferred to the empty Combat Search and Rescue helicopter with minimal disruption and time delay. Captain Doug Hoffman*, ODA 574 commander and the man tasked to provide security for the operation, recalled, "The scariest part of the whole operation for me was flying in those MH-53s." Drawing on his past experiences, he added, "They are so old that you usually need twenty to get five." But he gave credit where it was due by allowing that, "This time it only took six!" Even First Lieutenant Chris Hill*, one of the 23rd STS air controllers, breathed easier as the flight of five helicopters headed west from Ali As-Salim Air Base, Kuwait. He said, "We had problems with three [MH-53s] on the rehearsal; only one had a problem on the mission."¹¹

The flight route into Iraq had the SOF soldiers skirting the Iraqi border for hundreds of kilometers until they dashed north to Wadi al Khirr. The helicopters rendezvoused with Air Force tankers twice to refuel in-flight. The night of AOB 570's flight into Wadi al Khirr was the same night the Air Force began its "shock and awe" campaign. First Lieutenant Wayne West*, commander of the 23rd STS team, was listening in on the chatter of the helicopter pilots through a headset in the cargo compartment: "It was a little disquieting to hear the pilots talking about the [Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles] flying by above and below the helicopters."¹²

Aside from transiting a somewhat crowded night sky, the flight into the objective area was uneventful. The plan called for the AOB to be flown into a helicopter landing zone approximately ten miles from the airfield. About twenty minutes out from the landing zone, the crew alerted the soldiers and airmen to get ready. As the helicopters hovered to land, the rotor wash kicked up so much dust that the pilots decided to land two at a time instead of all at once in order to avoid colliding with one another in the "brown out" conditions.¹³

Once the group assembled on the ground and the helicopters lifted off, the soldiers moved a short distance and conducted a security halt to make sure the landing had not been detected. Hearing or seeing nothing to cause alarm, they moved to an objective rally point near the landing strip. The moon had not yet risen, so the night was clear, dark, and cold. The special operations forces put the nonstandard vehicles and their bed-mounted M240 machine guns in the lead, followed by the four ATVs. Travel was slow and difficult across terrain littered with large, sharp rocks.¹⁴

Intelligence reports stated that the area was infrequently traveled, but the AOB crossed numerous fresh vehicle tracks and several scraped, well-maintained, and recently used roads. The threat of discovery was uppermost in everyone's minds. Master Sergeant James Robins* from the 23rd STS was concerned that the loud whining

noise of the ATVs carried too far in the cold, desert night air. In addition, each ATV had an engine light pinpointing its position. Nevertheless, after two hours of deliberate and careful travel, the AOB reached its objective rally point, approximately five kilometers from Wadi al Khirr.¹⁵

After arriving, Sinclair sent an NSV-mounted security team from ODA 574 to lead the Air Force ATV-mounted survey team to the airfield. Sergeant Major Thad Berino* of AOB 570 provided rear security with his NSV. By this time, the moon was up and the improved visibility made the movement to the airfield easier; the bright moonlight also revealed how open the terrain was and how vulnerable the soldiers were to enemy observation. Once the small convoy reached the airfield, the security team established an overwatch position at the west end to provide surveillance and covering fire with its M240 machine guns. Robins and Master Sergeant Bill Dayton* traded their ATVs for Berino's quieter, more heavily armed NSV and took a quick look at the main runway and taxiway.¹⁶

The combat control team was working against a tight deadline for completing the survey. If Wadi al Khirr were unusable, the contingency plan called for a small security and survey element to be airlifted to the alternate site at Ghalaysan Airfield seventy kilometers to the southeast. The rest of the AOB would then move cross-country to Ghalaysan. The two MH-53s for the contingency were

orbiting in a holding pattern, but could only stay on station for three hours, so the decision needed to be made quickly. The movement to the objective rally point and then to the airfield had used up most of that time. Robins said that based on their pre-mission study, he and Dayton were, "about ninety percent sure we could use either the main runway or the taxiway." They made a quick sweep east along the main runway. They found that while most of the runway was intact, near hits had thrown huge slabs of concrete and massive amounts of dirt onto the surface. At the end of the runway, they cut over to the parallel taxiway and drove back to the west. They soon decided that while the secondary strip would have to be cleared of debris, it would be much less work than the primary runway and it was well suited for the MC-130s.¹⁷

Dayton and Robins passed the message to Sinclair that the airfield was usable. Sinclair released the orbiting MH-53s and led the rest of the AOB to Wadi al Khirr. Upon arrival, the remaining ODA 574 security teams quickly moved to their positions on the high ground surrounding the airfield. Meanwhile, Sinclair established the AOB command post near the center of the runway and made his initial reports to FOB 53. The primary mission for the remainder of the night was removing all the debris from the taxiway and that portion of the runway to be used as a turnaround to prevent any dangerous objects getting sucked into the engines or damaging tires.





The camouflaged Wadi al Khirr command post provided direction and security to incoming aircraft.

In the words of AOB 570 medic, Sergeant First Class Bruce Kroll*, “What it amounted to was one very long, tedious, boring police call.”¹⁸

Although the AOB had procured four wide-blade shovels to hasten the job, much of the shrapnel and chunks of concrete had to be picked up by hand. Working in shifts, the men moved on line to clear a swath 4,500 feet long and 66 feet wide. Despite the biting cold desert night, the men were soon dripping with sweat as they shoveled and picked up hundreds of pounds of debris. As daylight approached, the entire AOB moved under cover for “stand-to”—armed and alert, the AOB stood ready for action from enemy attack. After stand-to, a lot of runway still needed clearing. Although the plan was to stay out of sight during the day, everyone agreed that the flight strip needed clearing even if it meant taking the risk of being seen. However, at Berino’s recommendation, the soldiers rested before resuming the backbreaking work.¹⁹

The rejuvenated soldiers finished picking up the debris by noon, but they still had to deal with several large mounds of dirt that bombs had dumped on the flight strip. It was impossible to shovel all the dirt off the flight strip, but the soldiers came up with an innovative way to knock off the humps and smooth the surface. Berino scavenged around the old base and found a large piece of metal siding, which he rigged to the winch on his NSV, creating a slide similar to those used to smooth a baseball diamond infield. Two of the larger SOF soldiers stood on the siding to weigh it down as Berino pulled the metal across the uneven piles of dirt. By 1400 hours, Dayton and Robins were satisfied with the team’s work and reported to the command post that the flight strip was ready to receive aircraft.²⁰

For the rest of the daylight hours of 22 March, the AOB remained under cover to minimize chances of compromise. The troops hardly had time to hunker down when, at 1500 hours, the western security team reported two civilian vehicles coming toward the airfield from the southwest. The AOB had contingencies for chance contacts with civilians and decided that unless the civilians

displayed hostile intent or their presence jeopardized the mission, the teams would let them pass unmolested. Hoffman and his teams kept the vehicles under observation and determined that they were water trucks driven by Bedouin shepherds. The vehicles stopped and the drivers conversed briefly before driving off in the direction of one of the Iraqi border posts destroyed by air strikes the night before. It appeared to the security team that the Bedouins were intent on salvaging anything of value from the ruins. When the Bedouins left the destroyed outpost, they returned along the same route, but made a wide circle around the airfield. Throughout the afternoon, the team spotted dust clouds from vehicle traffic in the distance, but had no other close encounters.²¹

During the afternoon and into the evening, the air controllers provided the aircrews with the flight landing strip layout, updated weather conditions, and digital imagery via e-mail. After dark, Dayton and Robins ventured back out onto the flight strip to place the runway lights—marking the runway and key points on the flight strip with infrared strobe lights visible only to incoming pilots.²²

Hill, as primary air controller for the night’s operation, was responsible for talking with the aircraft pilots, advising them of current conditions on the flight strip and clearing them for landing and takeoff. West positioned himself with Sinclair, where he kept him advised on the status of the aircraft operations. On their ATVs, Dayton and Robins operated as a kind of tag team once the aircraft were on the ground. Dayton played the role of the “follow-me” truck and guided taxiing aircraft to the turn-off point, where he handed the aircraft off to Robins, who then guided the aircraft to the off-load area.²³

Once the troops and vehicles were off-loaded, Berino led the teams to the release point away from the landing operations. There the AOB passed on pertinent information to the team leaders. After receiving confirmation that all team personnel and equipment were present, they launched on missions throughout southern Iraq.²⁴

AOB 570 established a working airstrip in the middle of nowhere, enabling 5th Special Forces Group to infiltrate teams into the western desert.



The first aircraft arrived at 2210 hours, followed by a second aircraft two minutes later. The first aircraft stirred up a huge dust cloud and literally disappeared into the cloud. The SOF teams quickly unloaded their vehicles in the flying sand and in less than fifteen minutes, both aircraft thundered down the runway to take off again. The arrival and departure of the first two aircraft blew any remaining debris off the flight strip, making future landings easier. The first two aircraft were followed by two more flights of two at twenty-minute intervals. The first six aircraft brought in ODA 544, an intelligence team, and a CBS television crew. ODA 544 and the intelligence team quickly left to complete their missions in the Najaf area, but the CBS crew recorded a story on the flight operations at Wadi al Khirr which was then broadcast on the news a few days later.²⁵

The next group of six aircraft landed at Wadi al Khirr at 0100 hours. The first set of two airplanes brought in ODA 572 to relieve ODA 574 of the airfield security mission so the team could exfiltrate on the second set of aircraft. By the time the next two MC-130s arrived with more SOF teams, ODA 574 was ready to exfiltrate. When the last aircraft arrived with ODA 583 onboard, Sinclair transferred responsibility for the airfield to ODA 572 and loaded the AOB command and control node and the Air Force control team on the last two aircraft for the flight back to Kuwait.²⁶

The operation was an unqualified success and a testament to the planning and operational expertise of special operators from both the Army Special Forces and the Air Force. It was a bold move to establish a clandestine airfield deep in enemy controlled territory. With few exceptions, the actual operation followed the scenarios anticipated in the plan. West simply said it was a “seamless operation.” Sinclair summed it up: “I wouldn’t call it Desert One [referring to the desert landing strip established in Iran during Operation EAGLE CLAW in 1980], but it got five teams on the ground ahead of the conventional force and put eyes on the target.”²⁷ ♣

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Endnotes

- 1 Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Conner, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 22 May 2003, Ali As-Salim Air Base, Kuwait, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 2 First Lieutenant Chris Hill*, 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, U.S. Air Force, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 25 March 2003, Ali As-Salim Air Base, Kuwait, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 3 Advanced Operating Base 570 Commander’s Concept Briefing.
- 4 Captain Doug Hoffman*, ODA 574, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 5 May 2003, Baghdad, Iraq, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 5 Master Sergeant James Robins*, 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, U.S. Air Force, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 25 May 2003, Ali As-Salim Air Base, Kuwait, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 6 Pike, “H-3 Airfield.”
- 7 Robins interview.
- 8 First Lieutenant Wayne West*, 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, U.S. Air Force, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 25 March 2003, Ali As-Salim Air Base, Kuwait, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL; Sergeant Major Thad Berino*, ODB 570, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, Baghdad, Iraq, 12 April 2003, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 9 Berino interview.
- 10 Robins interview.
- 11 Hoffman interview; Hill interview.
- 12 West interview.
- 13 Berino interview.
- 14 Hill interview.
- 15 Robins interview.
- 16 Robins interview.
- 17 Master Sergeant Bill Dayton*, 23rd Special Tactics Squadron, U.S. Air Force, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, 25 March 2003, Ali As-Salim Air Base, Kuwait, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 18 Sergeant First Class Bruce Kroll*, ODB 570, 3rd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Dennis P. Mroczkowski, Baghdad, Iraq, 12 April 2003, digital recording, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 19 Berino interview.
- 20 Robins interview.
- 21 Hoffman interview.
- 22 West interview.
- 23 Dayton interview.
- 24 Berino interview.
- 25 Hill interview.
- 26 Berino interview.
- 27 Sinclair interview.

Correction

In the article “Helicopters in the Korean War: The Rescue of Virginia 1,” which appeared in *Veritas* Vol. 1, No. 2, Captain John W. Thornton and his son John W. Thornton Jr., were mistakenly identified as John H. Thornton.