

# Night Stalkers in the Philippines:

## Tragedy and Triumph in Balikatan 02-1

by Kenneth Finlayson



**T**HE post-9/11 Global War on Terrorism brought U.S. Special Operations Forces into action around the world. Among the far-flung islands of the Philippines, Army Special Operations Forces units from the 1st Special Forces Group (SFG) focused on the Islamic insurgencies in the southern islands of the archipelago, supported by the Night Stalkers of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR). Recently established on the Korean peninsula, E Company, 160th SOAR was the Army Special Operations Forces aviation element for the Pacific Command, and consequently drew the Philippines mission. The mission proved to be both tragic and triumphant for the unit.

The three MH-47E Chinook helicopters assigned the Philippines mission self-deployed from Taegu, Korea, on 22 January 2002, with aerial refuel support from the Air Force's 351st Special Operations Wing. The eleven-hour flight

was E Company's first transoceanic self-deployment, as well as the unit's first real-world deployment outside Korea. When one of the MH-47Es hit the refuel basket too hard and locked the probe plunger, preventing refuel, the flight diverted to Kadena Air Base in Japan for fuel.

Despite the unscheduled diversion, the unit managed to stay on schedule. The second refuel, about two hundred miles from Manila, Philippines, proceeded uneventfully. Two C-17 Globemaster IIIs, carrying the unit's equipment and support personnel, preceded the helicopters into Clark Air Base near Manila.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after their arrival, the MH-47E aircrews performed a Combat Search and Air Rescue mission with 1st SFG personnel. They then supported B Company, 1st Battalion, 1st SFG, at Fort Mag-saysay, where the company was training with the Philippine Army's Light Reaction Company as part of Joint Combined Exercise Bal-





*A primary mission of E Company, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, was the transport and resupply of the Special Forces soldiers during Exercise Balikatan 02-1.*

all the ODAs had time to get out to their respective Philippine Army units from Isabela, disaster struck the Night Stalkers.<sup>3</sup>

On the night of 21 February 2002, E Company's mission required them to insert the last group of ODAs onto Basilan as well as deliver supplies to the Special Forces elements already in place. The

anced Piston 01. Following this training, the MH-47Es relocated roughly four hundred miles south to Mactan Air Base, on the island of Cebu. During this period, air missions gradually shifted from daylight to sunset departures in preparation for the night flights necessary to support Exercise Balikatan (meaning shoulder-to-shoulder in Tagalog), which was a major component of the Cobra Gold exercise series. They staged out of Edwin Andrews Air Base (EAAB) at Zamboanga, on the southern island of Mindanao. The 350-mile round-trip flight from Mactan Air Base to EAAB took over six hours and required aerial refueling en route. The focus of E company's mission was to give aviation support to the Special Forces (SF) elements on Basilan Island, south of Mindanao.<sup>2</sup>

With the advanced elements already in place, the remainder of the 1st SFG Advanced Operating Base and Operational Detachment-A (ODA) personnel began deploying to Basilan on 17 February 2002. Having flown from Okinawa, Japan, on blacked-out MC-130s and arriving in Zamboanga at night, many of the ODAs were expecting to conduct an unconventional warfare mission with the normal accompanying security measures. Thus, it was quite a surprise to the soldiers when the first sortie of MH-47Es landed on the floodlit Camp Tabiawan landing zone northeast of the Basilan capital of Isabela, and a contingent of the local press was on hand waiting to take pictures. Media scrutiny of the event was intense and the teams made every effort to escape the spotlight. But before

two MH-47Es, code named Wild 41 and Wild 42, formed the two-ship mission from Mactan to Zamboanga, and flew their programmed route to the objectives at 150 feet above the water. Two MC-130P Combat Shadow refueling aircraft from the 351st Special Operations Wing accompanied the Chinooks and orbited in separate aerial refuel tracks—one on the east side and the other on the west side of Basilan Island—in the event the helicopters needed additional fuel after completing their insertions and supply runs. At the last minute, the late addition of a VIP contingent to accompany the insertion changed the load configurations of the two helicopters.<sup>4</sup>

Brigadier General Donald Wurster, the commander of Special Operations Command, Pacific Command, and a photo news team boarded Wild 41 at Camp Navarro, Zamboanga, for the initial leg into Basilan. The general and the news team got off at Isabela, along with the 160th SOAR Maintenance Contact Team. Wild 41 and Wild 42 then flew three sorties into the interior. The three Basilan sorties included carrying the last of the ODAs to Isabela and delivering supplies to remote interior sites, which

*During the initial phases of the operation, the crews flew missions in daylight. With their presence established, they reverted to their normal operational mode—flying in darkness with night vision goggles.*



required sling-loading of the materials. Sling-loading is not a routine mission for the Night Stalkers and the use of night vision goggles compounded the difficulty. The aircrews were all aware of an incident on a previous sling-load mission when one of the crewmen positioned on top of the load to hook the sling ring to the MH-47E lift pintel was blown off the load by the heavy downwash of the rotors, dislocating his shoulder. The sling-load operations to Basilan, while successful, added considerably to the already high stress levels inherent in the night flight operations.<sup>5</sup>

When the insertions were complete, General Wurster, the press team, and the Maintenance Contact Team were picked up and returned to Zamboanga. With the General back on board Wild 41, Major Curtis Feistner, the E Company commander and air mission commander, shifted to Wild 42. That move precipitated another; after the General departed in Zamboanga, the Maintenance Contact Team with its John Deere Gator was shifted to Wild 41 for the return flight to Mactan.<sup>6</sup>

The flight of the two MH-47Es, Wild 41 leading with Wild 42 in trail, left EAAB about 0100 hours and once offshore, climbed to meet the MC-130P Combat Shadow to aerial refuel. Because of turbulence, the refuel took a

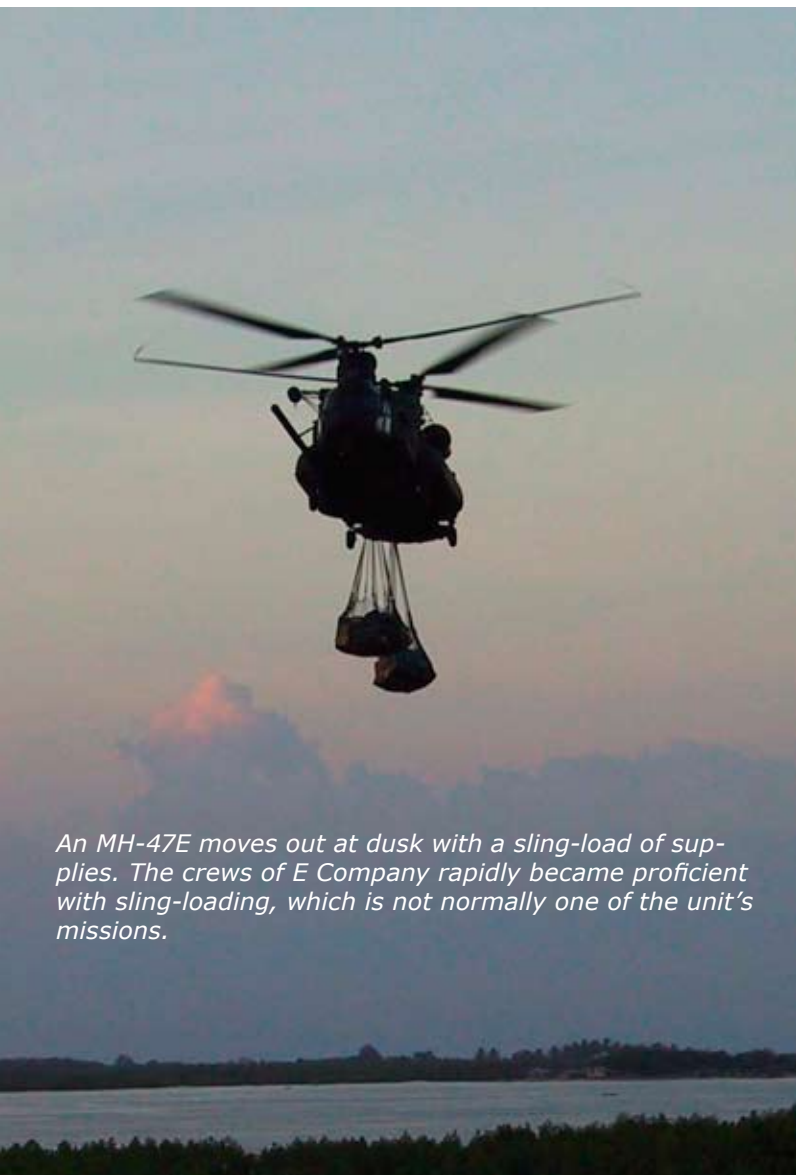
little longer than normal as Wild 42 had problems “hitting the hose.” With the refuel accomplished about 0155 hours, the two Combat Shadows turned south, climbing to get around approaching inclement weather, while the two Chinooks descended into the light rain, leveled off at 150 feet, and headed directly for Mactan Air Base.<sup>7</sup>

Staff Sergeant Ron Mason\*, an avionics mechanic on the Maintenance Contact Team, was sitting by the left bow window on Wild 41, watching out the window through his night vision goggles. He noticed Wild 42, the trail aircraft, approach close and then seem to start a “crossover maneuver,” climbing up and over as is performed during an aerial refuel. Wild 42 flew out of his line-of-sight, only to reappear fifty meters away, and then bank sharply left with the aircraft nose down. Mason did not have his headset hooked up, and he initially wondered why the door gunners began awakening the two U.S. Air Force Para-Rescue Jumpers (PJs) and telling them to get suited up. When Wild 41 slowed, turned around, and flew into a cloud of smoke, Mason saw several hundred small fires on the water below.<sup>8</sup>

Having watched the erratic maneuvers of Wild 42, hearing the warnings from the troops on the ramp, and seeing the fireball of the impact, flight engineer Sergeant John Peters\*, on Wild 41’s right-side minigun, told the two PJs to get suited up, and began to get the hoist and jungle penetrator ready. Flight lead Chief Warrant Officer 3 Dale Fargo\* witnessed the catastrophic crash from the left pilot seat. Fargo called in the emergency on the radio and immediately started Combat Search and Rescue. Hearing the emergency call for assistance from Wild 41, the two refuel Shadows (Juice 71 and Juice 72) went into two distinct orbits over the crash site—one at a thousand feet and the other at nine thousand feet—to act as a communications relay.<sup>9</sup>

Chief Fargo hovered about eighty feet above the water, searching the area for emergency strobe lights, then sweeping the crash site with his white light before the first PJ was lowered to the surface on the jungle penetrator. The airman stayed down less than fifteen minutes, getting dunked several times in burning JP-8 fuel, before being hauled back aboard. The second PJ, Senior Airman Andrew Brown\*, quickly replaced him. In the midst of the small fires, Brown noticed that almost every chemlite aboard Wild 42 activated on impact. He spotted a life preserver just below the surface of the water and recovered the body of the first Wild 42 crewmember; Brown ultimately recovered three bodies at the crash site. No other bodies from the ten-man crew were found, though Fargo and the crew scoured the crash site until forced to break off the search to climb and refuel. “This time the aerial refuel was really hairy because the weather was pretty bad. Visibility dropped to zero/zero when we were on the probe,” recalled Mason. “At times you couldn’t see the lights on the tanker.”<sup>10</sup>

After refueling, Wild 41 verified the crash site coordinates via GPS because the six-knot current moved the fire and debris away from the impact site. Wild 41 continued



*An MH-47E moves out at dusk with a sling-load of supplies. The crews of E Company rapidly became proficient with sling-loading, which is not normally one of the unit’s missions.*

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

the search, even doing a third aerial refuel at five hundred feet in order to maintain observation of the crash scene. Shortly after daybreak, with a U.S. Navy P-3 Orion and an Air Force C-130P on station, Wild 41 left the crash site and headed for Mactan Air Base. By then, the Wild 41 aircrew had been flying over thirteen hours straight.

With the coming of daylight, Philippine naval personnel in Zodiac inflatables and Philippine surface vessels moved into the crash area. Later in the day, an inflatable lifeboat from Wild 42 was recovered by a passing tanker. Over the next several days, around-the-clock searches by air and surface vessels failed to locate any of the seven missing personnel from Wild 42.<sup>11</sup>

The reality that E Company lost eight of its original members, including the company commander and executive officer, as well as two Air Force personnel, hit the unit when the lone MH-47E landed at Mactan Air Base the next morning. The Maintenance Operations Center noncommissioned officer set up the traditional Night Stalker honors formation, with all personnel in two rows standing at attention, when the helicopter landed. Everyone was very concerned about Operations Security since CNN announced the crash less than two hours after it happened. The source of the news leak that alerted the 160th families in Korea of the disaster was never established, although it most likely originated with the local media. At any rate, the local news was waiting expectantly just outside Mactan Air Base when Wild 41 landed.<sup>12</sup>

Once the aircraft shut down, Captain Gordon Malcolm\* and Chief Warrant Officer 3 Ron Redmond\* debriefed the Wild 41 aircrew before a Joint Task Force Crisis Action Team spent some time with them and the rest of E Company.

As Joint Task Force-510 started planning a memorial to honor the lost airmen, the HH-60G Pave Hawks from the Air Force's 33rd Rescue Squadron at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, Japan—originally planned for use during Phase II operations—were alerted for movement to the Philippines to back up the Chinooks on the Quick Reaction Force and casualty evacuation missions. This decision gave the Joint Task Force team better helicopter coverage, with Chinooks working at night and the Pave Hawks covering the daylight requirements, instead of the MH-47Es trying to do both.<sup>13</sup>

## In Memoriam Wild 42

ON 22 February, 2002, having completed the night insertion of SOF personnel and the resupply of units on Basilan Island, PI, two MH-47E aircraft from E Company, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), departed the area of operations for their base on Mactan Island. After completing an aerial refueling operation, "Wild 42" crashed into the ocean off the coast of Basilan. In the hours following the crash, search and rescue efforts by the accompanying aircraft, "Wild 41" recovered three bodies from the crash site. The remaining seven personnel of Wild 42 were not recovered.

At a memorial service held in the Philippines, the names of the crew of Wild 42 were inscribed on the memorial plaque. Their names are also placed on the Memorial Wall at USASOC headquarters, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. A second memorial service for the crew of Wild 42 was held at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, home of the 160th SOAR.





*A salvage operation recovers one of the rotors from the crash of Wild 42.*

General Wurster officiated at the formal memorial for Wild 42 in the 160th hangar at Mactan Air Base on 25 February 2002. Before that memorial, E Company conducted a private service where friends answered for their comrades during a final “roll call” before taps was played. More personal goodbyes were done over the crash site. On 26 February, while en route to Zamboanga to support the Special Forces teams on Basilan, the 160th SOAR airmen said their last farewells at the Wild 42 crash site. The MH-47E flight lead hovered while individual wreaths were dropped on the water and friends said final words, dropping small gifts favored by each person—a tin of Copenhagen, cigarettes, a small bottle of liquor, soft drink bottle caps, cans of beer, and bread. To conclude the ceremony, a C-130P Shadow dropped low—“down on the deck”—and slid a wreath off the tailgate into the water as a final salute to its fallen comrades. With the Special Forces teams now on the ground advising and assisting the Philippine infantry battalions, Phase I of Exercise Balikatan was officially underway. The Night Stalkers continued to drive on—there were other missions to complete.<sup>14</sup>

Under the tutelage and encouragement of their Special Forces counterparts, the Philippine commanders became more amenable to conducting serious operations and the requirements for support from the 160th grew. As the

Armed Forces Philippines began preparations for launching Operation DAY BREAK, a large counter-terrorism operation, the 160th SOAR experienced an aircraft breakdown while doing a night resupply on Basilan. Recovery of this aircraft severely tested the ingenuity and skill of the 160th personnel.

Having relocated their element from Mactan Air Base, Cebu, to Edwin Andrews Air Base at Zamboanga, Mindanao, in March 2002, the Night Stalkers were determined to avoid having an aircraft remain overnight on Basilan Island. This strategy changed in May 2002, when an MH-47E suffered a serious mechanical failure during a night resupply mission into the interior. As the new Wild 42 (recently arrived from Korea) approached the landing zone, the pilots noticed the aft rotor head of Wild 41 glowing bright white. The pilots aboard Wild 41 experienced heavy rotor vibrations even as the Wild 42 crew warned them that their aft rotor head glowed even brighter as the aircraft flared for landing. Fortunately, the aircraft landed and shutdown in time to avert a catastrophic rotor head meltdown. As it was, the aft rotor head seized up. Monitoring the situation on the radio, the Maintenance Contact Team at Isabela quickly alerted the unit’s maintenance operations center at EAAB to get a recovery operation organized.

At both Clark Air Base and Mactan Air Base, the maintenance personnel had planned and rehearsed a real-world recovery of a downed MH-47E. When the message came in about the downed aircraft, the maintenance platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Fred Randolph\*, formed a Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART). Within an hour the team began loading individual ammunition, water, rations, portable light sets, generator, fuel, and the spare aft rotor head. It took all six members of the DART (including the medic), to manhandle the rotor head aboard another Chinook. Test pilot Chief Warrant Officer 3 Arnold Gardiner\* was with the team to return the repaired aircraft to EAAB. While the DART maintenance crew was en route, the Special Forces ODA on the site of the disabled aircraft organized Philippine Special Forces soldiers to pull security around the perimeter of the landing zone.

The initial technical inspection was performed in the dark as soon as the DART arrived. At daybreak, according to Sergeant Randolph, the DART members, “were on that Chinook like ants on a Twinkie,” making preparations to pull the rotor head.<sup>15</sup> Because E Company’s only rotor head sling was back in Korea, Sergeant Randolph devised a replacement with three heavy cargo straps. He learned to use cargo straps as a field expedient head sling several years previously during a field exercise in Germany. The Night Stalker “maintainers” proceeded to “jig” the seized rotor head out with the cargo straps and to install the new one. The high humidity and heat took its toll on the team; by the time repairs were completed at 2100 hours, the medic had administered all his IV bags of rehydration solution to the dehydrated soldiers. After a full day’s effort, the new rotor head was in place.<sup>16</sup>



*Aerial view of the jungle landing zone with Wild 41 undergoing maintenance by the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team.*

Less than twenty-four hours after the Chinook's rotor had seized, Chief Warrant Officer 3 Gardiner started up the repaired Chinook and flew it back to Zamboanga. To perform a major component replacement of this magnitude in field conditions in a potentially hostile environment speaks highly of the dedication and expertise of the DART. In the morning, the team conducted another technical inspection to double-check the work and found no flaws in the field maintenance. After that exciting night in the jungle, E Company, once again at full strength, continued to support the Special Forces ODAs until the primary casualty evacuation mission for Operation DAY BREAK passed to the MH-60L Black Hawks of 3rd Battalion, 160th SOAR, which replaced the 33rd Rescue Squadron HH-60Gs Pave Hawks in May 2002.

In its first mission off the Korean peninsula, E Company, 160th SOAR acquitted itself with distinction during operations in the Philippines. A long self-deployment and a mission that tested every aspect of the unit organization, from the pilots and crews to the maintenance teams, validated its value in the theater. The tragic loss of Wild 42 cast a pall over the mission, but the remainder of the unit continued to function at a high level, in keeping with the organization motto, "Night Stalkers Don't Quit." ♣

## Endnotes



*160th SOAR  
Distinctive Unit  
Insignia.*

- 1 Staff Sergeant Donald Mason (pseudonym) interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 25 July 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Major Gordon Malcolm (pseudonym) and Sergeant First Class Fred Randolph (pseudonym) interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 12 September 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Francis L. Marion, "Opening the Second Front: Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines, January-August 2002," USSOCOM classified draft history of Joint Task Force-510, USSOCOM History Office Classified Files, MacDill Air Force Base, FL.
- 3 Sergeant John Peters (pseudonym) interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 12 September 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Mason interview.
- 6 Peters interview.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Mason interview.
- 9 Staff Sergeant Donald Mason (pseudonym) and Staff Sergeant John Simons (pseudonym) interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 25 July 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Staff Sergeant Clark Keltner (pseudonym) interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 26 July 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Mason interview.
- 11 Marion, "Opening the Second Front."
- 12 Mason and Simons interview; Keltner interview; Marion, "Opening the Second Front."
- 13 Mason and Simons interview; Keltner interview; Peters interview; Marion, "Opening the Second Front."
- 14 Keltner interview.
- 15 First Sergeant Fred Randolph (pseudonym) interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 13 September 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 16 Randolph interview.



*E Company, 160th  
SOAR, logo.*

*The Downed Aircraft Recovery Team who replaced the rotor head assembly in the jungle on Basilan Island.*

