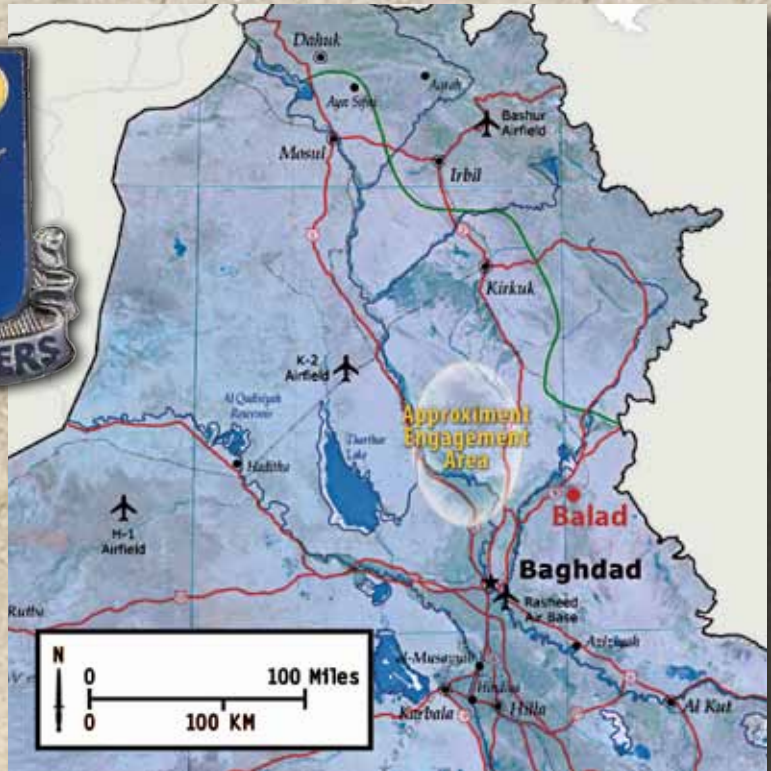




# VALIANT 41: 160th SOAR in Combat in Iraq.

by Kenneth Finlayson



Objective DOMINION PINE was located to the east of Lake Thar Thar, north of Baghdad. In the upper left is the 160th SOAR DUI.

*\*USSOCOM PAO guidance on current operations dictate the use of pseudonyms for all SOF personnel, Major and below. In this article aircraft call signs, and the objective name are also pseudonyms.*

The recovery of an aircraft downed due to mechanical failure or enemy fire is a major event that tests the capacity any aviation unit. The Night Stalkers of the 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) routinely fly missions deep into enemy territory where the recovery of a disabled helicopter is a high-risk endeavor. In November 2006, members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR were forced to extract a downed aircraft in the midst of a ferocious firefight with insurgents deep in the Iraqi desert. The courage and professionalism of the Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) personnel, both on the ground and in the air, were instrumental in the successful recovery of the aircraft in the face of a determined enemy attack.

On 27 November 2006, elements of the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR provided aviation support to ARSOF elements with a mission to interdict a high value target in a remote location in the vicinity of Lake Thar Thar, north of Baghdad, Iraq. The mission was to intercept the target vehicle and its passengers when it was in the vicinity of a building known as Objective DOMINION PINE\*. The 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR assets in the task force were two AH-6 Little Bird gunships (call signs VALIANT\* 41 and 42), two MH-6 Little Bird lift helicopters (GALAHAD\* 71/72) each with two ARSOF soldiers on board, and two MH-60K Black Hawks (PALADIN\* 65/66), each carrying 9 ARSOF

troops of the ground assault element. The task force left Balad Air Base at 11:38 am local time on 27 November for the 65-mile flight to the objective.

The Ground Force Commander (GFC) Major (MAJ) Dillon Teriault\* determined that the best opportunity to intercept the target was when the vehicle and its occupants were moving away from Objective DOMINION PINE\*. To accomplish this, Teriault decided to land the task force at a *laager* site about nine miles from the objective area and shut down the helicopters to conserve fuel.<sup>1</sup> Reaching the *laager* site around 1200, MAJ Teriault discovered that the site was unsuitable due its close proximity to civilian buildings. "Since the plan was to shut down engines and prepare to wait for an extended period of time, we needed a more secure location," noted Teriault.<sup>2</sup> The two MH-60s had landed and at approximately 12:05 pm, the Black Hawks lifted off and joined the four Little Birds heading north to secure a better site. In the next five minutes, the situation would change drastically.

At 12:10, as the flight headed for the new location, the crew of the AH-6 VALIANT 42 felt a violent shuddering in the tail of the aircraft. Struck by a Rocket-Propelled Grenade (RPG), VALIANT 42 suffered a catastrophic tail rotor failure. Exceptionally skillful flying brought the aircraft down in the desert in a controlled crash. When the helicopter lost its tail rotor, it began to spin around beneath the rotors. Called "autorotating," this occurs when the stabilizing influence of the tail rotor is lost.<sup>3</sup> The Little Bird spun counter-clockwise several times before crashing onto the desert floor. The pilot Captain (CPT) Allen Filson\* recalled, "We estimate [we made] four

An artist's rendition of the AH-6 VALIANT 42 being struck by a rocket. (Illustration by Frank E. Allen)



VALIANT 42 made at least four revolutions during its autorotation before it crashed in to the desert. (Illustration by D. Telles)

revolutions before we came to a stop, facing the direction we had just flown from. The right skid was torn off, the main rotor blades had imploded the Plexiglas canopy and we were resting on the right-side weapons system.<sup>4</sup> Gilson and his co-pilot Chief Warrant Officer 5 (CW5) Terry Pruitt\* scrambled out of the wrecked helicopter. Both men were unhurt. The MH-60's and MH-6's quickly landed near the crashed Little Bird.

MAJ Teriault rapidly established a security perimeter around the crash site with the twenty-two ARSOF personnel from the other aircraft. The remaining AH-6, VALIANT 41, performed an airborne sweep of the area before landing near the crash site. Prudence dictated the Little Bird not remain aloft for long. "The reason we don't stay airborne is these helicopters are what we call 'Muj Magnets.' If you start circling some place, the bad guys think something is up and they mass and come at you," said CW5 David Cooper, the pilot of VALIANT 41.<sup>5</sup> It was clear that the damaged helicopter would have to be evacuated back to Balad. This ended the mission to hit Objective DOMINION PINE.

MAJ Teriault directed that GALAHAD 65 and 66 return to Balad and bring back the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART) to evacuate the aircraft. He kept eighteen of the ARSOF personnel for security at the site, releasing CPT Filson and CWO Pruitt and the remaining four operators to return with the Black Hawks. At 12:32, the two MH-60s departed leaving the two MH-6's and one AH-6 at the site. The estimated turn-around time was roughly thirty minutes. The Night Stalkers remained at the crash site to await the arrival of the recovery team.

Within the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR, the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team is the key element when an aircraft must be recovered. Composed of highly trained aviation

maintenance personnel, the DART functions in the same manner that a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) would for a ground combat operation, waiting in readiness to respond to a downed aircraft. Capable of performing extensive on-site repairs, the DART could, if required, sling-load the downed bird back to the base of operations. The teams often use innovative techniques under adverse conditions to accomplish their mission.

"We knew it would be a 30-minute turn-around time to get the DART there and we could shorten the time the DART spent on the ground by prepping the aircraft for sling loading operations," said CWO Brad Furman\* the pilot of GALAHAD 71.<sup>6</sup> Furman and CWO Don Clemmons\* boarded the side pods of the MH-6 GALAHAD 71 and flew off to comb the area for pieces of the downed helicopter. After a quick search, the pilots returned and began preparing the AH-6 for the sling load. With only a multi-purpose wrench and parts of the aircraft for tools, the pilots secured the loose pieces



The crashed AH-6 in the desert. The pilots used fuel and ammunition from the aircraft to keep VALIANT 41 in the fight.

prior to the extraction.<sup>7</sup> While they worked, the security situation suddenly deteriorated.

With the ARSOF team was a Combat Controller Technician (CCT), U.S. Air Force Master Sergeant (MSgt) Avery Alsup\*. In the area of the operation was an Air Force Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft (call sign DRAGON\* 93) and two U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons (HELLCAT 55 and 56) to provide close air support. "DRAGON 93 was pushed over the VALIANT 42 crash site and I passed the HELLCATs the location. I wanted to make sure they had good situational awareness in case something developed," said MSgt Alsup.<sup>8</sup> As events unfolded, this proved to be a wise decision.

At 12:50 pm, ARSOF personnel manning the eastern part of the perimeter reported vehicles mounting weapons approaching from the south. "We initially believed them to be Iraqi Police or Iraqi Army based on the overt nature of their driving up on our position," said MAJ Teriault.<sup>9</sup> This misconception soon vanished when RPG and small arms fire began to rain in on the ARSOF position as the trucks drove to within 800 meters of the perimeter. MSgt Alsup called in HELLCAT 56 (HELLCAT 55 had left for aerial refueling), to engage the advancing enemy and



U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons prepare for operations at Balad Airbase, Iraq. The F-16s were instrumental in disrupting the enemy attack.

CW5 David Cooper and his co-pilot CWO Cory Carnival\* scrambled into their AH-6, VALIANT 41, to join the fight. At the crash site, the four MH-6 pilots hastened to remove ammunition and fuel from the downed AH-6.

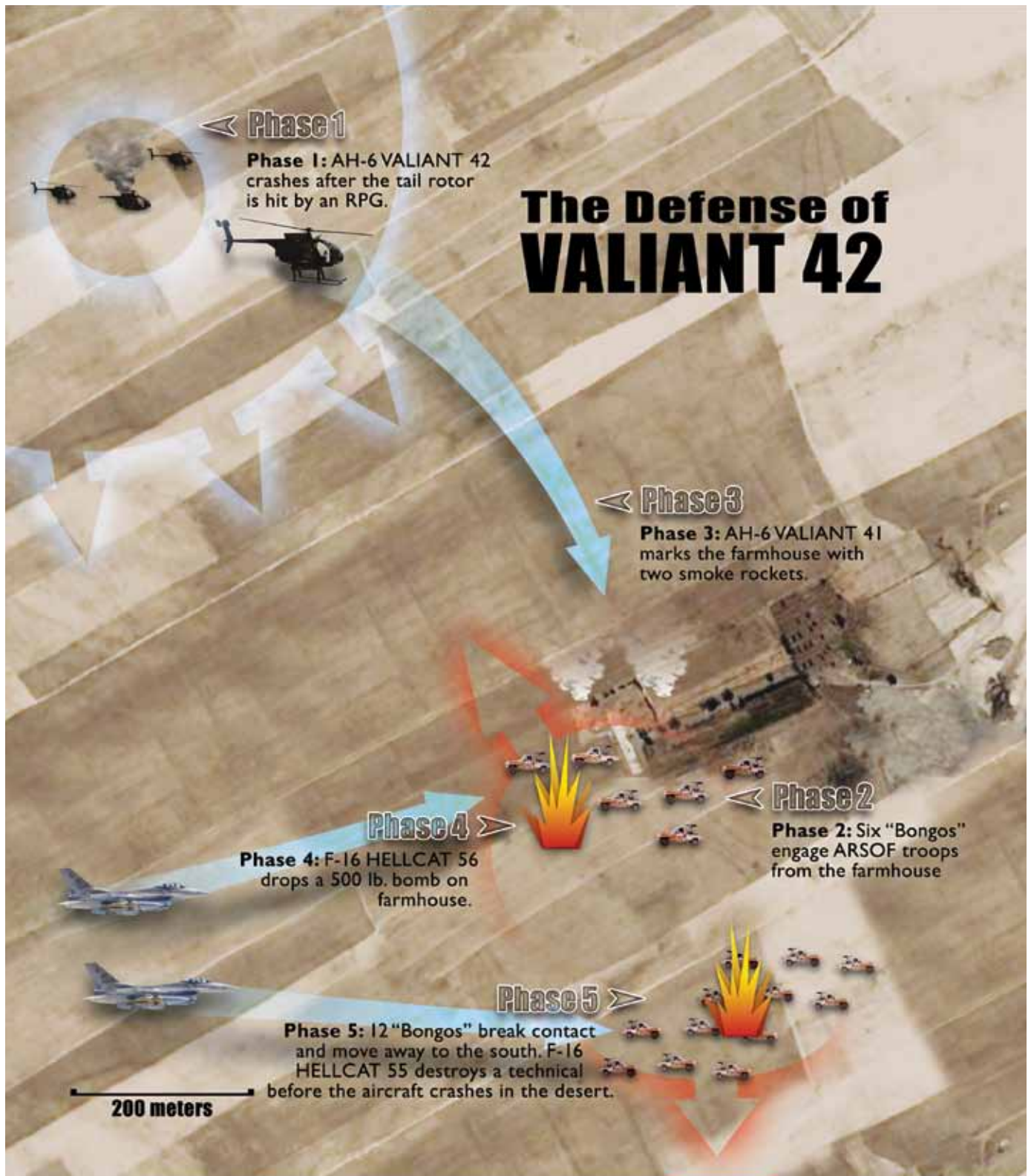
VALIANT 41 began engaging the enemy in the vicinity of a farmhouse on the south side of the landing area. "It was quite obvious where the fire was coming from," said Cooper. "I couldn't venture too far out in front of the ground guys because if I got shot down, I'm going to be all by myself. And during the daytime, a single helicopter fighting against air defense artillery weapons is not a good plan."<sup>10</sup> HELLCAT 56 tried to engage the farmhouse, but was unable to identify the sand-colored building that blended into the desert. VALIANT 41 tried to mark the target by firing two smoke rockets at the building. The Little Bird attracted intense fire. Cooper explained the difficulties of marking the target. "We don't practice shooting from that far away because you can't hit them [the targets] with rockets or mini-guns. I'll be honest with you, it was not working."<sup>11</sup> VALIANT 41 quickly ran low on ammunition and fuel.

The situation on the ground continued to deteriorate as the enemy pressed home their assault. Overhead, DRAGON 93 reported six "Bongos," KIA Motors pick-up trucks with as many as twenty enemy fighters on board engaging the ARSOF troops from the area near the farmhouse. Three of the "Bongos" mounted 12.7mm machine guns. MSgt Alsup continued to work with HELLCAT 56 and at 1:15, the F-16 released a 500-pound bomb near the farmhouse that immediately suppressed the enemy fire.<sup>12</sup>

At the crash site under fire, the MH-6 pilots worked feverishly to get ammunition and fuel to resupply VALIANT 41. CWO Furman said, "We could see he was shooting a lot of his ordnance. It became apparent that he was going to need some more and need it quick."<sup>13</sup>

MH-6 pilots transferred ammunition and fuel from the downed VALIANT 42 to rearm and refuel VALIANT 41 during the attack.





The pilots removed ammunition and a 300-pound fuel bladder from the downed AH-6. They decanted the fuel into "Z" bags, (small fuel bladders) to refuel VALIANT 41. "It was heroic stuff," said CW5 Cooper, "They knew I was going to need bullets. They were doing all this stuff under fire and you can't do it in the prone. You have to be standing up. Without prompting, these guys got to

work."<sup>14</sup> VALIANT 41 made two return trips to the crash site to refuel and rearm, rejoining the fight after each stop. The tide was turning in favor of the ARSOF.

At roughly 1:20, after more than forty minutes of heavy fighting, twelve of the "Bongos" broke contact and moved away to the south. HELLCAT 55 was back on station from its aerial refueling and began strafing runs



The Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle provided surveillance and firepower, destroying one enemy vehicle with a Hellfire missile.

on the vehicles with its 20mm cannon. Unfortunately, on the second run, the F-16 crashed into the desert about six miles from the landing zone. The pilot did not eject. His aggressive pursuit prevented any reorganization by the fleeing enemy and completely disrupted their attempts to continue the attack.

By 1:30, MAJ Teriault determined that there was no longer a viable threat, and fifteen minutes later, PALADIN 65 arrived with eleven additional ARSOF personnel, escorted by an AH-6 flown by CPT Filson and CWO Pruitt. Despite their crash, the two had gotten clearance from the Regiment's flight surgeon to return to assist in the recovery operation and provide escort for PALADIN 65.

DRAGON 93 continued to track the retreating enemy and as a *coup de grace*, at 3:30 pm, an unmanned Predator UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) killed one enemy vehicle with a Hellfire missile while the F-16 took out another. By 4:00 pm, the DART was on site and at 7:15, under the cover of darkness, the damaged Little Bird was sling loaded beneath the MH-60 and returned to Balad. The Americans suffered no casualties except for the courageous F-16 pilot, Major Dale Gilbert in HELLCAT 55.

For his heroic actions, CW5 David Cooper received the Distinguished Service Cross on 11 July 2008. Major Dale Gilbert, USAF, was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with "V" device. Other members of the 160th received Silver Stars.

This action is significant for the size and aggressiveness of the enemy force and for the brave actions of the Night Stalkers in keeping VALIANT 41 in the air and fighting with the VALIANT 42 ammunition and fuel. As the ground force commander, MAJ Dillon Teriault said, "The enemy eventually turned and ran, whatever was left of them. He [VALIANT 41] killed four or five vehicles and probably 20 personnel. VALIANT 41 single-handedly repelled that attack."<sup>15</sup> †

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The MH-60K Black Hawks provide long-range night penetration for the 160th SOAR. The "Kilos" transported the ARSOF troops to Objective DOMINION PINE and later sling loaded the downed VALIANT 42.

## Endnotes

- 1 Major Dillon Teriault\*, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Slaker, USSOCOM History Office, 30 November 2006, Balad Air Base, Iraq, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 2 Teriault\* interview.
- 3 Lieutenant Colonel Patrick O'Hara, U.S. Army Special Operations Command, interview by Dr. Kenneth Finlayson, 17 September 2007, Fort Bragg, NC, interview notes, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Captain Allen Filson\*, 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Slaker, USSOCOM History Office, 30 November 2006, Balad Air Base, Iraq, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 Chief Warrant Officer 5 David Cooper, 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Slaker, USSOCOM History Office, 30 November 2006, Balad Air Base, Iraq, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Chief Warrant Officer Brad Furman\*, 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Slaker, USSOCOM History Office, 30 November 2006, Balad Air Base, Iraq, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 Furman\* interview.
- 8 Master Sergeant Avery Alsup\*, U.S. Air Force, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Slaker, USSOCOM History Office, 30 November 2006, Balad Air Base, Iraq, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 Teriault\* interview.
- 10 Cooper interview.
- 11 Cooper interview.
- 12 Alsup\* interview.
- 13 Furman\* interview.
- 14 Cooper interview.
- 15 Teriault\* interview.