



Afghanistan, 25 years ago the first airborne assault of Operation Enduring Freedom: on the night of October 19, 2001, Rangers parachuted onto Objective Rhino

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On October 7, 2001, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom, beginning air strikes against the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda infrastructure in Afghanistan.

After nearly two weeks of bombing, Washington decided to demonstrate its ability to conduct deep ground operations in Taliban-controlled territory.

Planning involved the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), and U.S. air components.

Two objectives were identified in southern Afghanistan: Rhino, a desert airstrip southwest of Kandahar, and Gecko, a compound linked to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.

The plan called for a parachute assault on Rhino and a helicopter-borne raid on Gecko, with both operations coordinated within the same time window.

Objective Rhino: 199 Rangers in the Afghan night

On the evening of October 19, men from Companies A and C of the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, departed Masirah base in Oman aboard four U.S. Air Force MC-130 Combat Talon aircraft.

The objective was located in an isolated desert area, far from the main concentrations of U.S. forces.

Before the drop, U.S. aircraft struck identified positions in the area. Strategic bombers and AC-130 aircraft engaged facilities and security positions to reduce the likelihood of an enemy response during the arrival of the airborne force.

The four MC-130s then reached the drop zone.

At an altitude of approximately 800 feet, just under 250 meters, 199 Rangers exited the aircraft and jumped into the darkness.

The operation was conducted under virtually no-light conditions. After landing, the troops assembled and began securing the airstrip and surrounding facilities.

The assault was swift. The Rangers seized their assigned positions and cleared the buildings without encountering significant organized resistance.

A desert airstrip transformed into a support point

The operation was not intended to permanently occupy a populated area or destroy a major Taliban formation.

The Rhino airstrip was to be made available to support ongoing special operations, allowing the use of transport aircraft and the refueling of helicopters.

After the objective was secured, specialized U.S. Air Force personnel assessed the condition of the airstrip while support activities were put in place.

An MC-130 landed after the area had initially been secured. Helicopters that were to use the forward refueling point arrived afterward.

The Rangers retained control of the area for several hours before reboarding the aircraft and leaving the objective.

The mission demonstrated the 75th Ranger Regiment's ability to conduct a nighttime airborne assault deep in enemy territory, integrating with air components and other special operations forces.

Objective Gecko: the raid on Mullah Omar's compound

While the Rangers occupied Rhino, another U.S. force conducted an operation in the Kandahar area.

Objective Gecko is a compound associated with Mohammed Omar, leader of the Taliban regime.

The mission is assigned to a JSOC special operations force, inserted by MH-47 helicopters from the 160th SOAR, with air support.

According to USSOCOM's historical account, approximately 90 personnel are transported to the objective following a preparatory phase of air strikes.

The action is intended to strike the Taliban command structure, collect intelligence material, and identify any senior figures present at the compound.

The operators establish security positions and proceed to search the buildings.

Mohammed Omar is not found. Nevertheless, the raid yields material useful for intelligence purposes.

At the end of the mission, the operators are extracted by helicopter and the force returns via the Rhino support point.

The military significance of the operation

The assault on Objective Rhino and the raid on Gecko represent two components of a coordinated operation with distinct characteristics.

At Rhino, the 75th Ranger Regiment employs an airborne force to seize and secure an installation, demonstrating the ability to rapidly project combat units over great distances.

At Gecko, by contrast, the action is focused on a specific objective, with a helicopter-borne raid intended to gather intelligence and neutralize any elements of the opposing leadership.

The two missions demonstrate the ability to combine different special operations capabilities: airborne assault, helicopter-borne raid, air support, and the use of temporary forward infrastructure.

That same night, in northern Afghanistan, the Green Berets go into action

While Rangers from the 75th Ranger Regiment conducted the airborne assault on Objective Rhino in southern Afghanistan, another operation destined to mark the history of U.S. special forces was beginning hundreds of kilometers away.

On the same night between October 19 and 20, 2001, MH-47E Chinook helicopters of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment carried ODA 555 and 595 of the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) across the Hindu Kush mountains to insert them into northern Afghanistan.

Unlike the Rangers, who were engaged in direct action, the Green Berets were tasked with establishing links with Northern Alliance formations and coordinating operations against Taliban forces.

ODA 595, commanded by Captain Mark Nutsch, linked up with the forces of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, while ODA 555 was inserted into the Panjshir Valley to operate alongside Afghan formations deployed against the Taliban.

Two profoundly different missions, conducted on the same night, marked the beginning of a new phase of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Read also: ["Afghanistan, October 19, 2001: the first U.S. Special Forces go into action against the Taliban. Twenty-five years ago, the beginning of ground operations"](#).

Twenty-five years after Objective Rhino

Twenty-five years on, the drop on October 19, 2001, remains one of the most representative operations in the recent history of the 75th Ranger Regiment.

The action did not develop into a prolonged battle, but it demonstrated the ability to plan and execute a nighttime parachute assault supported by attack aircraft and special operations platforms.

The subsequent campaigns in Afghanistan would take on very different characteristics, with the increasing employment of conventional forces and a long counterinsurgency phase against the Taliban.

The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 would not prevent its return to power in August 2021, at the end of nearly twenty years of conflict and alongside the final withdrawal of U.S. forces.

The night of October 19-20, 2001, nevertheless remains a significant milestone in the opening of the U.S. ground campaign: while the Berretti Verdi established their first operational links with Afghan forces in the north, the Rangers demonstrated in the south their ability to strike deep through an airborne assault.