



Afghanistan, October 19, 2001: the first U.S. Special Forces go into action against the Taliban. Twenty-five years ago, the start of ground operations

Published on 19/10/2026

On October 19, 2001, twelve days after the start of U.S. bombing raids on Afghanistan, two U.S. Army Special Forces detachments were infiltrated into territory controlled and contested by the Taliban. They were ODA 555 and 595 of the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), transported by helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR). A ground campaign began that would rapidly alter the military balance in the country.

From September 11 to Operation Enduring Freedom

The September 11, 2001 attacks had prompted a U.S. military response against al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime that hosted its leadership.

On October 7, Washington launched Operation Enduring Freedom, with air strikes carried out by U.S. and British forces against military targets and regime infrastructure.

But to turn air superiority into results on the ground, it was necessary to identify enemy positions, coordinate strikes, and support the Afghan formations already fighting the Taliban.

The task was assigned to U.S. Army Special Forces, organized into small detachments highly specialized in Unconventional Warfare, conducted in part through the support, training, and coordination of local forces.



Afghanistan, 2001. U.S. special operations personnel and Afghan fighters with light vehicles and horses during the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom. Photo: U.S. Army / USASOC – DVIDS

October 19, 2001: ODA 555 and 595 cross the Hindu Kush

On the evening of October 19, MH-47E Chinook helicopters of the 160th SOAR took off from Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan. The unit is the Army aviation element specialized in transporting and supporting special operations.

The mission called for the infiltration of two Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams, each comprising twelve personnel, into different sectors of northern Afghanistan.

The operation posed considerable challenges. Aircrews had to cross the Hindu Kush mountains, contend with adverse weather conditions, and reach isolated areas without the benefit of conventional airfield infrastructure.

The flight took place largely in darkness, making use of the night-navigation capabilities of the 160th SOAR aircrews, known as the Night Stalkers.

The helicopters crossed mountainous valleys, facing risks posed by weather, altitude, and the possibility of detection by enemy forces.

The infiltrations were completed in the early hours of October 19, according to the official U.S. Army timeline: it marked the beginning of the deployment of U.S. ODA teams alongside the Alleanza del Nord.



Afghanistan, 2001. U.S. Special Forces personnel in front of an MH-47 Chinook helicopter, a platform used by the 160th SOAR to infiltrate ODAs into Afghan territory. Photo: U.S. Army / USASOC - DVIDS

ODA 595: twelve Green Berets alongside General Dostum

ODA 595 is infiltrated into the Darya-ye Suf Valley, south of Mazar-e-Sharif.

The detachment, commanded by Captain Mark Nutsch, is tasked with linking up with the forces of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, one of the leading commanders of the Northern Alliance.

The infiltration concludes at around 02:00 on October 19. On the ground, the Americans encounter an operational reality very different from what they are accustomed to: Afghan fighters equipped with a diverse array of weapons, limited resources, and mobility that also relies on horses.

To keep pace with Dostum's formations, the American personnel are forced to adapt quickly, also using horses to cross mountainous terrain and reach forward positions.

Thus began the story of the Horse Soldiers, the Special Forces personnel who fought on horseback in the first major American campaign of the 21st century.

But the detachment's main contribution is above all technological and operational.

The Green Berets have communications equipment, target observation and designation capabilities, and links to U.S. air components. They can therefore identify and report Taliban positions and coordinate precision airstrikes in support of the Afghan advance.

It is a distinctive combination: local fighters familiar with the terrain, small Special Forces teams, and American airpower.



Afghanistan, 2001. U.S. Special Forces personnel and Afghan fighters move on horseback during the campaign against the Taliban. Mounted mobility characterized ODA 595 operations alongside General Dostum's forces.
Photo: U.S. Army / USASOC – DVIDS

ODA 555: insertion into the Panjshir Valley

At the same time, ODA 555 is infiltrated into the Panjshir Valley, an area of strategic importance to Northern Alliance operations.

The detachment links up with Afghan formations operating in the northern sector of Kabul, where the Taliban hold defensive positions along the Shomali Plain.

Here too, the primary mission is not to conduct an independent American offensive, but to support allied Afghan forces through reconnaissance, operational coordination, and direction of air support.

The presence of U.S. specialists makes attacks on Taliban positions more effective, facilitating subsequent ground operations.

The two ODAs operate in separate sectors, but share a common approach: leveraging the Afghan forces' knowledge of the terrain and maneuver capability, while integrating them with U.S. technological and military assets.



Afghanistan, 2001. A U.S. special forces operator uses an optical device from a forward position. Observing enemy positions and coordinating air support were core ODA activities. Photo: U.S. Army / USASOC – DVIDS

The fall of Mazar-e-Sharif and the advance toward Kabul

In the weeks that followed, the combined employment of Special Forces, Afghan fighters, and U.S. airpower rapidly changed the military situation.

On November 10, 2001, Northern Alliance forces, backed by the United States, captured Mazar-e-Sharif, one of the main strategic centers in northern Afghanistan.

Three days later, on November 13, the Taliban abandoned Kabul.

The speed of the advance demonstrated the effectiveness of integrating small specialized detachments with numerically superior local forces, supported by substantial airstrike capability.

The operation became one of the best-known case studies in the use of U.S. Special Forces in unconventional warfare.



Afghanistan, 2001. U.S. special forces operators and Afghan fighters with light vehicles and horses. Cooperation between the ODAs, Northern Alliance forces, and U.S. airpower contributed to the capture of Mazar-e-Sharif in November 2001. Photo: U.S. Army / USASOC – DVIDS

Objective Rhino: while the Green Berets entered the north, Rangers parachuted into the south

The night of October 19–20, 2001, did not only mark the start of operations by ODA 555 and 595 in northern Afghanistan.

At the same time, in the south of the country, 199 soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, conducted a combat jump onto Objective Rhino, an airstrip in the desert southwest of Kandahar.

The airborne assault, supported by U.S. airpower, was coordinated with another raid by U.S. special operations forces against Objective Gecko, a compound associated with Taliban leader Mohammed Omar.

While the Special Forces of the 5th SFG launched unconventional warfare alongside Afghan forces, the Rangers demonstrated the United States' ability to project an airborne force deep into enemy-controlled territory.

Twenty-five years later: a lesson in unconventional warfare

Twenty-five years on, the operations of ODA 555 and 595 retain significant historical and doctrinal value.

The 2001 campaign demonstrated how a relatively small number of special operations personnel could help achieve significant operational results without the initial deployment of large conventional U.S. units.

Its success depended on several factors: the ability to build relationships with local commanders, adaptation to terrain conditions, the high level of professionalism of 160th SOAR aircrews, and the integration of air support into ground operations.

However, it also marked the beginning of a conflict that would continue for nearly twenty years.

The Taliban regime's initial collapse did not lead to Afghanistan's lasting stabilization. After a long war, the Taliban returned to power in August 2021 as U.S. forces completed their withdrawal.

October 19, 2001 therefore remains a significant date in the history of U.S. special operations: the moment when the Green Berets of the 5th Special Forces Group began a campaign that would profoundly shape the evolution of special operations in the 21st century.