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I'm so proud. I shot down Navy Seals' Chinook

A Taliban fighter who helped inflict the allies' worst loss of life tells The Sunday Times in Kabul how he avenged the death of Bin Laden

Miles Amore Published
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A Taliban fighter has given the first account of how his unit fired two “opportunist” rocket-propelled grenades that brought down a Chinook helicopter, killing 38 elite American and Afghan troops in the deadliest attack of Nato’s 10-year campaign.

The special forces, some from the unit that killed Osama Bin Laden, had flown into a remote valley to kill a group of Taliban commanders who were sheltering in the Sayedabad district of Wardak province, according to the fighter.

The dead, identified last week by a special forensic team at Dover air force base in Delaware, included 17 Navy Seals — some from Team 6, the unit that killed Bin Laden — five other navy special forces, three air force special forces and five crew. Seven Afghan commandos and an interpreter were also on board.

The helicopter was shot down as it came in to land close to where two Taliban had taken up sentry positions in the Tangi Valley, the fighter, whose nom de guerre is Haqiar, said. His account largely tallies with Nato’s version of events.

Haqiar, 24, who claims to be the only surviving member of the team that shot down the helicopter, said fighters were already on high alert because they had seen many US drones patrolling during the day.

They observed Iftar — the Islamic custom of breaking the fast during the holy month of Ramadan — and as soon as they had finished their meal, Haqiar and his comrade, Gulam Hazrat, took up guard duties in a ditch beside a terraced field overlooking the valley.

At about 11pm, a radio message from Haqiar's commander, Mullah Mohibullah, told them American forces had just killed six Taliban fighters further down the valley in the village of Qarya-e-Amir. "We knew something big was going to happen," he said.

An hour later, Haqiar and Hazrat heard a helicopter approaching and saw it silhouetted against the moon.

The Chinook was coming in to land about 100 yards from their position, escorted by two attack helicopters. The pilot appeared to be heading for a site between two mosques in the valley below their position, Haqiar said.

"The Americans knew that the mosques and the surrounding fields and gardens had lots of Taliban commanders sleeping there," said Haqiar.

As the Chinook reached eye-level, he wanted to ask his commander for permission to fire because he knew the shot would give away his position. But Hazrat launched the rocketpropelled grenade (RPG) before Haqiar could reach his radio.

"He fired and it landed inside the chopper and exploded. I fired one and it hit the nose of the bird. The chopper lost balance and fell to the ground on its side and rolled. There was a huge explosion and we could see into the back of the Chinook and we saw the inside was on fire," said Haqiar.

Nato later said the helicopter took fire from several insurgent positions as it made its approach.

The flames spread through the helicopter and quickly ignited the ammunition on board, sending sparks shooting into the night sky, Haqiar said.

"We could hear the bullets exploding till the next day. The flames lit up the valley. Suddenly it was so light," he said.

The two fighters turned on their radios to inform their commander that they had shot down the helicopter and began to flee with other Taliban. They dropped their weapons and ran through fields.

"I kept looking over my shoulder. The helicopter was still on fire and the other choppers couldn't do anything to help them," said Haqiar.

Before sunrise, more American soldiers arrived in the valley along with three medical evacuation helicopters, according to Haqiar.

The troops began to search houses, bazaars and fields in the valley, but Haqiar and a few of his men had already escaped. Hazrat fled to the neighbouring district of Chak, where he prepared to flee the country with other insurgents.

Haqiar's version of events agrees with Nato's and he denied an Afghan report that the Taliban had deliberately lured the Chinook into the valley. He said high-level Taliban commanders from other provinces had convened in the valley, which they use as a staging post for attacks in the surrounding provinces.

Nato said later that American special forces had flown into the valley to pursue a group of insurgents fleeing from the area where US troops had just killed the six Taliban fighters.

The insurgents belonged to a network previously under the command of Mohibullah's boss, Din Mohammed, who had been killed in an earlier special forces operation.

General John Allen, the Nato commander in Afghanistan, said: "The intelligence that had been generated to this point led us to believe there was an enemy network in the Tangi Valley and the purpose of this mission was to go after the leadership of that network."

Days after the crash, the Americans used local intelligence to track Hazrat and Mohibullah to a wooded area in the district. A strike by an American F-16 fighter jet killed both men along with several Taliban comrades.

"The two men were attempting to flee the country," said a Nato spokesman.

Haqiar escaped to the village of Hassan Khel to "relax and pray", he said. "When we heard that this was the group of special forces who killed Bin Laden we were so happy and proud. We didn't know the infidels on board were so special.

"Before, we believed we couldn't shoot down the choppers with our weapons. They used to say the air pressure would destroy our RPGs before they could hit their target. Now we know we can do it. We will train others to do the same."

Haqiar is now on the run. He intends to flee to Pakistan or Iran. The Sunday Times tracked down the fighter, who was extremely nervous about being recorded on tape, via an intermediary from the same district. The interview was conducted near Kabul. He said he wanted to tell the world about the attack, which he said had "made all Muslims proud".