

*The Other Face of Air Power:  
"Afghan Rescue 705 Flight,"  
July 28-29, 2010*







Forrest L. Marion, with  
Gregory A. Roberts

(Overleaf) Mid-day on the second day on the Konar Valley floor. The picture is taken east and the top of the ridgeline marks the Pakistan border.

In March 2010, the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing (AEW) commander, Brig. Gen. Michael R. Boera, offered his perspective on non-traditional roles of air power—“non-kinetic” in current military parlance—in the ongoing counterinsurgency in Afghanistan where he was then serving:

*This other face of airpower carries balloting materials to outlying areas of Afghanistan, granting elections a chance to have broad credibility throughout the country. It affords battlefield mobility to indigenous groups, allowing confrontation with and defeat of insurgents. This kind of airpower provides mobility to Afghan citizens, filling logistical gaps that the budding commercial market struggles to meet. It welcomes young people into the service of their nation, giving them a reason to strive for excellence in working for government organizations that have awakened to new, promising days after three bleak decades of uninterrupted armed struggle.<sup>1</sup>*

The excellent examples above notwithstanding, one aspect of this “other face of air power” that went unmentioned, and that Boera’s own force had demonstrated several months later, was that of humanitarian rescue in a combat zone. At the end of July 2010, four U.S. Air Force airmen, all of them advisors to the Afghan Air Force and assigned to Boera’s wing as well as to a NATO entity, the Combined Air Power Transition Force (CAPTF), which Boera also commanded—participated in what became by far the largest two-ship helicopter rescue in U.S. Air Force history. The fact that the mission was conducted in a highly-contested area of northeastern Afghanistan only added to the significance of the humanitarian accomplishment: the saving of more than 2,000 Afghan men, women, and children from devastating floodwaters.<sup>2</sup>

Not only did the mission save a great number of lives, which in itself was of the utmost importance in humanitarian terms, but in the context of the ongoing counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, in which the Taliban and other antigovernment forces continue striving for control with Kabul over allegiance and control of the indigenous population, the mission lent “legitimacy” to the government in Kabul as well as to provincial, local, and nomadic government leaders who were able to call upon the resources of the Afghan Air Force and its U.S./NATO partners and advisors.<sup>3</sup>

Since the spring of 2007, a combined U.S./NATO-led coalition initiative had been underway in Afghanistan to rebuild an indigenous air force, known in the 1980s as the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan Air Force (DRAAF). With its roots in the 1920s, the small Afghan air service in the 1950s

became highly “Sovietized” as the government turned to the USSR to meet its security needs. By the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, Afghanistan’s air force operated strictly Soviet-made aircraft, especially MiG and Sukhoi fighters, Antonov transports, and “Mil” Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters. The factional warfare of the 1990s, including the rise of the Taliban, reduced the air arm of 400-plus aircraft—large by regional standards—to a few dozen ill-maintained fighters, transports, and helicopters in the hands of competing warlords. Most of what remained of the Afghan air force was destroyed in the fall of 2001, during the U.S./coalition response to the September 11 attacks.<sup>4</sup>

By 2010, the CAPTF provided U.S./coalition air advisors to rebuild the Afghan Air Force (AAF). Whereas in 2007, the AAF had possessed only twenty aircraft—mostly Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters (export versions of the Mi-8 and Mi-24, respectively) and a half dozen Antonov transports. The fleet had doubled in size and included several Italian-manufactured C-27A “Spartan” transports. Instructor pilots, flight engineers, maintainers, logisticians, communicators, engineers, and personnel specialists—American, British, Canadian, Czech, and others—worked in partnership with their Afghan counterparts to reestablish an indigenous air capability. American and coalition leaders, such as General Boera, recognized that Afghanistan’s forbidding mountainous terrain, lack of ground transportation infrastructure, and threats to ground travel in the form of roadside bombs placed a premium on developing an air capability both for the country’s security as well as for governance. While the CAPTF sought to emphasize training over operational or operational support sorties with the Afghan airmen, the exigencies of the ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan meant that most of the flying effort was operational in nature—often at the expense of training. By the end of July, included among the twenty-five Afghan Mi-17 helicopters were the first two of ten Afghan Air Force “V5” models, tail numbers 702 and 705.<sup>5</sup>

The Mi-17 helicopter, often derided in the West because of its Soviet origins, had stemmed from modifications during the Soviet-Afghan conflict (1979-89) to upgrade the earlier Mi-8 (NATO designation “Hip”) and to better suit it specifically for Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain. When the Soviets prepared to withdraw from Afghanistan at the end of the 1980s, they left large numbers of aircraft for the Afghan government of Dr. Mohammed Najibullah, hoping thereby to assist in the compliant communist regime’s survival. The relatively cheap and simple Mi-17 helicopter also was meant to be sustainable by field level maintenance. But the

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OUS TER-  
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THREATS TO  
GROUND  
TRAVEL IN  
THE FORM OF  
ROADSIDE  
BOMBS  
PLACED A  
PREMIUM ON  
DEVELOPING  
AN AIR  
CAPABILITY**

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## Afghan Rescue 705 Flight

### Lead - Afghan Rescue 705

FL/AC Lt Col Greg “Boomer” Roberts, USAF  
Copilot Brig Gen Mohammed Barat, AAF  
FE 1Lt Shah Aqa, AAF  
CC SSGT Abdul Waris, AAF  
PA Lt Col Mohammed Bahadur, AAF  
PA Maj Mohammed Kazum, AAF  
IT(contract) Khwaja Wahidudin “Wahid” Joya

### Wingman - Afghan Rescue 702

AC Lt Col Bernard “Jeep” Willi, USAF  
Copilot Major Mohammad Hassan, AAF  
FE Capt Gulabadin, AAF  
CC Advisor MSgt Kevin Fife, USAF  
CC SSGT Mohammed Na’eem, AAF  
Flt Surgeon Lt Col Jimmy Barrow, USAF  
IT(contract) Najibullah Fazli

LATE ON  
JULY 27,  
2010. AN  
EARLY  
MONSOONAL  
SYSTEM  
WITH LARGE  
EMBEDDED  
THUNDER-  
STORMS  
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TO THE  
PROVINCES  
OF NORTH-  
EASTERN  
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“V5” models the Afghans began receiving in July 2010 included several updated features: automatic rear cabin ramps, modern internal rescue hoist, and Garmin 430 Global Positioning System navigation receiver, with Instrument Flight Rules equipment displays. Lt. Col. Robert A. Strasser, the 438 AEW chief of plans in 2010 and 2011, noted the decision to procure the Mi-17V5 was based on the desire for a “Western cockpit” in the Russian helicopter that, despite its origins, would provide the engineering, avionics, and safety features the U.S. Air Force considered acceptable for its coalition partners. Less than three weeks after their arrival, the Afghan Air Force’s first two—and its only—V5s were about to be put to intense life-saving, operational use.<sup>6</sup>

The drama began late on July 27, 2010. An early monsoonal system with large embedded thunderstorms brought heavy rains to the provinces of northeastern Afghanistan, including Nuristan, Laghman, Nangarhar, and Kunar. Jalalabad Airfield in Nangarhar Province received over eight inches of rain by the 28th. In the summer of 2010, the Taliban insurgency remained active in the area but appeared to be struggling. American and coalition officials believed the insurgency in the Kunar and Pech valley areas in southern Nuristan, northern Laghman and most of Kunar Province to be supported largely by antigovernment groups and individuals who crossed Afghanistan’s northeastern border with Pakistan’s volatile Northwestern Frontier Province. But despite the insurgents, the Afghan government and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had been making steady progress in the area. Thus, the monsoon rains occurred at a potentially strategic moment as they could easily have demonstrated the inability of the governing authorities to provide relief—indeed, life-saving rescue—to hundreds of local residents endangered by floods.<sup>7</sup>

The Kuchi representative called first. Several

dozen of the nomadic group needed help as floodwaters rose rapidly in the area of the confluence of the Kabul and Laghman rivers. He contacted the Afghan Ministry of Defense in Kabul which quickly passed the mission to the AAF’s Kabul Air Wing Commander, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Barat. Barat in turn called the American air advisors, with whom he had become accustomed to flying since the AAF rebuilding effort began. Despite his seniority, he chose to participate personally in the mission as one of the Mi-17 pilots. The general selected another trusted Mi-17 pilot, Maj. Mohammad Hassan, along with Afghan flight engineers and crew chiefs.<sup>8</sup>

The threat and weather scenario proved somewhat complex. The requested survivor location in Laghman Province was ten miles from the nearest known threat, the town of Mehtar Lam, which the advisors considered a fairly low threat. Perhaps more serious, however, was an area of well-armed insurgents situated along the straight-line course between Kabul and the Laghman survivor site. Moreover, the weather made it likely that the crews would have to “scud-run” under the low ceilings and pick their way through the mountain ranges and valley beds to get to the survivors. General Barat’s advisor, Lt. Col. Gregory A. Roberts—a career Air Force Rescue helicopter pilot who commanded the advisory helicopter squadron at Kabul—recalled that at the airport the weather was “not too bad at mission notification time: overcast clouds at about 1,000 feet and good visibility at two-to-three miles, with light rain. But everyone knew the weather in the mountains surrounding Kabul would be treacherous.”<sup>9</sup>

In consultation with the advisors, General Barat selected the aircraft for the mission: the two new Mi-17V5s. Although the two new helicopters had not yet been modified for defensive weapons, the anticipated low-threat environment made that fact of little concern at the time. Neither Barat nor Major Hassan had completed his “V5 familiarization” with the advisors, but that shortcoming could be overcome by the advisors.<sup>10</sup>

Arriving at the flightline, the Afghans and advisors quickly planned their response to the call for rescue. General Barat selected his advisor, Roberts, to fly with him in the lead aircraft; Roberts, in turn, selected Lt. Col. Bernard M. Willi, another career-long Rescue veteran and the USAF advisory group’s deputy commander at Kabul, as the pilot of the second helicopter. Roberts, as aircraft commander, and Barat, as copilot, would fly Mi-17V5 #705; Colonel Willi, with Hassan as his copilot, would fly tail number 702. As no Afghans had yet been trained to operate the new internal rescue hoist, U.S. Air Force MSgt. Kevin R. Fife volunteered as the hoist operator. Roberts assigned him to Willi’s and Hassan’s aircraft which made 702 “the dedicated hoist helicopter, if that was required.” Roberts and Willi conducted a “cursory flightline pre-mission briefing” including basic instructions for the Afghans on the major differences between the new V5 helicopters and the older Mi-17s. The American advisors reviewed the weather, crew members’ responsibili-



Roberts and Willi briefing the mission five minutes prior to engine start. Brig. Gen. Barat in dark uniform is facing camera. An Afghan face on an Afghan mission, supported by USAF air advisors.

ties, and discussed the basics of the USAF's Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) checklists, including basic formation communications procedures and the survivors' locations relative to the known threats. Meanwhile, everything the advisors said had to be translated by the Afghan interpreter-translators (ITs) from English to Dari to ensure effective communications.<sup>11</sup>

Several others joined the helicopter crews. On his own initiative, General Barat requested two Afghan public affairs photographers to fly along and record any rescues, an idea the American advisors considered an astute counterinsurgency measure. Additionally, Roberts had contacted the 438th wing's flight surgeon, Lt. Col. (Dr.) Jimmy L. Barrow for medical support. "Doc" Barrow arrived just in time to jump into Willi's aircraft as it began taxiing for immediate departure. The lead aircraft was already on its takeoff climb; Barat had received more calls on his cell phone for the rescuers to hurry.<sup>12</sup>

As Afghan Rescue 705 Flight departed Kabul the weather immediately closed in around the for-

mation. Just five miles east of the capital, the crews nearly turned around because they could barely see the ground below them or the mountains around them as fog billowed down the two-thousand foot eastern mountains. Instead, Roberts climbed above the thicker part of the cloud bank and widened the flight's lateral spacing from the nearest terrain. In aircraft 705, Roberts flew as Barat navigated the familiar valley through which ran the ancient Kabul-Jalalabad Road. In the second aircraft, Willi tightened the formation to better maintain visual contact with lead. Descending under the lower clouds into a series of small draws leading to the Kabul River, the clouds were close enough to the ground so as to afford only one passage to the east—the Tangi Abresham, or "Gorge of Silk"—its mouth marked by the Surobi Dam in far eastern Kabul Province. In keeping with its history from the nineteenth century when local fighters engaged the British, and in the 1980s the Soviets, there had been very recent insurgent activity in the chasm. Only four weeks earlier, General Barat had dispatched two Afghan Air Force Mi-35 helicopters to the strategic gorge where the helicopters located and killed several insurgents battling Afghan National Police forces. Two weeks after Afghan Rescue 705 Flight's mission, a combined Afghan Air Force-Afghan National Army operation targeted the home area of the same group of insurgents near the western mouth of the Tangi Abresham. While the visibility improved to a couple of miles in the area, the cloud ceiling remained low, perhaps one-third of the way down the mountains from their peaks. The bottom of the gorge was full of rushing water and a lone cliff-side road. Roberts led the formation directly above its middle, as if "flying through a tunnel with no place to turn around and no way to respond to an enemy engagement." Despite those concerns, the two helicopters passed through the gorge uneventfully. At a glance it was clear that the area east of the mountains in Nangarhar had received more

The flooded island in Konar. Note the stoic figure in khaki in the center of the photo. He was seen throughout the day directing the survivors - which males could proceed and which could not and hitting women to wear their head and face coverings. He was specifically reported to the combined crews as someone to avoid.







Southern Laghman Province looking south, flooded on the first day.

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rain than to the west near Kabul and that the flooding was severe. The broad river valley was a disaster area. Unknown to the crews at the time, the scene they were witnessing was caused by the same floodwaters which several days later struck Pakistan, killing nearly 1,700 people. It was to be Pakistan's worst recorded flood.<sup>13</sup>

Quickly, the two rescue helicopters went to work making the first pickups from the swollen Kabul River where the Laghman River joined from the north. The flooding had completely washed out the land area in the river basins. The water was well over its banks and extended for more than one-quarter mile on both sides, in some places much farther. A number of local farmers and nomadic herds-men who worked in the lowland area along the river had become stranded on tiny islands. After spotting the first people waving for help, Willi cleared the idea with his flight lead that he would demonstrate the first approach and landing. In a steady rain and with visibility at about two miles, Willi and Hassan, in tail number 702, made the first rescues of the day by landing on one of the miniscule islands. Next, the two crews needed to decide on a suitable drop-off location for those they rescued. Conferring on the radio among themselves in both English and Dari and also with the onboard survivors about a suitable drop-off location, they selected a small field at a village several miles away from the Kabul River's northern bank. For the next forty-five minutes the formation searched for and rescued thirty-eight people from the overflowing Kabul River. Willi and Hassan made three trips and rescued thirty; Roberts and Barat picked up eight on a single trip.<sup>14</sup>

Convinced that all survivors in the area had been picked up and anticipating the possibility of additional rescue requests from downriver, the formation departed for Jalalabad. Unable to penetrate a fog bank near the airport, the flight of Mi-17s doubled back and landed at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Gamberi west of the city. General Barat soon received confirmation via cell phone that the fog had drifted away, and the crews proceeded into Jalalabad. There they refueled and discussed the

situation with the AAF's Jalalabad liaison officer, Colonel Janghir. Shortly thereafter, the Governor of Nangarhar Province and Jalalabad's mayor requested Afghan Ministry of Defense assistance for flood victims immediately northeast of the city.<sup>15</sup>

Roberts led the formation just north of town in a renewed search for flood victims. In the back of his mind was the fact that only four weeks earlier his Afghan Air Force flight engineer had been wounded while sitting next to him in-flight by small arms fire not far away. The search area was the confluence of the Kabul River which flowed eastward and the Kunar River whose waters traveled from north to south. The weather remained rainy with low over-casts and fog throughout the afternoon, yielding visibilities no greater than two miles, often less than one. After a quick briefing via the aircraft radios, Afghan Rescue 705 Flight again split the search and rescue scene between them and went to work. Colonel Willi demonstrated a precision approach and hover over a confined area to rescue an imperiled family. Apparently having difficulty seeing through the rain, Barat gave Roberts the controls as the crew chief pointed out a sizeable crowd trapped in their homes and surrounded by rushing waters except for small, low berms and a field between several earthen houses. Colonel Roberts demonstrated another approach and landing among the palms and earthen berms to a washed-out field and picked up thirty of those stranded, promising through the IT that they would be right back for the remaining twenty-two.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the afternoon each of the two aircraft searched a small sector and recovered any obviously distressed residents. The local mayor and several AAF members from the detachment at nearby Jalalabad met the aircraft at the drop-off location on the north edge of town—a small, empty fairground safe from the flooding. As the number of bystanders and rescued flood victims increased, the legitimacy of the Afghan Government in Kabul as well as the local governing authorities also increased. Each time an Afghan helicopter with the AAF's roundel on the fuselage appeared on the scene, and each time additional Afghan men, women, and children were delivered to relative safety, meant an increase in government legitimacy in the eyes of the populace of Nangarhar Province. News crews gathered, and they even interviewed General Barat who spoke briefly from the aircraft. Moreover, a media crew rode aboard aircraft 705 for one trip back to the flooded area and helped in the rescue of some fifteen people. The humanitarian—and the legitimizing work—of Afghan Rescue 705 Flight would be broadly disseminated.<sup>17</sup>

Although the weather remained difficult in the pouring rain and poor visibility, the advisors guided the Afghan crews into a routine. As each Mi-17 landed or hovered just above the ground near a group of flood victims, the AAF crew chief, public affairs personnel, Fife and/or Barrow would hop to the ground, and with the help of the interpreters carry or assist any children, women, elderly, and fathers with children over the flooded ground to the aircraft. Twice



(Above) Inside the Tangi Abreshem and below the clouds. This passage was the only way from Kabul to the east. Three miles to the left of the picture is an insurgent stronghold area which would be the scene of an combined ANA and AAF offensive only 12 days later. The rugged mountain valley (above) contrasts sharply with the flooded plains in and around Jalalabad (right and above right).





Lt. Col. (Doctor) Jimmy Barrow and Col. Jan Ghir (AAF) during second refueling at Jalalabad on first day.



(Below right) The first eight saves for the lead aircraft in southern Laghman, early the first day. Col. Wili had just completed his first eighteen saves.

(Below) Jalalabad flooded early on the first day. Note the visibility.



The pilot waits and watches the weather as the Afghan evacuees run towards the rescue helicopter.





MSgt Kevin Fife helping an Afghan and his son to the AAF rescue Mi-17 helicopter.

**...[FIFE] POPPED UP FROM THE WATER, RETRIEVED THE KIDS AND SECURED THEM... TUCKED THEM UNDER HIS ARMS AND TRUDGED THROUGH THE RUSHING RIVER AND ROTOR WASH BACK TO THE HELICOPTER AND TO SAFETY**



while on the ground the helicopters experienced a momentary receding, then re-cresting, of the rushing flood waters, no doubt increasing the flight crews' adrenalin. Roberts described the rescue scene as having "an Afghan face, discreetly supported by American advisors towards a resolution of a volatile Afghan disaster." The public affairs officers General Barat had requested were important contributors, too, as they documented the scene and often left their cameras on the aircraft with the ITs to keep them safe from the elements, while they jumped out and assisted with the survivors. After a second refueling of both aircraft at Jalalabad Airfield, the crews resumed their rescue work until sunset. The rain let up late in the afternoon and the cloud deck rose; however, it remained very hazy and humid. Although the prospect of additional rescues the next day was unforeseen at that point, the weather conditions and crew fatigue made Roberts' decision to remain overnight in the local area a prudent one.<sup>18</sup>

With no room available at FOB Fenty on Jalalabad Airfield, the U.S.-Afghan crews found refuge for the night with Colonel Janghir. After a quick dinner of lamb, beef, and chicken kebabs, fruit, and soda, the fourteen crewmembers retired at about 10:00 PM to the old Soviet control tower. Janghir had selected the tiny room because it had air conditioning. Though they didn't have the strength or time to think about it at the time, the crews of Afghan Rescue 705 Flight had already conducted one of the largest single-event search and rescue missions in history. Little did they know their rescue work had just begun.<sup>19</sup>

The crews were abruptly awakened at about 4:30 AM the following morning by Janghir, who had received word of more local villagers in need. The men quickly made their way to the aircraft in the fog and faint morning light. The formation was off the ground by 5:00 AM, heading back to the alluvial

fan area north of town. Immediately, they began rescuing the few remaining survivors, probably most of whom had experienced a troubling night given the recurring cresting of the floodwaters. Using the same basic method as on the previous afternoon, Roberts, Barat, and crew picked up fifty-nine survivors in three trips. In aircraft 702, Willi and Hassan made one trip and saved twelve, but it was on the ground during this pickup in which "the most memorable and gallant individual effort of the entire mission was put forth."<sup>20</sup> Colonel Willi described it in his after-action report:

*Our rescues involved the recovery of a group of two men and two children (a ~10 year old boy and ~7 year old girl.) MSgt. Fife had de-planed and was assisting the people to board the aircraft. The two men were ahead of the children. As [Fife] was hurrying over to assist the children, they fell into the fast water and started being swept down the river. Completely disregarding his own safety and without a tether, [Fife] immediately jumped into the dangerous swift water and went after the children. I didn't see him come up at first and I knew that if he continued down the river, there was nothing I could do. . . . Miraculously [Fife] popped up from the water, retrieved the kids and secured them . . . tucked them under his arms and trudged through the rushing river and rotor wash back to the helicopter and to safety. He saved their lives.<sup>21</sup>*

After the survivors had been evacuated north of Jalalabad, the Mi-17s flew two low passes through the area. Seeing no one else in need of rescue, the crews turned their attention to refueling and breakfast. Meanwhile, General Barat had received two cell phone calls, piquing Roberts' interest because most of their airborne communications had been directly from Colonel Janghir via radio.<sup>22</sup>



The first rescue in Kunar. Even Lt Col Bahadur jumped out to help the family as their house crumbled below them. Photo snapped by Wahid Joya the interpreter with Col Bahadur's camera

After a quick breakfast at Fenty's dining facility—the Afghans ate elsewhere—Barat phoned Roberts. Through the IT, Barat asked the advisors to meet at the aircraft; they had a new mission, but he didn't reveal where. Taking off quickly, the crews found twelve people needing evacuation in knee deep water about a kilometer downstream. It was not yet 8:30 AM. The weather "remained horrible," Roberts recalled. The team began a final search of the area north and east of Jalalabad, as Roberts broached the subject of the next rescue mission with Barat.<sup>23</sup>

As Afghan Rescue 705 Flight conducted a final search of the washed out area five miles from Jalalabad, the ceilings had lifted slightly but it was still raining hard. The crews estimated that the water was about a foot higher than on the previous afternoon and faster flowing, covering nearly every piece of land in the river bed. As the flight of two flew low over the washed out river basin, Barat quietly told Roberts through the IT, Wahid, that Kunar's governor had requested rescue for about 300 people. While listening, Roberts instinctively began calculating for the trip north: refueling options and fuel loads, pressure altitude for engine "power available" and "power required" figures, and weather. Checking the weather conditions with Jalalabad Tower, he noted the results on his kneeboard card: clouds at 500 feet (scattered), 3,000 feet (broken), and visibility two miles in fog, haze, with heavy rain.<sup>24</sup>

Kunar—where 2,300 years earlier Alexander the Great had received a severe shoulder wound from the ancestors of the present-day insurgents—was known by the Afghans and Americans alike as "an insurgent hotbed." In 2010, the valley was one of the most dangerous in Afghanistan, and the air advisors daily reviewed the surface-to-air-fire activity there. Only a few weeks earlier, Colonel Willi's

aircraft had been fired on by a heavy machine gun in the area. Moreover, the two Mi-17 helicopters were completely unarmed. Although no rescue pilot wanted to use weapons in the midst of a humanitarian search and rescue situation, the mere presence of a gun pointing out the window helped dissuade potential attackers from shooting at the helicopter or approaching with a suicide vest while the aircraft was on the ground. General Barat as well as the American pilots understood that the Taliban and various insurgent factions were vying with each other and the legitimate Afghan government to control Kunar. The formation's destination was somewhere in the Kunar Valley bordering Pakistan's wild Northwest Frontier Area. Barat had not specified the exact location, if even he knew, but wherever the rescue helicopters might have occasion to land they would scarcely be able to defend themselves were they to be attacked. For Barat personally, there was an added danger. As a general officer in the air force of the legitimate Afghan government, if caught by the insurgents he would likely be executed on the spot.<sup>25</sup>

Roberts was on the flight controls as they finished sweeping the river confluence for more survivors and concluded that their job near Jalalabad was done. He headed up the Kunar Valley, still very close to Jalalabad, knowing he needed to brief his wingman on the radio, yet they still didn't know specifically where they were going. As Roberts rearranged his formation with his wingman and long-time trusted search and rescue friend he informed him that Barat had concluded there were no more survivors and that they had received a follow-on request. As Roberts recalled, "Willi's response was memorable, and accurate: 'Let me guess, up Kunar?'"<sup>26</sup>

Quickly, the formation discussed the request on the radio in both English and Dari. The advisors agreed with the Afghans on the single biggest issue: their helicopters were completely unarmed. Additionally, from the advisors' perspective, there would be pressure on the two instructor pilots not only to fly any demanding mission profiles—such as precise hovering for prolonged periods during a survivor pick up—but to help the Afghan pilots fulfill their roles in the cockpit given their unfamiliarity with search and rescue procedures and the new V5 model. As they climbed to the base of the clouds at about 500-800 feet above the ground, Roberts stumbled on what he thought to be the best approach: "Jeep . . . I'll lead you guys up there, if you're all volunteers—let me know in the next five minutes while we still have time to leave someone at J-Bad [Jalalabad]." "The radio was quiet for about thirty seconds and then Jeep's ever-optimistic voice came in loud and clear: 'Boomer, we're all in.'" With a quick check on the fuel status of both aircraft, Afghan Rescue 705 Flight accelerated up the Kunar Valley at the base of the clouds to minimize the chance of drawing surface-to-air fire.<sup>27</sup>

Mohammed Barat's bravery was unquestioned: he had earned two awards for valor as a helicopter pilot, one each under two different Afghan regimes.

**MOHAMMED BARAT'S BRAVERY WAS UNQUESTIONED: HE HAD EARNED TWO AWARDS FOR VALOR AS A HELICOPTER PILOT**



Mid-day Konar Province island south of Assadabad. The river was just about to crest one last time.



**MEANWHILE, DOC BARROW WAS BUSY CHECKING THE SURVIVORS' INJURIES. THROUGHOUT THE DAY HE EXAMINED NO FEWER THAN 400 SURVIVORS**

During the Soviet-Afghan war years, two of his copilots were shot beside him in his helicopter. On some especially dangerous missions he had flown without a copilot. A warrior at heart with a winsome smile and quick wit, since 2009 General Barat had led the AAF's Kabul Air Wing. Was it wise to risk losing not only an Afghan general officer but two of the highest-ranking American rotary-wing advisors in the country and their crews as well? If a helicopter was shot down or even became stuck in the mud during a pickup attempt, the crewmembers had no way to get out of the situation and they were entirely without backup. After several minutes in which Roberts and Barat discussed such concerns, finally Barat declared, "No, we go. . . . [If] you and Willi go, we go." Roberts nodded and passed him the controls: "Fly us there."<sup>28</sup>

About ten miles south of Assadabad, the capital of Kunar Province, Barat abruptly began a descent and announced that the formation was in the right area. The river valley was much more channelized, but there was a large inhabited island in the riverbed. It was clear that the floodwaters had completely swept over the island at least once earlier in the day or the previous night. There was also no doubt that Afghan Rescue 705 Flight was in "bad-guy land," as Roberts expressed it. The road within view led directly into Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province just a few miles away.<sup>29</sup>

The formation descended and began searching the area for survivors while simultaneously watching out for threats. The advisors introduced the Afghan crewmembers to helicopter search-and-rescue procedures with which they were mostly unfamiliar. The visibility had improved somewhat and the cloud decks were occasionally over the mountain tops to the east, but the rain still fell intermittently. The pilots noted the locations of several groups of survivors and assigned separate areas of responsibility for each helicopter.<sup>30</sup>

As soon as the pilots had gained their bearings, the formation committed itself to the task at hand.

Willi chose a group of people waving on the large island and had begun his approach just as the lead crew spotted on the aircraft's left side a family waving frantically; a large chunk of their earthen house had just fallen into the rushing water. Quickly realizing that Willi had his hands full with the first group, the career-long and accomplished rescue pilot shed the last vestiges of threat-induced conservatism and entered "an aggressive left-turning, energy-bleeding emergency approach" so as to land in the water downstream from the family and perpendicular to the flow. That way his crew could intercept any family member who might be swept into the water. With rotor blades popping in the hot, humid air, Roberts rolled out on a fifty-meter final approach as the helicopter transitioned through its normal approach shudder. He plunged aircraft 705 into the water, "praying that it was no deeper than a couple of feet." The helicopter landed in about three feet of water, at which point Barat began directing the Afghan crew chief to deplane and help the family of six aboard. This sequence set the tone for both aircraft for the next five or six hours. Upon landing near a group of flood victims, "all hands"—including flight engineer, crew chief, interpreter, photographer, and flight surgeon—would spring into action to assist the survivors aboard.<sup>31</sup>

After filling up their cabins with the first groups of survivors, the flight decided on a series of gently sloping fields east of the town of Dona as a suitable drop-off location. Meanwhile, Doc Barrow was busy checking the survivors' injuries. Throughout the day he examined no fewer than 400 survivors for life-threatening injuries. The security situation, however, also continued to deeply concern the crews. The survivors' nervousness was unmistakable; they appeared wary of insurgents or their sympathizers nearby. But without a better option, Roberts and Willi left the initial group of more than thirty survivors on the hills near Dona. By the end of the day, 1,700 others would join them.<sup>32</sup>

During the next ninety minutes, a couple of



Roberts with his first 8 in safe and taking off. Photo taken from Willi's aircraft which is landing to pickup rescue numbers 16-25.

ambulances and some townspeople from Dona appeared on the hills followed by a company-sized element of Afghan National Police in pickup trucks and Humvees. The police carried AK-47 weapons and obviously planned to form a perimeter and secure the area. About every third policeman on the roughly two hundred meter diameter perimeter surrounding the landing site held a rocket-propelled grenade/launcher set (RPG-7). About every fourth vehicle had a .50-caliber machine gun. With the help of the air advisors, the legitimate government of Afghanistan—both its air force and national police—were gradually improving the security of the situation even as survivors were still *in extremis* only a few miles away.<sup>33</sup>

While the lead aircraft refueled quickly about six miles away at Assadabad, some of the survivors had begun informing the police at Dona of troublesome fellow Afghans who remained on the island. Whether some actually were insurgents, their sympathizers, or simply antagonistic toward the Afghan government in Kabul and/or the local province was unknown. Regardless, openly carrying weapons and acting in a generally unhelpful manner, they were a concern to those Afghans who supported the legitimate government. After “hot refueling” at FOB Wright, the lead aircraft rejoined the effort just before aircraft 702 departed for fuel. The shuttling of survivors continued for another two hours as the aircraft searched for those most in need of help—many of them waving frantically as the helicopters passed back and forth between the flooded island and Dona’s fields.<sup>34</sup>

Soon after the first (of two) refuelings for both helicopters, the Taliban made their presence known. By that point, a number of survivors had warned the crews of “shady characters” on the island, at least some of whom were Taliban. When making pickups, the crews could see them badgering, even striking, survivors who lacked the Taliban’s required headgear, and they appeared to be attempting to control the situation on the ground

even as desperate families made their way to the Mi-17s. Still, the crews were shocked when they noticed to the northeast of town a large, white Taliban flag that appeared over several odd-looking buildings. That flag meant only one thing: the insurgents wanted the American and Afghan airmen to know that they were there, eye-to-eye with them. The police at the drop-off site, who could also see the Taliban banner, became nervous and expressed their concerns to the crews as the survivors arrived just outside Dona. Passenger loads were bulging. Roberts and Barat on aircraft 705 averaged thirty-nine passengers throughout the day with a high of fifty-seven. Willi and Hassan in aircraft 702 had a high of sixty-four passengers on one flight!<sup>35</sup>

For the second time, Roberts and Barat cycled northeast to the FOB in Assadabad for fuel. This time they shut down the aircraft for a quick lunch. When they returned, they found Willi and Hassan engaged in what Roberts described as “the most incredible hover I ever saw in my life,” as aircraft 702’s crew worked to rescue about fifteen individuals, including elderly people who were stranded on what remained of a walking bridge abutment whose bridge had washed away. The rescuers had observed the “bridge” survivors earlier, but, given the hazardous nature of the hover work required to get to them, they had hoped against hope that the stranded might find some way to safety on their own. As it was, the bridge survivors’ rescue was the most challenging of the day. Within an hour the rescue crews started to return to Dona only partially filled. Shortly thereafter the two helicopters saved from a site several miles to the south eight and twelve people, respectively—small numbers by the day’s standards—and delivered them to the Afghan National Police drop-off site. Those were the last to be rescued on the 29th. After landing at the by now well-secured site and bidding farewell to the police and survivors, the flight departed for Jalalabad to refuel, then on to Kabul. Their two-day rescue total was an astounding 2,080—some 1,700 on the second day—who were saved from the dangerous waters. Within the first few days of August, as the raging water continued downstream causing what *BBC News* termed the “worst floods in Pakistan’s history,” nearly the same number perished in Pakistan as were rescued by Afghan Rescue 705 Flight in Kunar Province on July 29.<sup>36</sup>

Tragically, eight months after the unprecedented rescue of some 2,000 Afghans in distress in Nangarhar and Kunar, in March 2011, two U.S./coalition airstrikes resulted in accidental civilian deaths in Kunar. In the first instance, nine Afghan boys, ages nine to fifteen, collecting firewood were struck; in the second, two children watering their family’s fields. Not only did the highly respected Commanding General of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, General David H. Petraeus, personally apologize to the President of Afghanistan for the first of the two accidental killings, the two mishaps tended to bring the legitimacy of the Kabul government and, by extension, the assistance of its U.S./coalition partners into question in the eyes of

**SOME OF THE SURVIVORS HAD BEGUN INFORMING THE POLICE AT DONA OF TROUBLE-SOME FELLOW AFGHANS**



Lt. Col. Greg Roberts received a Distinguished Flying Cross for his rescue efforts from Gen. Edward A. Rice, Jr., Commander, Air Education and Training Command on Nov. 10, 2011.



some Afghans, if not others as well. In stark contrast, U.S. Air Force historian Daniel L. Haulman has written that humanitarian “airlifts have saved the lives of thousands of people . . . abroad and have served as tools of U.S. diplomacy, demonstrating the versatility of air power not only as a weapon of war but also as an instrument of peace.” In the case of Afghan Rescue 705 Flight, “legitimacy” should be included. For instance, in March 2011 an American ISAF officer who was meeting with Kunar’s Provincial Governor Wahidi listened carefully as the governor recounted the rescue effort on his own

Barat flying through the Tangi Abreshem. Photo snapped by Roberts.



initiative, after noting a helicopter flying in the vicinity on what was a beautiful spring day. Later, U.S. Navy Commander Kyle W. Taylor paraphrased the governor who had recalled that during the previous summer’s floods the “Air Corps [helicopters] moved the people quite swiftly and really made an impact on the community . . . and it was the Afghan Air Corps [sic] that responded to the crisis.” As the 438 AEW Commander, Brig. Gen. David W. Allvin, stated for *Air Force Times*, when an Mi-17 or a C-27 “comes in and it’s got an Afghan tail flash, and the ones that get out are Afghans. . . . that’s enhancing the legitimacy of their own government.”<sup>37</sup>

In 705 flight’s scenario, a dedicated team of Americans and Afghans worked together not only to pull off the largest single-event rescue mission conducted by two helicopters in U.S. Air Force history, they also enhanced the legitimacy of the government in Kabul as well as in the provincial capital of Assadabad in the insurgent-ridden province of Kunar. At times during the mission, although not under Taliban fire, the aircrews found themselves eye-to-eye with the enemy—an enemy that lacked the capability to rescue those it would rule. As suggested by the rescues, as well as by the accidental killings of Afghan civilians in Kunar Province in 2010 and early 2011, the question of whether the residents of Kunar and the other provinces in the critical and historically volatile region of northeastern Afghanistan choose to side *with* the Kabul government, or *against* it, may well depend, in the end, as much on life-saving airlift—including rescue—as on life-taking air strikes.<sup>38</sup> ■

1. Michael R. Boera, "The Combined Air Power Transition Force: Building Airpower for Afghanistan," *Air & Space Power Journal*, Spring 2010, at <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/apj10/spr10/boera.html>.
2. Whether viewed as a purely humanitarian airlift, a search and rescue (SAR), or a combat search and rescue (CSAR) mission, the Afghan Rescue 705 Flight rescue event appears to have been the largest ever in terms of people saved with a two-ship helicopter force by the U.S. Air Force.
3. Historically, the Kuchi were nomadic sheep and goat herders in Afghanistan who typically spent the warm months in the shadows of the Hindu Kush in the north, moving south for the colder months; see Peter King, *Afghanistan, Cockpit in High Asia* (Geoffrey Bles: London, 1966), chap. 11. As of 2010, they were represented in the Afghan Parliament and the Afghan National Army, and they supported the Kabul-based Afghan government. The Afghan Constitution, Article 14, obliges the government to implement effective programs for "improving the economic, social and living conditions" of nomads (Kuchis) as well as adopting "necessary measures for housing and distribution of public estates to deserving citizens."
4. Forrest L. Marion, "The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air Force, 1989-2009," *Air Power History* 57:2 (Sum 2010), pp. 22-31.
5. Boera, "Combined Air Power Transition Force;" Hist, 438 AEW, July 2010; Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W.W. Norton and Co.: New York and London, 2010 [2009]), pp. 183-92. By early 2011, the AAF possessed ten Mi-17V5s. At least one previous CAPTF commander (in 2009, Brig. Gen. Walter D. Givhan), held the same view as that attributed to Boera in the above paragraph; personal observations, Col. Forrest L. Marion, USAFR, 438 AEW historian, Mar.-Jun. 2009; Marion, "Destruction and Rebuilding," pg. 30.
6. Disc, Lt. Col. Michael Krizanec, Croatian Air Force, with the authors, Kabul, Afghanistan, Apr. 4, 2011; Disc, Lt. Col. Robert A. Strasser, USAF, with the authors, Kabul, Afghanistan, Apr. 3, 2011; Gregory A. Roberts, unpublished ms., "Flight Lead Narrative for Afghan Rescue 705 Flight Operations, 28-29 July 2010," Aug. 6, 2010, revised Jan., Mar. 2011.
7. *BBC News*, "Flood deaths pass 400 in Pakistan and Afghanistan," Jul. 31, 2010, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10815265>.
8. Disc, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Barat, Afghan Air Force, with the authors, Kabul, Afghanistan, Apr. 6, 2011; Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Disc, Khwaja Wahidudin Joya, Interpreter-Translator, employee with Mission Essential Personnel, Inc., with the authors, Kabul, Afghanistan, Apr. 6, 2011 [hereinafter referred to as "Wahid"].
12. Barat disc; Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
13. "Pakistan floods 'hit 14m people,'" *BBC News*, Aug. 6, 2010, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10896849>; Khwaja Baseer Ahmad, *Pajhwok Afghan News*, Aug. 10, 2010, "Soldiers among 24 killed in Laghman offensive," at <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2010/08/10/soldiers-among-24-killed-laghman-offensive>.
14. Barat disc; Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
15. Barat disc. Colonel Janghir, like many Afghans, used only one name.
16. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
17. CNN, Josh Levs, "Daring Rescue Saves 2000," Aug. 4, 2010, at <http://www.CNN.com/video/#/world/2010/08/03/nr.daring.rescue.saves.2000.cnn?ref=allsearch>.
18. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
19. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative;" Daniel L. Haulman, *The United States Air Force and Humanitarian Airlift Operations, 1947-1994* (Air Force History and Museums Program: Washington, 1998), pg. 93. The closest comparison to this mission of a large-scale, humanitarian search and rescue mission was probably the *Prinsendam* rescue, Oct. 4-5, 1980, in which more than 500 people were rescued in two days. After the first day, Afghan Rescue 705 Flight had rescued just over 300 people.
20. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
21. Bernard Willi, unpublished ms., "After-Action Report," Aug. 3, 2010.
22. *Ibid.*; Barat disc.; Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
23. Barat disc.; Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
24. *Ibid.*; Wahid disc.
25. Disc, TSgt. Robert D. Black and 1S3 Otto B. McNaughton, both of 438 AEW Intelligence Directorate, with the authors, Kabul, Afghanistan, Apr. 6, 2011; email, Roberts to Marion, Mar. 31, 2011.
26. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
27. *Ibid.*
28. Marion, "The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air Force," pp. 25-26; Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative"; Disc, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Barat, Afghan Air Force, with Col. Forrest L. Marion, USAFR, Kabul, Afghanistan, Apr. 2009.
29. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative"; Black and McNaughton disc.
30. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative."
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. Wahid disc.
34. *Ibid.*; Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative." Given the threat, standard practice was for the helicopters to remain close together for mutual support. During their two refuelings (each), however, they were about six miles, and several minutes' flight time, apart from one another.
35. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative." Some passengers were small children, but, regardless, the numbers of persons airlifted by the Mi-17s per load was extremely high.
36. Roberts, "Flight Lead Narrative"; "Pakistan floods 'hit 14m people.'"
37. Haulman, *Humanitarian Airlift Operations*, preface, pg. vii; "Petraeus Apologizes After NATO Airstrike Kills 9 Afghan Children," *Outside the Beltway*, Mar. 3, 2011, at <http://www.outsidethebeltway.com/petraeus-apologizes-af-ter-nato-airstrike-kills-9-afghan-children/>; "NATO air strike killed two Afghan children in east—officials," *Reuters*, Mar. 15, 2011, at [au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/-/world/9016635/nato-air-strike-killed-two-afghan-children-in-east-officials/](http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/-/world/9016635/nato-air-strike-killed-two-afghan-children-in-east-officials/); email, CDR. Kyle W. "Chilly" Taylor to the authors, Apr. 2, 2011; Jill Laster, "From the ground up," *Air Force Times*, Apr. 25, 2011, pg. 25. Ironically, a few weeks earlier, in February 2011, Governor Wahidi had dealt with the aftermath of a US/coalition air strike in which civilians were killed, including women and young boys; see CNN Wire Staff, "Afghan governor: Women and children killed in military operation," Feb. 20, 2011, at <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/02/20/afghanistan.civilians.killed/?hpt=T2>. In another statement on legitimacy, Lt. Col. Frank D. Bryant of the 438 AEW expressed, "An air force . . . is the most visible military force that is for a country, it's not for a city . . . air power is easy to see, it's easy to recognize the advantages of it, especially when it's bringing things to the people"; disc, Bryant with Marion, Kabul, Afghanistan, Apr. 22, 2011. Tragically, Colonel Bryant and eight other warriors of the 438th Air Expeditionary Wing perished five days later in an attack at the Afghan Air Force base at Kabul International.
38. For the strategic nature of Kunar Province, see Matthew Rosenberg and Julian E. Barnes, "Al Qaeda Makes Afghan Comeback," *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 6, 2011, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704355304576215762431072584.html>.