

The 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit's Seizure of Camp Rhino

The CH-53 proved its worth and capability during the seizure of Camp Rhino.

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The following is an account of the execution of the longest amphibious airfield seizure in the history of the United States Marine Corps from the perspective of the assault flight leader (AFL) for the flight of six CH-53Es. The mission was flown 371.5 nautical miles (nm) inland from the USS *Peleliu* (LHA 5) offshore Pasni, Pakistan into a desert airstrip, later dubbed "Rhino," that is located 85nm southwest of Kandahar, Afghanistan. On 25 November 2001, CH-53Es carried the first conventional forces into Afghanistan and paved the way for follow-on forces that would wreak havoc on the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces in our area of responsibility.

The total mission package for the airfield seizure was six CH-53Es, four AH-1Ws, three UH-1Ns, six KC-130s (two tanker, four cargo), a P3 with a prepositioned 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) (MEU(SOC)) aviation combat element (ACE) pilot aboard, four AV-8Bs, and a command and control platform. Six CH-53Es were to act as the airlift for the first wave of Marines on deck into the forward operating base (FOB) Rhino. Three of these Super Stallions were 15th MEU assets onboard the *Peleliu* while the other three were provided by the

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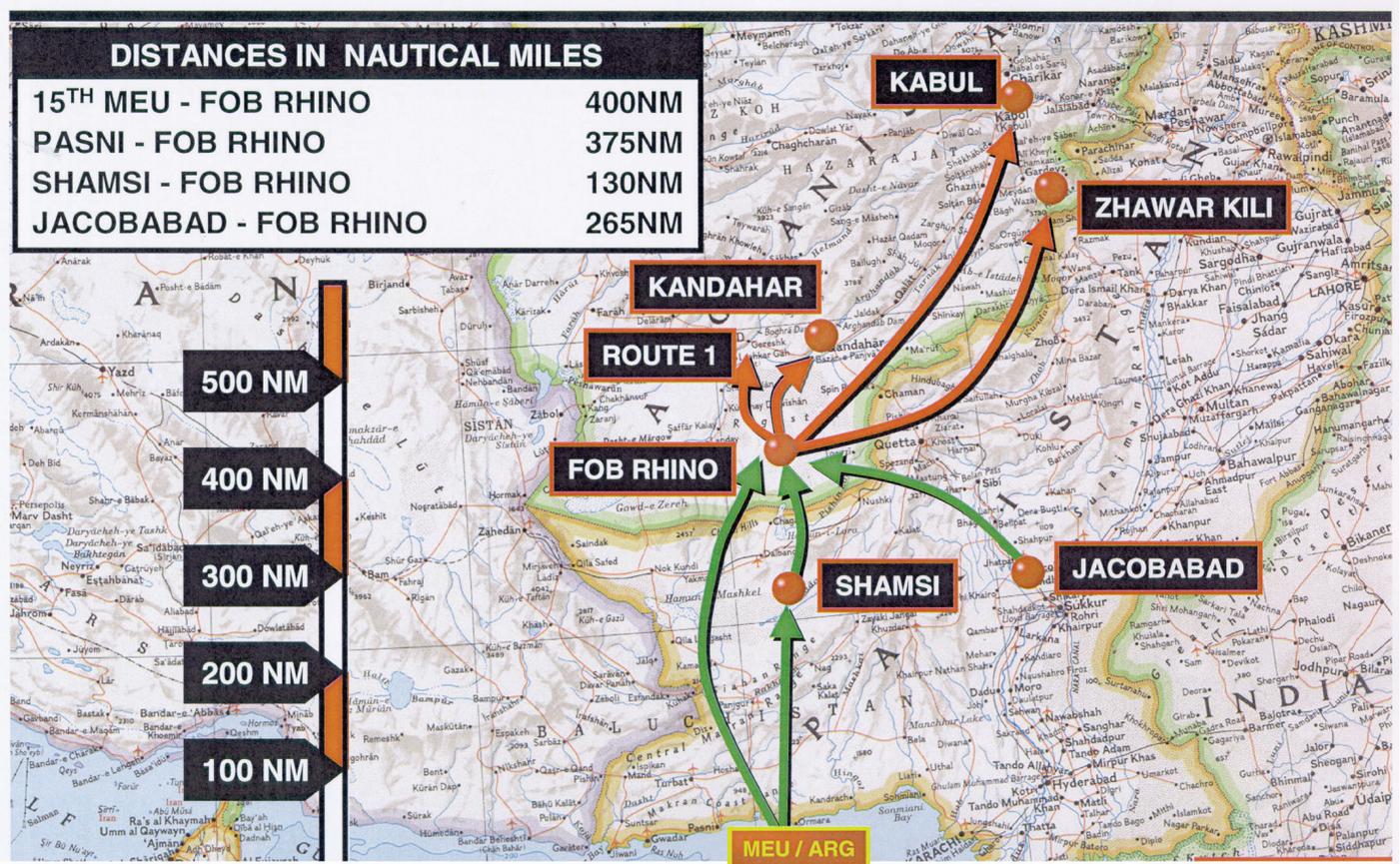
26th MEU onboard the USS *Bataan* (LHD 5), who had recently arrived on station in the North Arabian Gulf. The warning order was directed at 15th MEU assets specifically, and therefore, our pilots would plan and brief the mission. All heliborne mission assets were 15th MEU(SOC)'s with the exception of the three CH-53E that were from the 26th MEU(SOC).

The pilots from the *Bataan* were cross decked on the 23d for the air mission commander and AFL briefs and departed later that day back to their ship. We had anticipated launching on the evening of the 25th but were later delayed to the 26th while waiting for an execute order.

The mission began during daylight hours at 1215Z (1615 local time) as we lifted the skids (four AH-1W Cobras and the three UH-1N Iroquois from the deck of the *Peleliu* to a previously established forward arming and refuel-

ing point (FARP) in western Pakistan. From there they would refuel and proceed on the timeline in order to meet the assault force (six CH-53Es) in the objective area at Rhino.

At 1245Z (1645 local time) the flight of three CH-53Es departed the *Bataan* and assumed the overhead delta pattern while the other three CH-53Es spun up on the *Peleliu*. After loading 2 interim fast attack vehicles and 66 Marines and conducting radio checks, the first 3 departed *Peleliu* as the sun set. The crews goggled for high-light level conditions as they flew feet dry into southern Pakistan. The second flight of 3 landed aboard *Peleliu* and loaded 95 combat loaded Marines. Both flights pushed north separately to the helicopter aerial refueling (HAR) track that stretched for 50nm south to 5nm south of the Afghanistan border. Each flight of three maneuvered as their own elements and refueled from a single KC-130. Forty-five minutes of emission control (minimum radio use) HAR was allotted per division in order to achieve L-hour [the specific hour at which a deployment operation commences or is to commence] for the first division of three at 1700Z (2100 local time). As the first division was departing the HAR track, the rotary-wing escorts



were crossing the border in staggered waves: two AH-1Ws followed by three UH-1Ns, followed by two more AH-1Ws.

The HAR was considered to be one of the more challenging aspects of the flight, but it was not a “must plug” situation. In the event that an aircraft could not plug, for mechanical or other problems, the contingency plan was to have that aircraft, with their division, shut down at Rhino and wait for one of the waves of KC-130s that were carrying fuel destined to help establish the FARP. One of these KC-130s would conduct a hasty rapid ground refueling (RGR) for the CH-53s and then depart.

Despite an inoperable reel response in the right hose of the KC-130, rendering it unusable, all three aircraft in the first division of three were able to successfully refuel and onload 8,300 pounds of fuel each. At this time the appropriate controlling agency was contacted, and the flight pushed farther north across the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. This fuel would take them

into and out of the objective area, back south to the FARP site in western Pakistan, and then back to the *Peleliu*. The second division was not so fortunate as two of the three aircraft did not receive their requisite fuel and were forced to execute the Rhino alternate fuels plan via RGR.

At the Afghanistan border, penetration checks were performed in order to shut down all lighting and undesired emitting equipment. Crossing into Afghanistan, the flying became much more challenging as the terrain assumed a very low contrast much like a colorless moonscape. Altitudes were increased from low-terrain flight at 75 feet to 200 feet above ground level. The forward looking infrared receiver was of considerable help, as was the low altitude warning system. As we proceeded across the smooth landscape we saw virtually no signs of life, with the occasional exception of a small campfire or circle of camels that we circumnavigated. The distance from the border to Rhino is approximately 80nm.

The flight proceeded into the objective area with no resistance and the AFL contacted the escort flight leader (EFL) to establish the status of the landing zone (LZ). Reconnaissance and surveillance had been observing the objective area for some time. Additionally, the AIP P-3 had eyes on the objective, our AV-8Bs were overhead, and we were plugged into theater command and control. The escorts acted as the final screen for the landing of the assault force.

“The zone is winter” (meaning no enemy) was transmitted by the EFL to the AFL, and the flight of three CH-53Es pressed inbound to the site that would later be called Camp Rhino. Given the flatness of the landscape, you could see the complex at least 2 miles out. We’d been briefed on markings of “friendlies” in the area, and they all corresponded with what we saw in the objective area. Additionally, the initial terminal guidance was as briefed—a flashing infrared strobe placed in the middle of the runway just past a dirt apron.

We'd planned for a severe brownout condition based on flights that had gone into this area previously, and we were well to heed those advisories. The brownout conditions were very severe, as aircraft within both divisions were forced to wave off. L-hour was previously established as 1700Z (2100 local), and the wheels were on deck of the dash one CH-53E within 30 seconds of that L-hour. Assault forces quickly secured the objective area. The floodgates were now open for the buildup of combat power via KC-130s that flew waves throughout the rest of that night and many nights following.

Proper objective area deconfliction hinged on timing and a counter-clockwise flow of assault force aircraft through the objective area. As the first division departed and called "clear," the second division was within line of sight as they proceeded inbound. With the news that they were unable to successfully aerial refuel, the second division

of CH-53Es began to commence their contingency refueling plan. They would need to wait through a portion of the night until the KC-130 with ample fuel would land and conduct a hasty RGR. In addition, this evolution would take 4 hours, putting them at the western

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Pakistani FARP after sunrise and finally back aboard the *Bataan* well into the morning hours. Thus, after having launched 13 hours prior, it was indeed a long night for those crews.

Meanwhile, the first CH-53E flight on the original timeline proceeded across the border south to the FARP in

western Pakistan. There they topped off on fuel for the trip back to the *Peleliu*. Only 7,000 pounds of fuel were needed per aircraft, and the flight departed after 45 minutes on the ground.

En route home, high light turned to low light as the moon disappeared. The initial insert mission was ending, and the three crews from the *Bataan* were a few hours behind. The final recovery to the ship was under low-light level conditions at the end of a very long mission. The first division of aircraft landed without event, called for chocks and chains, and knew very little of what lay ahead. Later that morning we received confirmation that the other three CH-53Es had made it safely back to the *Bataan*.

The flight recovered at 0130 local time, nearly 9 hours after the aircrews manned up. The second division recovered 4 hours later after 13 hours. With limited ground support allowed in Pakistan, the CH-53E was able to insert a sizable assault force from the sea to an objective area nearly 400 miles inland under the cover of darkness to an austere LZ while exploiting the aircraft's full spectrum of capabilities. The flight flew over 800 total miles, conducted night vision goggle aerial refueling and, under extremely hazardous brownout conditions, inserted the initial assault force and airfield controllers onto the objective.

On 25 November 2001, the Marine Corps introduced ground forces into Afghanistan using the CH-53E. Within 5 days after the initial insert, the FOB called Camp Rhino could sustain air and ground operations for an entire MEU. The success of this historic achievement is a direct result of the exceptional airmanship, courage, and professional abilities displayed by the pilots flying on this mission and the capabilities of the CH-53E Super Stallion.



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