I. ON THE GROUND

The commandos will zip into Afghanistan under a cover of darkness, perhaps aboard MH-6 Little Birds, so whisper-quiet that snipers aboard can get close enough to their prey without the helicopter's traditional -- and loud -- "whomp-whomp" betraying their presence. As MH-60K Black Hawks momentarily pause, Kevlar-clad commandos will scurry down ropes, their bodies bending under weight of their night-sighted M-4 carbines, grenade launchers, miniature radios and hand-held GPS gear.

As Pentagon planners chart their next moves into Afghanistan, U.S. special forces have a big decision to make. If they are lucky enough to apprehend Osama bin Laden in his mountain lair, will they opt for a "snatch-and-grab" mission, tossing him, alive, into a helicopter, to face justice? Or will they simply "blow-and-go," killing him on the spot or, preferably, turning him over to Afghans for the coup de grace? "Our guys are going to be in the killing business in Afghanistan," says an Army special forces veteran. "When you're fighting people who desire to die for their cause, you accommodate them as quickly as possible."

While the nation's commandos deal with such grisly details, Pentagon and State Department officials are busy looking for real estate in the region from which to launch lightning strikes against bin Laden and his associates. Pentagon officials say there are three options for sending U.S. ground forces into Afghanistan:

-- Base helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, the Army's only commando chopper unit, on the USS Kitty Hawk now steaming in the Arabian Sea. The commandos also could be based on the carrier, or they could climb aboard at bases in Pakistan as the choppers head into Afghanistan for quick in-and-out strikes.

-- Deploy troops to Khanabad in Uzbekistan, from where they could launch missions into Afghanistan, just over 100 miles south. U.S. units here include an advance team from the U.S. Special Operations Command from MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida, members of the 5th Special Forces Group from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and about 2,000 infantrymen from the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, New York largely to provide security for the base.

-- Actually deploy troops to a base inside Afghanistan.

By week's end, political and military realities seemed to be pushing the Pentagon to embracing the first option -- running missions from the 4.5 acres of sovereign U.S. territory that is the Kitty Hawk. Uzbekistan seems chary of allowing the U.S. to launch any major missions from its soil. Publicly, they are permitting only search-and-rescue operations. And Pentagon officials don't like the idea of plopping hundreds or thousands of U.S. troops into the middle of Afghanistan for an extended stay.

The dangers inherent in sending U.S. troops into Afghanistan are many. For the first time, it would require U.S. aircraft -- and the troops on board -- to fly within easy range of the 100 or so Stinger missiles, supplied by the CIA in 1986 to help the Afghans drive out Soviet invaders, still in Afghan hands. (A 1989 U.S. Army study concluded that the Afghans' Stingers killed 269 Soviet aircraft in 340 attempts.) And it doesn't take CIA missiles to down these helicopters: 18 U.S. soldiers died in Somalia in a 1993 firefight after rocket-propelled grenades brought down special forces choppers trying to arrest a warlord, which marked the beginning of the end of the U.S. military presence in that war torn country. Swooping into Afghan canyons under cover of darkness, flying low to elude missiles and anti-aircraft fire, is always dangerous. And clashes in ravines -- or caves -- with suicidal followers of bin Laden means sure bloodshed on both sides, U.S. officials concede.

Pentagon officers said that more U.S. ground troops could be sent to the region next week to ensure the White House has a full range of options available once ground operations begin. Some of those could come from the 23,000 U.S. troops, including some special forces units, now participating in Operation Bright Star in Egypt, a long-scheduled biannual exercise. Commanders have told their units to plan on spending up to a year in the region, although individual soldiers probably would rotate through more quickly than that.

While officials in both Pakistan and Uzbekistan said their bases would not be used to launch attacks on Afghan soil, Pentagon officials said there was sufficient leeway to mount at least some clandestine operations from those airfields. Any major rescue mission normally employs several helicopters, one Pentagon official said. "There's not all that much difference," he noted, "between a search-and-rescue and a search-and-destroy mission." U.S. forces moved into bases at Pasni, a southern port city with an airfield, and Jacobabad, home to an air base. As many as 2,000 U.S. troops might eventually be based there, a Pentagon official said.

Pentagon officials say "dozens" of special forces remain in and near Afghanistan, periodically entering the country to scout potential targets and landing zone and to coordinate with Northern Alliance rebel forces and other groups opposed to the ruling Taliban movement. They have been reinforced by a fleet of unmanned aircraft, orbiting lazily in the Afghan sky and scouring the khaki folds of the rugged Afghan countryside for evidence of bin Laden and his men. RC-135 "Rivet Joint" planes have vacuumed electronic emissions from all sorts of transmitters -- radios, cell phones, walkie-talkies -- listening for clues to bin Laden's whereabouts.

"You're still looking with the same old-fashioned kinds of sensors -- infrared sensors, optical-imaging sensors -- that are frankly not very good at finding people inside of structures, much less inside of caves, and are certainly not very good at identifying those people," says Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution. "So we are going to have to count on some good luck in the commando phase of this operation."

While details of the missions remain tightly-held, Pentagon officials and ex-Special Forces officers say U.S. missions will be lightning-fast -- probably less than an hour spent on the ground inside Afghanistan -- and aimed at gathering intelligence as well as terrorists. "The United States of America, and certainly the United States military," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said, "has no aspiration to occupy or maintain any real estate in that region."

The most challenging mission -- hunting down bin Laden and his high command -- is most likely to be assigned to Delta Force, a 360-man Army unit so secretive it generally travels mixed amid Rangers and whose existence the military refuses officially to confirm. Pentagon officials believe, although they cite no evidence, that bin Laden is most likely holed up in a cave, or a series of caves, and that he moves to a new cave every day. These natural limestone redoubts afford him the most protection -- and present the greatest challenge to those who want to find him.

While the U.S. Army and Marines have trained in recent years to fight in cities, there has been little or no training done for waging war inside caves, military officers say. Like the hunt for bin Laden, technology only does so much in rooting an enemy squirreled away inside a mountain. Without fresh intelligence -- from an informer, most likely -- there is only a scant chance of apprehending someone hiding there. Caves are easily booby-trapped, and many have multiple entries and exits unknowable to newcomers. "We're going to figure out this cave business as we go along," says an ex-special forces soldier. "We'll improvise weapons and tactics as we go."

If troops suspect a cave is booby-trapped, they could simply call in an air strike. From the ground, they could aim a laser designator at the precise point they wanted a bomb to hit, and then watch from hundreds of yards away as a laser-guided bomb followed their beam to the target. Or, using their GPS gear, they could determine the location of a specific target, and relay its coordinates to incoming warplanes to destroy.

The simplest way to kill someone inside a cave -- assuming there is no "back door" -- is simply to destroy it with an EGBU-28, an improved version of the mammoth 5,000-pound bunker-buster crash-developed in 27 days during the Gulf War to destroy Saddam Hussein's deepest, most fortified bunkers. Capable of burrowing through more than 20 feet of concrete -- or limestone -- before detonating, B-2s dropped EGBU-28s on several caves this week. Cave dwellers also can be killed by injecting a fuel-air explosive aerosol into the cave and then igniting it, suffocating and incinerating those inside, defense officials say.

Pentagon officials were exited by intelligence showing that some of the caves attacked by U.S. warplanes experienced continuous explosions for hours following the attack this week. There was some hope that bin Laden or members of his high command were killed in these nonstop explosions. "I have seen several examples where there were enormous secondary explosions," Rumsfeld said Thursday, "in some cases that went on for several hours after targeting underground facilities."

Beyond Delta, other special forces that could be tapped for action inside Afghanistan include the Green Berets, who specialize in training foreign military units to fight, and the 5th Special Operations Group, which specializes in waging war in this part of the world.

On Thursday, Rumsfeld said that bin Laden most likely remains in Afghanistan, but that finding him will be difficult. "It's a big country. It has a long border -- around 360 degrees -- facing multiple nations. And there's no magic wand one can wave," he said. "It's possible to cross borders on foot, donkeys, in Datsuns, or by helicopter."

II. IN THE AIR

The U.S. air war against Afghanistan -- and make no mistake about it, except for a little British help on opening night, it was an all-U.S. show -- has gone about as well as could be expected, U.S. officials say. Like a busy housewife crossing items off her shopping list as she makes her way down familiar aisles, the Pentagon first destroyed Afghanistan's rudimentary air defenses in the first two nights of bombing. Then U.S. Air Force B-1, B-2 and B-52 bombers, backed by Navy F-18 fighter-bombers, began mowing down Taliban and al Qaeda military targets, including defense headquarters, depots and terrorist training camps.

Once the fixed targets were hit -- and, in some cases, rehit -- American warplanes began hunting for what the Pentagon likes to call "emerging targets" -- Taliban tanks and troops on the move. The missions seemed precisely targeted, with relatively few planes going after the relatively few targets Afghanistan offered. But by the end of the war's first week, all of the obvious targets had been scratched off the Pentagon's shopping list. "We're not running out of targets," Rumsfeld said, "Afghanistan is."

In the capital of Kabul, U.S. warplanes targeted the airport, Taliban headquarters, radio transmitters and various air defense sites. In the southern city of Kandahar, the Taliban's stronghold, U.S. forces hit the city's airport, air defense sites, and the compound of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. Several terror camps between the two cities were razed by B-52 carpet-bombing. In the northern town of Mazar-e-Sharif, U.S. forces attacked the local airfield, air-defense missile sites, and a concentration of Taliban forces. U.S. warplanes hit targets in at least six other Afghan towns in the war's opening days. "Much of the country is rubble," Rumsfeld said. "They do not have high-value targets or assets that are the kinds of things that would lend themselves to substantial damage from the air." Through the first five days of attacks, the Pentagon assigned itself an 85 percent success rate.

The Pentagon pivoted as the war began, seeming to shift its sights from bin Laden -- a very difficult target -- to the Taliban, a relatively simple one. Gone was President Bush's rhetoric of wanting bin Laden "dead or alive," and in its place was Rumsfeld's invitation to Afghans at large to overthrow the Islamic fundamentalists now controlling 90 percent of their country. "Afghanistan," he said bluntly, "would be vastly better off were they not there."

Even as the war raged on and U.S. bombers pummeled Afghan targets, U.S. officials stressed they were not at war with Afghanistan. "Let me emphasize that these are strikes against the Taliban and the foreign terrorists that they've invited into their country, not the people of Afghanistan," Rumsfeld said. "We stand with the Afghan people, who are suffering under the oppressive Taliban regime and who do not want their nation to be a base from which foreign terrorists wage war on the rest of the world."

Air Force pilots said the bombing runs weren't as challenging as their training had been. "It was dark and quiet," said a lead B-52 pilot who identified himself only as Woodstock to protect his family. "My crews didn’t encounter any threat that we weren’t prepared to deal with and nothing that put us unduly at risk." One of Woodstock's B-52s -- instead of the painting of a scantily-clad pin-up girl favored by World War II pilots -- had a more somber message: "NYPD," it read, "we remember." There were no wisecracks when bombs were dropped. "We keep the cockpit professional and quiet," said Vinnie, a B-1 weapons officer. "We have a lot of more important things to worry about than making emotional comments." But there was a sense of pride surrounding the mission. "It felt like being a football player on Super Bowl Day," Vinnie added.

U.S. pilots said they noticed little activity from the Taliban's three SA-3 surface-to-air missile sites, its 400 anti-aircraft guns, and an aging fleet of 30 Soviet-era MiG-21 and Su-22 jet fighters. All were targets during the war's opening nights, and their destruction gave the U.S. military the confidence to begin flying around the clock.

Navy Lt. Cmdr. Chris, 30, of Baltimore, finished a six-hour mission on Wednesday that included striking targets near Kandahar airport. "You felt like you were defending your country," he said. "The amount of resistance that we've seen in this theater is significantly less than you would see in Iraq, significantly less than we saw in Kosovo," said Chris, an F-18 pilot flying from the USS Enterprise. "You're not dealing with as sophisticated an air-defense system."

By week's end, the Pentagon attacked more than 60 targets spread across Afghanistan. As they rained smart and not-so-smart bombs down on the Taliban, cracks began to appear. There were reports that more than 1,000 Taliban troops -- that's 2 percent -- defected to the forces of the Northern Alliance. There was a sense inside the Pentagon that steady bombing would break the Taliban's will and lead to its collapse in short order. But at the same time, Adm. Sir Michael Boyce, the British military's top officer -- why is it the Brits who keep releasing all the neat facts? -- warned that the campaign could continue well into next year if the Taliban hunkers down. "It could be a very short haul" if the Taliban gives up bin Laden, he said, or "we must expect to go through the winter and into next summer at the very least."

The first U.S. air strikes against troops came during the conflict's opening hours when U.S. warplanes attacked a garrison -- on two successive days -- occupied by forces loyal to bin Laden near the northern town of Mazar-e-Sharif. Most of those troops, defense officials said, were not Afghans, but Arabs and Chechens.

The biggest difference between this air war and the Gulf War is the ubiquity of precision-guided munitions and their cheapness -- GPS-guided tail fins can turn a 500-pound dumb bomb into a near-precision weapon able to fall within 10 feet of a target at night and in all kinds of weather. But they are not silver bullets. The intense focus on this secret war -- the Pentagon is releasing very little information about the conflict, and even deferring to allies to announce the presence of U.S. troops on their soil -- may be misplaced. "The cruise missiles and bombers are not going to solve this problem," Rumsfeld said. "There is not a silver bullet."

By week's end, the Pentagon was issuing orders to keep the pressure on. Not only is the Kitty Hawk bound for a port -- most likely in Oman -- to pick up special-forces helicopters, but the USS Theodore Roosevelt moved from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean to relieve one of the carriers there and maintain the aerial bombardment.

And Britain, to date, appears to have been the only nation that actually conducted military operations alongside the Americans. But the Pentagon went to great lengths to spell out how many others were helping: "We have 36 countries that are offering military troops or equipment; 44 countries are providing overflight clearance; 33 countries are providing landing rights; 14 countries are providing places for equipment," said Torie Clarke, the Pentagon spokesman. But by week's end, only two nations were willing to provide blood.

III. THE TALIBAN MILITIA

Afghanistan will not be a pleasant place for U.S. troops. Its mountainous terrain is generously littered with thousands of land mines sown during the Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989, and the civil war that has impoverished the Texas-sized nation in many of the years since then. But the Afghan military -- what there is left of it -- is a ragged, ill-trained outfit. While the mujahadeen -- with the CIA's help -- was able to drive the Soviet army out of Afghanistan, they were battling foreign communists they despised. There is no telling how most Afghans would react to GIs parachuting into their midst; some would see them as saviors, an Army officer responsible for the region believes.

Instead of a real army, U.S. troops in Afghanistan would be waging war against odd collections of armed groups with varying level of organization, loyalties, skills and political commitment. But they can be brutal, as well. Richard Kidd, a 1986 West Point graduate, has been in and out of Afghanistan for close to a decade, and in 1998 and 1999 helped lead U.N. demining efforts there. In an email to his West Point classmates, he warns that U.S. troops will face brutal combat. "Our opponents will not abide by the Geneva conventions," he said. "Sometime during this war I expect that we will see videos of U.S. prisoners having their heads cut off."

There are only scraps of a military force left in the country. "There is no professional army left in Afghanistan," says Ali Ahmad Jalali, a former colonel in the Afghan army. "All that is left is militias." Many Afghan militiamen feel free to switch sides, shift loyalties, and join or leave the group spontaneously. "The country suffers from the absence of a top political layer capable of controlling individual and group violence," Jalali says. "Force is not a state monopoly." The forces loyal to the Taliban range in size from dozens to hundreds, are drawn from Islamic schools, and are commanded by veterans of the Taliban's prior wars. Some larger units have artillery, armored vehicles, and other support elements. Hundreds of former army officers and pilots, mostly members of the Pashtun ethnic group, operate the militia's aircraft, armored vehicles, artillery, and air defense systems.

"Their strength doesn't come from their military skills, but from the political influence of the factions they represent," Jalali says. "Once they are challenged, they are not good fighters -- they are just good conspirators."

The Taliban are not particularly well trained. "In major offensives, fighters have rushed to the front line to share the glory and spoils of war, leaving their tactical formations unbalanced -- a front-heavy and rear-weak force disposition," says Jalai, who now works for the Voice of America. "This leaves the force extremely vulnerable to counterattack." As for what's left of the Afghan air force, "most of the planes have outlived their operational age," Jalali reports, "and many are not technically safe to fly."

The Taliban milita relies on ethnic participation and bribery to win battles. It has prevailed against Northern Alliance forces because its motorized, lightweight operations can envelope and destroy the patchwork opposition it has faced. But the Taliban's progress has slowed: While it overran 65 percent of the country from 1994 to 1996, since then it has been able to put only about 25 percent more territory under its control.

Jalali says the Taliban military lacks the rigor required of an effective fighting force. "Even where the Taliban forces do enjoy a high level of offensive mobility, they lack the experience, discipline, and organizational skills to penetrate prepared defenses or consolidate positions," he says. "In major offensives, fighters have rushed to the front line to share the glory and spoils of war, leaving their tactical formations unbalanced -- a front-heavy and rear-weak force disposition." Such snafus would quickly be exploited by U.S. troops should combat clashes occur between the two forces.

The only standard weapon used by the Taliban is the Kalashnikov assault rifle. Beyond that, units are equipped with whatever they have been able to scavenge from defeated rebels. More importantly, they are not trained enough to use more sophisticated weapons properly. Instead of using tanks, artillery and airpower to generate combat synergy, they tend to be used in isolation, reducing their effectiveness. Tanks, which need to be on the move to be most effective, often are used simply as static guns.

Unlike in Vietnam, where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese fought out of nationalism and a belief in communism, nothing holds the Afghan militia together. That's why bribing soldiers to switch sides works. "Military action in Afghanistan is not on the basis of a clearly defined military objective," Jalali says. "Because the combatants are not committed to specific goals, they can change sides -- if one side no longer is accommodating them in terms of sharing land or power, they go to the other side."

Kidd, the West Point graduate, called the 1998 U.S. cruise-missile strikes against Afghanistan "absolutely inane," and suggested that such military action gave bin Laden the wrong impression of U.S. resolve. "The overwhelming consensus," Kidd wrote, "was that we were cowards who would not risk one life in face-to-face combat." This week, the United States could go a long way to correcting that misimpression.

IIII. ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE

U.S. military planners acknowledged this week they were not prepared for this kind of war. The Pentagon, which has hundreds of war plans on its shelves, had to start planning this campaign "basically from scratch" in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, a senior U.S. military officer said. The United States, he conceded, was ready to fight any new enemy in an old way, but hadn't done much thinking about fighting anyone in a new way.

Never has the U.S. military faced a tougher foe. Its last hero, Army Gen. Colin Powell, warned his fellow soldiers against ever entering combat without a clear "exit strategy" defining how and when the U.S. knew it had won the war. All that has changed with the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The U.S. military is preparing to risk national blood and treasure against a foe it does not know, in a region of the world that has churned outsiders into vanquished losers for centuries.

Most importantly, the American military is plunging into battle against a foe without what the Pentagon likes to call "centers of gravity." Those are pressure points the U.S. military can attack to make a foe yell "Uncle!" Without such centers, in the opening days of the Kosovo campaign, for example, the U.S. military fought with only limited effect. But once the bombing list was broadened to include such targets -- like Belgrade's television stations and electrical power plants -- the U.S. military and its allies began getting traction.

This approach is in keeping with the Pentagon’s traditional approach to warfare. The belief that others would fight as Americans fight dates back to Gen. George Patton Jr. “The Americans, as a race, are the foremost mechanics of the world,” the World War II general said. “It therefore behooves us to devise methods of war which exploit our inherent superiority. We must fight the war by machines on the ground, and in the air, to the maximum of our ability.”

But without tempting, high-value targets to wipe out, the world's most powerful military is largely impotent, Pentagon officials concede. “The United States is unbeatable on a traditional battlefield,” says Ralph Peters, a retired U.S. Army officer, “but that battlefield is of declining relevance.”

Four years ago, during a war game at the Army War College in Carlisle, Penn., the U.S. and its allies were never able to eradicate a terrorist group that resembles bin Laden’s Al Qaeda. "These new terror groups are built the same way the Internet is built," said an Army officer who participated in the 1997 game. "Every time you destroyed one chunk, the rest stepped in to fill the gap."

This is the "asymmetric warfare" Pentagon thinkers have been warning of for years. As the pre-eminence of the U.S. military has grown over both friends and foes, who would be inclined to take it on, tank-against-tank and plane-against-plane? “For most potential adversaries, attacking the U.S. asymmetrically is the only war fighting strategy they might reasonably consider for the foreseeable future,” says Charles Dunlap Jr., an Air Force colonel. “The Gulf War was an object lesson to military planners around the globe of the futility of attempting to confront the U.S. symmetrically, that is, with like forces and orthodox tactics.”

The lopsided battles over both Baghdad and Belgrade made it clear that anyone with a gripe against America best not engage in a shooting war if it wants to prevail. Say what you will about Osama bin Laden -- who prevailed with other mujahadeen in driving the Soviets from Afghanistan -- he has learned that lesson well.

For decades, the United States has embraced a “tit-for-tat” policy toward punishing terrorists, always seeking –- as in the case of the Pan Am 103 bombers whose treachery killed 270 – to “bring them to justice” as if they had merely defrauded Mastercard. America has generally responded with one-punch reprisals, from President Reagan's bombing of Tripoli in 1986 in reaction to the bombing of a West German nightclub, to President Clinton's cruise missile attacks against an Osama bin Laden training base and a suspected chemical weapons plant in Sudan, as the American reply to the bombing of U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998.

Pentagon officials stressed privately this week that if the Bush administration is serious – and they don’t yet know if it is – that the war on terrorism will require a campaign that will take years and entail an unknowable, but substantial, number of U.S. casualties. It is going to be like the Cold War all over again, with proxy forces and aircraft shootdowns and alliances with less-than-savory characters in an effort to glean every possible shred of evidence as to the terrorists’ means, financing and whereabouts.

Even today’s weaponry is aimed at a peer-competitor, able to compete with U.S. technical prowess in the air (the Air Force’s new $200 million a copy F-22 fighter), below the sea (the Navy’s new $2 billion a copy Seawolf submarine) and the ground (the Army’s new $23 million-a-copy Crusader artillery gun). Amazing, when one realizes that the bloodiest day ever on U.S. soil was wrought by 19 terrorists armed with cheap razor-bladed box cutters.

“An over-emphasis on technology can cause the West to overlook the many low-tech ways in which adversaries might asymmetrically respond to gadgetry-obsessed -- and gadgetry-vulnerable -- Western opponents,” Dunlap, the Air Force colonel says. History’s battlefields are littered with the corpses of superior military forces defeated by foes less well-equipped: France’s defeats in Indonesia and Algeria, America’s defeat in Vietnam, the Soviet Union’s defeat in Afghanistan, or Russia’s more recent defeat in Chechyna.

The sudden turnaround doesn't surprise Peters, the retired Army intel officer. “As the United States armed forces put their faith and funding behind ever more sophisticated combat systems designed to remove human contact from warfare, mankind circles back to the misbehaviors of yesteryear,” he says. “Technologies come and go, but the primitive endures.”

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