



ANNIHILATOR 23'S SIX-HOUR FIGHT



**OH-58D Kiowa Warrior pilots battle
Afghan insurgents**

BY JAN TEGLER





LESS THAN A KILOMETER SOUTH of the U.S. Army's Forward Operating Base "Salerno" in southeastern Afghanistan, Chief Warrant Officer (CW2) Joseph Priester pulled pitch to put his OH-58D down in a hastily improvised landing zone.

Priester had already landed in the spot three times, picking up wounded commandos while under fire. Sweat-soaked and fatigued, he craned his neck to the left to look for his copilot, Brian Peterson. Peterson sprinted for the helicopter, ducking under its whirling rotor disk.

"He runs over and looks into the cockpit," Priester remembers. "His seat is soaked in blood. There's blood on the flight controls and the instrument panel and there's blood on me and he just gets in and starts operating like it's nothing!"

AWACS to Afghanistan

By August 2008, Priester was an experienced combat pilot. Having already deployed to Iraq in the OH-58D, he'd accumulated about 1,500 hours of flight time by that May when he arrived at FOB Salerno as part of the 101st Airborne Division's "Task Force No Mercy."

Priester's OH-58D was one of six from A Troop, 2-17 Cavalry Regiment deployed to the FOB just 15 miles north of the Pakistan border. Known as the "Kiowa Warrior," the D-model of the two-seat helo derived originally from Bell Helicopter's familiar civilian model 206 Jet Ranger.

The Army loaded it with weapons and infrared sensors for use as an armed reconnaissance/scout helicopter during the last years of the Cold War, then pressed it into service for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it was lauded by infantry and special forces teams for its ability to fly and fight at extremely low altitude, nearly alongside ground forces.

"We're not infantry, but we consider ourselves one of them," Priester affirms. "They loved us."

The Kiowa Warrior wasn't the first military aircraft Priester had served aboard. For six years, he flew as an aircrew member on USAF Boeing E-3 Sentry airborne warning

and control AWACS jets operating near the airspace in Iraq and Afghanistan he'd know intimately later on.

He had always wanted to be a pilot and fly helicopters, so in 2003 he gave up his career as an Air Force Staff Sergeant and transferred to the U.S. Army, starting all over again in basic training. By 2005 he was in Iraq. It was a true baptism of fire, because Priester's first flight after graduating from flight training at Ft. Rucker, Alabama was also his first flight in combat.

"My first flight in combat was my first operational flight, and we had troops in contact!"

August 18, 0300 Hours: FOB Salerno Under Attack!

Forward Operating Base Salerno sat just over 15 miles from the Pakistan border on a high plateau, surrounded by the Hindu Kush mountains of Khost province not far from the city of Khost. The area had been a hotbed for insurgent activity since the war began with Taliban fighters trying to dislodge American forces and turn back the improvements they were making to local infrastructure, including new schools, businesses, and improved roads.

Built in 2002, Salerno had grown to the size of a small city by 2008, with a 3,000-

foot dirt runway, helicopter landing pads, a Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) and facilities for almost 5,000 servicemen and contractors. In addition to the half-dozen OH-58Ds, the base was home to an AH-64 Apache battalion, a CH-47 Chinook battalion, and a UH-60 Black Hawk battalion.

Thus, it was a prime target for local insurgents and, on August 18, 2008, an attack that would last three days began. It started with a series of small trucks and vans loaded with bombs driven by suicidal attackers intent on busting through FOB Salerno's main gate and wreaking havoc. Armed patrols around the base's perimeter and the station's Apaches repelled them but that didn't end their efforts.

By 2200 hours, when Priester attempted to get some sleep in the tent he was sharing with other OH-58 pilots, the insurgents were attacking again, armed with AK-47s and bolt cutters, and wearing suicide vests, trying to penetrate the fences around the base.

"That was one of a few days where I slept with my pistol under my pillow, but there was no sleep to be had," Priester remembers.

A little after 0300 hours on August 19, one of Priester's fellow OH-58 pilots, CW3 Scott Cotriss, was awakened by a platoon commander. Informed that the attack was still underway, he woke his copilot, CW2 Brandon Hodge as well as Priester and his copilot, CW2 Brian Peterson, then went to get a quick briefing.

"Never had I run to a helicopter before, but we ran three-quarters of a mile in kit to our aircraft," Priester says.

The three pilots quickly pre-flighted their two OH-58Ds, manned up and took off after Cotriss rejoined them. Priester and Peterson, flying "Annihilator 23" had a "rocket/rocket" weapons configuration, carrying two rocket pods with seven Hydra 70 mm rockets. Cotriss and Hodge had a "rocket/.50" configuration with a .50 caliber machine gun on the right side with 300 rounds and a seven-shot rocket pod on the left side of the helicopter.

Launching in darkness, the four pilots wore night vision goggles, vital tools for the low flying Kiowa Warriors.

"We're generally doing our mission below 100 feet AGL, bumping up above trees or above houses, whatever needs to be done to get a good view," Priester explains. He adds that the OH-58D's mast-mounted infrared sight above its rotor disk was outdated by 2008.

"It sees heat blobs in the distance, really. So we'll see something then move closer to see it with the NVGs [night vision goggles] or our eyeballs. This was a pure

eyeballs fight."

Within seconds, the Kiowa Warriors were in the fight, directed to an area south of the base to hunt insurgents the AH-64s had been pursuing most of the night. Priester took off as lead initially, receiving instructions from "Bearcat," the Apache element that was leaving the scene, to proceed two kilometers south to a group of mud huts where it was suspected four insurgents were hiding. The Apaches marked the target, then headed back to FOB Salerno.

Priester passed the flight lead to Cotriss, and the pair headed for the houses to recon a tight courtyard between the structures, where the insurgents were thought to be. The pilots took care not to hit the civilian homes—not an easy feat with the extremely basic aiming method the OH-58s utilized.

Known formally as an Area Ballistic Reference Point, the pilot's "pipper" was actually a dot they made with a dry erase marker by hand on the Kiowa Warrior's forward canopy glass—in Priester's case, 12 inches to the right of the canopy center bar. After making three passes at the courtyard, Cotriss took fire.

"I remember seeing about 15 rounds or three tracers," Priester explains. "So I rolled in flying toward the target at about 65 knots. I did a quick cyclic bump, climbing, then pushed the nose over and shot two rockets into a courtyard with vegetation in between the mud houses. It was about a 20 foot by 20 foot area, super tight for a rocket shot. I was within 100 meters all day long of everyone I was shooting at!"

The pair turned around for a fifth pass. Cotriss still had .50 caliber ammunition but Priester was out of rockets.

"I think we got them on the fourth pass. Scott and I rolled in again and I was out of weapons by this point. I was just covering him to be a distraction so maybe the bad guys would think I had weapons too. When we came around the fifth time, we didn't see any more fire."

August 19: Rearm, Refuel, Return to the fight

Next, Priester and Cotriss headed back to FOB Salerno's FARP for a quick splash of fuel and most urgently, more ammunition. Peterson and Hodge had to get out of the helicopters to rearm them because with the base under attack, the armament specialists who would normally be at the FARP were absent.

The OH-58s took off again as soon as they had weapons and established radio contact with "Glory 6," the FOB's infantry battalion commander. He directed them to split up with Cotriss patrolling north of a wadi just outside the base's wire and Priester to the south

THE INSURGENTS WERE ATTACKING AGAIN, ARMED WITH AK-47S AND BOLT CUTTERS, AND WEARING SUICIDE VESTS, TRYING TO PENETRATE THE FENCES AROUND THE BASE.

Left to right: CW2 Brian Peterson, CW2 Brandon Hodge, CW3 Scott Cotriss, and CW2 Joseph Priester pose in front of the Kiowa Warrior known as "The Judge" a few hours after their intense fight against insurgents attacking FOB Salerno. (Photo courtesy Joseph Priester)



An OH-58D, flying at the National Training Center on Fort Irwin near Barstow, California shows off a seven-shot Hydra 70 mm rocket pod on its starboard side, identical to the pods Priester's Kiowa Warrior was carrying in a "rocket/rocket" configuration during the 2008 firefight. (Photo by Ted Carlson)



"WE WERE TAKING FIRE FROM THE MOMENT I PULLED PITCH TO LAND THE FIRST TIME UNTIL THE LAST TIME I LANDED. I HAD RPGS GO UNDER MY ROTOR DISK AND THERE WAS MORTAR FIRE. I ALMOST GOT SMOKED A FEW TIMES!"

of the stream. They were hunting for insurgents hiding among the waist-high corn in the fields south of the base.

"Everything was happening just about 1,000 meters from the wire. The guys in the Air Traffic Control tower and the Guard towers were seeing and filming it all. Our crew chiefs were watching, and it was the first time they actually got to see their work do its job."

Cotriss and Hodge were the first to find insurgents, "a couple of bodies wearing American uniforms and suicide vests" Priester says.

Daylight was breaking as Cotriss made the report and the OH-58s kept searching for more insurgents. The two helicopter crews set up a round-robin with one aircraft over the fields while the other returned to the FARP for more gas and ammo.

Then, almost simultaneously, Cotriss' aircraft and Priester's began taking fire. Priester turned north to support Cotriss while a commando unit with U.S. Special Forces and Afghan Army soldiers made its way into the corn fields. Two of the insurgents popped up from the corn and started engaging a small element



of commandos 30 feet away, who dropped to their stomachs, returned fire, and called in the Kiowa Warriors.

"Danger-close for the rockets is 240 meters," Priester explains. "We told them we were going to suppress the fire but because they were danger-close we had to get approval from the commander on scene. We got it and Scott rolled in and shot .50 cal. I didn't shoot rockets. That gave the good guys a chance to run away, now about 15 meters from the insurgents."

As all of this was happening, Hodge was telling

Cotriss he'd been shot in the helmet. An AK-47 round had passed in front of Cotriss' face and miraculously went in and out of the back of Hodge's helmet without injuring him, then struck one of the main rotor blades.

"The commandos said they were taking continuous fire and asked us to attack again," Priester remembers. "I went in with rockets. I knew I killed one of the guys but I didn't know if I got them both. I just said, 'Target suppressed.'"

That attack allowed the commando element to regress northward a bit. "Then Scott went to the FARP and I went on my own."

0800 Hours: Landing in a Firefight

Time was flying by for Priester and the other pilots. The morning was now well advanced. As some of the commandos moved to the south again, one of the two insurgents who had been shooting at them earlier laid in wait under the corn. As the element neared, he detonated his vest or a grenade. More insurgents waited in the corn field.

"That wounded six of our guys," Priester says.

The commandos radioed Priester asking him to call in a Nine-Line MEDEVAC to the FOB's Tactical Operation Center (TOC) just a kilometer north of their position.

Priester was about to transmit the request. "But to get us to call the TOC with the Nine-Line, then have the TOC alert the MEDEVAC Blackhawks, get a crew to run to one of them, start and launch, then fly to pick up the wounded and fly back to the hospital, you're talking 10 or 15 minutes.

"I'm right there! I'm no doctor but I asked Brian what he thought about landing and doing CASEVAC [casualty evacuation]."

"Brian said, 'Yep, let's do it!'"

Peterson, a decorated, sniper-qualified infantryman before becoming a left-seater in the OH-58, was capable outside the aircraft, Priester stresses. "That was really still his element since he'd only been flying for about two years at this point and had spent 10 years as an infantryman."

Priester descended. "I didn't know it but we were taking fire from the moment I pulled pitch to land the first time until the last time I landed. I had RPGs go under my rotor disk and there was mortar fire. I almost got smoked a few times!"

Upon touching down, Peterson scrambled from the OH-58 and began organizing a collection point for the wounded. A medic with the commandos informed him which troops were most critical and needed to be evacuated first.

"The Kiowa only has two seats and I was in one of them. Brian did his best to lift them into the seat and



Above: It's not high-tech, but it worked. Known formally a Ballistic Area Reference Point, the OH-58D pilots' "pipper" was actually a dot they made by hand with a dry erase marker on the helicopter's forward canopy glass. Here's Priester's aiming reference as seen from the cockpit. (Photo courtesy Joseph Priester)

Below: CW2 Brandon Hodge's helmet. The bullet hole on the left shows where an AK-47 round fired by insurgents miraculously passed through the back of Hodge's helmet without injuring him. (Photo courtesy Joseph Priester)

strap them in while they were in a lot of pain. They closed the armor side panel and I took off!"

Cotriss, now aware that Priester was single-pilot evacuating wounded, dropped

STILL UNDER FIRE, PRIESTER LIFTED OFF AGAIN AND SHUTTLED A SECOND WOUNDED MAN TO THE FOB. HE RETURNED AGAIN, ULTIMATELY PLUCKING THREE MEN FROM THE FIGHT WHILE COTRISS EVACUATED TWO.

Hodge off inside the FOB to alert the base hospital that wounded were on their way and help receive them. Cotriss then flew to the landing zone Peterson had established and the OH-58s began to shuttle the wounded one at a time.

"It was just like you'd see in Vietnam with Hueys. You've got that one guy—Brian—in the middle of nowhere, waving his hands. Hey, land here!"

Meanwhile Priester landed inside the FOB with the first casualty and screamed at his crew chief over the noise of the helo, "Get that guy out of here and to the hospital!"

The crew dragged the wounded man from the Kiowa Warrior and Priester lifted off immediately. As he did he saw Cotriss "coming in with another guy."

Within seconds, Priester was at the LZ again, descending as Peterson waived him in. "I remember dirt kicking up around his feet as he was getting shot at. He didn't move, didn't hesitate."

Still under fire, Priester lifted off again and shuttled a second wounded man to the FOB. He returned again, ultimately plucking

three men from the fight while Cotriss evacuated two. A Blackhawk that had been hastily launched recovered the sixth casualty.

What Priester did was slightly unorthodox, but he says "I still stand by the decision to get those guys that day, and everybody lived."

The UH-60 made it back to Salerno but had taken mortar fire. As Priester shuttled back to the LZ, Glory 6 called, saying he "needs the area engaged because troops are taking effective sniper fire. So I'm single pilot and I'm still shooting weapons, danger-close on one pass. Scott then came out to relieve me and I landed to get Brian at the LZ."

That's when Peterson jumped into the bloody seat next to Priester. Spotted in blood as well, Priester throttled up and launched again. Directed slightly to the east of the LZ by Glory 6, the crew were told take out the snipers that had pinned down the commandos and that it was a "free fire area."





"I'd never heard anybody give a free fire clearance," Priester remembers. "That means fire at will in this area."

"We rolled in on that area, made multiple passes and silenced the sniper fire." They two saw bodies. "They didn't move after that."

Priester and Peterson sped back to the FARP to get more weapons, including white phosphorus rockets that burn at thousands of degrees for a special purpose.

"Glory-6 wanted all of the bodies to be destroyed," Priester explains. "With all the shrapnel from our rockets, .50 cal rounds and everything that had been flying around, he didn't want his explosive ordnance guys to have to go and blow up these vests."

1000 Hours: FOB Salerno

The OH-58Ds made runs on the bodies and completed the grim task. With that accomplished, the two crews were finally relieved after over six straight hours of combat, landing back at their pads at

around 10 am local.

"I was exhausted," Priester says. "The crew chief who had pulled the first Afghan National Army soldier from my cockpit met me when I landed. I asked him to help me out of the cockpit. I couldn't move. During that whole mission I only left the cockpit once—to go to the bathroom. My neck had seatbelt burns from twisting and looking in different directions."

Priester and Cotriss received Air Medals with Valor. Peterson received an Army Commendation Medal with Valor. Hodge received an Air Medal. Some observers thought they deserved higher awards.

Still fatigued, Priester, Cotriss, and Peterson were back in action the next day, killing a combined 13 more insurgents.

Now retired from the Army, Priester flies emergency medical services rescue helicopters for several municipalities. "Professionally, August 18, 19, and 20 were the best days of my life," he concludes. ✈

CW3 Scott Cotriss' Kiowa Warrior gets a "hot" refuel/rearm at FOB Salerno's forward arming and refueling point. CW2 Hodge is walking around the starboard side of the OH-58D to rearm its .50 caliber machine gun. (Photo courtesy Joseph Priester)