“The Beer’s On Us!”

Little Bird Support at Hadithah Dam

by James Schroder

The aviators of Company B, 1st Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) have an established reputation for being able to deliver close air support in even the most challenging conditions. The Night Stalkers lived up to and exceeded all expectations while supporting the 75th Ranger Regiment’s assault on Hadithah Dam the morning of 1 April 2003. Through well established operating procedures, the SOAR attack pilots demonstrated their value and flexibility on the battlefield.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 (CW4) Daniel Carter (pseudonym), his team, and their two AH-6 Little Bird attack helicopters were marking time at a dusty airfield in west-central Iraq when they received word of the mission. Having arrived at H1 five days earlier on an ostensibly overnight mission, the team looked and felt scruffy. Carter and the rest of the team were awaiting their replacements when they received the mission to support the Rangers’ occupation of Hadithah Dam. Only knowing part of the Rangers’ attack plan, the SOAR crews loaded their helicopters with munitions appropriate for ground support and took off.

Carter’s team arrived at the Rangers’ assembly site on the afternoon of 31 March 2003. Captain (CPT) David Doyle greeted Carter and briefed him on the Rangers’ tactical plan. The two commanders had known each other for years, and had worked together during training exercises and deployments. Together, they devised a fire support plan based on their collective experiences and standard operating procedures. With the Rangers’ graphic control measures—route, checkpoints, phase lines, and assault positions—annotated on a map, Carter

AH-6 Little Bird helicopters at H1 airfield in west-central Iraq. H1 was secured by the Rangers in the early days of OIF and provided invaluable support in later operations.
traveled back to the landing site to brief his team.

Fully expecting to execute the plan that he had
developed with Doyle, Carter was dismayed when
events soon orchestrated a different fate. After several
delays, the Rangers ultimately launched at 2240 hours,
two hours later than planned. Darkness soon envel-
oped the Ranger formation, and the terrain slowed
the advance. The attack was further delayed when the
steering gearbox failed on one of the Ground Mobil-
ity Vehicles. Resourceful mechanics had the gearbox
repaired within thirty minutes, but the delay forced
the Little Bird pilots to divert to a concealed for-
ward arming and refueling point (FARP) for gas.

As Carter’s AH-6 team provided aerial reconnais-
sance to the Rangers traveling toward Hadithah, another
AH-6 attack team arrived at H1 airfield. Having con-
ducted the first ever hot off-load of AH-6s from a C-17
Globemaster (meaning that the helicopters and pilots
were headed directly into combat), CW4 Michael Wed-
dington and his flight of two AH-6 gunships quickly
departed from H1. Racing toward the dam, Weddington
contacted Carter with his SATCOM radio and coordi-
nated a rendezvous en route. The team met at a hidden
FARP, approximately twelve kilometers west of the dam.
Carter hastily conducted a battle handover to Wedding-
ton, handing to him the map with the Rangers’ graph-
ics, and providing him with the pertinent details of the
assault; most were standing operating procedures.2

After the handover was completed, each flight swiftly
departed in opposite directions. CW4 Greg Coker contacted the
Ranger Fire Support noncom-
missioned officer, Sergeant
First Class (SFC) Steve Morris,
for a situational report. Morris
relayed the Rangers’ current
position, and within minutes
the Night Stalker flight closed
on the convoy as it reached the
outer perimeter of the dam.3

From the SOAR pilots’ per-
spective, the Rangers appeared
to take the dam uncontested.
The Night Stalkers flew south
and reconnoitered the sur-
rounding area as enemy forces
fired sporadically at the nearly
invisible helicopters. CW3
Dino Sorter (pseudonym), in
the trail Little Bird, spotted a
vehicle rapidly approaching
from the south with its lights
shining. He relayed the infor-
mation to Weddington in lead,
and Weddington swung his
flight around for a closer look.

Unsure of the intent of the
occupants, the pilots waited
until the combatants exited
their vehicle with RPGs and
rifles. In response to this obvious display of hostile
intent, Weddington launched a salvo of .50 caliber
bullets into the party. Sorter followed immediately
with another barrage, eliminating the threat.4

On the return flight north to the dam, the SOAR
pilots noticed an equally deadly enemy. The massive
spider web of wires and power poles emanating from
the dam posed a formidable threat. As dangerous as
any enemy fire, the nearly invisible high tension wires

![Map showing the flight of AH-6s from H1 toward Hadithah Dam in support of the Ranger assault.](image)

*The flight of AH-6s traveled northeast from H1 toward Hadithah Dam in support of the Ranger assault. The dam prevents flooding of the land west of Baghdad, and provides electricity to the city and surrounding population centers.*
High tension power lines present almost as much danger to low-flying helicopters as enemy bullets. During the Hadithah Dam operation, Little Bird pilots had to not only avoid hostile fire, but also maintain awareness of wire hazards and other obstacles at night.

Could easily snare and destroy a helicopter. The wires were a constant reminder to maintain gun run discipline, check altitude, and not to fixate on a target.

As the enemy moved through the bottomland up the west side of the river, fifteen to twenty-foot dunes obscured its movement. The Iraqis moved into the defilade and shot at the Rangers, but the Rangers could not see them to accurately return fire. However, the Little Bird pilots could easily survey the area, and killed several fighters with 7.62mm minigun rounds and 2.75 inch rockets. After a half dozen fire missions, Coker notified Morris that they needed to return to H1 for fuel. As the flight departed the area, the pilots listened to the reports of increased enemy activity. During the nineteen minute flight to H1, mortar attacks from the south intensified.

While refueling at the FARP, Coker tuned the SATCOM radio to monitor the Ranger command net and heard an agitated, familiar voice. SFC Morris was contacting the Ranger Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and requesting the status of the Little Birds. Coker could tell by the tone of his voice that something was wrong. As the Night Stalkers repositioned for departure, Morris called the TOC again, requesting the time inbound for the Little Birds. Coker alerted Weddington, who selected the SAT radio on his communication console, and the flight departed. Weddington radioed Morris when the flight was six minutes away. Gun fire echoed in the background.

Approximately a mile away from the objective, the Night Stalkers watched gunfire crisscrossing on the western side of the dam. 1st Platoon was fiercely engaged to its south with the same enemy fighters that the aviators had observed maneuvering through the rolling dunes along the Rangers’ western flank. The pilots saw tracers and flashes from the Rangers’ heavy weapons: MK19 40mm grenade machine guns and M2 .50 caliber machine guns. As Coker looked southward, two mortar tubes flashed 200 meters away. He radioed Mor-
When the battle intensified, the Night Stalkers were there to deliver the precise close air support that the Rangers needed, staying on station even as the morning sun stripped away the protection afforded by the night.

Endnotes
1 Chief Warrant Officer 4 Daniel Carter (pseudonym), B Company, 1st Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, interview by James Schroder, 17 March 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
2 Chief Warrant Officer 4 Michael Weddington, B Company, 1st Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, interview by James Schroder, 16 March 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
3 Chief Warrant Officer 4 Greg Coker, B Company, 1st Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 10 September 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
4 Weddington and Coker interviews provided source material for remainder of article.