

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Creating a **CJSOTF-A** Headquarters in Afghanistan

by Michael E. Krivdo



SGM Richard C. Kimmich (L) and CSM Christopher W. Abel (R) at the access gate of Camp Abel, home of the CJSOTF-A Headquarters, early 2002.

When formed on 1 March 2002, the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) faced several simultaneous challenges. The first was to provide command and control over units spread across Afghanistan and support them in the field. The second was to create a base to house the headquarters and its personnel. Its third challenge was to manage the incoming flow of food, water, ammunition, and supplies needed to sustain CJSOTF and all of its elements. The CJSOTF-A headquarters staff had to accomplish all of these tasks at a former Soviet Union airbase about twenty-five miles northeast of the Afghanistan capital of Kabul, while engaging the Taliban and al Qaeda throughout the rugged country.¹

In 2002, Bagram Airbase was still a hostile and austere environment with no modern features. Just months prior

the base had been fiercely fought over by Taliban and Northern Alliance forces. A Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) from 5th Special Forces Group under Task Force DAGGER operated out of Bagram as early as 21 October 2001, controlling close air support (CAS) missions for friendly indigenous forces still fighting entrenched Taliban dug into the plains around the airbase. When American combat support forces moved in soon after, there were only rudimentary defensive works, sporadic power, no potable water, and no sewage treatment. Landmines, 'booby traps,' and other unexploded ordnance from decades of conflict littered the area. The few buildings still standing, neglected for years, were damaged from the fighting. It took a concerted effort by the allied forces to make it habitable; more than

200 Soviet-era bombs and landmines were detected and safely destroyed in December 2001 alone.² That was the situation faced by the 3rd Special Forces Group (SFG)/CJSOTF-A staff in mid-March 2002.

While the new CJSOTF-A commander, Colonel (COL) Mark V. Phelan, and his staff focused on fighting the Taliban and al Qaeda terrorists, his Command Sergeant Major (CSM), Christopher W. Abel, concentrated on making the base habitable and functional. A long-time Special Forces non-commissioned officer with a wealth of deployments ‘under his belt,’ CSM Abel knew what needed to be done. The Group Support Company personnel staked out their claim near the runway and surrounded it with concertina wire. From this humble beginning they fashioned ‘Camp Abel.’ Procuring the services of the only functional bulldozer in Afghanistan, berms were formed, roads cut, and areas for tents were levelled. Allied Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) technicians ‘cleared’ the area of mines and explosives before construction could begin. 3rd SFG Engineers replaced generators with electrical lines that enabled the Group Signalers to install radios, telephones, and computers. CJSOTF enlisted personnel erected tents, poured concrete slabs, and built makeshift plywood facilities. One of the top priorities involved setting up the large ‘Circus Tent’ to house the Joint Operations Center (JOC). In addition, CSM Abel designated areas for a motor pool, supply center, dining facility, billeting area, and an aid station. In short order, the CJSOTF HQ had “a better setup than even the 10th Mountain [Division],” Abel said.³

Because of the still present threat of enemy ground attack or indirect fire, the command placed special emphasis on force protection measures to counter those actions. In addition to laying protective wire and constructing fighting positions, plans and procedures were formulated for base defense. Although soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division (MD) assumed overall responsibility for protecting the Bagram area, the CJSOTF-A headquarters organized its own local security force from available support personnel and it operated around the clock. The security force guarded



Map of Afghanistan showing the location of Bagram Airbase.

access points to the camp and escorted civilian laborers who had been cleared by the 10th Mountain Division to work on Bagram during daylight hours. In addition to household functions like filling water containers, emptying trash, and pumping waste, contract labor supervised by soldiers filled collapsible wire and heavy-duty fabric HESCO containers with sand and gravel and sited them to provide cover from direct fire weapons. Engineers excavated bunkers at key positions to give personnel shelter from indirect fire. Emergency procedures were published, rehearsed, and refined throughout.⁴

On 28 May 2002, COL Joseph D. ‘Joe’ Celeski assumed command of 3rd SFG and the CJSOTF-A in a simple ceremony held in the main street of the new camp. Attention then turned back to fighting the war and sustaining units in the field. In the months that followed, soldiers labored steadily to improve the camp facilities to meet the challenges as the war while still performing their normal daily duties. Each rotation worked hard to leave the camp in better condition than they had received it. In 2004, the CJSOTF headquarters moved to a new site on Bagram Airbase, but the old camp continued to serve special operations elements until the CJSOTF was deactivated on 31 October 2014.⁵ †

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Michael Krivdo earned his PhD in Military and Diplomatic History from Texas A&M University. He is a former Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance Officer with varied special operations research interests.

Endnotes

- 1 Website, “Bagram Airbase in Parwan Province, Afghanistan,” *Military Bases.Com*, 1998-2015, on Internet at: <http://militarybases.com/bagram-air-base-air-force-base-in-parwan-province-afghanistan/>, accessed on 5 May 2015.
- 2 Histories Division, Center of Military History, *The United States Army in Afghanistan, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, October 2001-March 2002* (CMH Pub 70-83-1) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), 14-15; International Campaign to Ban Landmines, “Afghanistan,” *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*, Key Developments Since May 2002, on Internet at <http://www.the-monitor.org/index.php/publications/display?url=lm/2003/afghanistan.html>, accessed on 5 May 2015.
- 3 Email correspondence, COL Joseph D. Celeski (Ret.) to Dr. Michael E. Krivdo, 25 March 2015, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Document, “Home is Where the JOC Is: CJSOTF-A Compound, April-May 2002,” CJSOTF-A, Camp Abel, Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan, SOCOM History Office, MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, FL; COL (Ret.) Joseph D. Celeski, interview with Dr. Michael E. Krivdo, 10 April 2015, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Command Sergeant Major (CSM) (Ret.) Christopher W. Abel, interview with Dr. Michael E. Krivdo, 3 August 2015, in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, quote from interview. **The CJSOTF-A compound was called Camp Abel by the soldiers in recognition of the close and continuous supervision that CSM Abel applied during the camp’s construction and operation.**
- 4 Brief, “Security Operations Overview CJSOTF-A Compound,” Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan, 17 July 2002, SOCOM History Office, MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, FL; Celeski email to Krivdo, 25 March 2015; “Home is Where the JOC Is.” **HESCO is a registered trademark of HESCO Bastion Ltd.**
- 5 “Home is Where the JOC Is”; Celeski interview, 10 April 2015; Abel interview, 3 August 2015.

*IAW USSOCOM Sanitization Protocol for Historical Articles on Classified Current Operations, pseudonyms are used for majors and below who are still on active duty, unless names have been publicly released for awards/decorations or DoD news release. Pseudonyms are identified with an asterisk. The eyes of personnel in photos are blocked out when not covered with dark visors or sunglasses, except when the photos were publicly released by a service or DoD. Source references (end notes) utilize the assigned pseudonym.

CSM ABEL

Christopher W.



CSM Christopher W. Abel, Senior Enlisted Advisor for CJSOTF-A, March-May 2002.

Christopher W. Abel joined the U.S. Army in 1973 and attended Basic Training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Trained as a Field Radio Operator at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, he served in the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; in the 2nd Infantry Division in the Republic of Korea; and in the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

In 1978, then-Sergeant Abel was selected for 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (1st SFOD-D)¹. He also completed the Special Forces Qualification Course as a Weapons Sergeant and in 1985 joined the 10th Special Forces Group (SFG) (Airborne) in Bad Tolz, Germany. He served first as a Senior Weapons Sergeant for a Military Freefall Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) and later as the Team Sergeant for a Combat Diving ODA. When he departed 10th SFG in 1990, he was assigned to the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School and served as the Sergeant Major for the Special Forces Underwater Operations School in Key West, Florida. Following that assignment, he became the A Company Sergeant Major (SGM) for 1st Battalion, 10th SFG in Stuttgart, Germany.

In 1998, SGM Abel joined 3rd SFG, Fort Bragg, as the SGM for Company A, 2nd Battalion. When selected for Command Sergeant Major (CSM), he became CSM for 2nd Battalion before advancing to the position of 3rd SFG CSM in 1999. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, elements of the 3rd SFG were attached to Task Force DAGGER for the invasion of Afghanistan. In early 2002 the 3rd SFG assumed the primary mission of supporting the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force - Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A), and CSM Abel became the Senior Enlisted Advisor. He retired on 1 July 2003 after more than thirty years of service.

Endnotes

1 Text cleared by USASOC G-3X and SSO 12 Aug 2015.



View of 'Camp Abel' looking out over billeting and working area tents, May 2002. ----->



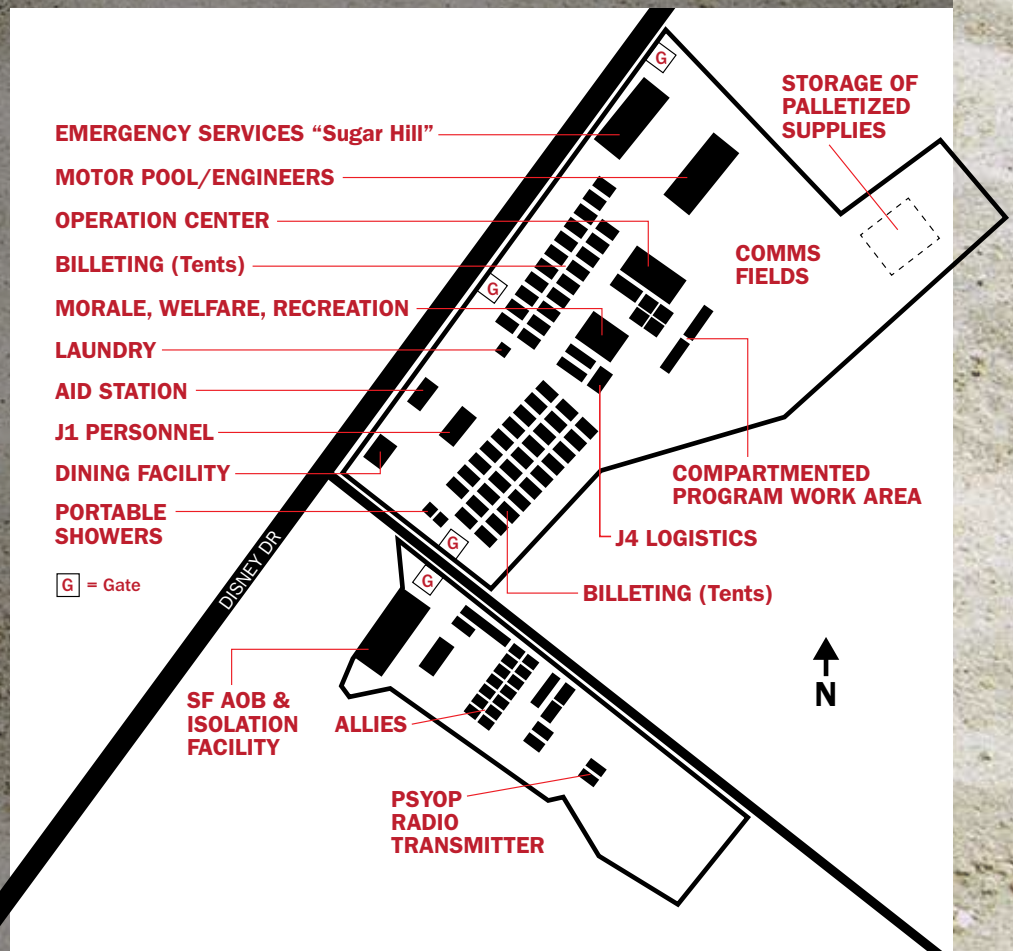
View of temporary guard towers constructed atop a HESCO wall. HESCOs filled with dirt and gravel were used for perimeter and interior walls. They were replaced in later years by concrete T-walls (large concrete forms in the shape of inverted 'T's). The advantages of HESCOs are that they can be easily sited and filled, and provide excellent protection from direct-fire weapons and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).



Photo showing a portion of the HESCO perimeter wall around the CJSOTF Headquarters in April 2002. Note the addition of lighting for night operations. Surveillance cameras were installed to allow guards to remotely view sectors without exposing themselves to direct fire weapons.



An expedient 'step-up' fighting position prepared behind a HESCO exterior wall in the CJSOTF camp at Bagram Airbase. The pallets allowed soldiers to engage enemy outside the perimeter wall behind sandbag protection. Several of these augmentation fighting positions were sited inside the camp area to cover critical parts of the perimeter.





Exterior of the CJSOTF-A aid station set up and manned by personnel of the Medical Platoon, Group Support Company, 3rd Special Forces Group, April 2002.

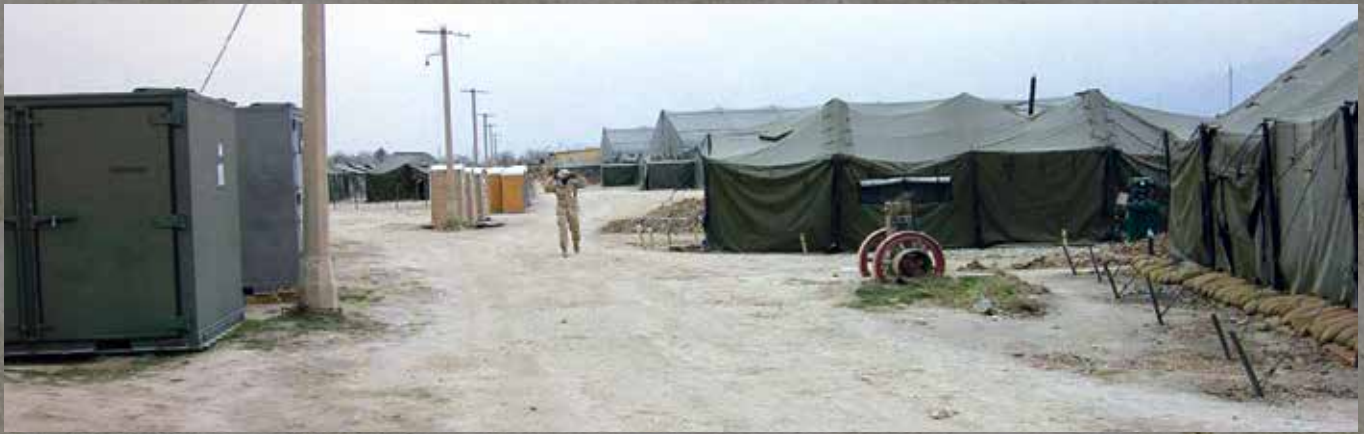
Construction of the large utility tent housing the Joint Operations Center (JOC) and other office spaces.



Interior of the CJSOTF-A aid station, organized to receive casualties in the event of an attack. The most severe casualties would be transported to the Emergency Medical Station (EMS) or evacuated to the nearest hospital as appropriate.

Tents erected alongside the JOC housed staff sections of the CJSOTF-A headquarters.





View facing the billeting area of the camp, April 2002.



Location of the 3rd Special Forces Group Signal Detachment (SIGDET) on the CJSOTF-A compound, Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan, May 2002.



The Motor Pool constructed by the Maintenance Platoon, 3rd SFG Group Support Company, May 2002.



Area occupied by an Operational Detachment – 'B' (ODB) of the 20th Special Forces Group, April 2002. They 're-purposed' a dilapidated Soviet-era building.



The Soviet Union constructed a control tower at Bagram Airbase in 1976 and used it until 1989 when they abandoned the area. When coalition forces seized the base from the Taliban in October 2001, a Special Forces Operational Detachment-Alpha (ODA) used the tower as an observation post to call in close air support (CAS) to assist the friendly indigenous forces defeat Taliban troops entrenched in the surrounding plains. U.S. Air Force Air Traffic Controllers put the tower back into service.



Soviet/Russian legacy building initially housed the CJSOTF kitchen and functioned as the cook's quarters. Messing initially took place to the left of the building, where tentage served as the CJSOTF-A Dining Facility on Camp Abel. Later, a more modern building was constructed.



Two types of underground bunkers provided soldiers with protection from indirect fire. These were located near sleeping areas and work stations for use during rocket or mortar attacks. The troops regularly rehearsed emergency actions.



Expedient bunker to provide protection from indirect fire attacks. Over time, these were replaced with above-ground concrete and sandbag bunkers. In those early days the troops experienced random direct fire attacks which were gradually replaced with sporadic monthly indirect rocket or mortar attacks.



Tent that housed the CJSOTF-A Base Defense Operations Center (BDOC).



The BDOC coordinated and directed the defense of the camp with all elements occupying Bagram Airbase.



Change of command/transfer of authority (TOA) between the outgoing CJSOTF-A/3rd SFG commander, COL Mark V. Phelan, and the incoming commander, COL Joseph D. Celeski, at 'Camp Abel,' Bagram, on 28 May 2002. COL Celeski (L) receives the 3rd SFG (A) flag from MG Geoffrey C. Lambert, commander of the U.S. Army Special Forces Command (USASFC).