



USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV 63) steams in formation during a joint photo exercise during exercise Valiant Shield 2007 while at sea, August 14, 2007. (U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Stephen W. Rowe)

“Creating the Point of the Spear”

The Deployment of *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) as an Afloat Forward Staging Base During Operation *Enduring Freedom*

By Justin B. Blanton

Within a month of the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, DC, the United States began a military offensive

against al-Qaeda’s center of operations in Afghanistan and the country’s ruling Taliban regime, which had harbored the terrorist organization since the mid-1990s. The objectives of the offensive, codenamed Operation *Enduring Freedom*, were to topple the Taliban, destroy al-Qaeda’s primary base structure, and apprehend Osama bin Laden, using

a minimum number of conventional ground forces. The projection of U.S. naval power was indispensable to the execution of Operation *Enduring Freedom*. Because Afghanistan is landlocked and located nearly 400 miles from the nearest coastline at its southernmost border, U.S. and coalition forces had to prosecute much of the war from naval vessels armed

Justin B. Blanton is a historian assigned to the Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC.

with Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs), aircraft carriers, and bases positioned far from combat zones. Air Force heavy bombers flying from outside the theater of operations delivered the vast majority of munitions, but U.S. carrier-based aircraft flew 75 percent of all strike missions, effectively substituting for land-based air forces to compensate for the lack of forward operating sites.

Grappling with the challenges of reaching targets deep inside one of the most remote parts of Southwest Asia and hundreds of miles from regional U.S. bases and allied installations, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) began devising plans to stage Special Operations Forces (SOF) of U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) from positions close enough to southern Afghanistan to strike al-Qaeda in its mountainous strongholds. While studying maps of the region, CENTCOM planners noticed that several Taliban and al-Qaeda targets were located within the range of shipborne helicopters flying from the North Arabian Sea. However, the Navy's helicopter carriers, from which Marine Expeditionary Units deployed, were not big enough for the composite force that CENTCOM envisioned. Thus, the solution was to position a large deck aircraft carrier off the coast of Pakistan to serve as an afloat forward staging base for SOF elements, in a manner similar to the Navy's use of *America* (CV-66) during the U.S. intervention in Haiti in 1994.

In mid-September 2001, CENTCOM directed Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) to prepare to fly *Carl Vinson's* (CVN-70) air wing to Qatar to use the carrier as an afloat forward staging base for SOF personnel and their helicopters. After issuing these directives, however, planners realized that the lack of readily available tankers in the area of responsibility meant that removing *Carl Vinson's* air wing to make room for SOF components would effectively eliminate the carrier's most potent asset for the entirety of the planned combat operation. The specter of such a consequential decision sparked intense deliberations among CENTCOM; NAVCENT; the Chief

of Naval Operations, Admiral Vernon E. Clark; and other fleet commanders regarding which additional carriers to commit to the region, if any, and which to deploy as an afloat forward staging base. Nearly all the potential options would have upended the precisely scheduled carrier deployments. In the end, because the SOF components tasked with serving in the mission were not yet ready to embark, CENTCOM planners chose to deploy the aging *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63) as an afloat forward staging base, thereby allowing *Carl Vinson* to keep her air wing. Based in Yokosuka, Japan, as part of the Forward Deployed Naval Force, *Kitty Hawk* was a conventional, large-deck carrier that had served in Vietnam, Somalia, and Iraq. Other than *Carl Vinson* and *Enterprise* (CVN-65), it was the carrier operating closest to Afghanistan on September 11.

After further deliberations, the Navy chose to surge several aircraft carriers to the North Arabian Sea in an effort to—in the absence of land bases—maximize expeditionary air power during Operation *Enduring Freedom's* critical opening phase. At first, *Enterprise* and *Carl Vinson* were the only carriers on station when strike operations began, but *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN-71) arrived on October 15. *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74) would arrive several weeks later to relieve *Enterprise*, which had already been on deployment for nearly 7 months. Each carrier would deploy with its embarked air wing, made up of several squadrons and detachments of both rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft, the latter composed primarily of F-14 Tomcats and F/A-18 Hornets. This surge of carriers into the Arabian Sea demonstrated the Navy's ability to adapt to the lack of access to land bases. It also demonstrated the versatility of sea-based forces equipped with a flexible doctrine for littoral warfare. Among the most salient demonstrations of this versatility was the deployment of the *Kitty Hawk* as an afloat forward staging base for special operations forces.

On September 27, *Kitty Hawk* received orders to deploy to the North Arabian Sea. To accommodate SOF elements, the carrier deployed with

fewer than 20 aircraft from Carrier Air Wing Five (CVW-5): eight F/A-18C Hornets, three S-3B Vikings, two C-2A Greyhounds, and two SH-60F/HH-60H Seahawks. On October 1, a reconfigured *Kitty Hawk* departed Yokosuka for the CENTCOM area of operations in company with cruisers *Vincennes* (CG-49) and *Chancellorsville* (CG-63, now the *Robert Smalls*), destroyers *Curtis Wilbur* (DDG-54) and *Cushing* (DD-985), the frigate *Gary* (FFG-51), and the oiler USNS *Rappahannock* (T-AO-204).

During the first few days of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, Navy surface combatants and submarines armed with TLAMs conducted many of the initial strikes. Combat operations formally began on the evening of October 7, when destroyers *McFaul* (DDG-74), *John Paul Jones* (DDG-53), and *O'Brien* (DD-975); the cruiser *Philippine Sea* (CG-58); the submarine *Providence* (SSN-719); and the British submarines HMS *Triumph* and HMS *Trafalgar* launched a barrage of some 50 TLAMs against fixed targets inside Afghanistan. These TLAM strikes were followed up by bombings carried out by 25 Navy carrier aircraft launched from *Enterprise* and *Carl Vinson* and 17 U.S. Air Force heavy bombers. The primary targets for the Navy aircraft included Taliban and al-Qaeda command and control installations, early warning radars, airfields, and major air defenses—principally, Soviet-built SA-2 and SA-3 surface-to-air missiles. The objective of the opening strikes was to achieve air supremacy, thus allowing U.S. aircraft to operate over Afghanistan with complete freedom for the duration of the campaign.

After transiting the Strait of Malacca on October 7, *Kitty Hawk* arrived off the island of Masirah, Oman, on October 12, steaming more than 5,000 nautical miles in 12 days. In the weeks following the September 11 attacks, CENTCOM had made strong diplomatic efforts to gain access to Masirah in preparation for launching military campaigns into Afghanistan. By September 20, Oman had granted permission to stage SOF elements from the island; SOCOM established a forward headquarters there just



U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Joshua McIntosh, 48th Operations Support Squadron complex air traffic controller, Capt. Kate Evans, 48th OSS airfield operations flight commander, and Senior Airman Justin Wood, 48th OSS radar airfield and weather systems technician, utilize a measuring wheel during a landing zone night operation near Fakenham, England, December 10, 2025. (U.S. Air Force/Airman 1st Class Rilynn Jacobs)

a few days before *Kitty Hawk*'s arrival. At Masirah, *Kitty Hawk* embarked a composite Army command. Consisting of more than 600 personnel, this command included a Special Forces Operational Detachment, the 2nd Battalion of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, and a team of Navy SEALs. Second Battalion embarked 20 helicopters, including MH-47D and MH-47E Chinooks, MH-60K and MH60L Black Hawks, and Hughes Little Birds. Once the SOF elements were in place aboard *Kitty Hawk*, the carrier commenced mission tasking in support of the critical overland strike operations that had already begun. To preserve the operational security of the embarked special operations forces, *Kitty Hawk* maintained a 5-mile exclusion zone for the duration of the operation, blacked out personal emails from the ship, and prohibited all press access.

The decision to convert *Kitty Hawk* into an afloat forward staging base for SOF missions was inspired by the use of *America* in the 1994 intervention in Haiti. During that operation, the Navy removed all of the aircraft from *America*, thereby turning the carrier into a floating platform for the exclusive use of SOCOM. During Operation *Enduring Freedom*, however, *Kitty Hawk* retained a small portion of her air wing, including the eight F/A-18C Hornets, which competed for limited space with 2nd Battalion's Black Hawks and Chinooks. The carrier's few remaining strike fighters flew missions over Afghanistan around the clock, interrupting the delicate battle rhythm of the embarked SOF elements who operated on a reverse cycle. After staging missions from the carrier at night, personnel from the composite Army command attempted to sleep through the incessant roar of strike fighters launching

off the deck during the day. While on station in the Arabian Sea, pilots from *Kitty Hawk*'s embarked Carrier Air Wing 5 flew some 600 missions over Afghanistan, including more than 100 combat sorties.

During the first week of the Operation *Enduring Freedom* air campaign, CENTCOM made multiple unsuccessful attempts to bring SOF teams into Afghanistan to collaborate with the Northern Alliance in their offensive against Taliban forces and provide targeting coordinates to Air Force and Navy aircraft. The initial obstacle was the slow process of political negotiations with the sovereign states neighboring Afghanistan to gain the use of airfields from which to launch missions. The most logical positions for staging such missions were located in Pakistan along its border with Afghanistan. However, because of domestic political concerns,

Pakistan agreed only to allow the staging of support flights from its territory and prohibited the launching of direct-action missions by SOCOM personnel. CENTCOM planners, therefore, turned to negotiating with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan for the use of their airfields. Unfortunately, once those countries eventually granted approval, SOF insertions were further thwarted by adverse weather conditions and heavy ground fire at predetermined landing zones marked by Central Intelligence Agency teams that had operated inside Afghanistan since September 26.

Finally, after weeks of frustration, on the night of October 19 the composite Army command staged the first major SOF mission into southern Afghanistan from *Kitty Hawk*. Four MH-47 Chinook helicopters carrying more than a squadron of Army Special Forces operators took off from the carrier in complete radio silence, launching from the flight deck in an exact sequence based solely on timing. The primary target of the mission was a residential compound near Kandahar belonging to the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. The purpose of the raid was to gather intelligence, capture key enemy personnel, and disrupt the Taliban's command and control systems.

Before seizing the compound, Army Special Forces from Masirah were tasked with securing a dirt airstrip approximately 80 miles southwest of Kandahar for SOCOM to use as a temporary forward arming and refueling point for follow-on missions. This airstrip had been built for the United Arab Emirates' military chief of staff, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, an avid falconer who flew in by private aircraft to access a nearby hunting camp. Originally planned to be a minimal helicopter assault staged from *Kitty Hawk* in support of the raid on Mullah Omar's compound, this mission slowly grew into a much more substantial airborne operation that had to be launched from Masirah to accommodate the large number of aircraft involved. The mission was to be led by Army Special Forces, and Army Special Forces were responsible for the raid on the compound.

Both missions were initiated by the insertion of a small Army pathfinder team at the airstrip that confirmed it was clear of Taliban forces. After the pathfinders completed their reconnaissance efforts, Air Force pilots flying B-2 Spirit stealth bombers and AC-130 gunships delivered pre-assault fires. Then, at 11:15 p.m. local time, approximately 200 soldiers from Army Special Forces parachuted in from four Lockheed MC-130 Combat Talons of the Air Force 16th Special Operations Wing flying from Masirah. One Army Special Forces company set up a perimeter and blocking positions while another cleared buildings. MC-130 support aircraft arrived 14 minutes later and dropped off a fuel bladder for the forward arming and refueling point. Shortly thereafter, the four Chinooks carrying the Army Special Forces team from *Kitty Hawk* approached the airstrip.

After refueling at the newly established forward arming and refueling point, the primary raid force departed for Mullah Omar's compound, located about 100 miles to the northeast of the airstrip. The compound included a brick house used by the Taliban leader and several outbuildings for accommodating his small security force. After AC-130 Spectre gunships and Black Hawk helicopters delivered preparatory fires, Army Special Forces personnel disembarked from the four Chinook helicopters.

While some Army Special Forces personnel entered compound buildings, others established a perimeter. Although they faced no resistance initially and never encountered Mullah Omar, they set about conducting sensitive site exploitation and intelligence-gathering. Approximately an hour after initiating the raid on the compound, the Army Special Forces ground elements called for the helicopters to pick them up. Under the protection of circling AC-130s, the four Chinooks successfully extracted the Army Special Forces team, but one of the helicopters struck the edge of a compound wall while lifting out of the landing zone. The accident ripped away the landing gear and caused a hydraulic fuel leak, but the aircraft managed to take off. The

outbound force for the assault on the compound then flew to the forward arming and refueling point at the airstrip to refuel before returning to *Kitty Hawk* at sunrise. Once the helicopters had departed the airstrip, the Army Special Forces boarded two Combat Talons that had landed there and left for Masirah.

During the raid on Mullah Omar's compound, a third company of Army Special Forces flew from the *Kitty Hawk* on Black Hawk helicopters to a site at Dalbandin, Pakistan, known as Objective Hondo, 26 miles south of the Afghanistan border, to set up another forward arming and refueling point for the night's outbound missions. After the Army Special Forces had secured the site, one of the Black Hawks attempted to reposition, creating a billowing dust cloud or "brownout" that obscured the landing zone. The disoriented pilots crashed the helicopter, which rolled onto its side, killing two Army Special Forces personnel and injuring three more.

Early on the morning of October 24, the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) launched a reinforced tactical recovery force from the amphibious assault ship *Pelee* (LHA-5), stationed in the North Arabian Sea, to recover the downed Black Hawk. Working in conjunction with Pakistani security forces, the Marines successfully retrieved the helicopter and delivered it to the *Kitty Hawk* without further incident.

Back aboard the *Kitty Hawk*, the composite Army command spent the first few days after the missions at the airstrip and Mullah Omar's compound completing after-action reviews and preparing for the arrival of CENTCOM Commander General Tommy Franks, who secretly visited the carrier on October 23. During this time, the Army Special Forces operators returned to Masirah, but 2nd Battalion, the SEAL team, and other Army Special Forces elements remained on board. On October 30, a week after General Franks's visit, Secretary of the Navy Gordon England boarded *Kitty Hawk* to express his appreciation for the crew's role in the nontraditional mission and to encourage them to understand



Marine Raiders with 1st Marine Raider Battalion near the completion of one of their and Special Patrol Insertion and Extraction (SPIE) exercises near Hurlbert Field, Florida, February 6, 2015. (Marine Forces, Special Operations Command/Sgt. Steven Fox)

their service as “creating the point of the spear” during Operation *Enduring Freedom*’s opening operations.

Helicopters from the composite Army command deployed from *Kitty Hawk* again on November 18 and inserted SOF into the Shin Narai Valley, near the Pakistani border, where it linked up with the anti-Taliban Pashtun leader and former Kandahar governor Gul Agha Sherzai. These SOF personnel worked with Sherzai’s forces to block the main road between Kandahar and Quetta, Pakistan, and seal the border crossing near Spin Boldak to cut off the Taliban supply route.

On November 21, a detachment of approximately 20 SEALs flew from *Kitty Hawk* to the airstrip in the composite Army command’s helicopters. The SEALs were charged with conducting ground surveillance and reconnaissance over the airstrip in advance of Operation *Swift Freedom*, a forthcoming Marine mission

to reoccupy the airstrip and build it into a forward base of operations for an offensive against Taliban forces near Kandahar.

At the end of November 2001, SOCOM began to draw down special operations forces in Afghanistan after the Taliban front in the north collapsed in several key locations, including Mazar-e-Sharif. The drawdown diminished the need for *Kitty Hawk*’s role as an afloat forward staging base for Special Forces, and the carrier began preparations to end her combat deployment. After flying off all remaining SOF helicopters to Masirah, the carrier departed the Arabian Sea on December 16, 2001, and returned to Yokosuka. During *Kitty Hawk*’s 83 days at sea in support of Operation *Enduring Freedom*, more than 1,000 SOF personnel from various Services staged from the carrier to conduct a range of critical missions including direct action raids, combat search and rescue, airstrike coordination, and intelligence gathering.

Conclusion

The aircraft carrier is one useful piece of a large force that can be used innovatively to augment the whole. This article’s brief overview of the deployment of *Kitty Hawk* in Operation *Enduring Freedom* is intended to provide context for how a carrier has been employed in a successful, nontraditional mission in the recent past. It demonstrates the flexibility of the Navy’s most expensive platform, which boasts capabilities well beyond the air superiority and strike roles traditionally associated with carriers, and it may offer a helpful data point for subsequent research projects seeking to address the anticipated challenges of potential nontraditional missions in the future.

The use of *Kitty Hawk* as an afloat forward staging base suggests that important nontraditional roles may become available to carriers as they approach the end of their service lives. While some of

these roles may require older carriers to reconfigure or even undergo modifications to make them more suitable for specific alternative missions, doing so could extend the ships' useful service by several years. Amid the resurgence of Great Power competition, the U.S. military as a whole and the Navy in particular will likely encounter nontraditional challenges. Maximizing the aircraft carrier's flexibility and lifespan and exploiting the platform's range of alternative capabilities will, therefore, improve the readiness of the entire joint force and increase the options available to military and civilian decisionmakers.³⁸ JFQ

Notes

¹ Gregory Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001–2002* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2016), 3–4, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-navy-operation-enduring-freedom-2001-2002.html>.

² Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The New Face of Naval Strike Warfare: U.S. Carrier Air Operations and Capability Improvements Since Desert Storm* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2004), 1, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9137.html.

³ Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 96.

⁴ Tommy Franks, *American Soldier* (New York: Regan Books/Harper Collins, 2004), 265.

⁵ Sam Cox, "H065.1: Operation Enduring Freedom—September to December 2001," Naval Intelligence Professionals, September 8, 2021, 7, 9, <https://www.navintpro.org/professional-articles/2021/09/08/h065.1-operation-enduring-freedom-september-to-december-2001/>; Loren Thompson, *Killing Al Qaeda: The Navy's Role* (Arlington, VA: Lexington Institute, 2002), 13, <https://lexingtoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/killing-al-qaeda-the-navys-role.pdf>.

⁶ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 4–5.

⁷ Thompson, *Killing Al Qaeda*, 13.

⁸ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 30; Mark L. Evans and Roy A. Grossnick, *United States Naval Aviation, 1910–2010*, vol. I, *Chronology* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2015), 540, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/publications/publications-by-subject/naval-aviation-1910-2010.html>.

⁹ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 6, 33.

¹⁰ Evans and Grossnick, *United States Naval Aviation, 1910–2010*, 541.

¹¹ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 97.

¹² Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 36–37.

¹³ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 106.

¹⁴ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 106.

¹⁵ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 79.

¹⁶ Cox, "H065.1," 19.

¹⁷ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 86–89.

¹⁸ Nathan S. Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan, 2001–2002: From the Sea* (Washington, DC: Marine Corps University, History Division, 2011), 59, <https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/from%20the%20sea.pdf>.

¹⁹ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 107–8.

²⁰ Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan*, 59.

²¹ Cox, "H065.1," 20.

²² Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan*, 59.

²³ Cox, "H065.1," 21.

²⁴ Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan*, 60.

²⁵ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 117.

²⁶ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 117.

²⁷ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 117–18.

²⁸ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 118.

²⁹ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 42–43; Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan*, 60.

³⁰ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 121–22.

³¹ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 45–46; Thomas A. Hejl, *USS Kitty Hawk (CV-63) Command History for Calendar Year 2001* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command Archives, 2001), 8, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/nhhc/research/archives/command-operation-reports/ship-command-operation-reports/k/kitty-hawk-cv-63-ii/2001.pdf>.

³² Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 58; Donald P. Wright, *A Different Kind of War: The United States Army in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), October 2001–September 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), 106–7, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/DifferentKindofWar.pdf>.

³³ Lowrey, *U.S. Marines in Afghanistan*, 111.

³⁴ Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 154.

³⁵ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 79; Thompson, *Killing Al Qaeda*, 13.

³⁶ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 35.

³⁷ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, xvi, 35.

³⁸ Bereiter, *The U.S. Navy in Operation Enduring Freedom*, 62.