

**Statement By**

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**Submitted to**

**The United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
Subcommittee on National Security**

**Hearing on**

**Afghanistan: Honoring the Heroes of Extortion 17,  
The U.S. CH-47D Aircraft Shot Down in Wardak Province, Afghanistan on August 6, 2011,  
Resulting in the deaths of 30 U.S. and Eight Afghan Military Personnel**

**February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Tierney, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to examine the events following the loss of 30 U.S. Service Members, eight Afghans, and a U.S. military working dog aboard a U.S. military CH-47D Chinook helicopter, call sign “Extortion 17” that was shot down by a rocket propelled grenade while conducting combat operations in Wardak Province, Afghanistan on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

As a senior U.S. government official, I share in the sacred trust placed upon the Department of Defense by the families and loved ones of our brave servicemen and women to ensure they have the resources, policies, and oversight they need to protect our country from terrorist attacks like those of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As a former Special Operations soldier, I understand the risks we ask our service members to take. Since 9/11, there have been 1,795 U.S. military personnel killed and 19,665 wounded in action in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The loss of our comrades in arms is a grim reminder of the tragedies of war, the violence of combat action, and the perilous lives they live each day in defense of our nation and our values.

My sadness, however, cannot be compared to the pain and anguish of our Gold Star families, some of whom are here today. Their sacrifices cannot be measured, their grief cannot be washed away, and their loss can never be replaced. I am deeply humbled to be in their presence, and I hope my testimony today can help answer their questions and in some small measure help bring them comfort. Above all, I am here to respect our fallen heroes, pay tribute to their ultimate sacrifice, and honor their service.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Source: U.S. Department of Defense, 26 February 2014, < <http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf>>

Eleven U.S. servicemen aboard Extortion 17 entered the military after the 9/11 attacks, answering the call to arms as so many brave Americans have done throughout the history of our great republic. Navy Petty Officer Nicholas Spehar, age 24, of St. Paul, Minnesota, the youngest SEAL in the group, was only 14 when the U.S. was attacked by al-Qa'ida. At just 21 years old, Army Specialist Spencer Duncan of Olathe, Kansas, a crewman on the Chinook helicopter, was the youngest on board. At 47, Army Chief Warrant Officer David Carter, of Centennial, Colorado, was the oldest. Many on board Extortion 17 had completed numerous deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, taking the fight to a vicious and determined enemy, and denying that enemy the chance to achieve its goal of attacking us again at home. The U.S. did not ask for this war – and although the horrific imagery of 9/11 may have faded from our memories, we cannot forget why we are fighting in Afghanistan. The Taliban hosted al-Qa'ida, allowed Usama Bin Laden to build his organization, and use Afghanistan as a launching pad to destroy the World Trade Center, attack the Pentagon, attempt to destroy the Capitol or the White House and kill 2,996 innocent people, mostly Americans.<sup>2</sup> If given the opportunity, they and those who follow them would try – and have tried - to attack us again.

Qari Tahir, the man our forces were attempting to capture or kill on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011, is one of many Taliban leaders who dedicate their lives to a corrupt agenda that seeks to eliminate freedom, equality, and prosperity in exchange for a medieval society built on violent extremism and wanton destruction. In mid-2011, he took command of the Tangi Valley, sitting at the top of a syndicate of sub-commanders to plan, organize, and conduct attacks on U.S. and Coalition

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<sup>2</sup> "We Have Some Planes." 9/11 Commission Report. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States. 2004. Retrieved October 1, 2013.

forces. His area of operations in Wardak Province is just 50 miles from Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. The Taliban place a premium on conducting spectacular attacks in Kabul to terrorize Afghans that support the government, and to kill U.S. and coalition forces. Capturing Qari Tahir would have given us valuable intelligence on plans for these attacks, and enabled more operations to dismantle the Taliban.

The U.S. Navy SEAL task force assigned to conduct operations in Tangi Valley was well conditioned to the dangerous operating environment. In mid-2011, combined with a U.S. Army aviation battalion, they had spent weeks conducting operations nearly every other night in Wardak and surrounding provinces south of Kabul to capture or kill Taliban forces, disrupt attack plots, and deny them sanctuary on this strategic approach to Kabul City.

Intelligence on August 5<sup>th</sup> indicated Qari Tahir was in Tangi Valley, just a short helicopter flight from the SEAL base camp. The Tangi Valley is strategic terrain that connects the two primary highways that lead to Kabul. The Kabul-Gazni highway defines the north end of the valley, and the Kabul-Gardez highway defines the southern end. The north end of the valley is only a couple of hundred meters wide, closely surrounded by mountain peaks on each side. The Tangi River winds through the valley southeast for about 10 miles, on the southern end the valley widens to more than four miles across. Melting snow from the high mountains to the north and west in central Afghanistan, and the occasional mountain rain shower, create a fertile valley floor that supports farming of apples and pomegranates.

Upon learning of Tahir's possible location, a team of U.S. Army Rangers and Afghan Special Forces was deployed into the valley from the south. At 10:58 p.m., they were inserted by the same CH-47D helicopters that would later conduct the mission to insert the SEAL team. As the operation got underway, our airborne Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, including an MQ-9 Predator, detected a group evading the Rangers, moving towards the north. AC-130 gunships orbiting overhead directed two AH-64 Apache attack helicopters to fire on and kill five enemy fighters. After some time another group of about 10 Taliban fighters was spotted that we suspected could be Qari Tahir himself fleeing the scene. The SEAL task force was monitoring this activity, and they were soon called upon to deploy quickly into the northern end of the valley to intercept Tahir and capture him and those moving with him. The SEAL commander assembled his force: 17 Navy SEALs, five Navy combat support specialists, three U.S. Air Force Special Tactics Airmen, seven Afghan Special Forces operators, an Afghan interpreter, and a military working dog. The Afghan soldiers were an essential part of the package; they are trained to move with our forces to the target, and when tactical conditions allow initiate operations by calling out enemy forces. This tactic was highly successful; over a period of years hundreds of operations were conducted without firing a shot.

After completing mission planning, and conducting coordination with the aviation unit, the SEAL Task Force moved to the CH-47s to commence the operation. At 2:22 a.m., on August 6<sup>th</sup>, Extortion 16 and Extortion 17 took off for the short flight to the selected landing zone, circling around the north side of the mountains to enter Tangi valley from the opposite direction used by the Rangers, with intent to surprise the evading enemy element. To expedite unloading at their intended landing zone, all of the SEALs and Afghans boarded Extortion 17,

with a crew of five U.S. Army aviators. Extortion 16 accompanied them part of the way to the target, and orbited a few miles away waiting for Extortion 17 to insert the assault force. As they advanced, the AC-130 and a suite of airborne intelligence platforms scanned the valley to overwatch the Rangers, who were still conducting their operation. The Apaches, flying in “detached escort” mode, approached from the south to check the landing zone for enemy presence, and scan the ingress route to detect any threats. They saw none.

At 2:38 a.m., Extortion 17 indicated they were one minute from the landing zone. As they slowed to land, Taliban fighters hidden on top of a building on the west side of the valley fired two or three rocket propelled grenades at the helicopter. The attackers, who had not been detected by the two Apaches, the Predator or the AC-130, were well positioned at the most narrow area of the valley, only 200 meters wide and serving to funnel a low flying, incoming helicopter right past the building they occupied. Although there was no moonlight and little illumination from the nearby village, they were able to hear and see the Chinook as it entered the valley, shooting at it from nearly head-on at a distance of less than 250 yards, leaving the pilot no chance to perform evasive maneuvers. Traveling at 120 yards per second as it leaves the launcher, the velocity of the RPG round, combined with the airspeed of the oncoming Chinook, left the pilot with less than one second to identify the threat, react and maneuver the 40,000 pound loaded helicopter. Evasive action was not possible. One rocket struck a rotor blade, causing the aircraft to spin violently, and crash almost instantly into a dry creek bed. The main fuselage was immediately engulfed in flames. Extortion 17 was down, and there were no signs of survivors. Apaches scanned the area for enemy, and fired its cannon along a tree line to prevent anyone access to the burning CH-47. The Ranger element was quickly alerted to

converge on the crash site. A 20 man Pathfinder unit was alerted and deployed to secure the site. As daybreak reached the valley, the solemn task of recovering our fallen heroes began. All 30 Americans and 8 Afghans on Extortion 17 had perished.

The recovery operation in a hostile operating environment lasted four days. All of the fallen were recovered within hours, but the wreckage was spread over a large area when the shattered rotor blades broke from their pylons upon impact by the RPG. The main fuselage was situated in a creek bed, and parts of the wreckage were swept a hundred meters down stream by a flash flood on the evening of August 6<sup>th</sup>. Ultimately nearly all of the wreckage was recovered. There was no flight recorder - this equipment is not standard on the CH-47D.

The fallen U.S. service members were taken to Bagram Air Base. Joined by their Afghan comrades, these brave warriors were paid honors by their fellow unit members, commanders, and coalition partners. A solemn memorial service marked the beginning of a dignified and respectful journey home for the brave men of Extortion 17. Consistent with our warrior ethos that no man will be left behind, all of the fallen; Navy SEALs and Combat Support specialists, Army aviators, Air Force Air Commandos, and Afghan soldiers all were equally memorialized in a combined service. All paid the ultimate price for freedom, and all deserved to be honored and respected. The commander of the U.S. Special Operations task force and a U.S. military chaplain paid tribute to the fallen, as did the Commander of the Afghan Special Forces.

As soon as this tragic incident occurred, our military leaders, planners, and operators began asking the question - "How did this happen?" General James Mattis, Commander of the

U.S. Central Command, immediately tasked an experienced General Officer to conduct a full investigation to determine the facts and circumstances surrounding the crash, the cause of the crash, any recommendations concerning improvements to tactics, techniques, and procedures to improve our operations, and any other matters pertaining to the incident the investigating officer deemed relevant. The investigating officer rendered his report a month later, complete with 86 exhibits full of supporting technical data, transcribed interviews with those involved in the planning of the mission and execution of the recovery operation, historical records of aircraft maintenance, crew qualifications, and other pertinent information.

What have we learned from this tragedy, and how does the Department of Defense assessment differ from some views expressed in the public domain?

We believe the SEAL task force employed sound tactics in planning and executing their fateful mission, including the decision to load the entire element on a single aircraft. Their high-tempo operations pace over the previous months was essential to maintaining pressure on the Taliban, and their success in past operations validated the effectiveness of their tactics, techniques, and procedures. Employing the SEALs, Rangers, Army aviation, and Afghan soldiers into a combined team reflects the best practices of our “combined joint task force” approach that has served as the model of success for more than 12 years of war since 2001.

We believe the attachment of Afghan soldiers to the SEAL task force, and the process for coordinating our operations with the Afghan military leadership, enhances the potential for mission success. The Afghan teams are invaluable additions to our force – having superior



knowledge of the operating environment, cultural nuances, and native language capability. The force attached to the SEALs is specially trained for these operations, and they have been partnered with U.S. Special Operations assault elements for the past several years. When the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan is over the Afghan forces will continue to provide security and conduct operations to counter the Taliban insurgency. The U.S. cannot stay in Afghanistan indefinitely providing security; we will cease combat operations at the end of 2014. To ensure long term stability in Afghanistan we must train and mentor Afghan forces now, so they can develop the capability to operate without us later.

We believe the Army CH-47D aircraft and crews were suitable and proper for this mission. Our Chinook pilots and crew carefully planned their route consistent with proven tactics, deliberately altering their route to enter the valley from a different direction than had been used earlier that night. They masked their approach by circling around the valley to the northeast, and dropped down to a low altitude on final ingress to the selected landing zone.

We do not believe a Special Operations Chinook and aircrew (MH-47) would have fared differently than the CH-47D flown by the Extortion 17 crew. As noted by the investigating officer, the Extortion 17 crew was experienced flying in the Tangi Valley – and inserted the Ranger unit earlier in the evening. The short flight route was over familiar terrain, with no air defense radar threat, obviating the need for the high-tech avionics package that distinguishes the MH-47 from the CH-47. The two models share identical Threat Countermeasures and Aircraft Survivability Equipment – meaning there is no technology advantage inherent in the MH-47 that would have protected it from the rocket that downed Extortion 17.

We do not believe Extortion 17 was the victim of a pre-planned enemy ambush, nor do we believe the enemy had advance knowledge of our flight route and landing zone location. This information was not provided to anyone outside the SEAL and Army aviation task force commands. Because the mission was developed and approved after the Ranger assault had begun, there was no coordination with Afghan officials. Although the presence of helicopters in the valley likely put the enemy forces on a heightened state of alert, the element that fired the rockets remained undetected by our airborne sensors until unleashing its fatal volley as Extortion 17 was nearing the designated landing zone.

We do not believe the rules of engagement restricted our forces from engaging the enemy during this operation. The AH-64 Apache helicopters that comprised the Air Weapons Team performed their escort duties consistent with proven tactics, demonstrating sound judgment at each stage of the operation from the time the Ranger element entered the Tangi Valley until all U.S. forces were extracted following recovery operations at the crash site.

We recognize our helicopters are vulnerable to direct fire from Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) and other shoulder fired ballistic rockets. Tragically Extortion 17 is not the first Chinook helicopter lost to RPG fire in Afghanistan. Sixteen Special Operators, including eight SEALs, perished in a similar incident involving an MH-47 in Kunar Province in June 2005, and in March 2002 an MH-47 was shot with an RPG, resulting in the first SEAL fatality of the war in Afghanistan.

Immediately after the loss of Extortion 17, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering directed the Helicopter Survivability Task Force (HSTF), established in August 2009, to examine in detail potential countermeasures to rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attacks. A surge effort involving more than 80 government personnel, including 23 nationally-recognized subject matter experts assessed technological solutions to this threat, including concepts of varying maturity from 17 industry teams. Unfortunately, the findings of this assessment were that technologies to enable the development of Active Protection Systems (APS) for helicopters are immature and unproven.

Subsequent to this effort, the Director for Operational Test and Evaluation delivered a report to Congress in February 2012 regarding the maturity of Active Protection Systems (APS) for Ground Vehicles. The findings of that report were that none of the seven tested systems were mature enough for fielding; further development, test, and evaluation was required for ALL of the systems. Given the severity of the RPG threat to rotorcraft, DOD has continued to actively research RPG Active Protection Systems for aircraft.

We recognize more needs to be done to help protect our forces – especially when they are so vulnerable in the air. In the two and half years since this tragic loss, HSTF efforts, supported by three reprogramming actions worth over \$182 million approved by Congress, have resulted in the fielding of 24 different survivability and safety equipment upgrades on over 2,000 aircraft, with CH-47s receiving as many as four of these individual upgrades.<sup>3,4</sup> Every rotorcraft operating in Afghanistan has received at least two of these upgrades, and some have received as

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<sup>3</sup> Over 3000 individual aircraft equipment upgrades were performed as a result of the HSTF efforts.

<sup>4</sup> Source: PA 10-3, March 2010; PA 10-24, Oct 2010; PA 11-25, Oct 2011

many as five. The Department continues to actively pursue the accelerated fielding of RPG Active Protection Systems on rotary wing aircraft.

Although we will continue to develop the best equipment to protect our brave service men and women, sadly there is no technological solution that will guarantee the safety of those thrust into battle, particularly when helicopters are involved. Afghanistan is especially dangerous given the high elevations and mountainous terrain. Our aviators have responded and performed brilliantly during this war, but the fact remains we will always have to balance the tactical requirement to move troops quickly across the battlefield with the dangers of incurring lethal enemy fire and flying in extreme terrain.

No advances in technology, or changes in the way we operate, will bring back our fallen heroes or ease the pain of their loved ones. We honor their sacrifices by rededicating ourselves to defending the nation from attack, upholding our values as Americans, and never forgetting those they left behind. Through our enduring commitment to our Gold Star families; the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, extended families, wives and children of the 30 Fallen Eagles aboard Extortion 17, we will cherish their memories, keep them forever in our hearts, and never forget them.

I stand ready to address your questions.