

The Horse Soldiers: The Extraordinary Story of a Band of US Soldiers Who Rode to Victory in Afghanistan

By Doug Stanton. (New York: Scribner, 2009), 354 pages, with endnotes and index. Foreword by Elisabeth Burgos.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

As US forces enter their ninth year of involvement in Afghanistan, it is easy to forget how combat operations began in this landlocked country in Central Asia. *The Horse Soldiers* is by all means a very personal account of the opening days of this nine-year campaign; Doug Stanton is very clear in his author's note that this is not an effort to create a strategic history. His objective is to help readers understand what it felt like to be a Special Forces operator assigned to Task Force Dagger, conducting combat operations on the ground in northern Afghanistan many hundreds of miles behind Taliban lines. Within the bounds of this perspective, this reviewer believes Stanton has done excellent work.

Stanton first captures the reader's attention with a short and vivid description of the opening hours of the extended fight at the Qala-e-Jangi (literally "fortress of war") in Mazar-e-Sharif. This prologue focuses on the most well-known portion of TF Dagger operations in the fall of 2001; it was the only portion covered directly by journalists on the ground during this action. With this brief reminder of the headline events of late November 2001, he quickly shifts back to the days immediately following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. His story begins with a cadre of young operators from 5th Special Forces Group (5SFG) from Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. In this phase, Stanton nicely describes the growing tension between the fighters in the midst of tactical preparations and the families they would soon leave behind. He follows the group through an isolation facility in an Uzbek airbase and on into Afghanistan on a night helicopter insertion provided by the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment—the Nightstalkers.

Once the members of TF Dagger are on the ground, the pace quickens, focusing on the combat operations that took place from mid-October 2001 through December 2001. During this period, two Special Forces A teams and a battalion command element from the 5SFG conducted operations against the Taliban, guiding the combat activities of Afghan resistance fighters, and supporting this "traditional fighting" capability by calling in airstrikes from US Air Force aircraft, including strategic bombers, fighters, and AC-130 gunships. Movement on the ground was complicated by the difficult terrain and the lack of motor transportation. Early on the SF operators learned that they were going to have to

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move on horseback if they wanted to keep up with their local allies. This made for the most ironic aspect of the story: modern fighters with satellite communication, night vision devices, and complex weaponry traveling on small Afghan ponies. The pace was controlled by their Afghan allies whose strategy was to defeat a committed enemy while maintaining a low casualty rate and influencing others to support the resistance.

The at times laconic pace of movement provided the SF operators with ample time to reflect on the historic nature of their effort. As reported to Stanton, they were well aware that their operation tied them to other figures in the history of irregular warfare from World War I (the most famous being T. E. Lawrence) and World War II (including figures from the OSS). As reflected in some of the more prosaic descriptions that sometimes slip into the book, Stanton was clearly impressed with the sense of awe the young operators felt as they realized the enormity of the strategic board on which they were playing.

By the end of the story, Stanton has provided an understanding of the intellectual complexity of living in a foreign culture while applying tactical combat power on an irregular warfare battlefield. The “horse soldiers” were often cut off from any significant ties to their command headquarters. At the same time, they had to make decisions they knew were likely to have grave strategic significance, yet they made them with care, often in the middle of battle, and most frequently after having spent most of the day traveling on horseback.

Readers looking for an assessment of the strategic purpose of the initial operations or a discussion of how we got from a small set of Special Forces to a large-scale commitment of men and material will be disappointed in *The Horse Soldiers*. This story also does not explore the collaboration between the CIA and TF Dagger and their Afghan allies. The SF operators interviewed by Stanton kept silent on this partnership (no doubt because of its classified nature) and described only the now well-known role of the CIA pathfinders who provided the SF teams with access to alliance leaders and the role of two CIA officers in the battle of Qala-e-Jangi. Readers interested in this collaboration should look to *First In* by Gary Schroen or *Jawbreaker* by Gary Bernstein, both of which describe the story from the perspective of the CIA officers operating with the Northern Alliance headquarters. Until the effort in the fall of 2001 is further declassified, this will simply have to do.

In sum, Stanton’s book provides great insight and understanding of what it was like for the members of TF Dagger in the fall of 2001. His thorough research included hours of one-on-one interviews with the surviving members of TF Dagger. He gives the reader a “feeling” as well as an understanding of how these “horse soldiers” succeeded in their operations in Afghanistan in 2001. He also provides family, friends, and anyone interested in Special Forces a glimpse of the world of the SF operator living and fighting behind enemy lines.

