

## HISTORY - Articles - Operation Enduring Freedom

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### US Pilots Focus on Taliban Troops

By CHRIS TOMLINSON

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ABOARD THE USS THEODORE ROOSEVELT (AP) - U.S. jets have shifted from attacking fixed targets to hunting down Taliban troops and tanks and supporting U.S. soldiers on the ground, the commander of the USS Theodore Roosevelt battle group said Saturday.

Rear Adm. Mark Fitzgerald said planes from the Roosevelt supported U.S. special operations troops in a ground attack inside Afghanistan. He declined to provide details, saying only that the mission was successful.

"We have gotten away from going after the big targets because there aren't any, so we have shifted to taking out those targets that impact on the ground battle," Fitzgerald said. "It's all trying to take away their capability to wage war."



Fighter pilots have been assigned to 30-square-mile "kill zones" to look for troop concentrations or armored vehicles, he said. Pilots must then confirm their targets with air controllers before attacking, Navy officers said.

"Once you get in a kill zone, there are a lot of targets - you just have to identify one that is militarily significant," said a Marine Corps fighter pilot from Indianapolis code-named "Simple." He said he returned to the ship on the second night without dropping his bombs because he could not be sure of his target.

The Marine Corps' VMFA-251 ``Thunderbolt" Squadron, normally stationed outside Charleston, S.C., is the first Marine unit confirmed to be participating in the campaign against the Taliban. While assigned to a Navy air wing, Marine pilots flying F/A-18C Hornet attack planes have specialized training in providing air cover for ground troops.

The crew of the USS Theodore Roosevelt launched another round of airstrikes just before midnight Sunday, catapulting U.S. Navy F-14 Tomcat fighters, EA-6B Prowler surveillance planes and Marine attack jets.

The USS Theodore Roosevelt, based in Norfolk, Va., is one of four Navy battle groups in the Arabian Sea. The other battle groups are led by the aircraft carriers USS Carl Vinson, USS Enterprise and the USS Kitty Hawk, which Pentagon officials have said is being used as a helicopter base for special operations troops.

A battle group can include as many as a dozen ships. An amphibious assault vessel with 2,200 Marines on board usually accompanies each group.

The Roosevelt's 76 planes have flown mostly at night. The carrier is home to 5,500 sailors and Marines, who now wake up at 6 p.m. and work through the night and sleep during the day.

At the Pentagon, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force Gen. Richard B. Myers, showed video Saturday of special operations troops parachuting onto an airfield in southern Pakistan. He said troops also attacked a Taliban command center outside of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan.

Myers also confirmed that two American soldiers were killed and three injured when a Black Hawk helicopter crashed in southern Pakistan. He denied Taliban claims that they shot the helicopter down.

Fitzgerald said missions such as flying helicopters at low altitude at night or fighting on the ground are extremely dangerous.

"War is not a very antiseptic thing. It's a very intensive operation that we are conducting out here. We are striking targets, we are killing people on the ground, that is what war is all about." Fitzgerald said. "We try to manage the risk, but risk is inherent in war. People get killed."

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