

Operation Enduring Freedom



On September 11, 2001—the day that changed the world—nearly 3,000 innocent people were killed in the most devastating terrorist attack ever on American soil.

In a coordinated assault, 19 suicidal terrorists hijacked four commercial jetliners. They deliberately crashed two of the planes into New York City's World Trade Center, leveling its twin 110-story towers. Another plane slammed into the Pentagon, damaging the headquarters of the Department of Defense. Before the fourth plane could reach its target—possibly the White House—it crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, after passengers fought the terrorists for control of the aircraft.

The United States quickly determined that the perpetrators were from the Islamic militant organization al-Qaeda, headed by Osama bin Laden. He and his fellow fanatics

were based in Afghanistan, where they had set up a network of camps to train radicals to carry out terrorism in other parts of the world.

Afghanistan is a poverty-stricken, landlocked nation about the size of Texas located in south-central Asia between Iran and Pakistan. Nearly all of its 31 million people are Muslims who follow Islamic religious codes and traditional tribal and ethnic practices. The vast majority live in small tribal compounds in the country's massive mountain ranges and remote valleys in the north and east, and on the barren desertlike plains of the south and west.

At the time of the 9/11 attacks, Afghanistan was under the control of the Taliban – a fundamentalist Islamic militia that had seized power in 1996. Because of their extreme interpretation of Islamic law, they banned most leisure activities and entertainment such as music, dancing, picnics, television, and sports. Also forbidden were children's toys, including dolls and kites; card and board games; cameras and photographs. The Taliban enforced harsh penalties for reading novels, magazines, and newspapers. They beat adult men for grooming their beards and women for making noise when they walked. Women were forbidden to attend school or hold jobs other than in the health-care field. People accused of even minor infractions were whipped by canes. For more serious offenses, the Taliban chopped off hands and held public hangings and stonings at soccer fields. Brainwashing and propaganda were used to fuel people's hatred of the Western world.

The Taliban also played host to bin Laden and his al-Qaeda radicals, granting them full protection in Afghanistan's desolate

mountains. The terrorists thought they were safe from America's military might. They were dead wrong.

Nine days after the 9/11 attacks, the United States demanded that the Taliban turn over all the leaders of al-Qaeda, immediately close every terrorist training camp, and round up all the country's terrorists and their supporters. The Taliban refused.

So on October 7, 2001, the United States and several allies (called coalition forces) launched Operation Enduring Freedom and invaded Afghanistan. Within three months, coalition forces—spearheaded by the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines—toppled the Taliban government, destroyed al-Qaeda training camps, and drove most of the militants into the jagged mountains bordering Pakistan. Although many of al-Qaeda's top leaders were dead or captured, bin Laden managed to escape and, from a secret location, urged terrorists around the world to attack Western countries.

Despite the early successes by coalition forces, the fighting in Afghanistan continued, partly because military resources were diverted to Iraq after it was invaded by the United States in 2003. Nevertheless, on October 9, 2004, Afghans held their first direct democratic elections, including voting for a president. The following year, they elected their parliament.

Throughout this war, the United States has poured billions of dollars in aid into Afghanistan. Much of the money has gone to build schools, mosques, roads, bridges, hospitals, clinics, water-treatment plants, and dams, and to train the Afghan National Police (ANP) and Afghan National Army (ANA). But progress to secure the future of Afghanistan and eliminate the militants there has been slow, frustrating, and violent.

The Taliban – supported by outside terrorist groups and Afghan drug lords – have proven to be tough enemies that still wield powerful influence in various regions of the country. Since 2006, they have increased attacks on coalition forces with roadside and suicide bombings, ambushes, and direct assaults by trained and well-equipped militants.

Afghanistan's military, police, and elected government officials haven't been strong enough to quash the insurgents and create a new and safe society. The country continues to rely on the help of American-led coalition forces. By the summer of 2010, the American troop level was expected to reach nearly 100,000 for Operation Enduring Freedom. Most U.S. forces have been fighting in eastern and southern Afghanistan along the Pakistan border. The rest make up part of a second operation, known as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), under the command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Joining the Americans are about 68,000 troops from 42 countries.

The ongoing mission of the U.S. military has come at a price: 945 American troops killed and another 2,779 seriously wounded as of January 2010, the beginning of the ninth year of the war.

Although there has always been some disagreement about the handling of the war in Afghanistan, there's one issue that everyone can agree on: The men and women of the U.S. military have served with unbelievable courage, compassion, and commitment.