

Special Forces and OEF-Philippines

“Special Forces ODA-192 and OEF-P”

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Abstract

This story involves a U.S. Army Special Forces, Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) deploying to southern Mindanao immediately following the 9/11 tragedy. Upon arrival to Zamboanga, intelligence personnel informed the detachment that the Abu-Shielf Group (ASG) had kidnapped two Americans and one Philippine nurse. They were somewhere in our AO. ODA-192 now had the responsibility to train, advise, and assist the AFP and protect all Americans in the southern region of Mindanao, Philippines.

The day started out like any other day in Zamboanga, Philippines. ODA-192, 1st Special Forces Group conducted routine missions in support of JTF-510, ARSOF, and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) SOUTHCOM. ODA-192 conducted Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Quick Reaction Force (QRF), and Force Protection missions for the southern peninsula of Mindanao, Philippines.

Intelligence updates kept us informed about the ongoing American hostage situation here in the southern region of Mindanao, Philippines. Martin Burnham and his wife Gracia, both U.S. citizens, became hostages on May 27, 2001, at the Dos Palmas Beach Resort in Palawan. The Al Harakatul Islamiya or the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), two Muslim insurgent groups, laid claim to the attack and abduction. Martin and Gracia Burnham, American missionaries working in the Philippines, were celebrating their 18th wedding anniversary when it suddenly became a hostage ordeal. The Burnham's were in captivity for about a year in that jungle. Then in June of 2002, a rescue attempt by AFP, supported by U.S. forces, resulted in Gracia's release. Martin's Burnham and Debra Yap were shot and killed during the ensuing firefight.

ODA-192 occupied two small thatched buildings on a small AFP military base, Camp Enrile, just south of the Philippine Army's SOUTHCOM Headquarters. ODA-192s mission was to advise and assist the AFP in combating terrorism in the Philippines. Additional mission included conducting conduct Foreign Internal Defense (FID) missions with host nation Special Operations Forces in support of the Global War on Terrorism.

Three months through a scheduled seven-month deployment, JTF-510 assigned an additional mission to ODA-192, Quick Reaction Force (QRF) for the entire southern region of Mindanao and Basilian Island. ODA-192 immediately reorganized their current

operational procedures and executed rigorous helicopter, vehicle and waterborne combat operations training. Our primary mission was to conduct a support role as QRF and Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) operations utilizing Task Force-160th Special Operations, MH-60 helicopters.

SOUTHCOM assigned eight Philippine Navy Seals to ODA-192 for host nation presence and support. These men were hand selected by their commander, due to their extensive combat experience and tactical knowledge. This combined unit's main function was to ensure security of the southern Mindanao region and provide a QRF to the island of Basilian, in support of crucial combat operation.

Intense helicopter operation training filled the team's daily training schedule. The detachment conducted numerous day and night fast rope insertions, air-landing infiltrations and waterborne helicopter insertions. The newly established QRF force conducted high visibility, overt training scenarios to project a superior show of force. The Joint Task Force-510 Commander, BG Donny Wurster, demanded that the U.S. led force be proactive and project overt military superiority against any enemy forces present in the region. ODA-192 planned and conducted several unscheduled, well-rehearsed overt training mission. This ensured the local population knew our capabilities and to demonstrate immediate response by U.S. and Philippine Special Forces Soldiers to any hostile situation within the region. These overt demonstrations of forces allowed the U.S. and Philippine forces to operate in a relatively safe environment.

During one hot day in late June, an emergency message came into the team's TOC requesting immediate QRF support. Initial information stated Americans personnel were in contact with enemy ASG forces. ODA-192 immediately recalled all team members and

scrambled their equipment for a rapid departure to JTF-510, HQ. Upon arrival to the JTF-510 compound, another Special Forces ODA arrived just minutes earlier. The ARSOF Commander ordered ODA-171 to move to Eabe Airbase and load the helicopters for preparation to launch a QRF team. Their mission was to fly north to Zamboanga Del Norte and support ongoing combat operations with the AFP Forces, currently engaged in a firefight with ASG Insurgents. ODA-192s mission consisted of securing the SOUTHCOM and Eabe Airbase helicopter landing zones for possible reception of WIA or KIA personnel.

ODA-192 donned their combat gear and conducted pre-combat inspections. Three team members, along with ARSOF medical personnel, departed for the Eabe Airbase LZ. The remanding members of ODA-192 moved to the SOUTHCOM Medical Facility to support the reception of any helicopters and personnel inbound from the combat operations. ODA-192 was unaware that the first helicopter to land at SOUTHCOM Medical Facility transported an American civilian WIA, Gracia Burnham. Held in captivity for over a year by ASG insurgents, Gracia now lays on a litter with a gunshot wound to her thigh. The team immediately established 360-degree security of the LZ and navigated the ambulance to the LZ for transport. We notified JTF-510 once we realized the American WIA was onboard.

The ODA-192 team sergeant and one other team member moved to the JTF-510 HQ and provided personal security escort for the JTF-510 Commander. Our movement took the commander to the emergency room of SOUTHCOM Medical Facility. Now the entire detachment provided security to all entrances and exit of the medical facility. Crew served weapons, placed at vehicle control points, ensured traffic remain outside the security perimeter. The ODA commander provided a personal security detail for Gracia Burnham and the JTF Commander. U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers now stood at Gracia Burnham's

bedside, while medical personnel attended to her gunshot wound. She seemed quite calm for someone who knew her husband was shot and killed. The ODA team sergeant ensured her that U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers had recovered his body and were guarding his remains.

ODA-192 now had a new mission, protect this American from harm and shield her from the media. Meanwhile at Eabe Airbase, other members of ODA-192 were removing the lifeless bodies of Philippine nurse, Debra Yap and American Missionary, Martin Burnham, from a Philippine UH-1 Helicopter. Both hostages lay dead from gunshot wounds received during a rescue attempt by the AFP Forces. Medical personnel opened both body bags and the ARSOF Surgeon examined the lifeless bodies for a positive declaration of death. ODA-192 ensured the bodies of Martin Burnham and Debra Yap remained secured and transported them to a secure location, awaiting further instructions. An official report later stated the two captives suffered gunshot wounds and died while in the crossfire of a fierce firefight between the AFP Rangers and ASG Insurgents.

JTF medical personnel treated Gracia Burnham while members of ODA-192 prepared to transport her by ground to Eabe Airfield, then by aircraft to Manila. Once in Manila, the U.S. Embassy medical team would be standing by to receive her. By now, the word had spread that an American hostage lay in an emergency room bed inside the SOUTHCOM Medical Facility. Despite the death of two civilian hostages, the AFP received immediate praise for a well-done rescue operation. Hundreds of reporters and local Philippine Government Officials ascended onto the SOUTHCOM Medical Facility, attempting to speak or photograph the newly rescued hostage. What stood in the way of the reporter's attempts to enter were several heavily armed U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers. Their rules of

engagement were simple; deny access to all unauthorized personnel, period! The only personnel allowed near the American casualty were U.S. Forces. Gracia Burnham's security remained at a high level of alertness.

Upon completion of Gracia Burnham's initial wound treatment, the JTF Doctors prepared Gracia for evacuation. The security teams assisted the hospital in parking an ambulance near the emergency room entrance. Tensions were high during the preparation for movement of Gracia Burnham's to Eabe Airfield. ODA-192 team members constructed several visual barriers using plywood and sheets. The command gave strict order to block the media from taking any photos of Gracia Burnham. Special Forces Soldiers surrounded Gracia Burnham's litter and escorted her through the visual barriers, to an awaiting ambulance. Team members loaded her litter into the rear of the awaiting ambulance. Other team members continued to repel the crowd of onlookers and media that surrounded the ambulance. As the ambulance drove off to Eabe Airfield, ODA-192 soldiers physically ran along side the vehicle, holding up sheets over the windows to protect the privacy of Gracia.

JTF coordinated for a C-130 aircraft to transport Gracia Burnham and the body of her husband, Martin, back to Manila, Philippines. On the hot tarmac of Eabe Airbase approximately nine hours after the deadly firefight with ASG insurgents, Gracia Burnham and ODA 192 members loaded the body of Martin Burnham into the belly of a running C-130 aircraft. The ODA members saluted Gracia and Martin Burnham with sorrow. The aircraft took off to the north, flying into the early evening sky. Many of the U.S. and Philippine soldiers stood on the hot tarmac, feeling a bitter sweet sorry for the terrible loss of an American life.

ODA-192 returned to their base with a somber feeling of partial mission success. We asked the question among one another, "How did it come to this?" Our conclusion forced us to accept the outcome and drive on. We were sure that a direct combat intervention by U.S. Special Forces could have saved all three hostages from their deadly ordeal. Due to the political ramification between the Philippine Government and the U.S. Government, we could only conduct limited, low visibility operations. To the family members of the Burnham's, ODA-192 could only stand-by and wait for the outcome.

My team learned a lot that day. Emotions still ran high from the recent images of the twin towers falling to the ground. We all understood what our roles were and how it fits in to the JTF Tactical Plan for OEF-P. Soldiers devote half their lifetime in preparing for combat. Every team member gives 110 percent during training and rehearsals to one day fulfill a rescue mission like this one. The situation unfolded and the call comes in too late for U.S. Military intervention. You feel helpless unloading the wounded or dead Americans from the helicopters. Here were two more Americans who suffered wounds and death by the hands of terrorist. Civilian politicians will always have the last word about U.S. Forces serving and protecting Americans from terrorist.



QRF Sniper Team 1
ODA-192, USAF PJ, TF-160 AC, AFP Navy Seal