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Story

# 22 Osama-unit Navy SEALs killed as Taliban rocket shoots down helicopter over Afghanistan

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 From With **POST WIRE SERVICES**  
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Nearly two dozen members of the elite Navy SEAL unit that took out Osama bin Laden perished yesterday in a horrific helicopter strike at the hands of the Taliban in Afghanistan, officials said.

The special-forces operatives were reportedly blasted by a rocket-propelled grenade as they rushed to aid other troops in a firefight at an insurgent stronghold in Wardak province, just west of Kabul.

Thirty Americans -- including 22 SEALs and an Army helicopter crew -- were killed, along with an interpreter, seven Afghan soldiers and a combat dog, which makes this the deadliest incident in the nearly 10-year war.

"My thoughts and prayers go out to the families and loved ones of the Americans who were lost," said President Obama, who was notified shortly after 8 p.m. Friday by National Security Adviser Tom Donilon.

"Their deaths," the president said, "are a reminder of the extraordinary sacrifices made by the men and women of our military and their families, including all who have served in Afghanistan."

Officials said none of the slain SEALs had participated in the May bin Laden raid carried out by their Team 6 comrades.

The helicopter was rushing to support forces battling the Taliban in Wardak, according to ABC News. It was unknown how close the twin-rotor Chinook was to the fight when it went down.

Afterward, troops on the ground rallied around the wreckage and kept it covered while more US forces rushed to secure the area.

A short time later, the Taliban claimed responsibility.

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"They wanted to attack our mujahedin who were in a house, but our mujahedin resisted and destroyed a helicopter with an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] rocket," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said by phone from an undisclosed location.

"Eight mujahedin were martyred," he continued, ". . . and today they [American soldiers] carried away parts of their plane and shattered pieces of their bodies."

US officials said the cause of the crash was under investigation.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said he "shared his deep sorrow and sadness" with Obama after learning of the deadly firefight.

The loss of nearly two dozen members will likely have a temporary impact on how many missions Team 6 can carry out. The team, whose operations are highly classified, is believed to have some 300 members, and reserves will be able to step in.

One of the slain SEALs was identified as Aaron Carson Vaughn, 30, of Tennessee. He was a decorated soldier who volunteered to return to combat just two weeks after his daughter was born this summer. He also leaves behind a 2-year-old son.

"He was a tough warrior, but he was a gentle man," his heartbroken grandma said yesterday.

The tragedy raises fears that a successful attack on the chopper could raise morale among the Taliban, who have been hit hard by special forces even as the total number of regular troops has been reduced.

From April to July this year, special-ops forces captured 2,941 insurgents and killed 834 -- twice as many as those killed or captured in the same three-month period of 2010, according to NATO.

The site of the crash is near the Tangi region, a particularly dangerous area that has been the scene of many planned attacks, said Wardak Deputy Gov. Ali Ahmad Khashai.

"Even with all of the operations conducted there, the opposition is still active," he said.

The Army had intended to hand over its Combat Outpost Tangi to Afghan National Security Forces in April, but the Afghans have yet to establish a permanent base there.

#### **The Chopper: Twin-rotor Chinook**

- \* Cost: \$32 million
- \* Max speed: 184 mph
- \* Troop capacity: 36
- \* Crew: 3
- \* Weight: 50,000 lbs.

#### **The Team: SEAL Team 6**

- \* Shot to fame when they took out Osama bin Laden
- \* Also credited with rescuing a ship's crew from Somali pirates in 2009
- \* Formed in 1980 after botched mission to rescue Iran hostages
- \* Believed to have about 300 members

#### **The Mission: Kill Taliban leader**

- \* The team was conducting a raid on a Taliban compound in the Tangi Joy Zarin area of Wardak's Sayd Abad district.
- \* They were believed to be targeting a high-ranking insurgent figure in the area, which lies 60 miles southwest of Kabul.
- \* Taliban officials claim they shot down the chopper with a rocket.

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