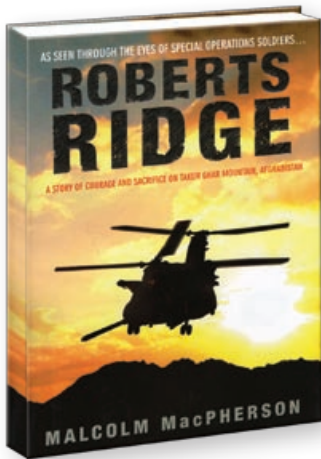


consider all the developments from 1945 to 2003. Given the dramatic advances of aerospace operations and technologies since the end of World War II, one would expect a new book to spend less time on older topics and give more attention to the jet age.

Readers looking for a basic reference should give *Air Power* a pass. As good as it claims to be, it is not really a book about air power as much a book about what was important to the development of United States Air Force air

tactics. Yet even here Budiansky's munitions fall well short of the target, and readers may want to look elsewhere for that handy desk reference. ■

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ROBERTS RIDGE:

A STORY OF COURAGE AND SACRIFICE ON TAKUR GHAR MOUNTAIN, AFGHANISTAN

BY MALCOLM MACPHERSON

NEW YORK:
DELACORTE PRESS, 2005
338 PAGES ISBN 0-553-80363-8

Review by
Major William March, CD, MA

As my focus at work or interests change, I have a tendency to reread books in order to obtain a different perspective or to attempt to glean some additional knowledge about a particular subject. I first read *Roberts Ridge* a few years ago out of general interest, given Canada's involvement in Afghanistan. The book tells the story of a United States (US) special operations mission that went horribly wrong. What started out as a "routine," albeit hazardous, mission in support of a larger military campaign quickly developed a life of its own when the Chinook helicopter

tasked to deliver a special operations team to the top of Takur Ghar Mountain came under fire. In the subsequent confusion, Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts—a navy Sea, Air, Land (SEAL) specialist—was thrown from the aircraft and subsequently died at the hands of the entrenched Taliban/al-Qaeda forces. *Roberts Ridge*, titled in his honour, is the account of the attempt to retrieve Petty Officer Roberts—first by his original team and then by a quick reaction force consisting primarily of US Army Rangers—and the ensuing fight at altitudes in excess of 10,000 feet.

At that time I found this book to be a gripping account of combat on a remote Afghanistan mountain top, under extreme environmental conditions and in the face of a determined enemy. The author, a journalist by trade, conducted meticulous research using open sources and interviews. His writing style is such that it brings the human element very much to the fore, and the reader quickly becomes emotionally engaged in the survival, or death, of the participants. In short, it was a “good read.”

Fast forward two years or so, and now the Canadian Air Force is operating Chinooks in Afghanistan. Suddenly, *Roberts Ridge* had new meaning and could be reread from a different point of view. The original insertion by Chinook of the special operations team was attempted in the face of a well-positioned enemy force—why? Was it a failure in intelligence, bad luck or a combination of both? There was a lack of a dedicated escort and hesitation in the use of suppressing fire prior to inserting the team at the landing zone—why? Was this standard procedure to increase the element of surprise, miscommunication, an underestimation of the enemy or a combination of many factors? The subsequent attempt at a “rescue” by US Army Rangers resulted in an under-strength unit being delivered by Chinook to the very same “hot” landing zone with predictable results. How did this happen? The ensuing firefight between the Rangers and their opponents took place at extremely close quarters—so close that the provision of close air support (CAS) using standard weapon loads (500- and 1000-pound bombs) could be as hazardous to the “friendlyes”

as it would be to the “hostiles.” Indeed, the author makes the point that when it became known that a Predator unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), equipped with Hellfire missiles (each with a smaller warhead) was available, there was little hesitation in tasking it to provide the much needed CAS because the potential for collateral damage was much less. Finally, the very nature of aerial operations in mountainous terrain and the need for aircrew (indeed, all combat forces) to be equipped, trained and motivated to, if necessary, fight and evade in this type of environment was a definite factor in the book. Not only did the author indicate that the Rangers were inadequately prepared to deal with the altitude and weather—so too were the aircrew.

Roberts Ridge is not an in-depth analysis of a military operation; it is an account of soldiers, sailors and air force personnel fighting for survival under extreme conditions. However, it does offer glimpses into the conduct of tactical helicopter operations that the Canadians in Afghanistan either are conducting or may be called on to undertake in the future. Therefore, it provides food for thought, and I highly recommend that it be given a “first” read. Or, if you are like me, a “second” read from a new perspective. ■

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