

Taliban who shot down Chinook helicopter have been killed, US says

General John Allen says F-16 strike killed those responsible for deaths of 38 US navy Seals and colleagues in crash

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US navy Seal Aaron Vaughn was among those killed when a rocket-propelled grenade fired by Taliban militants brought down their Chinook helicopter in Afghanistan. Photograph: AP

A US air strike has killed the Taliban militants believed to be responsible for shooting down a Chinook helicopter, killing 38 US and Afghan troops, the top commander in Afghanistan said.

Marine Corps General John Allen told a Pentagon news conference that forces learned where the insurgents had fled to and killed them in an early morning F-16 air strike on Monday.

A separate statement from Afghanistan said the strike killed Taliban leader Mullah Mohibullah and the insurgent who fired the rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) that downed the Chinook helicopter. It said the two men were attempting to flee the country.

Thirty US troops – most of them elite navy Seals – were killed in the crash, the single deadliest incident for American troops in the Afghan war. Eight Afghans were also killed.

President Barack Obama flew to Dover Air Force Base on Tuesday to watch the arrival of the remains of those killed. The military has launched an investigation into the incident.

The Chinook was shot down while attempting to come to the aid of a team of soldiers engaged in a firefight. They were on a mission to capture a senior Taliban leader in the Tangi valley responsible for a series of attacks, including the planting of roadside bombs. Allen acknowledged that the main Taliban leader sought in the operation was still at large.

The general defended the decision to send in the elite team, saying it was deemed necessary at the time to go after "elements that were escaping" from an ongoing operation to target the Taliban leader.

"We committed a force to contain that element from getting out. And, of course, in the process of that, the aircraft was struck by an RPG and crashed," Allen told Pentagon reporters via video-conference from Kabul.

"We've run more than a couple of thousand of these night operations over the last year, and this is the only occasion where this has occurred," he said. "The fact that we lost this aircraft is not ... a decision point as to whether we'll use this aircraft in the future."

While officials believe the helicopter was shot down by an RPG, Allen said the military's investigation into the crash will also review whether small-arms fire or other causes contributed to the crash.

Allen said the subsequent F-16 air strike killed the insurgents believed to be behind the attack – an assertion the Taliban immediately challenged.

In Afghanistan Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Taliban, said: "The person who shot down the helicopter is alive and he is in another province operating against [foreign forces]," he told Reuters by telephone from an undisclosed location.

- This article was amended on 11 August 2011. The original headline - Taliban who shot down Chinook helicopter killed in US air strike - has been corrected to attribute the assertion made.

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