



SGT Brandon Aird

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503rd Infan
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SSG Michael Bracken



OUNTAIN Ops

Scouts from the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry (Airborne) react as villagers below run after the Soldiers moving on the hillside during an patrol in Chowkay Valley, Afghanistan, August 22, 2007.

On the left, A Soldier with a provincial reconstruction team watches his Soldiers down a mountain during a patrol in Paktika province, Afghanistan, June 14, 2007.

The photo below shows the view from a gun position overlooking the Korengal Valley. When this photo was taken on August 7, 2007, Soldiers with Battle Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne) were occupying several positions along the valley in one of the most hard fought areas of eastern Afghanistan's Regional Command-East.



SPC Jason Mace

AMBUSH IN GUMBAD VALLEY

CAPTAIN PAUL A. THOMAS

The 1st Battalion (Airborne), 508th Infantry Regiment, deployed to Paktika province, Afghanistan, in late February 2005 with the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I served in B Company as the executive officer. B Company was assigned to the northern districts of Paktika, spending the first few months contending with flooded roads and repairing the fleet of vehicles inherited from the preceding unit. Due to the severe weather, with snow blocking the border passes to Pakistan, there was very little enemy activity for the first three months. As spring thawed the snow and the resulting floods subsided, we began to see more signs of enemy activity.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the brigade had arrived to Kandahar province in mid-to-late March and engaged in several firefights with the enemy while it was still conducting the transition of authority with the outgoing unit. After several months of fighting in the districts surrounding Kandahar, the Combined Joint Task Force-76 determined that additional troops were necessary in the south. My battalion commander detached one company for assignment in Kandahar province. As things stood, A Company had recently established a new forward operating base (FOB) along the Afghan-Pakistani border, C Company was responsible for more geographic area than any company should have been, and HHC could not be moved without severely disrupting the battalion. That left the battalion commander with sending B Company, originally his main effort for the deployment.

Having just conducted a change of command, the company was actually out on its first mission with its new commander on June 13, when the order to detach a company became nonnegotiable.

B Company was to move to Kandahar province, approximately 300 miles away,

arriving no later than the 20th. After a single meeting with the battalion staff in Orgun, I returned to my company's FOB to coordinate an extremely hurried load-out of the company. The company returned from its mission late on the 15th. Four days later, half of the company departed for Kandahar, and I followed with the second element the next day.

Upon our arrival to Kandahar, we were assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 319th Field Artillery, the "Gun Devils." The Gun Devils, an airborne artillery battalion, had been assigned an anti-armor company from the 82nd Airborne Division, in addition to several companies of Afghan National Army, and was now functioning as a maneuver headquarters. The commander embraced this role fully, but his staff was not organized to support maneuver companies and, as a result, received augmentation from the 173rd Airborne Brigade headquarters. The resulting staff conglomerate was still experiencing growing pains upon our arrival.

The Gun Devils assigned three districts in the northern half of Kandahar province to our company. Of these, Shwali Khot and Mienneshin had recently witnessed fairly heavy fighting between Taliban and Coalition forces. The third, Khakrez, was the site of significant fighting in the past but remained quiet during our tenure. Despite being repositioned to deal with the heavy fighting in Kandahar, the recent bloodlettings had apparently destroyed the local Taliban's capacity to conduct offensive operations.

In late August, we first made contact with the enemy in the form of an improvised explosive device (IED) in the Gumbad Valley of the Shwali Khot district, which belonged to B Company's 3rd Platoon. The IED consisted of old white phosphorous mortar rounds that exploded and burned without damaging any of our vehicles. This was followed by a direct fire

ambush in early September, which wounded one paratrooper and an Afghan interpreter. While the increase in activity marked an obvious trend in retrospect, at the time we treated each incident as a separate event even though they occurred in the same area.

The company was out in force for the parliamentary elections on the 18th of September. Coalition forces supported Afghan police and army at the polling sites, and the elections were held successfully without incident. The elections were the focal point of OEF VI; at their conclusion, my company commander felt comfortable enough to take leave.

His parting words as he entered the customs process to leave country were to remind me that I was not to conduct company missions under any circumstance. He assured me that he said the same thing to the battalion commander, LTC Bertrand Ges, who agreed not to assign any such missions to B Company during the commander's absence, but circumstances dictated otherwise.

The day after my commander departed, the battalion commander found me in my company area, spread a map on the hood of his truck, and gave me a quick warning order for a mission scheduled to commence in three days. B Company would provide support during OPERATION SHAITAN MACH, which was Pashto for "Devil's Face." Three maneuver companies, as well as one firing battery, would participate in the operation. In early June, a series of uncoordinated operations by multiple units resulted in insurgent movement to the northeastern corner of the Kandahar Province, as the Taliban fighters sought to avoid Coalition forces. This eventually resulted in a massive firefight in which direct fire and close air support (CAS) killed approximately 70 Taliban fighters. The commander attributed the currently placid nature of our company's area of operations (AO) to this fight and, given the recent increase in enemy activity, intended to duplicate the effect through a coordinated battalion operation. D Company, 2nd Battalion, 504th Infantry Regiment, was to spearhead the battalion's attack, beginning in the northern edge of Shwali Khot district and proceeding east to the Tarin Khowt Road. My company would provide blocking positions and clear areas to the south of D Company's axis of attack to



Map 1 — Afghanistan

ensure the enemy would flee east. Once we reached the Tarin Khowt Road, we would block the natural exits of the Zamtu Kelay River Valley, while A Company, 1st Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, conducted an air assault to block the southern end of the valley. D Company would then attack down the valley to destroy the enemy. Units would shift based on certain decision points to continue to trap and destroy the enemy. LTC Ges anticipated the entire operation would last five days.

After alerting my platoons to the impending operation, I sketched a general concept of the operation for the company. First Platoon would depart early on September 29th to establish a blocking position along the southern egress routes out of a mountain complex commonly referred to as "the Bowl." I would follow with 3rd Platoon and my headquarters section, stop south of Pada, establish a patrol base for the night, and clear the Gumbad Valley adjacent to the Bowl on the morning of the 30th. After clearing the valley, we would attack along a mobility corridor directly south of D Company's axis of attack to assist in driving the enemy east. The 3rd Platoon would then block an egress

route from the Zamtu Kelay River Valley, while 1st Platoon attacked up a neighboring valley. Second Platoon would depart on the 30th for the town of Zamtu Kelay and prepare to pass D Company into the Zamtu Kelay River Valley late in the day.

I met with my platoon leaders again to hear their input and give them a clearer picture of their role in the mission to focus their planning and preparation. We made no significant changes to the plan and briefed the company order to squad leaders and above the following day. I emphasized several points while giving the order. First, we had received the specific task to "clear" the Gumbad Valley. I specified that 3rd Platoon would have dismounted elements moving along both valley ridges, since the enemy often exploited our unwillingness to climb hills by using them for sanctuary and to observe our movements. I actually designated the clearance of the high ground as the decisive point of the operation since it would deny the enemy the ability to mass fires on the bulk of our forces on the valley floor. I tasked the mortars with providing immediate suppression and blocking enemy escape through isolating fires. We received

dedicated CAS for this mission, and I determined that it would be used to destroy fixed enemy positions, as the terrain in Afghanistan provided natural fortification that could make ground attacks costly.

After a few questions, we concluded the order, and the platoons returned to their respective areas to complete their individual plans. I attended a battalion backbrief. Up to now, I had not attended battle update briefs or any other operations-focused meetings except when my commander was in the field, but LTC Ges and the other commanders considered my comments and recommendations as though I participated in these meetings regularly. After a few minor refinements, the meeting broke, and I returned to the company area to provide a revised timeline. We spent the following two days fixing trucks; re-zeroing and test firing weapons; and loading the supplies of food, water, fuel, and ammunition we would require for the duration of the mission.

I departed with 3rd Platoon the afternoon of the 29th. My headquarters section consisted of my fire support NCO (FSNCO), one gun team of my mortar section, our attached Joint Tactical Air Controller (JTAC) team, and me. On our way out, we picked up a squad of Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers and their two tactical trainers who were French commandos. We made it to our attack position several hours after dark, having suffered a punctured gas tank enroute that our mechanic managed to repair.

The next morning, we pushed out early, passing through the town of Pada less than two hours after daybreak. We halted on a low hill to the north and east of the town to dismount troops to move up the valley. The 3rd platoon leader, LT Justin Quisenberry, contacted me with a report that his interpreter had overheard enemy communications via a small radio scanner given to him for that purpose. Such enemy chatter was common, and the enemy had established several retransmission stations throughout our district to aid in long-range FM communication. The chatter indicated that the enemy could directly observe our element but was not specific enough to allow us to target his location. Since it began immediately after we passed through town, LT Quisenberry believed that the observer was in the town as the enemy was not likely to have climbed any hills so early. He requested to send his first squad on a quick dismounted patrol through the town, accompanied by a squad of Afghan National Army. I approved the patrol which lasted approximately an hour and a half. The patrol turned up nothing, so we continued with our mission.

We moved into the valley with 3rd Squad, led by SSG Andrew Moore, moving dismounted along the western ridgeline and the squad of ANA moving along the eastern ridgeline. One of its French trainers and 3rd Platoon's 1st Squad Leader, SSG John Doles, accompanied the ANA. SSG Doles had become friends with Ben, the French commando, and volunteered to accompany him to provide definite communication with the main body, as Ben's accented English rendered understanding difficult over the radio. Additionally, we lacked strong faith in the Afghan soldiers' ability to fight, and we did not want to leave our ally out in the cold should a firefight actually occur.

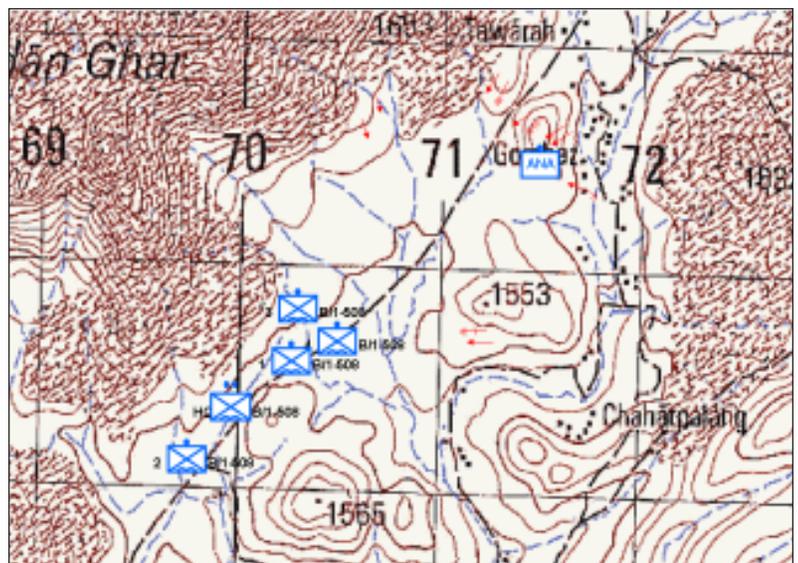
The mounted portion of the platoon, including my section, halted along the valley floor and established a

mortar firing point until the dismounted elements moved approximately 300 meters up the valley. We then packed up and drove until we were level with our dismounts and then repeated the process. The going proved slow and particularly arduous for the Soldiers on foot. We proceeded in this manner for several hours and, judging from the distance covered thus far, I knew we would not be able to clear the entire valley in this fashion and reach our designated attack position for the next day's operations. It was already approximately 1630 local time, and I called LT Quisenberry to let him know that we would recover our dismounts at the next halt and proceed to the Tarin Khowt road. He acknowledged and reported that 3rd Squad had suffered a heat casualty and was already moving to the road. We packed up our mortars and moved forward to receive them.

Meanwhile, the Afghan squad, less encumbered than its American counterparts, apparently continued forward to reach the next peak before stopping. As the element neared the top of the hill, it surprised a group of five Taliban fighters who had just crested the hill to establish a machine gun position. The Afghan element immediately came under heavy fire and became pinned to the side of the hill (See Map 2). SSG Doles called "Contact!" over the radio. SSG Moore rallied his remaining squad members and began a dash across the valley floor in an attempt to reach Doles' position. As they neared the northern end of the valley, the enemy fire intensified, with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) exploding on the ground behind them as they ran. The rest of the platoon rushed forward into the long valley with the trucks to bring the superior fire power of their heavy weapons to bear on the enemy.

Upon entering the southern end of the valley, we immediately began receiving fire from at least three separate enemy positions. An RPG exploded outside of my own vehicle as we drove into the valley. Meanwhile, SSG Doles, Ben, and one or two Afghans assaulted the enemy on their hilltop. As they attacked up the hill, Ben and SSG Doles were forced to separate so they would not both be canalized by the terrain. SSG Doles was the first to crest the hill and likely killed the two nearest fighters. He began firing upon the machine gun position, which immediately withdrew, both shocked and endangered by his attack. Just then, a sharpshooter's

Map 2 — Initial Array of Forces

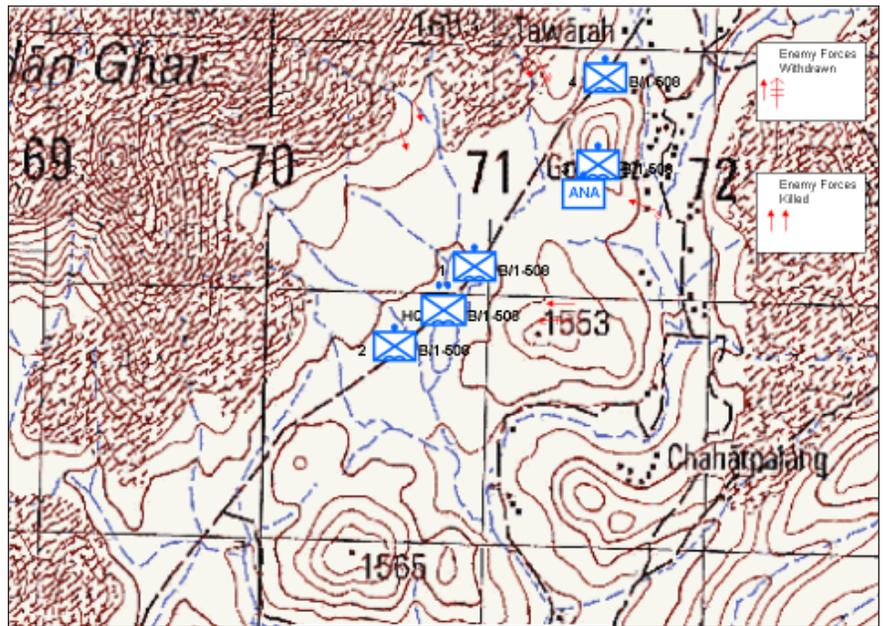


bullet from the eastern low ground struck SSG Doles, inflicting a wound that was to prove fatal. When Ben crested the hill, he found the two dead Taliban and then rushed to SSG Doles' aid, but it was too late.

As my HMMWV bounced into the valley, I called in the contact report over the tactical satellite radio (TACSAT), doing my best to sound nonchalant. I reported nine to 12 enemy fighters with small arms and RPGs, gave my current grid, and said I had all assets on hand that I currently needed. My HMMWV then skidded to a halt behind our mortar truck, whose crew had dismounted to establish their firing point. My FSNCO and I dismounted immediately, turning on our portable MBITR (Multiband Inter/Intra Team Radio) radios. Having very little idea where my forces were on the battlefield, I instructed the mortars to shoot what they could see and to watch for our men maneuvering on the enemy. Turning to my JTAC, who just exited his vehicle behind mine, I said that the A10s on station could identify and engage targets on the western ridgeline, as I was certain none of my own men were there. The mortars began to hang rounds as I trotted forward to join a squad that had taken cover behind some rocks.

I crouched with them for a moment before I realized that we were not receiving effective fire, then grabbed the nearest team leader and got the squad moving forward in bounding overwatch. The platoon sergeant, SFC Vernon Williams suddenly appeared along the road, beating his armor's chest plate with his non-firing hand and yelling at them to get into the fight. The team leaders looked at me and I said, "You heard the man; get moving." I stood up and jogged down to SFC Williams to see if he had a clearer picture of the fight than me. He said he had been held up behind the first sergeant's truck and had no better idea than I where his squads were. We continued up the center of the valley, noting that the AK fire was becoming progressively more accurate as we moved into their range. The squad accompanying us fell in behind an armored cargo truck driven by SFC Erik DaLuz, a senior medic who volunteered to accompany SFC Williams on this mission since the platoon medic was on leave. We stopped briefly to assist PFC David Udave with his M2 machine gun, which cycled rounds, but failed to fire. Another paratrooper engaged Udave's intended target with an AT-4 instead.

During this, SSG Moore and his squad reached the hill where the Afghans were still pinned down, this time by the sharpshooter. The sharpshooter had killed an Afghan soldier with a clean shot to the head and had creased the scalp of another. Uncertain of the enemy's position and not realizing the danger, 3rd Squad passed uphill of the Afghans. Suddenly, SGT Rico, a team leader, was thrown to the ground by an explosion on his back. A round from the sharpshooter had struck an M203 HE grenade carried in a belt around Rico's waist. His automatic riflemen began firing into the low ground but could not effectively suppress the sharpshooter. Heedless of the danger, SSG Moore rushed forward and pulled SGT Rico back behind cover, alternating between dragging and firing as rounds snapped by his waist and head.



Map 3 — Mid-engagement

Seeing the extensive wound on Rico's back, Moore stuffed it full of Curlex gauze to control the bleeding. SSG Moore radioed LT Quisenberry, who was just reaching 3rd Squad's position, updating him on the situation and the need for medical evacuation.

SFC Williams and I reached the northern end of the valley. We determined that at least three trucks had moved through the northern saddle via intermittent radio communications (See Map 3). Despite numerous attempts, neither of us had much luck raising either the squad leaders or platoon leader on the platoon or company net. Due to the convoluted terrain, the low output power of the MBITR, and the ongoing firefight, reaching anyone even briefly seemed like a major success. SFC Williams moved off to link up with his platoon leader on the eastern hillside and figure out what was going on. Despite the communication problems, we knew at this point that SGT Rico was wounded, but we had no idea where he was. Neither of us yet knew that SSG Doles had been mortally wounded.

My first sergeant finally caught up to me at this point. After a brief consultation, he moved north through the saddle with the company medic since he believed the casualty might be with that squad. I sent my FSNCO with him to determine if we had troops on the western hilltop so I could coordinate a CAS strike. I attempted to radio back to my truck to move the headquarters element forward to my position. After several patchy radio contacts, much hand-waving, and even some colored smoke to mark my position, the trucks had yet to start moving, and I was suddenly interrupted by Quisenberry's voice crackling over the net. He said we had two casualties, and he needed a medic immediately. He talked me through to his location, which I relayed to SFC DaLuz. DaLuz pointed out that he needed litter bearers to evacuate the casualties from the hillside.

As I grabbed two Soldiers to accompany DaLuz, I noticed that everyone, including our mechanic, was staring intently down their sights at the eastern ridgeline. SGT Toby Hogan, my mortar gun team leader, explained that they had recently taken RPG fire. Several RPG rounds had literally skipped off the ground behind the team's ammo bearer as he hammered in the aiming stakes.

Keeping my truck between the hill and me, I reached through the cab and grabbed the TACSAT hand-mike. I delivered a brief update and then delivered a nine-line MEDEVAC request. The battle captain confirmed receipt, and I turned my attention back to the eastern ridgeline. I yelled to a nearby M240B gunner on top of a truck that I needed cover to the top of the ridge, then looked about to see what combat power I had on hand. I saw a 3rd Platoon team leader with a M203; his SAW gunner; two Afghans, one with an AK-47 and the other with an RPG; and me. With this ad-hoc fire team, I took point between my men and the Afghans, and we moved up to the top of the ridge, where, fortunately, the enemy had already chosen to withdraw. I left the fire team up there to secure the ridgeline; consulted briefly with my JTAC, who had managed to dismount a radio and follow us up; then went back to the truck and reported via TACSAT that the HLZ for MEDEVAC was now secure. I directed the M240B gunner to dismount his weapon, and I sent him up the ridge to reinforce the position, sending my mechanic as his ammo bearer. I threw SGT Hogan a packet of VS17 signaling panels and pointed out where I wanted the HLZ.

By this point, the fighting had died out completely, and 3rd Platoon was beginning to regroup at the northeastern hill. LT Quisenberry called back to report on our casualties; I received vital signs for the wounded paratrooper, who had been struck in the same manner as SSG Doles, and learned that another paratrooper died. He requested that I move the HLZ closer to the hillside. I got drivers back in their trucks, and we moved back up the valley.

My first sergeant assumed control of the HLZ once I reached the northern end. I checked on our casualties, learning their identities. MEDEVAC arrived within 45 to 50 minutes of my initial call. I consulted with LTC Ges on TACSAT and directed my first sergeant to find a suitable spot for a patrol base. We established local security and began preparing for the next day's operations. At LTC Ges' direction, the Gumbad Valley would be the focal point of the battalion's operation for the remainder of the mission.

Closing Thoughts

The company learned several valuable lessons from this action. With regards to

On our part, we reaffirmed the value of using dismounted forces despite the rugged terrain and would use similar tactics in the future with success. While the company mortars had successfully forced the withdrawal of one RPG team, attempts to use CAS in such a fluid fight actually disrupted our tempo, allowing another RPG team to successfully escape.

the enemy, it was the first use of a sharpshooter in recent memory in Kandahar province. The fact that the sharpshooter was positioned to guard against enveloping forces displayed a tactical prowess never before seen in that region. Additionally, the ambush itself was tactically sound and showed that the enemy had become proficient in this technique.

On our part, we reaffirmed the value of using dismounted forces despite the rugged terrain and would use similar tactics in the future with success. While the company mortars had successfully forced the withdrawal of one RPG team, attempts to use CAS in such a fluid fight actually disrupted our tempo, allowing another RPG team to successfully escape.

The company failed to make effective use of several key weapons systems during the fight. One .50-caliber machine gun did not fire due to issues that could have been identified through test firing. Since the only available range for test firing heavy weapons was outside of the airfield, platoons often did not test fire these weapons until they reached their sector. Only the firefight on the far side of the northwestern hilltop involved the effective use of medium and heavy machine guns, which supported infantrymen as they assaulted up the hill.

Of all the issues, however, the greatest failure was in command and control. Since I had begun the morning with two platoons within FM range, I remained on the company command frequency. When 3rd Platoon dismounted during the fight, all of its MBITRs, to include the platoon leader's, were on the platoon frequency. I kept my MBITR, however, on the command

frequency for the majority of the fight. So, in addition to the fact that squads fought in three separate directions, I found myself unable to communicate with anyone but my headquarters section until I realized the issue and dropped to their platoon frequency. This led to the confusion as to whether CAS or ground forces were to be used to destroy the enemy on the western hilltop. Unfortunately, the broken terrain interfered with radio communications so much that I would have likely been unable to receive reports from the platoon elements regardless. The platoon leader stated that he only had spotty communications with his elements throughout the fight as well.

We also identified several areas to sustain within the company. Very few formal operations orders were given during our tour in Afghanistan. The order given for this mission constituted my single truly significant contribution to the fight. By using a deliberate decision making process, I unwittingly set the conditions for our success on the battlefield. Had we paid lip-service to the planning process, casualties would likely have been more severe.

Our company mortars demonstrated yet again that accurate and quick suppressive fire could rapidly break the enemy's will to fight. Initiative and aggressiveness on the battlefield also rapidly built combat power against the enemy positions. The company also demonstrated a high degree of proficiency in medical tasks, from first aid to establishing an HLZ, saving the life of one severely wounded American.

While I hesitate to call the battle a victory, the lessons learned that day resulted in immediate improvements in the company's standard operating procedures. Despite the increase in enemy activity, the company sustained only one other casualty during the remaining months in theater and conducted a successful hand-off with allied forces amidst continuing, albeit more limited, enemy actions.

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