

**MilitaryTimes**

# Dire Sunrise at Wanat

**Fierce firefight defending Afghan post claimed nine soldiers, wounded 27**

By [Michelle Tan](#) - Staff writer

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Task Force Rock arrived in Afghanistan's central Waygul Valley in Konar province in June 2007. The soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment were operating in a 4,000-foot-high valley, with rugged, steep sides reaching up to 9,000 feet. Their mission: Engage the local population and take on the enemy in one of the country's most hostile and volatile areas.

They set up their headquarters at Camp Blessing, in the southern end of the valley, but built a number of combat outposts to be closer to the locals.

But a series of deadly attacks, including betrayals by Afghan security guards who were supposed to protect their bases, forced them to abandon two of those locations, leading the soldiers to the village of Wanat.

And on July 13, 2008, near the end of their 15-month deployment, the deadliest Afghanistan battle yet for the soldiers unfolded. Nine paratroopers died and 27 were wounded in a fight with a well-organized enemy intimately familiar with the harsh terrain. The soldiers wound up abandoning the base.

But amid the heartbreaking loss emerged tales of courage. This is the story of that battle, revealed in interviews with soldiers who were there and the report from the Army's AR-15-6 investigation.

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Not much was happening in Wanat when U.S. soldiers arrived to establish a base, said 28-year-old Staff Sgt. Jonathan Benton.

"We had been there previously to do patrols," he said. "It was pretty quiet, so our guard wasn't on the highest because it just didn't seem suspicious to us."

That started to change when about 45 soldiers began to build Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler and Observation Post Top Side on July 8, 2008. The soldiers worked in shifts, the weapons atop their Humvees manned at all times.

As they worked, they were watched closely by local people who walked by or loitered in a nearby bazaar.

Six mortar men, a three-man TOW missile team and 29 paratroopers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, and five combat engineers from the 62nd Engineer Battalion built fortified patrol base positions, using sandbags, Hesco barriers and concertina wire. They were joined by a two-Marine training team and 24 Afghan soldiers, bringing the force to 72 troops.

They named the base for Sgt. First Class Matthew Kahler. An Afghan security guard who had been hired to guard an OP at nearby Combat Outpost Bella had fatally shot Kahler and then disappeared into the countryside.

OP Top Side, about 100 meters up an incline of terraces, consisted of three levels, with sandbags tied into existing rock walls. The soldiers placed strands of concertina wire around the OP and filled several so-called dead spaces, which they could not see because of the terrain, with extra concertina wire.

Then First Lt. Jonathan Brostrom, the platoon leader, got reports from a local elder that an attack against the Americans was imminent. On July 12, 15 men were seen moving in the mountains to the west and soldiers noticed water running through an irrigation ditch into an unused field near OP Top Side; the rushing sound made it difficult to hear if anybody was approaching.

As the sun began to rise the next morning, shortly after 4, commanders were putting together a 120mm mortar fire mission and TOW missile engagement when the enemy hit the patrol base and OP almost simultaneously.

Enemy fighters, some as close as 50 meters, first targeted the crew-served weapons atop the Humvees.

There was a burst of fire and rocket-propelled grenades tore into the mortar firing position, mortally wounding Spc. Sergio Abad, and striking the TOW missile position. The third RPG to strike the TOW missile position set the soldiers' truck on fire, forcing them to abandon it.

"Initially, everybody thought it was going to be more harassing fire," said Spc. Jeffrey Scantlin. "As the fight went on we realized they were there to stay."

Benton and his squad, which included Scantlin, were positioned near the eastern wall of the patrol base.

"Everybody was pretty rattled at first," Benton said, noting there were multiple RPG teams, some only 50 to 75 meters away.

The soldiers fired back, including using the Humvee-mounted MK 19. "We kept getting rocked a lot with those RPGs," he said. "They kept pushing us back."

When the soldier on the MK 19 ran out of ammo, Sgt. Dylan Meyer, 25, recalled jumping into the turret, reloading and firing. The weapon jammed a number of times and eventually its range of motion was severely restricted, but he continued to fire.

Enemy fighters were popping out from almost every nearby building, he said.

It wasn't long before soldiers started to get hit, said Scantlin, who handed his M249 squad automatic weapon to a fellow soldier and took on the role of medic.

Scantlin, 24, joined the Army through the Special Forces enlistment program, and received advanced medical training before dropping out of the program. That training became critical when the platoon medic was shot in the arm.

At the mortar firing position, the soldiers used fragmentary grenades to ward off the enemy. They fired four 120mm mortar rounds before an RPG ignited the attached ammunition supply point and forced them to return to the patrol base.

Some of the fiercest fighting was taking place at OP Top Side, where nine paratroopers were positioned.

Spc. Jason Bogar fired his M249 squad automatic weapon at enemy fighters to the east from his perch on the main position at the OP.

When the SAW jammed, Bogar placed a tourniquet on the wounded soldier next to him, while Spc. Matthew Phillips threw a grenade at approaching enemy fighters. Phillips was killed as he threw the grenade.

Spc. Jonathan Ayers and Spc. Christopher McKaig laid down massive firepower from an M240B machine gun and McKaig's M4 as they took incoming barrages.

"It was from every direction," McKaig, 34, said. "It was kind of difficult to tell what kind of explosions were which. Sandbags were exploding in front of us."

About 30 minutes into the battle, Ayers told McKaig he was running low on ammunition. McKaig himself had expended 12 magazines, and his M4 was overheating.

The soldiers decided to take cover behind the sandbags and, in an effort to save ammunition, pop up and fire short bursts at the enemy every three seconds, McKaig said.

After doing that four or five times, a bullet skipped off Ayers' helmet.

"He started yelling that he got hit," McKaig said. "He said, 'I'm hit.' I started looking at his body for blood. He said, 'Look at my helmet, look at my helmet.' "

The bullet had left a 3- to 4-inch gash on Ayers' helmet.

"It didn't penetrate him but it scared the both of us," McKaig said. "It was tough for us to jump up again because we knew the [enemy] fire was effective. We told ourselves we had to do it otherwise we'd get overrun."

A few minutes later, Ayers was hit.

"He slumped over the gun," McKaig said. "He coughed up blood and he was looking right at me. It was hard to tell but it seemed like time was slowing down."

Ayers died almost instantly, and McKaig fought on, throwing four hand grenades and firing two Claymore mines.

Shortly afterward, his M4 began to seize, so he picked up Ayers' M4, but a bullet had pierced the receiver.

"I was really mad," he said. "I thought I was going to die."

## **ATTACKS FROM ALL ANGLES**

In the first 15 to 20 minutes, all nine paratroopers at the OP were killed or injured. More enemy fighters moved in from the east to continue the attack on OP Top Side.

Some enemy fighters were only 5 to 10 meters away from the patrol base, firing from the village's hotel, nearby homes and surrounding treetops.

Sgt. Matthew Gobble, 25, was moving to his foxhole when he was wounded by an incoming mortar or RPG.

"I was a little dazed," he said. "I look around and I see people running to different positions."

Gobble moved behind cover and was soon joined by Spc. Tyler Stafford, who had suffered shrapnel wounds all over the left side of his body.

Sgt. Ryan Pitts left Gobble's area for the other side of the OP, where there was a bunker and a radio, Gobble said.

"He sat down in between the sandbags for cover and started calling up fire missions," Gobble said.

McKaig, who had paused to find a working weapon, slid down to aid Gobble and Stafford.

"I kept yelling we need to either fall back or get more ammo," McKaig said.

McKaig decided to run to the patrol base to get ammo, so he dove through an opening and zigzagged his way to the patrol base.

"I didn't think I was going to make it when I jumped out, but I knew I was going to die if I stayed there," McKaig said.

When a soldier tried to fire several Claymore mines, he found that the enemy had disabled or turned them around to face the OP. By that time, the only ammunition available at the OP was a light antitank rocket, which the soldiers fired at enemy fighters who were 15 to 20 meters away.

Enemy fighters, as close as the front wire, began firing RPGs into the tree line and tossing grenades.

Platoon leader Brostrom, Spc. Pruitt Rainey and Spc. Jason Hovater were the first reinforcements to arrive at the OP from the patrol base, but they were killed by enemy fire as they set up a machine gun position.

Benton continued to monitor his radio as more soldiers moved to the OP.

"I heard the OP get hit again and all of them went down," he said.

Benton and his soldiers began to run to the OP.

"In one moment you're focused on what's going on," he said. "The next moment, [I thought about how] I have a wife and three daughters. At the same time you hear more guys getting injured. The first hour was definitely the toughest, when you hear your buddies getting hit and wonder if you're next."

When a second group of reinforcements fought their way to the OP, they rendered medical aid to their wounded buddies but were wounded themselves when a volley of three RPGs hit the OP in quick succession.

Scantlin made his way to the OP and found chaos.

"Until I got to the OP I knew things were bad but I didn't really know how bad," he said. "It was one of those shocking moments."

Scantlin pushed aside his fear.

"I moved around and started to distribute ammo and water, and everywhere I went I seemed to see more bodies," he said.

As the fight intensified, the Americans responded with indirect fire, launching the first of 96 rounds of 155mm mortars. Shortly afterward, B-1 bombers, F-15 and A-10 fighter jets arrived and began dropping the first of 38 precision-guided bombs on enemy targets, allowing the Americans to move their casualties to a staging area for medical evacuation. Also on hand were AH-64 Apache helicopters that fired rockets, missiles and 30mm cannons on the enemy.

The enemy fighters dug into different positions in and around the village, including in the mosque.

### **ONE-WAY OP FIRE**

Some enemy fighters were close enough to throw rocks into the OP perimeter, mimicking grenades, according to the AR 15-6. The enemy could be overhead talking to one another on the north side of the OP, forcing the Americans to whisper into their radios as they relayed to the patrol base the locations of the enemy fighters.

Gobble said at one point he didn't hear any rounds being fired from the OP. "Any type of firing is fire that's coming in on us," he said.

An enemy fighter came in close and began throwing rocks, he said.

"We thought they were grenades because we knew they had grenades," he said. "One lands directly between Stafford's legs. He yelled, 'Grenade!' and when I turned around I saw it was a rock."

The soldiers figured the enemy was trying to fool them into jumping up so they could hit them with gunfire and decided they had to try and find their fellow soldiers.

So Gobble pulled himself up over the sandbags he had been leaning on and saw three soldiers lying on the terrace below. They were dead.

"I couldn't figure out where everyone was," he said. "I told Stafford, 'We've got to make a decision here. Go back to the patrol base or wait for McKaig to come back with more weapons or ammo.' Stafford's telling me, 'I'm messed up real bad. I can't move. I can't fight. We should go back to the vehicle patrol base.'"

They decided to use the terraces on the side of the mountain as cover and use the drainage ditch to move back to the patrol base.

"I jumped down one terrace below, and at this point I'm trying to see if anyone's still alive up there," Gobble said. "The last thing I want to do is leave someone who's still alive up there. I holler, 'Is there anybody left up here?' And nobody answered."

Moving under fire, Gobble and Stafford arrived at the patrol base and reported what they knew to the soldiers there and received medical treatment. They also learned that McKaig had not returned to their position because their commanders wouldn't let him return to the OP on his own, Gobble said.

As more soldiers moved to reinforce the OP, they found Pitts, still alive and hunkered down between two rows of sandbags.

Gobble said he would never have left the OP if he knew his friend was still alive.

"Even today I still beat myself up about it, even though I have talked to him about it," Gobble said. "I look back on it now and our Warrior Ethos says 'I will not leave a fallen comrade,' and that's pretty much what I did."

Gobble said he was on the brink of tears when, four or five days after the battle, he talked to Pitts about what happened that day.

"I felt so bad," he said. "I didn't even know how to explain it to him that I had no idea he was still up there, I had no idea he was in that position. He looked me right in the eye and said, 'I don't blame you.' He said, 'If you hadn't gone down, you and Stafford would probably be dead. You didn't know I was there. I'd still go to combat with you.'"

During the battle, a quick reaction force was dispatched from Camp Blessing, about five miles away. In order to reach Patrol Base Kahler more quickly, the soldiers did not stop to clear locations along the route known for concealing improvised explosive devices. Instead, they fired their crew-served weapons into the draws along the road where IED triggermen could be hiding.

### **'YOU FEEL NUMB'**

At almost 6 a.m., more than 90 minutes after the fighting began, the first medevac helicopter arrived at the patrol base. Reinforcements of 19 paratroopers in four Humvees arrived about 15 minutes later, and they were able to push back a renewed effort by the enemy to attack the patrol base. More paratroopers and Afghan

soldiers continued to arrive at the patrol base throughout the day, and the last medevac helicopter returned to Camp Blessing at 9:55 a.m., almost six hours after the first shot was fired.

"All the bodies were pretty bad," Scantlin said. "One of them ... I had to look at his name tag to know who he was. I couldn't recognize him. You feel numb, and it's very sad. They were all stellar soldiers, and it's nothing I wish anybody to experience."

As Gobble was evacuated from the patrol base, he looked out the window of the helicopter.

"It looked like something out of a Vietnam movie," he said. "There were buildings on fire, one Humvee had pretty much burned to the ground, there were all kinds of trash everywhere, Humvees had numerous holes in them, I could see soldiers running. I took a look at the OP and I saw a medevac bird landing there."

As the troops surveyed the remnants of the battlefield, they found AK-47 shell casings and RPG boosters in numerous hidden locations along the path to the west that ringed the patrol base.

Between 21 and 52 enemy fighters were killed and at least 45 were wounded during the fight, according to the AR 15-6.

In addition, the soldiers found enemy propaganda materials and supplies to make identification cards in one home, and bloody shoes, indicating the enemy had left their shoes in order to blend in with the barefoot and sandal-clad civilian population.

Benton said he was surprised by his reaction after the fighting stopped.

"I thought I would fall apart," he said. "But the ability to drive on ... and continue the mission after that was surprising to ourselves and other people as well."

It wasn't until later that night that the soldiers learned who had been killed.

"A lot of the soldiers clung on to each other," Benton said. "If we didn't have each other I don't think many of us would have made it through."

The next day, Afghan soldiers went to the local district center and disarmed the 20 Afghan policemen stationed there. Coalition and Afghan forces noted that the police station and district center appeared untouched by the previous day's fighting even though the center was in view of avenues of approach used by the enemy.

The police also appeared to be wearing clean new uniforms, which is not typical, and the police appeared to behave as if nothing had happened the day before.

When the Afghan soldiers searched the police station they found more than 100 firearms, thousands of rounds of ammunition, RPGs, shotguns and other weapons. The previous day's search of the village had turned up weapons of the same model as those used by the local Afghan police.

The Americans confiscated the policemen's weapons and left each of the 20 policemen with an AK-47 and 100 bullets.

On the morning of July 15, commanders in Wanat were ordered to move their troops to other locations.

The AR 15-6 concluded that while the soldiers' relationship with the locals in Wanat ranged from hostility or indifference to friendship, the decision to move so close to the village in order to interact with and secure the population was the right one. The investigating officer, a colonel whose name was redacted from the report along with other elements, also said actions by leaders at all levels were based on sound military analysis and risk mitigation, and that coalition forces must continue to conduct operations in and around Wanat.

"You toss and turn sometimes before you go to sleep because you relive some of it," McKaig said. "[But] I think that's what made us fight so hard, too, because our platoon was so close-knit."

"The only choice you can make is fight or not fight," he said, "... and we all decided that we're going to fight if we're going to die."

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## **CASUALTIES**

The nine men killed July 13, 2008, during the battle at Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler and Observation Post Top Side in Wanat, Afghanistan, belonged to C Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment. Many of the soldiers were promoted posthumously.

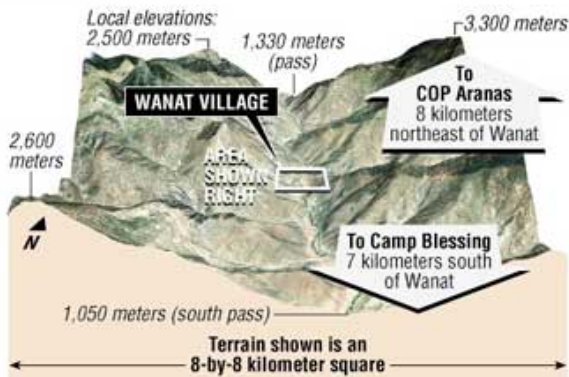
The nine killed are:

- 1st Lt. Jonathan P. Brostrom, 24, of Hawaii.
- Sgt. Israel Garcia, 24, of Long Beach, Calif.
- Cpl. Jonathan R. Ayers, 24, of Snellville, Ga.
- Cpl. Jason M. Bogar, 25, of Seattle.
- Cpl. Jason D. Hovater, 24, of Clinton, Tenn.
- Cpl. Matthew B. Phillips, 27, of Jasper, Ga.
- Cpl. Pruitt A. Rainey, 22, of Haw River, N.C.
- Cpl. Gunnar W. Zwilling, 20, of Florissant, Mo.
- Spc. Sergio S. Abad, 21, of Morganfield, Ky.

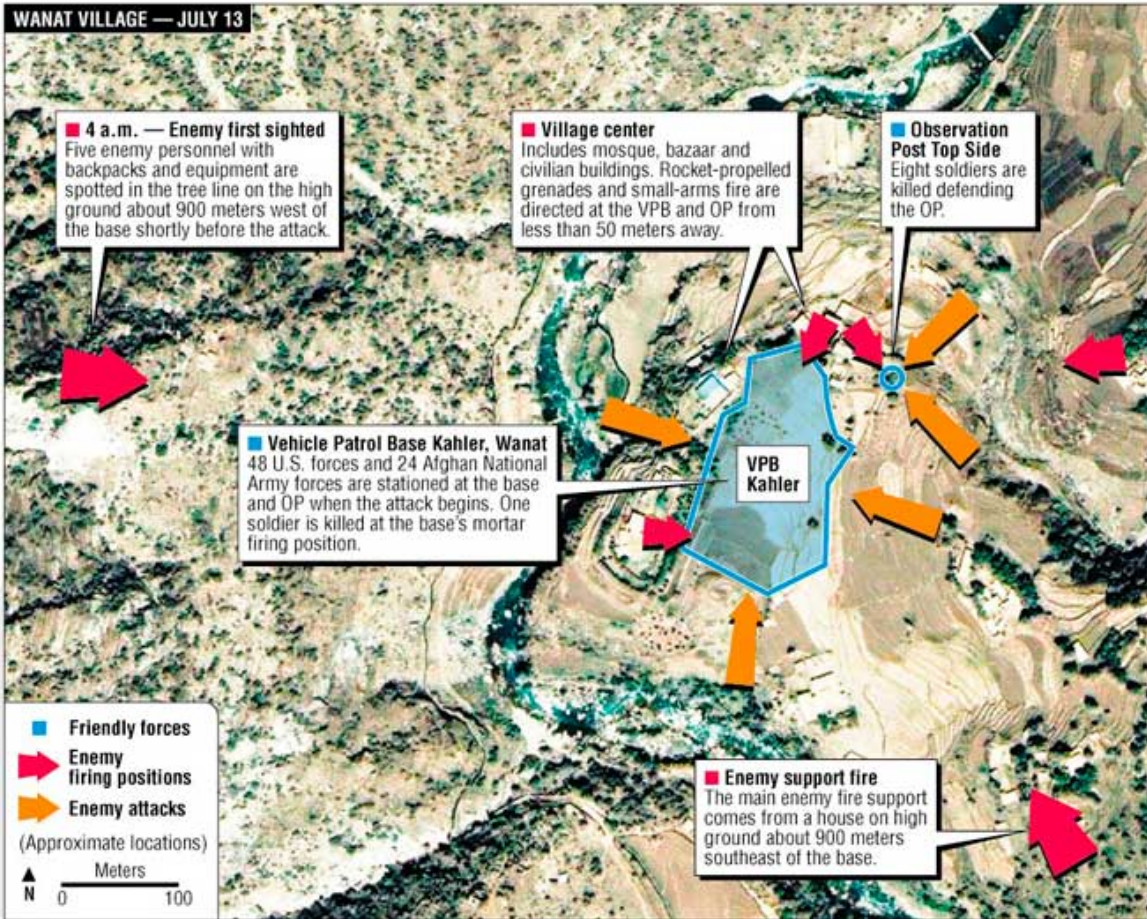
# WANAT BATTLEGROUND

Soldiers from 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, fought off an enemy force of more than 200 during a fierce battle July 13 in Wanat, Afghanistan. The soldiers and their Afghan National Army counterparts held their ground that day, but the battalion suffered heavy losses. Nine soldiers were killed in the battle and 27 were wounded.

## WAYGUL RIVER VALLEY



## WANAT VILLAGE — JULY 13



GeoEye satellite image



**Aug. 22, 2007:** Enemy fighters attack Combat Outpost Aranas, about five miles northeast of Wanat. An Afghan security guard who had worked for soldiers leads the fighters inside the perimeter. Eleven soldiers are wounded.

**Nov. 9, 2007:** Six soldiers are killed and eight others wounded when they are ambushed en route to Combat Outpost Bella, about four miles north of Wanat.

**Jan. 26, 2008:** Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Kahler is killed by a traitorous Afghan security guard as Kahler approaches an observation post near COP Bella.

**Early June 2008:** Commanders decide to close COP Bella and move to the village of Wanat.

**July 8, 2008:** Troops begin closing COP Bella and building Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler and Observation Post Top Side. They plan to later expand the patrol base into a combat outpost.

**July 13, 2008:** An estimated 200 enemy fighters attack Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler and OP Top Side. Nine soldiers are killed and 27 are wounded.

Sources: GeoEye satellite images, NASA/USGS Shuttle Radar Topography Mission elevation data, Army investigation report

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF