

February 24, 2008

# Battle Company Is Out There

By ELIZABETH RUBIN

Correction Appended

WE TUMBLED OUT of two Black Hawks onto a shrub-dusted mountainside. It was a windy, cold October evening. A half-moon illuminated the tall pines and peaks. Through night-vision goggles the soldiers and landscape glowed in a blurry green-and-white static. Just across the valley, lights flickered from a few homes nestled in the terraced farmlands of Yaka China, a notorious village in the Korengal River valley in [Afghanistan](#)'s northeastern province of Kunar. Yaka China was just a few villages south and around a bend in the river from the Americans' small mountain outposts, but the area's reputation among the soldiers was mythic. It was a known safe haven for insurgents. American troops have tended to avoid the place since a nasty fight a year or so earlier. And as Halloween approached, the soldiers I was with, under the command of 26-year-old Capt. Dan Kearney, were predicting their own Yaka China doom.

The Korengal Valley is a lonely outpost of regress: most of the valley's people practice Wahhabism, a more rigid variety of Islam than that followed by most Afghans, and about half of the fighters confronting the U.S. there are homegrown. The rest are Arabs, Pakistanis, Chechens, Uzbeks; the area is close to Pakistan's frontier regions where [Osama bin Laden](#), [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) and other [Al Qaeda](#) figures are often said to be hiding out. The Korengal fighters are fierce, know the terrain and watch the Americans' every move. On their hand-held radios, the old jihadis call the Americans "monkeys," "infidels," "bastards" and "the kids." It's psychological warfare; they know the Americans monitor their radio chatter.

As far as "the kids" are concerned, the insurgents are ghosts — so the soldiers' tactics often come down to using themselves as bait. The insurgents specialize in ambushes, harassing fire and hit-and-run attacks. [NATO](#)'s military advantage in such a war is air power. The soldiers don't hesitate to call in Big Daddy (who, in today's military, often flies in with the voice of a female pilot). But while these flying war machines are saviors to the soldiers, they cannot distinguish between insurgents and civilians.

I went to Afghanistan last fall with a question: Why, with all our technology, were we killing so many civilians in air strikes? As of September of last year, according to [Human Rights Watch](#), NATO was causing alarmingly high numbers of civilian deaths — 350 by the coalition, compared with 438 by the insurgents. The sheer tonnage of metal raining down on Afghanistan was mind-boggling: a million pounds between January and September of 2007, compared with half a million in all of 2006.

After a few days, the first question sparked more: Was there a deeper problem in the counterinsurgency campaign? More than 100 American soldiers were killed last year, the highest rate since the invasion. Why were so many more American troops being killed? To find out, I spent much of the fall in the Korengal Valley and elsewhere in Kunar province alongside soldiers who were making life-and-death decisions almost every day — decisions that led to the deaths of soldiers and of civilians.

## **Subduing the Valley**

OVER THE LAST two years, the Americans have steadily increased their presence in Kunar province, fanning out to the small platoon-size outposts that have become the signature of the new counterinsurgency doctrine in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The Korengal Outpost, nicknamed the KOP, was built in April 2006 on the site of a former timber mill and motel. The soldiers of Battle Company of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team live there in dusty tents and little wooden huts. They now have hot food and a small chow tent with an Internet linkup and a few phones for calling home. But the place was protected by not much more than concertina wire and sentries. Nearly every time I arrived at the KOP our helicopter was greeted by sniper fire or the *dushka* — a Russian-made anti-aircraft gun.

Dan Kearney was essentially lord of the Korengal Valley. A self-described Georgia army brat, he grew up idolizing his warrior dad, Frank Kearney, and wanted to move in his father's world of covert and overt operations. (His father is now a lieutenant general in Special Operations command.) Kearney often calls himself a dumb jock, playing the crass, loudmouthed tough guy with his soldiers. He had been in Iraq and told me he had gone emotionally dead there with all the dying and killing, and stayed that way until the birth of his son a year ago. His hardest day in Iraq was when a close friend, Rob Shaw, was severely wounded by an improvised explosive device that killed his first sergeant and a bunch of their friends — and the next thing he knew their colonel was asking Kearney to step in for Shaw and lead the company.

But as hard as Iraq was, he said, nothing was as tough as the Korengal. Unlike in Iraq, where the captains and lieutenants could let down their guard in a relatively safe, fortified operating base, swapping stories and ideas, here they had no one to talk to and were almost as vulnerable to enemy fire inside the wire as out. Last summer, insurgents stormed one of the bases in a nearby valley and wounded 16.

And unlike every other place I've been in Afghanistan — even the Pech River valley, just an hour's drive away — the Korengal had no Afghan police or district leaders for the Americans to work with. The Afghan government, and Afghans down the valley, seemed to have washed their hands of the Korengalis. As Kearney put it to me one day at the KOP, the Korengal is like a tough Los Angeles neighborhood, "and we're the L.A.P.D. kicking in the door, arresting

guys, demanding information about the gangs, and slowly the people say, 'No, we don't know anything, because that guy in the gang, he's with my sister, and that other guy, he's my uncle's cousin.' Now we've angered them for so many years that they've decided: 'I'm gonna stick with the A.C.M.' — anticoalition militants — “ 'who are my brothers and I'm not gonna rat them out.' ”

So what exactly was his job out here? To subdue the valley. It's a task the Marines had tried, and then the soldiers of the Army's 10th Mountain Division — a task so bloody it seemed to drive the 10th Mountain's soldiers to a kind of madness. Kearney's soldiers told me they'd been spooked by the weird behavior of their predecessors last May: near the end of their tour, many would sit alone on the fire base talking to themselves. Privates disobeyed their sergeants, and squad leaders refused to step outside the wire to show the new boys the terrain. No one wanted to be shot in the last days of his tour.

Kearney kept his soldiers on a tight leash at first. Col. John Nicholson, a brigade commander with the 10th Mountain Division, had promised the Afghans he would not bomb their homes. When Kearney and the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team officially took over from the division's 3rd Brigade Combat Team on June 5, they kept that promise. “My guys would tell me they didn't know which houses they're shooting from, and I'd tell them they can't shoot back into the villages,” Kearney recalled. “They hated me.” The insurgents were testing the new captain, he suspected, by deliberately shooting from homes. On July 10, the Korengalis ambushed his soldiers from one house they often used — a three-story mansion on a fertile outcropping, with balconies overlooking the valley, that belonged to Haji Matin, a timber baron turned insurgent leader. It had been the scene of fighting in the past.

When Kearney's moment of decision came, two of 2nd Platoon's sergeants, Kevin Rice and Tanner Stichter, had been shot, and the fight was still going on. Kearney could see a woman and child in the house. “We saw people moving weapons around,” Kearney told me. “I tried everything. I fired mortars to the back side to get the kids to run out the front. I shot to the left, to the right. The Apache” — an attack helicopter — “got shot at and left. I kept asking for a bomb drop, but no one wanted to sign off on the collateral damage of dropping a bomb on a house.” Finally, he said, “We shot a javelin and a tow” — both armor-piercing missiles. “I didn't get shot at from there for two months,” Kearney said. “I ended up killing that woman and that kid.”

Kearney could often sound cold-blooded, like when he'd march into the mess tent in shorts, improvising rap lyrics about killing bad guys. But then he'd switch to counselor, trying to salvage a soldier's marriage, or he'd joke with a Korengali elder about arranging a marriage between his own infant son and the elder's daughter to make peace. The performances steeled him against shouldering so much mortality. As he put it, “The only reason anyone's

listening to me in this valley right now is 'cause I'm dropping bombs on them." Still, he wasn't going to let himself shoot at houses every time his unit took fire: "I'd just create more people that hate me."

## **A Blood Feud**

IN LATE 2001, the B-52 symbolized, for many Afghans, liberation from [Taliban](#) rule. They wove images of the plane into their carpets. Urban legends sprang up about the B-52's power, how the planes glided along unscathed, even as the Taliban barraged them with antiaircraft fire. Kabulis spread the story that the B-52s had dropped thousands of leaflets saying, "Hit us if you can!" — and afterward the Taliban didn't waste their bullets on the B-52s.

But the jets that defeated the Taliban were wiping out innocent families as well. In July 2002, Special Forces in the mountains of Oruzgan thought they were destroying a high-value Taliban target, but instead they rocketed and bombed an engagement party. About 40 Afghans were killed and nearly 100 were wounded.

Such mistakes have continued, though the causes can change. The insurgents regularly use civilians as shields, children as spotters and women as food suppliers. NATO killing civilians is great propaganda for the Taliban. At the same time, to Afghans with little technological sophistication, the scale and impersonality make the accidents seem intentional. Many are convinced the Americans are deliberately bombing them and even deliberately aiding a Taliban comeback. The reality is that bombs are only as accurate as the intelligence on the ground — and since 9/11, the U.S. and NATO have used air power as a substitute for ground troops.

By now, seven years of air strikes and civilian casualties, humiliating house searches and arbitrary detentions have pushed many families and tribes to revenge. The Americans then see every Afghan in those pockets of recalcitrance as an enemy. If you peel back the layers, however, there's always a local political story at the root of the killing and dying. That original misunderstanding and grievance fertilizes the land for the Islamists. Whom do you want to side with: your brothers in God's world or the infidel thieves?

In the case of the Korengal Valley, the story began about a century ago, when the tribesmen now known as Korengalis were kicked out of the province of Nuristan (immediately north of Kunar province) and settled in the Korengal, which was rich with timber forests and farmland. Over time they made an alliance with one branch of the large Safi tribe, which once dominated Kunar politics. But down the road along the Pech River valley, the rest of the Safis opposed the Korengalis.

As the Afghans tell the story, from the moment the Americans arrived in 2001, the Pech Valley timber lords and warlords had their ear. Early on, they led the Americans to drop bombs on the mansion of their biggest rival — Haji Matin. The air strikes killed several members of his family, according to local residents, and the Americans arrested others and sent them to the prison at [Bagram](#) Air Base. The Pech Valley fighters working alongside the Americans then pillaged the mansion. And that was that. Haji Matin, already deeply religious, became ideological and joined with Abu Ikhlas, a local Arab linked to the foreign jihadis.

By 2007, the Americans understood what happened. Last year, the governor of Nuristan even sat them down with the Korengali elders to try and mediate between the two sides. Nothing came of it. Kearney tried to dig deeper, sending e-mail messages to anthropologists and Afghan experts to get their guidance. He spent hours listening to Haji Zalwar Khan — who acted as the valley’s representative to the Americans and the government — talk about history and grievances. Haji Zalwar, a jihadi veteran of the anti-Soviet fight, bore the valley’s burden almost alone and had the grim demeanor to prove it. Kearney met as many villagers as possible to learn the names of all the elders and their families. But he inherited a blood feud between the Korengalis and the Americans that he hadn’t started, and he was being sucked into its logic.

### **“Serious P.T.S.D.”**

LAST AUTUMN,, after five months of grueling foot patrols up and down the mountains, after fruitless encounters with elders who smiled in the morning and were host to insurgents in the evening and after losing friends to enemy fire, Captain Kearney’s men could relate to the sullen, jittery rage of their predecessors in the 10th Mountain Division. Many wondered what they were doing out there at all.

Kearney refused to entertain that thought. He would tell his visitors, whether generals or reconstruction teams, that his campaign plan was clear, if modest: “It’s World War II Pacific-island hopping, turning one village at a time.” Over five months, he had gained about 400 yards of terrain. When some generals and colonels had flown in for a quick tour, and Kearney was showing them the lay of the land, one officer said to another, as Kearney later recalled it, “I don’t know why we’re even out here.” Another officer jumped in to talk up the logic of the operation. Kearney told me he thought: Sort your stuff out before you come out here. My boys are sucking it up and dying. . . . For besides being lord of the valley, he had another role to play — motivator, disciplinarian and confidant to his soldiers. “It’s like being in charge of a soap opera,” he told me. “I feel like Dr. Phil with guns.”

One full-moon night I was sitting outside a sandbag-reinforced hut with Kearney when a young sergeant stepped out hauling the garbage. He looked around at the illuminated

mountains, the dust, the rocks, the garbage bin. The monkeys were screeching. “I hate this country!” he shouted. Then he smiled and walked back into the hut. “He’s on medication,” Kearney said quietly to me.

Then another soldier walked by and shouted, “Hey, I’m with you, sir!” and Kearney said to me, “[Prozac](#). Serious P.T.S.D. from last tour.” Another one popped out of the HQ cursing and muttering. “Medicated,” Kearney said. “Last tour, if you didn’t give him information, he’d burn down your house. He killed so many people. He’s checked out.”

As I went to get some hot chocolate in the dining tent, the peaceful night was shattered by mortars, rockets and machine-gun fire banging and bursting around us. It was a coordinated attack on all the fire bases. It didn’t take long to understand why so many soldiers were taking antidepressants. The soldiers were on a 15-month tour that included just 18 days off. Many of them were “stop-losses,” meaning their contracts were extended because the army is stretched so thin. You are not allowed to refuse these extensions. And they felt eclipsed by Iraq. As Sgt. Erick Gallardo put it: “We don’t get supplies, assets. We scrounge for everything and live a lot more rugged. But we know the war is here. We got unfinished business.”

For sanity, all they had was the medics’ tent, video games and movies — “Gladiator,” “Conan the Barbarian,” “Dogma,” Monty Python. Down the road in the Pech Valley, soldiers played cricket with Afghan kids and had organized boxing and soccer matches. Lt. Kareem Hernandez, a New Yorker running a base on the Pech River, regularly bantered over dinner with the Afghan police. Neighbors would come by with tips. But here in the Korengal, the soldiers were completely alienated from the local culture. One night while watching a scene from [HBO’s “Rome”](#) in which a Roman soldier tells a slave he wants to marry her, a soldier asked which century the story was set in. “First B.C. or A.D.,” said another soldier. The first shook his head: “And they’re still living like this 800 meters outside the wire.”

At the end of the summer, Kearney told his dad, “My boys are gonna go crazy out here.” The army sent a shrink, and Kearney got a wake-up call about his own leadership. He discovered that half his men thought he was playing Russian roulette with their lives and the other half thought he stuck too closely to the rules of engagement. “The moral compass of the army is the P.L. and the C.O.” — the platoon leader and the commanding officer, Kearney told me. “I told every one of my P.L.’s that they have to set that moral standard, that once you slip to the left, you can’t pull your guys back in.”

## **Operation Rock Avalanche**

ON OCT. 19, Kearney and Battle Company were air assaulted into the insurgents’ backyard for a mission that many thought insane. It was called Rock Avalanche and would last about six days. One of its main targets was the village of Yaka China.

Kearney, being the good soldier, tried to pump up his boys with the promise that they would be going after insurgents who had killed their friends and whose grizzled faces were plastered on their bad-guy family-tree wall at the KOP. They would upset the guerrillas' safe haven and their transit routes from Pakistan. They would persuade the villagers to stop harboring the bad guys by offering an \$11 million road project that had just been approved by NATO and Kabul and would be built by the Kunar Provincial Reconstruction Team. And they'd complete the "human terrain mapping" that is part of the new counterinsurgency doctrine — what families dominate, who's married, who's feuding, are there divisions to be exploited?

It was a lot to ask of young soldiers: play killer, cultural anthropologist, hearts-and-minds winner and then killer again. Which is why, just hours before the mission was to begin, some soldiers were smearing black-and-green war paint on their faces when their sergeant shouted: "Take it off. Now!" Why? They'd frighten the villagers.

It seemed a moot point as Rock Avalanche got under way. Apache gunships were scanning the ridges for insurgents. Other helicopters were dropping off more soldiers. An unmanned drone was whining overhead as it sent infrared video feeds to a large screen back at the battalion's headquarters, Camp Blessing, six miles north of the KOP.

Almost immediately, high on a mountainside looking down on Yaka China, Kearney had to play God. In a ditch to his left, Jesse Yarnell, a young intelligence officer, along with John, an Afghan interpreter, were intercepting insurgents on their two-way radios saying, "We see them, we're going to wait."

"They're right down there!" said Kevin Caroon as he gazed out of his night vision. Caroon, from Connecticut and a father of two, was an Air Force JTAC — the joint terminal attack controller who talks the combat pilots onto their targets. "See that? Two people moving south 400 meters away from us," Caroon said, pointing down the mountain face. More insurgents were located nearby.

"Sir, what do you want to do?" Caroon asked Kearney.

"I want them dead," Kearney said.

"Engage them?"

"Yes. Take 'em out."

Caroon radioed the pilot his instructions, "On-scene commander's intent is to engage." And that was it.

A sudden wail pierced the night sky. It was Slasher, an AC-130 gunship, firing bullets the size of Coke bottles. Flaming shapes ricocheted all around the village. Kearney was in overdrive. The soldiers back at the KOP were radioing in that the drone was tracking 10 men near the tree line. Yarnell was picking up insurgent radio traffic. “They’re talking about getting ready to hit us,” someone said. The pilot could see five men, one entering a house, then, no, some were in the trees, some inside, and then, multiple houses. He wanted confirmation — were all these targets hostile? Did Kearney have any collateral-damage concerns? Cursing, Kearney told them to engage the men outside but not to hit the house. The pilots radioed back that men had just run inside. No doubt there would be a family. Caroon reminded Kearney that Slasher had only enough fuel to stay in position for 10 more minutes.

“What do you want to do, sir?” Caroon asked him.

Kearney radioed his soldiers back at the KOP to contact his boss, Lt. Col. Bill Ostlund. Ostlund, a Nebraska social scientist who could switch effortlessly from aggressive bomber to political negotiator talking family values with Afghan tribal elders, was in the crowded tactical-operations room at Camp Blessing watching the drone’s video feed and getting the same intelligence. He signed off on collateral damage, and Kearney turned to Caroon: “Take out the compound. And anyone that comes out.”

Flaming rockets flashed through the sky. Thunder rumbled and echoed through the valley. Then there was a pause. Slasher asked Caroon whether the insurgents were still talking. Kearney shouted over to Yarnell in his ditch, “You picking anything up?” Nothing. More spitting rockets.

The night seemed incomprehensible and interminable. Slasher departed and Gunmetal — an Apache helicopter — swept in. Radio communication kept breaking down. At one point the crew of Gunmetal, sensing no hostile intent, refused Kearney’s orders to fire. Then suddenly Gunmetal was rocketing at figures scattering for cover. Then Slasher was back in the sky doing more “work.” In the predawn light Bone — the nickname for the B-1 bomber that seemed to be the soldiers’ favorite — winged in and dropped two 2,000-pound bombs above the village. Finally, around dawn, a weary Kearney, succumbing to gallows humor, adrenaline and exhaustion, said: “O.K., I’ve done my killing for the week. I’m ready to go home.”

Kearney estimated that they killed about 20 people, adding: “I’m not gonna lie. Some are probably civilians.”

In the logic of war, the best antidote for the menacing ghostliness of the ambushing enemy is killing and knowing you’ve killed them. The soldiers in the Korengal almost never had that kind of satisfaction. Any insurgents, if they were killed, would be buried fast, and all that was

left in their wake were wounded civilians. That morning, after a long night of fighting, was no different. Within an hour or so, Lt. Matt Piosa, an earnest, 24-year-old [West Point](#) grad, and his patrol were in Yaka China. They radioed that the village elders were asking to bury their dead. They'd also collected wounded civilians. The tally was bad — 5 killed and 11 wounded, all of them women, girls and boys.

Kearney radioed Camp Blessing the bad news and dropped his head between his knees. Killing women and children was tragedy enough. But civilian casualties are also a political issue. If he didn't manage to explain his actions to the Yaka China villagers and get them to understand his intentions, he could lose them to the enemy. Meanwhile, Yarnell and his team were intercepting radio messages like: "Be very quiet. Move the things over here. Pray for us." At least some of the insurgents from the previous night's fight had survived to fight again. The planes were tracking them hiding along a creek. But after the civilian casualties of the night before, senior commanders were refusing to give Kearney clearance to bomb or rocket them.

The short day was fading. The sun dropped behind the peaks. The cold winds rattled our bones. The soldiers tried to make light of their conviction that they'd be attacked by those insurgents dissolving into the villages. Their fears were realized.

## **Hearts and Minds**

TO TRY TO ACQUIRE allies, Kearney and some of his men flew down the next day to Yaka China. With nowhere else to land, the Black Hawk helicopters descended on the roof of a house not far below the compound that Slasher, the AC-130, had rocketed the night of the 19th. Dust and dried grass whipped across the house and the villagers' faces. Just to endear themselves even more, the soldiers from Battle Company had to step on harvested corn as they climbed down; it was drying on the second story.

The adversaries faced off in the courtyard as chickens sprinted in and out. On one side were Kearney, Ostlund and Larry LeGree, a naval nuclear engineer and head of the Provincial Reconstruction Team, together with their entourage, including interpreters, all in futuristic high-tech gear. On the other side were the Korengali elders, who looked as if they stepped out of "Lord of the Rings" with their crooked walking sticks, beards dyed red and blue eyes framed by kohl. With no Afghan government out here, the elders are the only channel for communication. The younger men sat on the ground, wrapped in shawls and bold indifference.

Kearney squatted and told the Korengalis that when he came to this region he hoped to walk into Yaka China and find out what the villagers needed. Instead, he found that there were some 50 insurgents in and around the village. He pointed to the evidence — military radio

batteries that his men had found, binoculars, rockets, an old pistol, a small pamphlet titled, in Arabic, “How to Kill,” and one in Pashto, “The Concise Book on the Virtues of Jihad” — that had been collected in the general area by Afghan soldiers and Americans. It was not a very incriminating haul, and everyone knew it.

The day before, a U.S. medevac had airlifted out the wounded civilians from the village. Humanitarian assistance was air-dropped in, including concrete for retaining walls, rice and blankets for winter. The provisions were not compensation, Kearney told the elders. “It’s what the government does for their people when there is security here,” he said. He asked them to tell him where in the mountains the insurgents were hiding their supplies. “That way I don’t have to come in here and shoot at you and identify the good guys from the bad guys,” he said.

To keep his bearings amid the hostile faces, Kearney kept appealing to Haji Zalwar Khan, the leading go-between among the valley’s elders. He made his fortune in the timber trade and blamed the Americans for shutting it down. He tried to placate both the Americans and the insurgents. He was not about to side with Kearney in public. “How can I know where you found these things?” he asked, referring to the jihadi items. “In the mountain? The house? How do I know whom they belong to?”

Kearney smiled. He was getting used to the routine between the Americans and the villagers — miscommunication and deception. The encounter felt as much performative, a necessary part of the play, as substantive. And I wondered how Kearney was going to keep his sanity for 10 more months.

Just a week or so earlier, I had been at the KOP when villagers from Aliabad — a mile south of the KOP, and the home village of Haji Zalwar Khan — complained to Kearney that some ordnance had hit a house. Later they sent up the homeowner’s teenage son to wrest compensation from Kearney. As we walked to the KOP’s entrance to meet the boy, a shot rang out, then another. The bullets smacked the dirt in front of us. Kearney shoved me into a shack where an Afghan was cooking bread. A few more shots were fired. It was “One-Shot Freddy,” as the soldiers refer to him, an insurgent shooter everyone had a theory about regarding the vintage of his gun, his identity, his tactics — but neither Kearney’s scouts nor Shadow the drone could ever track him. I accidentally slashed my forearm on a nail in the shack and as I watched the blood pool I thought that if I had to live with Freddy and his ilk for months on end I, too, would see a forked tongue in every villager and start dreaming of revenge.

Kearney was angry. “Taliban shot your house?” he asked the boy from Aliabad. An interpreter translated.

No, said the boy, Americans did.

“What’d we shoot with?”

“I don’t know the weapon, but there’s little holes and two big holes.”

“I didn’t shoot into Aliabad,” said Kearney, adding that if one of his soldiers had, it was because insurgents were firing from the village.

“No one shoots from the village,” said the boy, though everyone knew insurgents had wounded several of Kearney’s soldiers by shooting from the mosque, the cemetery, the school. . . .

The boy changed course, “God knows better than me,” and that sent Kearney on a riff: “Yes. God does and God talks to me and told me they do.” And by the way, hadn’t the boy noticed that the bad guys always start shooting first?

“O.K., then shoot them, not our house,” the boy said.

“Then tell me where the bad guys are,” Kearney said. The boy said he didn’t know. What he knew was that the Americans were always shooting at the village.

This went on for some time. When the boy again protested that no one shoots from his village, Kearney interrupted him. “Aminullah does,” he said. Aminullah was a native of Aliabad and a rising figure in the valley’s insurgency.

The boy smiled.

“You’re smiling because you know I’m right,” Kearney said.

“You’re right,” the boy said. “So shoot the cemetery, not our house.”

Kearney moved closer to him. “Look, if you want help with your house, all you have to do is ask. But don’t accuse us every time something goes wrong.”

The boy laughed and repeated that he didn’t know where the bad guys were.

“It’s crazy, man. They must be ghosts!” Kearney said, laughing.

“Aminullah doesn’t come to Aliabad anymore,” the boy said, perhaps trying to give Kearney a bone.

Kearney leapt at it. “So Aminullah is bad?”

“Yes.”

“Ah! Finally! We’re getting somewhere.” Kearney took off his helmet and squeezed his hands together and rocked as he sat on a wall. “What about Mohammad Tali, he’s a good guy isn’t he?” Kearney asked.

Smiling again, the boy looked at the dirt: “No. You already told us he’s a bad guy.”

“Ah!” Kearney said, throwing up his hands. “So you were down there in the village when I gave radios and food. But instead you say I shoot at you all the time?” Kearney swung his legs back and forth. “Hey dude, ask yourself. Why would I bring you radios and food *and* shoot at you? Does Aminullah? No. What happened that day after I left?” The boy said all he knew was that the villagers went home and “they” started shooting. “Where?” Kearney asked, “from your village?”

“What can I say? The Americans were in my village.”

“Yeah, so I was doing good stuff for you guys and they shot at me. And what I’m trying to say is they could have shot at you again. And if I shoot at your house I’ll help. We’ll fix up that wall. I’m not here to hurt you.”

Everyone was getting restless in the little check post. Kearney tried to lighten up a bit. He asked the boy what he thought about the Americans.

“You build roads and clinics and schools and are here to help,” the boy said.

“Cop out,” Kearney shouted, chuckling. “Easy answer. Hey dude, you can say we’re rotten and messing up your lumber trade.” The boy laughed. Kearney laughed. Pfc. [Michael Cunningham](#), the radio operator, and Sgt. Taylor White, who always manned the check post, both laughed.

“See, I knew it,” Kearney said. “That’s what you really think. Think I want to be here?”

“Yeah,” the boy said. “I think so.”

“Dude. I got a wife and son. I came here to help you out. If you give me as much help as possible I’ll get out of here a hell of a lot faster.”

Kearney told him to enjoy Ramadan, and then shouted, “Where’s my fuzzy friend?” as he looked about for Jericho, the puppy whose ears were chopped off by an Afghan worker: it was pre-emptive preparation for dog fighting — the ears would just give an enemy dog something to grab onto. “I need someone to make me happy. Jericho, I need some love.”

Jericho appeared, leaping about. Kearney picked him up. “Hey, what’s up buddy? You’re a good boy. You smell like dirt.”

Kearney turned to Cunningham and White and said, “Well, he’s the first to admit Aminullah’s bad.” And give or take a little unreliable information shared here and there, that was the Korengal routine.

## **Fight Time**

THE DAY AFTER the meeting with the elders of Yaka China, Yarnell and John could hear insurgents trying to pinpoint where Kearney and his men were. The helicopters had moved us to a ridge line, about 8,400 feet high, straddling the Korengal and Shuriak Valleys. The insurgents used the deep caves, boulders and forests as hideouts and transit routes between Pakistan and Afghanistan. We could hear someone who called himself Obeid saying he’d do whatever the Yaka China elders decided — whether to cooperate with the Americans or take revenge. By evening the elders had apparently reached their verdict. It was fight time.

Kearney, too, had reached a verdict. He would fool the insurgents, feigning a troop extraction when the helicopters came for resupply and pushing out his best guys in small “kill teams.” We heard the insurgents say, “We have wolves on them,” meaning spotters. A hoarse, whispering insurgent had eyes on either Sgt. Larry Rougle and his scouts or on Lieutenant Piosa and his rear guard. There was joking that Rougle and Piosa should dance and see which one the whisperer was spying on. Then nothing happened for almost 24 hours.

Rougle — who was called Wildcat — was on his sixth deployment since Sept. 11, 2001. He was with the first group of Rangers in Afghanistan. Even his rough background was something of a legend; he would tell how he grew up in a South Jersey gang, shot a guy, went to “juvie,” and there taught himself Russian (though he was estranged from his Russian father), taught himself politics, history, zoology. At night out in the woods, he’d tell his fellow scouts, “You know penguins are monogamous?”

I hung out with Piosa and his crew. His white skin, red hair and blue eyes belied the months of constant warfare he and his platoon had scraped through. It was a beautiful autumn afternoon and the soldiers were joking around, heating up Meals Ready to Eat, spitting gobs of Copenhagen and then, in a moment, recess was over. The insurgents were on them. Bullets ricocheted all through the woods. A strange silence fell as everyone scrambled for cover. Three of us crouched behind a skinny pine tree. And the silence broke: curses, shouting.

“Where’s it coming from?”

“Where are my guys?”

“Jones, are you seeing things?”

More bullets. Cracks against the tree trunks. Bits of confusing information were coming in on Piosa’s radio.

“They’re comin’ up the low ground at 2-4” — Sergeant Rice’s call sign.

“One W.I.A. hit in the arm.” Then there was panic and screaming.

“The enemy’s overtaken the hill,” bellowed Pvt. Sterling Dunn from further down the trees.

“2-4 is hit” — that was Rice.

“Wildcat is run over the hill” — that was Rougle.

“Get a team to run up there and take that hill. They pushed Wildcat over the hill!” Piosa shouted, trying over and over to reach Rice and Rougle, but getting no answer. The battalion surgeon, Capt. Joel Dean, and a sergeant sprinted up the hill to get to the wounded. As the first Americans neared Rice and Rougle’s positions they were fired on from those same positions. What was going on?

I followed Piosa through the brush toward the ridge. We came upon Rice and Specialist Carl Vandenberg behind some trees. Vandenberg was drenched in blood. The shot to his arm had hit an artery. Rice was shot in the stomach. A soldier was using the heating chemicals from a Meal Ready to Eat to warm Vandenberg and keep him from going into shock.

Piosa moved on to the hill where the men had been overrun. I saw big blue-eyed John Clinard, a sergeant from North Carolina, falling to pieces. He worshiped Rougle. “Sergeant Rougle is dying. It’s my fault. . . . I’m sorry. . . . I tried to get up the hill. . . .” Sergeant Rougle was lying behind him. Someone had already covered him with a blanket. Only the soles of his boots were visible.

“There’s nothing you could do,” Piosa said, grabbing Clinard’s shoulder. “You got to be the man now. You can do it. I need you to get down to Rice and Vandenberg and get them to the medevac.” Clinard wiped his face, seemed to snap to and headed off through the trees.

Two of Rice’s squad mates appeared, eyes dilated. They couldn’t believe they’d seen, up close, the ghosts they’d been fighting for the last five months. “I saw him in the eyes,” Specialist Marc Solowski said. “He looked at me. I shot him.” He and Specialist Michael Jackson had crawled up the hill twice trying to retake it. Each time the insurgents in “manjammies”

whipped them back with machine-gun fire. There was blood on the stones around us. Some thought they saw blood trailing down toward the village of Landigal, where they were sure an insurgent had dashed into a cottage.

“We’re not losing this hill again,” Piosa shouted. “This hill is ours!” He wanted bombs to be dropped immediately.

“There’s women praying in that house,” Dunn shouted back.

I was fixating on Rougle’s black hat, lying by the bloodied rock patch where Dunn was sitting, when Sergeant Stichter, Dunn’s senior, appeared, out of breath and shaking, back from tending to Vandenberg. He needed water. The F-15 known as Dude was en route, the Apaches were chasing men and Kearney — who had bolted down the mountain, throwing grenades in caves — was barking orders. Kearney was badly shaken. He adored Rougle, and he’d broken down when he saw his big old buddy Rice bleeding at the landing zone. Rice comforted him and then lumbered to the helicopter, just asking to talk to his wife before they put him under.

The insurgents had run off with some of Rougle, Rice and Vandenberg’s stuff — ammunition, communication equipment, night vision goggles, machine guns. Kearney wanted the equipment back. He wanted to punish the valley. Stichter had his eyes on a guy pacing a rooftop in Landigal and wanted to blow his head off. Specialist Mitchell Raeon, whose uniform was now soaked in Rougle’s blood, had the guy in his scope but couldn’t range that far. “That’s a female,” Dunn said.

Kearney had identified insurgents who’d dashed into a house and wanted to hit them, but Stichter got back word from Camp Blessing saying the target was too close to other houses. Kearney sent back a reminder — you let some guys get away the other night. It was impossible to know for sure, but Kearney believed they were the guys who had killed Rougle, and now, he said, you’re going to let another group get away?

Someone cursed, then said, “They’re all leaving the house.”

Kearney radioed down to one of his lieutenants at an observation post. “Where are they going?” Yarnell heard the insurgents say they were coming back for the rest of the equipment. And then, with no warning, an F-15 dropped a bomb on Landigal, but off target, or so it seemed. Kearney was furious. He was sure headquarters had intentionally missed the house he had wanted hit.

I noticed Raeon was packing and unpacking Rougle's things. Rougle's scouts were in disarray, rudderless, and admitting it. Raeon said he kept seeing in his mind Rougle's face alert and then dead, switching back and forth; he wanted it to stop.

The next day brought another brief firefight, and Rougle's scouts rallied swiftly. They said they felt him watching and proud. There were more bomb drops and refusals to drop bombs, and then Becky, everyone's favorite Apache pilot, swept in. Not only did she offer the comforting voice of a woman seeping right into their ears, but Becky was one of the most aggressive shooters. She flew up and down the canyon walls seeking out and rocketing insurgents. We heard them on the radio again boasting about retreating to safety under fire. They talked about the strike in Landigal that they thought might have killed Azizullah — “a real bad guy,” the radio operator told me.

Kearney was watching a crow flying above us. “Taliban are right,” he said. “Like they said yesterday, follow the birds, they follow the Americans. I wish I was made as strong as haj” — their nickname for insurgents. “They were balls to do what they did. And guess what? I'm not gonna lie. They won.”

## **Killing Together**

AS WE WAITED for dusk to get back to the KOP, we all knew the insurgents were nearby, eyes on Kearney, eyes on the soldiers down in the valley. Even nightfall was no comfort because the full moon was floodlighting the Korengal. I returned to the KOP by helicopter with Kearney, while 1st and 2nd Platoons had to make the long trek back on foot. As soon as 1st Platoon set off, the insurgents struck with a devastating L-shaped ambush. All Kearney could do, back at the KOP, was calm his boys on the radio, get in the medevac and invoke the gods of war. The Apaches, Slasher and Bone dropped bombs all night. The soldiers and insurgents were so close that when Slasher, the AC-130, flew in, the pilot coordinated not with the JTAC but with Sgt. Roberto Sandifer, the platoon's forward observer, who at that moment was under fire watching one of his guys die.

Around midnight, 1st Platoon filed into the KOP, eyes bulging, drenched in sweat, river water and blood. They were hauling the belongings of Mohammad Tali, a high-value target. Specialist Sal Giunta had killed him.

The next day I climbed up to the KOP and found Specialist Giunta, a quiet Iowan lofted into a heroism he didn't want. His officers were putting him up for a medal of honor. Giunta told me the story of that night, how they'd barely moved 300 yards before they were blasted. Giunta was fourth in the file when it happened, and he jumped into a ditch. He couldn't figure out why they were getting hit from where Joshua Brennan and baby-faced Franklin Eckrode should have been leading up ahead. He knew it must be bad, but as he leapt up to

check he got whacked with a bullet in his armored chest plate. It threw him down. They were taking fire from three sides. He grabbed some grenades: “I couldn’t throw as far as Sergeant Gallardo. We were looking like retards and I decided to run out in front of the grenades.” He found Eckrode with gunshot wounds. “He was down but moving and trying to fix his SAW” — a heavy machine gun — “so I just kept on running up the trail. It was cloudy. I was running and saw dudes. Plural.”

He couldn’t figure out who they were. Then he realized they were hauling Brennan off through the forest. “I started shooting,” he recalled. “I emptied that magazine. They dropped Brennan.” Giunta scrambled up to Brennan. He was a mess. His lower jaw was shot off. “He was still conscious. He was breathing. He was asking for morphine. I said, ‘You’ll get out and tell your hero stories,’ and he was like, ‘I will, I will.’ ”

They were still taking fire. No one was there to help. Hugo Mendoza, their platoon medic, was back in another ditch, calling: “I’m bleeding out. I’m dying.” Giunta saw Brennan’s eyes go back. His breathing was bad. Giunta got Brennan to squeeze his hand. A medic showed up out of the sky. They prepared Brennan to be hoisted to the medevac in a basket. Soon he would be dead.

As the medevacs flew out, Sergeant Sandifer had talked in air cover: Slasher, the AC-130. The pilot was a woman and, Sandifer later told me, “It was so reassuring for us to hear her voice.” She spotted guys hiding and asked if she was clear to engage. “ ‘You’re cleared hot,’ I told her. And we killed two people together.” But, at this point, the killings were no consolation to Sandifer.

As Giunta said, “The richest, most-trained army got beat by dudes in manjammies and A.K.’s.” His voice cracked. He was not just hurting, he was in a rage. And there was nothing for him to do with it but hold back his tears, and bark — at the Afghans for betraying them, at the Army for betraying them. He didn’t run to the front because he was a hero. He ran up to get to Brennan, his friend. “But they” — he meant the military — “just keep asking for more from us.” His contract would be up in 18 days but he had been stop-lossed and couldn’t go home. Brennan himself was supposed to have gotten out in September. He’d been planning to go back to Wisconsin where his dad lived, play his guitar and become a cop.

Sandifer was questioning why they were sticking it out in the Korengal when the people so clearly hated them. He was haunted by Mendoza’s voice calling to him: “I’m bleeding out. I’m dying.” He worried that the Korengal was going to push them off the deep end. In his imagination it had already happened. One day an Afghan visited their fire base, Sandifer told me. “I was staring at him, on the verge of picking up my weapon to shoot him,” he said. “I know right from wrong, but even if I did shoot him everyone at the fire base would have been

O.K. We're all to the point of 'Lord of the Flies.' " And they still had 10 months to go in the Korengal.

I wondered how Kearney was going to win back his own guys, let alone win over the Korengalis. Just before I left, Kearney told me his biggest struggle would be holding his guys in check. "I've got too many geeking out, wanting to go off the deep end and kill people," he said. One of his lieutenants wanted to shoot every Afghan in the face. Kearney shook his head. He wished he could buy 20 goats and let the boys beat and burn them and let loose their rage. He tried to tell them the restraints were a product of their success — that there was an Afghan government with its own rules. "I'm balancing plates on my goddamn nose is what I'm doing," he said. "All it's gonna take is for one of these guys to snap."

But leave the Korengal, as the colonel had suggested, and let some other company deal with it? No way. He'd spent five months learning the valley, getting involved in it; he couldn't just pull out. At least he would keep the insurgents busy here so the other companies could do hearts and minds unimpeded down along the Pech river. "I lost seven dudes here," he told me. "It's too much blood. I don't want to give this up. This is mine."

## **To Be Continued**

COLONEL OSTLUND and his officers, and the governor of Kunar and his officials, held an all-day meeting with the Korengali elders. The elders wanted to talk about Rock Avalanche and the devastation that had rained down on them. Colonel Ostlund told them, "If anything should happen to Captain Kearney, pain and misery will knock on many doors in the Korengal." He gave them 10 days to pick sides — the insurgents or the government. Only then would he consider going ahead with the road project. Their answer came back. They would leave the valley altogether. But they didn't, and 10 days later insurgents pulled off another ambush of a platoon from the 173rd. The entire patrol went down, either wounded or killed. Kearney told me recently that they had wounded Abu Ikhlas and killed some other bad guys. He said he was pretty sure that Haji Matin, the embittered timber lord, had been killed, too. But the dialogue with the Korengalis was pretty much the same as it had been. Only the winter snows have brought some minor respite to the valley.

*Elizabeth Rubin, a contributing writer, has reported extensively on Afghanistan, most recently in a two-part series for the magazine on the revival of the Taliban.*

Correction: February 26, 2008

A front-page picture caption on Saturday with the "This Weekend" summary carried an erroneous credit in some editions. The photograph of a wounded soldier in Afghanistan was by Lynsey Addario for The New York Times, not by Joshua Lott.



Eyes in the Sky: At Camp Blessing, battalion members — led by Lt. Col. Bill Ostlund, far right — watch a monitor showing Capt. Dan Kearney's troops six miles away.



Joint Terminal Attack Controller Gabe Beck, center, speaks with a bomber pilot while a "troops in contact" incident unfolds in the Korengal Valley. Working with pilots, Beck calls in airstrikes while weighing the possibility of collateral damage.



Lt. Matt Piosa rests inside a bunker. The 173rd Airborne division Battle Company established the bunker after a difficult battle with insurgents to control the strategic high grounds near the Korengal Outpost.



Captain Dan Kearney, second from left, and Staff Sgt. Mike Nestell discuss recent fighting with village elders. Haji Zalwar Khan is at far right.



Soldiers with the battle company take shelter from a mortar barrage in a bunker at the Korengal Outpost.



Capt. Dan Kearney bows his head in frustration after the denial of his request for an air strike against men walking nearby with weapons. Above his head, the laser of an AC-130 plane tracks a potential target.



Sgt. Tanner Stichter tends to a wounded Specialist Carl Vandenberg.



Cpt. Dan Kearney, kneeling, arrives to check on Staff Sgt. Rice, after Rice was shot in an insurgent ambush.



Soldiers take shelter behind a tree trunk as they await the arrival of a medevac helicopter. The helicopter will airlift the body of Staff Sgt. Larry Rougle, who was killed in the insurgent ambush.



Specialist Carl Vandenberg, right, and Staff Sgt. Kevin Rice, left, are assisted as they walk to a medevac helicopter after being shot by insurgents in the ambush.



U.S. troops carry the body of Staff Sgt. Larry Rougle, who was killed when the insurgents ambushed their squad in the Korengal Valley.



A soldier sits alone in the dust of a medevac helicopter as it departs with the body of his comrade Staff Sgt. Rougle.

All Photos credit to: Lynsey Addario for The New York Times