

VANITY FAIR

WAR



Sergeant Joshua McDonough and Specialist Miguel Gutierrez fire grenades and automatic weapons from the Restrepo bunker. *Photographs by Tim Hetherington.*

Into the Valley of Death

A strategic passage wanted by the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Afghanistan's Korengal Valley is among the deadliest pieces of terrain in the world for U.S. forces. One platoon is considered the tip of the American spear. Its men spend their days in a surreal combination of backbreaking labor—building outposts on rocky ridges—and deadly firefights, while they try to avoid the mistakes the Russians made. Sebastian Junger and photographer Tim Hetherington join the platoon's painfully slow advance, as its soldiers laugh, swear, and run for cover, never knowing which of them won't make it home.

BY SEBASTIAN JUNGER JANUARY 2008

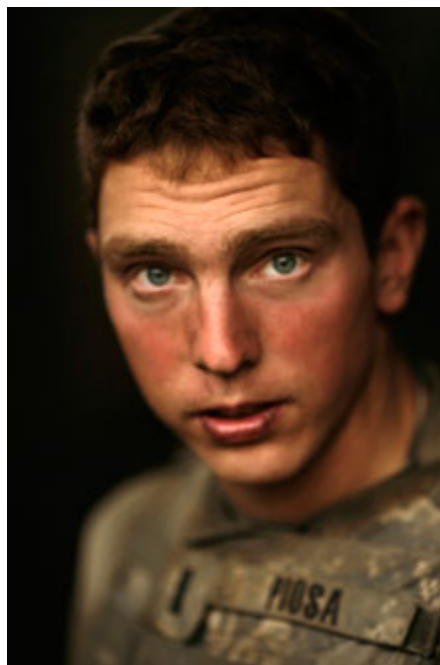
The 20 men of Second Platoon move through the village single file, keeping behind trees and stone houses and going down on one knee from time to time to cover the next man down the line. The locals know what is about to happen and are staying out of sight. We are in the village of Aliabad, in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley, and the platoon radioman has received word that Taliban gunners are watching us and are about to open fire. Signals intelligence back at the company headquarters has been listening in on the Taliban field radios. They say the Taliban are waiting for us to leave the village before they shoot.

Below us is the Korengal River and across the valley is the dark face of the Abas Ghar ridge. The Taliban essentially own the Abas Ghar. The valley is six miles long, and the Americans have pushed halfway down its length. In 2005, Taliban fighters cornered a four-man navy-SEAL team that had been dropped onto the Abas Ghar, and killed three of them, then shot down the Chinook helicopter that was sent in to save them. All 16 commandos on board died.

Dusk is falling and the air has a kind of buzzing tension to it, as if it carries an electrical charge. We only have to cover 500 yards to get back to the safety of the firebase, but the route is wide open to Taliban positions across the valley, and the ground has to be crossed at a run. The soldiers have taken so much fire here that they named this stretch “the Aliabad 500.” Platoon leader Matt Piosa, a blond, soft-spoken 24-year-old lieutenant from Pennsylvania, makes it to a chest-high stone wall behind the village grade school, and the rest of the squad arrives behind him, laboring under the weight of their weapons and body armor. The summer air is thick and hot, and everyone is sweating like horses. Piosa and his men were here to talk to the local elder about a planned water-pipe project for the village, and I can’t help thinking that this is an awful lot of effort for a five-minute conversation.



Video: [Sebastian Junger and photographer Tim Hetherington discuss this article.](#)
Classic: “[Massoud’s Last Conquest](#),” by Sebastian Junger (February 2002)
Classic: “[Afghanistan’s Dangerous Bet](#),” by Christopher Hitchens (November 2004)



Photos: [View a Web-exclusive slide show of Hetherington’s soldier portraits from Afghanistan.](#) Also: [more of Hetherington’s photos from Afghanistan.](#)

I’m carrying a video camera and running it continually so that I won’t have to think about turning it on when the shooting starts. It captures everything my memory doesn’t. Piosa is about to leave the cover of the stone wall and push to the next bit of cover when I hear a staccato popping sound in the distance. “Contact,” Piosa says into his radio and then, “I’m pushing up here,” but he never gets the chance. The next burst comes in even tighter and the video jerks and yaws and Piosa screams, “A tracer just went right by here!” Soldiers are popping up to empty ammo clips over the top of the wall and Piosa is shouting positions into the radio and tracers from our heavy machine guns are streaking overhead into the darkening valley and a man near me shouts for someone named Bunu.

Buno doesn't answer. That's all I remember for a while—that and being incredibly thirsty. It seems to go on for a long, long time.

The Center Cannot Hold

By many measures, Afghanistan is falling apart. The Afghan opium crop has flourished in the past two years and now represents 93 percent of the world's supply, with an estimated street value of \$38 billion in 2006. That money helps bankroll an insurgency that is now operating virtually within sight of the capital, Kabul. Suicide bombings have risen eightfold in the past two years, including several devastating attacks in Kabul, and as of October, coalition casualties had surpassed those of any previous year. The situation has gotten so bad, in fact, that ethnic and political factions in the northern part of the country have started stockpiling arms in preparation for when the international community decides to pull out. Afghans—who have seen two foreign powers on their soil in 20 years—are well aware of the limits of empire. They are well aware that everything has an end point, and that in their country end points are bloodier than most.

The Korengal is widely considered to be the most dangerous valley in northeastern Afghanistan, and Second Platoon is considered the tip of the spear for the American forces there. Nearly one-fifth of all combat in Afghanistan occurs in this valley, and nearly three-quarters of all the bombs dropped by NATO forces in Afghanistan are dropped in the surrounding area. The fighting is on foot and it is deadly, and the zone of American control moves hilltop by hilltop, ridge by ridge, a hundred yards at a time. There is literally no safe place in the Korengal Valley. Men have been shot while asleep in their barracks tents.

Second Platoon is one of four in Battle Company, which covers the Korengal as part of the Second Battalion of the 503rd Infantry Regiment (airborne). The only soldiers to have been deployed more times since the September 11 attacks are from the 10th Mountain Division, which handed the Korengal over last June. (Tenth Mountain had been slated to go home three months earlier, but its tour was extended while some of its units were already on their way back. They landed in the United States and almost immediately got back on their planes.) When Battle Company took over the Korengal, the entire southern half of the valley was controlled by the Taliban, and American patrols that pushed even a few hundred yards into that area got attacked.

If there was one thing Battle Company knew how to do, though, it was fight. Its previous deployment had been in Afghanistan's Zabul Province, and things were so bad there that half the company was on psychiatric meds by the time they got home. Korengal looked like it would be even worse. In Zabul, they had been arrayed against relatively inexperienced youths who were paid by Taliban commanders in Pakistan to fight—and die. In the Korengal, on the other hand, the fighting is funded by al-Qaeda cells who oversee extremely well-trained local militias. Battle Company took its first casualty within days, a 19-year-old private named Timothy Vimoto. Vimoto, the son of the brigade's command sergeant major, was killed by the first volley from a Taliban machine gun positioned around half a mile away. He may well not have even heard the shots.

I went to the Korengal Valley to follow Second Platoon throughout its 15-month deployment. To get into the valley, the American military flies helicopters to the Korengal Outpost—the KOP, as it's known—roughly halfway down the valley. The KOP has a landing zone and a clutch of plywood hooches and barracks tents and perimeter walls made of dirt-filled HESCO

barriers, many now shredded by shrapnel. When I arrived, Second Platoon was stationed primarily at a timber-and-sandbag outpost named Firebase Phoenix. There was no running water or power, and the men took fire nearly every day from Taliban positions across the valley and from a ridgeline above them that they called Table Rock.

I spent a couple of weeks with Second Platoon and left at the end of June, just before things got bad. The Taliban ambushed a patrol in Aliabad, mortally wounding the platoon medic, Private Juan Restrepo, and then hammered a column of Humvees that tore out of the KOP to try to save him. Rounds rattled off the armor plating of the vehicles, and rocket-propelled grenades plowed into the hillsides around them. One day in July, Captain Daniel Kearney, the 27-year-old commanding officer of Battle Company, counted 13 firefights in a 24-hour period. A lot of the contact was coming from Table Rock, so Kearney decided to end that problem by putting a position on top of it. Elements of the Second and Third Platoons and several dozen local workers moved up the ridge after dark and hacked furiously at the shelf rock all night long so that they would have some minimal cover when dawn broke.



A Black Hawk helicopter comes in to land on the roof of a village house in Yaka China to take out Captain Dan Kearney following a village meeting to discuss insurgent activity.

Sure enough, daylight brought bursts of heavy-machine-gun fire that sent the men diving into the shallow trenches they had just dug. They fought until the shooting stopped and then they got back up and continued to work. There was no loose dirt up there to fill the sandbags, so they broke up the rock with pickaxes and then shoveled pieces into the bags, which they piled up to form crude bunkers. Someone pointed out that they were actually “rock bags,” not sandbags, and so “rock bags” became a platoon joke that helped them get through the next several weeks. They worked in 100-degree heat in full body armor and took their breaks during firefights, when they got to lie down and return fire. Sometimes they were so badly pinned down that they just lay there and threw rocks over their heads into the HESCOS.

But rock bag by rock bag, HESCO by HESCO, the outpost got built. By the end of August the men had moved roughly 10 tons of dirt and rock by hand. They named the outpost Restrepo, after the medic who was killed, and succeeded in taking the pressure off Phoenix mainly by redirecting it onto themselves. Second Platoon began taking fire several times a day, sometimes from distances as close as a hundred yards. The terrain drops off so steeply from the position that their heavy machine guns couldn’t angle downward enough to cover the slopes below, so the Taliban could get very close without being exposed to fire. Lieutenant Piosa had his men lay coils of concertina wire around the position and rig claymore mines hardwired to triggers inside the bunkers. If the position were in danger of getting overrun, the men could detonate the claymores and kill everything within 50 yards.

The Quiet Americans



Sergeant Kevin Rice's tattoo bears testimony to fallen friends from a previous deployment.

I return to Second Platoon in early September, walking out to Restrepo with a squad who are going to evacuate a soldier who has broken his ankle. The hillsides are steep and covered with loose shale, and nearly every man in the company has taken a fall that could have killed him. When we arrive, the men of Second Platoon have finished work for the day and are sitting behind HESCOS, tearing open pouches of ready-to-eat meals (M.R.E.'s). They go to sleep almost as soon as it gets dark, but I stay up talking to the Weapons Squad sergeant, Kevin Rice. At 27, Rice is considered the “old man” of the platoon. He grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin and says that nothing he has done building Restrepo was any harder than the work he did around the farm as a kid. He has a tattoo of dancing bears on his left arm—a tribute to the Grateful Dead—and the names of men who were lost in Zabul on his right. He keeps an expression of slight bemusement on his face except during firefights, when he simply looks annoyed. Rice is known for his weird calm under fire. He's also known for fighting with the kind of slow, vengeful precision that most men can barely maintain on the pool table. I ask what he thinks about an all-out attack on Restrepo, and he just chuckles.

“I'm kind of looking forward to it,” he says. “It would be very entertaining. It would be up close and personal.”

With that, Sergeant Rice stretches out on his cot and goes to sleep.

Dawn, the Abas Ghar curtained by mist. It will burn off by midmorning, leaving the men drenched in sweat when they work. A patrol comes in before sunrise, elements of the Second who had gone to the KOP for a few days of cooked food and hot showers, maybe a phone call to their wives. Fully loaded with ammunition, weapons, and food, they can easily have 120 pounds on their backs. They dump their rucksacks in the dirt and several of them light up cigarettes. Some are still breathing hard from the climb. “Quitters never win,” Rice observes.

A 22-year-old private named Misha Pemble-Belkin is sitting on the edge of a cot, cutting the pocket off his uniform. On his left forearm Pemble-Belkin has a tattoo of the *Endurance*, Sir Ernest Shackleton's ship that became entrapped by sea ice in

Antarctica in 1915. “It’s the greatest adventure story ever,” Pemble-Belkin says by way of explanation. He takes the pocket he has just liberated and sews it over a rip in the crotch of his pants, which he is still wearing. The men spend their days clambering around shale hillsides dotted with holly trees, and most of their uniforms are in shreds. Pemble-Belkin uses his free time back at the KOP painting and playing guitar, and says that his father was a labor organizer who supports the troops absolutely, but has protested every war the United States has ever been in. His mother sends him letters written on paper she makes by hand.

The workday hasn’t started yet, and the men sit around talking and watching Pemble-Belkin sew his pants. They talk about what kinds of bombs they’d like to drop on the valley. They talk about how the militants try to hit airplanes with R.P.G.’s—a mathematical near impossibility. They talk about post-traumatic stress disorder, which many of the men in the unit have to some degree. One man says he keeps waking up on his hands and knees, looking for a live grenade that he thinks someone has just thrown at him. He wants to throw it back.

The sun pries itself over the eastern ridges and half the platoon gets to work filling HESCOs while the other half mans the heavy weapons. The men work around the outpost in teams of three or four, one man hacking at the rock shelf with a pickax while another shovels the loose dirt into sandbags and a third drops the biggest chunks into an ammo can, then walks over to a half-full HESCO, muscles the can over his head, and dumps the contents in.

“Prison labor is basically what I call it,” says a man I know only as Dave. Dave is a counter-insurgency specialist who spends his time at remote outposts, advising and trying to learn. He wears his hair longer than most soldiers, a blond tangle that after two weeks at Restrepo seems impressively styled with dirt. I ask him why the Korengal is so important.

“It’s important because of accessibility to Pakistan,” he says. “Ultimately, everything is going to Kabul. The Korengal is keeping the Pech River Valley safe, the Pech is keeping Kunar Province stable, and hence what we are hoping is all that takes the pressure off Kabul.”

While we are talking, some rounds come in, snapping over our heads and continuing on up the valley. They were aimed at a soldier who had exposed himself above a HESCO. He drops back down, but otherwise, the men hardly seem to notice.

“The enemy doesn’t have to be good,” Dave adds. “They just have to be lucky from time to time.”

Rules of Engagement

The Korengal is so desperately fought over because it is the first leg of a former mujahideen smuggling route that was used to bring in men and weapons from Pakistan during the 1980s. From the Korengal, the mujahideen were able to push west along the high ridges of the Hindu Kush to attack Soviet positions as far away as Kabul. It was called the Nuristan-Kunar corridor, and American military planners fear that al-Qaeda is trying to revive it. If the Americans simply seal off the valley and go around, Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters currently hiding near the Pakistani towns of Dir and Chitral could use the Korengal as a base of operations to strike deep into eastern Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden is rumored to be in the Chitral area, as are his second in command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and a clutch of other foreign fighters. While thousands of poorly trained Taliban

recruits martyr themselves in southern Afghanistan, bin Laden's most highly trained fighters ready themselves for the next war, which will happen in the East.

In addition to its strategic value, the Korengal also has the perfect population in which to root an insurgency. The Korengalis are clannish and violent and have successfully fought off every outside attempt to control them—including the Taliban's in the 1990s. They practice the extremist Wahhabi version of Islam and speak a language that even people in the next valley over cannot understand. That makes it extremely difficult for the American forces to find reliable translators. The Korengalis have terraced the steep slopes of their valley into fertile wheat fields and built stone houses that can withstand earthquakes (and, as it turns out, air strikes), and have set about cutting down the enormous cedar trees that cover the upper elevations of the Abas Ghar. Without access to heavy machinery, they simply grease the mountainsides with cooking oil and let the trees rocket several thousand feet to the valley below.

The timber industry has given the Korengalis a measure of wealth that has made them more or less autonomous in the country. Hamid Karzai's government tried to force them into the fold by regulating the export of timber, but the Taliban quickly offered to help them smuggle it out to Pakistan in return for assistance fighting the Americans. The timber is moved past corrupt border guards or along a maze of mountain tracks and donkey trails that cross the border into Pakistan. The locals call these trails *buzrao*; some American soldiers refer to them as "rat lines." The routes are almost impossible to monitor because they cross steep, forested mountainsides that provide cover from aircraft. After firefights, the Americans can listen in on Taliban radio communications calling for more ammunition to be brought by donkey along these lines.

Insurgent operations in the valley are run by an Egyptian named Abu Ikhlas al-Masri, who married locally and has been fighting here since the jihad against the Soviets. Ikhlas is paid directly by al-Qaeda. He shares responsibility for the area with an Afghan named Ahmad Shah, whose forces in 2005 cornered the navy-SEAL team and shot down the Chinook helicopter. Competing with them for control of the area—and al-Qaeda financing—is an Arabist group called Jamiat-e Dawa el al Qurani Wasouna. The J.D.Q., as it is known by American intelligence, is suspected of having links to both the Saudi and Kuwaiti governments, as well as to Pakistan's infamous intelligence services. Both groups are thought to pay and train local Afghan fighters to attack coalition forces in the area.

The first firefight of the day happens around noon, when a Chinook comes in to drop a load of supplies. The men have lit a red-smoke stick, meaning that it's a hot landing zone, and the Chinook starts taking fire as soon as it settles in low over the ridge. The pilot dumps his slingload and then bears off hard to the north while Restrepo's heavy guns open up. Someone has spotted muzzle flashes at a house in the next valley down, and the men pepper it with machine-gun fire. The house is painted a distinctive white and sits at the edge of an insurgent-held village named Laui Kalay. Eventually the muzzle flashes stop.

The men work until the next firefight, an hour later. A Black Hawk dropping off the battalion sergeant major takes fire at the KOP, and its Apache escort cranks a high turn over the valley and drops down to investigate. It makes a low run to the south and takes fire from the same white house. The men shake their heads and mutter strange compliments about anyone who would shoot at an Apache. The helicopter banks so hard it nearly goes upside down, and it comes in like some huge, furious insect, unleashing a long burp of 30-mm.-cannon fire. The house undulates with impacts, and then whoever is inside shoots again.

“Jesus,” someone says. “That takes balls.”

The houses in the valley are constructed of shelf rock and massive cedar timbers, and they have withstood 500-pound bombs. The Apache tears into it a few more times and then loses interest and loops back up the valley. The smoke around the house gradually clears, and after a few minutes we can see people standing on the roof. The villages are built on such steep hillsides that it is possible to step off the road onto the rooftops, which is what these people have done. A woman appears with a child, and then another woman wanders up.

“The women and children are there first, they’re on top of the roof,” says a private named Brendan O’Byrne, who is watching through a spotting scope. Standing next to him at the heavy machine gun is a soldier named Sterling Jones, busy working away on a lollipop. Jones has just pumped 150 rounds into the house. “They’re on top of the roof just so we can see them,” O’Byrne continues. “Now the men are arriving. We got one male, fighting age, on top of the roof. He knows that we won’t shoot, because there are women and children there.”

The American rules of engagement generally forbid soldiers to target a house unless someone is shooting from it, and discourage them from targeting anything if civilians are nearby. They can shoot people who are shooting at them and they can shoot people who are carrying a weapon or a handheld radio. The Taliban know this and leave weapons hidden in the hills. When they want to launch an attack they just walk out to their firing positions and pick up their weapons. Following a late-afternoon firefight, they can easily be home for dinner.

The reason for all this caution—other than the obvious moral issues—is that killing civilians simply makes the war harder. With their superior weapons, the U.S. military can kill insurgents all day long, but the only possibility of a long-term victory lies in the civilian population’s denying aid and refuge to the insurgents. The Russian military, which invaded this country in 1979, most emphatically did not understand this. They came in with a massive, heavily armored force, moved about in huge convoys, and bombed everything that moved. It was a textbook demonstration of exactly how not to fight an insurgency. More than one million people died—7 percent of the pre-war civilian population—and a truly popular uprising eventually drove the Russians out.

American forces are far more sensitive to humanitarian concerns than the Russians were—and far more welcomed—but they still make awful mistakes. In June, jumpy American soldiers in Korengal shot into a truck full of young men who had refused to stop at a local checkpoint, killing several. The soldiers said they thought they were about to be attacked; the survivors said they had been confused about what to do. Both sides were probably telling the truth.

Faced with the prospect of losing the tenuous support that American forces had earned in the northern half of the valley, the battalion commander arranged to address community leaders in person after the accident. Standing in the shade of some trees by the banks of the Pech River last June, Colonel William Ostlund explained that the deaths were the result of a tragic mistake and that he would do everything in his power to make it right. That included financial compensation for the grieving families. After several indignant speeches by various elders, one very old man stood up and spoke to the villagers around him.

“The Koran offers us two choices, revenge and forgiveness,” he said. “But the Koran says that forgiveness is better, so we will forgive. We understand that it was a mistake, so we will forgive. The Americans are building schools and roads, and because of this, we will forgive.”

It was probably no coincidence that the site chosen for this meeting was the foot of a steel bridge that the Americans had just built over the fast, violent Pech. According to Colonel Ostlund, there was a possibility that the Taliban had paid the driver of the truck to not stop at the checkpoint when ordered to. By the colonel’s reasoning, the Taliban would win a strategic victory no matter what: either they would find out how close they could get a truck bomb to an American checkpoint, or there would be civilian casualties that they could exploit.

Whatever the truth of that particular incident, the Taliban have certainly learned the value of American mistakes. Around the same time as the checkpoint shooting, coalition air strikes killed seven Afghan children at a mosque compound in the southeastern part of the country. Reaction was predictably outraged, but almost lost in the outcry was the testimony of survivors. They allegedly told coalition forces that before the air strike al-Qaeda fighters in the area—who undoubtedly knew they were going to be bombed—had beaten the children to prevent them from leaving.

“We had surveillance on the compound all day,” a NATO spokesman explained. “We saw no indication there were children inside.”

The soldiers of Second Platoon lurch out of their cots and feel around for weapons in the electric-blue light before dawn. The dark shapes around them are the mountains from which they will get shot at when the sun rises. A local mosque injects the morning silence with a first call to prayer. Another day in the Korengal.

The men assemble with their trousers untucked from their boots and their faces streaked with dirt and stubble. They wear flea collars around their waists and combat knives in the webbing of their body armor. Some have holes in their boots. Several have furrows in their uniforms from rounds that barely missed. They carry family photographs behind the bulletproof steel plates on their chests, and a few carry photographs of women in their helmets, or letters. Some have never had a girlfriend. Every single man seems to have a tattoo. They are mostly in their early 20s, and many of them have known nothing but war and life at home with their parents.

In my time in the Korengal, only one soldier told me that he joined the army because of September 11. The rest are here because they were curious or bored or because their fathers had been in the army or because the courts had given them the choice of combat or jail. No one I talked to seemed to have regretted the choice. “I joined the infantry to get out of people work and shit,” one soldier told me. “My main thing was partying. What was I going to do, keep partying and living with my mom?”

A short, brawny team leader named Aron Hajar said he enlisted because he understood a fundamental truth about a volunteer army: if people like him don’t sign up, everyone his age will be subject to a draft. When he told his family about his decision, to a person they urged him against it, but no one could say why. Hajar was a fitness trainer in California; he was bored, and his grandfather had fought in World War II, so he went down to the army recruiting office and signed the papers. He decided

to keep a journal, though, so others could know what it was like. “When my children, if I have any, decide to go into the military, I’ll say, ‘You can do whatever you want, but you got to read this first,’ ” Hijar explains. “It has everything, the good times, the bad times, everything that ever meant anything to me.”

The men start their day by moving the supplies that were slingloaded onto the ridgetop the day before. One man grumbles about having to do it so early in the morning, until someone else points out that they could always do it in broad daylight under fire. The supplies are mostly bottled water and M.R.E.’s, and it takes about half an hour for the men to skid them down into camp on a plastic evacuation sled and unload them. When they’re done, they sit on their cots and knife open the M.R.E.’s for breakfast while a specialist named Brian Underwood drops to the ground and starts doing push-ups in full body armor.



Specialist Brian Underwood shouts out to his gunner while preparing grenades, during an insurgent assault on Restrepo.

Underwood competes as a bodybuilder and is probably the strongest man in the platoon besides Carl Vandenberg, who stands six feet five and weighs 250. Specialist Vandenberg doesn’t say much but smiles a lot and is reputed to be a computer genius back home. In June, I saw him throw an injured man over his shoulder, ford a river, and then carry him up a hill. His hands are so big he can palm sandbags. He turned down a basketball scholarship to join the army. He says he has never lifted weights in his life.

“Vandenberg, you big bastard,” I overheard someone say to him once. It was out of the blue and utterly affectionate. Vandenberg didn’t look up.

“My bad,” he just said.

Battle-Tested

“GET HIS WAIST! GET HIS WAIST!”

Little gouts of dirt erupting from the ground. The workman-like hammering of a heavy machine gun. A soldier named Miguel Gutierrez is down.

“UP ON THE FUCKIN’ RIDGE!”

“HOW MANY ROUNDS YOU GOT?”

“HE’S IN THE DRAW!”

Everyone is yelling, but I hear only the parts between the bursts of gunfire. The .50-caliber is laboring away inside the bunker and Angel Toves is taking fire from the east and trying to unjam his machine gun and spent shells are vomiting in a golden arc out of another machine gun to my left. We’re getting hit from the east and the south and the west, and the guy to our west is putting rounds straight into the compound. I duck into the bunker, where Sergeant Mark Patterson is calling grid points into the radio and the platoon medic—the one who replaced Restrepo—is hunched over Gutierrez. Gutierrez was on top of a HESCO when we got hit and he jumped off and no one knows if he took a bullet or just broke his leg. Three men dragged him into the bunker under fire while Teodoro Buno hit the ridge with a shoulder-fired rocket and now he’s lying on a cot, groaning, with his pant leg slit up to his knee.

“Guttie’s fuckin’ hit, dude,” I hear Mark Solowski say to Jones, deeper in the bunker. There’s a momentary pause in the firing so Rice can figure out what’s going on, and the men are talking low enough that Guttie can’t hear. I ask Jones what happened.

“We just got fuckin’ *rocked*,” Jones says.

The most immediate threat is a grenade attack from the draw, and someone has to make sure that whoever is down there is killed or pushed back before he gets any closer. That means leaving the cover of the outpost and shooting—completely exposed—from the lip of the draw. Rice moves to the gap in the HESCOs and steps into the open and unloads several long bursts of gunfire and then steps back and calls for 203s, which are grenades shot from an M16-attached launcher. Steve Kim sprints to the bunker and grabs a rack of 203s and a weapon and sprints back and hands them to Rice. Bravery comes in many forms, and in this case it’s a function of Rice’s concern for his men, who in turn act bravely out of concern for him and one another. It’s a self-sustaining loop that works so well that officers occasionally have to remind their men to take cover during firefights. The rounds snapping in over the sandbags can become an abstraction to men who have been too well drilled in the larger, violent choreography of a firefight.

Rice was once reprimanded for smoking during a firefight. He’s not smoking now, but he might as well be. He walks into the open like he’s in his bathrobe going out to get the morning paper and pumps several rounds into the draw and then steps back

to cover. He's aiming close, the detonation coming almost immediately after the shot, and, after he's finished, retreats to the bunker to check on Guttie.

Guttie wasn't hit, as it turns out, but he broke his tibia and fibula jumping off the HESCO. The medic has given him a morphine stick to suck on and Guttie's stretched out on a cot listening to his iPod and staring up at the plywood ceiling of the bunker. "I find it odd that an airborne-qualified soldier jumps five feet and breaks his ankle," a soldier named Tanner Stichter comments.

"And by the way, I ain't wipin' your ass," adds Corporal Old, the medic.

Guttie asks Hajar for a cigarette and lies there smoking and sucking on the morphine. Brendan Olson is asleep against some sandbags and Kim is reading a Harry Potter book and, next to Guttie, Underwood is lying with his tattooed arms folded over his chest. The men get hit one more time that afternoon, another 20-minute blur of gunfire and shouting and rounds slapping into dirt. Everything seems backward in a firefight: the snap of the bullets going by is the first sound you hear, and then—many seconds later—the far-off staccato of the machine gun that fired them. Men who get hit from a great distance don't hear the gunshots until they're down, and some men never get to hear the gunshots at all.

The fighting is over by dusk, and the men gather again by the bunker in a weirdly lighthearted mood. O'Byrne once showed me footage shot by another soldier of him in a firefight. He's in the bunker returning fire when a burst of rounds comes in that smacks the sandbags all around him and sends him to the floor. When he gets up, he's laughing so hard he can barely work his weapon. Something like that is happening now, only it's most of the platoon and it's delayed by several hours. They've been hit hard today, a man's broken his leg, and the enemy has figured out how to get within a hundred yards of us. In a situation like that, maybe finding something to laugh about is as crucial as food and sleep.

The light mood ends abruptly when Sergeant Rice gets off the radio with the KOP. The military eavesdropping operation, code-named Prophet, has been listening in on Taliban radio communications in the valley, and the news isn't good. "Intel says they've just brought 20 hand grenades into the valley," Rice says. "And 107-mm. rockets and three suicide vests. So get ready."

Ranch House, everyone is thinking, but no one says it. Ranch House was an American firebase in Nuristan that nearly got overrun last spring. Before it was finished, the Americans were throwing hand grenades out the bunker door and calling for aircraft to strafe their own base. They survived, but barely: 11 out of the 20 defenders were wounded.

"You don't get 20 hand grenades to throw from 300 meters," Jones finally says to no one in particular. He's smoking a cigarette and looking down at his feet. "They're going to try to breach this motherfucker."

No one says much for a while, and eventually the men drift off toward their cots. As soon as it's full dark the helicopters are going to come to lift Guttie out, and there's not much to do until then. Jones is sitting on the cot next to me, smoking intently, and I ask what got him into the military in the first place. I'd heard he was a star athlete in high school and was supposed to go to the University of Colorado on an athletic scholarship. Now he's on a hilltop in Afghanistan.

“I pretty much prepped my whole life to play basketball,” Jones says. “I could run the 40 in 4.36 and bench-press 385 pounds. But I was making money the illegal way, and I got into the army because I needed a change. I pretty much went into the army for my mother and my wife. My mom raised me on her own, and she didn’t raise me to be selling drugs and shit.”



The 120-mm.-mortar squad at the KOP base.

That night I sleep in my boots with my gear close to me and a vague plan of trying to make it off the backside of the ridge if the unimaginable happens. It’s not realistic, but it allows me to fall asleep. The next morning comes clear and quiet, with a sharp little feeling of autumn in the air, and the men fall to working as soon as the sun is up. They stop only when a squad of Scouts shows up to deliver a hex wrench that Rice needs to fix one of the heavy weapons. After 20 minutes the Scouts shoulder their packs and head back toward the KOP, and I grab my gear to join them. It’s a two-hour walk, and we take our time on the steep slopes in the heat of the day. The squad leader is a 25-year-old sniper from Utah named Larry Rougle, who has done six combat tours since September 11. His marriage has fallen apart, but he has a three-year-old daughter.

“I usually vote Republican, but they’re all so divisive,” Rougle says on the way down. We are taking a rest break in the shade of some trees; Rougle is the only man who looks like he doesn’t need it. “Obama’s the only candidate on either side who’s actually talking about unity, not division. That’s what this country needs right now, so he’s got my vote.”

Ten minutes later we’re moving again, and just outside the KOP we take two bursts of machine-gun fire that stitch the ground behind us and make leaves twitch over our heads. We take cover until the KOP’s mortars start hitting back, and then we count to three and run the last stretch of ground into the base. A soldier is watching all this from the entrance to his tent. There’s something strange about him, though.

He’s laughing his ass off as we run by.

Three weeks after I left the Korengal Valley, Battle Company and other units from the Second of the 503rd conducted a coordinated air assault on the Abas Ghar. They were searching for foreign fighters thought to be hiding on the upper ridges, including Abu Ikhlas, the locally renowned Egyptian commander. Several days into the operation, Taliban fighters crept to within 10 feet of Sergeant Rougle, Sergeant Rice, and Specialist Vandenberg and attacked. Rougle was hit in the head and killed instantly. Rice was shot in the stomach and Vandenberg was shot in the arm, but both survived. Nearby, a Scout position was overrun and the Scouts fled and then counterattacked with help from Hijar, Underwood, Buno, and

Matthew Moreno. They retook the position and then helped evacuate the wounded. Rice and Vandenberg walked several hours down the mountain to safety.

The following night, First Platoon walked into an ambush and lost two men, with four wounded. One of the dead, Specialist Hugo Mendoza, was killed trying to prevent Taliban fighters from dragging off a wounded sergeant named Josh Brennan. He succeeded, but Brennan died the following day at a U.S. military base in Asadabad. An estimated 40 or 50 Taliban were killed, most of them foreign fighters. Three Pakistani commanders were also killed, as well as a local commander named Mohammad Tali. Locals claim that five civilians also died when the U.S. military dropped a bomb on a house where two fighters were hiding.

The incident caused village elders to declare jihad against the American forces in the valley.

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