



WHAT WAS YOUR TOUGHEST DAYSM AT THE OFFICE?

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10 Green Berets Receive Silver Star for Afghan Battle

by Ann Scott Tyson, Staff Writer Washington Post

After jumping out of helicopters at daybreak onto jagged, ice-covered rocks and into water at an altitude of 10,000 feet, the 12-man Special Forces team scrambled up the steep mountainside toward its target—an insurgent stronghold in northeast Afghanistan.

“Our plan,” Capt. Kyle M. Walton recalled in an interview, “was to fight downhill.” But as the soldiers maneuvered toward a cluster of thick-walled mud buildings constructed layer upon layer about 1,000 feet farther up the mountain, insurgents quickly manned fighting positions, readying a barrage of fire for the exposed Green Berets.

A harrowing, nearly seven-hour battle unfolded on that mountainside in Afghanistan’s Nuristan province on April 6, as Walton, his team and a few dozen Afghan commandos they had trained took fire from all directions. Outnumbered, the Green Berets fought on even after half of them were wounded—four critically—and managed to subdue an estimated 150 to 200 insurgents, according to interviews with several team members and official citations.

Today, Walton and nine of his teammates from Operational Detachment Alpha 3336 of the 3rd Special Forces Group will receive the Silver Star for their heroism in that battle—the highest number of such awards given to the elite troops for a single engagement since the Vietnam War.

That chilly morning, as the soldiers, each carrying 60 to 80 pounds of gear, scaled the mountain, they could already spot insurgents running to and fro, they said. As the soldiers drew closer, they saw that many of the mud buildings had holes in the foot-thick walls for snipers. The U.S. troops had maintained an element of surprise until their helicopters turned into the valley, but by now the insurgent leaders entrenched above knew they were the targets, and had alerted their fighters to rally.

Staff Sgt. Luis Morales of Fredericksburg was the first to see an armed insurgent and opened fire, killing him. But at that moment, the insurgents began blasting away at the American and Afghan troops with machine guns, sniper rifles and rocket-propelled grenades—shooting down on each of the U.S. positions from virtually all sides.

“All elements were pinned down from extremely heavy fire from the get-go,” Walton said. “It was a coordinated attack.” The insurgent Afghan fighters knew there was only one route up the valley and “were able to wait until we were in the most vulnerable position to initiate the ambush,” said Staff Sgt. Seth E. Howard, the team weapons sergeant.

Almost immediately, exposed U.S. and Afghan troops were hit. An Afghan interpreter was killed, and Staff Sgt. Dillon Behr was shot in the hip.

“We were pretty much in the open, there were no trees to hide behind,” said Morales, who with Walton pulled Behr back to their position. Morales cut open Behr’s fatigues and applied pressure to his bleeding hip, even though Morales himself had been shot in the right thigh. A minute later, Morales was hit again, in the ankle, leaving him struggling to treat himself and his comrade, he said.

Farther down the hill in the streambed, Master Sgt. Scott Ford, the team sergeant, was firing an M203 grenade launcher at the fighting positions, he recalled. An Afghan commando fired rocket-propelled grenades at the windows from which they were taking fire, while Howard shot rounds from a rocket launcher and recoilless rifle.



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Ford, of Athens, Ohio, then moved up the mountain amid withering fire to aid Walton at his command position. The ferocity of the attack surprised him, as rounds ricocheted nearby every time he stuck his head out from behind a rock. "Typically they run out of ammo or start to manage their ammo, but... they held a sustained rate of fire for about six hours," he said.

As Ford and Staff Sgt. John Wayne Walding returned fire, Walding was hit below his right knee. Ford turned and saw that the bullet "basically amputated his right leg right there on the battlefield."

Walding, of Groesbeck, Tex., recalled: "I literally grabbed my boot and put it in my crotch, then got the boot laces and tied it to my thigh, so it would not flop around. There was about two inches of meat holding my leg on." He put on a tourniquet, watching the blood flow out the stump to see when it was tight enough.

Soon afterward, a round hit Ford in the chest, knocking him back but not penetrating his body armor. A minute later, another bullet went through his left arm and shoulder, hitting the helmet of the medic, Staff Sgt. Ronald J. Shurer, who was behind him treating Behr. An insurgent sniper was zeroing in on them.

Bleeding heavily from the arm, Ford put together a plan to begin removing the wounded, knowing they could hold out only for so long without being overrun. By this time, Air Force jets had begun dropping dozens of munitions on enemy positions precariously close to the Green Berets, including 2,000 pound bombs that fell within 350 yards.

The evacuation plan, Ford said, was that "every time they dropped another bomb, we would move down another terrace until we basically leapfrogged down the mountain." Ford was able to move to lower ground after one bomb hit, but insurgent fire rained down again, pinning the soldiers left behind.

Finally, after hours of fighting, the troops made their way down to the streambed, with those who could still walk carrying the wounded. A medical evacuation helicopter flew in, but the rotors were immediately hit by bullets, so the pilot hovered just long enough to allow the in-flight medic to jump off, then flew away.

A second helicopter came in but had to land in the middle of the icy, fast-moving stream. "It took two to three guys to carry each casualty through the river," Ford said. "It was a mad dash to the medevac." As they sat on the helicopter, it sustained several rounds of fire, and the pilot was grazed by a bullet.

By the time the battle ended, the Green Berets and the commandos had suffered 15 wounded and two killed, according to an official Army account of the battle.

"We should not have lived," said Walding, reflecting on the battle in a phone interview from Fort Bragg, N.C., where he and the nine others are to receive the Silver Stars today. Nine more Green Berets from the 3rd Special Forces Group will also receive Silver Stars for other battles. About 200 U.S. troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan have received the Silver Star, the U.S. military's third-highest combat award.

* Article was taken from the Dec 12, 2008 Washington Post

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