

= Battle of Wanat =

The Battle of Wanat occurred on July 13, 2008, when about 200 Taliban guerrillas attacked NATO troops near Quam, in the Waygal district in Afghanistan's far eastern province of Nuristan. The position was defended primarily by United States Army soldiers of the 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team.

The Taliban surrounded the remote base and its observation post, attacking it from Quam and surrounding farmland. They destroyed much of the U.S. heavy munitions, broke through American lines, and entered the main base before being repelled by artillery and aircraft. The United States claimed to have killed at least 21 Taliban fighters for the loss of nine U.S. soldiers killed and 27 wounded, and four Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers wounded. The U.S. deaths were the most in a single battle since the start of U.S. operations in 2001.

The Battle of Wanat has been described as one of the bloodiest Taliban attacks of the war and one of several attacks on remote outposts. In contrast to previous roadside bombings and haphazard attacks and ambushes, this attack was well coordinated with fighters from many insurgent groups with an effort that was disciplined and sustained which was able to precisely target key equipment such as a wire guided missile launcher.

The battle became the focus of debate in the United States, generating "a great deal of interest and scrutiny among military professionals and from outside observers" mainly due to the relatively "significant number of coalition casualties". Several investigations were launched into events leading up to the battle. The initial investigation was completed in August 2008. In July 2009, Senator James Webb requested that the U.S. Army formally investigate the battle and previous investigation. Lieutenant General Richard F. Natonski conducted another investigation in late 2009 which led to orders of reprimand for the chain of command. In June 2010, the U.S. Army revoked the reprimands. They stated that no negligence was involved and said of the soldiers that "by their valor and their skill, they successfully defended their positions and defeated a determined, skillful, and adaptable enemy".

= = Background = =

In 2008, NATO forces in southeastern Afghanistan deployed sub company sized patrols to the Pakistan border to disrupt supplies flowing to the Taliban from the Federally Administered Tribal Regions of Pakistan. They established small patrol bases, which came under regular attack by Taliban forces.

In June, a small contingent of 48 American and 24 Afghan troops, 72 in total, were operating in and around Wanat, a mountain Quam that was the center of the Waygal District government and about five miles from the coalition military base Camp Blessing. On July 4, a U.S. Army helicopter attacked vehicles they claimed were firing on them and killed 17 people. Locals claimed those killed were civilians, including doctors and nurses from a local clinic. Both sides reported Forward Observation Base Bella was under attack by indirect fire. Intel reports said that the FOB was going to be overrun from within the base as well. The helicopter attack was in response to the indirect fire received from a mortar tube that was being fired from the bed of a Toyota Hilux pick up. The initial Taliban radio transmissions that were intercepted reported that the "Big Gun had been hit" (mortar tube) and the Taliban commander had been killed. A few hours after the helicopter attacked, with the Chosen Company commander and the troops in contact confirming the targets, the Taliban radio reports changed to "they killed the shop keeper (that had the same name as the Taliban commander), the big gun was not damaged and all the enemy wounded and KIA were civilians." Five days before the battle, on July 8, a platoon from the Second Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team established Vehicle Patrol Base (VPB) Kahler and a separate observation post called "OP Top Side" near Wanat. 8 July, 2nd Platoon, Chosen Company, departed from Camp Blessing after sunset in a ground assault convoy for the 90 minute long drive to Wanat. The convoy contained five M1114 armored Humvees.

There was one for each of the three rifle squads , a vehicle for platoon headquarters , and the last vehicle containing the TOW missile squad . The Humvees mounted heavy weapons , two with 50 @-@ cal machine guns , and two with MK @-@ 19 40mm automatic grenade launchers in protected cupolas to provide extra firepower and protection . Their goal was to create a Combat Outpost ( COP ) to connect with and provide security for the local populace , coordinate \$ 1 @.@ 4 million in reconstruction projects , and disrupt Taliban activity . The brigade was to be relieved by a newly arriving U.S. Army unit in two weeks .

The patrol base was situated on an open field about 300 meters long by 100 meters wide surrounded on two sides by buildings which composed the Quam . July 9 , a six @-@ man engineer squad arrived by Chinook helicopter . They brought a Bobcat loader and a shipping container with engineer equipment . The soldiers reinforced the base with existing terrain , sandbags , barbed wire , and used the Bobcat to fill a number of HESCO barriers ( essentially wall @-@ sized sandbags ) around the three squad positions and to create a firing pit for the big 120 @-@ mm mortar . However , the Bobcat broke down for one day , and could not lift high enough to place barriers to a 7 @-@ foot height , but were placed to just a 4 @-@ foot level , which would make it vulnerable to direct fire from guns or rockets which the attackers would exploit . The troops dug many of the fortifications and trenches with hand shovels . Still in preparation at the time of the attack , some areas were only protected by a barrier of concertina wire , but with no posts or stakes , the wire was just placed on the ground .

The Afghan company contracted to bring heavy construction equipment delayed its arrival to until 13 July . It was decided that soldier labor with the aid of an engineer squad and a Bobcat front end loader already at Bella would be good enough to prepare an initial defense in the six days until heavier equipment arrived . The number of men at the base was judged enough to defend against intelligence estimates that placed the insurgent forces in the local area at only about 150 experienced fighters , though they did not know that attackers would be backed up by other guerrilla groups from neighboring regions as far away as Pakistan and Kashmir . While they thought it was possible the base might be attacked while the camp was being prepared , they thought it unlikely . Platoon Sergeant Dzwik later remarked " I was expecting harassing fire from any one of the high ground in every direction . I did not think the village itself would let the AAF [ Anti @-@ Afghan Force ] turn their village into a battle zone .

Soldiers at the base noticed warning signs , including groups of men watching the construction from the nearby village , which was set at a higher elevation than the outpost , and other groups of men moving through nearby mountains . At a dinner meeting in the village , a villager told the Americans that they should shoot any men seen in the mountains , and asked them if U.S. UAVs were keeping watch nearby . The day before the attack , the militants began flowing water through an irrigation ditch feeding an unused field , creating background noise that masked the sounds of the advancing fighters .

Although the Americans believed that 100 or 200 attacked the base , a senior Afghan defense ministry official who did not reveal his name told Al Jazeera that he had information it was between 400 and 500 fighters . Tamim Nuristani , former governor of Nuristan , believed that numerous Taliban and Pakistani militant and terrorist groups banded together from surrounding regions including Kunar and the Bajaur tribal agency in neighboring Pakistan . According to U.S. intelligence groups operating in the region included Taliban , al @-@ Qaeda , Kashmir @-@ based Lashkar @-@ e @-@ Taiba and Pakistan @-@ based , ( as of 2013 still located in 1 of many strongholds in the Bajaur agency of F.A.T.A.-Federally administered Tribal areas in Kunar and Nuristan of Afghanistan ) , Hezb @-@ i @-@ Islami . According to the Long War Journal , Al Qaeda 's senior leadership including Ayman al Zawahiri and Osama Bin Laden were thought to shelter in the region ( Bin Laden was then in Pakistan ) . Taliban spokesman stated " The fighting in Afghanistan is getting heavier . When the Americans drop bombs on civilians ordinary people want revenge ? that 's why they are joining the Taliban , strengthening us " pointing out their " ability to enter the bases and kill Americans . " A NATO spokesman believed that the Taliban had moved into and expelled a nearby Khel ( small village @-@ tribe subdivision ) for the attack . On the evening of July 12 , Taliban soldiers moved into Wanat and ordered the villagers to leave . Undetected by the I.S.A.F. / A.N.S.F.

soldiers , they set up firing positions inside Kors and a mosque next to and overlooking the perimeter .

= = Battle = =

About 4 : 20 a.m. on July 13 , Taliban forces opened fire on the base with machine guns , rocket @-@ propelled grenades , and mortars . Another 100 militants attacked the observation post from farmland to the east .

The initial attack hit the forward operating base 's mortar pit , knocking out the 120mm mortar and detonating the stockpile of mortar ammunition . The insurgents next destroyed the Humvee @-@ mounted TOW missile launcher inside the combat outpost with coordinated fire from unguided RPG rockets . The mortars and TOW launcher which were to provide the heaviest and most accurate firepower had been quickly taken out by the attackers . The explosion of the mortar shells hurled the anti @-@ tank missiles into the command post .

From the American perspective , the most serious situation was the attack concentrated on a small team situated at the small observation post " TOPSIDE " nestled among rocks under a tree 50m to 70m outside the main base . The first round hit accurately , wounding or stunning every soldier . Pfc. Tyler Stafford was blown out of his machine @-@ gun position next to Spc . Matthew Phillips who threw a grenade before he was mortally wounded . Cpl. Jason Bogar fired hundreds of rounds from his automatic weapon until the barrel became white @-@ hot and jammed and then tended to Stafford 's wounds . A rocket grenade wounded Sgt. Ryan M. Pitts , who was also tended by Bogar with a tourniquet around Pitts ' leg before switching to another gun . Bogar then jumped from the outpost bunker to get close enough to kill insurgents who were firing down upon the men from the village hotel . Once outside the bunker , he was shot through the chest and killed . The surviving soldiers then ran from the outpost to the main post , leaving Pitts behind . Alone , Pitts was able to hold @-@ off the Taliban from overrunning his position until his comrades returned two hours later and he was evacuated to receive medical care .

Four U.S. soldiers were killed within the first 20 minutes of the battle , another died later , and at least three others were wounded . Three times teams of soldiers from the main base ran through Taliban fire to resupply the observation post and carry back the dead and wounded .

The U.S. troops responded with machine guns , grenades , and claymore mines . Artillery guns at Camp Blessing fired 96 155mm artillery rounds . The Taliban briefly breached the wire of the observation post before being driven back . After almost half an hour of intense fighting at the observation post , only one soldier remained . He was seriously wounded and fought alone until reinforcements arrived . Some militants also managed to get past the main base 's eastern barriers . Two American soldiers , platoon leader First Lieutenant Jonathan P. Brostrom , 24 , of Hawaii and Corporal Jason Hovater , were killed trying to deliver ammunition to the observation post . American soldiers were at times flushed out of their fortifications by what they thought were grenades , but which were actually rocks thrown by the attackers . Brostrom , Hovater , and another soldier may have been killed by an insurgent who penetrated the wire perimeter .

AH @-@ 64 Apache attack helicopters and a Predator unmanned aircraft drone armed with Hellfire missiles arrived over the base about 30 minutes after the battle began . During the battle , U.S. soldiers were resupplied by UH @-@ 60 Blackhawk helicopter with fire support from the AH @-@ 64 Apache Helicopters . Injured troops were evacuated to nearby Camp Wright , where members of E Troop , 2nd ? 17th Cavalry , 101st Airborne Division would wait to rearm and refuel the UH @-@ 60 's and AH @-@ 64 's . Later , a B @-@ 1B Lancer bomber , A @-@ 10 , and F @-@ 15E Strike Eagle aircraft were called in . The militants withdrew about four hours later . After the militants retreated , mop up operations followed , and the Taliban withdrew from the town .

Nine U.S. soldiers were killed in the attack , mainly in the observation post . Between 21 and 52 militants were reported killed with another 20 to 40 wounded , but coalition forces found only two Taliban bodies after the battle . The attack was the highest death toll for American troops in the country since Operation Red Wings three years earlier .

= = Operational issues = =

Civilian deaths caused by allied operations had increased sympathy among Waygal residents for the Taliban , who were allowed to move into the Quam . The residents may have been further dismayed by the failure of the Afghan president , Hamid Karzai , to address the concerns of a delegation of elders and maliks in Kabul two days previously .

Coalition troops had noticed other warning signs . The day before the attack , the " Spin Giris " ( Pashto for " White Beards " ? influential tribal elders ) of Wanat conducted a Jirga , ( elder community council @-@ experienced male members of the Quam have a right to attend ) , without the post 's Officer @-@ in @-@ Charge . As well , the villagers began pouring waste water into an area of dead space near the post more frequently , which may have concealed the movement of militants within the village .

A 2009 U.S. Army report criticized the brigade commander , Colonel Chip Preysler , and the battalion commander , Lieutenant Colonel William Ostlund , citing the lack of supplies , equipment , and drinking water for troops stationed in Wanat . At the same time , the report praised the performance of its soldiers under fire .

The same report criticized the actions of the involved commanding officers as being counterproductive to military goals , stating that " The highly kinetic approach favored by TF Rock ... rapidly and inevitably degraded the relationships between the U.S. Army and the Waigal population . "

This statement , portraying the operational approaches of the 173rd Airborne Brigade ( TF Bayonet ) and 2 @-@ 503 PIR ( TF Rock ) in a negative light , is contradicted by David Kilcullen in his book , The Accidental Guerrilla . Kilcullen stated that in March 2008 @,@

The fact that Kunar has bucked the general trend [ downward trend in security across the country ] seems largely to be the result of a consistent U.S. strategy of partnering with local communities to separate the insurgents from the people , bring tangible benefits of governance and development to the population , and help the population choose their own local Khan 's ( Protectors , usually military ) , through elections .

Kilcullen also noted a statement by a previous U.S. commander in Kunar regarding LTC William Ostlund , the 2 @-@ 503 commander : " Bill O. understood deeply that the effect of Coalition operations on the people was the key question . "

= = Aftermath = =

= = = U.S. withdrawal = = =

After the battle , Major General Jeffrey J. Schloesser , U.S. Army commander of coalition troops in Regional Command East , Afghanistan , decided to abandon the patrol base and sent additional U.S. troops to assist the base evacuation . Three days after the engagement the United States and Afghan armies withdrew from Wanat . An ISAF statement says ISAF and Afghan security forces " will continue to perform regular patrols near the village of Wanat . " The coalition forces continued to maintain a larger patrol base about four miles away from Wanat and concentrated on protecting the larger Pech River Valley .

The district police force for the area was disarmed by the Americans and the district chief and police chief were briefly detained and questioned . Both were released within 24 hours according to a spokesperson for the district chief .

Speaking at a Pentagon news conference after the attack , U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff , Navy Admiral Mike Mullen said the incident indicated that " all involved with operations on the ( Pakistan @-@ Afghanistan , especially the pourous Kunar , Kashmir , and Nuristan ) , border must do a better job of policing the region and eliminating the extremists ' safe havens in Pakistan 's federally administered tribal areas that are launching pads for attacks on coalition forces . " The Associated Press reported that the attack underscored a general gain in strength of Afghan militants

However , the 173rd Brigade Commander , Colonel Charles Preysler , specifically rebutted that conclusion in an interview on July 20 , 2008 . He stated that previous media accounts of the engagement mischaracterized the level of development of the platoon 's defences . He also said that the withdrawal of the platoon did not constitute " abandoning " the position because no permanent defensive infrastructure was developed or left behind . He further stated that the position was " not overrun in any shape , manner , or form " , adding that , " It was close combat to be sure ? hand grenade range . "

= = = U.S. Army investigation = = =

An investigation by the U.S. Army , completed on August 13 and released to the public the first week of November 2008 , found that the Taliban attackers had been assisted by the Afghan local police ( ALP ) , forces and a district leader . The evidence included large stocks of weapons and ammunition discovered in the police barracks in Wanat after the battle . The stocks were much more than could be used by the villages ' 20 @-@ man police force and included dirty weapons which appeared to have been used recently . In response to the report , Schloesser concluded that the governor and local police chief " had probably been acting under duress and had been cooperative with American troops . " The governor was absolved of blame in the attack but it was unclear about what was done with the local police chief .

The investigation also examined whether the Army had intelligence about a possible assault and whether the troops had access to it . The report found that despite reports earlier in July that 200 to 300 militants had been massing to attack another remote outpost in the vicinity , including numerous reports from local villagers that an attack was imminent , the commanders at Wanat had no reason to expect such a large frontal assault . The report , however , criticized the " incredible amount of time " ? 10 months ? it took NATO military leaders to negotiate arrangements over the site of the outpost , giving the Taliban plenty of time to coordinate and plan an attack on the base .

= = = Further actions = = =

In July 2009 , U.S. Senator James Webb asked the U.S. DoD Inspector General to formally examine the battle and the U.S. Army 's investigation into the event . In his request , Webb cited an unreleased report from the Army 's Combat Studies Institute by a contractor , Douglas Cubbison , that criticized how senior Army leaders in Afghanistan , especially Ostlund and Preyser , acted before the assault at Wanat . According to that report , soldiers at the Wanat base were critically short of basic necessities such as water and sandbags and had complained repeatedly , to no avail , that their base was in a precarious position . Cubbison had written the report at the request of Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell IV , commander of the United States Army Combined Arms Center . Cubbison wrote that a few days before the battle , on July 4 , a U.S. Army helicopter mistakenly attacked and killed 17 civilians , including all of the doctors and nurses at a local clinic , infuriating local Afghans . Platoon leader Brostrom and company commander Captain Matthew Myer told their commanders that they expected a retaliatory attack and asked for extra surveillance . Brostrom 's father , retired Army Colonel David . P. Brostrom , alerted Webb 's office to the Army historian 's report . Said Brostrom , " After I read the report , I was sick to my stomach . "

Letters of reprimand were issued to Colonel Charles Preysler , Lieutenant Colonel William Ostlund and Captain Myer for " failing to properly prepare defenses " at Wanat , Pentagon officials said March 12 . That same month , Myer was awarded the Silver Star for his actions during the battle of Wanat .

On September 30 , 2009 , U.S. Central Command commander General David H. Petraeus appointed U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant General Richard F. Natonski to lead a new inquiry into the battle and which would look into related issues " beyond the tactical level . " A later review was conducted by General Charles C. Campbell which " focused on the totality of circumstances that included and affected actions at Wanat " , including interviews of the officers involved , and reviews

of previous investigations with the exception of the Fort Leavenworth Combat Studies Institute ( CSI ) narrative ? stating that it had " not undergone pre @-@ publication vetting and academic review in accordance with standing CSI research protocols " . Campbell concluded that the officers involved were not at fault :

[ The officers ] were neither negligent nor derelict in the performance of their duties , exercising a degree of care that a reasonably prudent person would have exercised under the same or similar circumstance . To criminalize command decisions in a theater of complex combat operations is a grave step indeed . It is also unnecessary , particularly in this case . It is possible for officers to err in judgment ? and to thereby incur censure ? without violating a criminal statute . This is particularly true where the errors are those of omission , where the standards come from multiple non @-@ punitive doctrinal publications , where there is less than complete and certain knowledge of enemy capabilities and intent , and where commanders enjoy wide discretion in their exercise of their command prerogatives and responsibilities .

In June 2010 , General Campbell revoked the officers ' reprimands , citing that they would have a " chilling effect " on ground operations . The Army said that the second look at the incident proved that the officers were " neither negligent nor derelict " and " by their valor and their skill , they successfully defended their positions and defeated a determined , skillful , and adaptable enemy who masses and attacks at times , ways and places of his choosing " Secretary of the Army John McHugh was also humbled by their courage , stating " We remain grateful for and humbled by their extraordinary courage and valor . " Gen. George W. Casey Jr . , Army chief of staff further commended the performance of the soldiers :

In every review and study conducted to date , the courage , valor , and discipline of the soldiers who fought at Wanat have been universally praised . These soldiers were well @-@ trained , well @-@ led , and fought bravely to defeat a determined and intense enemy action to overrun their base in Wanat . They persevered in a fashion that deserves broad recognition of their bravery and tenacity . Our hearts go out to the families of the fallen soldiers .

Upset over Campbell 's decision , family members of those killed in action wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Army asking that the findings of Natonski 's investigation be upheld and the reprimands reinstated . In addition to the family members , the letter was signed by Senators Daniel Akaka , Jim Webb , Saxby Chambliss , Patty Murray , and Claire McCaskill .

In November 2010 , the U.S. Army 's Combat Studies Institute published a historical account of the Battle of Wanat . The official U.S. Army history of the battle , published in December 2010 , places little blame on the senior officers involved , instead blaming the uncertain nature of war , mistakes by junior officers , lack of knowledge by Army officers on the Wanat region 's complex political situation , and lack of intelligence that the attack forces would be drawn from the entire region , not just the local area .