



Staff Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts
MEDAL OF HONOR
OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM



Official Narrative:

*Former Staff Sergeant Ryan M. Pitts
Battle for Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler
Wanat Village, Afghanistan
July 13, 2008*

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On July 8, 2008, elements of Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade; Army engineers; Marine Corps Embedded Training Team mentors; and Afghan National Army conducted Operation “Rock Move,” in the Waygal Valley of northeastern Afghanistan.

The operation was aimed at repositioning forces from Combat Outpost Bella to the outskirts of a village called Wanat, in order to disrupt militant trafficking in the Waygal Valley, and to set the stage for effective economic and security development in the region.

This was the third and final move southward for Chosen Company, the final mission of their 14-month deployment. Over the course of 2007-2008, Chosen Company engaged in persistent combat with the enemy as the unit responsible for security in the volatile Waygal Valley region. For then-Sgt. Ryan Pitts and his teammates, Operation Rock Move meant the end of a long deployment was in sight.

Several factors prompted the decision to close COP Bella. Bella was located 16 kilometers from the nearest base, which was Forward Operating Base Blessing to the south, and relied solely on helicopter support for supplies and reinforcements. The small village of Wanat was halfway between Bella and FOB Blessing, at about 8 kilometers from FOB Blessing, which housed the company’s quick reaction force as well as the tactical operations center. Also, an improved road network made Wanat accessible to ground vehicles.

COP Bella was originally positioned to disrupt militant traffic, but its impact dwindled as Anti-Afghan Forces left the area or established alternate resupply routes. Additionally, the sparse development opportunities near Bella were further limited by a pervasive lack of cooperation from the traditional village leaders nearby.

Repositioning to Wanat would allow coalition forces to better interdict militant traffic, and lay the foundation for local economic and security improvements, a key component of counter-insurgency strategy. Wanat was the site of a new district government center and a new police station. Co-locating coalition forces in Wanat would foster relationships with the local government officials and improve goodwill with the local population, building on positive relationships from a bridge construction project completed in Wanat, in 2006.

After Army leaders announced the pending closure of COP Bella in June 2008, coalition forces began to receive reports of large enemy forces massing in the Waygal valley, who planned to attack COP Bella as forces withdrew. The reports were reinforced by several harassment attacks on COP Bella throughout mid-June and into early July. The final two attacks on Bella, on July 3-4, 2008, resulted in American and militant casualties, as well as allegations of Afghan civilian casualties.

Prior to the start of Operation Rock Move, theater-level engineering elements and Chosen Company leadership had visited Wanat to develop a base defense plan, which included an interior and exterior wall, a formal entrance control point, and guard towers. Civilian equipment operators were scheduled to arrive six days after 2nd platoon's arrival to Wanat, to build these and other permanent structures. To bolster defenses until then, 2nd platoon was reinforced with an engineer squad using a Bobcat front-end loader, a six-man mortar section using a 120mm mortar and a 60mm mortar, four M114 armored Humvees, and a TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) anti-armor missile system, among other assets.

Under the cover of darkness July 8-9, Chosen Company airlifted 1st platoon out of COP Bella, and 2nd platoon left FOB Blessing to begin setting up the new vehicle patrol base, known as a VPB, at Wanat. Chosen Company's 2nd platoon nicknamed the new post VPB Kahler, in honor of their former platoon sergeant and slain comrade, Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Kahler. Once at VPB Kahler, 2nd platoon, along with an attached engineer squad and 6-man mortar team, established a perimeter and began securing the base.

VPB Kahler was established in an open area and was roughly the size of a football field, aligned lengthwise from north to south. The open area lay southwest and adjacent to the village of Wanat, with the Waygal River forming its rough western border, and the road running from FOB Blessing to Wanat forming the eastern border.

On the northwest side of the VPB stood a large blue-roofed building surrounded by a high stone wall. Next, moving in a clockwise direction, a one-story mosque, a hotel/café complex, and a bazaar (marketplace) ringed the VPB.

Upon arriving, 2nd Platoon placed Observation Post "Topside," on a ridge to the east of the main base, and east of the bazaar and hotel complex. The ridge was high enough to block visibility from the VPB to the low ground in the northeast and southeast. Therefore, OP Topside was placed on the high ground to give 2nd platoon visibility of the terrain to the northeast and east, which might serve as an enemy avenue of approach into Wanat. OP Topside's location also provided visibility of two bridges just north of the town, and its close proximity to the VPB ensured it could be reinforced in the event of enemy contact.

One challenge of the placement of OP Topside was that it had no direct lines of sight to the north, where the ground fell away into a tree-filled ravine ten yards past the OP. The ravine contained a small offshoot of the Wayskawdi Creek. The creek curved along the north, northeast, and east of the ridge. Thus, the OP site had considerable dead space, which is an

area that could not be seen. Any enemy in this dead space could enter the hotel complex undetected. To mitigate this risk, Chosen Company developed pre-planned indirect fire support targets in the dead space that could be engaged if needed.

On July 13, 2008, 2nd Platoon conducted stand-to at 4 a.m. local time. Stand-to consists of placing personnel at their defensive positions in preparation for enemy attack, at the most likely time of attack – just before dawn. Sgt. Pitts, the forward observer, was positioned at Topside with a team of eight other paratroopers. Also assigned to Topside were: Spc. Jonathan Ayers, Spc. Jason Bogar, Sgt. Matthew Gobble, Pfc. Chris McKaig, Spc. Matthew Phillips, Spc. Pruitt Rainey, Spc. Tyler Stafford, and Spc. Gunnar Zwilling.

Shortly after stand-to, Soldiers conducting surveillance with the thermal imaging sights on a TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) anti-armor missile system, which was located inside the main vehicle patrol base perimeter, identified potential insurgents on the western high ground above Wanat. Pitts and Gobble, located in the center of the observation post, began putting together a request for indirect fire in response. Rainey, Ayers, and McKaig were located in the eastern position, referred to as the crow's nest. Stafford and Bogar were in the southern position, and Phillips and Zwilling were located in the northern position.

Before they could complete the call for fire, at approximately 4:20 a.m., the paratroopers heard a burst of machine-gun fire coming from the direction of a two-story building located on a terraced hill to the north. Then the valley erupted in enemy fire. An estimated 200 enemy fighters launched a full-scale assault, focusing their fires on the base's key defensive weapons systems and positions: VPB mortar-firing position, the vehicle with the TOW missile system, and OP Topside. The insurgents had infiltrated Wanat, setting up firing positions and weapons caches in the town's bazaar, hotel complex, homes, and mosque.

The paratroopers at OP Topside were simultaneously hit with small arms fire, rocket-propelled grenades, and hand grenades thrown at close range by insurgents concealed in the draw to the north of the observation post. All of the paratroopers at OP Topside were wounded, and two were killed, by the first volley of fire. Pitts was wounded by grenade shrapnel in both legs and his left arm.

After the initial blast, Pitts found himself thrown toward the northern position of the observation post. Stunned by the blast, he crawled to the southern end of the observation post, where he found Bogar. Seeing Pitts' leg wound, Bogar applied a tourniquet to Pitts' right leg. Meanwhile, Stafford informed them that Phillips and Zwilling had both been killed by hand grenades and rocket-propelled grenades in the initial volley of fire.

Realizing the enemy was in hand-grenade range, Pitts returned to the northern position, where the grenades were stored. Despite the risk of running into a short fuse, Pitts started "cooking off" grenades, letting them burn for several seconds before he threw them into the draw just beyond the observation post perimeter to the north. This tactic prevented enemy forces from throwing the grenades back at the observation post, before they detonated. By using this tactic, Pitts put himself at risk, but ensured the blasts were concentrated toward

the enemy. Between deploying hand grenades, Pitts called in a situation report to the company commander, Cpt. Matthew Myer. He informed Myer of the casualties and estimated enemy locations.

Pitts decided to fire the M240-B machine-gun in the northern position of OP Topside, in an effort to conserve hand grenades. Unable to stand because of his injuries, Pitts blind-fired over the wall of waist-high sandbags with the machine gun to provide momentary cover, then propped himself up on his knees to fire over the wall. Without another paratrooper in the northern position to act as assistant gunner, Pitts repeatedly fired until the gun jammed, then cleared the malfunction, and loaded more ammunition from the bag beneath the gun.

Within minutes, as the remaining paratroopers at OP Topside fought for their lives, the enemy forces had destroyed the TOW system and injured the personnel manning the 120mm mortar firing pit, setting the pit that held it ablaze. Myer, attempting to control the battle from the center of the vehicle patrol base, was desperate to get additional firepower to support the paratroopers at OP Topside. Pitts was the only contact between the command post and the OP, and the only person left capable of controlling indirect fire support. While firing the machine gun in the northern position, Pitts maintained contact with Myer on the radio, directing artillery fires from FOB Blessing onto the pre-planned targets around the OP.

At approximately 4:45 a.m., 1st Lt. Jonathan P. Brostrom and Spc. Jason Hovater maneuvered from the VPB main perimeter, through direct enemy fire coming from the hotel, to reinforce the paratroopers under direct attack at the OP. Pitts gave Brostrom a situation report and described the locations of the enemy, before surrendering the machine gun to Spc. Rainey and exchanging it for an M-4 with a mounted M-203 grenade launcher. While Brostrom, Hovater, Bogar, and Rainey re-established the OP's defensive position, Pitts manned the radio and continued to call in requests for indirect fire to Myer.

Suddenly, Pitts realized he could no longer hear other fires coming from within the OP. Realizing he was probably alone, and not wanting to reveal his position to the enemy, Pitts crawled silently from his position to the southernmost edge of the perimeter, checking to see if anyone was still alive. He discovered that McKaig, Stafford, Gobble, Brostrom, Rainey, Bogar, and Hovater were gone. All the paratroopers still with him in the OP were dead. Pitts later learned that Stafford and Gobble had moved to the casualty collection point at the traffic-control point, referred to as the TCP CCP, while McKaig maneuvered to the VPB for ammunition. The reinforcing troops, Bogar, and Rainey had been killed while setting up a defensive perimeter on the northwest side of the OP.

Alone and losing blood, Pitts radioed Myer to inform him that everyone at the OP was deceased or gone. Pitts was informed that reinforcements for the OP were not available. At this point, the insurgents were in such close proximity to Pitts, that Soldiers at the command post and those listening in on the channel could hear enemy voices through the radio. In that moment, Pitts resigned himself to certain death, but remained determined to do as much damage as possible to the enemy before they overwhelmed the OP.

Taking up the M-203 grenade launcher, Pitts began firing it almost directly overhead, straight up, placing grenades that would detonate just on the other side of the perimeter, where the insurgents had concealed themselves in the draw. Pitts also called on the radio for any Soldier with a sightline to the OP to begin firing over the sandbag wall at his position, to knock the enemy back if they breached the wall. Sgt. Brian Hissong at the TCP CCP answered the call, and began laying down fire directly over Pitts.

Then, four Soldiers – Staff Sgt. Sean Samaroo, Sgt. Israel Garcia, Spc. Michael Denton, and Spc. Jacob Sones – maneuvered from the TCP CCP to reinforce OP Topside. They found Pitts fighting for his life. Sones was initially able to treat Pitts, before another round of explosions rocked the OP, mortally wounding Garcia. While the other Soldiers attempted to secure the OP’s perimeter despite their injuries, Pitts crawled to Garcia and comforted him. Samaroo, Denton and Sones then pulled Garcia out of the open, to the OP’s casualty collection point at the southern position.

Soon after, attack helicopters arrived to provide close air support. Despite being nearly unconscious, Pitts continued to communicate with headquarters, providing needed feedback to Myer as he called in the first helicopter attack run to engage the insurgents to the north of the OP. This strike, only 30 meters from the friendly troops at OP Topside, took the pressure off the Soldiers at the main base enough so that a third group of reinforcements from the VPB could scale the terraces and secure the OP. Meanwhile, reinforcements from FOB Blessing arrived and began clearing enemy positions within the town and adjacent hillsides.

At approximately 6:15 a.m., after fighting for more than an hour while critically wounded, Pitts was medically evacuated along with Samaroo, Sones, and Denton. His actions allowed U.S. forces time to reinforce the OP and bring-in airstrikes which turned the tide of the battle.

If not for his ability to be the commanders’ eyes and ears in his critically wounded state, the enemy would have gained a foothold on high ground and inflicted significantly greater casualties onto the main vehicle patrol base, and the enemy could have been in possession of seven fallen Americans.

The remaining 2nd Platoon Soldiers and 1st Platoons reinforcements continued to fight-off the scores of Anti-Afghan Forces for several more hours. The OP and VPB Kahler-main were secured.

A few days later, Chosen Company left the village of Wanat – it was clear to Task Force Rock leaders – the same elders who welcomed them had betrayed them. The situation in Wanat had changed.