

Remembering a Deadly Day at Combat Outpost Keating

Oct. 3, 2009, would go down as the second costliest U.S. firefight of the Afghanistan War

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On Oct. 3, 2009, the odds were against U.S. troops at Combat Outpost Keating in Afghanistan's Nuristan province, located just 10 miles from the Pakistan border. Contained between the Landay River and steep mountains, Keating was attacked from multiple directions by 300 enemy fighters.

When the battle ended after more than 12 hours, eight U.S. soldiers were killed and another 22 wounded.

Based there were 53 U.S. soldiers primarily with B Trp., 3rd Sqdn., 61st Cav Regt., 4th BCT, 4th Inf. Div. Additionally, 20 Afghan troops, two Latvian soldiers and a dozen Afghan security guards were at Keating.

Among these U.S. troops were men of great mettle. While there are numerous accounts of bravery that day, two Medals of Honor and nine Silver Stars (two have since been upgraded) were awarded.

During the first minutes of battle, mortar rounds hit the main generator, cutting power to most of the camp. Enemy forces controlled the landing zone, which prevented the wounded from being lifted out. At one point, the insurgents even controlled the ammunition supply point.

To further complicate the situation, nearby Observation Post Fritsche was unable to provide mortar support to Keating, as it also was overrun by Taliban.

Action at the Aid Station

Capt. Christopher Cordova, the squadron's physician assistant, was manning the aid station where there was no power. The first soldier to arrive had profuse bleeding from the skull. As

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Cordova worked to stop the bleeding, five injured Afghan soldiers and another American who suffered a chest wound were brought in.

He was managing care for five Americans and seven Afghans, treating gunshot wounds, head injuries, shrapnel wounds, chest and abdominal wounds, eye injuries and broken legs, all in a makeshift station. (The main aid station was too heavily damaged to remain in operation.)

Meanwhile, Sgt. Thomas Rasmussen fought back and was knocked off his feet by a rocket-propelled grenade. He jumped up undeterred and ran through heavy fire to get more ammunition. On his way, he stopped to offer first aid to wounded troops.

Sgt. 1st Class Jonathan Hill rallied his 3rd Platoon troops in a counterattack, despite his multiple shrapnel wounds. At one point, he and his men came under heavy sniper fire. According to one account, Hill “without hesitation picked up a Latvian sniper rifle and eliminated the target at a distance of over 300 meters.”

1st Lt. Andrew Bundermann, de facto ground commander, worked to slow the fire in the operations center and salvage equipment. (Multiple explosions near the ammo supply set off a series of fires at the post.)

He later set up the tactical satellite radio to coordinate air support and medevac. He worked throughout the battle, calling in strikes on enemy positions, even amidst a winter storm that blew in right at the height of the battle.

Meanwhile, back at the aid station, Cordova learned that the first medevac would not arrive until after 7:30 p.m. A critically wounded soldier needed a blood transfusion in order to survive.

Using a transfusion kit, Cordova began pumping his own blood into the wounded soldier, along with blood collected from other soldiers.

The wounded American’s condition immediately improved after the first unit of blood, as did the spirits of all those in the aid station.

“Capt. Cordova’s care raised the morale of every soldier in the aid station, and word quickly spread across the outpost,” the battle narrative stated.

Cordova continued to treat the wounded even after flames were within 10 feet of his location.

“His actions saved the lives of several soldiers, and he alone accomplished the work of four medical professionals without stopping for food or sleep,” the battle narrative aptly

concluded.

“The enemy was obviously superior in numbers but not superior in discipline, professionalism and fighting skill,” Col. Randy George, of the 4th BCT told the Colorado Springs Gazette in 2011. “That was our troopers’ advantage up there. They performed heroically and bravely.”

‘Not an Ordinary Engagement’

Air Force Staff Sgt. Matthew McMurtrey — a cyber systems operator — was attached to the 61st Cav and woke at 6 a.m. that day to the walls of his bunk shaking, alerting him to the attack.

“It seemed that it would get extremely intense, with a lot of fire, a lot of RPGs hitting the wall, and then it would die,” McMurtrey told Air Force Magazine in 2011. “Basically, the air support was leaving and coming back. As soon as they left, the insurgents would come back.”

Air Force Capt. Justin Kulish was conducting a routine patrol in his B-1 bomber about an hour away when he got the call that Keating was in trouble.

“[The airspace above] Keating was packed full of jets, so we knew this was not an ordinary engagement,” Kulish told Air Force Magazine. “Once we got overhead the target, the biggest thing that struck me was how much of Keating was on fire. It seemed like the entire COP was burning [70 percent did].”

Nearly 20 Air Force and Army aircraft flew close-air support missions throughout the day, helping to kill about 150 insurgents. When the battle was over, 16 tons of bombs had been dropped.

“Without air support, I don’t think we would have made it, considering the number against us and the area we were in,” McMurtrey said. “That doesn’t mean anything should be taken from the guys on the ground. Those guys were amazing. They did their jobs, and I’m here because of what they did, but air support was definitely a must.”

Many of the Afghan troops, however, were a different story. An after-action report stated that within less than a few minutes of fighting, the Afghan soldiers serving at Keating, as well as the Afghan security guards, had fled their positions, allowing the enemy to quickly overrun the post.

Keating was permanently shut down three days following the attack. But the courage of the Americans who fought there will never be forgotten.

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