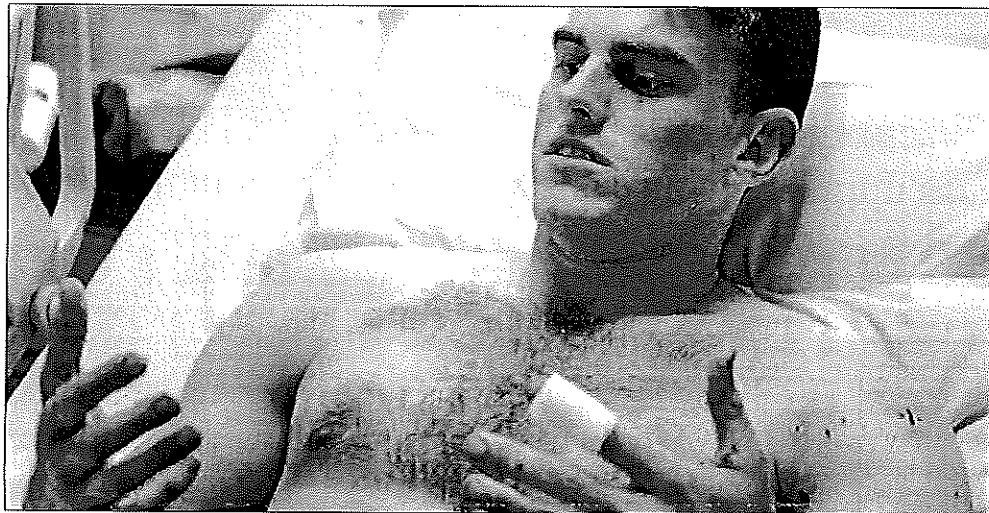


STARS AND STRIPES®

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SATURDAY, JULY 19, 2008

Free to Deployed Areas



Photos by Rex Black/Stars and Stripes

Spc. Tyler Stafford, 23, above, and Sgt. Jacob Walker, 29, recount the hours-long fight Sunday that killed nine of their comrades. Both soldiers, from Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne) based in Vicenza, Italy, are recovering at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany.

Fistfight of a firefight

GIs recount deadly attack on Afghanistan outpost

BY STEVE MHAZ
Stars and Stripes

Everything was on fire. The trucks. The bazaar. The grass. It looked surreal. It looked like a movie.

That was what Spc. Tyler Stafford remembered thinking as he stepped onto the medical evacuation helicopter. The 23-year-old soldier would have been loaded onto the bird, but the poncho that was hastily employed as his stretcher broke. His body speckled with grenade and RPG shrapnel, the Vicenza, Italy, infantryman walked the last few feet to the waiting Black Hawk.

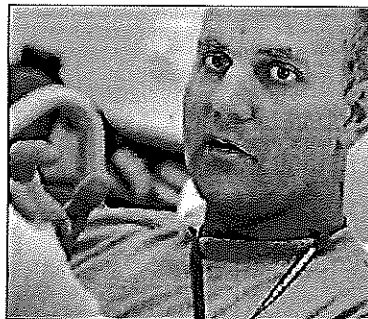
That was Sunday morning in eastern Af-

ghanistan's Kunar province. At a forward operating base — maybe as big as a football field — established just a few days prior.

Outnumbered but not outgunned, a platoon-plus element of soldiers with 2nd Platoon, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team accompanied by Afghan soldiers engaged in a fistfight of a firefight.

After maybe two hours of intense combat, some of the soldiers' guns seized up because they expelled so many rounds so quickly. Insurgent bullets and dozens of rocket-propelled grenades filled the air. So many RPGs were fired at the soldiers that they wondered how the insurgents had so many.

SEE BATTLE ON PAGE 3



Turning tragedy into resolve

Vicenza mourns loss of GIs killed in Afghanistan

By SANDRA JONTZ
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — They didn't answer the final roll call. Three times, 1st Sgt. Patrick Fatuesi called out to each of nine soldiers, first by rank and last name, then adding their first names, and finally beckoning the soldiers by their full names.

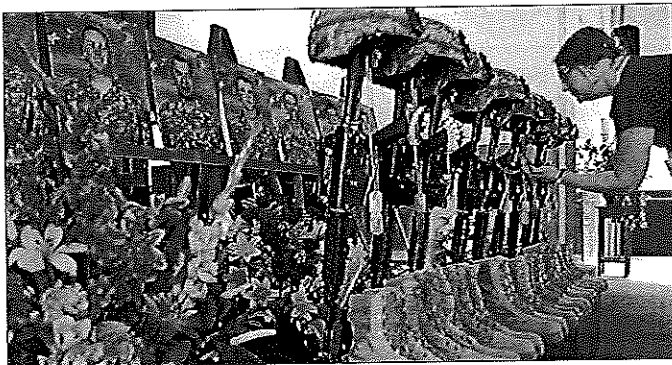
Each time, an eerily somber silence met his beckoning.

More than 400 people gathered at the Caserma Ederle chapel on a rainy Friday to honor the nine men of 2nd Platoon, "Chosen Company," 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, who were killed Sunday in a firefight in Afghanistan.

"We feel angry, even bitterly so, because our young men lived better lives, had higher hopes and more perfect love, than their attackers," Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Stewan Horning said during the invocation. "Please help us to not become weary of doing what is good; renew our courage so we complete the mission you assign each of us."

And so they gathered to remember the nine as men, not just as soldiers.

Like platoon leader 1st Lt. Jonathan P. Brostrom, who had a passion for Hawaii and surfing and wanted to be remembered as wearing surfboard shorts and sandals. "Happy-go-lucky, yes, yet he passionately competed in scuba diving, video games ... and Ranger skills," Horning said. "He so delighted in competition that he invented contests so he could win them."



PHOTOS BY SANDRA JONTZ/STARS AND STRIPES

A mourner reads the names on the soldiers' dog tags before Friday's memorial service honoring nine soldiers who were killed in combat in Afghanistan.

Four soldiers who knew the fallen best took to the lectern to provide snippets of their friends — at times, choking back tears.

Brostrom was his platoon, remembered Staff Sgt. John Ofinowski. "It was true, we needed you and you needed us," he said to his former leader. "I'm not sure how we're going to get along without you."

Spc. Sergio S. Abad could "light up a dark room with his crazy humor," Spc. Christopher Gross said of the 24-year-old soldier. He "always went out of his way to do his best."

Cpl. Matthew B. Phillips had a weird sense of fashion, and once donned a "wig and wedding dress — not very pretty I might add — to celebrate his upcoming marriage," Spc. Richard Ingledue recalled. He often dressed crazily: "Everyone laughed and that's why he did it."

Georgia native Cpl. Jonathan Ayers enjoyed Christian music, of

note "Amazing Grace," and "El-Shaddai" and enjoyed passions like soccer, bowling and ice skating. He also had an uncanny ability to avoid work details, Ingledue shared, earning him the nickname "Shamurai."

Cpl. Jason M. Bogar learned from his family to protect others. The "compassion, kindness and tenderness he exhibited toward the younger and more vulnerable people around him had no use for self-indulgence," Horning said. "While the role of a tough warrior in Afghanistan, he welcomed every opportunity to participate in humanitarian missions, especially those helping children."

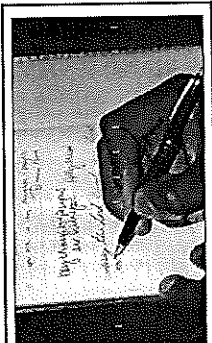
Sgt. Israel Garcia, one of three married soldiers among the nine, had deployed twice to Iraq before joining the Vicenza-based battalion. The Mexico native was motivated by family, church and the ideals of the Army. He led by example, Ofinowski said, such as when a young soldier couldn't

speak English well, he helped by making the evenings "reading time."

Cpl. Jason D. Hovater, who married his childhood sweetheart, was a "PT stud and machine who never got tired," remembered Spc. Ian Eads, and hung a poster of a young Arnold Schwarzenegger at the foot of his bed for inspiration.

A fanatic for strength and muscles, Cpl. Pruitt A. Rainey had a reputation in high school of being "the gentle giant," and maintained that in the Army. He was big on pulling practical jokes, like filling his buddies' boots with shaving cream or stealing their clothes when they showered, and his friends in turn called him "over-nursed baby" or "big polar bear," Eads said, eliciting some laughter from the crowd.

At age 20, Cpl. Gunnar W. Zwilling was the youngest, but more mature than his years, Ingledue said. "He had the gift of laughter



"May the Lord console you ..." wrote Staff Sgt. Meeklin Jeanbaptiste in the guest books for the nine soldiers honored Friday during a memorial service at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza, Italy.

Remembering the fallen

- Spc. Sergio Sagoni Abad, 21
- Cpl. Jonathan Ryan Ayers, 24
- Cpl. Jason Michael Charles Bogar, 25
- 1st Lt. Jonathan P. Brostrom, 24
- Sgt. Israel Garcia-Velazquez, 24
- Cpl. Jason Dane Hovater, 24
- Cpl. Matthew Britten Phillips, 27
- Cpl. Pruitt Allen Rainey, 22
- Cpl. Gunnar William Zwilling, 20

that was extremely contagious. "I'll never forget and stop loving," Ingledue said, pausing to choke back tears, "the little brother I had in Gunnar Zwilling."

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Battle: Coordinated attack sent GIs scrambling within seconds

BATTLE FROM PAGE 1

That was July 13. That was when Stafford was blown out of a fighting position by an RPG, survived a grenade blast and had the tail of an RPG strike his helmet.

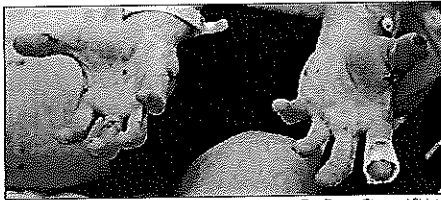
That was the day nine Chosen Company soldiers died.

It was just days before the unit was scheduled to leave the base.

...

The first RPG and machine gun fire came at dawn, strategically striking the forward operating base's mortar pit. The insurgents next sighted their RPGs on the tow truck inside the combat outpost, taking it out. That was around 4:30 a.m.

This was not a haphazard attack. The reportedly 200 insurgents fought from several positions. They aimed to overrun the new base. The U.S. soldiers knew it and fought like hell. They knew their lives were on the line. "I just hope these guys' wives and their children understand



By Bob Blocker/Stars and Stripes

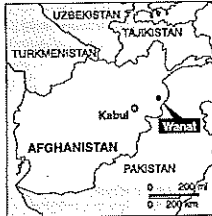
Spc. Tyler Stafford, 23, a soldier from Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), displays some of the wounds he received during the attack on an outpost in Wanat, Afghanistan, on Sunday. Stafford was hit by an RPG and survived a grenade blast.

how courageous their husbands and dads were," said Sgt. Jacob Walker. "They fought like warriors."

The next target was the FOB's observation post, where nine soldiers were positioned on a tiny hill about 50 to 75 meters from the base. Of those nine, five died, and at least three others — Stafford

among them — were wounded. When the attack began, Stafford grabbed his M-240 machine gun off a north-facing sandbag wall and moved it to an east-facing sandbag wall. Moments later, RPGs struck the north-facing wall, knocking Stafford out of the fighting position and wounding another soldier.

For more on the attack at Wanat, visit Stripes.com



Stars and Stripes

Stafford thought he was on fire so he rolled around, regaining his senses. Nearby, Cpl. Gunnar Zwilling, who later died in the fight, had a stunned look on his face.

Immediately, a grenade exploded by Stafford, blowing him down to a lower terrace at the observation post and knocking his helmet off. Stafford put his helmet back on and noticed how badly he was bleeding.

Cpl. Matthew Phillips was close by, so Stafford called to him for help. Phillips was preparing to throw a grenade and shot a look at Stafford that said, "Give me a second. I gotta go kill these guys first."

This was only about 30 to 60 seconds into the attack.

Kneeling behind a sandbag wall, Phillips pulled the grenade pin, but just after he threw it an RPG exploded at his position. The tail of the RPG smacked Stafford's helmet. The dust cleared. Phillips was slumped over, his chest on his knees and his hands by his side. Stafford called out to his buddy three or four times, but Phillips never answered or moved.

SEE BATTLE ON PAGE 4

Candidates address Afghanistan violence

BY PHILIP DINE
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

WASHINGTON — From the Pentagon to the presidential campaign trail to O'Fallon, Mo. — home of a young soldier killed this week in combat — the war in Afghanistan is taking on added urgency.

Conditions in Afghanistan, long seen as an American success story, are deteriorating even as Iraq, long viewed by many Americans as a lost cause, appears to be stabilizing.

For the first time, combat deaths in Afghanistan for both May and June have surpassed those in Iraq — a reflection of the changing fortunes of the two wars.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates is acknowledging that the administration needs to devote more resources and troops to Afghanistan. Pentagon leaders announced Thursday they would send close to 800 more bomb-resistant vehicles to protect troops from roadside bombs, the No. 1 cause of combat deaths and injuries there.

Troops in Afghanistan realize they need help.

Cpl. Gunnar Zwilling, the 20-year-old O'Fallon soldier killed Sunday in Afghanistan, worried as his unit prepared to open a new base in a remote area that they were "understaffed for that kind of operation," his uncle, Gary Zwilling, said Thursday.

Nine U.S. soldiers were killed during the ambush by 100 militants near the Pakistan border.

"I would hate for this to keep happening, have four or five troops killed here and there in Afghanistan," said Zwilling, a Vietnam veteran from Florissant, Mo. "We were proud of him and we would like to see this finished. Why can't we get the right number of troops there and finish this?"

The shifting fortunes in Afghanistan and Iraq are playing an increasingly prominent role in the presidential election.

The presumptive presidential nominees — Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill. and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. — agree more resources should be devoted to Afghanistan. But the two men differ widely on what it means.

McCain says the lesson is that the troop surge in Iraq, which he backed, has helped turn around the situation there and allow more resources to be dedicated to Afghanistan. Obama's insistence that the surge wouldn't work shows his poor judgment in military matters, McCain's campaign maintains.

"The problem with the Obama campaign's argument is that they seem to think that losing in Iraq helps us win in Afghanistan," Kori Schake, McCain's senior foreign policy adviser, said Thursday. A former Pentagon, State



RAHMATULLAH NAIMZAD/FP

Masked Taliban militants are seen in Ghazni province, Afghanistan. The presumptive presidential nominees — Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill. — agree the effort in Afghanistan needs more resources. They disagree, however, on the overall strategy.

Department and National Security Council official, she now teaches at West Point.

"What that shows is they don't understand that the counter-insurgency strategy that Sen. McCain has pushed so hard for is what is made for success in Iraq," she said.

As Obama sees it, the problems in Afghanistan demonstrate that he was right from the start to oppose the war in Iraq. The Obama campaign argues the Iraq effort has taken resources from the battle in Afghanistan.

"Barack recognized from the beginning that the invasion of Iraq was a diversion from the principal challenge that we face — going after the terrorists who attacked us on 9-11," said Denis McDonough, Obama's foreign policy adviser.

Obama's approach is pragmatic in that he wants to focus on "how we direct our finite resources to confront the challenges," McDonough said.

Report: Japan may nix plans to send troops

TOKYO — The worsening situation in Afghanistan may keep Japan from sending troops to help in humanitarian missions there, Japanese media reported Friday.

Reports in *The Asahi*, a national daily, and the Kyodo News agency said deteriorating security has weakened Tokyo's political will to send troops to the region.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura has said the deployment is a possibility, but passing the required legislation through parliament will require the votes of the junior coalition partner, the New Komeito Party, which is growing more cautious.

Afghan official: GIs shot female bomb suspect

KABUL, Afghanistan — U.S. soldiers shot and wounded a suspected female bomber as they took her into custody of her from Afghan police, a police official alleged Friday.

Gen. Khan Mohammad Mujahid, police chief in central Ghazni province, said the woman and a 12-year-old boy were taken into Afghan custody Thursday evening. The woman was later taken by the American troops, he said.

Mujahid initially said the police argued with the Americans over giving up custody. But he later said there was no argument and that the woman lunged at one of the U.S. soldiers, sparking the shot.

From The Associated Press

Battle: Soldiers rose above constant fire to hold off insurgents

BATTLE, FROM PAGE 3

"When I saw Phillips die, I looked down and was bleeding pretty good, that's probably the most scared I was at any point," Stafford said. "Then I kinda had to calm myself down and be like, 'All right, I gotta go try to do my job.'"

The soldier from Parker, Colo., loaded his 9 mm handgun, crawled up to their fighting position, stuck the pistol over the sandbags and fired.

Stafford saw Zwilling's M-4 rifle nearby so he loaded it, put it on top of the sandbag and fired. Another couple RPGs struck the sandbag wall Stafford used as cover. Shrapnel pierced his hands.

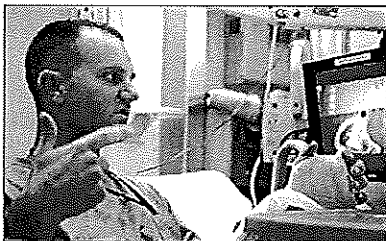
Stafford low-crawled to another fighting position where Cpl. Jason Bogar, Sgt. Matthew Gobble and Sgt. Ryan Pitts were located. Stafford told Pitts that the insurgents were within grenade-tossing range. That got Pitts' attention.

With blood running down his face, Pitts threw a grenade and then crawled to the position from where Stafford had just come. Pitts started chucking more grenades.

The firefight intensified. Bullets cut down tree limbs that fell on the soldiers. RPGs constantly exploded.

Back at Stafford's position, so many bullets were coming in that the soldiers could not poke their heads over their sandbag wall. Bogar stuck an M-249 machine gun above the wall and squeezed off rounds to keep fire on the insurgents. In about five minutes, Bogar fired about 600 rounds, causing the M-249 to seize up from heat.

At another spot on the observation post, Cpl. Jonathan Ayers laid down continuous fire from an M-240 machine gun, despite drawing small-arms and RPG fire from the enemy. Ayers kept firing until he was shot and killed. Cpl. Pruitt Rainey radioed the FOB with a casualty report, calling for help. Of the nine soldiers at the observation post, Ayers and Phillips were dead, Zwilling



SEN. BLOOMER/Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Jacob Walker, 29, a soldier from Company C, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), was shot in the wrist during the battle.

ing was unaccounted for, and three were wounded. Additionally, several of the soldiers' machine guns couldn't fire because of damage. And they needed more ammo.

Rainey, Bogar and another soldier jumped out of their fighting position with the third soldier of the group launching a shoulder-fired missile.

All this happened within the first 20 minutes of the fight.

Platoon leader 1st Lt. Jonathan Brostrom and Cpl. Jason Hovater arrived at the observation post to reinforce the soldiers. By that time, the insurgents had breached the perimeter of the observation post. Gunfire rang out, and Rainey shouted, "He's right behind the sandbag."

Brostrom could be heard shouting about the insurgent as well.

More gunfire and grenade explosions ensued. Back in the fighting position, Gobble fired a few quick rounds. Gobble then looked to where the soldiers were fighting and told Stafford the soldiers were dead. Of the nine soldiers who died in the battle, at

least seven fell in fighting at the observation post.

The insurgents then started chucking rocks at Gobble and Stafford's fighting position, hoping that the soldiers might think the rocks were grenades, causing them to jump from the safety of their fighting hole. One rock hit a tree behind Stafford and landed directly between his legs. He braced himself for an explosion. He then realized it was a rock.

Stafford didn't have a weapon, and Gobble was low on ammo. Gobble told Stafford they had to get back to the FOB.

They didn't realize that Pitts was still alive in another fighting position at the observation post. Gobble and Stafford crawled out of their fighting hole. Gobble looked again to where the soldiers had been fighting and reconfirmed to Stafford that Brostrom, Rainey, Bogar and others were dead.

Gobble and Stafford low-crawled and ran back to the FOB. Coming into the FOB, Stafford was asked by a sergeant what was going on at the observation post. Stafford told him all the soldiers there were dead. Stafford lay against a wall, and his fellow soldiers put a tourniquet on him.

From the OP, Pitts got on the radio and told his comrades he was alone. At least three soldiers went to the OP to rescue Pitts, but they suffered wounds after encountering RPG and small-arms fire.

At that time, air support arrived in the form of Apache helicopters, A-10s and F-15s, performing bombing and strafing runs.

When the attack began, Walker was on

the FOB. He grabbed an M-249 and started shooting toward a mountain spur where he could see some muzzle flashes. Walker put down 600 to 800 rounds of ammunition.

He got down behind the wall he was shooting from to load more ammo and was told they were taking fire from the southwest. He threw the bipod legs of his machine gun on the hood of a nearby Humvee. A 7.62-millimeter caliber bullet struck Walker's left wrist, knocking him to the ground. A soldier applied a tourniquet to Walker and bandaged him.

Walker and two other wounded soldiers distributed their ammo and grenades and passed messages.

The whole FOB was covered in dust and smoke, looking like something out of an old Western movie.

"I've never seen the enemy do anything like that," said Walker, who was medically evacuated off the FOB in one of the first helicopters to arrive. "It's usually three RPGs, some sporadic fire and then they're gone ... I don't where they get all those RPGs. That was crazy."

Two hours after the first shots were fired, Stafford made his way — with help — to the medevac helicopter that arrived.

"It was some of the bravest stuff I've ever seen in my life, and I will never see it again because those guys," Stafford said, then paused. "Normal humans wouldn't do that. You're not supposed to do that — getting up and firing back when everything around you is popping and whizzing and trees, branches coming down and sandbags exploding and RPGs coming in over your head ... It was a fistfight then, and those guys held 'em off."

Stafford offered a guess as to why his fellow soldiers fought so hard.

"Just hardcoreness I guess," he said. "Just guys kicking ass, basically. Just making sure that we look scary enough that you don't want to come in and try to get us."

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