



White rests on the trail to Combat Outpost Bella in Nuristan province, Afghanistan. (Photo courtesy of Sgt. Kyle White)

Former Sergeant to Accept Medal of Honor in Memory of Six Who Perished

By J.D. Leipold

Army News Service

Former Sgt. Kyle J. White said that when he accepts the Medal of Honor from President Barack Obama in a ceremony at the White House today, he will do so in honor of the five Soldiers and one Marine “who gave their lives in the defense of freedom and the American way of life.”

White spoke to reporters last month in Charlotte, N.C., near where he now lives. White was just 20 when he was deployed to Afghanistan. In November 2007, his 14-man unit and squad of Afghan soldiers was brutally ambushed on three sides by Taliban fighters on a path descending from the village of Aranas into a valley.

“[Today], when I’m awarded the Medal of Honor, I will tell their stories and preserve their memories. They will not be forgotten,” the Seattle native said. “Their sacrifice and the sacrifices of so many others is what motivates me to wake up each and every day to be the best I can. Everything I do in my life is done to make them proud.”

White, who will become the seventh living recipient of the nation’s highest military decoration for conspicuous gallantry and valor during actions in Iraq or Afghanistan, was asked how strong the memory of the battle is now, after almost seven years, during which



Sgt. Kyle Jerome White

time he attained a bachelor's degree and became an investment analyst for a major bank.

"I would say for the first couple of years, memories were more vivid than today," he said. "As time goes on certain things you think about less and less, but at any given moment I can close my eyes and hear the sounds and smell the gunpowder in the air. But six and a half years later, I don't think about it as much as I used to."

Ambush at Aranas

On Nov. 8, 2007, Soldiers of 1st Platoon, "Chosen" Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173 Infantry Brigade Combat Team, left Combat Outpost Bella by foot to visit the large village of Aranas, Afghanistan, for a Shura meeting with village elders. The American Soldiers weren't thrilled about the mission because the villagers had been suspected of collusion in a major attack months earlier on Combat Outpost Ranch House, which resulted in 11 wounded and the closure of the outpost.

Under cover of a pitch-black sky, the team made for the American-built schoolhouse on the edge of the village, where they would bunk for the night.

At daybreak, Nov. 9, the group prepared for the late morning meeting at the mosque, but villagers delayed the get-together, saying the elders were praying for several hours. The meeting was put off until early afternoon, at about 1:30 p.m.

White recalled that village turnout for the Shura was unusually large, as were the number of questions being asked. The Soldiers were hopeful about the level of interest from the young village males of fighting age. Then the 20-year old White said the interpreter was receiving

radio traffic in a language he didn't understand. The lone Marine and embedded training team member Sgt. Philip A. Bocks then advised platoon leader 1st Lt. Matthew C. Ferrara, it was best to leave the area.

"There was one shot, you know, down into the valley, and then it was two shots, and then it was full-automatic fire and RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) ... it was coming from multiple directions," White remembered. Carrying a fully-automatic M4A1, White emptied his 30-round magazine, then loaded another. But he didn't get a chance to fire.

"An RPG hit right behind my head and knocked me unconscious. ... It was just lights out. ... When I woke up, I was face-down on a rock," he said, recalling that as he was awakening, an enemy round fragmented near his head sending a shower of broken rock chips and debris into the side of his face. "I didn't feel pain at all, [it was] just numb like when you go to the dentist."

More shots, more booms, more chaos. Then White realized 10 of the 14-man American element and the ANA soldiers were gone. With no cover, the remainder of the patrol had been forced to slide more than 150 feet down the side of a rocky cliff.

The only ones remaining up top were Spc. Kain Schilling, Ferrara, Bocks, the interpreter and White. Then White looked around and saw Schilling had been shot in the upper right arm and was dodging, weaving and running toward the cover of shrubs and the umbrella canopy of a single prickly tree. White made for the tree, which provided just enough shade to make the two Soldiers nearly invisible.

White pulled out a tourniquet and asked Schilling, who was grimacing with pain, if he could apply it. White could see where the bullet entered and the blood was flowing from, so he slipped the tourniquet on and, instead of cranking down too hard, White said he tightened it just enough to stop the bleeding.

"As I was working on him, I had the radio on, then I rolled over and sat next to Schilling just to take my pack off, that's when I got that metallic taste, then that burning in my lungs," White said, adding that he and Kain covered their mouths with their shirts to filter whatever it was.

"Initially, I thought we were the first unlucky bastards to have chemical weapons on us ... that's what we thought initially, but then I saw a stream of smoke over my shoulder and I realized my pack was smoldering — it was the battery from my radio burning up," he said.

White checked his radio, but it was out of the fight. Then White saw Bocks, who was badly wounded, lying out in the open, about 30 feet from the shade of the tree. He began encouraging the Marine to use all the strength he could, but Bocks couldn't make any progress.

"I knew he needed help and there was a lot of fire coming in, but it really didn't matter at that point," White

said. "By then, I already had known, 'Well ... we're not gonna make it through this one; it's just a matter of time before I'm dead.' I figured, if that's going to happen, I might as well help someone while I can."

White sprinted the 30 feet to Bocks as rounds skipped around his feet and snapped past his head. He made it to Bocks unscathed, but remembered thinking that his wounds were severe. He looked over at Schilling and yelled at the interpreter to attend to the Soldier, but the interpreter was pinned down and couldn't move.

"At that time, I can remember thinking he wasn't going to make it, but I knew I wasn't going to stop trying," White said. "No matter what the outcome, I'm going to do what I can with what I have."

White grabbed the buddy carry handle on the back of Bocks' vest and began pulling the 200-pound-plus Marine toward cover. He realized that the enemy was now shooting directly at him and further endangering Bocks, so he ran back to cover, waited until fire died down, then ran out again repeating the process four times until Bocks was under cover.

White saw that Bocks' leg was bleeding badly, so he grabbed another tourniquet out of his pack, slipped it

around Bocks' leg and tightened down until the bleeding stopped. Next he tore Bocks' shirt open and saw another wound. But it wasn't until he rolled him over that he saw the large exit wound. "Stop the bleeding" is all he thought as he stuffed bandages, clothing, whatever he could to stop the bleeding. No matter what White did, the bleeding wasn't stopping and the Marine succumbed to his wounds.

No sooner had White realized Bocks had passed away than he looked over to see Schilling get hit again by small-arms fire, this time in the left leg. White scrambled to Schilling. Out of tourniquets, White pulled his belt from his uniform and looped it around Schilling's leg.

"Hey man, this is going to hurt," White said to Schilling, who replied, "Just do it!"

"So, I put my foot on his leg and pulled the belt as hard as I could until the bleeding stopped," White recalled.

White next looked around for the lieutenant and noticed his platoon leader, Ferrara, was lying still, face-down on the trail. Again, White exposed himself to fire, this time crawling to Ferrara's position. The lieutenant was dead, so White moved back to Schilling where he began to use Schilling's radio until an enemy round



Staff Sgt. Conrad Begaye awards then-Spc. Kyle White the Combat Infantryman Badge during a ceremony Nov. 6, 2007. Three days later, White's team was ambushed. (Photo courtesy of Sgt. Kyle White)



To be awarded the Medal of Honor, a recipient must have “distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty.” (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

zipped right through the hand-mic blowing it out of his hand. Now both Soldiers’ radios had been destroyed.

The paratrooper moved to Bocks and found that his radio was still operational, so he established communication with friendly elements and rendered a situation report. He understood the situation well enough that he was able to bring in mortars, artillery, air strikes and helicopter gun runs to keep the enemy from massing on friendly positions.

“I heard a hiss, just a second of a hiss and then a big, big explosion and that one brought me to my knees,” he said. “It scrambled my brains a little bit.”

That was concussion No. 2 for the day, caused by a friendly 120-mm mortar round that fell a little short of its target.

After nightfall, White began giving the interpreter commands to relay to the Afghan National Army soldiers to establish themselves as a security perimeter. Medevac was still a few hours away, so White kept telling Schilling to stay awake as he consolidated sensitive items — radios and weapons in a central location to ensure no equipment would be lost to the enemy.

While trying to keep Schilling from falling asleep, White battled his own multiple concussions. He knew if he passed out, the helicopters wouldn’t be able to find them or the two wounded Afghan National Army soldiers who White had also treated.

Eventually, White marked the landing zone and assisted the flight medic in hoisting the wounded into the helicopter. Only after all wounded were off the trail did White allow himself to be evacuated.

Though many Afghan National Army and fellow Soldiers were injured on that autumn day nearly seven years ago, five American Soldiers and one Marine died during the battle, which White and Schilling say they have never forgotten and never will.

Each of the surviving Soldiers of the Battle of Aranas wears a stainless steel wristband with the names of those who didn’t come home: 1st Lt. Matthew C. Ferrara, Sgt. Jeffery S. Mersman, Spc.

Sean K.A. Langevin, Spc. Lester G. Roque, Pfc. Joseph M. Lancour and Marine Sgt. Phillip A. Bocks.

The aftermath and life today

The only child of a Vietnam-era Special Forces Soldier and his wife, White first wanted to join the Marine Corps in 2006. His father convinced his 19-year-old son — who grew up hunting, fishing and snowboarding — to go Army instead and to become a paratrooper. In February 2006, he signed on as an infantryman.

Following Airborne training at Fort Benning, Ga., White was assigned to Vincenza, Italy, with 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry, as a grenadier and rifleman. While with the 503rd, White was deployed to Afghanistan as a platoon radio telephone operator from May 2007 until August 2008. He next served as an opposing forces sergeant with the Ranger Training Battalion at Fort Benning.

He separated from the Army on July 8, 2011, and used his GI Bill to attend the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he received a bachelor’s degree. Today, he works as an investment analyst at The Royal Bank of Canada in Charlotte.

Schilling, who was shot twice, credits White with saving his life. He said before White patched him up with two tourniquets, he didn’t think he had a chance of getting out of the ambush.

Today, he's well and serves as an armed security officer in Palo, Iowa. Like White, he was also just 20 at the time of the battle. While White and Schilling were friends before the battle, they've become even closer friends who experienced a major trauma and the horror of war.

"Kyle still comes up once a year because he knows I have a family and it's hard for me to break away. So he comes to me ... that's really cool," Schilling said, adding that he'll be at the ceremony. "I consider him my best

friend. We're still very close after these seven years."

Schilling said that though White didn't actually get hit by any enemy rounds, his pack was shot up and his weapon was also shot more than a few times.

"I just want people to know, the fire he moved through was just absolutely ... I can't even describe how intense it was, that's what amazed me, how he went to get Bocks so many times — faster than a speeding bullet. He's definitely lucky and so am I." ■



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