



In his home in Nashua, N.H., on May 3, 2014, Pitts, who is to receive the Medal of Honor for combat actions in Afghanistan, holds the flag that his grandfather flew every day while Pitts served in the Army. (Photo by Lisa Ferdinando)

NCO to be Awarded the Medal of Honor: ‘There Was Valor Everywhere’

By Lisa Ferdinando

Army News Service

Facing almost certain death during an enemy assault in Afghanistan, a gravely injured Ryan Pitts, then a sergeant, fiercely fought on, keeping an observation post and fallen Soldiers around him from ending up in enemy hands.

For his incredible bravery in Wanat, Afghanistan, on July 13, 2008, Pitts will receive the nation’s highest military honor for valor, the Medal of Honor, at the White House on July 21.

During that attack in Afghanistan at Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler and Observation Post Topside, nine of Pitts’ teammates were killed. He said his honor is theirs as well.

“This award isn’t about what I did; it’s about what we did as a team,” Pitts said. “It belongs to everybody who was there that day.”

Though he had suffered severe shrapnel wounds and was unable to use his legs, Pitts is credited with preventing the enemy from inflicting further casualties and from gaining possession of the fallen Soldiers.

“The fight was intense everywhere,” said Pitts, who now lives in Nashua, N.H.

At one point in the battle, Pitts heard no sounds coming out of the observation post where he was positioned. The then-22-year-old forward observer came



Then-Sgt. Ryan Pitts (left) and Sgt. Israel Garcia patrol the mountains of eastern Afghanistan in 2008. Garcia was among the nine Soldiers killed in the battle at Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler on July 13, 2008. (Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Ryan Pitts)

to a startling realization: He was alone; all the Soldiers around him were dead or gone.

He radioed the command post, only to be told that there was no one to send. The fighting raged with Soldiers locked elsewhere in intense battle.

"I wasn't angry," Pitts recalled. "I'm not angry about it now."

The enemy was so close that Pitts could hear them talking. In fact, the Soldiers listening to Pitts' communications could hear the enemy. This was the end, Pitts thought.

He put the hand mike down.

"I basically reconciled that I was going to die, and made my peace with it," he said. "My personal goal was to just to try and take as many of them with me, before they got me."

The attack began just before dawn, at around 4:20 a.m., with a burst of machine-gun fire. It then opened up into a full-scale assault that targeted the base's key defensive weapons systems and positions.

"It's hard to feel good about anything that day," said Pitts, who at the time was serving with "Chosen"

Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, out of Vicenza, Italy. Their unit was nicknamed the "Chosen Few."

"We lost nine family members," he said during an at-times emotional interview. His wife Amy listened nearby, sometimes in tears.

The fallen were brothers to him, he said, naming each one: Spc. Sergio Abad, Cpl. Jonathan Ayers, Cpl. Jason Bogar, 1st Lt. Jonathan Brostrom, Sgt. Israel Garcia, Cpl. Jason Hovater, Cpl. Matthew Phillips, Cpl. Pruitt Rainey, and Cpl. Gunnar Zwilling.

'I was going. I had my mind set.'

Pitts, who is from New Hampshire, recalled how as a kindergartener he drew a picture of what he wanted to be when he grew up: a Soldier.



From left, Sgt. Matthew Gobble, Pitts, then-Sgt. Adam Delaney, Sgt. Dylan Meyer, Sgt. Brian Hissong, Sgt. Mike Santiago and Sgt. Israel Garcia, all of 2nd Platoon, "Chosen" Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, pause for a photo before going out on patrol at Forward Operating Base Blessing, Nangalam, Afghanistan, in 2007. (Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Ryan Pitts)

He enlisted in January 2003, even before he had graduated high school.

"I wanted to do something meaningful, and I wanted to serve my country. So I decided to join the Army," he said. "Everybody supported me but nobody really liked the decision. It was just me. But I was going. I had my mind set."

Family and friends were "unbelievably supportive," he said. They wrote, sent care packages, and kept in touch while he was deployed and made time to see him when he was home on leave.

"My grandfather did his own thing. He put a flag up when I joined the Army, and he flew it until the day I was out. He never took it down," Pitts said.

Pitts, who went on to get a business degree and lives in a quiet neighborhood with his wife and their one-year-old-son Lucas, keeps the neatly folded, worn flag on display at home.

Service and sacrifice

Receiving the Medal of Honor is a heavy burden; every Soldier that day fought with all they had, some to the death, Pitts said.

"They were great men. But there are service members everywhere, men and women, who would do the same thing that we all did that day," he said.

The nine fallen Soldiers "fought until their last breath because they cared more about their friends than themselves," he said.

Pitts, who married Amy two years ago and had a son last year, said he wouldn't have his family if it weren't for the service and sacrifice of the Soldiers who fought that day in Wanat. He is alive today because of them, he said. The Soldiers trained and served together, lived together, shared stories, and laughed and joked together. They were like brothers, Pitts said.



From left, Spc. William Hewitt, Cpl. Jonathan R. Ayers and Spc. Chris McKaig pull security at Observation Post 1 near Combat Outpost Bella, Afghanistan, in the spring of 2008. (Photo courtesy Staff Sgt. Ryan Pitts)

"We were a family. We had become a family over the course of 14 months in combat. We trained for a year before that," he said.

"That day was a bad day for all of us," Pitts said. He was on his second combat tour of Afghanistan the time of the attack.

Pitts wants his son and the world to know about the men who made the ultimate sacrifice that day — the fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers; the heroes.

Pitts thinks of the lost Soldiers every day, he said. Their names and the names of other fallen Soldiers are inscribed on a memorial table at his home.

"Rest in peace my Brothers, you have not been forgotten," the table reads.

American troops arrive in Wanat

U.S. forces had arrived days earlier to establish the vehicle patrol base in Wanat, a remote village in Afghanistan's rugged northeast near the border with Pakistan. Under the cover of darkness, July 8–9, Chosen Company airlifted its 1st Platoon out of the nearby Combat Outpost Bella. The 2nd Platoon left Forward Operating Base Blessing, the main base for their battalion in the area.

For Pitts and his team, the mission was expected to be their last before returning home — they'd already been in Afghanistan for 14 months. The location was selected so

Soldiers could be near the people to build relations and foster goodwill, instead of being in a location farther from the village that would also be harder to supply, Pitts said.

"I think our commanders' intent was to be close to the local populace where we could hopefully help protect them and make an impact and better their lives," he said.

The location was on a plateau where two valleys met and had considerable dead space, or areas that could not be observed from the base. Roughly the size of a football field, the base was named in honor of Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Kahler of 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team. Kahler, a platoon sergeant, died Jan. 26, 2008, after being shot by an Afghan guard in Waygul, Afghanistan. It was a huge loss for the Soldiers, said Pitts, who was wearing a KIA bracelet in memory of Kahler the day of the attack in Wanat. Pockmarks from shrapnel are visible on the bracelet.

Kahler was a great leader who loved his Soldiers, Pitts said.

"We would have followed him anywhere," Pitts said. "He was one of those leaders, he didn't tell us to do things. He asked. You wanted to do it, whatever it was, for him."

Soldiers worked in the scorching heat in Wanat to establish the new base, which they hoped would become Combat Outpost Kahler. However, that never happened as the Army left Wanat shortly after the attack. The Combined Joint Task Force-101 commander determined that coalition

forces could no longer achieve their counterinsurgency objectives there due to complicity in the attack by local government officials, civilians, and Afghan National Police.

The valley erupts in fire

The morning of the attack, Pitts was at Observation Post Topside, a lookout and defensive position to the east of the main base, with eight other paratroopers: Ayers, Bogar, Sgt. Matthew Gobble, Pfc. Chris McKaig, Phillips, Rainey, Spc. Tyler Stafford and Zwilling.

Up before dawn, they noticed suspicious activity in the mountains to the west. Pitts and Gobble were preparing a request for indirect fire (mortar or artillery support), but before they could finish, the "valley erupted," Pitts said.

"The battle started with a burst of machine gun fire from the north. Then it just opened up," he said.

An estimated 200 insurgents launched a full-scale assault against the base, targeting the mortar-firing position, the vehicles with the TOW (tube-launched, optically-tracked, wire-guided) missile system, and the observation post.

"RPGs on top of RPGs — rocket-propelled grenades — hand grenades, every position was assaulted pretty heavily," Pitts said.

The paratroopers at the observation post were hit with small arms fire, RPGs and hand grenades thrown at close range by insurgents. Everyone in the observation post was



The view from the northern fighting position of Observation Post Topside, facing to the north and northeast. Shown here is the "dead space" where the enemy attacked just below the terraces. The building in the distance was used as an enemy fighting position during the Battle for Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler on July 14, 2008. (Photo courtesy Staff Sgt. Ryan Pitts)

wounded — several were killed — in the first volley of fire. Pitts suffered grenade shrapnel wounds in both legs and his left arm.

Pitts, who was unable to use his legs and bleeding profusely, crawled into positions and used hand grenades, a machine gun, a grenade launcher — any weapon available — to keep the enemy at bay. He fought alongside members of his unit who were defending or reinforcing the observation post.

The enemy was close enough to toss grenades at the Soldiers. Pitts started “cooking off” grenades, letting them burn for a few seconds before tossing them, putting himself in danger but not allowing the enemy time to toss them back.

With the remaining paratroopers at the observation post fighting for their lives, Pitts was the only contact between the command post and the observation post — the only person left capable of controlling indirect fire support.

Brostrom and Hovater maneuvered through direct enemy fire from the vehicle patrol base’s main perimeter to reinforce the observation post. Then there was silence from inside the post; suddenly, Pitts realized he was alone. While some Soldiers had moved to other locations, those who remained at the observation post or had come to reinforce the post had all been killed.

Pitts crawled from position to position, seeing fallen comrades all around him.

“I crawled back to the northern position and I’m trying to figure out what to do. It was probably just a couple of seconds, but it felt like forever,” he said.

When he called the company commander at the command post, Capt. Matthew Myer, for reinforcements, Pitts was told there was no one to send.

“And I said, ‘OK, well, you either send people or this position is going to fall.’ And then I just put the hand mike down,” Pitts said, noting at that point he made peace with the fact that he might just die there.

Then he used an M-203 grenade launcher and fired almost directly overhead, so the grenades would detonate just on the other side of the perimeter where the enemy was concealed.

Pitts called on the radio for any Soldier with a sight line of the observation post to begin firing over the sand-



The southern battle position within OP Topside, established as a casualty collection point because it was the area most secure from enemy fire. (Photo courtesy of Sgt. Ryan Pitts)

bag wall at his position, to knock the enemy back if they breached the wall. Sgt. Brian Hissong answered that call, laying down fire directly over Pitts.

Then, four Soldiers — Garcia, Spc. Michael Denton, Staff Sgt. Sean Samaroo, and Spc. Jacob Sones — came from the casualty collect point and the traffic-control point to reinforce the observation post. They found Pitts fighting for his life.

“I heard them and probably [had] never been more relieved in my life then when I heard those guys,” Pitts said.

Sones was initially able to treat Pitts before another round of explosions rocked the observation post, mortally wounding Garcia.

Pitts crawled to Garcia to comfort him.

“Garcia was lying in the area between the north and south position; he was hurt real bad. I think that was the first time that I really just didn’t know what to do,” Pitts said. “So I just talked to him. We didn’t talk a lot. I held his hand, he wanted to try and sit up.

“He said to me that he just wanted me to tell his family and his wife that he loved them. I told him that I would, and I did when we got back,” Pitts recalled. “I don’t know how long we sat there, maybe a couple of minutes, maybe not, might have been 30 seconds.”

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 that engaged insurgents north of the observation



Pitts holds a bracelet he wears that commemorates the late Sgt. 1st Class Matthew Kahler, a former platoon sergeant of 2nd platoon, which is taped over another bracelet (not visible) that commemorates the fallen of 1st Platoon, "Chosen" Company, who were killed in a Nov. 9, 2007, ambush. The bracelets prevented shrapnel from penetrating Pitts' wrist. (Photo by Lisa Ferdinando)

post. That strike took pressure off the Soldiers at the main base, allowing a third group of reinforcements from the vehicle patrol base to secure the observation post.

Now, reinforcements from Forward Operating Base Blessing began arriving and clearing enemy positions within the town and hillsides.

Throughout the battle, despite the loss of blood and severity of his wounds, Pitts' incredible toughness, determination and ability to communicate with leadership while under fire allowed U.S. forces to hold the observation post and turn the tide of the battle.

Without his ability to stay alert and fight while critically wounded, the enemy would have gained a foothold on high ground, inflicted significantly greater casualties onto the vehicle patrol base and could have gained pos-

session of the fallen Soldiers at the observation post.

At approximately 6:15 a.m., about two hours after the assault began, Pitts was medically evacuated, beginning the recovery that soon took him back to the United States.

Feeling he could no longer do what he wanted to do, which was fight, he chose to leave the Army and was medically discharged in 2009 with the rank of staff sergeant.

From the Soldiers he fought beside to the medical evacuation pilots who landed right after the observation post was hit by an RPG — "I honestly don't understand how that helicopter wasn't hit," he said — everyone that day gave everything they had in the fight, Pitts said.

"I'm in awe of everything they did that day — everything that everybody did, not just the guys who were killed," he said. "There was valor everywhere." ■

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