



Newsmakers

Enemy Inside the Wire: The Untold Story of the Battle of Bastion

One year ago this month, under cover of night, fifteen Taliban, dressed as American soldiers, snuck onto one of the largest air bases in Afghanistan. What followed was a bloody confrontation highlighting a startling security lapse, with hundreds of millions in matériel lost in a matter of hours—the worst day for American airpower since the Tet Offensive. Yet the attack faded from view before anyone could figure out what went wrong. For the first time, Matthieu Aikins relives those heart-pounding moments and offers an extraordinary account of the Battle of Bastion

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It

was a suicide mission. None of them had a doubt about that.

They gathered in the Afghan village just outside Camp Bastion's perimeter wire, the fifteen young men who'd been chosen, some of them barely out of their teens. The village wasn't much to look at, a scraggly collection of

mud-walled compounds erected on what, until recently, had been empty desert. Then, like an apparition from the sky, the foreigners had come and built a base so vast that its sewage runoff gave life to the barren ground outside the wire. Fields of opium poppy had sprouted within sight of the perimeter fence, their colorful flowers waving in the wind. For months, disguised as farmers, this team had been sending men to crawl inside the outermost lines of barbed wire, testing the foreigners' alertness and responses. Now they had found a weak point, and the mission could begin. There was no moon tonight, and darkness would cover their approach.

Earlier, in preparation, they had donned their stolen U.S. Army uniforms and faced a video camera. Their leader stood in the center with a Koran in one hand and a British assault rifle in the other. It was early morning, still cool enough for breath to form.

"In the name of almighty Allah, who is king of the kings," he said in broken, memorized English. He was a little older than the rest of them, his beard fuller but still short-trimmed, his face calm and confident. "I want to give this message to Obama, crusaders, and other non-Muslims. You have come to Afghanistan to guilt all Muslims under the name of terrorism. It is not terrorism. We are not terrorists."

The Afghan on his right—a boy, really, in an army cap and square-rimmed glasses—pinched his lips and tried not to giggle at his leader's English. A rooster crowed in the distance. "You rain the bombs on Muslims," he said. "Next, insult of our Muslim sisters. Next, to destroy our mosques and madrassas. These are those actions which makes us ready to sacrifice ourselves in the way of almighty Allah. We are not suicide bombers. We have morals just like other young boys."

They walked over to a whiteboard that had been affixed to a mud wall and sat down as the leader lectured with a pointer, the camera rolling. The board was marked with red and blue lines and symbols—showing the base's concentric defenses, its fuel farms, and their chief target, the jets on the airfield. It was a crude but accurate map of the Third Marine Aircraft Wing at Camp Bastion.

As they made their final preparations in the quiet of the village, two Harrier jets roared out from the base and headed north, their wingtips glinting against the crystalline sky. To the enemy on the ground, they were as untouchable as the sun.



It was time to call in his approach. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Raible, better known as "Otis" to his fellow Marines, was a big man, his frame and ham-hock arms filling the cramped cockpit of the Harrier, a machine that, after his fifteen years as a pilot, had become an extension of himself. A pugnacious little jet, it was built for close air support and vertical takeoffs and landings from improvised battlefield airstrips. None of that strike-from-10,000-foot business; the Harrier was more personal than that, designed to get right on top of the Marine infantry it was supporting, so that the grunts could look up and see its stubby wings and know that American airpower had their asses covered.

Raible was almost a caricature of a Marine commander—intense blue eyes, blond widow's peak shaved high on the sides—and his personality mirrored the reputation of his aircraft: aggressive, in-your-face, but also precise. He had memorized encyclopedic levels of details about the Harrier's complex avionics and electrical systems, and he led his Harrier squadron, the Avengers, with intellect and discipline. He wasn't the kind of boss you always felt at ease around, but his troops loved him, wanted to do better for him. His wingman joked that Raible was his "dad."

That afternoon, September 14, 2012, the two pilots had flown out in support of a company of Marines on a routine patrol. They spent a dull three hours using the jets' scopes to scan roads and compounds for any sign of the Taliban. There wasn't much action these days; after three years of slaughter, the guerrillas had learned not to engage the Marines in open battle, where they would be punished from the skies. But the surge was over now, and the Americans were leaving, pulling back to their big bases and letting the Afghan army and police slug it out in the field with the Taliban. With the troop drawdown well under way, Americans were increasingly watching the war from the sidelines—and from above.

By the time Raible pushed forward on the controls and nosed the jet toward the dazzling beacon of Camp Bastion, darkness had descended on the desert plain. On a moonless night like this, the base looked freakishly bright, like an electrified island in an endless sea of black. There were almost 30,000 people living down there in that vast array of

lights, spread across eight square miles, Marines and British soldiers and contractors, fenced in and inhabiting a world utterly separate from the country around them. The Brits had built Bastion back in 2006, but the Marine surge had made it *big*, and now, with its hospital and morgue, it was like a small city, staffed by armies of cooks and cleaners and supplied by a chain of fuel and food trucks coming in over the mountains from Pakistan. Ten years into the war, and the military had perfected the art of comfortable base living: Wi-Fi, surf-and-turf on holidays, Texas Hold 'Em tournaments in the rec center. The city-state of Bastion even had its own prince: the redheaded Captain Harry Wales, as Prince Harry was known on the base. He had arrived for a three-month tour flying an Apache helicopter, prompting a Taliban threat to kill or kidnap him. "We have informed our commanders in Helmand to do whatever they can to eliminate him," Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid had told the press four days earlier. The military laughed off the idea. "That's not a matter of concern," NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen retorted. The Taliban infiltrating a base called Bastion and carrying off the fourth in line to the British throne? Absurd.

Raible switched to the airport's tower frequency and called in his approach.

"Tower, Heat One-Five, five-mile final, four down and locked."

"Roger Heat One-Five, clear to land, runway one-nine."

The jet leveled out as its nozzles rotated downward, the landing gear flexing as the aircraft settled onto the tarmac. Raible pushed the throttle forward and taxied to a spot amid the rest of the air wing—a billion-dollar string of pearls all painted in smoky Marine gray. He had a Skype date with his wife that night, and it was already past nine o'clock. There was still paperwork to do.

The insurgents moved silently and swiftly in the dark, their packs heavy with weapons and ammunition, their sneakers padding gently against the hard dirt underfoot. They had split into three teams of five. The first group cut through the concertina wire at a bend in the fence on the edge of the perimeter. There were floodlights and guard towers every few hundred yards, but the soldiers manning them seemed oblivious. The team slipped through the second line of wire unnoticed and crept forward into the empty, broken terrain between the outer fence line and the airfield. Ahead, the lights of the airfield shone brightly, the orange light washing over the Marines' heavy transport helicopters; then the Ospreys, helicopter-plane hybrids; the attack helicopters, Huey gunships and sharklike Cobras; and at the far end, the "fast-movers," snub-nosed Harrier jump jets, loaded down with bombs and rockets.

Somehow they'd managed to walk undetected inside the massive base. Now there was nothing between them and their target. The first team headed for the Harriers.



Around 10 p.m., at the attack-helicopter squadron, Captain John Buss was having a post-flight cigar with a fellow Cobra pilot, savoring mouthfuls of the cool night air and a full-bodied Nicaraguan Man o' War—it was the closest thing to a nightcap you could get on a dry base—when they heard gunfire coming from the Harrier compound next door. *That's strange*, he thought. *Gunfire inside the wire?* Buss and his friend drew their pistols—Beretta nine-millimeters—and hopped the blast barriers at the edge of their compound, then crossed a



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fifty-yard pool of unlit darkness that separated them from the Harrier squadron. Taking cover behind some construction equipment, Buss squinted at the jets, his eyes adjusting to the dim light, and spotted a strange-looking group of men wearing uniforms. *Are they friendlies?* he wondered. Then one of the men shouldered a rocket-propelled-grenade launcher and, taking aim, fired an RPG at one of the Harriers, which exploded into a massive ball of flame. Buss couldn't believe his eyes—it was like watching a movie.

Holy shit, he thought, they're not friendlies.



At that moment, the helo-squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Lightfoot, was sitting at his desk about 200 yards away when the explosion rattled the walls in his office. Lightfoot, a rangy six feet one with the call sign "Beast," assumed the blast was just the bomb squad detonating unexploded munitions just outside the base, something they regularly did, though rarely this late at night.

Fifteen seconds later, he heard another, louder boom and got up to see what the hell was going on. He walked to the door, swung it open, and stood for a moment, staring open-mouthed: Out on the flight line, on the long strip of tarmac where the aircraft were parked, two \$30 million jets were engulfed in orange flames and billowing smoke.

More explosions sounded. Lightfoot figured the base was under mortar attack, and he joined a stream of Marines heading for the nearest bomb shelter. But—wait a minute. That was small-arms fire, a lot of it, coming from the Harrier squadron. *This isn't indirect fire, he thought, it's a ground assault.* Running back to the office, he yelled for the troops-in-contact alarm to be sounded. The siren would scramble a section of choppers on twenty-four-hour standby, the birds armed and fueled, the pilots dressed and sitting in the ready room. He usually sounded it when he got a call that the grunts had gotten into a gunfight with the Taliban and needed air support right away. Lightfoot had never imagined he'd be using it for his own protection.

As the horn wailed, Lightfoot rushed into his office, picked up the phone, and called the air wing's commanding officer. The general answered warmly—"Hey, Beast, how you doing?"—but when Lightfoot dropped the news of the attack, he immediately hung up and alerted the quick-reaction force, a British team trained specifically for airfield defense. The Brits were stationed on the other side of the base with the bulk of Camp Bastion's forces. Until they arrived, the Marines of the air wing were on their own.

Lightfoot went back outside and saw that his men had hauled out some spare machine guns that had been mounted on a group of helicopters. They were hunkering down on the perimeter of their compound. He turned to his maintenance officer. "How many more aircraft can we put in the air right now?"

"We got two Cobras and a Huey."

"Let's get 'em airborne ASAP," Lightfoot said.

The helos were no use sitting on the ground. Their fighting chance was in the air, and Lightfoot was going to pilot one of them.



Raible was just minutes from seeing her face. He and his wife hadn't been able to talk or Skype all that much recently. Donnella was back with the kids at the squadron's home base in Yuma, Arizona, and said she didn't want him to lose focus during his first major command. It was true, seeing her did make it harder to be away, but that would all be over soon. In a month, the squadron would begin heading back to the United States, their deployment over, and Raible would figure out his next step. It was just desk jobs from here on with the Corps, and he'd be eligible for retirement in three years.

Raible had missed dinner hours and instead grabbed something from the sandwich bar with Major Greer Chambless, a fellow pilot. They were just outside Raible's room, on the second-story catwalk of the squadron barracks, when they heard the sound of a rocket. Looking north toward the flight line, they made out the distinctive streak of an RPG flashing across the sky. Raible kept the astonishment from his voice: "Go to your room and get your flak and Kevlar on, and meet me downstairs."

Ten minutes later, after driving his Toyota 4Runner the mile to the flight line—cautiously, with the lights off—Raible arrived at the hangars. Three of his jets were burning on the tarmac, the orange flames leaping against the darkened sky, a sickening sight. Raible led Chambless and a rifle-toting corporal to the main maintenance building. Its window had been shot out.

"Hey, is anybody in there?" he shouted.

"Who's there?" came the muffled response.

"It's the CO. I'm coming in, hold your fire!"

Around a dozen of the night crew's mechanics and supply clerks had barricaded themselves behind tool cabinets, the muzzles of their rifles trained on the doors. Someone had taken potshots at them through the windows, but they didn't know how many attackers were out there or whether they'd try to storm the building once they'd finished with the jets. To Raible's relief, there were no casualties reported. But no one had any idea where the enemy was. Raible needed answers. He remembered the secure telephone line in the squadron's headquarters next door. If he could raise Camp Bastion's main operations center, he'd get a better sense of what was going on and whether help was on the way.

Raible grabbed Chambless and the corporal and told the rest to hold tight. This was a three-man operation. Just outside the hangar, Raible spotted figures running out near the jets. "Hey!" he yelled, enraged, as if he'd spotted some delinquent Marines on his flight line. He leveled his Beretta and snapped off a few shots, the first he'd ever fired in combat. Muzzles flashed in response, and automatic-weapons fire ripped over his head. Raible yanked himself back behind a barrier—they were outgunned. Motioning for Chambless and the corporal to turn around, he dashed back into the maintenance space.

In the hangar, Raible looked at the faces of the night crew as they gathered to hear what their commander had to say. They looked tense and drawn—afraid, even. These guys normally wielded wrenches and equipment manifests. But a basic tenet of the Corps is that every Marine is a rifleman, and every one of these men had been trained in marksmanship and basic infantry tactics. They were ready to be led into battle.

Raible swept his gaze over the crew in front of him. "All right, I need ten Marines to go take the fight to these guys," he told them, and watched as each one of them gripped his rifle and stepped forward to volunteer. Raible swapped his pistol for an M-16 and led his group out into the night.



It was twenty minutes into the attack. Sirens wailed as smoke and flames rose from the airfield. Camp Bastion's immense size had become its weakness; the attackers were running amok inside like tiny viruses. The base's operations center, located a couple of miles away, struggled to make sense of the reports it was receiving. Where had the attackers come from? Was the base also under mortar attack? And most important, how many insurgents were there?

Meanwhile, the second and third teams of Taliban fighters passed unimpeded through the hole in the perimeter fence. One five-man group, bent low with the weight of their ammunition, ran to the cryo facility, a lab between the fence and the flight line where Marines produced oxygen and



An RPG suddenly streaked out of the darkness and slammed into one of the fuel bladders. With a massive

nitrogen for their jets. Its concrete blast barriers, each about sixteen feet tall and ten feet wide—like highway dividers on steroids—formed a bunker from which the invaders could rake the airfield with a belt-fed machine gun. The other group of five moved purposefully toward their next target: the fuel farms, massive rubber bladders set inside earth embankments and with enough jet fuel to supply the whole air wing.

boom, the jet fuel ignited into a towering fireball, momentarily turning night into day.

They would make perfect bombs.



In a barrack just south of the fuel farm, a group of sergeants were sitting around watching Tupac Shakur's classic film *Juice* and doing what they normally did at night: bullshitting. That was how you unwound on base, in the absence of booze, civilian women, fast food, pretty much whatever you enjoyed when you weren't stuck in a camp surrounded by razor wire halfway around the world. Tonight's topic: street fights back home, the punches they'd given and received. Staff Sergeant Gustavo Delgado, 27, was built like a bulldog and liked to fight like one, or at least he used to, growing up around Chicago's Logan Square. That was before the Marines straightened him out, taught him to act like a professional.

None of the guys in the barracks were trigger-pullers or flyboys. They worked logistics, shipping parts and supplies to the other air-wing units in Afghanistan. But they were still at war, they were still doing something—that's what made it worthwhile, all the rules and the long days and bunk beds and graffitied bathroom stalls. The point was that you weren't back home getting drunk or married. You were *doing* something.

When they heard the first explosion, the sergeants walked outside and scanned the base. A few hundred yards to the north, the fuel farms were lit up with giant floodlights so sentries could keep an eye on them. As Delgado and his men looked on, an RPG suddenly streaked out of the darkness and slammed into one of the bladders. With a massive boom, the jet fuel ignited into a towering fireball, momentarily turning night into day.

Delgado could feel the blood pounding in his temples, a mix of fear and anger like he was back scrapping in Logan Square. Within minutes he'd mustered his unit and was down near the fuel farm, behind a blast barrier, exchanging fire with the insurgents. A series of explosions rocked their position, shrapnel screeching off the concrete. Someone was lobbing grenades. Delgado watched as a group of Marines at the northeast corner of the building started shouting and firing—they'd spotted an insurgent. Delgado ran to them and heard rounds slamming into the other side of the concrete barrier. Then he saw a figure in a U.S. Army uniform about thirty yards away. Delgado lined him up in his scope and fired, once, twice. He would later marvel at how calmly he had killed a man, yet at that moment there was only a kind of clarity, an imperative to act.

Farther out, near the cryo lab, he saw a machine gun open up, and he ducked down, the bullets ripping against the barrier. The insurgents were on top of them.



Back at the Harrier compound, things were getting ugly. The insurgents had taken cover behind one of the thick concrete walls and were unloading machine-gun fire and RPGs on the Marines. Earlier, hoping to outflank them, Raible and Chambless had launched a two-pronged counterstrike, with Raible leading a charge out one door of the maintenance building and Chambless taking a second team out another. But now Chambless's crew was pinned down behind a Humvee, with no sign of Raible. *We need a new plan*, Chambless thought. *I've got to find Otis*. Suddenly there was the metallic *clink* of a grenade rolling under the truck, and Chambless flinched as the explosion blew one of the Marines into a ditch, lancing him with shrapnel. Chambless's ears were ringing. The noise around them was intensifying. The Harriers, burning wildly, carried up to 11,000 pounds of jet fuel, and by now the 300 explosive rounds from their cannons were starting to cook off, punctuating the night with hammering booms. His Marines were low on ammunition, but the enemy seemed to have an arsenal. The Marine who'd been hit by the grenade was bleeding badly. Chambless dashed back toward the maintenance building, searching for Raible. "Otis!" he yelled. "Otis!" But there was no answer.



Ten thirty. Half an hour into the attack, and it was still chaos at the air wing. Marines fought in the darkness and

confusion, each unit defending its own compound. An RPG took the life of Sergeant Bradley Atwell, the night's first American death. It seemed like the attackers were everywhere. Fifteen men had cast thousands into turmoil.

The sound of a faraway explosion shook awake Major Robb McDonald. He opened his eyes and listened. He had a youthful, finely set face that typically bore a genial expression, one that belied the fact that he was an unusually talented specialist in violence. McDonald had spent three tours as a forward air controller with Marine special operations in Afghanistan. Now he'd returned as a pilot to work under the command of his old friend Raible.

Something was seriously wrong. McDonald, with the sinewy build of a distance runner, jumped out of bed, grabbed his Beretta, and, dressed only in a pair of green running shorts, sprinted down to the main barracks. As he emerged from the darkness, a group of Marines nervously pointed their weapons at him. Someone said that Raible had already gone down to the jets. Still half-naked, McDonald grabbed some body armor, and a Marine gave him a flight suit and a pair of boots several sizes too small, which would leave crippling blisters on his feet the next day.

[Click to enlarge.](#)

McDonald jogged the mile to the maintenance building and walked in, passing tired-looking Marines hunkered down in the hallway. He spotted Chambless; his face looked stricken.

"Six is dead," he said, using the shorthand for his commanding officer, Raible.

McDonald stared at his fellow pilot. "Show me where he is."

They walked into the equipment room, where Raible was lying on his back, covered by a blanket. McDonald crouched down beside his friend and pulled the blanket back. He had been badly wounded in the neck by shrapnel from an RPG. McDonald put his finger into the wounds and checked for a pulse. Nothing. He looked into Raible's open eyes, marveling for a last time at how blue they were. *A hard blue*, he thought. He took out Raible's wallet for safekeeping and then pulled the blanket back over, crossing his arms and legs and binding them with duct tape to make him easier to carry.

After he had prepared his friend's body, McDonald walked back into the hallway, where the demoralized Marines stared up at him. What the hell were they doing, all crammed in here like sitting ducks? He looked around at the thin aluminum walls of the hangar. *If the insurgents wanted to, they could just walk up, empty their magazines, and smoke us all.*



Five hundred feet above Camp Bastion, Lightfoot, the helo-squadron commander, pulled back on his control stick and brought the Cobra around in a slow loop over the base. The flying conditions were as wild as he had ever seen. Smoke from the flight line and fuel depots billowed up in impenetrable columns while blinding fires dotted the ground below. The night was so dark that even with his night-vision goggles he couldn't see the horizon. It was instrument-only flying.

By 11 p.m., an hour after the battle had begun, the situation was beginning to come into focus for Lightfoot and the other commanders. The insurgents' target was clearly the air wing and its military hardware. The Harrier compound was a mess of burning jets, and down by the fuel farm there was another confused gun battle where the Marines had encountered the two teams of Taliban. The British force had finally gotten into the action, too. (By now, Prince Harry had been stashed in a secure location.) Up to this point it had been a slugfest on the ground, a close-quarters struggle that could go on for hours. If the Marines were going to end this without taking a lot of casualties, Lightfoot knew he had to bring his choppers' firepower to bear.

The trouble was distinguishing friend from foe. The attackers were wearing U.S. Army uniforms, and they were mixed in with Marine positions. Lightfoot radioed for another one of his Cobra pilots, Major Robert Weingart, to swoop down and take a closer look.

With a Huey gunship flying on his tail, Weingart darted in and out of the columns of smoke, trying to decipher the pinpricks of light below in the green field of his night vision. *Are those muzzle flashes, or rounds cooking off, or what?* His wingman's voice crackled over the radio: "Hey, we've got reports of insurgents in the cryogenics facility on

the east side of the road." Weingart flew above the barren ground between the fence line and the airfield to take a look. There was definitely someone shooting from that position, but he couldn't be sure, even with his night vision, who it was. He couldn't risk strafing friendlies. Then he had an idea: He radioed the base operations center and directed the ground troops to fire in unison on the enemy's position. He'd use the gunfire, glowing in his night vision, to point the way to the enemy. Within minutes the quick-reaction force unleashed a bright green string of tracers onto the cryo facility. Target confirmed. Weingart lined up the Cobra on an attack run and let loose a long burst of explosive twenty-millimeter cannon rounds.

On the ground below, Delgado and his men, still pinned down by machine-gun fire, heard the rush of a helicopter coming in, followed by the roar of a chain gun. *God what a beautiful sound*, Delgado thought. The cryo plant lit up with hundreds of small explosions as the rounds impacted.

The Marines around him erupted in cheers. "Fuck yeah!" Delgado yelled.



Where the hell were the insurgents? And how many of them were out there? McDonald had led the Marines out of the flimsy maintenance hangar into the relative safety of the squadron's headquarters building. But he still didn't have a fix on the enemy. So far, they'd located only a single injured attacker. McDonald spotted him through his rifle scope: a body lying flat about fifty yards away, against a concrete wall, wearing a U.S. Army uniform. The man looked gravely wounded. He had a beard, an AK-47, and some grenades and wore a pair of running sneakers. As McDonald watched through binoculars, the insurgent brought a can of spray paint to his face and, bizarrely, starting huffing it as an anesthetic. The guy was obviously messed up. Better to leave him for the quick-reaction team to capture. Maybe they could exploit him for intelligence.

McDonald had no idea how many attackers had slipped in, but he knew where he might find them: out on the flight line, looking for more aircraft to burn. He enlisted three Marines to have a look. "I'm gonna go count the jets," he quipped to a startled sentry on his way out.

McDonald took up a position behind a shipping container out on the tarmac. Set along the runway was a long line of blast barriers, designed to protect aircraft from incoming rockets and mortars. Leaving the three Marines to cover him, he sprinted up to the first barrier and came around it. And there, about thirty feet away, were four bearded Taliban in U.S. Army uniforms. The closest one was facing him, holding a huge belt-fed machine gun.

Oh shit. McDonald didn't hesitate: He raised his rifle and squeezed the trigger, hitting the gunman in the face. He kept firing, and the rest of the group hit the ground, injured maybe but not dead. One grabbed the machine gun and loosed a long blast, the bullets ricocheting off the wall. McDonald ducked back; he tried to return fire but couldn't get an angle. *He's in there pretty good*, he thought. Then McDonald heard the *thump-thump* of helicopters overhead and started running back to headquarters, an idea forming in his head: He was going to call in an air strike on his own compound.

McDonald went into his office, picked up the radio, and got patched into the attack helicopters still circling. He talked them onto the insurgents' positions using the landmarks—barriers and buildings—they passed on the way to work everyday. The pilots were concerned; this was "danger close" to their headquarters. "Understand, I'm clear to engage your line?" the Huey pilots said warily.

"Yep, you're clear to engage," McDonald answered.

The Huey came around and dropped into a hover. Through the gunner's night-vision goggles, the four huddled attackers were silhouetted against the pale concrete. The gunship fired, and hundreds of rounds tore into the enemy, their bodies jerking back in a macabre dance before crumpling to the tarmac.



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facing McDonald, holding a huge belt-fed machine gun.

When the British quick-reaction team eventually showed up twenty minutes later, McDonald came out with his arms in the air. He explained that his team was holed up in the headquarters building and that the choppers had killed four insurgents. Then he remembered the lone wounded attacker, who was still lying on the tarmac. "We got one guy alive up here. He's got a bunch of hand grenades and an AK-47. You guys wanna go pick him up, or—"

"Fuck that!" the Brit chief said. He wanted to wait for backup. "Everybody get back behind the walls."

"Well, hang on a second," McDonald said, and walked back to the headquarters building, retrieving his weapon and exiting through the back door. He shouldered his rifle and found the wounded insurgent in his scope. The bearded Talib had apparently seen the Brits and was now gripping his AK-47 and a grenade. McDonald took a breath to steady his aim and fired a couple of rounds into the man, who slumped lifelessly against the concrete. He calmly returned to the quick-reaction team and told them it was all clear.

Though the Brits on the ground and the choppers in the air would spend the rest of the night searching for more attackers, McDonald had killed the last of the fourteen Taliban who died that day. (Another was captured alive after being wounded.)

Later, in the pale glow of dawn, McDonald marveled at the destruction around him. Six Harrier jets, along with an Air Force C-130, had been reduced to burnt-out hulks spewing toxic smoke, and two more had been badly damaged. A stunning \$200 million worth of military hardware gone, two Marines dead, and over a dozen more American and British injured. A "secure" base completely compromised.

McDonald stood over the bodies of the men they had killed. They had genuine U.S. Army uniforms—which were often stolen from supply trucks and sold in Pakistan—with proper ranks and name tags. One guy's tag said Smith. Another's was on upside down. The rest of their gear was common stuff that McDonald had seen on dead Taliban before: RPGs, AK-47's, a cheap Chinese nine-millimeter pistol, running shoes, and bags of nuts and raisins. One of them had a pair of glasses that had fallen down across his slack mouth.

Fifteen men with rifles and raisins against the full might of U.S. and British military power. *You had to admire their balls*, McDonald thought. He didn't know whether to call it courage or what, but it was something.



The Marines of the Third Air Wing were lauded as heroes by the Corps and the Pentagon. Their swift response to danger that night, mechanics and pilots turned defenders and riflemen, undoubtedly prevented a greater catastrophe. Raible, who died leading his men into battle, would be nominated for the Silver Star, the military's third-highest combat honor.

But a troubling question still lingers: How could fifteen insurgents have penetrated a mammoth base like Camp Bastion, inflicting the largest loss of American aircraft in combat since Vietnam?

According to an American official familiar with the after-attack inquiry, there had been warning signs. The Marines and British had caught lone men crawling inside the wire on several occasions in the months leading up to the attack. But the Marine leadership in Helmand, led by Major General Charles M. Gurganus, was managing a drawdown in forces as the surge came to an end. And a month before the attack, says the official, the Marines cut their forces assigned to patrol outside the wire from 325 down to one hundred—forces that might have caught the attackers before they struck.

After a decade on the offensive in Afghanistan, the U.S. military was now moving to a support role. Sensing this shift—and perhaps the inertia that comes with a less aggressive posture—the Taliban struck, hitting a jugular. The air-wing Marines, trusting the camp's defenses, had not heavily fortified their compounds. The Harrier squadron, in particular, was left almost entirely unsecured. That section of the fence line was controlled by the British, who had in turn delegated the guard-tower duty to a handful of soldiers from the minuscule South Pacific nation of Tonga, soldiers without night-vision gear whom the Marines had sometimes caught asleep on duty. For the families, this fact above all has been tough to accept. "Why would we entrust a tiny Third World country to safeguard our Marines?" asked Donnella Raible, who is now raising three kids on her own.

Deborah Hatheway, whose nephew, Sergeant Atwell, was also killed that night, remains furious at what she sees as a lack of accountability. "This was a 100 percent preventable attack," she told me. "Instead of stepping up to the plate and admitting their mistakes, all they want to do is cover it up."

The Marine Corps didn't initially launch a formal investigation into the attack—the kind that could lead to reprimands—and it has refused to release its after-battle inquiries. A Marine source told me that in March, in response to pressure from the families, the Senate stalled Gurganus's promotion to lieutenant general, after which the commandant asked CENTCOM—Central Command—to open a formal investigation. (CENTCOM declined to comment for this story.)

By February, five months after the attack, a new Marine air squadron had begun serving at Camp Bastion.

Matthieu Aikins is a reporter based in Kabul.

TAGS

Camp Bastion, Afghanistan, Battle Of Bastion, War, Military, Army