Introduction

Notes on Terminology

Although nearly all the media reports and US Army documentation refers to the District Center of “Wanat” in the “Waigal Valley” of Nuristan Province, the community’s name is properly “Want” or “Wantt” and the valley’s name is properly “Waygal.” Because the common use of these names is “Wanat” and “Waigal” these spellings, although linguistically incorrect, will be employed throughout this paper. Future students and historians, however, should note that this engagement actually occurred at “Want” or “Wantt” in the “Waygal Valley.”

Even before the soldiers of 2d Platoon, Chosen Company, 2-503 Airborne Infantry moved to Wanat, they determined that the new Combat Outpost (COP) there would be named for SFC Matthew Ryan Kahler, 29, of Granite Falls, Minnesota. SFC Kahler trained the 2d Platoon for this deployment, and served as its Platoon Sergeant from May 2007 until his death on January 26, 2008. SFC Kahler was killed by Afghan Security Guards in a friendly fire incident at COP Bella. His last words to “the Chosen Ones” were typical of his regard and concern for his soldiers. He told a young PFC of his platoon to step aside and to let him take the lead “as it might be dangerous.” In recognition of SFC Kahler’s exemplary leadership, dedication, and supreme sacrifice, and at the specific request of several soldiers of his platoon, the US Army Combat Studies Institute will exclusively refer to the COP at Wanat as “COP Kahler.”

Various authors and analysts have employed different terminology when referring to the insurgents in Afghanistan. The two most common terms are “Anti-Afghanistan Forces” (AAF) and “Anti-Coalition Militia” (ACM). During its tenure in Afghanistan, the 173d Airborne Brigade generally used AAF; while the 10th Mountain Division more commonly utilized ACM. I have chosen to use “ACM” as I believe that it more properly describes the insurgents that are being encountered in Nuristan and Kunar Provinces.
That is, the majority of the forces being encountered are more akin to militia, local fighters fighting within or near to their communities, rather than being what Western militaries might consider to be organized forces. Additionally, these insurgents perceive themselves as fighting for a better future for Afghanistan, one that is fundamentally Islamic, has local government, and is free of international or western influence. They are, more accurately, anti-coalition in that they are opposed to the Afghan central, western-influenced, elected government of President Karzai. Thus, the term “ACM” is more technically accurate than anti-Afghanistan (they simply possess radically different views of what they consider to be pro or anti-Afghanistan).

**Introduction**

The events discussed in this Occasional Paper occurred less than a year ago, and only six months before this study effort was initiated by the US Army Combat Studies Institute. Because the conflict in Afghanistan continues, it has obviously been impossible to interview any members of the ACM that fought against the American forces at Wanat. Thus, this Occasional Paper by necessity addresses only a single side of the engagement. Because American and Afghan Security Forces have withdrawn from the Waigal Valley and no longer maintain a presence there, security considerations precluded a visit to the scene of the fight, and only limited contact with Afghan residents of the Waigal Valley was possible. With a very few exceptions the officers, NCOs, and soldiers who fought in this engagement remain on active duty. Many of them were deployed during the preparation of this paper, complicating research considerably. In fact, the soldiers of the 62d Engineer Battalion had not yet returned from the deployment during which they were engaged at Wanat. However, literally dozens of the Officers, NCOs and soldiers who fought at Wanat wanted to ensure that their story was preserved, and generously
and candidly contributed to this project. In particular, CPT Matthew Myer, COL William Oslund, and COL Charles Preysler, who respectively commanded Chosen Company, the 2-503 Airborne Infantry, and the 173d Airborne BCT throughout the deployment to Afghanistan and during the engagement at Wanat, stepped forward to ensure that the sacrifices and courage of the soldiers that they had the honor and privilege of leading for fifteen months in Afghanistan received due credit, even at the risk of being professionally censured. I am deeply appreciative of the assistance of these three soldiers in particular, and would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge their courageous participation and inestimable contributions to this study effort. Unfortunately, Brigadier General Mark Milley, Deputy Commanding General-Operations (DCG-O) for Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF-101) who was intimately involved in the Wanat engagement, declined to contribute to this study, although he was specifically invited to do so. Major General Jeffrey Schloesser, CJTF-101 Commander who made the final decision to withdraw from Wanat and the Waigal Valley on 15 July 2008, also declined to contribute to this study, although he was specifically invited to do so. The participation by the Engineers at Wanat; and Artillerymen at Camp Blessing, has not received due discussion in this narrative because the units involved remained deployed performing active COIN operations in Afghanistan during the preparation of this study, and their soldiers were not available for comprehensive personal interviews.

Principally as a result of the generous and candid contributions by many soldiers and officers from Chosen Company, 2-503 Infantry, 173d BCT, and CJTF-101, it is believed that this study presents a comprehensive, accurate and objective narrative of the engagement fought at Wanat, Afghanistan in the early morning hours of 13 July 2008. The analysis and lessons learned
contained in Chapter 3 are, by definition, part and parcel of the historian’s art, and are thus subjective. However, it is believed that all of the conclusions drawn can be fully supported by the evidence available this close to the events that occurred.

As a published military historian who has been active professionally in the field since 1971, the author is obliged to note that new interpretations, and new primary source research, are continuously emerging on battles and historical events that have occurred decades, centuries, or millennium in the past. Engagements such as the Battles of Waterloo and Gettysburg, which have received literally scores of book length studies by committed historians who have dedicated a lifetime to their study, are continuously being re-examined and providing opportunities for new study and interpretation. Thus, the author fully anticipates that as additional resources (hopefully to include considerably more Afghan contributions) and the declassification of sensitive documents become available for this engagement, that future historians will have the opportunity to revise and alter the interpretations contained within this Occasional Paper. The author will not be surprised by this, and in fact welcomes it. However, it is believed that this study will serve as the core secondary source for future historians to document the courage and bravery of the American fighting men who decisively defeated a skilled, determined opponent under extremely adverse circumstances at COP Kahler in Wanat, Afghanistan on 13 July 2008.

As always, any faults, errors, or omissions belong to the author.
Chapter 1

“…one of the toughest places in Afghanistan…”

Historic and Campaign Background of the Waigal Valley

Nuristan is a province of convoluted topography and small agricultural communities, and is considered to be remote and primitive even by the standards of Afghanistan.¹ The Waigal Valley runs for thirty kilometers astride the Waigal River, trending generally south from the Hindu Kush Mountains until it joins the Pech River Valley at Nangalam. The Pech River in turn joins the Kunar River in Asadabad. The area is spectacularly rugged, and is divided into numerous small river valleys separated by steep mountain ridges routinely in excess of 10,000 feet. The Waigal Valley is located within two Afghan provinces- Nuristan to the north, and Kunar Province to the south. The provincial boundary is located approximately one kilometer south of Wanat within the Waigal Valley.² All of the valleys of Nuristan, the Waigal Valley not excepted, are rocky, deep, narrow and steep sided, most of them classic examples of geological V-shaped valleys. One international observer simply stated, “The terrain is mountainous, indeed, this is one of the most topographically forbidding operating environments in the world.”³ Nine villages are located within the Waigal Valley.⁴

Afghanistan’s history is one of strife and conflict, and the nation has seen a succession of foreign and domestic rulers and conquerors. The first European conqueror to enter Afghanistan was Alexander the Great of Macedonia (Greece), who had continued east from Persia (modern Iran) and operated throughout the region from 328 and 329 BC ⁵ Passing through Kandahar (the name a phonetic interpretation of “Alexander”) and modern Kabul, he spent one winter at the newly christened “Alexander in Caucasus” at Begram (modern Charikar), approximately fifty miles northeast of Kabul near the modern Bagram airbase. During the next campaign season Alexander then passed up the Panjshir Valley, and crossed the Hindu Kush Mountains through the Khawak Pass. Having defeated the Persians at Bactria, Alexander
spent the next winter there, establishing a Macedonian colony and marrying a local beauty, Roxanne. From here, Alexander passed into India, and on to further adventures and his eventual death. Although it is commonly claimed that descendants of his soldiers that remained behind as colonists at Bactria became the Nuristani ethnic group, modern scholarship has generally discounted this theory. Still, the genes of Alexander’s warriors remain alive in Afghanistan.  

During their long tenure in India and Pakistan, the British government never penetrated into Kunar or Nuristan, although individual explorers (some doubtless serving as British spies) ventured into the region. In 1896 the Afghan Amir Abdur Rahman Khan moved into Nuristan, and subdued the population. As a price for his future protection, he required Nuristan to accept Islam. Abdur Rahman, a grandson of Dost Mohammed, ruled in Kabul for twenty-one years and he introduced a stable central government to Afghanistan for the first time in its history, a government that he extended into Nuristan.

The next great invasion of northeastern Afghanistan occurred in December 1979 when the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan to salvage a weak Communist central government in Kabul. Kunar had been the scene of various early rebellions against the communist central government. Soviet influence and occupation within Kunar (now the provinces of Nuristan and Kunar) was limited, being restricted to garrisons in major population centers, and along important transportation corridors. Regional Soviet efforts were focused upon restricting the flow of Mujahideen and supplies from Pakistan into Afghanistan through the Kunar Valley. Only on rare occasions did Soviet armored columns penetrate into the Pech valley, and the Mujahideen repelled them with relative ease. For example, in March 1980 the Soviet 201st Motorized Rifle Division attacked up the Kunar Valley towards Asadabad, and continued operations from Jalalabad in May 1980. As a result, during the struggle against the Soviet invasion the Pech, Korengal and Waigal Valleys were relatively unaffected, although considerable heavy fighting was centered around Jalalabad and Asadabad, given their proximity to and control of the Kunar Valley and
Khyber Pass. Nuristan and Kunar saw other fighting between communist proxies, local landowners and communities, and organized criminal organizations attempting to gain control of the lucrative Kamdesh timber and gemstone interests.9

During the civil war in Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal from the nation, and the ensuing Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban maintained only a token presence in the Pech and Waigal Valleys. Nuristan’s remote location, its rugged, severely constrained terrain, few roads, and proximity to the Northern Alliance in the Panjshir Valley made a large presence unpalatable to the Taliban. Still, the Nuristanis in the Waigal Valley suffered considerably during the period of Taliban governance because the Pashtun Taliban joined forces with the Safi Pashtun of the Pech Valley to harass the Nuristanis and prevent them from transiting the Pech lowlands.

Central government influence within Waigal Valley has historically and traditionally been limited, although this has recently been changing. Similar to other remote areas, the central government had no permanent administrative presence in the Waigal valley until the post-Soviet era (1993) when a separate Nuristan province was established and the Waigal valley became designated as a district within that province. A district center for this district was established at Wanat and the track linking the Pech valley road to Wanat was improved sufficiently to allow motor vehicles to reach the administrative center for the first time.

The Waigal valley is dominated by two ethno-linguistic population groups (a group of people with a common language), the Nuristanis to the north, and the Safi Pashtuns to the south.10 Because of the rugged terrain and steep ridgelines throughout northeastern Afghanistan, the majority of the communities are isolated, and relationships between and within the various ethno-linguistic groups are extremely complex. The people in the Waigal valley differentiate themselves from other Nuristanis by referring to themselves as Kalasha. The people of the four lower villages of the Waigal Valley identify themselves as
Chimi-nishey in comparison to the dwellers of the northern villages who consider themselves as 'Wai.' The Nuristani population of the Waigal valley also differentiate themselves between 'Amursh-kara' and 'Kila-kara.' This refers to the type of cheese that they make. This is not the minor point of distinction that it appears, because the type of cheese produced significantly influences how a family organizes their pastoral/dairying activities and this, in turn, reflects differences between the amount and quality of summer pastures that the people of the northern half of the valley possess compared to the southern half of the valley. Such complicated distinctions validate the convoluted human terrain of the region. It must be noted that even within the same ethnic-linguistic group, that tensions to various extents abound even between adjacent villages, the majority of whose families are often related. As Sami Nuristan, a resident of the Waigal Valley who is currently a college student in the United States, notes:

…be prepared to hear contradicting requests. Also, be open to see some sort of rivalry between the inhabitants of different villages in the valley. You might hear one thing from one village and may hear completely the opposite from another village. It has been there as long as Nuristan existed.11

Historically, the principal means of defense for the small populations of Kafirs was the isolation of their compact settlements. These villages were set in locations which were inaccessible and surrounded by vast tracts of rugged lands not traversed by trails, paths or routes. These tracts could only be exploited by well-armed herders who could take their animals there under protection, and they served as effective buffer zones for their communities. The Nuristanis controlled the highlands along with the attendant forests, pastures, gem-rich mountains, and water for irrigation that can turn semi-arid land into valuable agricultural fields. After peace was imposed on the region by the acceptance of the rule of Abdur Rahman, the Nuristani populations gingerly moved into these buffer areas on the periphery of their settlements. They constructed irrigation systems and agricultural terraces and also built rudimentary
shelters to use while tending their fields. Over time, given population growth and sustained security, these rudimentary shelters were gradually improved and became permanent hamlets. To the south, the Safi Pashtuns who resided in the lowlands of the Pech and Kunar Valleys discovered that they had little opportunity to expand their agriculturally based livelihood into these buffer zones. They gradually applied pressure and attempted to move into the portions of the Waigal Valley controlled by the Nuristanis. Thus, the Waigal Valley has seen conflicts as the Nuristanis expand out from their remote mountain villages towards their southern lowlands; and the Safi Pashtuns seek to expand up from their communities in the Pech and Korengal Valleys towards the north. There is considerable animosity within the valley, and localized struggles between the two ethnic groups are common.

In Nuristan, the largest unit that has significance is the corporate community, which to some extent shares in management and decision making for the use and disposition of scarce and valuable natural resources. 'Waigal' village, for example, the northernmost and largest population concentration in the valley, actually is comprised of two different corporate communities, Beremdash and Waremdesh. Conflicts, usually over resources such as pasture, forests or water, were frequent between and within the corporate communities of the Waigal valley and elsewhere in Nuristan. The potential for such conflicts between these distinct corporate communities was one reason why the Nuristanis had an extremely strong exogamy rule. They recognized the need to create at least some bonds between other Nuristani communities in order to have social and cultural links to resolve conflicts that might arise, to engage in some trade between craftsmen who specialized in products in different communities, and also to call on one another for mutual assistance when necessary. Within Nuristan, efforts to act in unity above the level of the corporate community have proven to be difficult and fragile. Some of the current conflict in the region can be traced to the recent dissipation of solidarity within the corporate communities.
The Pashtuns and Nuristani ethnic groups speak distinctive languages, and there are particular dialects within these languages. The Nuristanis have a large number of dialects, some of which are so divergent as to constitute separate languages. For centuries the Nuristanis practiced their own polytheistic faith rather than Islam, and as a result the area was known as “Kafiristan” (or land of the Infidels). This changed only in the late 19th century, when Nuristan finally embraced Islam at the forcible demand of the Abdur Rahman. At this time the name was changed to “Nuristan” (or land of light). Anthropologists have performed extensive studies of the Nuristanis, in part because of their comparatively rich and diverse culture and arts, and partially because of their distinctive “Aryan” appearance. Nuristan was established as an independent province only in 1993, when it was separated from Kunar and Lagham Provinces.

Nuristani ethnic groups live in homes traditionally constructed into the sides of mountains to conserve limited arable land. The homes are constructed with wooden supports, bracketed in such a manner that they are generally resistant to the frequent earthquakes that plague the region. Families tend to use their first floor for storage and reside on the second floor, and families and neighborhoods are connected by walkways, terraces, and ladders. Access to the ground (first) floor is usually restricted, and the ladders that connect residences can be readily removed to enhance security against attack by bandits or enemies. Structures tend to be clustered or concentrated, literally stacked atop each other, with an extended family living with other such families within a tightly-knit community. The Nuristanis practice what Anthropologists refer to as mixed mountain agriculture, where their pastoral activities are a key element that is integrated with their crop cultivation. Essentially, the Nuristani are predominantly subsistence farmers of agricultural land constructed as terraces cut into the hillsides that dominate the region, while livestock is raised on slopes that are too steep to be converted to farmland.

The Safi Pashtun of the Pech Valley typically reside in compounds, which the English Army in the 19th Century consistently referred to as “forts.” These compounds are enclosed by sturdy walls, sun dried
over decades to assume the consistency and strength of concrete, and with firing platforms and observation towers incorporated into their design. Each compound houses an extended family. Because the lowland Safi Pashtuns do not have access to the summer pastures of the highlands, they could not maintain economically viable herds of goats or sheep. As a result, the Safi Pashtuns economy is more centered upon agricultural cultivation, and the location and maintenance of irrigation canals are extremely important.

Nuristan is surprisingly heavily vegetated, with considerable timber of commercial possibility. Gem mining is now also a major source of commercial prosperity within both provinces. Both industries are controlled by criminal cartels, which have frequently exploited these resources to garner individual wealth, and the people of Kunar and Nuristan have derived little benefit from either product. Within recent years Kunar and Nuristan Provinces have seen the introduction of opium poppies as a financially lucrative crop. When soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division conducted air assault operations into Nuristan in April 2006 they were surprised to encounter large poppy fields.

Both the Safi Pashtuns and Nuristanis have reputations as warriors. One study has noted: “Feuds are an important part of [the] culture, and many cultural values are reflected in the feud. For example, masculinity and honor are strong values, and provide themes for many stories and songs. Men strive to be fierce warriors who are loyal to their kin, dangerous to their enemies, and ready to fight whenever necessary.”\(^\text{15}\) However, other anthropologists assert that this reputation is exaggerated, and reflects a misinterpretation of the recognition that those who successfully defend their families and communities are afforded. Communities have a tradition of being entirely autonomous and independent, based upon the isolation of individual valleys imposed by the rugged terrain. Controversies have traditionally been resolved by the intervention of elders from the corporate community. Individual leaders who can peacefully resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise over access to and the use of constrained resources

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are considerably respected within their communities. Still, given the poor and unsettled security situation of recent decades, it is uncommon for a household not to have access to weapons for self defense. Although an overly simplistic generalization, it remains valid that Afghan traditional cultures such as those found in Nuristan accept the simple physical premise of rule by the strongest, either through rule of force, skill of negotiations, or fulfillment of economic advantages. One anthropological study summarized regarding the Parun Valley, a subsidiary of the Pech River located to the north of the Waigal Valley: “…the Parun valley offers the picture of an encapsulated Kafir culture enclosed by high mountains and an invisible cultural wall, both of which shielded it somewhat against powerful political enemies surrounding the valley.” This assessment holds true for Wanat and the Waigal Valley.

Within these remote societies and communities, traditional processes for problem resolution (Shuras) and respect for individual and family “honor” are strong, and these two concepts are crucial to comprehending the human terrain in northeastern Afghanistan. A Shura is an Arabic (word for شورى) "consultation" or "council". It is believed to be a long-established process by which pre-Islamic Kafirs, households, and community representatives made corporate decisions. Thus, a Shura is the traditional method used by Afghan communities and family groups to discuss circumstances and achieve resolutions to conflicts. A Shura does not consist of a delineated or rigid composition, rather it is an informal organization assembled that is appropriate for the subject to be discussed. It should also be stressed that a Shura consists of a process of negotiation, and that the process and discussions themselves are significant as the mechanism for achieving consensus. When members of the US Army Human Terrain Team (HTT) met with a Pashai Shura from the Kunar Valley in January 2009 they observed, “Our guests told us that no matter how friendly we are or what we give to a Pashai, if we disrespect them the relationship is over.” A series of informal codes of behavior guide both Nuristanis and Safi Pashtuns, referred to as “Kalasha char” (Kalasha actions) or “Tati-gunwa-oba-char” (Father-grandfather actions-customs). Elsewhere in Afghanistan, such informal codes of conduct are better known as “Pashtunwali.” Although
informal, these codes of conduct possess complex expectations of behavior and ethics, which stress honor, self-respect, independence, justice, hospitality, conflict resolution, personal improvement, personal responsibility, charity, forgiveness, worship, and revenge.

Kunar and Nuristan Provinces lie within the sphere of influence of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e-Islami, now known as Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), a Mujahideen (soldiers of God) fundamentalist organization founded by Hekmatyar originally to fight the Soviets, which is known to have received considerable support and recognition from the Pakistani Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) among others (to include the American CIA during the Mujahideen-Soviet conflict). Although HIG retains considerable strength and influence within these two provinces, it should be noted that it is not the only anti-coalition organization entity influencing events in Nuristan and Kunar. There are various takfiri organizations, some of which have their roots in 1980 anti-Soviet Mujahideen organizations; others which are closely tied to the Taliban Movement; and still others that are influenced by the newer Al Qaeda successes. A number of more radical takfiri entities are linked to Lashkar-i-Tayyiba, a Pakistan based terrorist organization infamous for its recent attacks in India. There are also powerful timber, gem mining and drug (opium) interests that vigorously resist the establishment of central government influence and the trade restrictions, government regulations and taxation that accompanies it.

Within northeastern Afghanistan, there are three general types of ACM- local fighters; dedicated core fighters of the HIG, other takfiri entities and organized criminal factions that are generally Afghan-centric; and the hard-core radical Islamic fundamentalists such as the Taliban and Al Quaeda that can be considered to be trans-national.

Local fighters consist of local recruits from Nuristan and Kunar Provinces, or young men solicited from madrassas and Afghan refugee populations located in Pakistan. These local fighters are generally young, unemployed, and poorly educated. They are either entirely untrained and are only used as porters
to carry ammunition for more experienced fighters, or have received only rudimentary training in weapon employment. The majority of them support the ACM primarily because of economic or material motivations, either for direct payment, or for something as simple as a set of new, high-quality clothing. Like many young men, some of these local fighters join strictly for the excitement of being a warrior, or to gain a reputation among their peers and within their communities. The local fighters are generally not ideologically motivated, and can be recruited away from the ACM simply through regular employment and financial opportunities. More dedicated ACM insurgents will have their operations degraded by the loss of these local fighters, principally because of the absence of transportation and heavy labor, and dilution of their potential recruiting pool.20

The core Afghanistan-centric fighters are members of HIG, other takfiri entities, or core members of the various drug and lumber cartels. These fighters are generally experienced, highly skilled, well trained and armed, and are equipped with state-of-the art military equipment. For example, during the June 21, 2006 engagement in the Gremen Valley of Nuristan, an ACM leader was observed utilizing powerful military binoculars with range finding capability against a 10th Mountain Division sniper team. During the same campaign, soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division’s 1-32 Infantry recovered Night Observation Devices (NOD) being employed by the insurgents, originally lost by a SEAL Team during Operation REDWING, from ACM fighting against them in the Pech and Korengal Valley regions. These dedicated fighters are also ideologically motivated, either through religion, or through strong economic or financial ties. Some of them might be motivated by blood feuds or previous discords with American soldiers. These fighters tend to be from local districts or provinces, have grown up within regional communities, and speak local languages and dialects. Their predominant focus and motivations are within northeastern Afghanistan, or their immediate home community, district or province. It is conceivable that, under the proper circumstances, an agreement or consensus could be reached with many of these fighters.
The final set of ACM insurgents are dedicated Islamic takfiri fundamentalists, members of the
Taliban or Al Quaeda, that are trans-national in that they are often foreign fighters, frequently operate
across international borders, and can be considered to be espousing a global Islamic caliphate. Many of
them are from a range of Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen or Chechnya. Most of the
fundamentalist fighters are based in Pakistan. They are exceptionally dedicated, absolutely fanatical,
possess considerable operational experience, are highly skilled, well trained, and well armed and
equipped with state-of-the art military equipment. Although they possess deep and similar religious
beliefs to citizens of Afghanistan, they are usually from foreign nations, come from different cultures and
societies, and speak different languages and dialects. They generally command considerable financial and
material resources, with which they can influence both dedicated and local fighters. These fighters are
absolutely fervent and fanatical, and are totally dedicated to their cause. These fighters cannot be
influenced or effected, and they must be kinetically engaged.²¹ Foreign fighters are documented to have
been operating in Nuristan as early as 2002, and in 2006 an estimated two hundred Taliban fighters were
documented to have been active in Nuristan. Small infiltration teams of Taliban, HIG, and Al Qaeda are
all documented to have been active in Nuristan in 2007.²²

American soldiers rarely operated in Nuristan between 2001 and 2005. Coalition incursions were
generally restricted to small “commando” type raids performed by Special Operations units attempting to
kill or capture High Value Targets (HVT) or large sweep and search operations of limited duration. It
should be noted that some Special Operations units retained small continuous presences within the area
that were quite well received by the local communities.

The most well known American incursion into Kunar Province was Operation REDWING, when a
US Navy SEAL Team was inserted against Ahmad Shah, a Taliban HVT to the east of the Korengal
Valley and south of the Pech River in June 2005. The SEAL Team was compromised by a chance
encounter with Afghan goat herders, and following a heavy firefight was defeated by a large force of insurgents. A Special Operations helicopter, hurrying to the relief of the SEAL Team, was shot down by an RPG and sixteen soldiers were killed. Ahmad Shah was subsequently slain by the 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division in 2006. Of the SEAL Team, only Hospital Corpsman 2d Class (SEAL) Marcus Luttrell survived.  

In April 2006 the 3d Brigade Combat Team (BCT), the “Spartans” of the 10th Mountain Division, mounted Operation MOUNTAIN LION into Nuristan and Kunar Provinces. During Operation Mountain Lion, 1-32 Infantry (The “Chosin” Battalion) established combat outposts throughout the Waigal, Pech and Korengal Valleys. A Special Forces SGT Major recalled of his understanding, based upon extended service within this locale:

Nuristan was absolutely an Al-Qaeda stronghold because of its remoteness, access to Pakistan and nearby refugee camps. The Pech Valley is one of the toughest places in Afghanistan; the Russians lasted less than 5 days there. There is only one road, which is sandwiched between the Pech River on one side and mountains on the other. The mouth of the Pech River opens up into the Konar Valley [and] just four kilometers away is the Pakistan border. There was another valley on the South side of the Pech River that was a terrorist sanctuary called the Korengal Valley. The Korengal Valley had Arabs, foreign fighters, and its own dialect. The guys that had ambushed [a Special Forces Team] lived in this valley, and this is where the rocketeers that had been harassing the [Special Forces] base planned and operated out of.

To control the terrain, 1-32 Infantry constructed a combat outpost on the dominating terrain in the middle of the Korengal Valley. On May 7, 2006 General Bismullah Khan, Chief of Staff of the ANA, raised the Afghan National Flag on a prominent flagpole at the Korengal Outpost. General Khan’s intent was to demonstrate the establishment of Afghan sovereignty in the area, and according to an enthusiastic (if
somewhat hyperbole) account, “the flag could be seen throughout the entirety of the valley to broadcast this message.”

1-32 Infantry established three COPs to facilitate operations within the Waigal Valley. One existing installation, Camp Blessing, was occupied at the intersection of the Pech and Waigal Rivers, near the community of Nangalam in Kunar Province, properly in the Pech Valley. This was intended to be the base camp for operations in the Waigal and Pech Valleys, and Camp Blessing would eventually serve as Battalion Headquarters for 1-32 Mountain Infantry and its successors, 2-503 Airborne Infantry. Camp Blessing was named for SGT Jay A. Blessing, a Ranger SGT killed in an IED attack in early operations in Kunar Province. Two new COPs were constructed in the Waigal Valley proper, “COP Ranch House” near the village of Aranas; and “COP Bella” near the tiny hamlet of Bella. Bella consisted of only a few houses, a medical clinic with several doctors and health care professionals (the primary medical facility in the Waigal Valley), several stores, a restaurant and a hotel. Ranch House was inadvertently named by CPT Doug Sloan, Company Commander of B, 1-32 Infantry who established the outpost. Initially describing the location to his battalion commander, CPT Sloan noted with a strong sense of humor: “It’s pretty big. Got a great view. It’s clean and well kept. Neighborhood’s good. It’s one story, a nice ranch-house style, I like it.” From that moment on, it became Ranch House. Bella and Ranch House were both Spartan and austere; while Camp Blessing contained more amenities such as showers, a 24-hour mess hall, a regular weight room, and a dedicated Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) facility.

Throughout 2006-2007 the 1-32 Infantry performed counterinsurgency, and experienced intensive and frequent combats, in the Waigal, Pech and Korengal Valleys as it attempted to extend the influence of the central Afghan government into these two provinces. 1-32 Infantry made considerable positive progress in the Waigal Valley, LTC Chris Cavoli, the Battalion Commander, would later remark:
I like Wanat quite a bit. The people were always good to us. They always gave us tips when trouble was coming. I felt very confident moving about without my armor on, and spent some memorable days drinking chai in the little chaikhana there. The key thing was the relationship that [1st] LT Andy Glenn and his engineers had established there when they were building the bridge. Glenn was great with the people, and they took him in like a brother. This made the place pretty safe, comparatively speaking.\textsuperscript{27}

In September 2006 COL Cavoli’s 1-32 Infantry occupied Wanat with 1LT Andrew “Andy” Glenn’s platoon of Combat Engineers from Alpha Company, 27th Engineer Battalion; a platoon of Bravo Company, 1-32 Infantry; and an ANA Company. Once ensconced in Wanat, 1LT Glenn immediately met with the local elders, and negotiated with them to hire approximately fifty local laborers to help them build the bridge. Glenn provided all of the necessary tools and construction materials. Every day 1LT Glenn purchased bread using Afghan currency from the bazaar; and every two to three days larger purchases of food were made from the local economy. Laundry services were also informally contracted from citizens in Wanat. Local security was provided by the 1-32 Platoon which provided immediate security in Wanat and a QRF, and an ANA Company that established Observation Posts (OP) on three pieces of high ground surrounding the community. There were some minor skirmishes as ACM insurgents probed activities in Wanat, but they proved to be ineffective at disrupting coalition operations in the village. 1LT Glenn’s engineers eventually constructed two segments of WWII surplus Bailey Bridges, a major bridge over the Waigal River, and a minor bridge over the Wayshawal River (or Creek) just to the east. No external Afghan construction companies were inserted into Wanat, as a Jalalabad based Safi Pashtun construction company had recently lost considerable equipment and materials when it attempted to operate between Wanat and Bella. Approximately 45 days were required for the construction of these two bridges. Throughout this period, 1LT Glenn remembered that relationships with Wanat were positive and beneficial, and he felt that the population and community leaders of Wanat
were favorably disposed towards the coalition. When 1LT Glenn and his engineers departed Wanat in early November, they left behind two relatively modern bridges in the community, and strong support for and favorable perceptions of the American army and Afghan government. When Wanat village was searched following the 13 July engagement, positive memorabilia from this project including a 27th Engineer Battalion coin were discovered to still be present in the community.

There was considerable ACM presence in the Waigal Valley, including politically oriented formations such as various former Mujahideen entities, al Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG); and criminal cartels from the timber trade in particular. These various ACM groups vigorously resisted the American insertion and successes that Company B, 1-32 Infantry was achieving in the Waigal Valley, and there were a number of regular skirmishes, indirect fires, and minor engagements. The most significant of these occurred on 11 August 2006 when three soldiers were killed while on patrol between Aranas and Bella. On 31 October 2006 MAJ Sloan, an extremely popular officer who was close to completing his tenure in company command, was killed by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) along with two of his soldiers, and a fourth was critically wounded, upon returning from a patrol to Muladesh (a village southeast of Bella). MAJ Sloan had been meeting with elders and community leaders to coordinate a range of Civil Affairs and economic development projects including schools, micro-hydro-electric sources, bridges and roads. His death was greatly mourned by traditional elders and leaders within the valley. Although ACM resistance to the Americans continued, it was disorganized as various ACM factions had erupted within the valley, and heavy snows and cold temperatures reduced combat operations during the winter (the Afghanistan insurgents typically do not actively campaign during the winter months). Following a three-month extension announced in January, 2007 the Spartans were relieved by the 173d Airborne Brigade Combat Team (BCT) beginning in May, 2007.
Of the two infantry battalions that comprise the 173d Airborne BCT, the 2-503 Airborne Infantry has the distinguished lineage of the “Rock Battalion,” so named for its successful and daring airborne assault on Corregidor Island (“The Rock”) in the Philippines during February 1945 (World War II). The history of the 173d Airborne Brigade began in 1963 when the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) was established in Okinawa as the quick reaction force for the Pacific Command. Under Brigadier General Ellis S. Williamson the unit trained extensively making mass parachute jumps, and as a result they earned the nickname “Tien Bien” or “Sky Soldiers” from Nationalist Chinese paratroopers.

Deployed to Vietnam in May 1965, the brigade was the first major ground combat unit of the United States Army to serve there. The Brigade was specifically deployed by General William Westmoreland, to serve as a “Fire Brigade” to obtain time for other major combat units to be deployed, entirely in accordance with its stated mission. At 0900 Hours, 22 February 1967 (during Operation Junction City) over 800 paratroopers jumped into the rice paddies at Katum. The 2-503 Airborne Infantry Battalion was the same unit (plus attached combat engineers and artillerymen) that had made a famous jump on the Island of Corregidor during WWII, the only full-sized combat jump in the Pacific Theater. Thus, the “Rock Battalion” made the first and only full-sized combat jump by an American unit in Vietnam. The Sky Soldiers were the first to go into War Zone D, fought in the booby-trap infested Iron Triangle, blocked NVA incursions at Dak To in the Central Highlands, and were the first into the Ho Bo Woods where they discovered the Tunnels of Cu Chi. The brigade engaged in some of the bloodiest fighting of the war in the summer and fall of 1967, culminating in the capture of Hill 875. At its peak in Vietnam, the 173d Airborne Brigade (Sep) had nearly 3,000 soldiers assigned. During more than six years of continuous combat, the brigade earned fourteen campaign streamers and four unit citations. Sky Soldiers serving in Vietnam received thirteen Medals of Honor, 46 Distinguished Service Crosses, 1736 Silver Stars and over 6,000 Purple Hearts. There are over 1,790 Sky Soldiers' names on the Vietnam Memorial.
Wall in Washington D.C. Although a new organization, the 173d Airborne Brigade earned an enviable reputation during its extended term of service in the Republic of Vietnam.30

The brigade was deactivated on 14 January 1972 at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The 173d Airborne Brigade was then reactivated on 12 June 2000 in Vicenza, Italy, to serve as the European Command’s only conventional airborne strategic response force for the European Theater. On 26 March 2003, the 173d added to its distinguished history by making the largest mass combat jump since WWII when the Brigade’s Soldiers landed in the Bashur Drop zone effectively opening a northern front in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Nine Sky Soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.31 Between March 2005 and February 2006, the 173d Airborne Brigade began a deployment to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom VI. The 173d Airborne Brigade headquarters served as the C2 [C2] element for the Combined Joint Task 76 in Bagram. Seventeen Sky Soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice in support of operation Enduring Freedom VI. The 173d Airborne Brigade performed a RIP/TOA with the 10th Mountain Division in February 2006 and returned to Italy. On 18 September 2006 the 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) formally completed its transformation under the US Army Unit of Execution (UEX) doctrine and became the 173d Airborne BCT. The 173d Airborne Brigade’s history has been comparatively short, but illustrious.

Initially, the 173d Airborne Brigade was scheduled for a return to Iraq, and was executing focused training for that mission. Because of various realignments performed by the US Department of Defense including the surge in Iraq, and the need for another BCT in Afghanistan, in February 2007 the 173d Airborne BCT’s mission was adjusted for a return to Afghanistan. At this time, the BCT was performing a training rotation to Grafenwoehr and Hoehnenfels Training Centers in Germany to focus upon live fire training. As SPC Tyler Stafford, a machine gunner with 2d Platoon of Charlie Company, 2-503 Airborne Infantry recalled, “…we had been working a lot on convoys and urban tactics, and then when we found
out we were going to Afghanistan, we had to switch it over to mountainous warfare.” Cultural and language familiarity for Afghanistan also replaced that previously presented for Iraq.

Unfortunately, the comparatively late change of mission for the 173d Airborne BCT from Iraq to Afghanistan did not permit the Brigade sufficient time to prepare any form of campaign plan. As BCT Commander COL Charles “Chip” Preysler related:

In January, we rolled into Grafenwehr and Hohenfels and did our maneuver/live fire training at platoon level. On 1 Feb, the Army called up and said “you need to get home right now because we changed your mission, you’re no longer going to Kirkuk, and you’re going to Afghanistan.”

Because of timing and range availability, the 173d BCT continued with its Mission Readiness Exercise (MRE) at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) at Hohenfels, while the BCT senior leadership performed the PDSS in Afghanistan (Pre Deployment Site Survey). Thus, the BCT leadership was not present for the majority of the MRE. Although this provided an enhanced training opportunity for subordinates and junior officers, the absence of senior leadership certainly degraded the quality and depth of experience usually gained from the MRE. In particular, the senior leadership of the 173d BCT could not derive maximum benefit from the MRE’s emphasis upon leadership engagements, which is one of the greatest strengths of the readiness exercises. Additionally, the MRE is theater oriented, and although efforts were made to adjust the MRE from an Iraq focused training to Afghanistan, because of the short notice the result was a less than satisfactory hybrid that contained elements of both Iraq and Afganistan focused training. The BCT then re-deployed from Hohenfels and Grafenwoehr to Italy (a time-consuming re-deployment). As COL Preysler recalled: “Immediately upon completion of the MRE, we rolled home as fast as we could because it was Easter weekend, and we went on block leave. We came back from leave and eight days later we deployed.” Thus, the BCT never had time to even issue a formal deployment operations order, much less prepare any formal campaign plan. The 173d BCT never had an
opportunity to perform any Command Post Exercise, war-game their ensuing campaign, or perform any educational or intellectual preparation for the Afghan mission. Adequate Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield was never conducted. Focused cultural and regional study and mission evaluation could not be performed. At a soldier and unit level, although some adjustments to training were implemented as noted by SPC Stafford, there was insufficient time for any major alterations in training, for any comprehensive cultural familiarization to Nuristan, or for any dedicated language instruction. Insufficient time was available for any focused mountain training or mountain warfare preparations, to include high altitude acclimatization, mountaineering equipment acquisition or specialized physical fitness training. COL Preysler made possibly one of the greatest understatements in the history of the United States Army when he complained, “Pretty tough way to come into combat.”

TF Rock and TF Bayonet performed what is known as a Pre-Deployment Site Survey (PDSS) to Afghanistan in February 2007. TF Rock and Bayonet met with TF Spartan, the 3d BCT of the 10th Mountain Division. Although TF Spartan had just transferred its BCT headquarters from FOB Salerno in Khost to the newly named FOB Fenty at Jalalabad Airfield, and had recently adjusted its battle space as a result of their three month extension in Afghanistan, the Spartans had been operating in Kunar and Nuristan Provinces since Operation Mountain Lion in April 2006. Specifically, the 1-32 Infantry had sixteen months experience operating in the Pech, Korengal and Waigal Valleys. The Spartans were intimately familiar with the operating area, and made every effort to familiarize TF Rock with the two province Area of Operations (AO). In its sixteen months of service in northeastern Afghanistan, TF Spartan had increased the number of FOBs or combat outposts from seven to 22 in the provinces of Nangahar, Nuristan, Kunar, and Laghman (N2KL), and from thirteen to 21 in Paktika, Paktya, Khost, Ghazni, and Logar (P2KGL). These numerous new forward operating bases enabled the Mountain Division to provide enhanced security to considerable portions of Afghanistan, and permitted the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan government to provide services to a large portion of Afghanistan that they had
not previously been able to reach. Expansion of these FOBs enabled the 10th Mountain Division to employ the “ink line” counterinsurgency strategy to construct new roads and significantly improve existing routes, and begin to connect the rural population of eastern Afghanistan to the central government. However, one considerable challenge entailed by this strategy was supplying this significant expansion in the number of small bases operated by the Spartan Brigade. Many of them were in extremely rural, isolated locations surrounded by rugged terrain and high mountain ridges. Existing road infrastructure to these new base locations was either absent, in extremely poor condition, or vulnerable to ambush and IED attack. Rotary wing assets were scarce, and subject to frequent interference by weather conditions, particularly in the winter months. During their PDSS, TF Rock and Bayonet “…felt like we’d gone too far, too fast.” Accordingly, TF Rock and Bayonet contemplated a withdrawal from both Ranch House and Bella, and establishment of a single new COP at a location closer to the Pech Valley, and that possessed good road access and trafficability for logistical purposes.

Upon TF Rock getting their boots on the ground, the 2-503 Infantry benefited from an excellent Relief in Place (RIP) with 1-32 Infantry. Because it was task organized for its combat mission, 2-503 Airborne Infantry was known as “Task Force [TF] Rock” throughout this deployment; and the 173d Airborne BCT was similarly known as “TF Bayonet.” Lieutenant COL William Ostlund, the TF Rock Commander, specifically recalled, “Our RIP / TOA was equally organized and led by our counter-parts at all levels. 1-32 had 16 months in country – they were experienced, confident, but humble. COL Chris Cavoli, the battalion commander, subsequently went to the Marshall Center [George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany] and taught COIN. He and I stayed in continuous contact and sought continuity of thought and action – he remained as a friend and mentor who understood the fight, had a strong mind, and time to think and offer advice as he reflected on his actions in Kunar.” The formal Transfer of Authority (TOA) occurred on 6 June 2007.
Even before the RIP was completed, TF Rock suffered its first casualty. PFC Timothy R. Vimoto, Battle Company, 2-503 Infantry was killed by small arms fire on 5 June 2007 in the Korengal Valley. PFC Vimoto’s father was Command SGT Major (CSM) Isaiah Vimoto of the 173d Airborne BCT, and it was a demoralizing blow to sustain before the Brigade had even occupied its new AO.

Doubtless taking advantage of the ongoing RIP, a small number of ACM insurgents attacked the district center in Wanat in early June 2007. On 5 July, after TF Rock had been in place less than a month, a “horrendous extended battle” occurred with several hundred insurgents in which an estimated eighty insurgents were slain, during which two soldiers from Alpha Company were killed. Tactically, this was a major victory for TF Rock. However, as LTC Ostlund stated: “Basic Taliban efforts coupled with abysmal IO [Information Operations] efforts from Brigade through ISAF began turning the victory into a defeat. I personally REFUSED [his emphasis] to allow this and tirelessly working with the local through province leaders, the ANSF partners, and the PRT. We secured the victory and set a template and a mode of operation in action.” From this engagement on, TF Rock knew that they were going to be involved in a challenging and demanding deployment.38

C Company, 2-503 Airborne Infantry from TF Rock was responsible for the Waigal Valley. Known as “Chosen Company” or “The Chosen Few” the company had established a strong reputation during earlier combat deployments, and the soldiers had adopted as their informal mascot the popular Marvel Comic Book hero, “The Punisher,” a “lone soldier standing between evil and the community, willing to do the job that nobody else will, taking out the bad guys.” The Chosen Few demonstrated their high morale by privately purchasing and universally wearing “punisher skull” patches embroidered with the proud words: “Chosen Few.”

The Chosen Few were commanded by CPT Matt Myer, a self-professed “Army brat” whose father had served 27 years in the Infantry, and he was a 2001 graduate of the US Military Academy at West
Point. CPT Myer had previously deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom I with the 4th Infantry Division; and then attended a CPT’s course with the US Marine Corps. Within the battalion he was a well-regarded company commander, known for possessing a calm, contemplative leadership style which was balanced by the aggressive, dynamic approach of the Chosen Few’s First SGT, 1SG Scott Beeson. Although Chosen Company ostensibly contained three platoons, throughout the entire Afghanistan deployment one platoon (3d Platoon) had been detached to Destined Company. Thus, CPT Myer only had two platoons (his 1st and 2d Platoons) to operate within the Waigal Valley. Typically, these platoons rotated between COP Ranch House and COP Bella, with one platoon at Camp Blessing that served as the TF Rock QRF. Thus, Chosen Company was the economy of force effort within TF Rock, and CPT Myer was constrained by a lack of combat power throughout the entire deployment.

The two platoons of Chosen Company occupied an overextended sector containing the three combat outposts established by 1-32 Infantry in the Waigal Valley. The first two months saw relatively light contact. In August 2007, CPT Myer publically fired the incompetent and corrupt local Afghan Security Guards (ASG) Security Chief at Ranch House. Shortly thereafter, at dawn on 22 August 2007 sixty or more insurgents attacked COP Ranch House from the vicinity of the Aranas schoolhouse in a major, deliberate attack intended to overrun the post. Only 25 American soldiers from the 1st Platoon, Chosen Company were at the facility, augmented by small detachments of ASG and the Afghanistan National Army (ANA). Unlike the regular combat formations of the ANA, the ASG are simple security guards responsible for serving as gate guards, and providing static defense from guard towers. The ASG generally possess minimal training, their responsibilities are distinctly limited, they are only equipped with small arms for individual defense, and they are not organized or intended for sustained combat. At Ranch House, the ASG were hired locally from Aranas and its immediate vicinity. The early morning attack began with a heavy barrage of RPGs, and an ensuing withdrawal by ASGs exposed a segment of the perimeter, which permitted a number of insurgents to penetrate within the post. Hand-to-hand fighting...
resulted, and the ACM were only repelled by Close Air Support (CAS) strikes directly on Ranch House. Eleven paratroopers were Wounded in Action (WIA), some of them with life threatening injuries, and one ASG and one ANA were killed.39

From the date of this attack Chosen Company and TF Rock faced nearly incessant combat actions, ranging from light harassment fires to intensive ambushes and sustained combat. Initially, this level of combat was similar to what 1-32 Infantry had sustained in the Waigal Valley, as the positions at Bella and Ranch House were serving to constrain ACM operations in and through the valley. However, in November 2007 the fighting considerably intensified, when a deadly ambush was executed as a platoon-sized American patrol travelled from Ranch House to COP Bella, following a Shura in Aranas. The casualties were heavy, with five Sky Soldiers being killed, along with one Marine serving as an Embedded Tactical Trainer (ETT) with the ANA, and two ANA killed. Eight US and three ANA soldiers were also wounded in the heavy fighting. In fact, every member of the patrol initially ambushed had been wounded in the engagement.40 This fight set the tempo for the remainder of Chosen Company’s deployment in the Waigal Valley.

A great tragedy occurred at OP Bella early in the morning hours of 26 January 2008. 2d Platoon, Chosen Company was stationed at OP Bella, and Platoon Sergeant SFC Matthew Ryan Kahler, 29, of Granite Falls, Minnesota was visiting guard stations at first light to monitor alertness. There had been previous problems with the ASG falling asleep, or leaving their guard posts to warm themselves by the stoves. As SFC Kahler led his patrol to one guard post which had not responded to their radio calls, he stepped to the front, warning one of the soldiers, “This could be dangerous.” As he moved forward, calling out to the silent bunker, an ASG suddenly leaned out, shot at and killed SFC Kahler. Although a subsequent Article 15-6 investigation ruled that it had been an accidental discharge, soldiers in SFC Kahler’s platoon believed that the ASG had deliberately shot their Platoon Sergeant, and from that
moment on relationships between the ASG/ANA and Chosen Company were degraded. SGT Erik Aass, Company Radio Telephone Operator (RTO), specifically noted, “Many of the soldiers had grown accustomed to being very suspicious of the ASG.” In contradiction of Islamic and regional traditions, no regrets or condolences were received from local families, communities or government officials, further degrading the already weak relationships between Americans and Afghans. After the November ambush and this shooting, the Chosen Company soldiers no longer fully trusted the Afghan people of the Waigal Valley, and no longer gave the Afghans “the benefit of the doubt.” From this moment on, Chosen Company’s emphasis shifted to kinetic operations. As a result of the loss of SFC Kahler, SSG Dzwik transferred from the 1st Platoon to become Platoon Sergeant.

Although LTC Ostlund specifically noted that “Our focus was on living with the population” this was not the case in the Waigal Valley, where the paratroopers occupied only two COPs, and had almost no interaction with the population. One machine gunner from the Chosen Few Company recalled: “We also didn’t go off the FOB unless there was a patrol;” and “We didn’t interact with them as a soldier goes. We just pulled security mostly and they didn’t come near us and we didn’t go near them.” Even when serving side by side with an ANA Company at Wanat, there was almost no interaction between the ANA soldiers and the Paratroopers except at the ETT level. Throughout the campaign there was very limited interaction between the Paratroopers and the Waigal Valley population, except at the company and battalion leadership level.

TF Rock fought a very kinetic fight in the Waigal Valley. LTC Ostlund briefed: “We dropped 861 bombs with few questions asked…. In a comprehensive briefing on their Afghanistan campaign, TF Rock leadership was able to meticulously articulate every kinetic engagement:

- 9,434 combat patrols;
- 1,081 Engagements;
- 5,382 Indirect Fire Engagements;
- 36,225 Indirect Rounds fired;
- 3,789 Aerial Delivered Munitions;
- 108 TOW missiles fired; and
- 23 Javelin missiles fired.43

By any measure, this is an extraordinarily intensive quantity of combat. During 1-32 Infantry’s tenure in the Waigal Valley, CAS missions were severely constrained. Dropping of a bomb within the limits of any community was strictly forbidden, although CAS attacks were employed outside of settlements. The indiscriminate employment of firepower within towns was also strictly limited. Soldiers of TF Rock, however, have provided numerous videos of CAS strikes being directed against houses within Waigal Valley communities. As LTC Oslund stated, TF Rock dropped large numbers of CAS bombs “with few questions asked.”

TF Rock did make considerable efforts to initiate a large number of economic development projects. However, TF Rock was unable to provide commensurate statistics for Shuras conducted, VETCAPS and MEDCAPS performed, quantities of Humanitarian Supplies distributed, schools constructed, or similar economic, political and diplomatic initiatives. Candid videos taken by a member of 2d Platoon, Chosen Company reveal literally dozens of kinetic engagements, but not a single one of meeting with the Waigal Valley population (and this from a man who himself had a young child). One video was purported to show an “ambush” in which slain insurgents were gathered together and left under direct observation, so that their comrades could be similarly engaged when they emerged to recover the corpses of their fellow fighters in accordance with Muslim law and traditions. Although not a violation of the laws of land warfare, such a tactic demonstrates a lack of respect for local religions, and a commensurate lack of respect for their opponents. A study on the Soviet-Afghanistan War specifically
addressed this issue, as recounted by an American student who spent considerable time with the Mujahideen:

[The Soviet commandos] …disintegrated it [the body] making a proper Islamic burial impossible. The storytellers were more outraged by this than anything else. It was a violation not only of man but, far worse, of man’s ties with Allah: the ultimate kind of atrocity in Afghan eyes.44

Such kinetic activities accomplished little tactically, and were almost certain to preclude the development of positive relationships with the Nuristanis.

The 10th Mountain Division in the campaign season before had initiated “Operation MOUNTAIN LAMB” specifically focused upon the distribution of humanitarian supplies to the population of northeast Afghanistan. Operation MOUNTAIN LAMB was distinctive, in that the operation was actually run directly from Fort Drum. This was entirely a non-kinetic, humanitarian operation with two objectives. First was to amass and then ship a large quantity of humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan. Civil Affairs operations in Afghanistan had significantly expanded under the Mountain Division’s tutelage and needs for humanitarian supplies exceeded the ability of the US Army supply system to provide such specialized, non-military items. Second, General Freakley believed that the North Country community and residents needed to, as he later put it in a video teleconference, “get into the fight.” Freakley recalled the long history of contribution and cooperation between the North Country and the US Army, a record that extended nearly a century to the establishment of Pine Camp (the forerunner of Fort Drum) in August 1907. Freakley wanted to provide an opportunity for the North Country community and citizens to actively contribute to the war effort, directly support the operations of the 10th Mountain Division, and at the same time begin to forge a bond between the North Country and the Nation and citizens of Afghanistan. Operation MOUNTAIN LAMB focused on obtaining humanitarian supplies for
Afghanistan that the division had identified as being non-perishable, and that were in great demand by the citizens. In particular, the division had noted that blankets, clothing, shoes and school supplies were urgently required. Operation MOUNTAIN LAMB eventually obtained 23,000 pounds of donated blankets, shoes, clothing, school supplies, and toys for the children and citizens of Afghanistan. An additional $10,000 in cash was donated, which assisted with shipping some of the items, and bulk purchasing of specific items in particularly high demand. MOUNTAIN LAMB had garnered considerable positive effects between the 10th Mountain Division soldiers and Afghan populace. Neither TF Rock nor TF Bayonet ever established such a program.45

To the people of the Waigal Valley whose homes were being leveled, and whose neighborhoods and farm fields were being turned into battlefields, they saw no commensurate improvement in their lives, and no real evidence of security being provided by the coalition. As demonstrated in Wanat in the fall of 2006, when security was provided, interaction between the soldiers and the population was permitted, and when the community derived economic benefits (such as being paid for labor, selling bread and food, and receiving two modern bridges) from the coalition’s presence, the community responded with strong pro-central Afghanistan government and American feelings, and reciprocated with support and intelligence. It should be remembered that 1-32 Infantry still experienced frequent combat and sustained casualties in the Waigal Valley, as their locations at Bella and Ranch House severely constrained ACM operations in the valley, and the ACM vigorously opposed the American and Afghan central government insertions. A number of these engagements were intensive. However, officers and soldiers of the Chosin Battalion generally believed that developments in the Waigal Valley had been challenging and difficult, but generally positive during their 2006-2007 deployment.

By 2007-2008 absence of services being provided by the Afghan government after months of coalition presence, coupled with lack of security being enabled by the American military occupation, and
alienation caused by the aggressive kinetic fight being carried to the insurgents by TF Rock, swiftly degraded the relationships between the population of the Waigal Valley and the coalition. Within five months, TF Rock had sustained as many casualties as TF Chosin had sustained in its entire deployment; and by the time of its redeployment in July 2009 the Chosen Few Company alone had sustained as many casualties as the entire 1-32 Battalion had. The population, facing legitimate threats and dangers from the virulent insurgents, could not tolerate being perceived as being supportive of the coalition unless they were being adequately protected by the American paratroopers and Afghan Security Forces, including the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) and Afghanistan National Police (ANP). Without security, or improvements to their quality of life that were worth risking their lives for, the residents of the Waigal Valley remained (at best) uncommitted. Numerous American soldiers have interpreted this as: “The population is also very xenophobic and are largely fence sitters.” LTC Ostlund assessed that: “Waygul history is replete with deception, dishonesty, two-faced tactics, actions counter to Afghan culture and Islam.” However, both of these assessments can be construed as being exclusively American in interpretation, rather than incorporating the Waigal Valley population’s situation and concerns.

An Anthropologist who is an expert on Nuristani culture assessed that the population’s recalcitrance is simply a self-defense measure taken to protect themselves against the insurgents, while hoping for commensurate improvements from the government and American army. As noted, since 2002 the Waigal Valley has contained an active and significantly sized element of Taliban and HIG fighters. Between 2006 and 2008 their presence resulted in considerable intimidation and coercion of the various inhabitants. As counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen has assessed: “…the majority of Afghans simply want security, peace and prosperity and will swing to support the side that appears most likely to prevail and to meet these needs….” Even a few local Taliban supporters distributing the feared shabnamah (night letters) to those who they view as collaborators with the Afghan government or the Americans has a corrosive effect upon citizens, for as one analyst has noted: “Such a message is
devastatingly effective in areas where trans-generational feuds and revenge are a fabric of the society.”

When outright violence and physical intimidation are carried out, the citizens’ very lives are endangered, and fear and trepidations are accordingly increased. The Wanat elders’ clearly expressed desire that the Americans simply occupy the land required for COP Kahler in Wanat reflects this, as this would have enabled them to actually support the Afghan government and US Army, while concurrently providing them deniability in the face of the insurgent threats. In fact, this would provide the elders with a strong bargaining position against the insurgents, as they could chide the insurgents in a subsequent Shura that they were incapable of protecting them against the American infidels.

Influencing this perception is the extremely deleterious effects of destroying even a single residence in the comparatively small villages of the Waigal Valley, which are very tight-knit and inter-related through the extended families that inhabit the region, and are also desperately poor. The residents of these communities hold the Americans who dropped the bomb to be equally as culpable as the insurgents who attracted the bomb in the first place. One senior American analyst with exhaustive experience of Pakistan and Afghanistan has concluded: “…the indiscriminate use of firepower in inhabited areas has been extremely damaging to counterinsurgency efforts among a revenge-oriented people with a zero tolerance for insult and collateral damage.”

The highly kinetic approach favored by TF Rock, in contravention of the earlier approach taken by TF Chosin (1-32 Infantry) of the 10th Mountain Division, which had significantly restricted its employment of firepower, rapidly and inevitably degraded the relationships between the US Army and the Waigal Valley population.

Because of the intensive insurgent attacks at Ranch House and its vicinity, the need for the COP to be re-supplied exclusively by rotary wing, and its isolation from the community of Aranas that it was intended to support, TF Rock made the determination to abandon Ranch House on 2 October 2007, before the onset of winter so that resources did not have to be expended sustaining that remote and relatively
isolated facility. Predictably, the Taliban and HIG presented this decision as an insurgent accomplishment, and that the Americans had been driven out by their actions. A lengthy propaganda video was created that depicted the insurgents seizing and occupying Ranch House in a deliberate attack. This notwithstanding the fact that Ranch House had already been abandoned by coalition forces when the video was actually made, demonstrating a formidable psychological operations and IO effort on the part of the ACM insurgents, and the video constituted a significant ACM IO victory. COL Preysler stated to the US Army Center for Lessons Learned (CALL) in an interview at the end of the brigade’s deployment:

IO is still a huge weakness. In fact IO is still the weakest Line of Operation. The problem we have with IO is, first of all it has to be a much bigger organization. We need a lot more help. You cannot man an IO cell at brigade with two people…I think brigade had a lot of trouble with assisting the tactical level and then feeding the [strategic communications] piece. I wish I could do it over again. The lack of sophistication, the lack of the ability to resonate with the people is frustrating because we don’t understand the culture. The only solution is to bring in the Afghans to do the IO for you because they understand the culture… But, if you really wanted to do this IO piece right, at the brigade level, you would have a lot more people, a lot more energy, and a lot more things happening. We’re not sophisticated; we’re not effectively resonating with the people. This is an art and you have to study this art. You have to have somebody with the ability and the talent to think about this every day without having to worry about everything else.

The cultural unfamiliarity, and ensuing lack of IO success, was directly attributable to the brigade’s last minute transfer from Iraq to Afghanistan, leaving them almost no time to effectively prepare for the human terrain of the Waigal, Pech and Korengal Valleys. TF Bayonet failed to perform effective IO to counteract the perception of an ACM victory at Ranch House.
In large measure because of this ACM IO victory that empowered the insurgents in the Waigal Valley, Chosen Company and TF Rock continued to experience numerous and intense TICs (Troops in Contact), and efforts to resupply COP Bella became increasingly more difficult. Eventually, as with Ranch House, the decision was firmly made to evacuate Bella, and to construct a new COP at Wanat from which operations within the Waigal Valley could be more effectively performed. In fact, TF Rock had contemplated transferring operations from COP Bella to Wanat as early as their PDSS to Afghanistan in February 2007. In conjunction with this decision, negotiations were initiated with local leadership to obtain permission to use land within or adjacent to Wanat for a COP. Plans to establish a COP at Wanat were considerably delayed by extended discussions between TF Rock and Wanat community leaders regarding where and when such an outpost would be established, and the specific arrangements for land use.

Previously, land use negotiations had been performed through the Afghanistan Ministry of Defense, which typically resulted in the actual land owner not receiving any payment for the coalition use of his property. Needless to say, this resulted in considerable ill will generated by coalition occupation. In an attempt to reverse this animosity, the US Army established Contingency Real Estate Support Teams (CREST), small teams of real estate SPCs operating at the Division/CJTF level under the Division/CJTF Engineer. These CREST teams were specifically organized to research land ownership, and then negotiate directly with the land owners, and ensure that they then received equitable and direct payments for the US Army use of their property. Thus, US Army standard procedures are that land arrangements have to be formalized with the community and land owner prior to coalition occupation with CREST involvement.\textsuperscript{55} Although completely appropriate for locations where security is well established, in the case of Wanat where the ACM actively operated in close proximity (if not within) the community, the Afghan elders and community leaders felt that such arrangements would leave them exposed to the various ACM insurgents as having actively cooperated with the coalition forces and central government of Afghanistan. Rather,
they wanted the coalition forces to simply occupy the land, and then pay for its use “ex post facto” to provide them with political coverage against the Taliban. Such an approach would in fact give the Wanat elders a lever that could in turn be used against the Taliban, as they could then complain that the insurgents had not “protected” them against the wicked infidel occupiers. Negotiations continued interminably. The discussions were formally documented in writing from TF Rock to the Wanat District Leadership on 20 April 2008. Two Shuras between Chosen Company, TF Rock, and the leadership at Wanat were held on 26 May and 8 June 2008. The Shura in Wanat on 26 May in particular did not go well at all. Both the Battalion and Company Commander felt that they were being “put off” by the elders, and that the meeting was being deliberately drawn out. The Shura was not, in any measure, positive. In fact, in a gross violation of well established cultural traditions, the Elders did not eat lunch with the Sky Soldier officers. During the return movement from Wanat to Camp Blessing, the convoy was involved in a heavy ambush in which two American soldiers were seriously wounded. American officers felt that the elders had specifically delayed the Shura so that the attack could be established. This ambush can be interpreted as the people of Wanat expressing (through violence) their vehement opposition to the plan.

A follow-up Shura on 8 June went no better, and American officers believed that only their pointed conversation and discussions regarding the presence of “spy planes and bombers” deferred another ambush. Regardless of these problems, and the poor reception that the possibility of a Wanat COP had received from the Afghan community leadership, the difficulty of maintaining COP Bella, and its isolated nature, resulted in a final decision in late June by TF Rock to withdraw from Bella, and open a new COP in Wanat.

An event that had significant ramifications on subsequent operations in the Waigal Valley occurred on 4 July 2008. On this date a pair of pickup trucks was engaged by a team of two AH-64 Apache gunships and destroyed. The pickup trucks had either been deliberately fleeing from the vicinity of an
indirect fire attack launched on COP Bella as coalition forces would attest, or simply departing from the Bella Medical Clinic in response to a coalition warning to evacuate the Bella vicinity as per Afghan reports. The pick-up trucks may or may not have actually contained militants, and a careful study by TF Bayonet was inconclusive. Among the seventeen dead were all of the health care providers from the Bella Health Clinic, one of the scarce medical facilities in the Waigal Valley. According to Afghan media sources (which have been widely repeated throughout numerous Afghan sources), the following were casualties:

Killed:

- Dr. Nemetullah, doctor of Bella village’s clinic
- Kalam Massi, guard at clinic
- Naeem Massi, clinic nurse employee
- Sonkra, landowner near Bella
- Rafiullah, son of Sonkra
- Sonkra’s wife
- Noorullah, son of Rafiullah
- Sonkra’s grandchild, 8 mos old
- Sulaiman Klorik, a shopkeeper
- Hazrat Ali, a driver
- Shoaib Sondi, a shopkeeper
- Kafayatullah, a driver
- Tabgul, a driver
- Dr. Najeebullah, a doctor at Bella’s clinic
- Sanaullah, a shopkeeper
(Two other civilians).

Wounded:

Wiaullah Muraluddin, a landowner near Bella
Dr. Zainab, female employee at Bella’s clinic
Asma, 8, daughter of Dr. Nematullah
Abdullah, son of Mira Jan, a shopkeeper in Bella
Rohullah, a worker in Waigal
Ansarullah, a shopkeeper.57

TF Rock and TF Bayonet officers involved unhesitatingly claimed that UAV coverage had clearly revealed that the engaged vehicles were fleeing from confirmed indirect fire attack sites that were actively harassing COP Bella, and noted an immediate reduction in ACM indirect fire attacks and activity following the helicopter engagement. LTC Ostlund has confirmed that forensics conducted on some of the killed disclosed the presence of gunpowder, that weapons were found within the vehicles, and that TF Rock believed some of the dead to be known insurgents. However, because the vehicles allegedly contained at least one identified guard for the Bella Medical Clinic, the presence of gunpowder and weapons could be anticipated. CPT Benjamin Pry, the S-2 (Intelligence) Officer for TF Rock believes that the trucks contained civilians departing from Bella, but that insurgents forced their way onboard to provide them with “human shields” to facilitate their get-away from their attack site, and in effect launched their attack to lure the Americans into causing civilian casualties.58 Given the confused situation in the Waigal Valley in early July 2008 it is nearly impossible to determine whether civilians or insurgents were actually killed.

Coalition forces involved absolutely believed that the vehicles contained insurgents, but this was not believed to be the truth by the population within the Waigal Valley. Exacerbating the situation, TF
Bayonet chose not to initiate any IO to mitigate the effects of the attack, rather the official TF Bayonet and CTJF-101 position was to “… not take responsibility for, nor deny, that it caused non-combatant casualties.” This response was entirely ineffective within the IO arena, since the highly capable ACM IO operation was expending considerable efforts alleging that all the dead were innocent civilians. No condolences or regrets were expressed by the 173d BCT. An unanticipated effect of this attack was that Chosen Company, TF Rock and TF Bayonet staff and commanders were distracted by the need to perform a formal and involved (and thus time intensive and stressful) Article 15-6 Investigation on the incident in early July, at the same time that CONOP ROCK MOVE to establish a new Combat Outpost at Wanat was being performed.

This attack, whether justified or not by US forces, aggravated public opinion throughout the Waigal Valley against the Americans, and caused much of the population to (for at least the time being) actively support the ACM. Sami Nuristani, a Waigal Valley resident, analyzed the incident:

I think July 4 was a disaster both for the people of Waygal valley and the Coalition forces. The aftermath of the Bella incident led to the Wantt attack, the link is very obvious mostly caused by the anger over the death of innocent civilian in Bella. I have known two of the deceased in that incident. Most people believe that the locals were so angered by the Bella incident that they even cooperated (or simply did not report to the Americans) with those who attacked the Wantt outpost. The attack certainly changed people’s support for the US army given the fact that they killed the very people who had helped them or were very cooperative to them. 59

The Governor of Nuristan, Tamin Nuristani, strongly criticized this attack and the attendant loss of civilian lives, and the coalition response. Shortly thereafter, on 10 July 2008, President Karzai fired Governor Nuristani, who had served in that position since 2005, antagonizing some elements of the
Nuristan populace.\textsuperscript{60} Although Governor Nuristani was not particularly popular among the majority of the population, he was a local representative from Nuristan Province, and President Karzai’s actions coming immediately after the 4 July attack at Bella further alienated the local population from the Afghan central government. In large measure, by early July the population in the Waiwal Valley no longer supported either the presence of TF Rock or the Afghan government.

Beginning in early July the first soldiers of TF Duke (the 3d BCT of the 1st Infantry Division), and particularly 1-26 Infantry that was intended to relieve TF Rock in the Pech, Korengal and Waigal Valleys, started to arrive in Kunar, initiating the formal RIP process. Against this background, CONOP [Concept of Operations] ROCK MOVE was developed and implemented. This was a consolidated operation that had two integral elements, withdrawing from COP Bella, and simultaneously standing up the new COP in Wanat. The Operations Order was completed in close coordination with Chosen Company in early July; and CONOP ROCK MOVE was briefed to COL Preysler on 6 July 2008; and it was briefed to Brigadier General Mark Milley, Deputy Commanding General for Operations for the 101st Airborne Division, on 7 July 2008. At these briefings, LTC Ostlund recalled:

> We all had concerns about weather and enabler support. We mitigated concerns by attaching 2 x mortars to the platoon and a TOW, giving WANAT priority of 155[mm Field Artillery] fires from 2 x platoons (4 tubes) [at Camp Blessing], placing Co C2 [Company C2] with the platoon, and having echelon QRFs available.\textsuperscript{61}

Emphasizing the need for TF Rock to withdraw from COP Bella to a more effective location, indirect fire attacks upon Bella significantly increased, reaching a crescendo in early July as the ACM became aware (probably through the written negotiations and the pair of \textit{Shuras} in Wanat) that the COP was scheduled to be abandoned. On 3 July 2008 SPC Gabriel Green of Chosen Company was severely wounded by
mortar fragments in just such an indirect fire attack, and had to be urgently evacuated by MEDEVAC helicopter from Bella.

By 1 July 2008 the tenure of the Chosen Ones in the Waigal Valley was down to the final two weeks. All of the soldiers’ personal gear (except for their rucksacks and combat equipment) had already been shipped home. Chosen Company and TF Rock had spent over fourteen months in intensive, unremitting combat in the Waigal. By this time, the soldiers of Chosen Company and TF Rock were more than familiar with the ACM that they fought against. They knew how the insurgents fought, they understood their tactics and how they preferred to employ their weapons, and they respected the ACM as tough, determined, committed and skilled fighters. However, as noted, actual interactions between the population and the paratroopers had been extremely limited, and as a result the population and Chosen soldiers were virtual strangers. Generally, Chosen Company’s time in the Waigal Valley had proven to be frustrating, and after fourteen months of engagements, little real progress was visible. As LTC Ostlund believed, and most of his Chosen Few soldiers would have concurred with him, “Waygul history is replete with deception, dishonesty, two-faced tactics, actions counter to Afghan culture and Islam. [The] Population provides no information to GoA [Government of Afghanistan] and provides support to AAF [Anti-Afghan Forces].”62 One young, but highly experienced, Chosen Company soldier echoed LTC Ostlund’s impressions:

Those people, they disgust me. We built them a school and gave them money for roads. A lot of times, I gave the workers clothes for their kids and shoes for their kids. I gave them blankets. We’d give them food and they complained that we didn’t do enough for them. Those people live a different life than the rest of the Afghans. They have no morals whatsoever. They would kill their own son if you gave them a goat. Everything about those people up there is disgusting. They’re worthless.63
Against this background of mutual distrust and nearly fifteen months of acrimonious interaction, the withdrawal from COP Bella and the occupation of COP Kahler in Wanat moved forward.


2 This Chapter was significantly improved through a comprehensive review performed by Dr. David Katz of the Naval War College. Dr. Katz is intimately familiar with Nuristan, and his PhD Thesis was on this topic. David J. Katz, Kafir to Afghan: Religious Conversion, Political Incorporation and Ethnicity in the Vaygal Valley, Nuristan. University of California, Los Angeles Ph. D. Thesis, 1982.


8 Stephen Tanner, Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2002), 245-246.


10 Discussion of these ethnic groups has been carefully reviewed by Dr. David Katz.

11 Sami Nuristani, Personal Statement, E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI (March 2, 2009).

12 French Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss developed the "Alliance Theory" of exogamy, the practice of marrying outside a local entity such as a family, clan, tribe, or community to build alliances with other groups. According to Levi-Strauss’ theory, such practices result in enhanced opportunities for cultural and economic exchanges, and unites diverse organizations that would otherwise engage in conflicts (either military or economic). The author believes exogamy to be widely exercised, historically such practices were common not only within 18th century Native American tribes and nations; but within the ruling families of monarchs in Europe.

13 Wahab and Youngerman, A Brief History of Afghanistan, 16-17.

17 Max Klimburg, “The Enclave Culture of Parun in Former Kafiristan” Asia 104 (July 2007), 70.
19 There are a range of popular names for these regressive, radically fundamentalist Islamic entities, to include jihadists, salafists and wahhabis. I have chosen to utilize the term “takfiri” as articulately discussed by Kilcullen, The Accidental Guerilla, xviii-xix.
20 For discussions of local fighters, see Giustozzi, Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop, 41.
21 It should be noted that this assessment is an expansion of that promulgated by Giustozzi in Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop, 33-43. Giustozzi merely divides the Taliban insurgents into “local” and “core” components. I espouse that the “core” insurgents more accurately should be considered to be Afghan-centric; and trans-national. My assessment is an elaboration of the more insightful analysis provided by Kilcullen, The Accidental Guerilla, 83-87.
24 SGT Major D. Utley, “Konar Valley” in US Army SGTs Major Academy, Long Hard Road, NCO Experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq (Fort Bliss, Texas: October 2007), 53-56.
26 Statement of Colonel Christopher Cavoli, former Battalion Commander of 1-32 Infantry, 10th Mountain Division (E-mail to Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute, March 15, 2009).
27 Cavoli, Statement.
28 CPT Andrew Glen, Personal Interview, performed by Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute, on April 2, 2009.
29 Major Scott Himes, Personal Interview, performed by Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute, on April 25, 2009.
31 ILT Colonel Harry D. Tunnell IV, Red Devils, Tactical Perspectives from Iraq (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006).
32 CPL Tyler M. Stafford, Personal Interview, performed by Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on February 10, 2009.
33 Colonel William Ostlund, Personal Statement Regarding OEF 07-08 deployment (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on 19 February 2009).
35 The “ink line” strategy is fully articulated by Cubbison, The Crossed Swords Tribe of Afghanistan, 57-62; and Kilcullen, Accidental Guerilla, 87-95.
36 Colonel William Ostlund, Personal Statement Regarding Engagement at Wanat (E-mail to Douglas R. Cubbison, 23 February 2009).
38 Colonel Ostlund, Personal Statement Regarding OEF 07-08 deployment.

40 This ambush is well documented in David Hanselman, “Bella Ambush, 9-10 November 2007.” (n.p., n.d.).

41 SGT Erik Aass, Personal Interview, performed by Mr. Matt Matthews, US Army Combat Studies Institute, on January 13, 2009.

42 Colonel Ostlund, Personal Statement Regarding OEF 07-08 deployment; and CPL Tyler Stafford, Personal Interview, performed by Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute on February 10, 2009.

43 2d-503d Airborne Infantry. Power Point Presentation: “Thoughts on COIN OEF VIII.” (not dated).

44 Chultheis, Night Letters, 2-3.


46 1LT Erik Malmstrom, 1-32 Infantry, 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division, “Losing the Waigul Valley” The Pennsylvania Gazette (November/December 2008), 44.

47 Combined Joint Task Force-101, “Statement on Waigal District/Nuristan.” (E-mails to Mr. Matt Matthews, CSI, 3-4 April 2009). The CJTF-101 G-2, LTC Gervais, used identical language in a June, 2009 interview with CSI. It must be noted that anthropologists who have studied Nuristan do not concur with this assessment.


52 Confirmed through extensive discussions and conservations with Colonel Chris Cavoli.


54 Preysler, CALL Interview.

55 The land use process was articulated by LTC Julian Smith, CJTF-101 and Division Engineer (Personal Interview, June 10, 2009).


58 CPT Benjamin Pry, Personal Interview performed by Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute on May 6, 2009.

59 Sami Nuristani, Afghan Citizen of Waigal Valley. Personal Statement (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on March 2, 2009). The author has personally confirmed Sami’s statements with Colonel Chris Cavoli, former 1-32 Infantry Battalion Commander in the Waigal Valley.


61 Colonel William Ostlund, Personal Statement Regarding Engagement at Wanat (E-mails to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on February 24, 2009 and May 8, 2009).

62 LTC Ostlund, “Battle of Wanat Storyboard.”
Chapter 2

“We are in a Bad Situation….”

Battle of Wanat, July 13, 2008

“A US soldier approached me and I asked him if there were any other patients. He responded, ‘No.’ I pointed to the KIA and asked ‘Are they dead?’ He looked at me and stated, ‘They’re gone.’”


Any new military installation is at its most vulnerable in the first few days of its inception. At this time, protective barriers such as HESCOs and stone walls are still under construction, defensive positions such as guard towers and FOB entrances are still being established, defensive obstacles such as Concertina are being installed, fields of fire are being cleared, the best possible positions for heavy weapons systems are still being identified, permanent and redundant communications are being established. A certain amount of confusion is attendant as heavy construction is underway, and different contractors and workers circulate through the new installation. Additionally, from an insurgent’s perspective, once a military installation is firmly established, it inevitably brings jobs, employment and business to a community. Local workers are hired to help operate mess halls and clean latrines, Local National (LN) trucks roll in and out and require fuel and servicing, their drivers require meals and lodging, construction workers are hired, inevitably local materials of various types such as concrete and wood are required. Once established, a coalition military presence brings in economic stimulus and improvements such as schools, jobs, construction, and businesses to the area that spread coalition presence and authority, and begin to convert the adjacent community from neutrality or hostility to
support of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan central government. Attacking an established military installation inevitably engenders hostility from the adjacent community that has developed business ties with the coalition and is certain to be hurt economically by such an attack.

COP Kahler at Wanat was at its most tenuous existence from the morning of 9 July until heavy construction on the stone wall and HESCO barrier planned to encircle it was completed, and until the final kilometer and a half of good road from Camp Blessing could be finished and economic incentives and advantages could begin to flow.\(^1\) With a large insurgent force actively operating in the Waigal Valley and available for immediate employment, and the local populace ill disposed to the coalition as a fall-out from the earlier helicopter attack, it was unlikely that the ACM would let this fleeting opportunity slip away without taking action. Early in the morning of 13 July, approximately one hour before BMNT, the insurgents launched a determined and furious assault upon COP Kahler at Wanat.

**The Decision**

Wanat was one of the nine major villages in the Waigal Valley, it was the farthest south in the Waigal Valley and thus the closest to the major American and Afghan government facilities in the Pech Valley. The Waigal District Center of the Nuristan Province was located in Wanat, the ANP Police Headquarters for the Waigal District was also located there, and a relatively modern road extended from Camp Blessing at Nangalam in the Pech River Valley to within one mile of Wanat. With a minimum of construction, this road could be completed to provide excellent ground trafficability to Wanat, thus eliminating the requirement for rotary wing resupply. LTC William Ostlund, Commander of TF Rock, specifically recalled:

We targeted WANAT for over a year as a place where we could effectively progress along the Lines of Operation (LOOs) of Security, Governance, Economic Development and IO. Wanat would position a base that was in close proximity to a new district center,
a new police station, a market, and a population center – and was accessible by air and
ground LOC. We had $1.4 million in projects planned or ongoing in WANAT’s area.

CPT Devin George, then Chosen Company Executive Officer (XO) and intimately involved in the
planning process, echoed:

The reason we moved to Wanat was so we would be co-located with the district
government so we could mentor them so they could police themselves up. We wanted to
help them develop their government so they could do something other than just guard the
district center and not really affect anything outside of their one-kilometer bubble.

As LTC Ostlund stated, TF Rock had been planning this consolidated move since their TOA in June,
2007. In March 2008 the TF Bayonet Operations Officer (S-3), MAJ Jack Rich, told TF Rock to
aggressively move ahead with the evacuation of Bella and establishment of a new COP at Wanat. MAJ
Rich specifically told the Battalion Command and Operations Officer, “We really want you to look at
moving to Wanat. Come up with a course of action. I’m going to send our Brigade Engineer rep
[representative] to go recon and we’ll get this thing moving.” In response, TF Rock initiated a series of
visits to Wanat, and began serious negotiations with the elders and property owners. It took
approximately a month, but the Brigade Engineer visited Wanat and formalized a plan for the permanent
COP. By late June 2008 such a move, if it was to be implemented by TF Rock rather than left to the
incoming 1-26 Infantry of TF Duke, could no longer be delayed and TF Rock made the final decision to
establish COP Kahler at Wanat. TF Rock then formalized the mission into a CONOP, and the CONOP
was briefed to 173d Airborne BCT and the 101st Airborne Division command, then operating as CJTF-
101 headquarters in Afghanistan and operating out of Bagram Airfield about sixty miles north of Kabul,
for final approval.
The Plan- CONOP ROCK MOVE

CONOP ROCK MOVE entailed establishing a permanent Combat Outpost at Wanat. This is in contravention of the Brigade Commander’s remarks in late July following the engagement, when COL Preysler stated:

That’s all it was, a series of vehicles that went out there. People are saying that this was a full-up [forward operating base]/combat outpost, and that is absolutely false and not true. There were no walls. FOB denotes that there are walls and perimeters and all that. It’s a vehicle patrol base, temporary in nature. If there’s no combat outpost to abandon, there’s no position to abandon. It’s a bunch of vehicles like we do on patrol anywhere and we hold up for a night and pick up any tactical positions that we have with vehicle patrol bases. We do that routinely.... We’re always doing that when go out and stay in an area for longer than a few hours, and that’s what it is. So there is nothing to abandon. There was no structures, there was no COP or FOB or anything like that to even abandon. So, from the get-go, that is just [expletive], and it’s not right.²

This statement requires clarification. First, within US Army doctrine there is no such thing as a “Vehicle Patrol Base.” “VPB” is not a recognized US Army acronym. It is not defined in any Field Manual; nor is the concept, or any Tactics, Techniques or Procedures (TTPs) for a “Vehicle Patrol Base” taught at any US Army schools or institutions. On 9 July there were four Surveyors from the 62d Engineer Battalion present at COP Kahler, establishing survey for the FOB intended to be constructed on the site, an action that was only necessary if a permanent occupation was contemplated.³ The SSG in charge of the engineers reported that on 9 July, “There was a four man survey crew there for the day to put in locations of guard towers, the perimeter and hard huts.”⁴ SFC Dzwik, the Platoon Sergeant of the Chosen Few who paid very close and meticulous attention to the fortification of the site, specifically recalled, “They [the
Surveyors] were tracking that they were going to start building the FOB right away. They had marked off the guard towers and where the walls were going to go.” Third, an engineering design prepared by the 62d Engineer Battalion specifically depicts a range of permanent structures intended for the COP such as billets, an exterior stone wall and interior HESCO barrier wall, HESCO guard towers, Shower & Laundry facilities, a Traffic Control Point at the entrance to the COP, a well pump house, and even a leach field for disposal of wastewater [Figure X]. One of the Engineer soldiers working on-site noted, “The 11th [of July] was mostly just pulling guard and waiting on contractors to get there with the heavy machinery to level out the ground so we could start building.” Fourth, a number of HESCOs were installed at COP Kahler, and the first permanent facility (the mortar pit) was already well along to completion by the evening of 12 July. Fifth, LTC Ostlund specifically discussed that there were integrated plans for a wide range of projects intended to be implemented at Wanat:

We targeted WANAT for over a year as a place where we could effectively progress along the Lines of Operation (LOOs) of Security, Governance, Economic Development and IO. We would position a base that was in close proximity to a new district center, a new police station, a market, and a population center – and was accessible by air and ground LOC. We had $1.4 million in projects planned or ongoing in WANAT’s area.

Sixth, if Wanat was only going to be a temporary VPB, there would have been no necessity for TF Rock to develop a formal operations order, much less brief CONOP ROCK MOVE to the TF Bayonet commander and CJTF-101 DCG-O Brigadier General Milley. Last, within the CONOP ROCK MOVE operations order, three of the key tasks were:

• Air Assault/Move of personnel and equipment from COP Bella to Blessing – to Wanat;
• Establish COP Wanat – OPs, fighting positions, force protection walls, and bunkers; and
• Maximize IO effects – closing Bella/opening Wanat.
These three key tasks clearly indicate that establishing a functional COP at Wanat was TF Rock and TF Bayonet’s intent. The Battalion S-3, MAJ Scott Himes, also recalled that the operation’s intent had been to establish a permanent COP that TF Duke could then operate out of.

CONOP ROCK MOVE was intended by TF Rock, TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 to establish a permanent COP at Wanat that could be supported by a finished, high-quality road from Camp Blessing to Wanat, that would provide for a daily connection with the District Center at Wanat, facilitate coordination with the District Governor and District ANP, establish security for the Wanat village, and enable contact and influence with the Waiginal Valley population. The COP was designed to be a permanent facility surrounded by a stone exterior wall and interior HESCO wall with permanent billeting, potable water and waste water facilities. Wanat was planned to be a permanent COP that TF Duke of CJTF-101 was going to assume responsibility for, and perform daily operations out of, rather than a temporary “Vehicle Patrol Base.”

In order to sustain this COP, and permit it to serve as a conduit for economic improvement and governance flowing from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan within the Pech and Kunar Valleys, the road from Camp Blessing had to be completed. The total distance of this road was approximately eight kilometers. Of this distance, the southern 6 ½ kilometers from Camp Blessing was finished, and was capable of sustaining heavy military and commercial vehicle traffic. The last northern 1 ½ kilometers to Wanat was poor, narrow, and rough and needed to be smoothed, straightened and widened before it could support regular and heavy military or commercial traffic. HMMWVs and Jingle Trucks could travel on the road, but slowly and cautiously. The road connection was crucial, as Ranch House and Bella had been abandoned because it was only possible to support them logistically by rotary wing (helicopter) operations, and COP Kahler was specifically sited at Wanat because it could be logistically supported by ground transportation.
By late June, the decision was made by TF Rock and TF Bayonet to evacuate COP Bella, and transfer operations to the new COP Kahler at Wanat. The TF Rock staff developed the Operations Order for CONOP ROCK MOVE. During the development of CONOP ROCK MOVE, TF Rock never performed a Rehearsal of Concept (ROC) drill. The purpose of a ROC drill is to bring all the participants in a combat operation together, to synchronize the operation, ensure that the commander’s intent is understood by all participants, and to de-conflict issues or resolve deficiencies in the plan. Apparently, the belief was that the briefings to TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 would fulfill the intent of a ROC drill, and that because of the extended planning timeframe to include numerous previous site visits for the occupation of Wanat that a comprehensive ROC drill was not necessary. On 6 July 2008 TF Rock briefed COL Preysler on the operation. The next day, 7 July 2008 TF Rock briefed Brigadier General Mark Milley, DCG-O 101st Airborne Division. During these briefings, the absence of a ROC drill was never identified or addressed by TF Bayonet or CJTF-101 leadership. One integral component of CONOP ROCK MOVE that was never addressed was the RIP between Chosen Company and the TF Duke element that was intended to assume responsibility for COP Kahler. No mention of this transition was provided by CONOP ROCK MOVE, nor did TF Rock, TF Bayonet or CJTF-101 leadership address their plan to seamlessly insert TF Duke elements into Wanat, and extract the Chosen Few for return to Italy. In the absence of a comprehensive ROC drill, deficiencies in CONOP ROCK MOVE in terms of logistical support, ISR support, fire support planning, and the transition to TF Duke were not conclusively identified.

On 7 July 2d Platoon of Chosen Company received the Operations Order, and it executed pre-combat checks that day and the next. 2d Platoon and Chosen Few Company did not receive a formal Operations Order from TF Rock, nor did they perform formal ROC drills, but key leaders did brief back their concept of operations. Platoon Sergeant Dzwik noted that: “The commander had set up where he was envisioning the positions, which was pretty much where we set up. We knew the area, so we knew
from pictures we took and from visiting the positions where we were going to go.” As SFC Dzwik noted, the 2d Platoon had visited Wanat on several previous occasions in March, April and May 8, and their specific squad positions were already selected. The precise location for COP Kahler was established before the 2d Platoon ever began their movement to Wanat. The general site for the OP had also been selected on a ridge to the east of the major platoon position, although its precise positioning had not yet been determined. After fourteen months of combat operations in Afghanistan, the 2d Platoon scarcely needed a formal ROC drill to establish an effective platoon fighting position.

As briefed, the Operations Order was strictly a combat operation. Because of various timing issues, CONOP ROCK MOVE called for the evacuation of COP Bella first, followed by the establishment of the new COP Kahler at Wanat. This would somewhat alleviate excessive demands upon rotary wing assets, particularly given the RIP then in progress, as supplies could readily be transferred from Bella to Wanat by the helicopters departing COP Bella. However, there was no accompanying IO engagement explaining that COP Bella was simply being moved. By segmenting the operation, the population of the Waigal Valley perceived that the large insurgent force known to be operating against Bella had driven the US Army out of that outpost. Positively establishing the new COP Kahler before Bella was abandoned would have alleviated this negative IO message, along with performing a prominent, formal movement from Bella to Wanat in a highly visible manner that could be well publicized. There was no formal coordination with the Nuristan Provincial Governor, although the District Governor at Wanat had been consulted and was familiar with the operation. However, there was no incorporation of political objectives, or integration with Afghan governance, in CONOP ROCK MOVE. There was no prior coordination with the ANP District Headquarters at Wanat. Although an ANA Company was included in the operation, the ANA was not incorporated into the planning process. LTC Anderson, the ANA ETT OIC later noted that: “They [TF Rock] were pushing the ANA out to the front but not so much in the planning phases. Their planning was to pack everyone on the backs of
vehicles and just take off. That was something we had to work on.”\(^9\) CONOP ROCK MOVE did not include the distribution of any humanitarian aid to Wanat, and no Civil Affairs component was included in the CONOP. There was no MEDCAP (Medical Civil Affairs Patrols) or VETCAP (Veterinary Civil Affairs Patrols) associated with the operation. This was in complete accordance with guidance from CJTF-101: “The commanding general of Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) 101, [Major] General Schlosser, actually said, as part of the counterinsurgency doctrine, ‘All you folks up here in the Waygul Valley, if you don’t want to play then we’re not going to spend a dime in development. We’re not coming up to do medical civic assistance programs (MEDCAPs) or anything. If you’re all good with that, as long as you stay there, we may come in and do some operations if we know there are high-value targets…’ But we were just going to cut them off and let them rot on the vine a little bit as everyone else developed.”\(^10\) Initially, adequate ISR and Collections Assets were provided to the operation by the CJTF-101 G-2, although on the evening of 8-9 July these were relatively ineffective due to the heavy weather that dominated that night. CONOP ROCK MOVE did not call for TF Rock to move their organic Raven UAV to Wanat, primarily because of previous challenges with operating the fragile system in terrain similar to that to be found around the community. ROCK MOVE had no formal MILDEC component, although inserting the 2d Platoon convoy of five vehicles into Wanat under cover of darkness on July 8\(^{th}\) could be interpreted as providing some limited MILDEC. There was no associated show of force with the occupation of Wanat. The comparatively small force at Wanat, which had been quietly inserted into town at night, failed to impress anybody that the American army element establishing COP Kahler possessed overwhelming strength. Rather, the relatively small force inserted into Wanat gave the impression of weakness and vulnerability. Although considerable economic development and growth were planned for Wanat, and TF Rock had identified no less than $1.4 million in economic projects specifically to benefit the community, the 2d Platoon arrived at Wanat without bringing any of this economic activity with them. Rather, they carried only promises of future prosperity. 2d Platoon was not provided with any local
currency to perform local purchases from the Wanat economy, such as 1LT Glenn’s Engineers had done in the fall of 2006.

The Chosen Company soldiers, who had only thirteen days of duty remaining in Afghanistan following nearly fifteen months of continuous combat and operations, were not particularly thrilled to receive the mission. In fact, they had already shipped their personal items back to Italy, and only retained a single rucksack with immediate living gear, and their combat equipment and weapons. SPC Stafford remembered:

…none of us wanted to go. We had about 13 days left before we were scheduled to get out of there on the choppers and we were all really pissed off that we had to go. We knew the intel reports of massing enemy attacks and very high-risk missions, so not a lot of us wanted to go.\(^1\)

Another soldier sadly echoed, “All of us knew this was going to be a bad mission, nobody seemed to understand it.” The burden of keeping the platoon intent upon the mission and motivated to accomplish it fell primarily upon recently promoted SFC Dzwik, as Platoon Sergeant the senior NCO in the platoon. Dzwik stated that he didn’t change the routine of combat checks and drills in preparation for an operation, and he simply told the soldiers that they had come here to do fifteen months of a job, not fourteen months. SFC Dzwik noted that by this time the platoon was a tight-knit, highly efficient organization that worked smoothly and efficiently together, and that their focus on mission accomplishment never slipped.\(^2\)

1LT Brostrom was particularly displeased with the mission. He talked at Camp Blessing with his best friend and former Ranger buddy, 1LT Brandon Kennedy with Alpha Company:
… the topic came up about the Wanat mission. He told me he did not like it. He said he thought it was a bad idea and he knew he was going to get ‘fucked up’ because the last four times he had gone up there, he had been ambushed or IED’ed every time, often with very good effects. 1LT Brostrom told me that he wasn’t sure why they were trying to do this mission so close to the end of the deployment and that he had been told back in March or April (when he and his platoon had been pulled out of Bella) it was for the reason of establishing the Wanat FOB. 1LT Brostrom said he sat for three or four months waiting to do this mission and figured it just eventually wouldn’t happen, but then was surprised and disappointed at the same time that they were trying to push this mission. I asked who ‘they’ was and he couldn’t quite tell me if it was coming down from Brigade, Battalion or just his Company Commander, but he knew he wasn’t too fond of the idea and nor were his men. 1LT Brostrom expressed concerns to me about the number of men he was taking with him for the mission (I think he told me it would be around 23-24 plus some ANA, who he felt didn’t really count towards combat power anyway) and that he was also concerned about the terrain surrounding the area…I did actually ask LT Brostrom if he had brought this up with his Company Commander. He told me that he had talked with CPT Myer and brought up a lot of his concerns, and that they had made plans to help mitigate some of the risks (like giving the new FOB mortar support), but 1LT Brostrom didn’t seem like all his concerns had been answered/mitigated. I don’t know if LT Brostrom ever brought his concerns to anyone else, or how exactly they were all mitigated, but he did tell me had talked with his commander about his concerns.13

1LT Brostrom echoed nearly identical concerns to a friend of his, a Military Police CPT in the Brigade Special Troops Battalion stationed at Jalalabad. He told her of intelligence information that a post at
Wanat was certain to be attacked by a strong enemy force, employing such language as “We know we’re going to get hit hard” and “We know this is going to be bad.” He also told his correspondent that they were going to load up the HMMWVs with as much ammunition as they could carry. Platoon Sergeant Dzwik also raised similar concerns through the NCO chain of command.

The evacuation of COP Bella was completed on 8 July. At CPT Myer’s insistence, the garrison there had been increased for the last few days of its existence, because CPT Myer feared that the large ACM force known to be operating against Bella intended a large scale attack on that post. CPT Myer specifically recalled: “I had a feeling that the enemy was trying to do a large-scale attack on Bella because they knew we were going to vacate it. They could do a large attack and then say they forced us out of Bella. That was basically an information operations part of the mission.” SGT Aass, the RTO for CPT Myer, recalled that the structures at Bella were left intact: “CPT Myer decided that we should leave it standing and just make an announcement that we were donating the buildings to the villagers. Either way, the Taliban were going to claim that they drove us off. This way, we could twist the argument and say we were giving something to the villagers. If the Taliban then chose to take it over, then we could say they stole it from the villagers.” Fortunately, Bella was successfully evacuated without any contact. Some senior officers such as COL Preysler of TF Bayonet felt that the most dangerous portion of CONOP ROCK MOVE was behind them. CPT Myer was among one of the last to leave Bella. All materials and personnel were either transferred to Camp Blessing, or some of the Class IV (construction materials) and Class V (ammunition) were moved to COP Kahler at Wanat.

**Occupation of Wanat, July 9th to July 12th**

2d Platoon, Chosen Company (The “Chosen Few”) moved from Camp Blessing on the evening of 8 July, departing for the approximately ninety-minute journey after sunset. Soldiers on the convoy that
were interviewed provided various times for departure, but have consistently stated that their departure was after nightfall. Five HMMWVs were driven to Wanat, a HMMWV apiece for the three rifle squads, a single HMMWV for the 2d Platoon Headquarters, and a TOW HMMWV. SGT Hisson remembered the HMMWVs being loaded “with as much food, water, ammo, and people as they could hold.” Upon arrival at Wanat they established a vehicle laager in the open field near the bazaar, identified by TF Rock as the site for the proposed Wanat COP since June 2007. This was the identical site that 1LT Glenn’s Engineers had used as a staging area and cantonment in the fall of 2006, during the tenure of their bridge construction. Shortly after they arrived a drenching rainfall descended for the remainder of the night. SGT Hisson remembered that it was “pitch black” and that the northern part of the field flooded. SPC Stafford recalled, “We pulled in there, circled the Humvees and then about that time it started dumping rain and a big thunderstorm.” With the heavy rain and darkness, little could be done except to pull local security until morning. At first light the field was swept for mines and IEDs, the platoon leadership located fighting positions, and entrenchment began. 1LT Brostrom and SGT Pitt selected the site for the OP on a knoll to the east.

The commander at COP Kahler from 8-12 July was the 2d Platoon Leader of the Chosen Few, 1LT Jonathan P. Brostrom, 24 years old from Hawaii. Brostrom’s father was US Army COL David Brostrom, who had retired in 2004, following a successful career to include tenure as Commander of the 10th Mountain Division’s Combat Aviation Brigade. Although born in Germany, 1LT Brostrom had grown up in Hawaii and was an avid outdoorsman, a dedicated weight lifter, and an accomplished swimmer who had worked as a life guard throughout high school and college. Brostrom had graduated from the University of Hawaii in 2006 with a degree in Human Resources, and was commissioned through that University’s ROTC program. While an ROTC Cadet he earned the Air Assault, Airborne, and US Navy Scuba Diver Badge. Following graduation from Ranger School, 1LT Brostrom deployed to Italy and then Afghanistan in June 2007. Brostrom planned on making the Army a career, and hoped to transition to
Special Forces as he gained more experience. He had initially served as Assistant S-3, and by July 2008 had been 2d Platoon Leader for eight months in Afghanistan, with considerable combat experience at COP Bella. He was a seasoned Platoon Leader who was popular with his soldiers, and well respected within TF Rock.

On the afternoon of 9 July additional Chinook helicopter flights delivered the ANA Company from the 3d Kandak [Battalion], 2d Brigade, 201st Corps (24 ANA soldiers plus three US Marine Embedded Tactical Trainers (ETTs) and two interpreters) and additional 2d Platoon, Chosen Few Company soldiers to Wanat (who had not been able to fit into the HMMWV convoy the night before). Several other helicopter flights also carried the 120mm mortar to the site, along with construction materials such as HESCOs, hand excavation tools (shovels and picks), sandbags, and Concertina. Most of this material, along with supplementary ammunition, had been previously positioned at COP Bella, and was transferred to Wanat.

A six-man engineering squad from C Company, 62d Engineer Battalion (that had just been deployed to Afghanistan from Fort Hood, Texas) also arrived by Chinook helicopter, along with a Bobcat and a small CONEX filled with specialized equipment for them to work with. A large rubber fuel blivet for the Bobcat was placed next to this CONEX, roughly located in the center of the COP.

The logistical approach called for physical construction of COP Kahler by a Jalalabad-based Afghan construction company, with CH-47 Chinook helicopter flights delivering specialized supply loads such as the ANA, 120mm mortar tube, ammunition, and the engineers’ equipment. Because even five heavily laden HMMWVs could not transport all of the platoon’s requirements, a number of LN (LN) “Jingle trucks” were intended to accompany the construction company with the majority of the logistical supplies for COP Kahler. Unfortunately, there were problems with the construction company, including lack of a Route Clearance Package to ensure that the road from Camp Blessing to Wanat (which had been
the location of several previous IED attacks) was safe, and the absence of a combat escort to enable them to safely move north to Wanat. Unfortunately, Chosen Company had never worked with this Afghan construction company before. At one time, several trucks actually began moving from Camp Blessing to Wanat, but turned around before arrival, complaining (almost certainly truthfully) that: “…the AAF were watching the road.”

This complex logistical plan required an Afghan construction company to work to a meticulous time schedule in coordination with an American Route Clearance Package and combat escort between Camp Blessing and Wanat. This support was never identified as a requirement in CONOP ROCK MOVE.

Among the mortar squad was PFC Sergio Abad, 21, of south Florida. Abad had served most of the deployment with the Battle Company mortars in the Korengal Valley, but had recently been transferred to the Chosen Few 120mm mortar squad. Abad was a foster child, was a fine salsa dancer, and had earned a reputation as a highly skilled mortar gunner, although like many young soldiers he possessed a bit of attitude. His Section SGT, SGT Hector Chavez, remembered of him:

He was one of those guys that you wondered why he was in the military. He was a very smart kid. He made us look like privates with the knowledge he had of the 120. He had a lot of knowledge. The only problem was that he was very cocky and had a street attitude that we couldn’t get him to shake, no matter how many times we smoked him. He was a good kid, though, and he listened to his NCOs. Had he learned to keep his mouth shut, he would have easily been promoted to SGT (E5). He was a hell of a gunner, though. Probably one of the fastest guys I’ve seen on the 120. He knew his job. He studied very hard and was set on getting promoted to E5.

The ANA company that was ordered to support the Chosen Few at Wanat was a new ANA organization formed only in January and February 2008. It had received initial organizational training at
Kabul, and then been moved to the Pech/Korengal/Waigal Valley region in March 2008. The majority of the enlisted men were relatively young, inexperienced recruits from throughout northeastern Afghanistan. The Kanak Sergeant Major was an extremely experienced soldier, was from the Waigal Valley, and provided considerable local knowledge and familiarity. The Company was advised by three Marine ETTs, two of which had been with this same organization since their arrival in country in March 2008 (the NCOIC SSG Luis Repreza and CPL Jason Jones), while CPL Jason Oakes was replacing another ETT member and had only joined the ETT team on the ground at Camp Blessing on 9 July, just in time for the helicopter ride to Wanat. LTC Kevin Anderson, USMCR, the Officer-In-Charge (OIC) of the ETT noted that the Company had been undergoing intensive training, and had made considerable progress. The ANA’s weaknesses were logistics and communications, and the majority of these services were provided by the Marine ETTs. LTC Anderson specifically noted that their level of training enabled the ANA to perform effective and independent dismounted and local security patrols.20

Eventually, a handful of LN Toyota Hi-Lux pick-up trucks arrived at COP Kahler with supplemental water and rations, but not until shortages of these indispensable provisions had delayed work for most of three days. The Toyota Hi-Lux ¼ ton 4x4 double cab pickup trucks are found everywhere in Afghanistan, in every conceivable condition, they carry anything and everything, and they can negotiate even the most brutal terrain. These tough little Toyota pickup trucks are the single most ubiquitous vehicles in Afghanistan, and they constituted the last reinforcements that would arrive at Wanat until the afternoon of 12 July, when another helicopter flight delivered CPT Myer, his RTO (SGT Erik Aass), additional water and rations, and correct parts to operate a generator to pump the fuel from the blivet into the Bobcat. CPT Myer and SGT Aass were the only personnel reinforcements that arrived at COP Kahler after 9 July, and with their arrival there were 49 Americans (forty paratroopers, six engineers, and three Marine ETTs) at COP Kahler. Although LTC Ostlund had noted that stationing company C2 at Wanat was a component of the planned mitigations for the risk assessment, the only
company C2 assets that were ever deployed to Wanat were CPT Myer and SGT Aass. The Fire Support Officer (FSO), 1SG, and other company assets such as communications equipment were never transported to Wanat. The additional company 60mm and battalion 120mm mortars remained at Camp Blessing, from which Wanat was out of mortar range.

**Defensive Configuration and Terrain Discussion**

In order for COP Kahler to be effective, it had to be placed in close enough proximity to Wanat to facilitate regular coordination with the District Center and ANP, had to be positioned to be readily re-supplied by road from Camp Blessing, and to provide permanent security for the community against the ACM forces operating in the Waigal Valley. As with nearly every community in Kunar and Nuristan, Wanat was located within a valley. Wanat was specifically located at the junction of the Wayskawdi Khwar, a creek that flowed generally from the east, and the larger Darrehye Waygal (Waygal River) that flowed from the Hindu Kush to the south into the Pech River. Fairly recent additions were the 150’ Bailey Bridge constructed over the Waigal River, and the 30’ Bailey Bridge over the Wayskawdi River, which had been built by local labor and 1LT Glenn’s Engineers in the fall of 2006. COP Kahler had to be positioned to control these two bridges, as they were absolutely critical terrain within the Waigal Valley. Wanat is a community of approximately fifty families, and it contained a mosque, hotel, district government center, district police center from which a force of ANP operated, and a large bazaar (market). A local resident, Amhad (not his real name for security purposes), noted that the community had initially enjoyed good relationships with the US Army, “…people were treated very good by US and Afghan Forces, two years ago, while building two bridges by US Forces, a lot of people were hired from Want and nearby villages and people from Want Village were and still are nice with US forces.” This refers to the fall 2006 construction by the 10th Mountain Division. Although the Chosen Company and TF Rock leadership felt that Wanat was hostile to American forces, Ahmad suggests that the people were
more concerned with the conflict that an American base in their community would be certain to attract, as they were well familiar with the regular fighting that plagued Ranch House and Bella. Ahmad noted, “The most important reason I think was that Want Villages did not want their village be battle field. They knew that if US Army build base there, militant will attack or fire rocket and villages will be the most victim of fighting. That is why they were against the base. It was mentioned by villagers to the US Army in meetings.” 21 Here, Ahmad is referring to the two Shuras held at Wanat, and his statement is confirmed by American officers attending these meetings.

COP Kahler occupied a large open field, which the Chosen One soldiers described as the size of a football field, aligned from north to south, and located generally south of and directly adjacent to the village of Wanat. The field was generally flat and level, declining slightly from north to south, with low terraces running east to west that were relatively easily negotiated, descending from north to south. The center of the field was at 3,350 feet elevation, and was generally devoid of vegetation, but contained numerous small rocks. As with nearly every community in Kunar and Nuristan, Wanat is surrounded by prominent ridges to the northwest, northeast, southeast and southwest, that consistently approach 10,000 feet in peak elevation. One Chosen Company soldier candidly referred to the location of COP Kahler as “being at the bottom of a bowl, surrounded by a whole lot of shit sandwich.” For this reason, during the previous American occupation of Wanat in the fall of 2006 three OPs had been specifically established by the ANA to provide over-watch of the valley community.

To ameliorate this exposed set of necessary circumstances, dictated by the realities of the Afghanistan topography, a strong, deliberate defense was planned for COP Kahler including an exterior stone wall, an interior HESCO barrier, and four guard towers. Unfortunately, because of various factors, there were minimal defenses in place at COP Kahler as night fell on the evening of 12 July. COP Kahler at that moment consisted of a number of squad sized fighting positions, generally oriented towards the
village of Wanat, to the north (twelve o’clock). From the southwest (8 o’clock) clockwise the position consisted of:

- A field latrine area (at 8 o’clock) protected by several HESCOs;
- The mortar firing pit and Ammunition Supply Point [ASP], well-constructed of HESCOs (9 o’clock). The 120mm mortar was emplaced in this firing pit;
- ANA Fighting Position (10 o’clock), with approximately half of the ANA Company;
- Third Squad, 2d Platoon Fighting Position with Up-armored HMMWV and Mk-19 grenade launcher (11 o’clock);
- ANA Fighting Position (12 o’clock), with the other half of the ANA Company;
- To the rear of the ANA fighting positions a 3-man fighting position was constructed by the three ETT Marines and their interpreters, positioned so that they could provide command & control to both of the ANA fighting positions, and have somewhat better fields of vision;
- Second Squad, 2d Platoon Fighting Position with Up-armored HMMWV and Mk-19 grenade launcher (1 o’clock);
- A Platoon/Company Command Post (CP) with the Platoon Leader’s Up-armored HMMWV with a .50 M2 heavy machine gun (3 o’clock). The CP was placed directly against the southwestern wall of the “C” shaped building which offered it considerable protection from any fires from the north, but also obstructed lines of sight directly to the north;
- To the west of the Command Post the Bobcat constructed a ramp on the late afternoon/early evening of 12 July for the 3-man TOW HMMWV, to enable it to have a better field of fire. The TOW HMMWV only occupied this position just before dark on 12 July;
- The 60mm mortar was set up in the middle of the COP, approximately mid-way between the mortar pit with the 120mm mortar and the Command Post. It was installed in an incomplete firing position that offered limited protection.
To the southeast (4 o’clock) and across the road the 1st Squad, 2d Platoon had a Traffic Control Point (TCP) with an up-armored HMMWV and a .50 M2 Heavy machine gun, with a single strand of Concertina stretched across the road as an obstacle. The machine gun was oriented towards the south, facing down the road towards Camp Blessing. To the south of the 1st squad TCP, there was a small ANA position, with less than a dozen ANA assisting this TCP. By the night of 12 July, the 1st Squad TCP was a fairly robust position. One soldier recalled:

This was…improved to a triple wall of sandbags four feet high and two 4’ HESCOs with camo-netting overhead, more for shade than any sort of concealment. The end result was a position overlooking the road, with an 8’ trace behind (west) of us, a 4’ triple thick sandbag wall forming the left side and 1/3 of the front wall [south] and two interlocked trapezoidal 4’ HESCOs forming the remainder of the wall. The truck remained due west of the position, covering south down the road.22

The west and north sides of the COP were defined by a ravine (seasonably dry) filled with trees and heavy vegetation. The road from Camp Blessing to Wanat ran from south to north, and defined the eastern periphery of COP Kahler. A large building with a prominent blue roof was located to the northwest of the COP (at about 10 o’clock), surrounded by a high stone wall. To the due north was a smaller, single story building that served as the Wanat Mosque. The large District Center was farther to the northwest of the mosque and located on a narrow isthmus between the two rivers, immediately adjacent to and west of the road to Camp Blessing. A cluster of buildings existed to the northeast and east, just across the road from Camp Blessing, from approximately 1 o’clock to 3 o’clock. This cluster of buildings included several multiple storied buildings, one of which served as a hotel, and a long single storied building to the due east that served as the community bazaar or market. There was a gap between the bazaar and these other buildings, so that soldiers could easily walk or run from the COP to the OP to
the north of the bazaar. Just to the south of the bazaar was a small, separate building that served as the local public latrine for the market. To the south of this building was the 1st Squad TCP. Although soldiers could walk directly from the COP to the OP through the bazaar, they most frequently followed a path that had been created through the 1st Squad TCP.

Within the open field was an unfinished (walls only) “C” shaped building on the eastern side of the field, with the open portion of the “C” facing to the northeast. This “C” shaped building was not authorized to become a portion of COP Kahler, and it was not occupied by Chosen Company. Platoon Sergeant David Dzwik recalled that they were specifically told that they were not permitted to use this building, and the formal plan for the completed COP Kahler did not include this building within its limits. The orientation and location of this unfinished building suggested that it was intended, when completed, to become an expansion of the market. The road from Camp Blessing to Wanat ran between the market and the “C” shaped building. Agricultural terraces ran for a considerable distance to the south, and the southern periphery of the COP was only defined by the Concertina perimeter. Commanding enclosed Nuristani compounds of multiple buildings that included lookout towers and firing positions were located on high prominent knolls to the southwest and southeast of the COP; and to the southeast and northeast of the OP.

The Chosen Company squad and ANA fighting positions were dug two to four feet deep as the ground permitted, with layers of sandbags raising them another one to three feet above the ground surface. SFC Dzwik specifically recalled that the ground was hard with a lot of rocks, and that it was very difficult digging given the limited hand tools and personnel entrenching tools that were available, and that excavating more than a couple of feet down was not feasible. Nearly all of the fighting positions were covered with camouflage netting, primarily installed to provide shade to the soldiers rather than providing any meaningful concealment (the COP was in the middle of the town in an open field, surrounded entirely
by high ground and village structures, and a few camouflage nets were certainly not going to conceal the COP from anybody). Some fighting positions, such as the mortar firing point, had camouflage ponchos stretched above individual sleeping positions or the soldier’s cots. None of the positions had overhead cover, as there was no available material to provide this. SFC Dzwik later noted that he had located some large wooden beams that could have been used for this purpose, but they were piled by a vacant Afghan house, and he did not want to take the wood without gaining the owner’s permission and properly paying for it.²⁴

On the morning of 9 July 1LT Brostrom, working with SGT Ryan Pitts, the Platoon’s Forward Observer [FO], established an Observation Post (OP) on a ridge to the east of the main COP Kahler position. The general area for this OP had been established by CONOP ROCK MOVE, but not the precise location. The site of this OP was dictated by the exigencies of the terrain. The OP was to be located on a prominent, heavily terraced, agricultural ridge located east of the Blessing-Wanat Road, and southeast of the junction of the Wayskawdi Khwar, the creek that flowed from the east into Wanat, and the larger Darrehye Waygal (Waygal River). This knoll was oblong shaped and consisted of a large number of flattened agricultural terraces. The terrace walls were constructed of stone, were probably about one hundred years old, and were three to four feet high. Chosen Company soldiers noted that they varied from “waist” to “mid-chest” in height. This ridge was high enough to completely block all observation and fields of fire from the COP to the northeast (about 1 o’clock) through to the southeast (about 5 o’clock). This ridge prevented any visibility or control of the Wayskawdi Khwar, which flowed through a large ravine to the north, northeast, and east. Thus, placing on OP on this ridge permitted visibility to the east of terrain that would otherwise have been entirely concealed. 1LT Brostrom and SGT Pitts selected a site for the OP that was located just west and near (but not at) the topographical crest of the knoll, six terraces up (approximately twenty feet in elevation above the road or ground level), and on
the western military crest of the ridge. It was separated by the long, single story market (bazaar) from the road and COP Kahler.

This OP was informally named “OP Topside.” On 16 February 1945 during the airborne assault on Corregidor by the 503d Airborne Infantry, Drop Zone Topside had been the parade ground on ‘Top Side’, a 550-foot-high elevation that dominated Corregidor. Topside was the most important Drop Zone in the history of the 503d Airborne Infantry. The OP to the east of COP Kahler dominated the terrain, just as Top Side had dominated Corregidor.

The actual OP site, which eventually consisted of three fighting positions, was west of and about two terraces below the top terrace at the pinnacle of the knoll, and there was rising ground to the south and east, and descending ground to the north and west. The OP was located on the northwestern portion of this terrace and thus the ridge. SGT Pitts noted that 1LT Brostrom had specifically positioned the OP here because, “…he said he didn’t want the observation post to be too far out, because we didn’t really have a lot of people.” A large, strong Afghan compound was located several hundred yards to the southeast on extremely prominent terrain. Following the engagement, an OP would specifically be located at this compound, as it was clearly key terrain. However, 1LT Brostrom did not feel that he had adequate soldiers available to defend this relatively remote and isolated position. This compound was also outside of the site boundaries designated by CONOP ROCK MOVE for the OP. A third position farther to the east of the actual OP position selected, that provided better observation and fields of fire into the deep ravine to the north and east, was also considered. However, if the OP had been farther to the east in either of these other two positions, the distance to reach the OP from COP Kahler would have been farther, and the route to reach them would have been particularly exposed to enemy observation and potential fire, because the top of the terraced ridgeline would have had to be crossed. When CPT Myer arrived on the afternoon of 12 July he was not particularly enthusiastic about the topographical location of OP Topside,
in fact: “I suggested moving it higher on the hill but all the paratroopers and the PL [Platoon Leader] said it would be more exposed on the hilltop and they would rather have the force protection of the rocks. I agreed we would move it when we had more force protection.” Thus, neither the prominent compound nor the other location to the east was selected. A fourth OP location that was contemplated was the two-story hotel that dominated the mosque-hotel-bazaar complex of buildings within Wanat village. However, an OP in the hotel would not have improved observation or obtained fields of fire to the east, which was the entire purpose of the OP, and it was also outside of the boundaries dictated for the OP by CONOP ROCK MOVE. Additionally, the Afghan residents of the hotel would have had to have been dislocated, and ILT Brostrom did not possess this flexibility.

By placing it adjacent to the western terrace, access to the OP would be somewhat protected, and the western terraces that provided egress to the OP could be observed and controlled by gunfire from the main COP and the OP itself. However, this tactical positioning of the OP did not provide complete observation or fields of fire of the low ground to the north and east, although it should be noted that the precipitous variations in terrain caused by the multiple terraces on this ridgeline would have resulted in dead ground in the immediate vicinity of the OP regardless of its precise location.

Three fighting positions were constructed at the OP, as with the fighting positions at COP Kahler, both excavated and raised with sandbags. OP Topside consisted of a north facing fire-team sized fighting position, an east facing fire-team sized fighting position, and a southern facing fire-team sized position. Both the north and south positions were rectangular and anchored on large boulders. The southernmost fighting position had been constructed at SPC Bogar’s specific recommendation. The east-facing fighting position was semi-circular, and was dug into the next terrace to the east. For some obscure reason, it became known as the “Crow’s Nest.” A long, strong sandbag wall was constructed along the western side of the OP, with the three fighting positions all anchored to this sandbag wall. Because of the
topography of the agricultural terrace, the ground descended sharply to the north and east about thirty to forty feet forward of the OP, and there was extensive dead ground to the north and east. Several large trees on the western periphery of the OP provided shade, and some limited concealment, for the OP. An area of dense brush and numerous small trees was immediately to the northwest (10 o’clock to noon) of the OP. The paratroopers did not possess adequate equipment such as axes or chain saws to enable them to cut down the trees and brush, although the engineers had some limited equipment capable of dealing with this vegetation. When adequate construction equipment and personnel arrived, the intent was to entirely clear this small copse of brush and trees.

The Crown’s Nest was at a higher elevation than the other two fighting positions. To cover the dead ground in close proximity to the OP, four Claymore command detonated anti-personnel mines were emplaced at the periphery of the dead ground to the north, east and south. These were emplaced after dark, and recovered at first light after stand-to. They were not entrenched or dug-in, they were simply placed upon the ground surface, and were not positioned in depth. Two command detonated M18A1 anti-personnel Claymores were controlled from the northern firing position, one to the north, and the other to the east. Two more Claymores were controlled from the southern firing position, one to the south, and another to the east. SPC Stafford specifically recalled testing the Claymores when installing them, and noted that they were “good Claymores.” A large number of hand grenades were carried up to the OP along with an M-203 40mm grenade launcher mounted to an M16 5.56mm rifle, to assist with the defense of the dead ground. SGT Pitts established several target reference points to also control the dead ground, a mission for which the 60mm mortar was ideally suited. Field artillery was formally registered by SGT Pitts on one of these targets, and both the 60mm and 120mm mortars were fired to settle their base plates.

The terrace immediately to the west (and below) of OP Topside was used as the sleeping position for the soldiers assigned to the OP, and their individual tents were located there. The sleeping terrace
could be swept with fire from COP Kahler proper. There were no fighting positions at the sleeping
terrace, because it was not intended to be defended. During hours of likely attack such as dawn and dusk
all the soldiers were always awake and at stand-to in the fighting positions at the OP, rather than being
asleep. A short stretch of sandbags had been constructed running east to west across the northern portion
of the sleeping terrace, to provide protection from the dead ground to the north. The intent was to
eventually extend this wall to provide protection to the entire sleeping terrace, but there were only enough
sandbags to finish this short stretch of north-facing sandbag wall by dusk on July 12th. The thick
concentration of brush and trees continued northeast of the sleeping terrace (from 1 to 2 o’clock).

Both the sleeping terrace and OP fighting position were surrounded by a single strand of
Concertina wire, which had been routed through the trees and brush at the northwest corner of the OP.
This Concertina had not been staked down or secured to the ground because the 2d Platoon had run out of
posts and stakes. This Concertina generally ran along the periphery of the agricultural terraces, where the
dead ground began.

Organic ISR assets included the TOW Improved Target Acquisition System (ITAS), a thermal
system mounted on the TOW launcher on the TOW HMMWV; and the Long Range Advanced Scout
Surveillance System (LRAS), a ground mounted thermal system that was installed at OP TOPSIDE.
Detailed technical capabilities of these two systems are classified, but they provided the Chosen Company
soldiers with formidable night vision and long range surveillance capabilities, although both of these
systems were line-of-sight.

Major weapons systems at COP Kahler were the single battalion 120mm mortar, the single
company 60mm mortar, and the single TOW Missile Launcher on its HMMWV. All three weapons
systems were positioned as previously described. The 120mm mortar was emplaced within a fortified
firing pit that was generally completed. The 60mm mortar was simply set up in the middle of the COP in
a supplemental firing position with limited protection. The TOW was mounted on an up-armored HMMWV, which had been moved to its newly constructed ramp in the center of the COP late in the afternoon/early in the evening of 12 July.

**Establishment of COP Kahler**

The permanent occupation of COP Kahler began with the first light of 9 July. By that afternoon, the available forces for construction were:

- Thirty-eight Paratroopers of 2d Platoon, Chosen Company; including one TOW section and a 120mm mortar section from D Company; and one 60mm mortar section from Chosen Company headquarters, accompanied by one Afghan interpreter;

- Six engineers from Company C, 62d Engineer Battalion operating one Bobcat; and

- Three Marines ETTs with 24 ANA soldiers and two Afghan interpreters.

Throughout 9-12 July consistent actions were performed at COP Kahler, with relatively little daily variation:

- Local security was continuously maintained;

- Two hours each of stand-to was performed at dawn and dusk, with particular emphasis being paid to the period before BMNT;

- Construction of crude field latrine with some protection by HESCOs;

- Construction of 120mm mortar firing pit and rudimentary ASP of HESCOs;
• Construction and improvement of squad fighting positions, 60mm firing position, and the CP against the “C” shaped building using sandbags;

• Construction of TCP to the south including two HESCOs and sandbags;

• Construction of OP Topside by sandbags; and

• Emplacement of Concertina around the COP and OP.

This work was constrained by six factors:

• Lack of water, which ran low as early as 9 July. It should be noted that the ANA never suffered from a lack of water, as they drank local water from the community of Wanat’s water source. Because of health concerns, the American paratroopers could not drink this water. The Chosen Few lacked the capability to sterilize the readily-available water from the Wanat community in large quantities (they possessed only “a couple” of bottles of iodine tablets to prevent the 2d Platoon from entirely running out of water).

• High temperatures during mid-day, which combined with the lack of water seriously limited construction. Platoon Sergeant David Dzwik remembered of this labor: “…the first couple days was just nothing but digging in hard ground, which you could only get maybe a foot to two down. It was still the dead heat of Afghanistan, so during the hottest parts of the day in the afternoon there was a lot less being done just because even working for 10 minutes, you’re using up a lot of water. We tried to do as much as we could from first light at four o’clock in the morning until it got just too hot. Then we would rest up and then try to get some more stuff done when it started cooling down a little bit towards sundown.”30 It should be noted that the established US Army work/rest table for hot weather mandates that only ten
minutes work, and fifty minutes rest, are required for heavy labor in temperatures above ninety degrees F, and thus SFC Dzwik was adhering to published Army standards.

- Limited manpower, as local security had to be continuously maintained at both the COP and OP, and major weapon systems such as the 120mm mortar and TOW had to be continually manned;

- Limited construction equipment (a single Bobcat), which ran out of fuel on 11 July, and was not re-fueled until the next afternoon;

- Limited construction materials (constrained quantity of sandbags, HESCOs, Concertina and Concertina supplies such as stakes and posts); and

- No heavy construction material for overhead cover or bunkers.

Patrols were not conducted between 9-12 July. This reflected a lack of manpower, problems with maintaining proper hydration of the soldiers to avoid hot weather injuries, and the need to prioritize construction of a fortified, defensible position at COP Kahler. The 2d Platoon did not make effective use of the ANA, who could have performed at least rudimentary presence patrolling within the community, and who could consume local water without health restrictions. The Marine ETTs certainly felt that the ANA were fully competent and capable of performing dismounted local security patrols. Because of the previous poor relationship between 2d Platoon and the ANA and ASG, it appears that there was some level of distrust between the 2d Platoon and the ANA. The first patrol was scheduled for the morning of 13 July, and was intended to be a joint patrol between Chosen Company and the ANA, but it was never completed because of the engagement. Some of the NCOs at the site were displeased with the decision to dispatch even this patrol, SGT Hissong recalled, “I remember arguing with SSG Samaroo about having to build a base and still do patrols with such a small amount of people.”31
All platoon weapons and supplementary weapons systems were carefully placed in overlapping fields of fire by 1LT Brostrom and SFC Dzwik, with established azimuths of fire and formal range cards. When CPT Myer arrived on the afternoon of 12 July, he personally walked with 1LT Brostrom around the entire perimeter. CPT Myer and SFC Dzwik later recalled that 1LT Brostrom had drawn a detailed tactical diagram of the platoon defensive positions on an MRE box, but unfortunately this diagram could not be located following the engagement. Formal range cards with measured azimuths for primary directions of fire, limits of fire, and Final Protective Fires (FPF) were completed for every major weapons system. SGT Pitts pre-plotted target reference points for indirect fire (mortar and field artillery) completely around the COP, and in particular to cover the dead ground to the north and east of the OP, and on 10 July he forwarded updates to this target plan to the Battalion Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at Camp Blessing. COP Kahler had priority of fires within the battalion, which meant that it could call upon the single platoon (two tubes) of newly fielded M777A2 155mm howitzers, located at Camp Blessing. These weapons were manned by C Battery, 1-321 Airborne Field Artillery (the “Cobras”) out of the 18th Field Artillery Brigade, Fort Bragg, North Carolina (there were never four artillery pieces at Camp Blessing as LTC Ostlund intimated, only two guns). Because of the topographical location of Camp Blessing which is located on low ground surrounded by considerably higher ground, and the identical topographical condition of Wanat, and intervening high terrain between Camp Blessing and Wanat, the artillery had to be fired strictly high-angle, with the gun tubes pointed nearly vertically. Because of the vagaries of physics and ballistics, this imparted a considerable range probable error into the artillery, meaning that each round had a relatively large variation that could not be corrected for by gunnery techniques. In turn, this restricted how close that the artillery could be delivered to friendly troops, because of the very real possibility of friendly fire impacting upon COP Kahler.

The limited extent of these defenses reflected not a lack of permanency for COP Kahler, but rather severe constraints of materials and resources. Chosen Company and the 62d Engineer soldiers
present used every available means at their disposal to construct their defenses. All HESCOs available were emplaced. However, because of technical limitations of the Bobcat, the HESCOs had to be cut down to a 4’ height rather than their full 7’ height. There were only enough HESCOs to provide limited protection to the field latrine and construct the mortar pit which included a rudimentary ASP; with two HESCOs left over for the TCP. However, none of these HESCOs were completed to their full seven feet height, none of them were filled more than four feet because of the Bobcat’s limitations, and several of the HESCOs had been simply placed in position and were never filled with dirt at all because the Bobcat had run out of gasoline. In fact, when a CH-47 Chinook helicopter landed directly in the middle of the COP late on the afternoon of 13 July, the second tier of HESCOs at the mortar pit were blown over and scattered by the prop blast. No HESCOs were emplaced at OP Topside, because the Bobcat could not ascend the hill to fill any HESCOs there. All available sandbags were filled. All available Concertina wire was emplaced. The main COP was surrounded by a perimeter of double Concertina wire, properly staked down. Because the platoon ran out of Concertina wire, stakes and posts, the OP could only be surrounded by a single strand of wire that could not be properly staked down, and the wire had to be simply laid down on the ground, resulting in a barrier with extremely limited capability.

Improvements to the position were constrained due to the high temperatures and insufficient water, resulting in the soldiers becoming dehydrated, and not being able to work during the heat of the day. Although the 2d Platoon had loaded the HMMWVs with all the water, food, and ammunition that they could carry, water is bulky and heavy, and given the requirements for one man to consume one quart of water during heavy labor in the heat of the day, the large quantities of water (no less than twelve gallons per hour) required by 2d Platoon simply could not be carried in on the HMMWVs. SFC Dzwik would later note that he thought that he had brought enough water with him to Wanat, but the unexpectedly high temperatures, and heavy labor that he had not anticipated (the platoon had expected construction equipment and engineers to be available to construct the COP), required prodigious
quantities of water to maintain his soldier’s health. The only water purification capability carried by the 2d Platoon was several bottles of iodine tablets propitiously carried by the Platoon Medic. This provided some meager water purification capability, enough to ensure that the platoon never actually ran entirely out of water. However, the iodine tablets require time to function (approximately one hour), and a large number of tablets was required to decontaminate even five gallons of water (five gallons of water requires no less than forty tablets, practically an entire bottle). Furthermore, the water acquires a distinctive and unpleasant taste that some people find offensive, and some soldiers become ill when forced to drink water with iodine in it, or actually prove allergic to iodine (thus requiring even more water to stay hydrated).

A number of Chosen soldiers specifically recalled the limits upon construction efforts that could be performed. SGT Queck remembered: “There was only so much we could do seeing as we had almost no supplies to use for construction. We have very few HESCOs and sandbags to use for fighting positions. We ended up having to cut HESCOs just to get them to the proper size. On top of that, the only piece of heavy equipment we had to fill HESCOs was a Bobcat, which could not even fill our 8’ HESCOs in our mortar pit.” One of the engineer SPCs similarly discussed, “We couldn’t do much manual labor that day [10 July] because we ran out of water, or close to it, that morning. The 11th…a group of soldiers put up the C-wire around the perimeter, but couldn’t finish because they ran out of pickets.” SGT Gobble also stated: “However due to the limited supplies i.e. sandbags, C-wire, water, etc. we were only able to do so much.” Another junior enlisted man echoed: “11 July…work was halted a couple times due to a “BLACK” Status on water and MREs. Air would not come out to resupply us and [we] had [to] rely on a hired local nat. [LN] to bring water out in hi-luxs. I believe the 11th was the second day for this.” SPC John Hayes, the platoon RTO, also mentioned, “There were many logistical issues such as water resupply, blivets & fuel that we couldn’t pump & a Bobcat out of fuel so we couldn’t build HESCOs.” Another SGT echoed: “When we first started digging our fox hole we had to wait on shovels and pick axes not being used at the time…. I remember on the 10th, 11th we down to less than a liter of water per person and
subsequently we did not dig or work to conserve our energy and water supply.” 34 SPC Michael Santiago specifically recalled: “I remember manning the radio in the turret and hearing the day before we ran out of [fuel for the Bobcat] our PL calling and asking when were we going to get resupplied. Chosen Base did not know.” 35

The only mechanized equipment present was the Bobcat, and although there was sufficient fuel contained within a large rubber blivet, the fuel pump required to transfer the fuel from the blivet into the Bobcat malfunctioned immediately, and as a result the Bobcat ran out of fuel on July 11th until a replacement finally arrived on the helicopter that delivered CPT Meyer and SGT Aass on the afternoon of 12 July. The Bobcat was only provided with a bulldozer blade, and it could only fill the HESCO barriers to a four foot level as it could not lift any higher than that. There was no other construction equipment at the COP, only picks, shovels and E-tools were available to excavate the fighting positions and fill sandbags. Given the extreme constraints of limited available manpower and materials, and insufficient hydration, the position was fortified to the maximum extent possible within the time constraints.

Neither the 2d Platoon nor the ANA performed any search operations within Wanat. Normally, if deemed necessary, such a search would have been performed by the ANA with the US Army providing tactical over-watch, as the Afghans were considerably more effective at performing such searches. However, unless there was specific information or a specific target identified, a village-wide, neighborhood, or building-to-building search would not routinely have been conducted, and none was performed in Wanat until after the engagement. Given the superlative ACM field craft and procedures, it is unlikely that such searches would have served as a deterrent to the ACM infiltration into the village, or provided any advanced warning of an impending attack.

One major constraint was the absence of the Afghan construction company, who had been contracted to perform the heavy labor and major construction at COP Kahler by TF Rock. This Afghan
construction company never materialized, and as a result no construction equipment (save the single Bobcat that ran out of fuel) and insufficient construction materials were present at COP Kahler. The reason for the absence of this construction company cannot be positively ascertained. It was an Afghan company, but it came from the Jalalabad area. Thus, the company was Safi-Pashtun, and was entering the Nuristani community of Wanat. The company would certainly encounter hostile resistance from locals, who would feel that the Safi-Pashtuns were invading their community, and stealing jobs that otherwise would go to local Wanat laborers. In 2006, another Jalalabad construction company that was improving the road between Wanat and Bella suffered the loss of considerable equipment under nearly identical circumstances, and this incident would definitely have been well known to the Afghan firm.\(^3\) The company may have determined not to travel to Wanat for this reason, or it may have actually been “warned off” by local agitators (or both). The final kilometer and a half of the road was not completed from Camp Blessing to Wanat, and although Jingle Trucks could transport the heavy construction equipment and materials over this portion of the road, movement would be slow and cautious. A more viable strategy would have been to negotiate with Wanat community leaders to hire local labor, while providing hand-tools and construction materials as done in 2006 by 1LT Glenn. If heavy construction equipment was required, then a Shura could have informed the community of this fact. If provided with other incentives the community leadership would probably have permitted a “outside” heavy equipment construction company to enter Wanat, because this would not be work that the Wanat community could realistically perform. This exact process was previously employed by the US Army during the construction of the Bailey Bridges at Wanat with considerable success that garnered marked good will in the community, as described by Ahmad and 1LT Glenn. The absence of this Afghan construction company not only incurred severe constraints upon the construction of the COP, but the concept of using an outside construction company seriously harmed the already deteriorated relationships with the population of Wanat.
The 2d Platoon was not equipped with any humanitarian supplies, nor was it accompanied by any MEDCAP or VETCAP capability. No humanitarian initiatives were scheduled to be a component of CONOP ROCK MOVE, no humanitarian supplies were either driven in by the platoon or flown in, and no MEDCAP or VETCAP augmentation arrived. The 2d Platoon performed no Civil Affairs actions of any type during their tenure at Wanat. No local workers were hired, as the 2d Platoon had no Afghan funds to pay such local workers. The soldiers were not permitted to make local purchases from the bazaar, and because of the absence of local currency the 2d Platoon did not buy bread or food from the Wanat bazaar as their counterparts had done earlier when the bridge was constructed by the 10th Mountain Division in the fall of 2006. Until CPT Myers arrived, no Shuras or meetings with the local elders of village leaders, or the District Governor or ANP, was performed, although 1LT Brostrom did attempt to organize just such a meeting. His efforts were rebuffed, and the only Shura held was the one that 1LT Brostrom interrupted in the District Center. The 2d Platoon soldiers were not permitted to have any contact with the Afghan citizens of Wanat that hadn’t fled upon their arrival.

Because of months of negotiations and Shuras, the ACM was well aware that the US Army intended to establish a Combat Outpost in the large field immediately south of the District Center, and west of the Bazaar (Wanat Market). Further violating good OPSEC and MILDEC TTPs, this same field was the one previously used by the US Army Engineers for 45 days in the fall of 2006. SFC Dzik angrily noted: “If the intelligence was there that Bella was in danger of a large scale attack, then they had to of known that the fighters would move down to Wanat. They (AAF) knew that we were planning a base there for months. They had the time to develop a plan and spend a few days refining it before they hit us.” A number of insurgents deposited their weapons and military equipment with their compatriots, donned local clothing, and took advantage of the presence of the market to gather intelligence regarding the combat outpost being established by Chosen Company. Following the engagement, a number of pair of footwear were found discarded in Wanat, strongly suggesting that the foreign fighters and dedicated
fighters (who are typically quite well supplied) had abandoned their modern shoes for bare feet or sandals that are routinely worn by the Nuristan population to enable them to blend in with the locals, and also to enable them to more quietly approach the American positions in the early morning hours of July 13th.

Nearly every soldier at COP Kahler was well aware of these efforts directed against them. The Chosen Few were receiving reports from the few citizens that remained in Wanat that an attack was eminent, but such warnings had been received so often, and were so vague, that they were discounted. Of greater concern, as SGT Jason Oakes, a US Marine Corps ETT with the ANA, specifically remembered:

There were civilians who were watching us all through the day. There was nothing we could do to tell them, “You can’t watch us digging in the ground here.” They knew exactly where we were. You could do eye judgment 30, 40, 50 feet and then be in the city just walking around doing a pace count and there was nothing we could do… You can’t shoot somebody for walking around slowly.

SPC Stafford, assigned to OP Topside, echoed: “A lot of guys would sit at the bazaar and just watch us really closely. They watched everything we did… military-age males…we all kind of knew they were bad dudes, but you can’t do anything about it.” SGT Hissong also noticed that they were under observation:

As it got later in the morning [9 July] we started to notice that there was a group of about 15 to 20 local men gathering in the bazaar. We later learned that the locals had told CPT Myer that they didn’t want us there. As we built our fighting position we noticed that small groups of men were gathering in the bazaar and appeared to be watching us work and talking about our base.

Another soldier echoed SGT Hissong: “Also the people in the bazaar from 09 July 2008 through 12 July 2008 were all fighting age males, no women or children. At some points they looked as if they were pointing things out/drawing in the dirt.” Using the soldier’s vernacular, another one young SPC was still
furious about this when he prepared his post-battle statement: “I absolutely noticed the shady fucks in the bazaar the day before drawing in the sand and staring down the FOB.” Beginning on the first day of occupation both COP Kahler and OP Topside were under continuous ACM observation. Photographs taken of COP Kahler from a helicopter landing at the LZ at mid-day on 9 July document numerous military aged males at the mosque, hotel and bazaar clearly observing American activities at the COP, within twelve hours of occupation. Every American and ANA fighting position and weapon system’s precise location were almost certainly known, through previous knowledge of the open field that would become the COP, augmented through pace counts and triangulation performed by the insurgents through careful observation from the bazaar.

On the afternoon of 12 July CPT Myer took the advantage of speaking to the few local men who were standing around the bazaar. During CPT Myer’s conversation, according to his RTO SGT Aass, “…one of our soldiers, SPC Denton, recognized one of the civilians hanging around as a former member of the Bella Afghan Security Guards (ASG). When confronted, he admitted freely that he was. Many of the soldiers had grown accustomed to being very suspicious of the ASG.” Because of the former poor relationships between the 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few and the ASG, particularly resulting from the fatal shooting of SFC Kahler at COP Bella, this served to heighten the soldiers’ concerns with their security.

On the night of 11-12 July a small group of personnel was observed moving in a draw to the west/northwest by the ITAS and LRAS observation systems. Although shepherds and citizens regularly moved around Wanat or any other Waigal Valley community, five individuals moving in a group across the mountains in the dead of night was extremely unusual. This was particularly true in July, when the animal herds were not located anywhere near Wanat. Soldiers also confirmed that the individuals were wearing packs, which was also unusual; and that they were carrying something in their hands, also unusual for a shepherd, although the sights could not identify the actual objects they were holding.
Accordingly, a 60mm mortar fire mission was initiated against them, without discernable effect. An engagement with a 60mm mortar was a relatively ineffectual attack, and almost certainly this marginal response was interpreted by the insurgents and Wanat citizens as a demonstration of American weakness.\(^{43}\)

Additional spotings continued to be made by the ITAS and LRAS sensors. SSG Jesse Queck with the Mortar Section recalled that “on the night of the 12\(^{th}\) morning of the 13\(^{th}\) fifteen to twenty individuals were observed on a ridge about one to two kilometers to the south, that looked as if they had packs on.” Because of the absence of Positive Identification (PID), these individuals were not engaged, and they soon vanished from sight. SGT Grimm with the TOW section wrote, “At dusk on the 12\(^{th}\) we spotted one person to the west near a fighting position 1,500 meters away high on the mountain we were told not to engage.” Other soldiers, on guard and observation duty at different times, reported “at two separate times, they saw two elements moving (5-7 guys) but couldn’t [PID or engage].”\(^{44}\) In retrospect, these sightings were almost certainly members of the ACM assault force moving into position, and should have provided warning that forces were massing against COP Kahler. One soldier brusquely commented, “I just want to say we should have ghosted those dudes that night but didn’t.”\(^{45}\) Permitting even small groups of personnel to freely move about the mountains under cover of darkness exposed the base to encirclement and harassment, if not outright attack.

Although the soldiers paid it little attention at the time, another possible indicator of impending action revealed itself on the morning of 12 July when an irrigation ditch to the north of OP Topside suddenly began to fill with water. Although there had been considerable rainfall during the early morning hours of 9 July, both SGT Pitts and SPC Stafford at the OP though it was odd that an irrigation ditch would suddenly fill with rushing water. SGT Pitts later stated: “The only thing that in hindsight could have possibly indicated about an attack was the irrigation ditch in front of the N. [north] position began to
flow with water after previously being dry. It stopped halfway through the day and then it started again after only not flowing for approximately two hours. In hind sight it may have been done to help add noise allowing AAF to sneak closer to our positions without being heard.” Stafford echoed: “It started the day before. The fields weren’t being used and there were irrigation ditches that ran right in front of my position, on the other side of the sandbags, touching the sandbags. They had turned it on. At first Phillips had dug a ditch to divert it, a couple meters in front of the OP. But then it just kept running so we didn’t think anything of it, really, other than we were all kind of joking like, ‘Wow, if somebody sneaks up on us, we can’t hear them.’”

Early in the afternoon of 12July, before CPT Myer arrived, 1LT Brostrom received word that a Shura was taking place within the town, between the community elders, the District Governor, and the District ANP. 1LT Brostrom was extremely angry that he had not been invited to this Shura. SFC Dzwik specifically recalled:

The Wanat Shura gathered at the Wanat District Center without inviting any Coalition Forces. I don’t know who was all at the Shura but I do know that the Police Chief & Police XO were there. I believe that the Sub Governor was… I was digging my fighting position when 1LT Brostrom came over, quite upset & said they had a Shura going. He was upset because we had spent the whole time trying to get a Shura together. He went down with a few soldiers plus the ANA commander. They were shocked to see him. 1LT Brostrom said they were pretty much done when he got there. They were not that open to him & I remember him saying that they were rather surprised & seemed upset that he showed up since he was not invited.

1LT Brostrom, SSG Benton, the interpreter, and five other soldiers traveled rapidly to the Shura. They were accompanied by the ANA Commander and a squad of ANA soldiers. Within Nuristan and Kunar cultural traditions, 1LT Brostrom had every right to be insulted. As the senior American, he could be
considered to be the elder or leader of the tribe of American warriors that had just arrived in town. Deliberately excluding him (and thus the Americans) from a community or District *Shura* was a considerable insult. As SSG Benton recalled, “The reception was not warm at all. The ANP did not respond to any of our greetings and seemed very nervous that we were there.” Some soldiers have speculated that the attack was actually being planned at this meeting, which would account for the response of the ANP. SFC Dzwik specifically recalled: “It is my belief, due to the cold welcome & the events of the 13th that they were discussing an Attack on the VPB.” By inserting himself into this *Shura* and expressing his displeasure, 1LT Brostrom was behaving appropriately within the local culture. Unfortunately, this single action (although well executed), was by itself unable to reverse the chain of events that would culminate the next morning. This interrupted *Shura* was positively reported up the chain of command by 1LT Brostrom, and was deemed important enough to be brought to the attention of the TF Rock Intelligence Officer.

Shortly after 1LT Brostrom’s unsuccessful visit to the District Center, a helicopter with CPT Meyer and his RTO, SGT Aass, landed. Myer and Aass had hitched a ride on a re-supply helicopter moving the replacement pump for the fuel blivet so that the Bobcat could be refueled, along with water and MREs to Wanat. CPT Myer was demonstrating his accomplished skill of hitch-hiking a ride on helicopters, a talent which any traveler in Afghanistan has to rapidly develop to transit between bases. The Chosen Few soldiers were particularly pleased to receive the additional supplies onboard the helicopter.

CPT Myer had been detained at Camp Blessing since he departed OP Bella on one of the last flights out from that outpost. Myer had been busy working on an Article 15-6 investigation regarding the 4 July helicopter attack and various RIP actions. Although LTC Ostlund had specifically mentioned that: “We mitigated concerns by … placing Co C2 [Company C2] with the platoon…” this was the first moment that any such Company C2 element had actually been at Wanat since the first arrival of Second Platoon
late on 8 July, and this “Company C2” only consisted of CPT Myer and SGT Aass. The Company FSO, Executive Officer (XO) and 1SG did not accompany CPT Myer, and no additional company assets were deployed to COP Kahler.48

CPT Myer first walked around the position and greeted his soldiers (a standard troop leading procedure), then 1LT Brostrom briefed him upon the defensive configuration and fire support plan within the COP, and they held a joint inspection of defensives completed to this point. At some point CPT Myer walked past the bazaar and attempted to make contact with the local Afghans gathered there, and in the process briefly spoke with Ibrahim (not his real name for security purposes), a senior member of the community if not formally an elder. CPT Myer knew Ibrahim from previous visits to Wanat. Ibrahim was a strong advocate of the Afghanistan government and American forces, and his son Ishmael (also not his real name) spoke fluent English and served as an interpreter with US forces at Jalalabad. Ibrahim invited CPT Myer to dinner although he specified it must be “after dark.”49

After nightfall, CPT Myer and a small party walked to Ibrahim’s house for the meal (not a formal Shura). 1LT Brostrom, CPT Myer, SGT Aass, and SPC Hayes attended from the American leadership, along with Ibrahim and one other senior member of the community. Ishmael translated throughout the dinner. Ibrahim told the Chosen Company leadership that “…if they saw any people up in the hills, we should shoot at them because they’re bad. He pretty much said that everybody up in the hills was bad and that we should shoot at them…he said that there were bad people around.”

As the meeting broke up, Ishmael pulled SGT Aass and CPT Myer aside and specifically asked them if the Army had UAV support. CPT Myer deflected the sensitive question by simply responding that he didn’t know what that was. There are two possible explanations for Ishmael to ask such a question. First, if Ishmael was an ACM supporter or had been compromised by the ACM, he may have been attempting to gather intelligence. This should have been a positive indicator, particularly when coupled with

86
Ibrahim’s warning, that a major attack was eminent. The second and more likely explanation is that Ishmael knew that a serious attack was going to occur shortly, and he was warning the Americans that they needed to have UAV coverage to help them identify the attack, and then repel it. When coupled with Ibrahim’s warning, this served as a positive indicator that an attack was eminent. Because of the late hour of CPT Myer’s return to COP Kahler (approximately 2300 with stand-to at 0400), no report of this meeting was ever transmitted to TF Rock TOC, and no intelligence analyst or officer was aware of Ishamel’s question regarding the UAV coverage.

**ACM Approach to Wanat**

While the majority of the Americans except for the sentries slept, those ACM insurgents who had not already infiltrated Wanat to gain intelligence on the newly established COP Kahler began their movement from nearby villages into assault and fire support positions. Subsequent American BDA and intelligence determined: “We know they used the low ground with the water coming in from the east [the Wayshawal River] as well as the [Waigal] river running north-south to conceal their movement, both visual and for sound as they walked over the shale and rocks in the area. We do know they had OPs up on the west.” The ACM also established C2 positions on at least one of the mountain tops that offered excellent vantage points of Wanat.50

There was no indication of anything amiss around COP Kahler. SPC McKaig at OP Topside specifically remembered, “It was very quiet just before we got attacked… no movement in our area.”

The ACM demonstrated considerable field craft by maintaining strict noise and light discipline during the approach, and they were able to establish assault and fire by support positions with absolute stealth. This feat, although impressive, is not extraordinary for the insurgents. An attack on a 10th Mountain patrol in
Nuristan on 21 June 2006; and the Ranch House attack on 22 August 2007 had demonstrated precisely the same capabilities. During the 1936 frontier conflict in Waziristan, 1LT John Masters, a British company commander, described just such a movement by Pashtun tribesmen:

The next night twenty tribesmen arrived in the dip at three a.m., scattered among the rocks, and lay still. They were hard men and had full control of their bodies. No one of them coughed or cleared his throat, but all lay utterly still among the boulders. The nearest soldiers were four miles away, but if an undisciplined young tribesman had moved a pebble the infinite, murderous patience of his elders would have withdrawn the whole ambush, just in case. They would have crept away, to return again three or five nights later- never the same night. Every man carried a straw so that, if he had to, he could urinate silently down the stem.\(^5^2\)

The ACM also demonstrated considerable skill in utilizing the convoluted terrain around Wanat to ingress into their assault and support positions while absolutely minimizing their exposure, and maximizing the utilization of dead space and defilade to mask their approach. Again, this was a capability that the ACM had frequently demonstrated, and it echoed what 1LT Masters had observed decades previously: “From the Pathans [Pashtun tribesmen] we learned more about the tactical value of ground than any of our competitors or future enemies knew.”\(^5^3\)

In the early morning darkness the COP and OP were coming to life. 2d Platoon had a rigorously enforced daily “stand-to” routine that was nothing more than a continuation of Major Robert Roger’s famous Rules of Rangers or “True Plan of Discipline” first formulated in the late fall of 1755, and which Major Rogers used to train British and Provincial officers as early as 1758: “At the first dawn of day, awake your whole detachment; that being the time when the savages choose to fall upon their enemies, you should by all means be in readiness to receive them.”\(^5^4\) Soldiers were woken up for reveille between about 0345 and 0350. At this daily stand-to all soldiers were at their posts at least one hour before
BMNT, all fighting positions were manned, all weapons were loaded and oriented on their primary fields of fire, all soldiers were dressed in “full battle rattle.” SFC Dzwik rigidly enforced stand-to: “I was in the Ranch House attack back in August 2007 when they hit us at five o’clock in the morning, so I knew that was a time that they liked to hit. I’m a huge believer and a huge enforcer of stand-to. Everybody was ready, even a half hour before it got light. Everybody was up and in their armor, 100 percent security and not a lot of movement around. It’s one thing I preach: you’re down in your position scanning in your sector.”

The ANA and ETTs similar participated in stand-to, and COP Kahler and OP Topside was fully alert and ready for action at 0400 local time.

In addition to stand-to, 1LT Brostrom was organizing members of the joint American-ANA patrol consisting of thirteen soldiers intended to evaluate a potential OP site, located on prominent high ground to the south. If the location was found to be acceptable, the site would be subsequently occupied, and CONEX containers would be air-lifted in with the necessary pre-packaged materials to establish an OP. 1LT Brostrom’s patrol was scheduled to depart at 0430.

Although it would not impact the subsequent fighting, the Bobcat and the two engineer SPCs responsible for operating it were also busy at the mortar pit in the pre-dawn darkness. Sometime during the night a natural spring had opened up, possibly because of the heavy rain a few nights previously, and poured water into the mortar pit. One of the engineer SPCs who had just completed his tour of nighttime guard duty discovered the natural disaster when he dropped his body armor to the ground to get some sleep, and it landed with a prominent splash. He woke his fellow engineer up, and they began using the Bobcat to excavate a ditch around the mortar pit to divert the water. At the southern portion of the mortar pit, the water was “boot-top” to “mid-shin” deep, the water was only a couple of inches deep in the center, and the mortar pit was just wet and muddy to the north.

89
Early in the morning, well before dawn, the ITAS system which had been manned continuously since the 2d Platoon had arrived at Wanat revealed five individuals moving on a hillside to the west of the COP. Alerted over the radio, OP Topside turned their LRAS in this direction to observe, and confirmed their location and activities. Lacking any UAV support, the COP was entirely dependent upon its own equipment (line-of-sight) to monitor the COP vicinity. CPT Myer was alerted by the sentries about 0400, and he immediately recognized the individuals as a threat to the COP: “Five shepherds aren’t going to be together. Based on the terrorist videos that we’ve seen and things like that, a group of five to ten guys in the mountains is commonly enemy personnel.” Myer immediately began to coordinate an integrated attack, using a TOW missile and the 120mm mortar. SSG Phillips had his crew lay the mortar on the target, and SGT Grimm at the TOW recalled, “We had the back of the turret dropped ready to fire.” Twenty minutes passed and still the attack was not initiated. Just to the southeast at the 1st Squad TCP, SGT Brian Hissong was talking to SSG Samaroo regarding the TOW team’s observation of personnel moving around them in the hills. Concerned with the delay in launching the strike, Hissong growled, “We better fucking kill these guys before we get hit.” Samaroo’s reply was interrupted by two bursts from an RPD machine gun, and “then about a thousand RPGs at once.”

The ACM Insurgents

The leadership and composition of the ACM force that attacked Chosen Company at COP Kahler cannot be positively determined, less than a year after the engagement at Wanat. No ACM sources were available to support the preparation of this study. CPT Pry believes the ACM force to have been commanded by Mullar Oman, a veteran Nuristani fighter with Taliban ties.

The ACM force likely contained a contingent of committed takfiri foreign fighters. The single enemy body recovered was dressed in typical Afghan dress over military “BDU” type fatigues, indicative of takfiri foreign fighters. ANA commandos identified him as being “Arab” rather than Afghan.
Numerous soldiers reported the insurgents to be dressed in military clothing such as BDUs. One media report has suggested that the attacking force had an Al Qaeda combat element known as Lashkar al Zil, or “the Shadow Army,” at its core:

The Shadow Army has had some recent successes in Afghanistan over the past year. In July 2008, the unit made up of al Qaeda, the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Hizb-e-Islami [HIG] joined forces and conducted a complex assault on a US outpost in Wanat in Nuristan province.\(^60\)

Lashkar-e-Taiba is documented to enjoy strong support in Kunar Province, immediately to the south of Nuristan, and it is not inconceivable that it could extend its AO into Nuristan.

This contingent (possibly relatively small) of foreign fighters was augmented by a substantial body of dedicated and experienced Afghan fighters, supported by a large component of local fighters. This is suggested by the field craft and accuracy of firepower demonstrated, and the determined assault that was launched upon OP TOPSIDE. This is supported by several observations by CPT Pry, that: “One thing that was very odd about the Bella attack that never actually materialized was that there was a lot of reporting, probably 30 days prior, of foreign fighters coming into Watapur [Valley, east of the Waigal Valley, there are intimate family ties between the Watapur Valley and Wanat].” CPT Pry also observed, “I wouldn’t be surprised to find more evidence than we had that the foreign fighters had been brought in as an influx for the attack on Bella.”\(^61\)

It should be noted that the CJTF-101 G-2 section does not believe that any foreign fighters participated in the engagement based upon the absence of foreign language SIGINT intercepts immediately during and after the engagement (once ISR assets were returned to Wanat).\(^62\) However, the absence of SIGINT assets during the movement of the ACM force against Wanat on 12 July and the next morning somewhat erodes this assessment. Additionally, engagements subsequent to the Wanat fight
occurred in mid-July farther to the east in Nuristan, along likely lines of egress between the Waigal Valley and Pakistan, which were suggested as ACM withdrawing to their Pakistan sanctuaries to re-organize and re-arm following the Wanat fight.

The attacking ACM most likely consisted of a solid central component of trans-national foreign fighters comprised of Al Qaeda and Taliban supporters; allied with Afghan-centrist organizations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and HIG that contain hard core, experienced fighters from Afghanistan; and almost certainly supported by numerous local fighters from Nuristan energized by the 4 July helicopter attack. This provided the ACM with the outside logistical assets and arms necessary to launch a large attack; experienced, professional leadership familiar with the terrain and population; a core contingent of skilled, experienced, committed and determined fighters to lead the assault; and local fighters intimate with the ground around Wanat and capable of moving the necessary logistical assets and foreign fighters forward without being detected through the terrain in the Waigal Valley. Regardless of its precise composition, it was a lethal and talented fighting force whose capabilities should not be underestimated. The attack displayed highly effective leadership, considerable planning, effective intelligence, and accurate knowledge regarding the capabilities and effectiveness of American weapons systems and observation equipment. The great amount of firepower employed for two hours suggests that there was considerable local fighter support, simply to transport and supply the staggering quantities of ordnance expended, and evacuate the considerable number of casualties successfully from the battlefield. This was a large, and extremely skilled and dedicated, fighting force.

At the time that CONOP ROCK MOVE was implemented, it should be noted that different officers assessed the actual size of this force at various strengths. However, all officers were in agreement that there was a substantial ACM force operating in the Waigal Valley. The Army’s Article 15-6 Investigation suggested that two hundred ACM participated in the engagement, and other intelligence
reports from the Waigal Valley also mentioned a force of no less than two hundred operating against OP Bella in the days before the attack, most if not all of which would have participated in this engagement. CPT Pry believes that the initial attack element contained about 120 fighters, and reinforcements from local Nuristan villages that poured into the engagement area the day of the battle increased the size of the attacking force to a total of two hundred fighters.\textsuperscript{64}

Given the presence of a large ACM force operating against Bella, one of the major questions regarding this engagement is whether or not an adequate “risk assessment” of the operation was performed. LTC William Ostlund stated that just such an assessment was performed:

We all had concerns about weather and enabler support. We mitigated concerns by attaching 2 x mortars to the platoon and a TOW, giving WANAT priority of 155[mm Field Artillery] fires from 2 x platoons (4 tubes) [at Camp Blessing], placing Co C2 [Company C2] with the platoon, and having echeloned QRFs available.\textsuperscript{65}

LTC Ostlund and other officers noted that the most serious concerns regarding CONOP ROCK MOVE involved the evacuation of COP Bella. Helicopter pilots flying into the outpost were severely constrained by the topography into a single flight path, and were limited to employing false landings, varying their altitude of approach and the times of their flights, which were relatively ineffectual as defensive measures.\textsuperscript{66} Accordingly, the rotary wing evacuation of Bella was determined to be the most dangerous portion of the plan, particularly given the large ACM force known to be operating near Bella, and the comparatively large number of helicopter flights that would be needed for the evacuation.\textsuperscript{67}

The aviation question aside, an evaluation of the risk assessment contained within CONOP ROCK MOVE suggests that much of it was actually “boiler-plate” that could have described any operation (even a routine training event or administrative moment in Italy) such as assessing heat/cold
weather injuries and negligent discharges. For example, the “heat injuries” included recommendations that “soldiers consume adequate amounts of water during the operation.” The weather forecast for Nuristan for the second week in July 2008 estimated high temperatures at 104 degrees F. The risk assessment failed to estimate how much water would actually be required for the soldiers to “consume adequate amounts of water” even though such a calculation is readily produced using the US Army hot weather injury table, anticipated temperatures, and estimated work load. As a result, the new COP at Wanat ran perilously low on Class I supplies, specifically potable water because the risk assessment failed to identify that no less than twelve gallons per water per hour would be required at COP Kahler during the majority of daylight hours.

Numerous soldiers at COP Kahler remembered Afghan citizens either speaking directly with them, or informing them through the ANA, that an attack was imminent. However, within Afghanistan, such warnings are routine and recurring and nearly always prove to be false or exaggerated, and after a year’s combat service in the nation the Chosen soldiers were relatively inured to such utterances. Still, the presence of a relatively large insurgent force of at least several score fighters operating in the vicinity of Bella was well documented, and efforts to locate and strike this force had resulted in the 4 July AH-64 attack on vehicles believed to contain insurgents near the COP. The capability of the ACM insurgents to move rapidly, and to swiftly divide into small parties, and then just as rapidly reconstitute, was repeatedly validated throughout TF Rock’s tenure in the Waigal and Korengal Valleys. Inexplicably, the ability of this large insurgent force to quickly react to the transfer of American forces from Bella into Wanat and transfer operations less than ten kilometers to the south was discounted. There were multiple occurrences at Wanat between 9-12 July that should have raised concerns that a large event was going to take place at Wanat.
First, beginning the night of 11-12 July the ITAS and LRAS sensors at Wanat began to acquire small groups of individuals moving across the mountain slopes around COP Kahler, and then vanishing into the many precipitous draws and ravines of the countryside. PID as insurgents could only be obtained in one instance, and otherwise these parties were not engaged. However, the sudden appearance of numerous small groups of individuals should have been a matter of concern, particularly since animal herds are typically not present in the vicinity of Wanat in the month of July. Almost certainly, these were contingents of the assault force moving into the town in preparation for the 13 July morning attack. Second, 1LT Brostrom interrupted a Shura at the District Center the afternoon of 12 July, under extremely suspicious circumstances. Third, the gathering of idle military age males (and no women or children) at the bazaar, clearly paying close attention to the American efforts at COP Kahler, was unusual enough to raise the suspicions of nearly every one of the 2d Platoon soldiers at Wanat. Fourth, a number of soldiers were alarmed at the absence of women and children or older men in Wanat. Ominously, only military aged males were seen on the streets, and many houses were recently abandoned or suddenly vacant. This alone was a positive indicator that trouble was imminent. Finally was the simple question asked by an interpreter the evening of 12 July, regarding whether the force at COP Kahler had UAV coverage. This was an alarming and unprecedented inquiry that strongly suggested that something unusual was on the verge of occurring at Wanat.

The process for passing intelligence reports from the 2d Platoon at Wanat to Battalion had to be done by radio, from 1LT Brostrom directly to either CPT Myer or the TF Rock Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at Camp Blessing. Because of CPT Myer’s heavy workload occasioned by the ongoing RIP, the numerous logistical details necessary to return his Company to Italy, and the Article 15-6 investigation ongoing for the 4 July Bella helicopter attack, he was frequently not available and at these times 1LT Brostrom would talk directly to the TF Rock TOC. 1LT Brostrom had a single radio FM frequency available to communicate within the platoon at Wanat (the Platoon net); and used the Battalion
Command FM radio frequency to talk to CPT Myer and the TF Rock TOC, with a satellite communications link as a backup. 1LT Brostrom was in constant and frequent communications with Camp Blessing, and his logistical and intelligence reports were regularly forwarded to the Company Commander, Battalion Commander, Battalion Intelligence staff, and the Chosen Company XO and Battalion Supply Officer. Most of these reports were apparently not judged to be of significant import, although the TF Rock Assistant S-2 and S-2 both specifically remembered receiving a discussion of the Shura that 1LT Brostrom had interrupted at the District Center on 12 July. Clearly by the time that these limited, apparently sketchy reports had been filtered by Battalion and Brigade, CJTF-101 G-2 saw no reason for alarm at Wanat. As a result, on the evening of 12 July all intelligence collections and ISR assets were withdrawn from Wanat by the CJTF-101 G-2. As 1LT Matthew Colley, Battalion Assistant S-2, noted: “Normally when this occurs it is because the CHOPs or the DIV CM (Collection Manager) does not deem the threat credible enough to have an asset devoted to it, or something else is deemed a higher priority due to threat. We fought with BDE and our BDE tried to get the assets reassigned to us, but DIV did not reallocate the assets to us. I was the BN Collection Manager and synched all ISR assets and conducted the collection requests, so I am absolutely positive that collection was pulled that night.”

MAJ Scott Himes, the TF Rock S-3, and CPT Benjamin Pry, the TF Rock S-2, both recalled that it was typical for a CONOP to receive additional ISR assets during the first few days of the operation, and if “nothing happened” then the ISR assets were withdrawn and transferred to other operations in Afghanistan. LTC Pierre Gervais, the CJTF-101 G-2 who made the final decision to withdraw these assets from Wanat, specifically noted that during four days of monitoring the “bubble” around the fledgling COP at Wanat that nothing of consequence was detected, that no enemy action had occurred, and that another major CONOP was planned south of Jalalabad on 12 July. Subsequently, this CONOP generated a TIC, and for these reasons ISR was withdrawn from Wanat.
CPT Pry was absolutely furious at being stripped of his ISR assets. At the two CONOP briefings to TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 he believed that he had been given a commitment by CJTF-101 that adequate ISR assets would be available to support CONOP ROCK MOVE. Nearly a full year after the engagement he would state:

This was a major point of contention…between me and [LTC] Hinton. I even got unprofessional with him the day before the attack happened because we were losing so many assets and had so little support. He was doing the best he could and in turn was doing the same thing to division. He was demanding the support we weren’t getting, but we weren’t the priority anymore because it wasn’t flashy.

CPT Pry remarked upon the heated conversation that he had with LTC Hinton: “I think there were six people in the office and about once a minute one person was getting up and walking out because they didn’t want to be witnessing the conversation.” By the evening of 12 July, he fumed, “We had no support from brigade, division or theater level assets at the time.”74 LTC Hinton was similarly angry and frustrated nearly a year after the engagement:

The challenge for me and our headquarters was with collection assets. There were so many competing priorities for collection. CJTF-101 had a priority for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and those were approved by the assistant division commander for operations. We essentially did the same thing for ISR. There just wasn’t enough collection to meet all the demands that were out there. At the same time we were getting this reporting at Wanat, we had daily mortar attacks against a position that, terrain-wise, was even worse than Wanat and Bella up in northeast Nuristan. Our Shadows couldn’t reach it either, so we were relying on Predator for full-motion video support. It was an issue for us to provide adequate support, and I kind of referenced that
earlier when I said the battalion S2 was upset that he wasn’t getting the level of support he thought he needed. He had guys that were building force protection on the ground and he didn’t think they had the adequate overhead collection to mitigate that limited force protection. It was really challenging to provide ISR because there wasn’t enough to go around to meet all the requirements that units had.

Hinton concluded: “It will burn in me forever.” Subsequent interviews with numerous members of the CJTF-101 G-2 element, to include LTC Gervais, revealed they were entirely unaware of the various intelligence indicators that were being reported by 1LT Brostrom from Wanat, and that if received might have influenced their decision to withdraw ISR assets from Wanat. Performing a comprehensive analysis of the functioning of the tactical intelligence system as operated by TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 is beyond the purview of this study, but what is clear is that there was a tactical intelligence breakdown (in either collection, reporting, dissemination, and/or analysis) somewhere between TF Rock, TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 that directly influenced events in the Waigal Valley in early July, 2008.

Officers on the ground and at Camp Blessing (CPT Myer and LTC Ostlund) clearly believed they had a firm grasp on enemy TTPs, as CPT Myer stated:

What we anticipated was that they were going to first attack us with rockets, because that was something they could do that didn’t take a lot of personnel to do it. If we had a new area occupied, they could try to affect us and try to dial in those rockets like they had done at Bella. They had shot rockets at Bella over time and then eventually they could get them inside the wire pretty consistently. So we thought if they were going to do a large-scale attack, they’re going to first refine all the assets they wanted to utilize to do that, and then after something like 90 days, then they’re going to try to do a large scale attack like they did at the Ranch House.
However, the ACM leadership had a substantial force available to them within the Waigal Valley, such that an absence of personnel strength did not constrain their operations in July, 2008.

The NCO leadership anticipated the same kind of attack. SFC Dzwik recalled: “I was expecting an attack. I thought the enemy would make their presence known. I was expecting harassing fire from any one of the high ground in every direction. I did not think the village itself would let the AAF turn their village into a battle zone.” 1SG Benson echoed this expectation. American combat commanders were confident that they would be attacked by indirect or harassing fires rather than a deliberate attack such as that launched at Ranch House in August 2007. American commanders thus assumed that the enemy would do precisely what they had done before, rather than adjusting or modifying their tactics, or introducing entirely new tactics.

The American commanders had also focused their concerns on evacuating Bella, particularly because the anticipated threat resulting from the evacuation of Bella by rotary wing assets was significantly higher than the establishment of a new COP at Wanat. However, a new position is most vulnerable in the early days of its formation. The ACM were well aware of this, they had a large operational force available actively maneuvering against Bella, and the July 4th helicopter attack had generated considerable ill will against the Americans in the Waigal Valley which they could exploit. Such an ACM attack on a recently established position under cover of darkness was in fact a previously established and well documented ACM TTP in eastern Afghanistan. The 10th Mountain Division’s previous experience in the year before was that once an outpost had been established it was rapidly attacked, almost as a matter of course, by the ACM. A typical and nearly identical counterattack had occurred only eighteen months previously on 10 January 2007, upon the newly established Margah combat outpost on the Pakistan-Afghan border. This outpost was in the process of being established by 2-87 Infantry and the ANA, and was garrisoned by a single platoon of each, totaling forty soldiers. The
ACM rapidly deployed from secure bases within Pakistan under cover of darkness using LN trucks to achieve considerable tactical mobility. The well-organized, synchronized attack by two columns of 150 insurgents heavily armed with RPGs and machine guns was only disrupted by effective intelligence and a devastating integrated firepower attack.⁷⁸

The ACM capability to launch a powerful deliberate attack in the Waigal Valley was previously and recently demonstrated by the nearly successful assault on Ranch House in August 2007, and in the devastating 9 November 2007 ambush near Aranas. The intelligence summary for CONOP ROCK MOVE clearly stated that the enemy situation was: “…the AAF have begun to stockpile weapons and place forward caches in and around the high ground surrounding Wanat in anticipation of CF moving there and placing a base. The AAF have also likely started to construct fighting positions and determine hide sites to visit after engaging CF at Wanat. Many of the AAF from this area have actually gone north to participate in the attacks on COP Bella but will return north [south] within 24-48 hours of CF establishing a presence. AAF will likely attack CF in Wanat from the high ground to the southeast and southwest.” The TF Rock Intelligence officers accurately surmised the “…possibility of AAF establishing positions from within the bazaar at Wanat and engaging CF from these positions.”⁷⁹

Both 1LT Colley and CPT Pry concurred that an attack was likely at Wanat. Colley specifically recalled, and in doing so revealed the extent of the OPSEC failure at Wanat: “We conducted numerous enemy analysis in our INTSUMs [Intelligence Summaries] and made it very clear that the enemy threat was increasing due to the increased Coalition interest in the area and the local belief that a base would be built.”⁸⁰ Pry recalled:

When they [ACM] first heard we wanted to put stuff there, Mullah Osman [a prominent Taliban Commander in Nuristan] was absolutely furious. He started his intimidation of the elders and he started it strong. He started sending fighters there and moved some
fighters into a small village just to the northeast of it where they set up shop. He did a lot of intimidation on the elders.”

Also assessing the OPSEC failure that had occurred at Wanat, CPT Pry remembered: “We also had a massive spike on both SIGINT and HUMINT after they said we would be moving there.” He continued:

I thought we’d get attacked if the same groups from Bella came down, which we had all indications that they would…. That was something that CPT Myer and I disagreed about. He expected harassment fire and I thought they’d do a large-scale attack. That was based off the leadership involved. Mullah Osman kind of gets mad at little attacks. He liked stuff like the Ranch House…he wanted a large-scale attack and that’s what I thought he was going to bring down to Wanat.

CPT Pry specifically discounted that the ACM would employ relatively inaccurate indirect mortar and rocket fires upon the new COP at Wanat:

Doing harassment attacks right next to a lot of people’s houses over a long term would significantly degrade the AAF’s ability to work with the locals or even intimidate them. Eventually they would just get fed up, and that had been happening in other areas of the Korengal, which used to be completely AAF dominated. If they could come in and do a spectacular attack, something everyone takes note of and they could stand up, shake their fists afterwards, and say ‘We were successful.” Of course they can mold their definition of success, but for them to stand up and say ‘We were successful’ and for the locals to believe them, that’s what they needed in that area in order for them to achieve victory and get us driven out of there. They had to do a big attack."
In the event, the intelligence estimates prepared for CONOP ROCK MOVE proved to be remarkably prescient. TF Rock, TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 leadership failed to configure the Wanat garrison against the possibility that the ACM could launch a Margah Outpost or Ranch House style assault upon this new COP before it was fully established. The potential that the large ACM force maneuvering against Bella would simply transfer operations less than ten kilometers to the south was also not given due deliberation. The risk assessment for CONOP ROCK MOVE was understated, in large part was a “canned” risk assessment that failed to reflect the actual circumstances of the operation, and appeared to have been prepared in isolation from the intelligence estimate.

One recurring deficiency was the absence of a comprehensive understanding of the complex and convoluted cultural and ethnic considerations within the Waigal Valley. As a result, CONOP ROCK MOVE failed to appreciate or contain any evaluation of the considerable dissension that the 4 July Helicopter Attack had generated within the Waigal Valley population. One Waigal Valley resident clearly recalled, “The [US air attack on 4 July] opened a way among the people for the militants to preach against US forces.”83 There was some circumstantial evidence of this, for example, when 1LT Brostrom was handed a list of the casualties from the attack that he later forwarded to CPT Myer.84 This could have had several meanings by the Afghan residents (a protest, a warning, or simply a request for compensation or condolences). There was a US Army Human Terrain Team (HTT) located in Afghanistan, which was specifically composed of anthropologists and deployed to provide just this type of assessment to the combat elements. However, as stated by the HTT Team Leader:

…upon my arrival to then AO Bayonet (173d ABCT) we were informed that we would not be allowed to enter, at the time, AO Rock in which Wanat is located, due to the kinetic activity that was prior to, during and after the time of the attack at Wanat. We made requests and they were denied.85
Thus, this detailed expertise was denied to the TF Rock commanders and staff officers. TF Rock performed no analysis of cultural circumstances or effects, or changed population conditions, caused by recent events within the Waigal Valley.

An additional concern was the absence of UAV support to the newly established COP Kahler. The 173d Airborne BCT and CJTF-101 stated that UAV support was not available to COP Kahler due to weather issues at Bagram Airbase and Kandahar Airbase on 12-13 July. However, this statement is not accurate. Rather, there was a major CONOP and a significant TIC underway south of Jalalabad on the evening of 12 July and the morning of 13 July, and CJTF-101 had diverted their available UAV to that area in support of those events.

It must be noted that were limited UAV assets available to CJTF-101 within Afghanistan, and they were always heavily tasked, and in great demand. As previously noted, CJTF-101 had withdrawn all the ISR assets from Wanat on 12 July, and efforts by both TF Rock and the 173d Brigade had not been successful in getting these resources restored because of the higher priority of the ongoing CONOP and subsequent TIC. However, the CJTF-101 and 173d BCT response only addressed major UAVs such as the well-publicized Predator and Warrior systems. The 173d BCT deployed to Afghanistan with two organic UAV systems- the RQ-7 Shadow and RA-11 Raven. TF Out Front also deployed to Afghanistan with the MQ-5B Hunter UAV. The Brigade had four Shadow platforms, comprising one complete system (a system includes a launcher, recovery equipment, maintenance equipment, and two radio control vans). The Shadow had to be operated out of Jalalabad Airport, because of a technical limitation that the UAV requires a regular landing strip to be recovered, a resource in short supply in the rugged terrain of northeastern Afghanistan. Additionally, the Shadow could not be operated within the Waigal Valley, because of the extreme terrain of the Pech and Waigal Valleys that blocked radio signals. During its fourteen month stay in-country the 173d Airborne BCT considered constructing an alternate location at.
Camp Blessing, but there were terrain and space limitations that restricted its use for the Shadow, and in any event Jalalabad was more central to the Brigade’s overall Area of Operations. Thus, the organic Shadow system available to the 173d BCT could not reach Wanat. The Hunter system shared the identical restrictions as the Shadow system.

The 173d BCT had a number of Raven systems available. The Raven was considered to be a Battalion asset, and TF Rock had dedicated Raven systems available. The Raven system is a smaller, highly portable system with night vision capability that can be operated by a single soldier, can be carried in a rucksack, and re-charged from a HMMWV. It has a six nautical mile radius of operation, and a ninety minute single flight endurance. The Raven is “launched” by literally being thrown into the air by hand, it contains an IR camera system that provides an “over the hill” capability, and is fully night capable. However, the Raven system also possesses reduced capabilities and numerous vulnerabilities, which restricted and degraded its optimal employment throughout the TF Rock deployment. Within the difficult terrain dominated by the precipitous ridges and valleys, the Raven had to be carefully employed due to cross winds and variable drafts that severely constrained the Raven’s utility. TF Rock had not enjoyed much success with the Raven system during its year in Afghanistan, and the Raven clearly had limited applications.87 TF Rock could easily have deployed a single Raven to COP Kahler. The use of the Raven UAV system would have certainly been warranted given the vulnerability of COP Kahler until its fortification was completed, and would have provided COP Kahler with a considerably enhanced ability to monitor behind the numerous hills, and within the various gullies and ravines that cut through the Wanat topography. This is particularly true if the Raven were primarily flown at night, when the mountain winds were traditionally calmer. Even if the Raven could only fly circles overhead of the new COP at night, this would still have served as a deterrent. This capability was never deployed to Wanat.
By determining to occupy Wanat so close to the end of their tour of duty, TF Rock and TF Bayonet also diluted focus on the occupation of the COP. The majority of Battalion and BCT leaders and staff officers were focused upon the RIP, the process of transitioning a new combat element into the battle space; and the Transfer of Authority (TOA), the actual process at which responsibility is formally transferred from one command to another. At the Company level, in addition to the various tactical responsibilities associated with the RIP, a major and exhaustive effort was confirming property accountability, and transfer of remaining installation and organizational property accountability to the incoming commander. This is particularly stressful to a Company Commander, as he has pecuniary liability for any mistake. The relieving unit, Task Force Duke (3d BCT of the 1st Infantry Division), was scheduled to perform the RIP from 7-28 July 2008, and it was underway during the establishment of COP Kahler. The formal TOA was at the time scheduled for 2 August, and in the event it was actually performed on 24 July. SFC Dzik, 2d Platoon Sergeant, was adamant about his displeasure at performing such a major operation while a second major operation, the RIP, was underway:

…it is my own personal belief that this was the wrong time to start a new FOB. The RIP was going on so that was using up assets that could have been used. We should have set this up earlier in the deployment or waited till the fighting season was done to do this. I speak of this in terms of logistic, ISR, CCA, CAS and support. There was a lot of focus on the RIP and I believe that if we had done it earlier or waited we could have had more assets to properly cover and bring in the supplies need for a rapid build up of defenses and logistics. We could have moved more forces into the area instead of worrying about moving forces out of the area for redeployment. If we would have done it during the late fall or winter then we could have made it with very little threat of enemy attack and had it set up ready to go for the next fighting season. It would also have given us time to warm the locals to the idea and prosperity that we would bring.88
The greatest logistical constraint that the ongoing RIP imposed was to further limit the number of available rotary wing flights. Within Afghanistan, helicopter support is always a constraining factor, and there is always considerable competition at obtaining sufficient numbers of flights for any given operation. Because of the ongoing RIP that demanded numerous helicopter flights, the number of helicopters available to establish COP Kahler was further limited. Additionally, CJTF-101 policy was that within Nuristan and Kunar Provinces rotary wing flights to many of the remote outposts had to be escorted by a team (two) of Apache AH-64 attack helicopters to provide adequate security to the relatively vulnerable cargo helicopters (one 10th Mountain Division soldier who had served for twelve months in the same area referred to these helicopters as “giant bullet magnets”). As a result, there were insufficient helicopters available to adequately support the establishment of the new installation at Wanat.89

Further diluting the attention of CPT Myer at Camp Blessing was the numerous administrative, logistical and property accountability issues necessary to move the Chosen Few from Afghanistan back to Italy. For example, customs inspections had to be scheduled and prepared for, and all pieces of equipment returning to Italy had to be meticulously and painfully cleaned. When combined with the demands of the major Article 15-6 Investigation, Chosen Company and TF Rock command attention was clearly diluted to some extent from activities at Wanat, at the most vulnerable moment of its existence.

The Attack on COP Kahler

The ACM attack was focused upon striking a heavy blow against COP Kahler, and overrunning OP TOPSIDE. ACM documents are not available to provide a detailed ACM plan, and Mullah Osman remains an active combatant against coalition forces in Nuristan. Most likely there was no formal commander’s intent or operations order as the US Army implements them. However, the ACM had obvious objectives, and it is clear that the insurgent fighters were executing an integrated attack plan.
ACM objectives and intent are derived by the author from the conduct of the actual engagement obtained through Battle Damage Assessment [BDA], from the observations of American soldiers at COP Kahler, from the assessment provided by the TF Rock Intelligence Officer, and from other similar attacks mounted by the ACM in northeastern Afghanistan and Iraq between 2006 and 2009. The ACM objectives appear to have been:

- To engage COP Kahler with an overwhelming firepower attack that would enable an assault to be launched against the main American force if circumstances proved favorable;

- To employ this firepower attack to pin down the US defenders in COP Kahler, to eliminate or suppress the major American weapons systems (Mortars and TOW); and isolate COP Kahler from OP TOPSIDE;

- To further isolate OP TOPSIDE by placing major insurgent forces with heavy firepower into the bazaar, hotel complex, and mosque;

- To penetrate OP TOPSIDE’s defensive perimeter, and then overrun OP TOPSIDE;

- To obtain an IO victory at OP TOPSIDE by capturing an American soldier, seizing the body of an American soldier, or capturing American arms and equipment; and documenting this achievement with a videotape.

The insurgents in the nearby Korengal Valley had attempted to seize an American soldier from Battle Company earlier in the deployment. A *Vanity Fair* magazine article recorded: “One of the [Battle Company] dead, SPC Hugo Mendoza, was killed trying to prevent Taliban fighters from dragging off
wounded SGT Josh Brennan. He succeeded, but SGT Brennan unfortunately died the following day at a US military base in Asadabad. Following the engagement at Wanat, 1LT Moad from Battle Company speculated:

    We had seen in the past that AAF had tried to capture either KIA or WIA soldiers during an attack as a means to increase their credible propaganda, so it was potentially one of their objectives by overwhelming an outpost like OP Topside which was detached from the rest of the platoon. I am not sure if they actually tried to take any soldiers, but the situation seemed probable as the majority of the fires were centered on OP Topside.

These objectives suggest that Mullah Osman organized a sophisticated, carefully planned attack that had a high probability of success in the narrow window available to the ACM insurgents to execute their plan prior to the arrival of American air support.

    Chosen Company sources are specific that the entire COP and OP were surrounded by the ACM, who infiltrated into firing positions at extremely close range to the Americans. Insurgent fighters had been inserted into the hotel/mosque complex and the bazaar, to isolate OP Topside from COP Kahler. CPL Oakes, one of the three-man Marine ETT, specifically recalled a 12.7mm DShK heavy machine gun being emplaced in one of the bazaar/hotel buildings (he is quite positive that he was shot at by it while moving to the OP). The DShK is a relatively heavy weapon, with the gun alone weighing 76 pounds and its attendant tripod and ammunition considerably more than that, suggesting that carrying such a heavy weapon by hand into the hotel/bazaar complex under cover of a few hours of darkness while maintaining stealth in close proximity to the American paratroopers would be a challenging if not impossible task. Still, takfiri videos from fighting in Nuristan in 2007 clearly depict a DShK machine gun in use. A study of Mujahideen tactics during the Afghan-Soviet War reveals that the Mujahideen insurgents regularly employed DShK machine guns in tactical assaults and ambushes. ACM insurgents have also been
documented to have used a DShK machine gun in the nearby Korengal Valley during the 2007-2008 campaign. The presence of a DShK heavy machine gun in the hotel complex is an entirely likely scenario, and would be consistent with the ACM inserting a major fighting force between COP Kahler and OP Topside to isolate the small American force at the OP. If not a DShK, then certainly another model of machine gun, most likely a PKM General Purpose machine gun, was located in the bazaar. At least one RPG was also observed being fired from an unfinished stall under construction/repair in the center of the bazaar. The back blast from this RPG launcher, or tracers from return gunfire by the Americans, caught loose construction materials in this stall on fire. By the time of the arrival of the AH-64s at 0522, this stall was fully involved in flames.

The ACM fire was initiated from all directions surrounding both COP Kahler and OP Topside, and most particularly from the bazaar and building complex east of the road and west of OP Topside, this last being specifically intended to isolate OP Topside from the remainder of COP Kahler. The ACM employed an extremely intensive fire, particularly using the DShK/PKM and RPGs, to isolate the OP from the main COP. SGT Grimm noted: “...the RPG fire, that day, was very rapid, in quick and methodic succession and relatively accurate.” SFC Barbaret, Platoon Sergeant from the Battle Company QRF that arrived at the very end of the engagement, recalled: “BDA gathered up and where it was located showed that the AAF had made use of all available dead space and buildings surrounding the area where COP Kahler was established and the high ground on all sides. The OP was open to fires from the high ground on its north and west sides which was evident by the RPG tail fins found inside of the position on the south and east walls.” SPC John Hayes, Platoon RTO, was staggered at the rate of fire the ACM sustained: “The enemy engaged with RPGs. Lots and lots and lots of RPGs. It seemed like they went on forever. They must have had someone running resupply or a major cache of RPGs.”

After regularly contesting ground with 1-32 Infantry and then 2-503 Infantry since April 2006, the ACM was well aware their radio communications were monitored. Additionally, radios were typically a commodity in limited availability. Accordingly, the ACM fired two long bursts of RPD fire as an unmistakable signal to launch the attack. Once the initial two bursts of RPD fire echoed off the surrounding hills, the ACM launched an immediate wave of small arms and RPG fire against the Americans. These first two rounds of RPD shots were fired at about 0420, and the TF Rock TOC recorded that the initial “SALUTE” report from Wanat was received at 0423. The first American vehicle targeted was the TOW HMMWV.

Although the location of the four gun trucks within the COP and at the TCP were not modified except for relatively minor re-positioning, the TOW HMMWV was frequently and regularly moved within the confines of the COP, during both daylight and under cover of darkness. In fact, the TOW HMMWV had been moved approximately fifty yards to the south to a newly constructed ramp late on 12 July. Still, this new location did nothing to enhance the TOW truck’s survivability. The insurgents clearly understood the importance of the TOW system and were determined to knock it out at the first fire. SGT Justin Grimm, the TOW Section Leader, recalled the initial wave of fire that swept over the TOW vehicle:

Within 30 seconds of initiation the TOW truck was hit with two RPG round on the driver’s side which was facing the [east], the first round hit the engine compartment setting the engine on fire and disabling the truck, the second RPG hit driver’s side rear. Then a third RPG hit from the north, passenger side rear. The vehicle started flaring up and I ordered the crew to evacuate the vehicle.

Because of their angle and location of impact, two of these RPG were fired from the bazaar/hotel complex to the east of the COP. Even though it was ready to fire at the five insurgents moving against the COP,
the TOW system was put out of action so rapidly and violently that the missile could not be launched. As the combat progressed the TOW HMMWV began violently burning, along with the nine TOW missiles onboard (eight spares, one ready to fire). 98

The other primary weapons systems at COP Kahler were the Battalion 120mm and Company 60mm mortars, and the insurgents focused considerable efforts upon suppressing them. Although the 120mm mortar was protected in a HESCO surrounded firing pit, and the 60mm was in a sand-bagged firing position, the rate and accuracy of the insurgent fires proved highly effective at silencing both mortars. At the first onset of fire the two Engineer SPCs had abandoned the Bobcat to its fate, and immediately terminated their ditch digging exercise to dive into the now nearly dry mortar pit for cover. SFC Dzwik was visiting the mortar pit at the onset of the attack, and was also forced to take shelter within it. SGT Aass specifically recalled, “During all this time I could see all of our positions being hit by intense volleys of RPG fire (at least several dozen RPGs were fired) and intense machine gun and SAF [Small Arms Fire].” 99 SSG Phillips and PFC Scott Stenoski managed to fire four rounds without re-aiming the 120mm mortar, so that these four high explosive shells were fired at the position where the insurgents had been spotted by the TOW and ITAS just a few minutes earlier that morning.

SGT Chavez saw insurgents climbing into the trees to fire over the HESCOs into the mortar pit. He remembered:

I could see guys (enemy) trying to climb the trees behind the HESCO baskets to our northwest but I kept shooting them down. I did this about 3 times and then I informed SSG Phillips that they were to our northwest and were on top of the buildings trying to shoot us and also trying to get over the HESCOs. We decided to throw grenades. 100
Here, the inability of the Bobcat to fill the HESCOs to their full seven foot height was revealed to be a failure of the greatest magnitude, as the 120mm mortar could not be further manned due to the intense volume of accurate small arms and RPG fire directed into it. PFC Stenoski recalled:

We were surrounded. They were popping up behind [the] HESCOs and shooting RPGs at us. SGT Phillips and I hung four 120 millimeter rounds. It was all we could get off before an RPG round came in from the south side and hit inside our mortar pit, so we stopped firing the 120. We started getting potshots from the mountain side so I launched 203 [M-203 grenade launcher] rounds up there… They were at least 15 to 20 feet away from us. There were trees behind the HESCOs and most of them were trying to climb the trees to shoot over the HESCOs. One guy actually side-stepped and shot an RPG through the crack of the HESCO in the corner. It went right between the middle of SGT Phillips and me and right over the 120 tube. It hit the bazaar and missed us. The enemy was smart, though, because they were using the latrine we had built for cover, and I threw a couple grenades at the latrine.101

One of the Engineer SPCs in the mortar pit recalled, “During the firing RPGs and rounds were hitting the pit constantly.” In the mortar pit, SGT Chavez specifically recalled AK and machine gun rounds sparkling as they ricocheted off the 120mm mortar tube.102

The men in the mortar pit fired their personal weapons furiously and frantically into the trees. SGT Chavez killed three ACM alone who had ascended the trees to fire over the HESCOs. SSG Phillips poured out fire, as recalled by another Engineer SPC loading for him, “…[SSG Phillips] went through three rifles using them until they jammed.”103 SSG Phillips recalled: “My M4 quit firing and would no longer charge when I tried to correct the malfunction. I grabbed the Engineers SAW [M249 5.56mm Squad Automatic Weapon] and tried to fire. It would not fire, so I lifted the feed tray tried clearing it out
and tried to fire again. It would not.” SSG Phillips did not realize that SGT Queck had earlier attempted to
fire this SAW, and it had failed at its first shot when a bullet jammed in the barrel. Queck had quickly
discarded the SAW, swearing profanely in frustration that it was “fucked up!” This did not deter
Queck for long, as he launched an AT-4 missile at the building to the west of the mortar pit. Other
soldiers in the mortar pit began throwing hand grenades over the top of the HESCOs, to keep the ravine
clear of enemy. As this gunfight continued, one RPG exploded striking SPC Abad in his legs and
shoulder and seriously wounding him. First aid was immediately started on Abad, but his wounds did not
appear to be life endangering, and as he lay on the ground being treated he continued to hand ammunition
to SGT Chavez.

SGT Chavez and SGT Queck attempted to run out to the middle of the COP to reach the 60mm
mortar, so that it could be put into play. However, the enemy small arms fire sweeping the interior of the
COP was absolutely vicious, and despite their best efforts they simply could not reach the mortar. The
60mm mortar would not be fired during the entire engagement.

Then, as one of the Engineers recalled, “…a RPG hit in the east corner of the ASP & hit the stack
of 120mm mortar rounds. SSG Phillips fell over because of the concussion and when he got back up, I
looked around the cases were sparking and he yelled to all of us, ‘Get the hell out of here.’” With the
gunpowder charges on the 120mm mortar rounds throwing sparks and the possibility that the entire ASP
would explode into fire, the soldiers in the mortar pit hurriedly left the shelter of the HESCOs to run
across the open field for the Command Post. SPC Abad was by now unable to move on his own, and SPC
Morse (one of the Engineers) and SGT Chavez each grabbed a shoulder and began dragging him through
the intense fire. While evacuating his soldier, SGT Chavez was also shot through both legs and
incapacitated. Chavez was knocked down, but he still continued to crawl, pulling Abad towards cover
even though wounded himself. Immediately SGT Aass, SGT Queck, and other soldiers poured out of the
CP to haul both of the wounded mortar men into its shelter. With the Platoon Medic, PFC William Hewitt, already shot through the arm at nearly at the first fire and incapacitated, SPC Scantlin who had received previous supplemental medical training, stepped up and became the platoon medic. He handed his SAW over to another soldier, as the weapon was needed to maintain fire support against the ACM assault. Scantlin’s frantic and skilled efforts treated everybody within the COP Kahler, to include another soldier shot through the left wrist, one of the engineers who had been shot directly through his buttocks, and now he had Abad and SGT Chavez from the mortar pit. SPC Scantlin was able to keep everybody alive with the exception of SPC Abad. Sadly enough, SPC Abad’s condition began to rapidly deteriorate, and he began to have problems breathing. Apparently his wounds were quite severe, much more serious than anybody had at first realized, and at this moment in the firefight bringing in a MEDEVAC was simply not feasible. SPC Scantlin frantically tried to insert a needle to decompress his chest, but this did no good, and as a desperate last resort Scantlin initiated CPR, but all of his efforts proved to be in vain, and SPC Abad slipped away. It was a devastating emotional blow to the soldiers in the CP, particularly as they had assessed his wounds as not being life endangering. One of the soldiers in the CP later acclaimed Scantlin’s efforts: “I can’t say enough how brave he was and did his job as well as a medic’s job with huge courage and disregard for his own safety.”

The gang from the mortar pit had just arrived at the CP when the burning TOW vehicle finally exploded, scattering flames and burning TOW missiles in all directions. One unfortunate ANA soldier was caught in the fireball, and was severely burned. Two of the Marine ETTs, Corporals Jones and Oakes, sprinted from their position to assist the badly burned ANA soldier to cover and assistance. When the HMMWV went up the explosion also knocked out the TACSAT antenna and with it all TACSAT communications. Fortunately this was only being employed as a means of backup communications, and the ability of the COP to communicate with Camp Blessing was never impaired. The fireball flung two of the smoldering TOW missiles into the air, and they landed directly in the CP, one landing literally in the
lap of a soldier. Alarmingly, the missile’s motor was activating, and a number of soldiers recalled hearing the motor spinning up. SSG Phillips, who had previously been awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for his actions in the defense of Ranch House, hastily grabbed a pair of empty sandbags and wrapped the fabric around his hands, then grabbed the hot missile and at great personal peril he carried the live anti-tank round through heavy gunfire into the middle of the open field, well away from any American or ANA soldiers. At the same time, CPT Myer scooped up the other missile in the CP and heaved it over the side of the sandbag wall. To add to the confusion within the COP, several HESCOs that had been unfilled or partially filled with dirt caught fire from their proximity to the raging inferno that had just a few moments previously been the TOW HMMWV.\textsuperscript{108} The HESCOs smoldered, adding considerable quantities of thick, black smoke emanating from the burning truck and bazaar.

At the first wave of RPGs sailing through and impacting within the COP, CPT Myer immediately called to the Battalion TOC at Camp Blessing and announced in un-mistakeable terms, “This is a Ranch House style attack.” The urgency of the situation was clearly announced by the sounds of machine gun fire and RPGs exploding in the background of his radio transmission. CPT Myer had two FM radios, one on the 2d Platoon net and the other on the TF Rock Battalion Command Net; with Tactical Satellite (TACSAT) as backup until the antenna was destroyed. SPC Hayes (2d Platoon RTO) and SGT Aass assisted CPT Myer with coordination, until Aass later departed to reinforce OP Topside. Having unfortunately left his FSO back at Camp Blessing, Myer focused his efforts upon obtaining and coordinating fire support. The first fire mission was called in at 4:23 a.m., and was an immediate suppression mission called in on a target approximately five hundred meters to the northwest of the COP, danger close for 155mm field artillery, and about as close to friendly positions as high angle artillery could be safely fired. The fires were delayed for only a few moments as LTC Ostlund confirmed that all the Chosen defenders were within the perimeter, as he knew that a patrol was scheduled to depart the COP first thing in the morning. Once he confirmed that all his soldiers were within the COP’s confines,
LTC Ostlund released the first fire mission.\textsuperscript{109} Within six minutes of the RPD bursts the first 155mm rounds from Camp Blessing impacted. CPT Myer initially focused the fire on the southern and western sides of the COP, and brought the rounds in “danger close” (within six hundred meters of friendly positions). However, the artillery’s effectiveness was limited because the insurgents had infiltrated to within “belt buckle” distance of the Americans. To the north of the COP, the two gun trucks equipped with the Mk-19 grenade launchers were also limited in their ability to aid the defense, as the insurgents had gotten within the minimum arming distance of the grenades. Because of the topographical location of Camp Blessing (within a topographical bowl), and the soaring terrain intervening between Camp Blessing and Wanat, all the field artillery had to be fired “high angle.” The result is a relatively large probable error in range, a field artillery term for routine variation between individual rounds that cannot be controlled or reduced, precluding the field artillery from being brought in as close to COP Kahler as it was needed.\textsuperscript{110} For the first half hour of the engagement, the only fire support that COP Kahler received was this relatively ineffectual artillery fire. Between 0429 and 0505 the platoon at Camp Blessing executed five fire missions, firing a total of 52 rounds of high explosive projectiles. This can be considered to be a relatively low rate of field artillery fire, less than the sustained rate of fire of two rounds per minute, and considerably below the maximum rate of fire for the M777A2 howitzer. Close Air Support arrived on station shortly thereafter, with the first B-1 bomber dropping two bombs at 0458. Generally, CAS in the initial stage of the engagement was employed to control access to the battlefield by the 1st Platoon QRF, and to deny ACM insurgents from transiting to and from the battlefield, rather than providing direct support to the beleaguered defenders. The necessary use of fire support at distances generally beyond danger close reflects the absence of a qualified fire support coordinator at Wanat.

SGT Aass, helping CPT Myer operate the radios, was stunned at the intensity of the fire that the insurgents were able to maintain, “The RPG fire was like machine gun fire.” SGT Queck specifically recalled, “Every time, it seemed, I would poke my head up from behind the sand bags I would hear bullets
whizzing by my head.” SFC Dzwik retained enough composure to assess the ACM attack professionally:

There was a lot of small arms, a lot of AK, definitely a lot of PKM and RPK from their fire support positions. There was a lot of that raining in. The RPGs were pretty heavy. When I was down at that mortar pit, there was a guy shooting either in a tree or from behind a tree, and luckily enough he wasn’t smart enough to realize that when he shot the RPG, it would come out, the fins would pop out, they’d catch the branches and it would send that RPG off in a different direction. He did that multiple times and he had a good eyes-on into the center of the pit, so it was pretty fortunate that he wasn’t intelligent enough to figure out that he had to move to a better position.

There were three vehicles that could still fire from the COP, the two squad HMMWVs on the northern segment of the perimeter, both armed with Mk-19 grenade launchers, and the Platoon HMMWV with a .50 cal at the CP. The TOW HMMWV was now fully involved in flames and had necessarily been abandoned. The Marine ET Ts also had a single M240 7.62 mm medium machine gun manned by Cpl. Jones, described by the paratroopers as “the big Marine with a moustache.” This gun’s presence was fortunate as both the 2d Platoon’s M240 machine guns were located at OP Topside. The insurgents so aggressively pushed their advance that their positions were within the minimum arming range of the 40mm grenades. Additionally, their SAF was so devastating that one of the grenade launchers was struck with a bullet through the feed tray, permanently disabling it. The other Mk-19 grenade launcher jammed, which they are prone to do. Thus, the American defenders at the main COP had only a single .50 caliber machine gun, the Marine M240 machine gun, and their own small arms to repel the assault. It is to the credit of the Chosen soldiers that they maintained at least fire parity from the COP. To achieve this, the 2d Platoon soldiers were firing their weapons “cyclic,” on full automatic at the highest possible rates of
fire. As a result, numerous soldiers experienced weapons malfunctions, just as SSG Phillips had faced at the mortar pit. One young SPC fighting at the COP Kahler later complained, “…I ran through my ammo till my SAW would not work anymore despite the ‘Febreze’ bottle of CLP I dumped into it.” Another SGT described the desperate struggle at the COP when the 2d Platoon QRF departed to reinforce OP Topside:

…to fight off the AAF attacking us from the mosque and bazaar and hotel. Right before SGT Garcia left to help Topside there was a AAF fighter popping up and down behind the wall of the mosque shooting at us and [SGT Garcia] grabs [an] M-203 and shoots a grenade and hits the pillar right beside where he was fighting from. We did not see him again…I then grabbed the Engineers weapon that was left at our position and which was a SAW and…started laying down about 800-1,000 rounds at the bazaar and wood line around the mosque. SPC… then fired a SMAW-D and AT-4 at the same time at the bazaar….

Private Krupa, a new soldier who had only joined the platoon as a replacement less than two months previously and was in his first real action, manned the .50 cal heavy machine gun in the HMMWV at the CP. Several of the soldiers were concerned with how Krupa would perform in his first engagement, but he shortly alleviated these concerns. SGT Aass stated in admiration:

Private Krupa … was up in the turret, taking direct fire from multiple locations, and he was literally standing ankle-deep in .50 cal casings from all the rounds that he’d fired. I was worried that after he shot off his first can of ammo he wasn’t going to know what to do next, but under fire he changed maybe a dozen cans of ammo.114

PFC Krupa described his efforts from the HMMWV’s gunner turret:
RPGs were coming in constantly from the west. I remember at one point I had to slow my fire down because the barrel was red hot and there was a debate on how much ammo was left. By this time I had shot about ten .50 cal 100 round ammo cans…I would wait for the tree leaves to kick up so I knew where the AAF were at. Immediately after they would fire, I would fire at their positions…

The 1st Squad TCP to the south was also under extreme duress. SGT Hissong watched SPC Hamby firing the M2 machine gun to the south, “…the truck was taking very heavy fire, I’ve never seen a truck take so many hits as it was right then.” SPC Hamby fired a one hundred round belt of ammunition at an enemy position from which a RPG had been fired, “…an RPG came sailing impacting in the same place on the same building. It left a very definitive trail from the point of origin I then dumped what was left in that location.” Incredibly, the volume of fire actually increased, Hamby remembered, “I went down into the truck and grabbed a can of .50 cal ammo to reload as I was reloading the turret I was in became overwhelmed with gunfire.” SGT Hissong was alarmed, “When he ducked down to reload, it was like the turret of the truck exploded from all of the bullets hitting it and RPG’s impacting around it.” As SPC Hamby attempted to get the M2 machine gun back into action, it was struck by a 7.62mm round directly in the top of the feed tray cover which was raised for re-loading, which put that gun out of action permanently. SSG Samaroo believed that the .50 cal was out of action within five minutes of the start of the engagement. The situation was so desperate, and the fire raining down upon them so incessant, that SGT Hissong expended an AT-4 missile against the large compound house on a prominent hill to the southeast of the TCP.

The insurgents were so close, and so aggressive in pushing their attack, that the American defenders regularly observed and engaged them, a fact which is distinctive in Afghanistan where many soldiers rotate through an entire tour of duty and never actually see their enemy. That was not a problem.
at Wanat on 13 July 2008. Some of the soldiers recalled how the ACM were dressed (not always employing politically correct terminology): “Some were wearing masks, others were wearing rags on their heads, some with BDUs, others with “man jammies.” SGT Hector Chavez, fighting from the mortar pit, specifically recalled firing upon ACM insurgents dressed in BDU tops and “man-jammy” pants. Following the engagement, bloody BDU clothing was found in the town of Wanat.

During this time, the ANA Company remained in their fighting positions, in the middle of the COP, and to the south at the southernmost TCP. Numerous Chosen Company soldiers complained of their inactivity. One soldier with the 1st Squad TCP claimed that: “The ANA had fled from their position.” Another SGT stated, “I also remember ANA not shooting that much and never leaving their foxholes.” SGT Dzwik was not professionally impressed with the ANA performance:

They never got out of their holes. They only had four wounded, which tells me that the enemy directed their fire at the Americans, not the Afghans. The Afghans sprayed and prayed. That’s about it. To be honest, though, it was more than I expected. The other numerous occasions I’ve been on with Afghan soldiers as our backup, they ran.

SGT Hissong summed up what most of the Chosen soldiers felt, “they were still pretty much totally useless.” However, the Marine ETTs supervising the ANA stated that their soldiers carefully monitored their fields of fire, and that they controlled their fire to avoid expending all of their ammunition. Unfortunately, the ANA has a tendency to adopt the popular (in Afghanistan) “spray and pray” technique of weapons firing. This methodology serves to expend large quantities of ammunition with no proper aiming of the weapon, thus serving little or no purpose. The ANA apparently did not engage in this at Wanat, which some Americans interpreted as the ANA not adequately participating or supporting them in the firefight. There were comparatively few ANA wounded (four wounded that had to be evacuated), and none killed. However, the ANA were not ordered to OP Topside where the majority of
the Chosen Company casualties were sustained, deliberately because of language difficulties that could have easily resulted in a “blue on blue” or friendly fire incident. There is some evidence that the ACM may have deliberately avoided targeting the ANA, rather they focused their fires upon the Americans. As previously noted, it must be stressed that the ACM were interested in attacking the COP with firepower only to suppress the position, while they committed their greatest effort against the OP. Thus, the ANA were only exposed to suppressive fire, and were never engaged in the intense fighting at OP Topside. Their numbers of casualties at their two firing positions within the COP were slightly less than the Americans manning the COP (who suffered one KIA and four WIA), but were still within the range of casualties sustained by the Chosen Company paratroopers within the main position. Regardless of the opinions of the Chosen Company troopers, which were doubtless influenced by the previous problems experienced by the Platoon with the ASG at Ranch House and Bella, it appears that the ANA fully participated in the defense of COP Kahler, and none of the locations that they were responsible for were occupied, overrun or seized by the ACM.122

SGT Grimm, TOW Section Leader, specifically recalled of the ACM assault:

They infiltrated a couple of days before. Fire initiated from multiple locations at once, from covered and concealed positions, engaging heavy weapons first. They fired on the VPB to keep us pinned down in the low ground so that they could isolate and overwhelm the OP. It felt like they were not trying to come inside the perimeter at the low ground, only at the OP. There was a heavy volume of fire on us, but I did not see AAF attempting to enter the main COP perimeter.123

The ACM plan to control the COP itself with firepower had succeeded admirably well. The 120mm mortar and 60mm mortar were effectively suppressed with RPG, small arms fire, and hand grenades; while RPGs had destroyed the TOW HMMWV. However, although the bazaar was occupied with a
strong, well-armed fighting force this ACM contingent could not prevent regular reinforcements from moving from COP Kahler and the 1st Squad TCP towards OP Topside, which was under extreme duress at this moment.

**Defense and Sacrifice at OP Topside**

The OP Topside position consisted of three connected firing positions, and was manned by nine soldiers on the morning of 13 July. A roughly square firing position at the north faced to the north and northeast. It was anchored to a large rock to the northwest. It contained a single M-240 machine gun, operated by SPC Stafford. His Assistant Gunner was SPC Gunnar Zwilling. This firing position was also occupied by the 2d Platoon FO, SGT Pitts, and his radio. Pitts did not have an RTO with him. This northernmost firing position controlled two Claymore anti-personnel command detonated mines, placed to fire down into the dead ground to the north and east. A semi-circular firing position was in the center, and was oriented to the east. This position was given the moniker “Crow’s Nest” by the soldiers. It was manned by PFC Jonathan Ayers and SPC Pruitt Rainey, and also contained a single M-240 machine gun. The Crow’s Nest was actually at the pinnacle of the knoll, and it was located on a terrace above the remainder of the position. A roughly square firing position faced to the south and southeast, which had been constructed at SPC Jason Bogar’s insistence. It was also anchored to a large rock to the southwest. This was manned by SPC Bogar, SGT Matthew Gobble, and SPC Chris McKaig. It contained a SAW, an M203 grenade launcher, and controlled two more Claymore mines, oriented into the dead ground to the south and east. These positions were attached to each other, and shared a common, long western sandbagged wall. All positions were excavated a couple of feet deep, and were then raised with a double layer of sandbags to mid-chest height. The LRAS sensor was located in the middle of the OP. SPC Matthew Phillips, the Platoon Designated Marksmen, was stationed in the sleeping terrace behind the short stretch of double sandbagged wall facing to the north, where he could employ his M-14 Sniper Rifle
to greatest advantage. SPC Phillips was not isolated, SPC Stafford recalled that he could see him from his machine gun firing position, and that he was “just about ten feet away.” The OP was approximately fifty yards to the east of the bazaar building. The OP also contained one Vietnam Era vintage M-72 66mm Light Anti-Tank Weapon (LAW), two more modern AT-4 Anti-Tank weapons, personal weapons (9mm Beretta pistols for the two M-240 gunners, four M-4 5.56mm carbines for the other soldiers), and a large quantity of hand grenades. The intent was to cover the dangerous dead space to their east and north with the M-203, hand grenades, and Claymore mines. SGT Pitts was specifically located at the OP to control artillery and mortar fire onto the targets previously plotted to control the dead space.

SPC Pruitt Rainey, 22, from Haw River, North Carolina was a large, powerful soldier who fanatically worked out. Since his assignment was humping the M240 machine gun and its ammunition and tripod, his physical size and strength was an invaluable platoon asset. Rainey had been a star wrestler in high school, was good with youth, and intended to use the G.I. Bill to return to college and become a Physical Education teacher and wrestling coach at the high school level. He also liked to sleep, and his friend SPC Tyler Stafford had a collection of photographs of Rainey in repose in various improbable locations. SPC Matthew Phillips, 27, of Jasper, Georgia was another southern boy, a deadly accurate shooter and accordingly served as the 2d Platoon’s Designated Marksmen. Like many young men from the Old Confederacy, Phillips was unabashedly patriotic, telling his father that he was proud to be serving in Afghanistan: “He felt that that's where the evil really was, that people like those who attacked us in 2001 were there.” SPC Jonathan R. Ayers, 24, of Snellville, Georgia loved the Airborne Infantry, and seemed destined for a military career. Even as a child, his father recalled: “Jon was just very military since he was 3 years old. He looked at your shoes, and if they weren't perfect, they were no good. He loved the regiment of the military; he loved order and schedule.” SPC Gunnar Zwilling, 20, of Florissant, Missouri was extremely concerned about the Wanat mission. Candidly, he told his father, “It's gonna be a bloodbath.” Zwilling’s father was a Navy Vietnam Veteran, and like many southern families the military
tradition ran strong in the Zwilling clan. Zwilling’s younger brother was also in service to the nation, serving in the Air Force where he was responsible for servicing a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft. SPC Jason Bogar, 25, of Seattle, Washington was a skilled photographer. Bogar’s father, Michael Bogar, is a widely published and highly talented religious educator. Bogar’s family did not want him to join the Army, but Bogar was an extremely idealistic young man who felt that it was his responsibility and his duty to serve the Republic, and he also enlisted so that he could take advantage of the GI Bill to eventually attend art school for photography. Bogar always had his camera with him, and sent home scores of spectacular, professional quality photographs of Afghanistan that were cherished by his family.125

SPC Stafford had just completed monitoring the five individuals on the hillside through the LRAS and was walking back to the northern fighting position, when he heard the two bursts of machine gun fire, and then the OP was struck by a wave of RPGs. This first round of explosions was devastatingly accurate, and everybody in the OP was immediately wounded, stunned, or both. SPC Stafford remembered:

… I yelled to Zwilling, then we got hit and I got blown out of that position back into the middle of the OP. I could feel all the shrapnel. It was burning pretty badly in my legs and my stomach was burning really bad and my arm. I thought I was on fire because it burned so bad, so I started rolling around screaming that I was on fire and then I just woke up from that. I regained my senses from that and sat up looking back towards the west. I could see Zwilling, who was just a couple feet from me, and he had the same look I would have on my face after getting hit in the face by Mike Tyson, probably. Then there was another explosion that happened right behind me. I’m not sure if it was a hand grenade or an RPG, but that threw me down onto the terrace where we slept. It had blown my helmet off but that one really didn’t hurt me because I think my interceptor body
armor (IBA) caught most of that. My helmet went down just a little bit and I crawled over to it and put it back on. I knew I was hit pretty badly. I looked up and saw Phillips and he was kind of hunkered down on his knees below that sandbag position. He was just popping his head up over the sandbags. I called to him, “Hey, Phillips, man, I’m hit, I’m hit. I need help.” He just looked at me and nodded his head yes and just gave me a Phillips smile like he was saying, “I’ll get you, man. Hold on. But I need to kill these guys first.” He had a grenade so he pulled the pin on his grenade and he stood up and threw it. Right as he threw it, an RPG either hit the sandbags right in front of me or the boulder that was right behind me that was protecting us from the west. The RPG, once it exploded, the tail [fins] ricocheted and hit me in the helmet. I put my head down and it smacked me right on the top of my helmet. There was a big imprint in my helmet and everything… I looked up after that, after the dust settled, and I could see Phillips who was slumped over like he was sitting on his knees. He was slumped over with his chest on his knees and his hands all awkwardly beside him, turned backwards. I screamed at him four or five times, “Phillips! Phillips!”

Stafford’s friend Phillips never responded, and he would never see his comrade Zwilling again. SGT Pitts told a similar story: “The next thing I knew, things just started exploding inside our fighting positions. Multiple RPGs were shot at us, along with hand grenades… I was shell-shocked for a couple of seconds and I had been hit immediately.” SPC McKaig recalled, “We were getting hammered.” At this first volley, Zwilling and Phillips were killed, SGT Gobble was so badly wounded that he was effectively knocked out of the fight, and everybody else in the OP was wounded to some extent.

Stafford crawled back up to the protection of the southern post of the OP, where he watched SPC Bogar put up a heroic defense, nearly single-handedly, with his SAW. Bogar placed it on top of the
sandbags, notwithstanding as Stafford noted, “I’m just watching that boulder pop with rounds coming in.” Stafford was badly wounded and drifting in and out of consciousness, but he distinctly remembered, “Bogar had just set his SAW on top of the sandbags and he was just kind of spraying, going through SAW rounds pretty quick. I remember him, loading and spraying, loading and spraying.” At the Crow’s Nest, SPC Ayers was also going cyclic with the M-240. Stafford also remembered being impressed at the volume of fire that Ayers was pouring out, “I could also hear the 240 going off above me in the Crow’s Nest, because Ayers was just ripping them apart. I could hear Rainey screaming at Ayers not to melt the barrel on the 240 and to control his fires.”

SPC Bogar fired approximately six hundred rounds at a cyclic rate of fire from his SAW when that weapon became overheated, and eventually jammed the bolt forward. SPC Stafford noted, “Bogar was still in our hole firing quite a bit. Then Bogar’s SAW jammed. Basically it just got way overheated, because he opened the feed tray cover and I remember him trying to get it open and it just looked like the bolt had welded itself inside the chamber. His barrel was just white hot.”

After what SPC McKaig estimated as thirty minutes, Ayers ran out of 7.62mm ammunition for the M-240. McKaig remembered, “We had to fire constantly just to get the upper hand…they were coming from the southeast about 50 to 75 meters away. They were all different ranges coming from all different directions. We had to stay low because the fire they were putting down on us was extremely effective.” McKaig recalled: “Thank God we had some natural cover too. The only tree in our OP was getting destroyed by everything that would hit it. Branches, sticks, leaves and chunks of wood were landing on top of my helmet.” At least one of the RPGs cascading into the OP also set material located around the fighting positions afame. SPC McKaig was appalled: “Me and Ayers also had a fire from an explosion that caught some of our equipment on fire. I remember engaging the enemy and trying to kick out the fire at the same time. I remember telling myself ‘The Army never trained me for this kind of situation’.”

126
To maintain fire superiority, or at least fire parity, over the insurgents Ayers and McKaig continued to engage over the edge of the Crow’s Nest with two M-4 carbines. At intervals they would pop up together, fire six to nine rounds at the muzzle flashes ringing the OP, then drop down before they could be engaged. Eventually, Ayers was struck on the side of his helmet, which stopped the bullet. McKaig recalled, “We had to coax ourselves into jumping back up again, because the whole time we were thinking we were going to die. We knew if we jumped up again, we would probably catch one in the face.” But PFC Ayers and SPC McKaig did just that, and continued to pour fire out of the Crown’s Nest. Eventually the inevitable happened, and Ayers was struck and killed instantly, collapsing over his weapon. Now SPC McKaig experienced problems with his weapon, “My weapon was overheating. I had shot about 12 magazines by this point already and it had only been about a half hour or so into the fight. I couldn’t charge my weapon and put another round in because it was too hot, so I got mad and threw my weapon down.” McKaig reached for Ayers’ rifle, only to discover that it was also out of service, as it had taken an AK-47 round directly through the receiver.

Out of weapons, McKaig suddenly remembered that he still had two Claymores out. A quick glance revealed that at least one insurgent had exploited the lapse in gunfire and emerged from the dead ground to breach the Concertina obstacle and assault into the OP. McKaig didn’t hesitate and “cracked off the two Claymores. The first one killed an insurgent that was in our wire. Sparks flew out of him, I don’t know if he had ammo or whatever on him, and it killed him instantly.”

SGT Pitts, who had ended up in the southern position having been blown there by the RPG blasts, was also in a critical situation. Pitts had been badly wounded by the initial swarm of RPG and hand grenade blasts, in the right leg, the left leg, and his left arm and hand. His right leg was particularly seriously wounded, and it was bleeding so badly that SPC Bogar had to cease his one-man SAW barrage to put a tourniquet on it. Pitts complained, “I couldn’t move my right leg at all after that first hit.” SPC
Stafford, badly wounded himself, crawled back briefly into the northern firing position, emptied his 9mm pistol over the sandbag wall, and then reached for his two Claymores. Stafford described, “I grabbed one clacker and I brought it down, took the safety off, and I started clacking and there was nothing. I clacked it probably 10 times and nothing went off.” The Claymore’s wires were run directly on top of the ground, and almost certainly one of the many RPG blasts had severed it. Stafford continued, “Then I saw the other one and so I grabbed it and clacked it. I don’t know, the reports say they had turned them around and stuff like that, so I don’t know if they had come in and turned them around, if they were that ballsy, or if all the RPG blasts had made them fall down. But when I clacked, it blew up and back at us.” Startled, in his own words, “It scared the bejusus out of me,” Stafford grabbed an M-4 carbine that was in the position (either SGT Pitt’s or Zwilling’s) and began firing it, “I probably got off four or five rounds before another RPG hit right in front of that wall and tore my hands up really bad. So I dropped the rifle and I was hurting really bad at this point…I’m bleeding out of both legs, arms, hands, stomach.” Stafford crawled back to the southern position, where the other soldiers were at this moment clustered. SPC Bogar’s suggestions to build the southern position had almost certainly saved the lives of all the soldiers that remained at the OP.

Stafford told SGT Pitts that Phillips and Zwilling were gone, Phillips dead and Zwilling probably so, that he was badly hurt, and that “They’re over there, they’re close, they’re throwing grenades, Sergeant.” Pitts became absolutely furious at this, and returned to the now vacant northern firing position. SGT Pitts described his lonely stand to the north, “I threw six or seven hand grenades into the dead space into the riverbed…I was cooking them off for about three or four seconds so they would blow up as soon as they got over the Concertina wire and landed on the other side.” In between lobbing grenades at his opponents, Pitts called down to the Command Post and described the situation at the OP to them. He told them the OP needed help, urgently. Until it came, Pitts tried to fire Stafford’s M-240, but was unable to effectively do so due to his severe wounds.
At about this moment, as summoned by SGT Pitts, the first QRF from the main COP arrived, 1LT Brostrom and SPC Jason D. Hovater. 1LT Brostrom recognized that what the German military referred to as the “schwerpunkt,” the critical point of the engagement, was at OP Topside and that he needed to move immediately to the OP to assess the situation and to gain control of the fight ongoing there. Brostrom told CPT Myer “‘We have to do something’ and shortly thereafter he repeated, ‘‘We need to reinforce them.’” The salvos of RPGs bursting on OP Topside were prominently visible from the main COP. With heavy fire also sweeping the open fields of COP Kahler, CPT Myer did not want to weaken the primary platoon defensive position until 1LT Brostrom had gained situation awareness of the actual circumstances at the OP. Accordingly, he hastily told Brostrom to “…take a few guys up there.” Accordingly, 1LT Brostrom directed only two soldiers to accompany him, SPC Jason D. Hovater and PFC William Hewitt. Hewitt was the Platoon Medic and based upon transmissions from SGT Pitts, 1LT Brostrom knew that the medic was urgently needed up at OP Topside, but Hewitt made it only a few steps out of his fighting position at the CP before he was shot through the arm, a serious wound that knocked him out of the battle. SPC Hovater, 24, had grown up in the mountains of East Tennessee, was a skilled musician, and had only married six weeks before this deployment. He was infamous within the platoon for his sense of humor, and was legendary for his impression of the Battalion Commander. Hovater had a memorized caricature of LTC Ostlund that regularly doubled spectators up with laughter. But Hovater was also an accomplished athlete, and he was acknowledged as the fastest runner in the Platoon. Brostrom had just reenlisted Hovater a month previously. 1LT Brostrom wanted Hovater to accompany him on the run up to the OP, because he knew that he could depend upon Hovater to stick with him as he hastened to the *schwerpunkt* of the contest.127

Brostrom and Hovater sprinted together through the intense fire sweeping the flat ground of the COP and then scrambled up the terraces. Standing at the sleeping terrace, 1LT Brostrom shouted urgently to SGT Pitts in the northern position, and instructed him to hand over the machine gun and ammunition
since Pitts could not make effective use of it. SGT Pitts remembered, “I told him where I thought they were and then he disappeared.” SPC Rainey then reinforced Brostrom and Hovater on the sleeping terrace, and SGT Pitts was the last to see any of these three soldiers alive. Although speculative, it appears that it was 1LT Brostrom’s intention to establish the M-240, to be manned by Rainey and Hovater, on the sleeping terrace in the vicinity of the sandbag wall that SPC Phillips had initially manned, and had been killed at during the early barrage of RPG rounds. 1LT Brostrom certainly knew that there were numerous casualties at the OP that would have to be evacuated (at this point in the engagement the only helicopter LZ was at the southern end of the main COP), and that reinforcements would have to be moved from the main COP Kahler to the OP to help evacuate the wounded and to retain the position. Having just raced through a gauntlet of heavy gunfire at the bazaar and hotel complex, 1LT Brostrom would also have known that this position was controlled by ACM weapons, if not actually occupied by the enemy. A machine gun position could suppress the ACM in or around the bazaar and hotel (which could be readily engaged from the sleeping terrace), so that the platoon could move between COP Kahler and OP Topside.

SPC Stafford distinctly recalled of the ensuing engagement on the sleeping terrace:

I heard 1LT Brostrom up at the OP talking. He was screaming at Rainey and I could hear them shouting back and forth together and I don’t remember who said it, but they said, ‘they’re inside the wire’ and then I heard a bunch of gunfire and Rainey screaming, ‘He’s right behind the fucking sandbag! He’s right behind the fucking sandbag!’ I don’t know if they were grenades or RPGs, but there was a whole bunch of fire down on the sleeping terrace where we slept. Then all fire from the OP went quiet like there was no outgoing fire anymore.

SPC McKaig remembered the incident in nearly identical terms: “…there was an insurgent right on the other side of a rock near our sleeping area. I remember hearing people screaming and yelling that he was
right over there. I don’t know if it was that insurgent or another insurgent that killed him and Hovater, but shortly afterwards I couldn’t hear them anymore and they were probably killed.” Precisely what happened on OP Topside’s sleeping terrace will never be known. Most likely, 1LT Brostrom and SPC Rainey were placing the M-240 into action, while SPC Hovater covered them with his M-4 carbine. As their attention was focused on the machine gun, they were simultaneously engaged from two different directions by small arms and likely RPG fire from the bazaar/hotel complex, and at close range by one and probably by a couple of insurgents who had penetrated into the OP and were fighting from behind the sandbag wall and within the adjacent brush. When their bodies were recovered, 1LT Brostrom, SPC Rainey and SPC Hovater had all been killed by gunshot wounds, 1LT Brostrom’s in such a manner that it suggested he had been shot from the side or rear, quite possibly while he was turning his head; Rainey had been shot in the back; while Hovater was shot down through his face into his chest and his weapon lacked its magazine, intimating that he had been shot in a prone firing position while he was re-loading. SPC Hovater had not failed in his charge, and he had stayed and fought with 1LT Brostrom to the very end.

Shortly after the engagement on the sleeping terrace, SGT Gobble “looked back to the North and I could see a man inside the wire. I quickly shot at him but he dove behind a large rock.” This was most likely at least one of the insurgents who had fought the three members of the Chosen Few on the sleeping terrace. The enemy was by this moment very close to the OP. Huddled in the southern position, SPC Stafford had just had at least two RPGs explode right on top of him, and Bogar had fired hundreds of rounds from his SAW directly above his head, but the enemy was so near that Stafford could hear the recoil and cycling of the insurgents’ weapons distinctly. Stafford would later recall, “It sounded to me like they were right up on top of the hill, on top of the hill from the OP. That’s how close they sounded to me.” McKaig recalled that the insurgents began using an intriguing tactic, one which neither he nor anybody else had ever encountered before. Specifically, the insurgents began throwing rocks at them, “The insurgents then started throwing a whole bunch of rocks at us. They apparently mixed some
fragmentary grenades in with them as well. As soon as it fell into my hole, my first reaction was to grab it and throw it out, or to jump out. Once I saw that they were rocks, though, I started yelling, ‘They’re rocks! They’re rocks!’ They were trying to get us to jump out.” Since resistance was still coming from the OP the insurgents, who wanted to take at least one American prisoner, were using rocks to attempt to trick the American soldiers into leaving their protection. Fortunately, McKaig recognized the threat for what it was and the ACM ploy failed. At some time during the fight at this point, SPC Bogar was killed, but nobody saw him fall.

By now ammunition and functional weapons at the OP were beginning to run desperately low. SGT Pitts had the M203 and one M4 carbine in his northern fighting position. Stafford’s M240 machine gun had been lost in the vicious engagement on the sleeping terrace, and Phillips’ M14 rifle lay twisted into a pretzel by his side on the sleeping terrace. Ayers’ M240 at the Crow’s Nest was out of ammunition, one M4 there was knocked out with a round through its receiver, and both the SAW and the third M4 were irreparably jammed. SPC McKaig, the only one of the three soldiers still capable of fighting at this moment, had picked up the remaining M4 carbine and urgently looked around the position:

I only had two magazines left and I knew I needed to save them in case the insurgents jumped over the sandbags. We could hear their voices and they were still throwing rocks at us. I had hand grenades up in my position so I went back up there and threw two hand grenades to the southeast, then I threw another two to the northeast into the dead space where we were taking fire from. I slid back down to where SGT Gobble and Stafford were, and by some miracle there was a LAW rocket hanging in a tree nearby. We were taking fire about 40 meters to our southeast from these little mud huts that were there. I saw a bunch of muzzle flashes and movement over there, so I opened up the LAW and tried to fire it. It wouldn’t fire. SGT Gobble came to and told me to pull harder on the safety, so I pulled as hard as I could on the safety and then leaned out and fired the
LAW rocket. I hit dead center where those guys were. The shooting stopped after that for what seemed like an eternity, but it was only about six seconds.

Nearly out of both ammunition and working weapons, and with only three soldiers still alive and with all of them wounded to some extent, SGT Gobble and SPC McKaig determined to abandon the OP. By this time SPC Stafford had lost a lot of blood, and was in considerable pain and was floating in and out of consciousness. SGT Gobble pushed the rear (west) double wall of sandbags over, and the three soldiers began working their way through this gap and down to the sleeping terrace. SGT Gobble tried to check on his brother soldiers lying still on the sleeping terrace, but realized that they were all dead. While doing this, “I didn’t want to leave anyone behind that was alive so I began crawling to the next one and that was when I got shot at by a man on the other side of a large rock inside the OP. Because I was out of ammo and all the weapons around me were inoperable I wasn’t able to engage him.” Avoiding the exposed sleeping terrace and the path that led close to the bazaar, clearly occupied by the enemy, this small band of brothers headed to the 1st Squad TCP to the southwest. SPC Stafford had a difficult time getting through the Concertina, getting tangled in the wire. Exhausted, Stafford decided “I was pretty sure I was going to die right there.” He finally got through the obstacle and descended, rolling down the terraces, and practically fell into SSG Samaroo’s burly arms. SGT Sam shouted, “What the hell’s going on in the OP?” SPC Stafford gasped out, “They’re all dead SGT.”

SSG Samaroo moved the wounded soldiers back to the protection of the TCP, and began treating the wounds of all three men. What SGT Gobble and SPC McKaig did not realize, was that SGT Pitts was still alive and fighting at the northernmost position. The two soldiers had called out to him, but not receiving any response (SGT Pitts was apparently busy on the radio attempting to get fire missions, and in any event he was partially deafened by the numerous RPG explosions that had rocked the OP) they believed that he had been killed like everybody else in the OP.
Before he had moved to the sleeping terrace to join 1LT Brostrom and SPC Hovater, Rainey had handed SGT Gobble’s M-203 to SGT Pitts, in exchange for the machine gun that Pitts wasn’t able to handle effectively because of his many wounds. Pitts put the grenade launcher to good use, “I started shooting them straight up into the air so they’d drop in as close as they could on one side. I was putting them right where I put the grenades and hoped the arc would bring them down into the riverbed.” After he threw all his hand grenades and fired all his 40mm grenades, SGT Pitts noticed that “it was quiet and nobody was shooting but me.” A quick survey of the OP revealed that he was by himself. SGT Pitts “then got on the radio and told them that everybody was either dead or gone except for me and that if they didn’t send anyone up here, the position was going to fall. I let them know that the enemy was really close.” The enemy was, in fact, so close that Pitts could plainly hear them talking outside the hole. SPC Hayes, the Platoon Leader’s RTO assisting CPT Myer at the COP Kahler CP, could hear the insurgents talking through Pitt’s hand-mike. SSG Benton, at the Command Post, also heard: “SGT Pitts say in a hushed tone that he was hit, laying down behind cover, and could hear AAF walking within ten meters of his position.” Pitts picked up the M-4 rifle that Stafford had earlier discarded and braced himself for the insurgents coming over the wall, fully intending that he was not going to go down without a fight.

1LT Brostrom had designated a Platoon QRF to reinforce whatever position required assistance in the event of an attack. Apparently he had not yet ordered that QRF to move when he personally headed to the OP to assess the situation up there, and was subsequently killed in the brief, violent combat on the sleeping terrace. When the OP went quiet as the outgoing gunfire ceased, SSG Samaroo ordered a fire-team sized QRF to move to the relief of OP Topside on his own volition, with SPC Hanson and PFC Hamby under his leadership. This QRF had only taken a few steps towards the OP when it encountered SGT Gobble and SPCs McKaig and Stafford, and temporarily halted its movement forward to evacuate the two badly wounded soldiers to the TCP where their wounds could be treated. That task completed, SSG Samaroo hastily organized a second QRF consisting of himself, SPC Michael Denton, SGT Israel
Garcia and PFC Jacob Sones who had sprinted from their 2d Squad position, and struck out for the now ominously silent OP. SGT Israel Garcia, 24, Long Beach, California was a career soldier on this third deployment. A true American patriot, Garcia joined the US Army immediately upon graduating from High School in 2002, and had rapidly matured into a highly competent and well respected NCO. “Ira” was a smiling man with a positive personality who loved horses and soccer, was immensely proud of his Mexican heritage, and had married his high school sweetheart shortly before he deployed.

Before his small QRF raced across the open terraces for the OP, SSG Samaroo carefully scanned the hillside where the OP was located for any enemy activity: “…that’s when I engaged a man, shot him, he was directly on top of the OP shooting over a large boulder into the OP.”129 At this moment, OP Topside was clearly penetrated by the ACM, and it was nearly overrun and in the ACM’s possession. However, the penetration was momentary, and SSG Samaroo’s vigorous counterattack immediately regained control of the position and drove the very few ACM that had stayed alive long enough to reach OP Topside away.

Following the engagement SPC Zwilling’s body was found far down the terraces, nearly at the bottom of them, a considerable distance away from the OP fighting positions.130 The SGT that finally located him, in response to a frantic search initiated by 1SG Beeson when he realized that one of his soldiers was unaccounted for, remembered being told to:

…start gathering and consolidating all SI [Sensitive Items] from the KIAs and wounded soldiers equipment. I seen a bag at the bottom of the OP so I went down to grab it and I looked over the edge of the terrace and seen SPC Zwilling lying on his side not moving so I jumped down and ran up to him he was dead already so I called up for help to move him to the LZ he was wearing his IBA [protective body armor] I took it off and rolled him over he had a bullet wound in the left side of his chest and his leg was almost completely blown off from the thigh to the top of his boot.131
SPC Zwilling was killed or incapacitated by the RPG explosion that had severely wounded SPC Stafford. It is unlikely that an RPG or grenade explosion could have blown his body the distance from the OP that he was discovered. SPC Zwilling’s leg had been struck directly with an RPG, and his mortal wounds were so severe that it is also inconceivable that he could have walked or crawled that distance by himself. SPC Zwilling’s body also contained a closed fracture of the femur caused by “blunt trauma” and numerous abrasions that could possibly have been caused by being hastily dragged over terraces. It is almost positive that the ACM that overrun OP Topside were attempting to remove his body for propaganda purposes and were preoccupied with this effort, rather than entering the OP northern fighting position where SGT Pitts waited for them. SPC Bogar’s body was also found “two terraces down” from the OP, which he would almost certainly not have voluntarily left due to the intensity of the insurgent firing, suggesting that he may also have been removed from the OP fighting position. SPC Bogar’s body also contained some superficial abrasions that might have been caused by being dragged a short distance. The timely arrival of SGT Samaroo’s QRF at OP Topside interrupted the insurgent’s effort and prevented the removal of SPC Zwilling from the OP, and possibly also precluded the removal of SPC Bogar.

With no further signs of insurgent resistance, SSG Samaroo and his three soldiers ascended the hill. At OP Topside, as one honest young soldier later recounted, they discovered: “ Fucking chaos. All their equipment was destroyed. The enemy had turned their Claymores on them and they snuck around and killed most of our guys.” SSG Samaroo and his team immediately got Ayer’s M240 at the OP back into operation, checked the casualties that they could locate (Phillips, Rainey, Ayers, Hovater, and 1LT Brostrom) and determined that their brothers were already deceased and beyond any earthly aid, contacted SGT Pitts and assessed his injuries, and re-established security from the Crow’s Nest fighting position. They could not locate either Bogar or Zwilling. All four soldiers immediately began to put out fire, and they were instantly involved in an intense firefight in every direction. One of SGT Samaroo’s soldiers remembered being engaged: “From all four cardinal directions. They used mortars, recoilless
rifles, RPGs, RPKs, PKMs, AKs and anything they could get a hold of. I can’t even tell you how many RPGs hit, there were so many of them.” SGT Samaroo’s little group held their own for a few minutes, then another wave of deadly accurate RPGs overwhelmed them. SPC Denton recalled:

…that’s when my position was hit by, I believe, two RPGs with a third hitting inside the actual OP…The blast blew me outside of my bunker, causing me to land on my head and neck, then the rest of my body hit the ground. I lost my weapon in the process. After that, I started crawling to get away from the position by a few feet and I could hear everyone screaming, including my Squad Leader [SSG Samaroo], that he had been hit.

SGT Pitts also remembered:

[SGT] Garcia was pulling security in the middle area and keeping a lookout. Sones was treating me against the north wall. I was sitting down and he was bandaging me up. That’s when another volley of RPGs and hand grenades came in. I was hit again, as was Sones. That’s when Garcia took a direct hit from an RPG. I thought he was dead from his wounds. I knew Samaroo and Denton were wounded and I could hear Samaroo screaming that he was hit. I don’t remember much after that. I do know that I crawled over to Garcia and talked to him some. Sones and I crawled into the southern position and Samaroo and Denton jumped in as well. I told them that Garcia was messed up. I don’t remember who did it but one of them dragged Garcia into our position. Samaroo needed a radio so I got a multiband inter/intra team radio (MBITR) up so we could talk to the FOB. He told them we needed more people and that they were wounded… Denton started pulling security to the east, despite being hurt, and Samaroo was doing the same towards the north and west. Sones was pretty shell-shocked and Denton’s hand was pretty messed up.
SPC Denton recounted, “I started looking for a weapon for myself and found one. I couldn’t fire with my right hand, it was hard to stand because both my legs had been hit, but I could stand to pull security to the east where we were still taking fire from the most, where they had snuck up on us, and tried to run us over from.”

One RPG had struck SGT Garcia directly on his abdomen, below his body armor. His wounds were catastrophic and mortal. SGT Garcia remained conscious for a few brief moments. SGT Pitts crawled over to him and held his hand, telling him that they were going to take him home. SGT Garcia passed away shortly afterwards, SGT Pitts still holding his hand.

When SGT Garcia was hit, his radio went “hot-mike” temporarily jamming the platoon frequency, and causing radio problems for a few minutes until the problem rectified itself. Recognizing the gravity of the situation based upon SGT Samaroo’s urgent calls for assistance, and with SFC Dzwik extremely concerned that “…I was not tracking on where all my soldiers were,” Dzwik and SSG Phillips led a fourth relief party consisting of every soldier that they could lay their hands on, including SGT Aass, SGT Jesse Queck, SPC Jeffrey B. Scantlin, SGT Grimm and PFC Aaron Davis from the TOW section (since their TOW system had now burned down to the ground), augmented by two of the Marine ETTs (Corporals Oakes and Jones) carrying their M-240. They temporarily halted at the TCP, throwing a yellow smoke grenade into the road to cover their crossing of the open space, and were guided up to the OP by SPC Grapes of the 1st Squad TCP who knew the way to the OP (the other soldiers had never been up there before). At about the same time that this fourth QRF was climbing towards OP Topside, the first AH-64 Apache Attack Helicopters finally reached Wanat. The first gun run was performed by Hedgerow 50 at 0523 against the north side of the brushy area immediately adjoining the OP, the gunner remarking: “There is a guy right on the other side of the trees.” An insurgent is briefly visible through the thermal sights within the brush, immediately engaged by cannon fire. Hedgerow 53 followed it in at 0524,
oriented upon a green smoke grenade thrown from SGT Samaroo’s party at the OP, and it placed about fifty 30mm high explosive rounds into the dead ground fifty yards to the east of the OP where SPC Denton remembered most of the trouble was emanating from. The Apaches had delivered their initial gun run in support of the OP at 0523, just over one hour after CPT Myer’s first frantic radio call to the TF Rock TOC, and within forty-five minutes of being alerted by the TF Rock TOC.

The Army Aviation component that supported TF Bayonet (and thus Chosen Company and TF Rock) was based at FOB Fenty at Jalalabad Airfield and was provided by 2d Squadron, 17th Cavalry of the 101st Airborne Division, task-organized as Task Force Out Front. Commanded by LTC John Lynch, a highly experienced OH-58 pilot:

My task force at that time consisted of 14 Kiowa Warriors, which was one of my organic troops, as well as a platoon out of 2d Troop. I had an Apache company-minus with six AH64s. I had a Chinook platoon with four CH47s, a MEDEVAC detachment with three forward support medical teams, three UH60 air ambulances, a Black Hawk assault platoon with six UH60Ls, and an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) detachment with four Hunter UAVs. I also had a Pathfinder detachment. Their primary task was to do personnel recovery but we used them to do a lot of other things. They made sure loads were rigged correctly for those odd sling loads and things like that. Those were all of my operational guys. I also had a maintenance troop augmented by folks out of the higher-level and intermediate-level maintenance unit as well as civilian contractors. I also had my forward support troop which, aside from doing vehicle maintenance and running logistics functions on the forward operating base (FOB), they run the forward arming and refueling points (FARPs). Two of those FARPs came into play during the Battle of Wanat. We ran a base FARP at Jalalabad Airfield. We had a forward-based FARP at Asadabad and one at Camp Blessing as well. There was an additional FARP up at Naray but that wasn’t run by my
guys. I also had my Headquarters Troop, which consists of the staff and the medics and those kinds of folks.132

TF Out Front had to cover the entire TF Bayonet battle space, consisting of Nuristan, Nangarhar, Kunar and Laghman Provinces. The OH-58D Kiowa Warriors could only operate below 6,000 feet which severely constrained their utility in Nuristan and Kunar. With six AH-64 Apaches TF Out Front had to provide a continuous 24-hour Quick Reaction Force of two gunships; on a daily basis provide a two-gunship escort to cargo helicopters flying beyond certain points (to include the Waigal and Korengal Valleys); and of course comply with mandated crew flight and helicopter maintenance schedules. Mechanical breakdowns and battle damage only exacerbated the limitations derived from operating only six gunships over an immense geographic area. When mission, maintenance, and flight crew constraints permitted the Apaches were employed on deterrence and direct attack missions. Because Bella could only be evacuated by rotary wing, there were serious concerns regarding force protection of the valuable helicopters during CONOP ROCK MOVE. In the event, no helicopters were damaged during the evacuation. On the night of 12-13July TF Out Front had a two-helicopter team of Apaches ready at Jalalabad as a QRF; and two MEDEVACs were also ready on the ground. As a result of the successful conduct of the Bella portion of CONOP ROCK MOVE, TF Bayonet had not requested any extraordinary measures be taken for the protection or defense of COP Kahler at Wanat. Although basing a flight of Apaches at the Camp Blessing FARP for enhanced responsiveness to the Pech, Korengal and Waigal Valleys was not extraordinary, no such request was transmitted to TF Out Front. Thus, at the time of the attack on Wanat there were no AH-64 helicopters in the air, or any closer to Wanat than Jalalabad.

At 0430 TF Out Front was performing a transition between two shifts (a “night shift” and “day shift”) of attack helicopters at FOB Fenty in Jalalabad, executing this transition approximately 45 minutes before BMNT so the helicopters were ready to respond to any incidents at BMNT (as was typical). CPT
Jennifer Fortenberry, TF Out Front Battle CPT, was briefing the incoming AH-64 pilots when the urgent call came in from TF Bayonet. She immediately scrambled the pilots, who only had to sprint to their helicopters parked directly outside the TOC. The helicopters were warmed up and in the air within ten minutes. Shortly thereafter, the call came in for three wounded, and the two MEDEVAC helicopters were alerted. At 0453 the Flight Surgeon recorded the MEDEVAC helicopters departing Jalalabad. Even before the helicopters could depart, the number of wounded was increased to eight. Approximately twenty minutes were required from CPT Myers’ announcement to the TF Rock TOC that “This is a Ranch House type attack” to the helicopters being alerted. Given the intensity of the attack and the need for support at Wanat this appears to be an excessively long response time, which remains unexplained. The ongoing transition caused no delay in response times by the Apaches, in fact it actually accelerated it as no time was lost in notifying the pilots. One AH-64 night shift gunner, CW3 Jim Morrow, who had not yet been formally relieved, flew his Apache into the fight at Wanat. Recognizing that this was a serious TIC, CPT Fortenberry on her own volition also alerted another UH-60 to serve as an expedient MEDEVAC by placing the Physician Assistant (PA) onboard, which had to be approved by TF Bayonet.

Once alerted, the helicopters made the flight to Wanat in twenty-nine minutes. Typical flight time from Jalalabad to Wanat was approximately thirty minutes by the most direct possible route at the maximum AH-64 speed. Because field artillery was firing from Camp Blessing in defense of Chosen Company, the Apaches’ arrival at Wanat was slightly delayed waiting completion of the fire mission. The two MEDEVAC helicopters remained at the FARP at Camp Blessing while the Apaches flew directly to participate in the defense of COP Kahler. The Apaches arrived at Wanat at 05:22, and performed their first two gun runs at 0523 and 0524, less than one hour and five minutes after the attack started. This equates with the best estimates of the Chosen Company soldiers, that aviation support arrived somewhere between an hour and ninety minutes after the first RPG fire.
The arrival of the Apaches was absolutely critical to finally regaining control of the situation at OP Topside. The Apaches immediately began gun runs into the dead ground to the north and east of the OP, suppressing the insurgents lying under cover in these areas engaging the OP, and driving the insurgents back from the OP. Some of the gun runs came in as close as thirty meters from the OP, at the very edge of the dead ground to the north and east. The attack helicopters’ fires were devastating to the ACM insurgents attacking the OP. From the moment of their arrival, the insurgents were forced to cede the initiative, which they had enjoyed since they launched the attack. Still, they didn’t leave without a protracted, stubborn fight. They continued to engage the OP, particularly lofting RPGs at the hilltop. SGT Aass later noted, “I remember somebody saying they were shooting the RPGs up into the trees. I think they were trying to have the RPGs explode over us and rain down shrapnel on top of us.” The prominent tree that OP Topside had been built against served as an effective aiming point for the insurgents, who lobbed RPG rounds in from several hundred meters away. After the battle the tree was found to be gouged and scored by numerous RPG strikes. A number of these RPGs proved to be extremely accurate, and even with the Apaches performing regular gun runs, the OP remained a distinctly dangerous location to be. Shrapnel continuously rained down from the incessant RPGs thundering against the tree from all directions. SPC Davis was badly wounded by one RPG detonation. SFC Dzwik received a minor wound in his arm from another RPG. CPL Oakes, one of the Marine ETTs, was similarly struck and wounded. The ACM gunners were determined, and remained in their firing positions for at least two hours, until intense attack helicopter and CAS strikes finally drove them away.

At about this time, CPT Myer suddenly materialized at the top of the OP, having run up through the bazaar (which until a few moments ago had been clearly occupied by the enemy) entirely by himself. As CPT Myer himself stated, “I kept getting conflicting reports about casualties at OP Topside.” This was almost certainly because casualties at the OP were being received faster than they could be accurately reported, and because everybody at the OP was wounded themselves by this point. The “hot mike”
situation was also occurring at this time, which doubtless impinged upon effective communications. SGT Aass, when he made his way up to the OP to regain radio communications at that location, later found multiple hand-mikes out of operation, all riddled with gunshots. Determined to assess the situation for himself, CPT Myer made his dangerous run to Topside, ascertained how many of his soldiers were actually wounded, and how urgently MEDEVAC helicopter flights were needed. The answer was all too apparent, that MEDEVACs needed to be brought in, and that they needed to be brought in immediately. While here, CPT Myer quickly grasped how close the fighting at OP Topside had been when a soldier warned him, “…he yelled out that there was a grenade that hadn’t exploded…I reached down and threw it about twenty meters out of the pit. I remember seeing the spoon sticking out of it and it looking like a Russian grenade.”

By this time, numerous other soldiers began pouring up to the OP, urged on by radio calls regarding casualties and the desperate situation at Topside, and the fact that the indirect fires, CAS, and Apache gun runs had effectively suppressed the insurgent fire at the main COP. SPC Scantlin made the climb and began treating the wounded. SPC McKaig got back into the fight, and began humping boxes of machine gun ammunition up to the hilltop position.

The most desperate fighting at the OP had ended by about 0630. By this time, all nine fallen heroes were recovered. One of the Apache helicopter pilots expressed the sentiments of every American on the ground and in the air when the grim call came over the radio frequency, “We will have additional fallen hero missions to follow. I have a total of nine KIA.” The pilot swore, instinctively, loudly, violently, and profoundly, “GOD-DAMN-IT!!!”

The Art of Saving Lives - MEDEVACs at Wanat
By this time, MEDEVAC helicopters were beginning to descend on COP Kahler, these flights being initially provided by two MEDEVAC UH-60 Blackhawk Helicopters from 1st Platoon, Charlie Company, 6-101st Aviation Regiment from the 101st Airborne Division stationed at FOB Fenty at Jalalabad Airfield. When the call came, the MEDEVACs were in the air “really quick” and made short work of the flight. These first two MEDEVAC birds were Dustoff 36, commanded by CW3 Chris Hill, Co-pilot was CPT Ben Seipel, Flight medic was SSG Matthew Kinney, Crew Chief was SGT William Helfrich, and Flight Surgeon was CPT Justin Madill; and Dustoff 35, Commanded by CW2 Wayne McDonald, with CW2 Juan Guzman as Co-Pilot, SSG Atwon Thompkins as Flight Medic, and SPC Neil Crawley as Crew Chief. Normally the Flight Surgeon would not be onboard, but as Dr. Madill remembered, “I knew that when both MEDEVAC are needed there may be multiple patients. I also knew that 04:37 Local was an unlikely time to receive a routine MEDEVAC call.” The MEDEVACs, escorted by the two AH-64 Apache gun ships, departed Jalalabad at 0453. The two birds briefly landed at Camp Blessing, and while they waited for the artillery to cease firing and the gunships to assess the situation at the LZs, the MEDEVACs loaded “Speedballs” a nickname for rubberized body bags filled with ammunition for rapid delivery from helicopters. When the fires cleared, the two helicopters headed in for the relatively brief eight kilometer flight to Wanat.

The two MEDEVACs arrival was noted to have been shortly after the 1st Platoon QRF arrived from Camp Blessing, and within thirty minutes of the AH-64 helicopters arriving on station to begin providing fire support to the beleaguered defenders of COP Kahler. The MEDEVAC helicopters employed two Landing Zones (LZs) at Wanat- the previously established, formalized LZ at the southern end of the open field at COP Kahler; and a second impromptu LZ on a terrace to the south of the OP. Dustoff 35 went to the LZ at COP Kahler, Dustoff 36 to the OP.
At 0552 the first MEDEVAC helicopter, DUSTOFF 35, landed at the LZ to the immediate south of COP Kahler, leaving with five WIA. The MEDEVAC had challenges identifying the LZ as it was obscured by heavy smoke from the burning TOW HMMWV and two other fires within the COP, and the bazaar building that had been set on fire during the heavy fighting immediately to the east. The smoke and dust was so thick that Dustoff 35 had to pull pitch, and go around for a second time before they could safely land. Dustoff 35 reported receiving ground fire on its approach and landing, to include one noticeable “boom” that rattled the helicopter frame.

The second MEDEVAC helicopter, DUSTOFF 36, landed at 0605 on a relatively large, open terrace to the south of OP Topside, and departed with four WIA. Dustoff 36 initially anticipated having to use a jungle penetrator, a heavy “anchor” shaped piece of equipment that could be winched down from the helicopter, but could only retrieve one soldier at a time, and required the helicopter to hover while the equipment was operated. Upon arriving at Wanat, they were able to successfully identify a single terrace that was both large and flat enough that they could land, thus eliminating the requirement for the jungle penetrator. This was fortuitous as hovering while operating a jungle penetrator was a hazardous operation, particularly as the Apache pilots continued to observe and engage considerable gun flashes all around the beleaguered COP and OP.

Heavy fighting still raged at COP Kahler as the MEDEVAC flights headed in. The Flight Surgeon in Dustoff 36 “…heard our pilots communicating with the Apache crews who were engaging a large enemy force on the east side of the valley.” This was, of course, the enemy force that was located to the east of the OP, and still attacking OP Topside. He also remembered, “En route to the COP Kahler OP I heard the ground element (Chosen 6) guiding our pilots to their location. I heard machine gun fire during the ground elements radio transmissions and saw plumes of smoke on the ground in the area of COP Kahler from explosions.” Both helicopters reported observing ACM on the ground in close
proximity to the LZs as they flew in. Both LZs were marked with violet smoke and VS-17 ground recognition panels. Once on the ground, Chief McDonald flying Dustoff 35 could not forget the sights and smells of combat, “The perimeter of the LZ was on fire to the north. There was yelling and screaming coming from the back of the aircraft. I could smell the gunpowder that was spent from rounds expended in the firefight.”

When CPT Madill landed with Dustoff 36 he exited the aircraft along with SSG Kinney (the Flight Medic) and sprinted through the Concertina to reach the OP and the wounded soldiers there. Stopping at a machine gun crew he observed SGT Garcia lying on the ground and realized that he could do nothing for him, and also saw three of the KIA lying on the terrace below. CPT Madill described the chilling interview that ensued:

A US soldier approached me and I asked him if there were any other patients. He responded, ‘No.’ I pointed to the KIA and asked ‘Are they dead?’ He looked at me and stated, ‘They’re gone.’”

With multiple wounded aboard both helicopters, they hastily departed, the Apache gunships calling to them “…that we were taking heavy fire from the east side of the valley.” The MEDEVACs initially flew to the closer LZ at Asadabad until that facility’s limited medical capacity was filled, and then they flew the slightly farther distance to Jalalabad that had more medical capabilities. Following these first flights, a third MEDEVAC helicopter, Dustoff 34, joined them for subsequent medical evacuations, and all three helicopters repeatedly returned to Wanat. CW4 Callaway was the Pilot-In-Charge of Dustoff 34, with Co-Pilot CWO Dance, SGT Tuten as Crew Chief, and SGT Cannaughton the Flight Medic. On all of these flights, the MEDEVAC birds returned with speedballs of ammunition to resupply the soldiers on the ground as they continued to engage the enemy with heavy gunfire.
Almost immediately upon the two MEDEVACs departing Jalalabad (approximately 0445), an additional UH-60 Blackhawk that had been designated as a QRF transportation helicopter was also alerted to serve as a third MEDEVAC. It was airborne just at first light, shortly before 0515. To enable it to serve as a MEDEVAC helicopter it was briefly delayed while it picked up CPT Kevin King, the Physician Assistant (PA) for TF Out Front. This flight was called “Profit 71.” It was under the command of CW2 Isaac Smith, and Smith recalled that the crew consisted of: “CPT Paul Minnie was the pilot. I was the pilot in command. Our crew chief was SGT Chad Swanson and our door gunner was SGT Miranda Stevenson.”140 After the first two MEDEVACs had landed, Profit 71 followed them in. CPT King recalled, “As we came in for a landing, I heard the pilot ask someone on the ground where we should land the helicopter, the shaky voice on the other end said, ‘Don’t care, just land’”. CPT Minnie was able to take advantage of a momentary lapse in the fighting and landed at the LZ to the south of COP Kahler, and five wounded including the badly burned ANA soldier were loaded on board. Initially intended for Asadabad, that facility’s limited medical capability was rapidly overwhelmed, and it was diverted to Jalalabad. During the flight CPT King became seriously concerned with the condition of the badly burned ANA soldier. As Chief Smith remembered:

That was when CPT King said, “How long is it going to take us to get back to Jalalabad Airfield (JAF)?” I informed him of an approximate time, 20 minutes or so, and he said, “It needs to be as fast as possible because this guy in the back isn’t looking very good at all.” Our escorts were the close combat elements so they couldn’t keep up with us at this point. I instructed CPT Minnie to go to 100 percent torque on both engines and fly as fast as possible. I then informed the close combat elements that if we didn’t get back now, there’s a heavy possibility that one of the soldiers would die. So, we flew back, single ship, through the Kunar back into JAF.
CPT King simply noted of his patient’s deteriorating condition, “I needed to get him out of there, so I told the pilot to put his foot down and he did.”

Attempts to ascertain precisely which soldiers were evacuated on which specific helicopter flights have proven to be fruitless. SFC Stockard with the 1st Platoon QRF honestly remembered, “There was so many MEDEVAC birds that came in I lost count how many birds actually came in that day.” Soldiers on the ground loading their wounded comrades continuously changed priorities as more seriously wounded soldiers were shifted to be placed aboard the helicopters. Additionally, soldiers on the ground just knew that they were loading their stricken brothers onto a MEDEVAC, and didn’t know much less care which helicopter or which MEDEVAC flight it was. Aboard the helicopters, the medics were far too absorbed in the effort to save the badly wounded soldiers, who were “completely covered in blood and dirt,” to even learn their identities.

SGT Pitts, badly wounded, was stunned at the courage and skills demonstrated by the 101st Airborne’s MEDEVAC pilots:

I’ve seen a lot of MEDEVACs but I’ve never seen anything like what they did. It was one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen. I actually wrote the crew chief of the bird I was on. I couldn’t believe the pilots landed where they did, that exposed. I couldn’t believe it. The Apaches were doing gun runs about 30 meters away.

SGT Hissong echoed: “We were still taking fire when I saw the medevac birds come in. What they did next was the single greatest thing I have ever seen a pilot do. Instead of landing down at the COP, they landed on an extremely small flat spot next to OP Topside. They were taking heavy fire the whole time but managed to get our critical casualties evacuated. They landed in that same spot about 10 more times before the end of the day.” SPC McKaig said it best in an emotional e-mail that he wrote to the aviators
shortly after the engagement: “The risk your unit took just to help us will always be remembered.” Although sixteen American soldiers and four ANA soldiers were evacuated, many of them with life endangering wounds, not a single soldier that was placed aboard a MEDEVAC helicopter died. The extraordinary care of the MEDEVAC crews, and their incredible courage in flying into the smoke of burning vehicles and buildings and the heavy ground fire, is solely responsible for this miracle. They were the true angels of the battlefield of Wanat.

**Arrival of Quick Reaction Forces at Wanat**

Almost immediately upon CPT Myer’s urgent call that he was under “a ranch house style attack”, at 0430 the 1st Platoon of Chosen Company at Camp Blessing was alerted to move as a QRF to relieve Wanat. Assigned as the TF Rock QRF, the 1st Platoon of the Chosen Few was under the leadership of 1st Platoon Leader 1LT Aaron R. Thurman, supported by the Company 1SG Scott Beeson, and the 1st Platoon Sergeant SFC William S. Stockard. The QRF filled four HMMWVs. The vehicles were essentially ready to go, and the weapons were already mounted (a single .50 machine gun, two Mk-19 grenade launchers, and a single M240 machine gun). The QRF was delayed for a few minutes, while additional ammunition was piled onboard the HMMWVs for COP Kahler. A quick operations order was issued, and the QRF departed Camp Blessing at about 0515, just at BMNT. SFC Stockard noted: “The sun was starting to come up so it wasn’t too dark. We didn’t have NODs mounted or anything. We could see fine.” The QRF absolutely raced up the road from Camp Blessing, even knowing that there was only a single road into Wanat, and that employing ambushes or IEDs along a route to a TIC was a common ACM TTP. Running considerable risks to help their brothers fighting for their lives at Wanat, 1st Platoon never slowed down, and used their heavy weapons systems to fire into every ravine and draw along the road, and every other known or likely ambush position. The trip from Camp Blessing to Wanat usually required ninety minutes. The 1st Platoon QRF made it in 45 minutes. Apache gun tapes show the four
HMMWV convoy approaching the TCP at 0601, at that point within five minutes or less of arrival at Wanat.

As can well be imagined, the situation that the 1st Platoon arrived at was extremely confused. The TOW HMMWV and HESCOs were burning in the main COP, and the stall in the bazaar was furiously blazing from the heavy exchange of gunfire raking it from the American positions. The smoke from these various fires drifted to the east and piled up over the COP and road, obscuring visibility. OP Topside was still under intense attack. Communications between the QRF and COP Kahler were spotty at best, obscured by both the terrain and the combat action that the main COP was still engaged in. Heavy enemy fire continued to pour from the bazaar, hotel and mosque sweeping across the road. Only a few American soldiers remained at the 1st Squad TCP as most of them had moved to relieve OP Topside. The four HMMWVs stopped briefly at the TCP. The lead truck was welcomed to Wanat by a wave of small arms fire and an RPG that impacted within twenty meters of it.

Accounts by the various members of the 1st Platoon QRF are somewhat confused, as the soldiers were on unfamiliar terrain that was partially obscured by the dense, drifting smoke; and they almost immediately entered into close and intense combat with the insurgent force in the bazaar/mosque/hotel complex and atop the OP. SSG Kyle Silvernale, one of the 1st Platoon Squad Leaders, was introduced to the realities of the situation immediately upon his arrival when he linked up with SGT Hissong at the TCP. SGT Hissong recalled the meeting:

When they arrived I ran from my position to link up with them. The first person I saw was SSG Silvernale. I don’t remember the conversation but he later told me that when I got to him he asked me where the enemies were. He said I just looked around and didn’t really answer him so he asked me again and I said “I didn’t
know”. He said “What do you mean you don’t know” and my response was “…they’re everywhere man.”

The 1st Squad’s HMMWV blocked the road, and had to be moved aside for the convoy to proceed. To augment the depleted manpower at the TCP, 1st Platoon dropped two soldiers there. Additionally, the 1st Platoon medic who had accompanied the QRF bailed out of his HMMWV and immediately ran to the Casualty Collection Point (CCP) located at the CP to assist with the numerous casualties on the COP. 1SG Beeson, accompanied by his RTO, also exited his truck to reach CPT Myer and ascertain where his services were most needed. A quick shouted conversation and 1SG Beeson and his RTO and accompanying medic immediately turned and sprinted towards OP Topside.

1LT Thurman split his small force into two squads, one under his personal direction that he immediately led against the bazaar, and a second squad under Platoon Sergeant SFC William S. Stockard followed 1SG Beeson up to OP Topside. Two of the HMMWVs remained at the TCP where they retained freedom of movement. By this time the fighting at the TCP was nowhere near as severe as it had been just a few minutes earlier, but at several times it swelled up and the fighting became furious. Although 2d Platoon soldiers had denigrated the conduct of the ANA, one of the 1st Platoon soldiers who had just arrived was quite complimentary of their response to incoming enemy fire:

As I was pulling security…I heard incoming small arms whizzing by. SPC [not identified] yelled to me that the fire was coming from the compound to the west, he informed me of tracers coming out of the compound, so I traversed my turret and returned fire once I recognized the source of the fire. Ten meters to our north on the west side of the road was an ANA bunker. Four ANA were inside, they were shooting and taking fire from the same compound. As I fired into the windows, the ANA would fire an RPG into that same spot. Contact with the compound was over in roughly ten minutes.
The other 1st Platoon soldier at the TCP related a nearly identical story: “We began taking small arms fire from the windows of a compound to the west. CPL [not identified] returned fire with the M240B into the compound. Four ANA were also at the checkpoint and began firing with RPG’s and PKM into the compound. After about ten minutes of continuous fire into the compound we stopped receiving small arms.”

The remaining two HMMWS drove aggressively forward, past the bazaar to the northern end of the bazaar close to the mosque and hotel. According to 1SG Beeson, an extremely experienced soldier who passed through this area en-route to the OP, he believed this aggressive movement by the two heavily armed HMMWVs was entirely unexpected on the part of the insurgents, and the immediate onslaught by a portion of 1st Platoon caught them entirely off guard.

It was 1LT Thurman’s first full-fledged firefight as he charged into the bazaar, and his inauguration by fire would be a close, personal and violent engagement. The driver of the lead truck, which mounted an Mk-19, described the intense combat he immediately found himself embroiled in:

I drove my truck through the bazaar on the road to the north, past the hotel and mosque. I parked the truck using a rock wall as cover and blocked the road with the truck. SPC [unknown] shot a round with his M4 at the building to northeast doing a recon by fire. Immediately after his shot the truck came under PKM fire, SPC [unknown] shot the Mk-19 at the house and then a LAW when the ammo can was empty. I got out of driver’s seat and went to the back seat and prepped another ammo can so he could reload. I then went back to the driver’s side door and covered SPC [unknown] while he reloaded the Mk-19. I opened up with my M249 at the house and received effective SAF from the house. SGT [unknown] handed me an AT-4 to shoot, and took my M249, I got down off the road onto a lower terrace and shot the AT-4 at the house and hit the bottom floor. SPC [unknown]
then handed me another AT-4 he had in the turret for me to shoot, I went to the side of the truck and shot again at the house and knocked out a bottom floor window, at that point we stopped taking fire from the house. SGT [unknown] brought me a SMAW-D [M141 Bunker Defeating Munitions] and told me to shoot the house. I went to the same place I had shot the second AT-4 from and prepped the SMAW-D to fire it, but a MEDEVAC helicopter came in and I put the safety back on. After the MEDEVAC helicopter left I fired the SMAW-D at the house, but it went short and hit two terraces down from the house and bounced into the trees around the house and detonated. I got my M249 back…and started scanning for enemy we then came under effective small arms fire from the draw to the east to the road to the north. I engaged the enemy in my draw with my M249 and SPC [unknown] engaged them with the Mk-19. I went back the passenger seats and prepped all the Mk-19 ammo cans…I went back to the driver’s door and continued to engage enemy in the draw and in the bushes past the hotel. I received heavy small arms fire whenever I came up behind the door to shoot.

The assault squad was covered by the other HMMWVs; “…one to two AAF tried moving through the closest alleyway to myself to try and get behind the Mk-19 truck and the dismounts as they rounded the corner past the mosque. As soon as I had seen the AAF moving to try and get around the bazaar myself and the truck to my 5 o’clock engaged heavily with M240 and .50 cal. After about thirty to forty rounds I no longer see any AAF trying to maneuver in the alley.” SGT Hissong observed 1LT Thurman’s two HMMWVs roll past him:

When the trucks started to move through the bazaar, the enemy started firing a lot of [RPG] rockets, but 1st platoon returned with a massive amount of fire from their machine guns. It seemed like they drove the enemy out of the bazaar by the COP but the OP was
still taking fire. The CO had already told the Apaches to level several enemy occupied buildings in the area and they were doing a pretty good job with that, but it still seemed like I was hearing about a new casualty at the OP every few minutes.\textsuperscript{148}

SGT Aass watched the fight in progress:

A 1LT pushed through the bazaar and they had eyes on a compound that we were taking some pretty heavy fire from. The 1st Platoon guys were trying to mark the compound with 203 rounds and I was trying to get the Apaches to come in on what they were shooting at to destroy it, and eventually they did. They pretty much turned that building to ruins. I remember [Staff] SGT Silvernale from 1st Platoon getting on the radio and announcing that he was going to clear the hotel. I made sure nobody was firing at the hotel and he went in there with two or three other guys and cleared the hotel.\textsuperscript{149}

SSG Silvernale also described the intensity of the fighting that he engaged in, along with his Platoon Leader, as he cleared the bazaar area:

…I moved forward using the truck as cover from the direct fire we were receiving from the bazaar. I then moved to the mosque…unsure that SSG Joshua A. Salazar truck would make it through the bazaar I laid down covering fire into the bazaar and hotel. While waiting for the second truck to push through the bazaar SPC [unknown] and myself received two near RPG misses. The first RPG impacted the east wall of the mosque about four meters from us. The second RPG impacted the same wall but about three feet from our position knocking me flat down on my back. I received shrapnel in the left hand from the RPG and SPC [unknown] received shards of glass from the Mosque window in the right and left forearm. Getting back up I started to lay additional cover fire into the bazaar.
and hotel until SSG Salazar truck passed through. Moving to the northern end of the bazaar behind the second truck I noticed a fresh blood trail leading through an overhang between the hotel and the building just north of the hotel. Pushing past the building just north of the hotel my element came in to heavy enemy contact once again. We started taking effective direct small arms fire from the north and east. Multiple enemy positions to the east of our position, one directly behind the hotel…Six AAF due east of the draw about 100 meters, four AAF the house due east approximate 200-250 meters away unknown number of AAF, and the white house to the north approximately 400 meters four AAF….moved into the bazaar and started clearance operations throughout the bazaar. Starting at the 2d floor northeast corner of the hotel clearing a foot hold, I moved through the northeastern most room to the window in order to throw frags [fragmentary grenades] down on the enemy position in a flanking maneuver. Once clearing the foot hold we cleared the rest of the bazaar using an axe we found inside the hotel and shotgun to breach.150

While the fight in the bazaar was going on, SFC Stockard led a squad up to strengthen OP Topside. The OP was no longer under direct assault, but heavy and accurate small arms and RPG fire was still being directed at it from at least three promontories that overlooked it, and insurgents remained ensconced in the various dead spaces surrounding it. The first of these was a house approximately one hundred to 150 yards to the southeast and above the OP; the second was a large house/compound across the Wayskawdi River valley three hundred yards to the northeast; and the third was a large compound to the south of the TCP and COP. 1SG Beeson had by now reached OP Topside: “We just continued to hold our position under fire. We then took an RPG right above my head that hit the rock and a tree and forced me to the ground. Right after that either an RPG or a grenade landed in the CP area and blew up cutting the LRAS in two pieces and wounding [three soldiers].”151 SFC Stockard recalled succinctly, “They shot
RPGs and everything else they could at us.” To help with the insurgents that remained in close proximity, SFC Stockard threw a number of fragmentary grenades to his front. Another soldier in the firing position with him recalled, “Things died down a little while later.”

The ACM defenders in the area did not leave on their own volition, and they put up determined resistance. The driver of one of the HMMWVs remembered, “I was going to turn the truck around in case we needed to move quickly. As soon as I turned the truck around a volley of RPGs started hitting inside the wire [just to the west of the road]. 1LT [Thurman] jumped back in the truck. I looked to my left and saw an RPG explode about five meters from my truck. I told 1LT Thurman, ‘Sir, those RPGs are RIGHT here!’ He said, ‘I know, drive!’” He also recalled of the intensity of the fire that the ACM was directing at the 1st Platoon: “A bunch of RPGs started blowing up to our 9 o’clock. Maybe ten to fifteen RPGs. I’ve never seen that many RPGs hit at once before. It literally took my breath away to see. During this time we were still being effectively engaged by PKM and small arms. SPC [blank], the gunner of SSG Salazar’s truck, called out that he saw enemy in the trees between us and Topside. We engaged that area with small arms, frags [fragmentation hand grenades] and Mk-19. We just couldn’t seem to kill all of them.” After a stiff fight SGT Silvernale’s squad cleared the ACM from the bazaar, hotel and mosque complex. Once the enemy were pushed out of the buildings, 1LT Thurman had SGT Silvernale throw yellow smoke grenades directly onto the enemy positions to mark them, and then called in multiple Apache gun runs onto their heads, some as close as only meters away from Chosen Company soldiers. These gun runs were extremely accurate, and they proved devastating to the ACM. At 0639 the Apaches fired their first Hellfire missile into the large compound to the northeast of the COP, across the river valley. When more ACM fires continued to pour out of the building, a second Hellfire slammed into it at 0820 in response to the terse, exasperated command from the ground, “Level the buildings.” The wave of nearly continuous Apache gun and rocket runs began to slowly but perceptibly knock down the ACM resistance. The tide of battle began to turn about one hour after the ACM onslaught, and by 0830 the
Americans has clearly regained the initiative. The scales had been tipped in the direction of the beleaguered Chosen Few by the two Hedgerow Apache flights with their amazingly accurately delivered fires, the prompt response of the 1st Platoon QRF in driving furiously to Wanat; and the aggressive actions of the 1st Platoon QRF upon its arrival. After 0830 the combination of attack helicopters and CAS ensured that the ACM never regained the initiative.

TF Rock responded aggressively, and additional QRFs began to pour into Wanat as transportation assets were rounded up. The second Battalion QRF dispatched to Wanat was the 3d Platoon from Able Company, accompanied by the Company TAC and a Scout Section which traveled by HMMWV from Camp Blessing and arrived at about 0820 and assumed responsibility for the defense of the COP. This QRF was commanded by CPT David Nelson of Able Company, and consisted of six HMMWVs and thirty soldiers (25 from the 3d Platoon led by 1LT Brostrom’s best friend and Ranger buddy, 1LT Kennedy; and five from Company Headquarters). 1LT Kennedy had shared concerns regarding his friend’s mission, later documenting: “I didn’t like the fact that it was only one platoon and there was no plan to insert Americans onto the high ground to establish OPs, especially with how much enemy activity had gone on the prior missions.” As he pulled into COP Kahler and began to look for his friend, 1LT Kennedy understood that his worst fears were realized.

As soon as CPT Myer reported over the radio, “This is a Ranch House style attack” his fellow company commander CPT Dan Kearney of Battle Company alerted his entire company for an impending movement to Wanat. In the event, only one platoon was finally moved up to Wanat, the 3d Platoon led by 2LT Michael Moad, a 2006 graduate of the US Military Academy. This platoon arrived by CH-47 Chinooks, and reached Wanat several hours after the 1st Platoon QRF had arrived (at about 1330). 1LT Moad’s platoon was immediately assigned responsibility for OP Topside. 1LT Moad and his Platoon Sergeant, SFC Barbaret, were extremely displeased with the tactical position of OP Topside. As SFC
Barbaret observed, “My initial perception on the battlefield was why are we in the low ground, where are the fortifications, and why don’t we own any high ground?” Moad and Barbaret felt that the dead ground to the north and east could not be adequately covered from the position, and they observed that an Afghan compound 150 yards to the southeast overlooked the entire position. Accordingly, 2LT Moad transferred the OP to this compound, as he subsequently described:

I took the remainder of my platoon to the large compound about 150 meters to the east of OP Topside in the high ground. The compound offered dominating observation above the village of Wanat and a good majority of avenues of approach into the proposed Combat Outpost. Moreover, this position was previously used as an attack position against Chosen Company evident by the large amount of expended AK-47 brass. Lastly, we were not actually first to this location; however, one squad from the Able Company QRF had occupied and maintained this position until we relieved them in the mid-afternoon. Once in position, I had my platoon re-clear the compound and then selected positions for my soldiers to man while offering them the best cover and concealment. We used the compound as our defensive position and then sent out reconnaissance and surveillance teams to search the nearby area for any PIR. We set out Claymores in all likely avenues of approach and began to use surrounding rocks and sandbags we had carried into Wanat to build up defendable positions. Once in position my Platoon Forward Observer and I conducted terrain denial operations by using the 120mm which was still in operation around the Chosen Command Post. By nightfall, we broke down the OP Topside and moved the rest of my platoon and the Scout section to the compound.154

Additional assets continued to arrive at Wanat throughout the day. A reduced TF Rock TAC (Tactical Command Post) reached Wanat at about 1930, and a small American Other Defense Agency (ODA)
contingent, supporting a sizeable command of ANA Commandos, also landed by helicopter. By now, there were over two hundred ANA and American soldiers present at Wanat, many of them elite Afghan commandoes who were highly experienced and extremely well trained special operations soldiers.

Additional reinforcements continued to arrive on 14 July. The eighteen highly skilled and trained soldiers comprising a platoon of 101st Airborne Pathfinders arrived, and initiated careful clearance efforts of all dead ground around the Chosen company positions.

The Waigal District ANP detachment had not supported the Chosen Company defense of COP Kahler in any manner whatsoever, even though their District Headquarters was located directly in the combat zone. One Chosen Few SGT specifically recalled, “We pushed past COP Kahler down the road and received fire from alleyways and a house on the other side of the draw, and we returned fire. The ANP compound was in the vicinity to my left about 200 meters. There was no fire coming from there; they were not engaging the enemy though they could have. After the fight, I saw ANP walking around like nothing had happened. Their uniforms were all clean. They were carrying RPK and AK weapons.”

The ANA Commandos at first light on 14 July marched on the District Center, disarmed the ANP, and initiated a careful clearance of the town of Wanat itself. What the Afghan commandoes found proved to be both alarming and disconcerting. The ANP District Center, which served as the headquarters for a twenty man police force, was later discovered to contain:

- 76 AK-47 automatic rifles;
- 11 RPK 7.62mm light machine guns;
- Three PKM 7.62mm general purpose machine guns;
- Six RPG launchers;
• Three 12-gauge shotguns;

• One grenade launcher; and

• Six 9mm Pistols.

The majority of these weapons had been recently fired, and large quantities of 7.62 mm ammunition and RPG Grenades were discovered. SGT Grimm also noted:

In the Wanat ANP compound I saw it was untouched [his emphasis], though it was on the ingress/egress route of the AAF that attacked from the mosque and bazaar. I saw a lot of expended brass inside their perimeter, southwest side (facing us). ANA commandoes found a lot of bloody uniforms. All the ANP were in fresh brand new uniforms, which is unusual since they are only issued one uniform and usually they are dirty. They also appeared freshly shaven with razor nicks on their faces. There were also over one hundred weapons, including AKs, PKMs, PRKs, RPGs, pistols and shotguns. They were dirty and had recently been fired.155

Combined with the weapons that were found in the ANP compound by the Afghan Commandos, the evidence was considered to be overwhelming that the ANP had been in collusion with the ACM insurgents. As a result, the District Police Chief was subsequently relieved of his duties and arrested; and the ANP was disarmed. The District Governor was also arrested, although he was later released.156

Over one hundred structures in Wanat were searched, every single one of them vacant. Located within one house was a large medical cache suspected to treat ACM casualties, along with used BDUs.157 Another building yielded four AK-47 automatic rifles, two Realistic@ model TRC222 40 channel handheld radios, floodlights, blasting caps hidden inside a first aid kit, detonator cord, and a video camcorder with the tape still inside it. SGT Justin Grimm, now serving as a standard infantryman since his TOW
system was melted down to its suspension, assisted with the clearance of Wanat. In one house, SGT Grimm observed “I saw about six ANP ID cards, a four-inch stack of laminate, loose photos, everything to make ID cards. There was a camcorder and weapons.”\textsuperscript{158}

Small engagements continued unabated throughout the remainder of 13-14 July. Several of these were small parties of insurgents who were in hiding, and were attempting to ex-filtrate Wanat. By now, ISR assets to include a Predator UAV was scouring the countryside adjacent to COP Kahler, and the ACM were rapidly identified and engaged with various assets to include mortars, artillery, and CAS. CPT Pry noted of this augmentation of resources for Wanat, “It took at least an hour for the Predator UAV to move all the way to the engagement area from where it was diverted, which I believe was south of Jalalabad at the time that it was diverted.”\textsuperscript{159} Throughout the night of 13-14 July additional small groups of ACM insurgents continued to probe the American perimeter, seeking to identify gaps in the American defenses that they could in turn exploit. Their attempts were invariably brought to a quick cessation through the vigorous application of overwhelming American firepower, to include the presence of a devastating AC-130 gunship. By the afternoon of 15 July the Americans had expended an impressive amount of firepower at Wanat, to include almost one hundred 155mm artillery rounds; numerous bombs from various types of airplanes include A-10s, F-15s and AC-130 gunships; hundreds of 30mm cannon rounds, several score of 2.75” rockets, two Hellfire missiles delivered by the extremely accurate Apaches; and additional Hellfires delivered by other assets including UAVs.\textsuperscript{160} However, with the exception of a limited number of artillery projectiles and the majority of the Apache strikes, nearly all of this ordnance had been expended after 0630 on 13 July.

Although there was by now considerable combat power in Wanat, there were still problems with C2 as exercised by TF Rock. LTC Ostlund, TF Rock Commander and COL Preysler, TF Bayonet Commander, both visited Wanat several times but did not remain on-site. The TF Rock TAC that
remained at Wanat was under the supervision of MAJ Scott Himes, the TF Rock S-3 or Operations Officer. It should be noted that the TF Rock TAC actually only consisted of MAJ Himes, the FSO, the Assistant S-2, a single RTO, and two riflemen for security. 2LT Moad from Battle Company remembered that after briefly talking to the two company commanders at Wanat and receiving his platoon’s assignment, “I did not speak to CPT Myer again for the duration of my stay” and “I did not hear or see from him [CPT Nelson] again as well.” 2LT Moad made no mention of seeing any higher ranking officer than CPT Myer or CPT Nelson at Wanat. Upon his arrival, MAJ Himes “…found the SF team leader and discussed the way ahead. His initial desire was to conduct an approach march to the northeast along the valley floor with a march objective of Qualay-e-gal (four kilometers to the east).” In other words, the Special Forces commander wanted to aggressively maneuver to seal off the major route of ACM ingress, supply and logistics, and egress that ran down the deep defile of the Wayskawdi Khwar by seizing the small village of Qualay-e-gal, which entirely commanded every route through the Wayskawdi Khwar valley. If adopted, this tactical approach was certainly risky, although the massive quantity of American firepower and ISR assets would have clearly mitigated such risks. Still, it had the potential of inflicting a significant (if not crushing) defeat upon the ACM. MAJ Himes instead felt that “My concern was that we did not have adequate forces securing our northern flank” and thus the large and skilled Afghan Commando force was piecemealed to providing local security to COP Kahler. The American SF and Aghan commandos retained forty men within Wanat to serve as a powerful QRF, and pushed out after dark in all directions to seize and secure high ground to the northwest, northeast and southeast. By now an AC-130 gunship was also on station, and with these measures any ACM efforts directed against Wanat were doomed to fail. However, the fleeting opportunity to cut off the ACM retreat and inflict a catastrophic defeat upon the insurgents slipped away as the sun set over the towering ridges around Wanat.
TF Rock issued the Battalion TAC at Wanat a pair of contingencies at 1700 on 14 July, to either continue with the construction of the permanent COP, or to withdraw from the town. The officers and soldiers on the ground began to plan for either option.

**Evacuation**

1LT Matthew Colley, the Assistant S-2, recalled the moment that the decision was made to withdraw from COP Kahler:

> I was present when the decision was being made to eventually withdraw from the VPB…Bayonet 6 asked ROCK 6, who in turn asked CHOSEN 6 what should occur. The decision was made from the ground commander and was agreed upon throughout the chain of command.\(^{164}\)

Just as a variety of factors had influenced the decision to establish COP Kahler at Wanat, a range of factors influenced the decision on the night of 14 July to evacuate. The initial recommendation came from CPT Myer, Chosen Company Commander, to leave Wanat. That recommendation was vetted by both the TF Rock and TF Bayonet Commander, and was shortly afterwards confirmed by the CJTF-101 Commander, MG Jeffrey J. Schloesser, who depended upon the recommendations provided by TF Rock and TF Bayonet since he had never personally visited the Waigal Valley (although BG Milley had previously flown into Bella). The core logic of this approach was later provided by both CPT Myer and LTC Ostlund. CPT Myer:

> After the fight on July 13\(^{th}\) in Wanat, the situation for occupation was drastically changed. No matter how much coalition forces conducted I/O to explain/battle the circumstances for occupation of Wanat, it would be viewed as hostile. The population in and around Wanat had clearly supported the enemy and did not maintain the conditions
for coalition force support and projects. Wanat is ideal because of the ground LOC open to the rest of the BN, but that would take significant manpower to keep open.

TF Duke had a significant role in the decision to leave Wanat. It could have been handed to them, but with significantly more personnel required to hold the ground and expand influence on the population. From my understanding, that is personnel that they were not willing to put there.

LTC Ostlund:

Working the LOOs was going to take an incredible influx of resources for security, the district governor was going to need to be replaced, the market was shot up [in fact one building in the bazaar was burned to the ground] and we were not going to reward the area with $1.4 million in projects – the conditions radically changed on the morning of 13 Jul 08 and the Wanat population priced themselves out of our desire to assist them at that time.

The incoming unit was not able to assume Bella and was unwilling to assume Wanat (COP Kahler). I supported pulling out of the area, finishing the hard ball road to Wanat, which would allow for safer and routine patrolling into the area, while the governor was replaced and the police were replaced or retrained, and the population was re-engaged. I thought the argument – “we paid too much to abandon this place” was a DUMB emotional v. logical, tactical, and supportable argument.165

At the heart of the decision, TF Duke simply had no interest in assuming responsibility for COP Kahler at Wanat. Given the apparent hostile population (a population which had been strongly pro-US in May 2007), and the powerful attack that the ACM had been able to launch on the morning of 13 July, TF Duke
apparently felt that Wanat was too “hot” a location for them to operate from. Since the incoming unit demurred to operate it, COP Kahler was to be abandoned.

On the morning of 15 July 15th, the final word came down from CJTF-101 through TF Bayonet and TF Rock to abandon Wanat, and the American force immediately began the process of withdrawal. Helicopters began arriving, and trucks began pouring up from Camp Blessing. The retrograde movement was executed as assets were available and supplies could be loaded. The final helicopter flight contained the seven remaining Chosen One mortar men and their mortars. By 0430 on 15 July all of the Americans had returned safely to their respective COPs.166 Only a few partially filled in fighting positions remained of COP Kahler. The Americans had abandoned Wanat to the insurgents.

Aftermath

As the sun slowly set on the battered buildings of Wanat in the evening of 13 July, both contestants had sustained heavy losses. American casualties were nine killed, and 27 wounded. Of the wounded, sixteen were seriously enough wounded that they were evacuated from the battlefield, while eleven were treated at Wanat and returned to duty. Five ANA were wounded, four seriously enough for evacuation.

All of the American KIA were sustained in the first two hours of combat (between 0420 and 0630 in the morning). On the day that he heard that his brother had been killed, Air Force Airman Zwilling completed the necessary maintenance procedures preparing his U-2 for a flight over Afghanistan, before he headed home for his brother’s funeral. The U-2 flew overhead with a memorial to SPC Zwilling proudly adorning its nose.

ACM casualties are, of course, speculative. The ACM insurgents are highly skilled at evacuating their wounded and dead from the battlefield, and recovering their casualties is such an extremely high priority for the insurgents that it can best considered to be a primacy. It is rare for American soldiers to
do more than locate a few scattered blood trails. 2LT Moad was assigned responsibility for OP Topside. While there, he assessed his surroundings:

As I sat in the OP I observed the 30mm cannon strafe marks in the ground just 1-2 meters outside the OP itself just in front of the sandbag defensive wall which was ultimately inside the wire about 10 meters from the sandbags [1LT Moad was describing the sandbag wall on the sleeping terrace, and observed 30mm rounds that were fired during the second gun run at the insurgent in the brush just north of the OP at 0524]. I believe this is where the AAF was killed and lay until recovered by the Scouts… I remember the body distinctly: he was wearing traditional Afghan top and bottom clothing. I think the top was blue and bottoms were tan. He was wearing a green rack system, though I didn't check the contents. From what the Scouts said, he did have an AK-47….

The body of a single ACM was recovered from the Concertina wire at the OP, where he was entangled. This is almost certainly the insurgent that SPC McKaig killed with his Claymore. The Chosen Company soldier who recovered his corpse recalled: “I seen an enemy KIA in the wire…we pulled him out of the wire he was wearing a chest rig and off white clothing and a BDU coat under his top after getting him out of the wire we pulled him down over near the OP and searched him the enemy KIA had three AK-47 mags on him all were empty no AK-47 was found. Nothing else was on the enemy KIA.” The Afghan commandos that had reinforced Wanat identified the dead ACM as being “Arab” rather than Afghan, strongly intimating that he was a foreign fighter. Estimates of ACM KIA range from 21 to 52, with another 45 believed to have been WIA, based primarily upon SIGINT intercepts from various sources.

Certainly the ACM force was catastrophically injured, possibly to include the loss of key leadership, although assessing the extent of their losses is impossible because the ACM regularly dissolves into small parties to ex-filtrate from the scene of an engagement. The camcorder that was subsequently recovered
from the village of Wanat was clearly intended to document the tactical victory that the ACM expected. The fact that no videotape of this assault has materialized as of March 2009, nor have any ACM claims of successes or accomplishments achieved at Wanat been trumpeted as an IO victory, suggests that the ACM had very few, if any, accomplishments or advantages achieved at the tactical level to exploit.170

With the evacuation from Wanat, there was no longer a coalition presence in the Waigal Valley. Ranch House was evacuated in October 2007. Bella was evacuated on 8 July 2008. Wanat was evacuated on 15 July 2008. With this action, sixteen months of campaigning by 1-32 Infantry, and fourteen months of campaigning by TF Rock, from April 2006 through July 2008, was abrogated. The Waigal Valley residents who had cooperated or worked with the coalition forces for the past three years were abandoned to their fates at the hands of the insurgents. An entire valley was ceded to ACM control.171

1 HESCOs are woven metal baskets, lined with heavy fabric, shipped flat, and easily erected and filled. They are manufactured by the HESCO Barrier Ltd. Company of England. Per their company marketing literature: “HESCO Concertainer® is a prefabricated, multi-cellular system, made of Galvan coated steel welded mesh and lined with non-woven polypropylene geotextile.” Essentially, HESCO barriers are nothing more than the gabions used in military engineering throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, giant baskets filled with dirt, gravel, rock or any other available materials, but made of metal mesh instead of the woven sticks of their forefathers.


3 SFC Dzwik Interview with Mr. Cubbison.
4 Article 15-6 Investigation.
5 SFC Dzwik interview with Cubbison.
6 Article 15-6 Investigation.
7 Colonel Ostlund, “Personal Statement Regarding Engagement at Wanat.”
8 SFC David Dzwik, Personal Interview performed by Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute, April 2, 2009.
9 LTC Kevin Anderson, USMCR, Personal Interview performed by Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute, April 2, 2009.
10 LTC Lynch Interview. This statement was completely and independently verified by the CJTF-101 G-2. LTC Pierre Gervais, Personal Interview with Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, on June 9, 2009.
11 CPL Stafford Interview.
12 SFC Dzwik Personal Interview.
13 Statement of 1LT Kennedy, Article 15-6 Investigation.
15 CPT Myer Personal Interview.
16 SGT Aass Personal Interview.
18 CPT Devin George, Personal Statement, “Logistics at Wanat.” (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on 22 April 2009).
20 LTC Anderson Personal Interview.
21 “Ahmad,” Personal Statements from Afghan citizen of Waigal Valley (E-mail to Mr. Matt Matthews, CSI, November 13, 2008 and E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, March 2, 2009). Note: Because of Security Considerations, “Ahmad” has requested that his true name not be revealed.
22 Article 15-6 Investigation.
23 SFC Dzwik Personal Interview.
24 SGT Dzwik Statement and 1LT Moad Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
26 SFC Dzwik Personal Interview.
27 CPT Myer Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
28 SGT Pitts Personal Interview.
29 CPL Stafford Personal Interview.
30 SFC Dzwik Personal Interview.
31 SGT Hissong Statement.
32 Unfortunately, during the time frame during which this study was prepared, this battery was in the process of re-deploying from Afghanistan and was then on block leave, and no members of the Battery were available to participate in the research of their role at Wanat.
33 SFC Dzwik Personal Interview.
34 Article 15-6 Investigation.
35 SPC Michael Santiago Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
36 CPT Glen Personal Interview.
37 SGT Dzwik Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
39 CPL Stafford Personal Interview.
40 SGT Hissong Statement.
41 Article 15-6 Investigation.
42 SGT Aass Personal Interview.
43 Article 15-6 Investigation.
44 SGT Jesse Queck Statement, SGT Justin Grimm Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
45 Article 15-6 Investigation.
46 CPL Stafford Personal Interview and SGT Ryan Pitts Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
47 Article 15-6 Investigation.
48 Colonel Ostlund, Personal Statement Regarding Engagement at Wanat.
49 CPT Myer Personal Interview; SGT Aass Personal Interview.
50 CPT Pry Personal Interview.
51 SPC Chris McKaig, Personal Statement, “Stand To at Wanat.” (E-mail to Mr. Matt Matthews, CSI, January 22, 2009).
53 Masters, Bugles and a Tiger, 230.
55 SFC David Dzwik, Personal Interview performed by Mr. Matt Matthews, US Army Combat Study Institute, October 21, 2008.
56 SGT Chavez Personal Interview and SFC Dzwik Personal Interview with Cubbison.
57 CPT Myer Personal Interview.
58 SGT Grimm Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
59 Hissong Statement; SPC Tyler Hanson Personal Interview, performed by Mr. Matt Matthews, US Army Combat Studies Institute, November 19, 2008.
61 CPT Pry Personal Interview.
62 LTC Gervais Personal Interview.
63 Author’s Assessment; independently supported by ILT Colley Statement and CPT Pry Personal Interview.
64 Lt. Colley Statement; CPT Pry Personal Interview.
65 Colonel Ostlund, Personal Statement Regarding Engagement at Wanat.
66 CW2 Isaac Smith, Personal Interview with Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison on May 19, 2009; and LTC John Lynch, Personal Interview with Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison on May 12, 2009.
67 Colonel Charles Preysler, “Statements on Afghanistan Deployment and Wanat Engagement” (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on May 19, 2009.
68 Himes, Personal Interview. The author personally confirmed this through examination of TF Rock Intelligence Summaries prepared in late June and early July, 2008; all of which consistently mention the presence of a large, well-organized, and well-led ACM force operating against Bella throughout this timeframe.
71 ILT Matthew A. Colley, Statement on Afghanistan Deployment (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, March 25, 2009).
72 Major Himes Interview; CPT Pry Interview.
73 LTC Pierre Gervais, Personal Interview, performed by Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on June 9, 2009.
74 CPT Pry Interview.
75 LTC Hinton Interview.
76 CPT Matthew Myer, Personal Interview with Mr. Matt Matthews, US Army Combat Studies Institute on December 1, 2008.
77 Statement of SFC David Dzwik, Article 15-6 Investigation.
78 The similarity in the Margah Attack on January 10, 2007 and the Wanat Attack was independently identified by Colonel Chris Toner, former Commander of 2-87 Infantry during the 2006-2007 Campaign in Afghanistan, during personal conversations with Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute. The author had the privilege to observe the Margah Outpost Attack from the Joint Operations Center at Bagram Air Force Base.
79 CONOP ROCK MOVE Operations Order.
80 ILT Colley Statement.
81 CPT Pry Interview. Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) and Human Intelligence (HUMINT).
in a relatively large bottle. Thus, the young SPC is noting that he used such quantities of CLP that should have been

84 SGT Erik Aass Interview; Statement of SSG Luis Repesa, Article 15-6 Investigation.
85 Statement of Drew T. Bowman, Human Terrain Team (HTT) Team Leader (E-mail to Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, dated 12 February 2009).
87 LT Colley Statement; SGT Erick J. Rodas, “Statement on Raven UAVs.” (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, Combat Studies Institute, 27 February 2009); and Major Himes Interview. The author personally observed a 3-71 Cavalry, 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division Raven being flown into a pine grove and failing to emerge at Fort Polk, Louisiana in May 2008. A dual failure of Raven UAVs is documented to have occurred at the Battle of Fallujah, Iraq in 2004. Matt M. Matthews, Operation AL FAJR: A Study in Army and Marine Corps Joint Operations (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 42.
88 SFC Dzwik Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
89 LTC Hinton Interview.
91 ILT Michael Moad, Personal Statement on Wanat (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, US Army Combat Studies Institute on March 17, 2009).
92 CPL Oakes Personal Interview.
94 Article 15-6 Investigation.
95 CPL Stafford Personal Interview.
96 SFC Dzwik Personal Interview with Cubbison.
97 Article 15-6 Investigation.
98 SPC May Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
99 Article 15-6 Investigation.
100 SGT Chavez Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
101 PFC Scott Stenoski, Personal Interview performed by Mr. Matt Matthews, US Army Combat Studies Institute, November 4, 2008.
102 SGT Chavez Personal Interview.
103 Article 15-6 Investigation
104 SSG Phillips Statement, SGT Queck Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation. Another soldier noted that this SAW later operated perfectly once the barrel had been replaced, suggesting that the first barrel had some type of flaw or obstruction in it.
105 Article 15-6 Investigation
106 SPC Scantlin Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
107 Article 15-6 Investigation.
108 CW2 Smith Personal Interview.
109 Colonel Ostlund, Statement on Fight at Wanat.
110 LTC Stephen J. Maranian, “Field Artillery Fires in the Mountains of Afghanistan” Fires (July-September 2008), 36.
111 SGT Aass Personal Interview; SGT Phillips Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
112 SFC David Dzwik Personal Interview with Matthews.
113 “CLP” refers to Break-Free@ brand CLP- Cleaner, Lubricant and Preservative, the standard US Army and tactical weapons weapon cleaner and lubricant. “Febreze@” is a household laundry product that comes in a relatively large bottle. Thus, the young SPC is noting that he used such quantities of CLP that should have been
adequate to have cleaned debris and fouling from the weapon, and provided sufficient lubrication for further operation of the SAW.

114 SGT Aass Personal Interview.
115 PFC Krupa Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
116 Article 15-6 Investigation; SGT Hissong Statement.
117 SSG Samaroo Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
118 Article 15-6 Investigation.
119 SGT Chavez Personal Interview.
120 SFC Dzwik Personal Interview with Matthews.
121 SGT Hissong Statement, “Combat Outpost Kahler.”
122 This assessment is based upon extensive discussions by the author with the three Marines engaged as ETTs at Wanat.
123 Article 15-6 Investigation.
124 The defense of OP Topside is described in the following sources: SGT Pitts, SPC McKaig, CPL Stafford Personal Interviews; Statements of SGT Pitts, SGT McKaig, SPC Stafford and SGT Gobble in Article 15-6 Investigation; and Bill Rautenstrauch, “Battle at Wanat, SPC Christopher McKaig” LeGrand (Oregon) Observer (August 30, 2008) available from: http://www.lagrandeobserver.com/Features/Portraits/Battle-at-Wanat accessed 2 Feb 2009-02-02 (accessed on 2 February 2009).
126 SPC Chris McKaig, Personal Statement, “Stand To at Wanat.” (E-mail to Mr. Matt Matthews, CSI, January 22, 2009).
127 Personal discussions with Colonel David Brostrom (US Army, Retired), 26-27 March 2009 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
128 SSG Benton Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
129 SSG Samaroo Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
130 First SGT Beeson Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation. Confirmed by 1SG Scott Beeson, Discussions with regarding Actions at OP Topside. (Phone conversation with Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, March 16, 2009).
131 Article 15-6 Investigation.
132 LTC Lynch Personal Interview.
134 SGT Aass Personal Interview.
135 Lt. Colley Statement.
136 CPT Myer Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
137 Statement of CPT Justin Madill.
138 Statement of CPT Justin Madill.
139 CW2 Wayne A. McDonald, Personal Statement, FOB Fenty, Jalalabad Airfield, Afghanistan, July 14, 2008.
140 CW2 Smith Personal Interview.
141 CW2 Smith Interview and CPT Kevin King, Statement “Wanat” (E-mail to Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, on May 14, 2009).
142 SFC Stockard Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
143 SGT Pitts Personal Interview.
144 SGT Hissong Statement, “Combat Outpost Kahler.”
145 SPC Chris McKaig, E-mail of Thanks to 1SG John Morales, TF Out Front (5 August 2008).
146 SGT Hissong Statement, “Combat Outpost Kahler.”
147 Article 15-6 Investigation.
148 SGT Hissong Statement, “Combat Outpost Kahler.”
149 SGT Aass Personal Interview.
SSG Silvernale Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
151 SGT Beeson Statement, AR 15-6 Investigation.
153 1LT Kennedy Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
154 1LT Moad Statement.
155 SGT Justin Grimm Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
157 SFC Barbaret Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
158 SGT Justin Grimm Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
159 CPT Pry Personal Interview.
160 Colonel Charles Preysler, “Presentation of Collateral Investigation Results to the Family of 1LT Jonathan P. Brostrom” (not dated).
161 Major Himes Personal Interview.
162 1LT Moad Statement.
163 Statement of Major Himes, Article 15-6 Investigation.
164 1LT Colley Statement.
165 Joint Statement, Colonel Ostlund and CPT Myer.
166 Statement of Major Himes, Article 15-6 Investigation.
167 1LT Moad Statement.
168 Article 15-6 Investigation.
169 Preysler, “Presentation of Collateral Investigation Results to the Family of 1LT Jonathan P. Brostrom.”
170 It should be noted that in Ramadi, Iraq in 2004 the Marines claimed that the video of an insurgent defeat of a Marine sniper team was playing on television before the Marine patrol investigating the circumstances had even reported. Although possibly apocryphal, this suggests that by nine months after the defeat a video would certainly have materialized, if one ever existed. David J. Morris, “The Big Suck: Notes from the Jarhead Underground.” Virginia Quarterly Review 83:1 (Winter 2007), 149.
Chapter 3

“...unforgiving of tactical error, momentary inattention, or cultural ignorance”

Conclusions, Analysis, System Recommendations, and COIN Lessons Learned

“...effects in war seldom result from a single cause; there are usually several concurrent causes. It is therefore not enough to trace, however honestly and objectively, a sequence of events back to their origin; each identifiable cause still has to be correctly assessed.”

General Carl Von Clausewitz\(^1\)

The engagement that occurred at COP Kahler in Wanat, Waigal District, Nuristan Province, Afghanistan on the morning of 13 July 2008 was an American tactical victory. Less than fifty American defenders, and a small ANA contingent of two dozen soldiers, repelled a determined, carefully planned and coordinated assault by at least 150 heavily armed, disciplined insurgents who attacked with nearly perfect tactical intelligence, and with highly skilled field craft that permitted them to achieve total tactical and operational surprise. Yet for all of their advantages, not a single one of the ACM tactical objectives that can be determined were achieved. Defeat of the ACM objectives was entirely due to the tactical skills, high morale and esprit-de-corps, superb officer and NCO leadership, and combat determination of 2d Platoon, Chosen Company that prevailed over this intense, aggressive, resourceful ACM assault.

Nine American soldiers were killed during this engagement, and 27 were wounded, sixteen seriously enough to demand evacuation. American commanders were not prepared to sustain such heavy casualties, particularly this close to the end of their deployment. COP Kahler was abandoned within 48 hours at
CJTF-101 orders, even though it had just withstood a viciously pressed enemy assault, and was no longer endangered.

Evacuation of COP Kahler resulted in the total abandonment of the Waigal Valley by American forces, and the complete withdrawal of any American presence from the Waigal Valley. This abrogated sixteen months of effort on the part of 1-32 Infantry, 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division; and fourteen months of efforts on the part of Chosen Company, 2-503 Infantry, 173d BCT. On 15 July 2008 three full seasons of campaigning in the Waigal Valley were concluded in an American operational defeat.

Withdrawal under perceived duress at COP Kahler resulted in a significant IO victory for the ACM, and considerable loss of face and honor by the Americans. Friends of the central government and coalition forces in the Waigal Valley were abandoned to their fate. Given the realities of the honor-based, warrior-ethos ethnic groups within the Pech and Waigal Valleys (Nuristani and Safi Pashai), American and Afghan government prestige may have been irreparably harmed, and unarguably has been catastrophically diminished. Beginning in 2008 and continuing through 2009, the Waigal Valley serves as a conduit for insurgents moving from Pakistan into central Afghanistan (Kabul vicinity), and increased insurgent attacks in central Afghanistan are a direct result of the surrender of this valley. Restoring coalition presence in the Waigal Valley, and interrupting these ACM lines of communications and logistics, will require years of sustained sacrifice and labor.

This Chapter provides a range of analysis regarding the circumstances of this engagement. The first portion of this Chapter is an objective assessment of the tactical and strategic factors that influenced the Engagement at Wanat. This section provides positive conclusions that can be documented regarding events at Wanat, Afghanistan on 13 July 2008. The second portion of this Chapter is an assessment of the factors that influenced the Engagement at Wanat. Analysis provided in this section is subjective, and the influence or effects caused by these events cannot be absolutely quantified. The third portion of this
Chapter provides succinct recommendations identified in this report regarding specific system failures that influenced events at Wanat. The fourth portion of this Chapter is a subjective assessment of how Wanat can contribute to knowledge of counterinsurgency doctrine and tactics, specifically as they are being implemented in Afghanistan today by coalition forces.

By 1932, British soldiers had spent nearly a full century fighting in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Years of conflict, pitched battles, engagements, and skirmishes that had occurred between the British regulars and Afghan irregular were brutal, vicious, and unrelenting. One historian has noted of the fighting that the British soldiers experienced in this rugged, remote part of the world: “It was a savage, cruel and peculiar kind of mountain warfare, frequently driven by religious zealotry on the tribal side, and it was singularly unforgiving of tactical error, momentary inattention, or cultural ignorance.” American soldiers deployed in northeastern Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008 found that little had changed in seven decades. This chapter will discuss the unforgiving tactical errors, momentary inattention and cultural ignorance that shaped the events at Wanat on the morning of 13 July 2008.

**Conclusions**

The successful defense of COP Kahler at Wanat was made possible by the following measures taken by 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few from the morning of 9 July through dusk on 12 July.

The 2d Platoon, Chosen Company leadership made the best possible use of Class IV (construction materials) assets on hand at Wanat. All available Concertina wire was installed, and all available Concertina stakes and poles were employed. All available HESCOs were emplaced, and based upon limitations of the construction equipment available at Wanat (a single Bobcat with bulldozer blade that ran out of gas on 11July) all available HESCOs were filled to the maximum extent possible. All available
sandbags were maximized. All available weapon systems were positioned with established fields of fire and range cards. With the exception of weapons systems either suppressed or destroyed by the ACM, all weapon systems were optimally positioned. Available hand tools were used to the maximum extent possible, and given the tools available, the positions were excavated to the greatest depth feasible. Given the constraints of available potable water at the COP, the soldiers worked to the maximum extent possible, and most soldiers complained of being “dehydrated” at some point in the four days before the engagement. The soldiers could not have worked any harder to improve their positions without sustaining hot weather injuries. The position would not have survived the determined attack made on the morning of 13 July without the rudimentary fortifications that 2d Platoon were able to construct, and defensive measures established, even given the severe constraints under which they labored.

2d Platoon leadership ensured that the platoon deployed with sufficient ammunition. The Platoon deployed with the maximum amount of ammunition that they could carry onboard their HMMWVs, and received additional ammunition by helicopter from Bella on 9 July. During the two hour sustained engagement between 0420 and 0630 on 13 July, the Platoon was never constrained by lack of ammunition. This precaution by 2d Platoon leadership ensured that COP Kahler was not overrun or captured. Both the 1st Platoon QRF, and the numerous MEDEVACS flying into COP Kahler, carried considerable quantities of additional ammunition into Wanat. This supplemental ammunition arrived at precisely the right time to enable the 2d Platoon to sustain the high, cyclic rates of fire that were necessary to maintain their successful defense of COP Kahler.

2d Platoon leadership maintained high standards of discipline within the platoon. Numerous candid photographs taken by soldiers at COP Kahler from 9-12 July do not evince a single instance of soldiers being out of proper uniform, or not wearing their personal protective equipment. CONOP ROCK MOVE came at the end of a 15-month deployment, but no degradation of discipline was documented, or was
reported by members of the platoon. Rigid adherence to high standards of discipline, to particularly include the “stand-to” measures that permitted the platoon to successfully withstand the determined attack, reflect great credit upon the leadership of 2d Platoon and Chosen Company.

“Stand To” at 0400 (approx 75 minutes before BMNT) resulted in the garrison of COP Kahler being alert, awake, all defensive positions were fully manned, and all soldiers were fully equipped and armed prior to attack being launched. This standard defensive measure, first documented by Major Robert Rogers of Rogers Rangers, and meticulously implemented by 2d Platoon leadership, prevented disaster.

All tactical maneuvers, principally focused upon organizing, dispatching and leading QRFs to the assistance of OP Topside, were implemented by platoon leadership, initially 1LT Brostrom, and following his death by individual platoon NCOs using their own situational awareness and initiative in the best tradition of the US Army NCO corps. SFC Dzwik has noted that: “I was reduced to a rifleman for most of the fight” but that “…even when their current leadership was wounded or doing something else, each individual soldier acted as if he was an NCO.” SGT Aass, as the Company Commander’s RTO in a position to know, echoed: “whenever one leader went down, there was always somebody to take over in his position. Then when somebody who was senior to that person showed up at whatever point, there was yet another seamless transition. There were never any arguments over who was in charge. Somebody was always in charge.” 4 This engagement serves as a role model for NCO initiative and leadership.

Finally, every paratrooper, engineer and Marine at COP Kahler demonstrated magnificent courage, devotion to duty, and selfless sacrifice throughout the engagement at Wanat. Not a single soldier ever faltered in their determination to conquer. The individual exploits of bravery are too numerous to document, even in a full length narrative. A few of the more spectacular exploits were SPC Abad, mortally wounded, continuing to hand ammunition to SGT Chavez. SGT Chavez continued to pull SPC Abad to safety even while he was himself seriously wounded. SSG Phillips throwing a smoldering, live
TOW missile out of the Command Post, under intense enemy fire. 1LT Brostrom and SPC Hovater sprinted through grazing machine gun fire to rush to the succor of OP Topside, invisible to them at that moment because it was obscured by the bursting of multiple RPGs, throwing themselves into a veritable maelstrom of fire. PFC Ayers and SPC McKaig continued to expose themselves to return fire at the insurgents, even after SPC Ayers was shot directly in his helmet. CPT Myer personally moved to the OP to assess the number and condition of his soldiers that had been wounded in the fighting there. The MEDEVAC crews landed their helicopters on a small terrace under accurate and intense enemy fire, through heavy smoke that completely obscured their vision, to save the lives of desperately wounded soldiers. Numerous Silver Stars and other awards for valor were distributed for the paratrooper’s actions at Wanat. Not for the first time in 235 years of American military history, enemy soldiers found themselves facing grimly determined American warriors who could be killed, but could never be defeated.

TF Bayonet Commander, COL Presyler, in a post-engagement interview with *Stars and Stripes* stated: “As far as I know, and I know a lot, it was not overrun in any shape, manner or form. It was close combat to be sure — hand grenade range. The enemy never got into the main position.” This statement requires careful evaluation and analysis.

During the engagement, COP Kahler itself was never overrun or penetrated by the enemy. The attack on COP Kahler was primarily performed by firepower and was intended to suppress the American defenders at the COP and eliminate their heavy weapons (TOW and mortars); isolate COP Kahler from OP Topside; and prevent communications between and the movement of reinforcements from COP Kahler to OP Topside. Although Marine Corporal Oakes observed several insurgent rushes upon the perimeter, a determined assault on COP Kahler was never made, and the defensive perimeter at COP Kahler was never penetrated. The ACM employed an intense, well-planned, accurate, and disciplined
firepower attack with targeting based upon positive intelligence against COP Kahler to achieve their tactical objectives. Nevertheless, the ACM failed in their objectives. The 2d Platoon was able to reinforce OP Topside at numerous times during the engagement. Early in the engagement, 1LT Brostrom and SPC Hovater were able to pass through ACM forces located in the bazaar and reach the OP. Shortly thereafter, SSG Samaroo led a QRF from the TCP towards OP Topside. This QRF never actually reached the OP, but it was not deterred by enemy action, rather it became focused on evacuating the wounded party containing SGT Gobble, and SPCs Stafford and McKaig. This necessary task accomplished, SSG Samaroo then led another QRF party from the TCP that initially restored the situation at OP Topside at a critical moment. This QRF included SGT “Ira” Garcia and other soldiers that had raced from COP Kahler to the TCP to assist the OP. Finally, the large QRF under SFC Dzwik and SSG Phillips was again able to reach the OP from the COP proper. CPT Myer was able to travel to OP Topside by himself, assess the situation, and safely return to the CP. Finally, 1SG Beeson and his RTO were also able to reach the OP from the Command Post at COP Kahler. The ACM insurgents located in the bazaar and hotel complex, and engaging COP Kahler from all cardinal directions, failed in their objective to isolate the OP from the COP.

OP Topside was not overrun by the enemy. Although not rigidly defined by the US Army or historians, “overrun” implies that a defensive perimeter was breached, a defensive position was entirely occupied by hostile forces, that hostile forces exercised tactical control over a defensive position, and that hostile forces were taking actions to consolidate a defensive position for their own use/purposes (including IO exploitation). None of these conditions were ever achieved by the ACM at OP Topside.

However, the perimeter defenses of OP Topside were successfully penetrated by the ACM. Although not rigidly defined by the US Army or historians, “penetration” implies that a defensive perimeter was breached, that some hostile forces entered into a defensive position (either through fire or physical
occupation), and that combat is actually occurring within a friendly defensive position. All of these conditions were achieved during at least one portion of the engagement, when 1LT Brostrom, SPC Rainey and SPC Hovater were surprised and killed by an enemy intruder within the OP. Two surviving soldiers clearly heard, during this engagement, SPC Rainey urgently shouting “he is right behind the sandbag” which could only have referred to the section of sandbag wall constructed on the sleeping terrace, within the Concertina perimeter. During this engagement at least one of the soldiers was also heard to shout: “He’s inside the wire.” 1LT Brostrom’s fatal gunshot wounds are consistent with being surprised from the rear and side, and Rainey had been shot in the back, possibly while attempting to get the machine gun into operation on the sleeping terrace. SPC McKaig successfully engaged an insurgent crossing the Concertina wire with a Claymore. SFC Barbaret, the Platoon Sergeant of the 3d Platoon, Battle Company which had been dispatched as a QRF from the Korengal Valley to Wanat, remembered, “We assisted in the collection of the personal effects from OP Topside and searched one AAF KIA right outside of the OP.” Another SSG, a member of one of the various QRFs that deployed to Wanat and then moved up to the OP, observed: “I only saw one enemy KIA. His body was stuck in the wire and looked as if he had been hit with a Claymore mine. I noticed that the enemy body was barefoot. When I went to replace the Claymore that had been used previously I found the enemy’s shoes in a ditch within ten meters from the fighting position I had occupied. It was clear that the enemy had made it inside the wire on that side of the base and was killed before he could make his way any further.” SGT Gobble, during his fighting withdrawal from the OP, also remembered, “I began crawling to the next one [next American soldier killed on the sleeping terrace] and that was when I got shot at by a man on the other side of a large rock inside the OP.” SSG Samaroo successfully engaged an insurgent standing on a rock and shooting into the OP. When Marine ETT Corporal Oakes arrived on the OP, he observed and engaged: “…up at the top OP, there was an insurgent climbing over the top of the Concertina wire.” A SSG who was a member of the 1st Platoon QRF specifically noted: “I saw a place where the outer Concertina wire
surrounding the OP was breached and vegetation appeared trampled. It appeared that somebody could have come from the draw or north end of the bazaar to get inside the OP perimeter.” The initial AH-64 Apache gun run, conducted only a minute after the attack helicopters’ arrival at Wanat, also engaged an insurgent briefly visible in the heavy brush within a few feet to the north of the OP’s northern position, and within the Concertina wire perimeter. SGT Pitts could hear insurgents talking outside his fighting position as he lay alone, helpless and wounded, and these insurgents were so close that soldiers in the CP could hear them over SGT Pitt’s hand mike. CPT Myer discarded an insurgent hand grenade that had not detonated during his brief visit within the OP position, and SPC McKaig remembered dodging rocks that the ACM accurately tossed into Topside.

OP Topside’s defensive perimeter was positively penetrated, and fighting occurred within the OP perimeter, but OP Topside was never overrun. Although American defenders of OP Topside suffered severe casualties, no American prisoners were taken, the remains of all American casualties were retained under American control, no American arms or equipment are known to have been seized, and to date no propaganda video tape or documentation of the attack on OP Topside has surfaced.

Yet although the 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few had achieved a magnificent tactical victory at Wanat, as remarkable as any small unit action in American military history, they were placed into a challenging defensive scenario because of a number of factors.

Beginning with the PDSS in February 2007, TF Rock and TF Bayonet contemplated establishing a new COP at Wanat, and as early as June 2007 TF Rock’s planning had progressed to identifying the location that would subsequently become COP Kahler. In order to emplace this new COP, TF Rock and TF Bayonet were committed to negotiating with the Wanat elders and community leaders for land access at Wanat. Because of formalized US Army procedures TF Rock leadership could not simply occupy the land in an aggressive tactical operation, and then compensate the land owners (although precisely this
technique was used as recently as April 2006 in the Waigal Valley by the 10th Mountain Division’s 3d BCT). As a result, TF Rock entered into extended negotiations for a specific parcel of land immediately adjacent to the community that would eventually become COP Kahler late on 8 July. In a land ownership document negotiated between LTC Oslund and the District Governor on 20 April 2008, TF Rock provided the District Governor with the surveyed, detailed engineering plan for the proposed COP. This was done although LTC Oslund would remark of the District Governor shortly after the fight at Wanat, “He is an informant for the AAF.” In a Shura at Wanat on 26 May 2008 the Elders specifically told the Chosen Company Commander and Rock Battalion Commander that they did not want to sign a formal agreement for the land use, and preferred for the US Army to simply seize the land to provide them with “plausible deniability” with the ACM. Insistence upon signing a formal land access agreement was perceived as “intimidation” or “pressure” by the Afghanistan elders that would expose them to possible retaliation by the ACM, and they probably felt that the American leadership did not comprehend the pressure and threats that they were under from the strong ACM presence in the Waigal Valley (which had in fact attacked Wanat less than a year previously, in June 2007).

Seizure of land for military purposes is a long standing military tradition. Historically, the American Continental Army employed this technique from its earliest days. When establishing a defensive fortified position at Bemis Heights during the Saratoga Campaign in the late summer of 1777, the American Northern Theater Army simply occupied a tavern and land belonging to Jotham Bemis, along with a farm and structures belonging to John Neilson. Another small farm house and additional land belonging to Ephraim Woodworth was also seized by the Continental Army. This methodology was already a tried and proven TTP employed by the Continental Army in 1777, and it remained equally valid for employment in 2008. Adherence to a formalized set of procedures needlessly antagonized the Wanat community elders and leadership. Furthermore, it openly violated well established Operational Security (OPSEC) procedures by offering the ACM months of notice regarding US intentions to establish a base in
Wanat, and weeks of advance warning regarding precisely where the base was to be located. This was exacerbated by the selection of the large open field that had already been used as an American staging and cantonment area by the 10th Mountain Division for 45 days in the fall of 2006. The failure of TF Rock to achieve tactical surprise at Wanat, the relatively rapid response by a large ACM force to the occupation of Wanat by Chosen Company on the night of 8 July, and the considerable accuracy achieved by the ACM during their attack on 13 July, were all due to detailed prior knowledge of the battleground and COP Kahler that directly resulted from the violation of OPSEC principles for CONOP ROCK MOVE.

Once the 2d Platoon HMMWV convoy arrived late on the rainy night of July 8th-9th, they found themselves severely constrained by a number of factors, principally logistical. Although the establishment of a new COP is a major operational undertaking and CONOP ROCK MOVE was a high enough priority operation that it had to be approved by both TF Bayonet and CJTF-101, the establishment of COP Kahler at Wanat does not appear to have been a TF Rock, TF Bayonet or CJTF-101 priority. No commanders or senior leadership from TF Rock, TF Bayonet or CJTF-101 inspected Wanat; no TF Rock, TF Bayonet, or CJTF-101 staff officers traveled to Wanat; nor did the TF Rock, TF Bayonet or CJTF-101 Command Sergeant Major visit COP Kahler. No senior leadership was present at COP Kahler at Wanat at any time until after the major engagement had concluded on 13 July. Only CPT Myer, the Company Commander, arrived at Wanat before the engagement, and he only arrived on the afternoon of 12 July, four full days after the COP was occupied. Until it had actually been the target of a major ACM attack, no senior leadership visited the new installation.

Insufficient resources (logistical particularly including water; heavy construction equipment; and engineering materials) were dedicated to the operation. Insufficient construction materials and equipment were present. The COP was surrounded only by a double layer of Concertina wire, which was properly staked down only on the afternoon of 12 July. Had the attack occurred even a day before, almost certainly
COP Kahler would have been overrun and destroyed. No construction materials except a few HESCO barriers and sandbags were available. OP Topside was surrounded only by a single strand of Concertina wire, which was simply laid across the ground due to a shortage of stakes and posts. This proved insufficient to prevent the ACM penetration into OP Topside that resulted in American fatalities during the early morning engagement. A single Bobcat was available for construction, and it could not completely fill the HESCOs due to a technical limitation. In any event, the Bobcat ran out of gas on 11 July and could not operate again until late on 12 July when CPT Myer arrived with a replacement generator. There were no other construction tools available except shovels and picks, and personal E-tools that proved of limited value given the hard, rocky ground at the COP (the personal tools worked perfectly well at the OP, where the ground was considerably softer, and thus easier to excavate, agricultural soil). There was no construction material provided to construct overhead cover. SFC Dzwik specifically noted the presence of large beams that could have been used to construct overhead cover. However, he had no way of paying for the wood if he confiscated it, and he was not authorized to take such a step in any event. The shortages of potable water were already mentioned, as well as the absence of any water purification equipment except woefully obsolete and inefficient iodine tablets. The new COP ran out of potable water, and there was no means available to perform sterilization of the large quantities of local water immediately available (the ANA never had a lack of potable water, as they drank local water). When additional potable water finally did reach Wanat, it had to be driven by Afghans in a privately owned Hi-Lux pickup truck. For an operation that was contemplated since February 2007, and had been in active planning since March 2008, CONOP ROCK MOVE was insufficiently planned and inadequately supported logistically. The absence of a ROC drill meant that these deficiencies were never identified. SGT Brian Hissong said it simply and said it best, “When we got there we used all of the resources we had to make the best possible positions. But we didn’t have much.”
Regarding the actual occupation of Wanat and establishment of COP Kahler there, an integral component of CONOP ROCK MOVE was the employment of an Afghan construction company to transport construction materials to Wanat; and to provide mechanized equipment, Afghan heavy labor and engineering services for the construction of the new, permanent installation. The use of an outside construction company was poorly considered, and antagonized the local Wanat population. Had the Army transported construction materials and hand tools to Wanat, and local workers contracted to perform the labor, this would have speeded up construction. It would also have enhanced relationships with the local populace and demonstrated immediate economic benefit to Wanat derived from the US Army occupation. This precise technique was used previously with considerable effect by the 10th Mountain Division in Wanat in the fall of 2006. If heavy equipment operation that exceeded local ability was necessary (as was almost certainly going to be the case), this could have been negotiated with the community once some demonstrable form of economic prosperity had already been brought to Wanat. Destruction of engineering equipment belonging to an Afghan construction company from Jalalabad between Wanat and Bella in 2006 was well documented, and should have served as a caution that any outside construction company (that is, one from outside of the Waigal Valley) would encounter challenges operating in the vicinity. It should not have been surprising that the Afghan construction company failed to show up at Wanat in a timely manner. Dependence should not in any event have been placed upon any Afghan contractor rigorously fulfilling a contractual schedule, although the timely establishment of critical force protection measures at COP Kahler as a component of CONOP ROCK MOVE was entirely logistically dependent upon just such a circumstance occurring. Additionally, providing a precise date of arrival to an Afghan construction company that coincided with the planned tactical occupation of Wanat flagrantly flaunted good OPSEC and MILDEC procedures. On the final day of COP Kahler’s existence the Afghan construction company finally began to arrive at Wanat, although “they never showed up with all their equipment.” The construction company “moved around a little bit of dirt” before it was sent back home.
to Jalalabad. Absence of the construction company placed the burden of constructing an initial defensive capability entirely on the 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few and an under-strength squad of the 62d Engineer Battalion, and neither of these units were equipped, trained or supplied to fulfill such a task.

An important decision factor in the selection of Wanat as the location for COP Kahler was the ability to logistically sustain an installation by road from Camp Blessing. Ranch House and Bella were abandoned in large part because of their dependence upon rotary wing logistics. However, in July 2008 this road was not finished between Camp Blessing and Wanat. The final mile remained unimproved; and that portion of the road was narrow, rough, and winding. Only HMMWVs and LN Hi-Lux pickup trucks could readily traverse it, which were not adequate to support a full COP. Jingle trucks could negotiate this final stretch of road, but only slowly and carefully, and with considerable risk to these heavily loaded, cumbersome trucks. Before the road could be used to support a COP at Wanat, it had to be completed. This task was to be left to the Afghan construction company. The absence of this construction company meant that the road was not completed, and the 2d Platoon at Wanat was isolated logistically. Furthermore, no meaningful government or economic provisions could be extended to the District Center of Wanat. Before the initiation of CONOP ROCK MOVE, the road construction should have been completed, preferably hiring local labor from Wanat with expertise and supervision provided by US Army Engineers. Moving the 2d Platoon into Wanat before the necessary road was completed severely constrained the platoon’s logistics, and endangered the success of CONOP ROCK MOVE.

When the 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division operated in Wanat in the fall of 2006, they occupied it with a Company of ANA that established three OPs on high ground, a platoon of 1-32 Infantry to augment security, and a platoon of Combat Engineers to actually perform the construction. The Combat Engineers were augmented by a large contingent of local laborers, who were equipped with hand tools and construction materials that had been carried to Wanat (and were subsequently left behind for the use
of the community in a move that considerably enhanced relationships with the population). The 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few had a more involved mission to construct a permanent COP, rather than simply install two Bailey bridges and then move on, but had a smaller force structure and less logistical support with which to accomplish their mission. A single Platoon was insufficient combat power to establish a COP through the construction of numerous fighting positions, establish and maintain local security, and establish and maintain a security and relationship presence within the community of Wanat. SGT Pitts recalled of his perspective from the OP: “We definitely could have had more support, though. I almost feel as if we were left out to dry or a little neglected. It seemed as if nobody really expected anything to happen. They just wanted to get us out there and get it done.”

The ACM threat was underestimated by Chosen Company and TF Rock leadership. In the past, and throughout the previous fourteen months of the deployment, the ACM had typically (although not exclusively) employed a set of tactics that included considerable intelligence gathering, and an extended period of harassment predominantly employing indirect fires, before attempting any major ground attack. At Wanat, the ACM performed their intelligence gathering well before Chosen Company was inserted, because of the OPSEC failure occasioned by the protracted land use negotiations. CPT Myer and LTC Oslund, and the majority of the Chosen soldiers, believed the ACM would employ identical harassment and indirect fire tactics, rather than modifying their tactics and launching a deliberate ground assault without warning as they had done at the Margah Border Outpost in January 2007 or Ranch House in August 2007. CPT Pry, the TF Rock Intelligence Officer (S-2), had a completely different interpretation of the capability of the ACM around Bella and Wanat, which in the event proved to be accurate. TF Rock did perform a risk assessment, and believed that by giving COP Wanat two mortar systems (one company 60mm mortar and one battalion 120m mortar), a TOW system, and priority of artillery fires for the two 155mm artillery pieces at Camp Blessing, they had sufficiently strengthened the COP. However, in the event of a TIC at COP Kahler, the priority of fires would have been handed to Wanat in any event, so by
itself the priority of fires offered little real increase in combat power. These relatively insignificant reinforcements were insufficient to provide an adequate force structure necessary for the successful defense of the COP that remained under construction, particularly given the intelligence estimate that had been formulated for CONOP ROCK MOVE.

An oft-quoted military adage states, “…the other side gets to vote too.” The ACM attack was extraordinarily well planned and well conducted. They achieved complete tactical surprise. One reason for their success, which may well have influenced when they actually attacked, was the specific light conditions of the night before. Moon set occurred at 0026 on 13 July, and the deep valleys near Wanat almost certainly became darker considerably sooner. This early moon set provided the ACM with a minimum of four full hours of nearly complete darkness to perform their final movement to Wanat, and subsequent occupation of their fire and assault positions.

The ACM force manifested considerable field craft in its advance into assault positions. American line-of-sight sensors only intermittently, and then for rarely more than a few moments duration, acquired small groups of Afghans (almost certainly ACM) moving across the ridgelines surrounding COP Kahler. American sentinels were alert and active, one soldier even documenting the number of “shooting stars” that he had observed in the early morning hours of 13 July. SGT Pitts specifically recalled walking to the edges of the terraces around the OP to monitor the dead space adjacent to them during his shift on sentry.16 Yet, not a single guard reported seeing or hearing anything suspicious, and SPC McKaig specifically recalled that everything was quiet and calm immediately before the attack kicked off. The ACM insurgents made extensive use of cover and concealment, to include using ravines and draws as avenues of approach, to reach COP Kahler and OP Topside un-detected. The TTP of abandoning their shoes to approach more quietly, and walking adjacent to running courses of water to disguise their
footsteps, has been documented. The skills of the ACM in implementing the attack at Wanat must not be discounted.

**Analysis**

The initial challenge faced by the 173d BCT was strategic, and it was caused by the US Army Forces Generation (ARFORGEN) model. ARFORGEN is intended to accomplish the following tasks for the US Army:

[ARFORGEN] is the structured progression of increased unit readiness over time resulting in recurring periods of availability of trained, ready, and cohesive units. These units are prepared for operational deployment in support of Combatant Commanders’ or civil authorities’ requirements. Units are task organized in modular expeditionary forces, tailored for mission requirements. They are sustainable and have the capabilities and depth required to conduct the full range of operations in a persistent conflict. Operational requirements drive the ARFORGEN training and readiness process. These same requirements support the prioritization and synchronization of resourcing, recruiting, organizing, manning, equipping, training, sustaining, sourcing, mobilizing, and deploying cohesive units more effectively and efficiently.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, sworn in only on 18 December 2006, had performed a comprehensive fact finding journey to Afghanistan during the second week in January 2007. During his visit to Bagram Airbase, Gates asked CJTF-76 leadership what they needed. CJTF commanders, including 10th Mountain Division Commander MG Benjamin Freakley, and Deputy Commanding General for Operations BG James L. Terry, were adamant that they needed additional force structure. General Freakley, who during his initial pre-deployment planning process had to substantially modify his campaign plan due to the absence of the division’s 4th BCT, had been seeking additional forces since his
arrival in Afghanistan. In an unanticipated move, Secretary Gates determined to deploy another BCT to Afghanistan. However, because of the relatively small US force structure and the ongoing “surge” in Iraq, DOD did not have an additional BCT available to deploy. Accordingly, the decision was made to extend the tour of the 3d BCT, 10th Mountain Division (then currently serving in northeastern Afghanistan and that had already started to re-deploy) from twelve to fifteen months (it would actually serve sixteen months). However, this still provided only three months before the 3d BCT would have to be replaced. The decision was made to re-allocate the 173d Airborne BCT from a planned deployment to Iraq, to Afghanistan instead. The 173d had previously served in Afghanistan from 2004-2005, but they had not been deployed in northeastern Afghanistan, and all their ARFORGEN preparations were focused upon Iraq. The 173d leadership was only informed in early February 2007 that their deployment was to be changed. At this moment the BCT was already deployed to perform live fire and intensive field training in final preparation for their Iraq deployment at Grafenwoehr, Germany; and then to perform their Mission Readiness Exercise (MRE) at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center (JMRC) at Hohenfels (with a planned Iraq focus). This three month window provided the 173d BCT barely sufficient time for the senior leadership to perform a PDSS to Afghanistan; for the BCT to complete the MRE (with a hastily and partially revised focus on Afghanistan); return to Italy; provide its soldiers with block leave prior to a fifteen month deployment; and then begin to deploy in early May. The 173d BCT never had time to issue a formal deployment operations order, much less prepare any form of campaign plan. The 173d never had an opportunity to perform any Command Post Exercise, war-game their ensuing campaign, or perform any educational or intellectual preparation for the Afghan mission. Focused cultural and regional study and mission evaluation, and adequate Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield, could not be performed. There was no opportunity for language and cultural awareness training focused on Nuristan and Kunar Provinces. There was insufficient time for mountain warfare focused training and skills to be performed, mountain military techniques and equipment could not be evaluated, and mountain specific equipment
could not be purchased or requisitioned. Somewhat compensating for this hasty change in mission was that numerous officers and NCOs had previously deployed to Afghanistan, so there was considerable leadership continuity within the Brigade. However, the 173d BCT was destined for a different region with different cultural circumstances, different languages, different tribes, and markedly different terrain. Most importantly, the ACM situation and opponents that they faced were also markedly different. As a result, the 173d BCT deployed without a clear mission, or any campaign plan, except to take over in northeastern Afghanistan as directed by CJTF-82 then in overall command in Afghanistan. The 173d was never able to fully compensate for this lack of training and preparation for an Afghanistan deployment.

As summarized in Chapter One of this study, because of hundreds of years of inter-tribal and inter-community conflict and strife, and hundreds of years of geographic and cultural isolation, the Waigal Valley presents a convoluted and extremely challenging human terrain environment to understand, particularly when viewed from a typical “western” or “American” perspective. Yet, without comprehending this human and cultural terrain, a US Army force cannot hope to effectively operate within this geographical terrain. The 2-503 Airborne Infantry and 173d Airborne BCT never had the time or opportunity available to perform the intensive and exhaustive academic and intellectual study of Nuristan and Kunar Provinces necessary to achieve this intimacy with the cultural and human landscape before their deployment. Unfortunately, because of their introduction to northeastern Afghanistan in the heart of the campaign season, immediately upon insertion TF Bayonet and TF Rock were decisively engaged by the ACM. Thus, TF Bayonet and TF Rock never had an opportunity to develop a comprehensive and fundamental understanding of Kunar and Nuristan upon their deployment. Task Force Rock and TF Bayonet were not familiar with the cultural antagonism present in the Waigal Valley and Wanat, particularly the traditional discord between Nuristani and Safi Pashtun, and this lack of knowledge directly and adversely effected the logistical implementation of CONOP ROCK MOVE.
Unfortunately, upon TF Bayonet’s deployment there was not a Human Terrain Team (HTT) in Afghanistan, although this situation was remedied in April 2008. Absent an HTT for the majority of their deployment, the development of enhanced HUMINT capability should have been a priority at all command levels. The 10th Mountain Division in the previous deployment had been able to make effective use of the relatively new Tactical HUMINT Team (THT) concept, as documented in the division’s Operational History:

These teams, no larger than a regular Infantry fire team, receive exhaustive language training, and considerable cultural immersion. Unfortunately, the THT was a relatively fledgling concept in the spring of 2006, new teams were just being organized, and many of the fielded teams had only recently been formed and were relatively young and inexperienced, with its leadership being comprised of comparatively junior NCOs. Mountain leadership, at all levels, was not used to operating with these THTs, there had been no previous training in the employment of THTs, and smooth working relationships had to be developed in the field. Even with these challenges, the THTs that supported the division in 2006-2007 were superlative, and contributed substantial information and assistance to the division’s counterinsurgency operations. There just weren’t enough of them, and the teams available were still learning.\footnote{17}

The THT concept markedly matured by 2007-2008, and the TF Rock Intelligence section was able to make effective use of this concept. However, interaction at the Platoon and Company level was apparently limited, and 1LT Brostrom was the only Chosen Company soldier to mention working with the THTs.\footnote{18} TF Rock was supported by one THT that was specifically focused upon the Waigal Valley. Unfortunately, this THT was not initially deployed with 2d Platoon to Wanat. Although it is speculative, it is conceivable that a THT operating at COP Kahler at Wanat would have possessed the potential to provide sufficient intelligence to the 2d Platoon, Chosen Company and TF Rock that an ACM attack was
no longer just a possibility as assessed by the TF Rock Intelligence Officers, but was in the process of being actively implemented against them. Only on 14 July was THT support finally deployed to COP Kahler, and this was of course too late to influence the engagement. 19

Even when the HTT arrived in northeastern Afghanistan, there was a lack of contact between the HTT and TF Bayonet, and TF Bayonet has stated that the HTT was only performing studies and gathering information, rather than providing any HUMINT or cultural resources. Because of “security considerations,” the HTT was not permitted into Task Force Rock’s AO, particularly the Waigal Valley. 20 As a result, TF Rock and TF Bayonet failed to effectively employ the HTT resource available to them. Further adversely impacting the acquisition of effective HUMINT, the highly kinetic methodology favored by TF Rock antagonized the local populace, and degraded a number of prior relationships that 1-32 Infantry of the 10th Mountain Division had established within the Waigal Valley that had the promise of providing an enhanced HUMINT capability. Culturally, the local Afghans perceived the 10th Mountain Division and TF Bayonet as being different tribes, and were thus treated distinctly. There was never any connection or bond between the population of the Waigal Valley, and the Chosen Few, TF Rock, and TF Bayonet. This clearly degraded the capability of TF Rock and TF Bayonet to collect effective HUMINT regarding previous, current and future events within the Waigal Valley. What precise effect this absence of cultural awareness had upon the events of 13 July is, of course, speculative. But it is absolutely conclusive that the relationship between the American Sky Soldiers and the population of the Waigal Valley had deteriorated by early July, 2008.

The TF Rock operation to perform the establishment of COP Kahler at Wanat was a major tactical decision, as documented by the preparation of a formal Operations Order for CONOP ROCK MOVE, and the briefing of CONOP ROCK MOVE to both the TF Bayonet Commander, and CJTF-101 at General Officer level. CONOP ROCK MOVE should have been a TF Rock, TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 priority
of effort. CONOP ROCK MOVE was scheduled for early July, when the RIP with TF Duke was already in process, with TF Duke Staff officers and NCOs arriving, and TF Duke units being inserted into the TF Rock AO. In fact, four of the six battalions from TF Bayonet had already completed their RIP with TF Duke units and had departed Afghanistan. This scheduling meant that TF Rock and TF Bayonet’s priorities were placed upon planning for and performing the RIP. This should in no way be interpreted as implying that TF Rock’s attentions were diverted from tactical operations, and quite clearly this was never the case. But TF Rock’s attentions were diluted from these tactical operations; and in early July the TF Rock leadership, staff officers, and senior NCOs were managing five challenging priorities simultaneously. The first four of these were performance of the Article 15-6 investigation for the 4 July helicopter attack near Bella, performance of the RIP, performing the necessary logistical and administrative planning for the impending return of the Battalion to Italy, and maintaining ongoing combat and support operations throughout the entire TF Rock AO. These four lines of effort had to be performed while executing a major tactical operation (CONOP ROCK MOVE) with two simultaneous and distinct segments- evacuating COP Bella exclusively through the use of rotary wing assets, and establishing COP Kahler. This balancing act was being performed at the end of fourteen months of sustained, continuous, stressful, and intense combat operations, at which point even the most highly motivated, fit and dedicated soldier is worn and depleted physically, mentally, and emotionally. The impact and extent of this dilution of focus upon CONOP ROCK MOVE cannot be quantitatively assessed, but that some level of dilution occurred cannot be doubted. The wisdom of implementing a major operation such as CONOP ROCK MOVE at the end of a fourteen month deployment, while a RIP was underway, is questionable. Whether or not TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 command exercised due diligence in authorizing CONOP ROCK MOVE to proceed at this juncture is highly questionable. Additionally, whether or not TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 command exercised due diligence in permitting
CONOP ROCK MOVE to proceed as planned without some level of intervention or augmentation, is similarly questionable.

Neither TF Bayonet or CJTF-101 placed adequate emphasis upon the planning, implementation, and sustainment of CONOP ROCK MOVE, as evinced by the failure to adequately assess the logistical support plan particularly regarding the establishment of the new COP Kahler at Wanat, to address the critical logistical concerns that inhibited the establishment of COP Kahler between 9-12 July, to resolve the absence of the Afghan construction company from Wanat during this time, or to maintain adequate ISR assets while COP Kahler remained vulnerable, particularly in the light of TF Rock’s intelligence assessment. There was an absence of command involvement, and thus command influence, at Wanat by both TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 from 9 July until the ACM attack actually occurred early on the morning of 13 July. Whether or not such command interest could have resolved the challenges that the establishment of COP Kahler faced, or in some manner altered the course of events, is, of course, speculative. But senior US Army leadership failed to positively influence events at Wanat.

In addition to the OPSEC failure that resulted in American plans being widely known in the Waigal Valley well before the occupation of COP Kahler actually occurred, TF Rock failed to implement any Military Deception (MILDEC) planning efforts as a component of CONOP ROCK MOVE regarding the establishment of COP Kahler at Wanat.21 As noted in the DOD Joint Planning Document on Military Deception, “Use of MILDECs during any phase of an operation should help to mislead adversaries as to the strength, readiness, locations, and intended missions of friendly forces.” Furthermore, the functions of an effective MILDEC Plan are to:

- Causing ambiguity, confusion, or misunderstanding in adversary perceptions of friendly critical information, which may include: unit identities, locations, movements, dispositions, weaknesses, capabilities, strengths, supply status, and intentions.
• Causing the adversary to misallocate personnel, fiscal, and material resources in ways that are advantageous to the friendly force.

• Causing the adversary to reveal strengths, dispositions, and future intentions.

• Conditioning the adversary to particular patterns of friendly behavior to induce adversary perceptions that can be exploited by the joint force.

• Causing the adversary to waste combat power with inappropriate or delayed actions.22

As early as June 2007 TF Rock had selected the location for COP Kahler at Wanat, and there is no evidence that TF Rock ever evaluated or considered any other positioning for the installation. Implementation of an effective MILDEC Plan could have had great value at Wanat, particularly recognizing that the protracted negotiations for land use had clearly revealed American plans to establish a combat outpost at Wanat, that this precise location was well known through previous American use and the extended land ownership discussions, and that a known ACM force was actively maneuvering against Bella. The success or benefits, if any, that could have been derived from any conceptual MILDEC Plan for this operation remains speculative.

The 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few deployed to Wanat to establish COP Kahler without any civil affairs capacity. CONOP ROCK MOVE contained no civil affairs component, as directed by the leadership of CJTF-101. Although CONOP ROCK MOVE mandated that the 2d Platoon would deploy to Wanat with two medics, the Platoon had only a single medic present at COP Kahler. Even two platoon medics were inadequate to perform any meaningful MEDCAP, much less a single medic. This single medic actually present never treated or saw a single Afghan citizen of Wanat. The Platoon had no capability of performing any VETCAP (although it should be noted that most herd animals were not in the Wanat vicinity in July). The Platoon deployed without any humanitarian supplies. The Platoon
deployed without any Afghan funds, and the soldiers were prohibited from having any contact with the citizens of Wanat (even if they were so inclined). The Platoon did not have any capability of making any purchases from the Wanat market, or hiring any Wanat laborers. Although TF Rock planned for numerous economic development projects at Wanat, no local Afghan funds were dispatched with the 2d Platoon for such things as paying for bread, laundry or local labor, and any economic benefits to Wanat were vague promises in the future. What, if any, effect the absence of CA capabilities and benefits had upon the population of Wanat and the Waigal Valley cannot be ascertained. However, this absence clearly did not engender any positive relationships between the Chosen Few soldiers establishing COP Kahler and the population of Wanat; and it is reasonable to assume that it degraded relationships already seriously strained by a year of highly kinetic operations implemented by TF Rock in the Waigal Valley, and catastrophically strained by the 4 July helicopter attack near Bella.

Relationships between the Nuristan and Kunar Province population and TF Rock began to degenerate almost immediately upon arrival in Afghan, when TF Bayonet CSM’s son was tragically killed during the RIP. Relationships further deteriorated when ASG deserted their posts during the attack on COP Ranch House in August 2007, exposing the 2d Platoon of Chosen Company to nearly being over-run, and the American paratroopers only survived through determined resistance. The devastating ambush on 9 November 2007; followed shortly thereafter by the fatal shooting of SFC Kahler by an ASG at Camp Bella, further damaged the relationships between the Chosen Few and Waigal Valley population. Given the events that had transpired, such a response was not only entirely natural and human, but to be anticipated from any soldier. Still, in a COIN environment, such degradation in the relationships between the soldiers and the population can be catastrophic, and cannot be permitted to occur. In fact, any degradation in the relationships between soldiers and the population is absolutely poisonous to meaningful COIN operations. It was attendant upon Chosen Company and TF Rock leadership, and TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 leadership above them, to insure that any such degradation in this relationship
was immediately identified, and reversed. This did not occur, and the lack of interaction between the 2d Platoon and the residents of Wanat was the inevitable result. What influence a stronger relationship and improved interactions between the Waigal Valley population and TF Rock’s troopers could have had in predicting or preventing the attack is speculative. There was also limited interaction between the ANA Company at Wanat and the paratroopers of the 2d Platoon, and this clearly reduced the potential effectiveness of the ANA Company. As CPT Myer noted, upon his arrival at Wanat his interaction with the ANA was restricted to: “…I looked at…the ANA sector of fire to ensure that they would have good fire control measures to keep them from firing at US forces.” What effect this limited coordination between the ANA and the Paratroopers had on the engagement is speculative.

The absence of natural illumination the night before the attack was exacerbated by the decision of CJTF-101 to withdraw collection assets, including ISR and UAVs, from Wanat on 12 July. TF Rock vigorously protested this decision, and TF Bayonet echoed these concerns, but CJTF-101 did not reverse their decision. This protest occurred exclusively at the staff officer level, and was so vociferous on the part of the TF Rock S-2 that it could not have been more ardently pressed. However, limitations in ISR coverage were a continuous constraint throughout the deployment, and because such limitations were habitual TF Rock leadership failed to raise concerns with this reduced surveillance through command channels. COL Preysler, commanding TF Bayonet, felt that with the evacuation of Bella completed the most dangerous and exposed component of CONOP ROCK MOVE had been successfully accomplished, and accepted that “There was going to be some loss of ISR like every operation over an extended period of time in OEF.” This withdrawal of assets from Wanat on 12 July left the Chosen Few soldiers without any surveillance systems except for their own line-of-sight sensors at COP Kahler and OP Topside. Given the still exposed situation of COP Kahler with a minimum force structure and no permanent defenses due to the absence of sufficient logistical resources, COP Kahler remained dangerously
vulnerable at dusk on 12 July. As SGT Pitts remembered, “We thought we were going to have more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) coverage and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).”

As previously discussed, TF Bayonet had three organic UAV systems available in Afghanistan. The BCT deployed with the Shadow UAV system as a Brigade asset, augmented by the CJTF-101 provided Hunter system that arrived later in the deployment. The Shadow and Hunter System both require a short landing strips and have limitations in C2, and had to accordingly be operated from Jalalabad Airport as Camp Blessing did not contain an adequate landing strip for the system. Signals capability for the Shadow was enhanced with a relay system at Camp Blessing such that the Shadow UAV could operate between Jalalabad and Camp Blessing, and further to the west into the Pech Valley. However, because of the extreme elevations and topography in Nuristan and Kunar, and technical limitations, the Shadow and Hunter could not operate north into the Waigal Valley or in the vicinity of Wanat. These constraints upon the Shadow UAV had not been addressed by TF Bayonet even after fourteen months of operation in the Waigal Valley.

The Raven UAV system is a considerably smaller and less capable system, operated and assigned at Battalion level. TF Rock did not deploy any of their Battalion organic Ravens at Wanat. Given the small force that initially defended COP Kahler, and the initial lack of defenses, a single Raven system would have provided the garrison at Wanat with a valuable nighttime surveillance system that could have been extremely effective at identifying indirect launch sites that TF Rock clearly anticipated to receive at Wanat. It is not outside the realm of possibility that the Raven system could conceivably have detected the several score ACM as they moved into their assault positions under cover of darkness and terrain, although whether or not it could have been successfully operated at night at Wanat is highly questionable. However, even if it did not provide any meaningful ISR capability, simply the noise generated by the Raven flying circles overhead of the COP at night could have served as a deterrent.
What influence improved ISR assets at COP Kahler, or the continuation of ISR coverage of the “bubble” around Wanat, would have had on the ensuing fighting is speculative. If the ACM were performing careful communications security measures, there might not have been any transmissions to be intercepted by SIGINT. The ACM are extremely skilled at moving through the Afghan terrain, and they almost certainly were directed by local guides who were intimately familiar with the vicinity of Wanat. Obviously, there is no guarantee that additional ISR assets would have detected the attack moving against Wanat, although CPT Pry (the TF Rock S-2) adamantly believes that given adequate ISR that the attack would have been observed and disrupted, given the previous record of success experienced by TF Rock when it was provided with such assets. SFC Dzwik also clearly felt that: “I believe just a few hours of ISR above us at late evening would have spotted the enemy moving into position.”

The decision to simultaneously withdraw from COP Bella at the same time that COP Kahler was established was clearly an IO failure. This permitted the ACM to publicize that they had driven the Americans from COP Bella. Perhaps a more effective strategy would have been to completely establish COP Kahler and conduct joint operations from Wanat for a period of time before evacuating Bella, so that the Americans could implement their own IO campaign by stating that they had simply transferred operations. The failure to have an operating, established COP at Wanat prior to the evacuation of OP Bella resulted in a significant ACM IO victory within the Waigal Valley. The failure of TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 to implement effective IO mitigation in response to the 4 July helicopter attack at Bella also resulted in an ACM IO victory. The limited Afghan sources available for this study stated that this AH-64 Apache aerial attack decisively turned the Waigal Valley against the coalition forces and Afghan central government. In turn, this IO perception emboldened the local fighters within the Waigal Valley. However, absent actual interviews with the ACM fighters and commanders, what precise influence IO had on their actions must remain speculative at this time.
The small available force at Wanat (a single platoon) required them to focus upon COP construction and local security, rather than establishing a presence within the community of Wanat (the whole purpose of establishing a COP there). A more robust table of organization would have included a platoon of combat or construction engineers to perform physical construction of the COP (six engineers with a single Bobcat was not sufficient) with additional heavy construction equipment, while two infantry platoons performed local patrols and established local security. US Army engineer support should have been used to establish the immediate COP with fully functional and integrated defensive positions, while Afghan labor and construction (locally contracted) could have then been used to construct the planned permanent facilities. A more robust force structure was clearly mandated to establish COP Kahler at Wanat. TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 failed to exercise due diligence in insuring that CONOP ROCK MOVE was adequately task organized to realistically accomplish the objectives established by TF Rock. What influence a larger, more powerful force at Wanat would have made upon the 13 July engagement (and indeed whether or not an engagement would have even been initiated under these circumstances by the ACM that clearly held the tactical initiative on 13 July) is of course speculative.

It has been suggested the running water in the irrigation ditch to the north of OP Topside was a deliberate ACM TTP to mask the noise of their approach to the American positions. However, others soldiers that fought at Wanat have discounted the possible effect that water running in this ditch might have had. Given the wildly convoluted terrain and considerable dead space around Wanat, and minimum four hours without illumination that morning, a background of gurgling water would have provided little additional advantage to an Afghan insurgent. Furthermore, Wanat lies at the intersection of two substantial bodies of water, which following the heavy rains the night of 8-9 July were swollen with rapidly flowing water. Like most Nuristan communities, agriculture in Wanat is also dependent upon the irrigation system, which is sometimes controlled at a distance by gates, such that a farmer might simply have decided to take advantage of the runoff from the heavy rain to irrigate his farm fields. At least some
of the ACM insurgents are known to have abandoned their shoes and boots to walk barefooted, which probably was more than adequate to have disguised their footsteps. The TF Rock Assistant S-2 who accompanied the TF Rock TAC to Wanat on 13 July also noted that the ACM had approached along the river beds, so that the rushing water in the rivers would serve to mask their noise. The running water in the ditch near OP Topside is not believed to have played any role in the engagement.

As with any tactical situation, there are areas for discussion. First, the four HMMWVs at the COP and the single HMMWV at the TCP could have been shifted after hours of darkness by the Platoon leadership, which may have enhanced their survivability and made them more effective during the attack. Because of contractual land use constraints, 1LT Brostrom was restricted as to where he could place his soldiers at Wanat. For example, 1LT Brostrom was prohibited from making use of the vacant “C-shaped” building that could have offered the platoon with a highly defensible position. The constrained space available within the COP boundaries meant that 1LT Brostrom had to place his soldiers in pre-designated positions, and he had little tactical flexibility available. Because of the constrained size of the COP, alternate and supplemental fighting positions were not constructed. And because of the small size of the COP, vehicles could not be rotated under cover of darkness to alternate fighting positions, as there were limits regarding how far the HMMWVs could actually have been moved, and given the small size of the field there were space restrictions as to where the five HMMWVs could even have been positioned. The TOW HMMWV, which was the one vehicle that was regularly moved throughout the occupation of COP Kahler, and had actually been shifted to a new position during the evening of 12 July, was still effectively targeted and destroyed at the first fire, suggesting that little advantage would have been achieved by employing this tactic because of the space constraints. Obviously, the 120mm and 60mm mortars had to have their base plates settled, and thus could not be readily moved, and in any event the 120mm mortar pit was a fixed installation. The ACM was extremely familiar with the field that became COP Kahler, and almost certainly had informally surveyed the entire field before the Chosen Few ever arrived. The
fact that the TOW HMMWV was the first vehicle to be successfully engaged at the initial fire on 13 July, and was the only HMMWV to be destroyed during the fight for COP Kahler, strongly suggests that COP Kahler was under such close observation, and the field was so well known to the ACM, that moving vehicles around within the constrained space available would have had little effect. The ACM were well familiar with the most dangerous weapons systems emplaced at COP Kahler, and clearly engaged them with accurate, heavy firepower at the first fire. It is speculation, but most likely moving the HMMWVs a few feet or yards within the perimeter after dark would have made no contributions whatsoever to the defense of COP Kahler, without having a larger footprint to operate within (which in turn could not have been defended by a single platoon). The absence of supplemental or alternate fighting positions also played no role in the engagement at Wanat.

One possible tactical error made by 2d Platoon leadership was the failure to emplace the 60mm mortar into a deliberate and fully manned firing position. This was a direct reflection of the limits imposed by manpower, materials, and hydration at COP Kahler. Apparently the platoon leadership was confident that the Battalion 120mm mortar was able to provide effective indirect fires, and that the 60mm mortar would be employed only in a tertiary role. However, in the event the 60mm mortar would have been ideally suited to place indirect fires into the dead ground to the north and east of OP Topside. It should be noted that the ACM were well familiar with the most dangerous weapons systems emplaced at COP Kahler, and immediately and continuously engaged them with accurate, heavy firepower. This fire suppressed the 120mm mortar (it executed only a single 4-round fire mission on a target that it was pre-laid on), and destroyed the TOW HMMWV at the very first fire (it failed to launch even a single round). Effective small arms fire also isolated the 60mm mortar, as several mortar men discovered when they made desperate but unsuccessful attempts to reach the mortar in the midst of the engagement. Whether or not the 60mm mortar could have been effectively operated in a fully manned, separate and more heavily
fortified firing position is speculative, and probably unlikely, given the fact that the 120mm mortar in a deliberate, nearly finished firing pit was entirely suppressed from the first fire.

The Platoon Leader can be criticized for not performing more aggressive patrolling from COP Kahler between 9-12 July. Some few, entirely local, patrols were conducted. The first substantive patrol was planned to depart the COP at 0430 on 13 July and was in fact being organized for departure when the attack was launched. However, 1LT Brostrom was challenged by limited manpower, severe shortages of water, and high temperatures which necessitated that he provide his soldiers with regular rest periods to avoid hot weather injuries. 1LT Brostrom had forty-nine soldiers available at COP Kahler by the evening of 12 July. However, much of this force was not available to perform patrolling. There were six engineers at COP Kahler, but they had other duties and responsibilities, and were not trained infantrymen. Three of the soldiers constituted the TOW section, and they had to remain within the COP to operate the TOW launcher and ITAS, and to provide over-watch of any patrol. Six soldiers were with the two mortar sections that had to remain with the COP to provide indirect fire support to any patrol. Two of these soldiers were the Chosen Company Commander and his RTO, who only arrived late on the afternoon of 12 July, and were in any event not available to perform routine patrols. Another nine soldiers remained on OP Topside, and were fully occupied in providing security for and constructing that vulnerable position. Thus, 2d Platoon only had twenty paratroopers available within COP Kahler to construct defensive positions that entailed heavy labor while still providing necessary rest periods to avoid hot weather casualties, and simultaneously maintaining local security to include operating a TCP. Given the requirement to construct defenses at COP Kahler, the serious water shortage, and limited personnel strength it is not believed that the 2d Platoon by itself had the capability to have performed any effective patrols within the Wanat vicinity. Diverting the paratroopers to perform patrols rather than improving their defenses quite possibly would have resulted in the perimeter being overrun on the morning of 13 July. The single platoon assigned to this mission was too small to provide local security, establish a COP,
and perform patrols. The Platoon Leader made the correct decision in deferring patrols and to concentrate on force protection. In fact, the defensive measures completed were just barely adequate to repel the attack when it did come.

The three ETTs and 24 soldiers of the ANA Company were available to perform patrols, and the Marine ETTs certainly felt that the ANA Company possessed adequate training and skills to perform effective dismounted patrolling. The ANA also did not suffer from the hydration constraints, as they could drink the readily available local water. Unfortunately, the shooting of SFC Kahler by an ASG, and the previous poor performance of the ASG at Bella and Ranch House, had seriously degraded relationships and trust between Chosen Company and the Afghan security forces. This resulted in an extremely limited role being assigned to the ANA at Wanat. More effective use could and should have been made of the available ANA force. It must be noted that the ANA and their Marine ETTs were notified to participate and were included in the planned patrol on the morning of 13 July.

The running water in the ditch in front of OP Topside was speculated by some soldiers as possibly being initiated by the insurgents to cover their movements into assault positions in the early morning hours. No combat patrol to locate the source of the running water was initiated, and because of this absence it cannot now be determined if this was actually an insurgent TTP, or was simply caused by a farmer opening the gates of the irrigation system to divert runoff from the heavy downpour a couple of nights previously to his farm fields. The ANA Company, with its Marine ETTs, was adequately trained to have performed just such a reconnaissance. A more visible security presence in the community of Wanat provided by ANA patrols might have proven to be a deterrent to the ensuing assault.

The only substantive tactical error made by the 2d Platoon was the failure to more effectively employ the ANA in dismounted patrols within the Village of Wanat. Other tactical changes and techniques were possible, but it is unlikely that these would have altered the course of the engagement on the morning of
13 July. And what effect, if any, ANA dismounted patrols within Wanat could have had on the events of 13 July cannot be objectively assessed.

**System Recommendations**

There were repeated and recurring failures of small arms firing at “cyclic” rates of fire (high volume of fire for extended duration) during this engagement. Weapon systems that experienced failures include M-4 rifles, SAW automatic weapons, and MK-19 grenade launchers. The failure of weapons at OP Topside degraded the defense of that post at a critical moment in the engagement, and contributed to the penetration of that position by the ACM. Some GWOT and US Army veterans queried by the author suggested this could have been caused by improper weapon cleaning. However, numerous Chosen Few NCOs interviewed for this study have been vehemently adamant in stating that weapons were meticulously and regularly cleaned, and rigorously and routinely inspected by the chain of command. Other Afghanistan and Iraq combat veterans consulted have noted that the high rates of fire sustained during the two hour intense engagement phase at Wanat could possibly have contributed to these failures. However, numerous weapons failed relatively early in the engagement (particularly a number of M-4 rifles and one SAW at the mortar pit), and in any event the maintenance of cyclic rates of fire was critical to restore fire superiority, and to prevent positions (particularly at OP Topside) from being overrun by determined, numerous, and hard pressed insurgent assaults. The US Army Project Manager-Soldier Weapons needs to investigate the reason(s) behind the repeated failures of multiple weapons at sustained cyclic rates of fire, and initiate appropriate measures to address such failures.

The absence of effective crew (squad or platoon) water purification and individual soldier water purification equipment adversely constrained operations at COP Kahler. After 235 years of US Army combat and field operations, it is inexcusable that the Army still lacks the ability for deployed soldiers to sterilize their own drinking water in sufficient quantities in hot weather climates utilizing a man-portable,
hand-carried, lightweight, reliable and effective water purification system. It should be noted that such systems as the “Steri-Pen®” which the author has successfully employed in extended camping and hiking trips in the Adirondacks, fits into an ACU cargo pocket with room to spare, weighs less than five ounces with batteries installed, and is powered by standard, off-the-shelf batteries. All soldiers going on detached, isolated service in a semi-arid environment must be habitually equipped with adequate individual water-purification equipment. The current US Army water purification tactical system is a Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Unit (ROWPU), which comes in various sizes. The smallest is a 600 GPH unit, which provides just under 1,000 gallons of water per hour from a fresh water source, orders of magnitude more than would have been required by a single platoon, which required approximately twelve gallons per hour. Even the smallest capacity ROWPU is a large piece of equipment, eighteen feet long, eight feet high, and eight feet wide. It weighs about 8 1/2 tons, including the trailer and the required 30KW generator, and requires a dedicated five ton prime mover. Such a ROWPU could not have been deployed to Wanat, given the incomplete state of the road between Camp Blessing and Wanat. The Army’s newest system, the Lightweight Water Purifier (LWP) provides approximately one hundred gallons of water per hour from a freshwater source, still weighs 2,000 pounds and consists of nine separate modules, and accordingly requires an entire HMMWV to transport it.

What US Army tactical units require are not a massive, high-capacity piece of equipment such as the ROWPU or LWP, but rather a squad/platoon capable water purification system that is rucksack sized, can be carried by a single soldier or can be carried in a HMMWV, and can produce between ten and twenty gallons of water per hour. Such a minimal capacity tactical water purification system must be fielded by the US Army. Had such a capability been present at Wanat, the Platoon could have exploited the large quantity of water available at Wanat (as the ANA did). This glaring deficiency needs to be immediately addressed by the US Army Program Executive Officer-Soldier, at both a crew (squad/platoon/company) and individual soldier level.
American soldiers require additional and enhanced training in tactical employment of Claymore mines. Claymore mines were integral to controlling and denying the dead ground around OP Topside, and were not optimally employed to accomplish this task. Claymore mines were not employed at COP Kahler, although they could have proven to be extremely efficient at controlling the dead ground in the ravine to the west and north of the COP’s perimeter. Insufficient numbers of Claymore mines were positioned to control the dead ground to the north, east and south of OP Topside (only four Claymores were thus employed). At OP Topside the Claymore mines were simply placed atop the ground. Claymore mines were properly tested by the soldiers, and the three Claymore mines whose wires were not damaged functioned correctly. Claymore mines were only emplaced after darkness at OP Topside, which was an effective TTP. However, the limited numbers and failure to have overlapping Claymore fields of fire is evidence that Claymores were not employed to their maximum effectiveness at OP Topside. Of the four Claymore mines emplaced at OP Topside at Wanat, one of them had its wires severed by a nearby RPG detonation, rendering it unusable. A second Claymore was either knocked over by the RPG detonations, fell over for some other reason, or was deliberately turned around by the ACM. There was no way for the defenders of OP Topside to know that this Claymore mine had either fallen over or been tampered with. The other two Claymore mines functioned as intended, and at least one killed an ACM insurgent in the act of crossing the wire. Claymore mines should always be employed in depth with interlocking fields of engagement, with the rear Claymores employed and recovered after darkness, and all firing wires buried. Every tactical unit should establish SOPs that all Claymores should have their rear highlighted with visible markings (chemical lights, reflective tape, IR glitter tape, white paint, etc.) so that any enemy disturbing or tampering with Claymores is readily detected, and deterred by the employment of covering Claymores or other suppressive fire. Additional numbers of Claymore mines should be routinely deployed for the defense of static positions. Doctrine and TTPs for Claymore mine employment need to
be reinforced, enhanced and strengthened. This recommendation should be addressed by the US Army Center for Lessons Learned and by TRADOC service schools, particularly the Infantry School.

The Company FSO was not present at COP Kahler from 8-12 July, did not accompany the Company Commander to Wanat on 12 July, and did not participate in 1st Platoon’s QRF on the morning of 13 July. The Company FSO was at Camp Blessing when the attack began, and notwithstanding considerable efforts on his part he could not reach Wanat until late on 13 July when the intensive fighting was long since concluded. The Platoon FO was at COP Kahler but he was detached to OP Topside. CPT Myer stated, “I didn’t take my fire support officer because SGT Pitts was up there and he was the most competent FO we had in the company. I knew he could do everything he needed to do.” Unfortunately, on the morning of 13 July, SGT Pitts was detached from the CP and was manning the OP. Absence of the Chosen Company FSO, and the detachment of the FO on the OP, clearly detracted from performing effective fire support planning at COP Kahler from 9-12 July. A pre-planned target list was prepared during the planning for CONOP ROCK MOVE on 3 July; and was updated by SGT Pitts on 10 July from OP Topside. However, the pre-planned target list failed to include designated FPF. The absence of the Company FSO at Wanat required the Company Commander to serve as the FSO during the engagement on 13 July. CPT Myer was predominantly focused upon managing (and de-conflicting) indirect fire assets and later obtaining and scheduling MEDEVAC assets during the major part of the engagement. Because he had to serve as FSO/FO at Wanat, CPT Myer’s influence upon tactical decisions during the defense of COP Kahler was limited. Although LTC Ostlund noted that “placing Company C2 with the platoon” was an implemented mitigation for a perceived threat to Wanat, the Company FSO was never deployed to Wanat. The Company FSO facilitates considerable enhancement to the acquisition, prioritization, control, integration and management of fire support assets, and could have taken measures to provide additional firepower to COP Kahler’s defense. Such a supplementation could have had significant value, particularly during the first hour of the engagement when COP Kahler was entirely dependent upon organic weapon
systems and field artillery. As one young soldier who fought in the maelstrom of Wanat later complained, “Where was the air support?” With the absence of the Company FSO from COP Kahler, nobody was present to ensure that any air support was pre-scheduled or available; or to resolve the deficiencies introduced by high angle artillery fire that were ballistically unavoidable. Chosen Few Company leadership, and TF Rock leadership, failed to ensure that adequate fire support planning was performed at Wanat. This lesson learned should be addressed by the US Army Center for Lessons Learned and by TRADOC service schools, particularly the Fires School.

Finally, because of the heavy ground fire that was continuing, and the comparatively large number of casualties on the ground, the MEDEVAC helicopters had to carry the maximum possible number of wounded out. The result was extremely crowded conditions on board the MEDEVAC helicopters. CPT J.J. Madill, Flight Surgeon onboard Dustoff 36 that landed three times at OP Topside, specifically recalled:

With our situation, we had 4 haphazardly loaded patients, their gear, the JP and hoist equipment out, our aid bags, the MO, me and the crew chief all piled in the back and it made delivery of medical care very difficult.32

The US Army should investigate the possibility of using CH-47 aircraft as MEDEVAC helicopters rather than exclusively depending upon the smaller Blackhawk helicopters. As CPT Madill has stated: “Not only could more patients be picked up at once but importantly better en route care could be given with more room.” This lesson learned should be addressed by PEO-Aviation and the US Army Aviation School at Fort Rucker, Alabama.

**COIN Lessons Learned**
The first COIN challenge that the 173d Brigade faced was mandated by the Department of Defense deployment schedule. Because of the ongoing “surge” in Iraq, and the requirement to insert an additional combat brigade into Afghanistan, the 3d BCT of the 10th Mountain Division was extended to a sixteen month tour (through June 2007). Thus, the replacement for the 3d BCT, 10th Mountain had to be deployed in the May-June 2007 timeframe. This is in the midst of the insurgent active campaign season in Afghanistan, and the arriving unit accordingly had to engage in combat operations almost immediately. In fact, the 2-503rd Infantry had one soldier killed while performing the RIP/TOA, when PFC Vimoto became a casualty on 5 June 2007 in the Korengal Valley. Arriving in the winter, when the insurgents do not generally engage in combat operations, permits the relieving unit time to learn their operational area without having to engage in intensive combat. Thus, when the insurgents return in the spring, the coalition combat unit has had the opportunity to gain familiarity with the terrain (both topographical and human) through frequent patrols and *Shuras*. This is not a new or particularly insightful COIN concept. During the American Civil War, when the 2d Colorado Cavalry was deployed to a three county area in western Missouri that had been the most virulent in that state:

…the 2d Colorado was provided with sufficient time to adequately scout and familiarize themselves with their area of operations before the Confederate partisans returned from their winter sojourn. COL Ford and his men fully exploited this invaluable respite between their arrival in mid-February and the re-emergence of the guerillas in late April. The Confederates soon discovered that their opponents were nearly as familiar with the locale as they were, negating a significant advantage that the local irregulars had enjoyed since the start of the war.33

A spring or summer deployment, as was forced upon the 173d Airborne BCT, incurs a substantial disadvantage upon any American unit operating in the already unfamiliar culture of Afghanistan. In the future, DOD should only perform a fall or winter deployment into Afghanistan, providing their tactical
elements with adequate time necessary to learn the terrain (both topographic and human). This was an opportunity that the 173d Airborne BCT was denied.

There was limited prior coordination or joint planning between TF Rock and TF Bayonet and the ANP Police and District Governor at Wanat, although several discussions with the District Governor regarding land leases were certainly performed. There was no coordination between the 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few and either the ANP at the Wanat District Center, or the Wanat District Governor at the Wanat District Center, once dawn revealed the platoon’s presence on 9 July. It appears that 1LT Brostrom attempted to initiate a meeting with the Afghan leadership, but was unsuccessful. 1LT Brostrom did interrupt a Shura at the ANP headquarters, which he was not invited to (doubtless for obvious reasons). There is overwhelming evidence that the ANP Police Chief was corrupt and supportive of the ACM, and he was arrested for complicity on 14 July. There was sufficient evidence gathered following the attack for the District Governor to be similarly arrested, and he was released only following intensive investigation. Both of them may well have deliberately avoided 1LT Brostrom’s overtures, and had no intention of responding positively regardless of what entreaties he may have proffered. The degraded relationships between the Chosen Few and the Waigal Valley population likely played some role in this absence of interaction. However, it should also be noted that all previous coordination between the Wanat community leadership and elders had been done with CPT Myer and LTC Ostlund, rather than 1LT Brostrom. He may have been judged to be too low in rank for the ANP Police Chief or District Governor to have been willing to meet with him, and his entreaties were thus rebuffed. The presence of CPT Myer may have ameliorated this effect, and the fact that a dinner meeting with Wanat community leaders was held almost immediately upon CPT Myer’s arrival on 12 July tends to support this premise. The 2d Platoon at COP Kahler was working in isolation, and the military operation of CONOP ROCK MOVE was segmented from any political initiative on the part of the Afghan central government or ISAF. CONOP ROCK MOVE contained no discussion of political or Afghan government objectives,
and it was strictly a separate US Army kinetic operation to transfer a Combat Outpost from Bella to Wanat.

The COIN methodology as practiced by the 10th Mountain Division in the previous two campaign seasons (2006-2007) prior to the arrival of TF Bayonet was referred to by the moniker of “clear, hold, build and engage.” Succinctly, the intent was to clear enemy from the operational area, hold the territory, build infrastructure and resources, and engage with the local community. COL Michael Coss, G-3 of the 10th Mountain Division, provided a detailed analysis of the “Clear, Hold, Build and Engage” concept:

The first part “clear” aimed to separate the insurgents from the population they depended on for support. The task force planned to clear by targeting and eliminating the enemy’s key leaders and eradicating his weapons and ammunition caches. Also key was [the] goal of inserting the most competent Afghan Army or police forces between the enemy and the population as quickly as possible, to begin cultivating popular confidence and trust in the new Afghan government. The second part…was “hold.” During “hold” operations, coalition forces were to develop capacity to make the new indigenous security forces and government credible and permanent. “Build” the third component…transforms the physical and human terrain. In the build phase, the CJTF planned to establish permanent security and assist the government with R&D projects to improve physical and human conditions. Such projects help to persuade the population- the center of gravity in any insurgency- that stability and prosperity advanced by the government exceed anything the insurgents have to offer. The fourth and final component…was “engage.” The task force planned to meet with Afghan civil and military leaders and regular Afghan citizens to help them develop the sense of responsibility they would need to eliminate insurgent activity in sanctuaries, among the population, or in transit through the border region.34
CONOP ROCK MOVE failed to implement these various lines of operation. A single platoon of Chosen Company, absent highly visible CAS or attack helicopter support, did not contain sufficient combat power to clear the ACM insurgents from the vicinity of Wanat. SGT Pitts, 2d Platoon FO, specifically observed: “One thing that wasn’t done, and in hindsight should have been…was to have a show of force or just aircraft on station…”35 Construction of COP Kahler at Wanat was intended to hold the terrain around Wanat for TF Duke to operate effectively in the Waigal Valley. However, until COP Kahler and the associated OPs were actually constructed, a single platoon in the open field near the bazaar lacked the capability of holding Wanat. Lack of engagement with the ANP, and isolation of the Chosen Few platoon from the ANA Company, also ensured that holding of Wanat continued to be a US Army rather than an Afghan government and security force mission, and this was a mission that a single platoon could not realistically perform. Absent “clear” and “hold” there was little real possibility of building relationships or engaging the local population.

There is an overwhelming counterinsurgency reality in Afghanistan. The ACM insurgents possess inherent advantages in that they come from the same culture, have lived among the same tribal systems, have the identical ethnical background and religion as the people of Afghanistan, and are native language speakers. These are advantages that American or NATO counterinsurgents can simply never possess. They are, after all, from Des Moines, not Darah-e-Pesh. The ACM insurgents also possess the advantage of time- they live in Afghanistan, and if the campaign lasts twenty years or even twenty generations, that is how long it will last, and they will still be in Afghanistan.

However, American and NATO counterinsurgents are not without inherent advantages of their own, which the ACM insurgents cannot hope to match. The coalition counterinsurgents have overwhelming firepower and military might, and in a traditional warrior and honor based society that greatly respects strength, this is a formidable advantage. One observer noted: “Afghan traditional culture accepts the
simple physical premise of rule by the strongest.”36 Although usually interpreted as meaning exclusively the strongest militarily, this statement actually means that the strongest economically, financially, politically or militarily tends to become preeminent. And the counterinsurgents also possess great financial resources, directly translating into economic influence, which the insurgents have no hope of countering. The counterinsurgents can build roads, create employment, foster businesses and markets and trade, deliver fuel and food, and provide medical and veterinary treatment, electricity and water for irrigation. Thus, Afghanistan can be viewed as a contest between two different sets of advantages: cultural, ethnical, traditional, linguistic and religious values and time; against military, financial, and economic strength. The side that most efficiently employs its advantages, while countering or diluting the advantages that the opposition possesses, will win the confidence and support of the population.37 To achieve tactical and operational success in Afghanistan within this context, a range of steps well grounded in COIN doctrine must be implemented for any tactical operation to be a success, and to make a permanent contribution towards fostering the Afghan central government:

- Prior coordination with Afghanistan district & provincial governments, with the Afghanistan government taking the lead in identifying location(s) and objective(s) for operations;

- Integrated combat operations with ANA and ANP, with ANA taking lead in combat operations planning and execution and US Army providing support as necessary and appropriate, and with the ANP taking lead in security and stability operations planning and execution and US Army and ANA providing support as necessary and appropriate;
• Concurrent Civil Affairs planning with distribution of humanitarian supplies and performance of MEDCAP/VETCAP activities integrated with any kinetic operation;

• Coordination with PRT, Afghanistan government, and NGO to concurrently bring in governance, school facilities and staff, medical facilities and staff, economic development, and infrastructure improvement. Before any kinetic operation is implemented all of these resources should be in position and ready for immediate establishment/insertion in coordination with the tactical operation. Facility construction will take longer, but improvement of existing facilities can happen quickly, particularly if materials/equipment is stockpiled, and it is most important to have trained personnel such as medical staff or schoolteachers available and supported.

• Integrated I/O campaign immediately upon initiation of US/Afghanistan operation with leaflets, brochures, posters, newspapers, electronic media (cassettes, CDs, DVDs), radio station announcements, including during civil affairs handing out numerous radios by ANA through village elders to keep the population informed and quell rumors;

• Implementation of “ink line strategy” to immediately establish ground lines of communication and place them into operation, as previously performed by the 10th Mountain Division with considerable effect in the Pech Valley in particular, and as recommended by COIN expert David Kilcullen. Where existing roads are to be used, the tactical operation must include route clearance and sanitation package to initially get the roads clear of IEDs. If a
new road is to be constructed, then engineering resources such as bridges, construction equipment and materials should be pre-positioned, and contracts with LOCAL (tribal or community) construction firms should be pre-negotiated and ready for immediate execution;

- Integrated MILDEC plan (admittedly not a major component, and in most cases this only needs to only be functional at immediate tactical level to avoid IEDs and to maintain OPSEC);

- Immediate US tactical commander (and this might be a Platoon Leader or Company Commander) must be prepared to assume mantle of tribal leadership, and immediately execute a Shura upon arrival (and the officer who will be local leader must perform not only this Shura, but any previous Shuras, and they should NOT be performed by a higher ranking officer who will depart the AO once an operation is completed), and be fully supported with HUMINT and Interpreter, to receive a comprehensive briefing from THT and HTT before the movement into an area. Any important cultural, ethnical or religious considerations identified by the THT and HTT must be disseminated to the solders involved in the operation, particularly those who will be operating within the community; and

- Arrive with overwhelming tactical force, both ANA and US army, including CAS and tactical helicopters, to insure that residents understand that the US Army has the military strength and the fire power, and are more than willing to use them. A Canadian Army Officer who fought in Afghanistan noted in
2008: “We know through experience that the more combat power we commit to a mission, the less kinetic that operation is likely to become.”

Not a single one of these conditions necessary for COIN success in Afghanistan were achieved by Chosen Company, TF Rock, or TF Bayonet during CONOP ROCK MOVE. The Wanat attack was directly caused by inadequate COIN methodology as dictated by CJTF-101, and practiced throughout the year’s campaigning by TF Rock, which had employed a highly kinetic approach, particularly including the conduct of numerous CAS strikes (including frequent CAS attacks using bombs in the 500-2,000 pound range) on a number of villages in the Waigal Valley. The result polarized the local population, and attracted a large ACM insurgent force already operating in close proximity to Bella towards Wanat.

Prior coordination was absolutely and exhaustively performed by TF Rock with the District Governor regarding the establishment of a COP at Wanat, and obtaining land use permission for the site of the proposed COP. However, this prior coordination provided detailed engineering plans for the new COP directly to the District Governor weeks before the operation began, thus violating OPSEC for the immediate tactical operation. TF Rock had definitely identified and planned for follow on civil affairs and economic development projects in Wanat, but none of these had been initiated within the first week of COP Kahler’s existence, or were visible to the Wanat population. There is no evidence that any aspect of the actual CONOP ROCK MOVE was integrated with the Wanat District Governor, Nuristan Provincial Governor, or Afghan central government. In fact, post-battle interviews with numerous officers intimately involved with CONOP ROCK MOVE revealed considerable confusion regarding even where Wanat is located, and the appropriate District Governor to negotiate with. Political goals, tasks, or objectives were a not a component of CONOP ROCK MOVE.

Competing priorities between proper negotiations with the community leaders and property owners to facilitate land occupation and use by US Army forces, and the need to maintain OPSEC, was not
resolved by the US Army. At Wanat, extended land use negotiations that were not desired by the community resulted in the ACM gaining considerable intelligence regarding the future site of COP Kahler, well before it was established. The US Army needs to address this dichotomy.

The ANA was not involved with the planning for CONOP ROCK MOVE, and was not effectively employed by either 2d Platoon or Chosen Company leadership at Wanat. The long-standing enmity between the 2d Platoon and Afghanistan security forces, which was finalized with the fatal shooting of the 2d Platoon Sergeant in January 2008, had not been reduced or controlled by the Chosen Company, TF Rock or TF Bayonet leadership. When CPT Myer arrived on 12 July at Wanat and inspected the COP, his major concern with the ANA was that they would not shoot into adjacent American troops. Coordination with the ANP was even poorer. The ANP Police Chief repeatedly told the Americans that they were not welcomed in Wanat, and openly failed to cooperate with them. Subsequently, it was determined that he had been co-opted by the ACM. Inadequate previous coordination with the ANP resulted in such animosity going undetected by HUMINT until 1LT Brostrom’s platoon actually arrived in Wanat, and this friction to successful operations in Wanat was never addressed, particularly given the absence of CPT Myer from Wanat. Even if COP Kahler was successfully established, permanent security and stability in Wanat could never have been maintained without the active and complete cooperation of the ANA and ANP, and neither Chosen Company nor TF Rock took measures to insure that such cooperation was to be secured.

TF Rock and TF Bayonet had not employed either Civil Affairs or Humanitarian supplies in the Waigal Valley throughout their 2007-2008 deployment as per command guidance from CJTF-101, and there was no Civil Affairs or Humanitarian component to CONOP ROCK MOVE. An ABC Nightline television show entitled “The Other War” (aired on November 12, 2007) showed a youthful Platoon Leader of TF Rock in negotiations with village elders in the Korengal Valley. This young 1LT clearly
promised humanitarian supplies to the village elders, but only in response to their active cooperation and support. In other words, the Platoon Leader was attempting to coerce behavior that he deemed supportive from the village elders through the manipulation of humanitarian supplies, a COIN technique that is most likely to prove ineffective, and in fact is entirely likely to engender animosity. A more productive COIN technique is to first gain the trust of the elders and community through the distribution of humanitarian supplies without constraint or condition, thus proving generosity and good will, and later negotiating after positive relationships are established. If this is indicative of COIN tactics within TF Rock, and ancillary evidence suggests that it is accurate, then TF Rock’s attempts at COIN were more likely to foster hostility than reciprocity from the local population.  

CONOP ROCK MOVE had no MEDCAPs or VETCAPs imbedded in the operation, and had no distribution of any humanitarian supplies imbedded in the operation. Civil Affairs was not a component of CONOP ROCK MOVE planning and execution.

The Americans also did not complete the road from Camp Blessing (and thus the remainder of Afghanistan) into Wanat, and the absence of this road’s completion meant that “ink lines” were not exploited to connect the Waigal Valley. The concept to hire an outside construction company to construct the permanent COP harmed relationships with the community of Wanat, because even if it was an Afghan construction company, it was a Safi Pashtun construction company from Jalalabad constructing a road into a Nuristani ethnical area. Had the Americans negotiated with the local elders to improve the road from Blessing to Wanat and have the COP constructed using local labor with payment, tools, supplies and equipment provided by the Americans (as had been done successfully in Wanat in 2006), they would have immediately generated economic development in Wanat, and gained the respect of the community (and also economically tied the community to the Coalition Forces and by association the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan central government). Exacerbating the economic situation, American soldiers were not permitted to visit the nearby market place, spending money on souvenirs and food. They brought no humanitarian supplies with them, no civil affairs supplies were distributed, no jobs or businesses or
economic advantages of any kind were brought to Wanat by the Americans. Thus, the Americans failed to optimize any of their inherent financial and economic advantages.\textsuperscript{40}

LTC Ostlund, TF Rock Commander, has stressed that numerous financially lucrative and large economic development projects were planned to benefit the Wanat community. In the various \textit{Shuras} held at Wanat prior to the establishment of COP Kahler these economic programs had been thoroughly and comprehensively articulated to the Wanat village leaders and elders by both CPT Myer and LTC Ostlund. However, the Wanat community saw an American occupation, a permanent American presence in their community being established that would certainly attract ACM response to include indirect fire attacks, but did not see any evidence of accompanying economic development benefits. Without an immediate economic benefit being demonstrated to the community of Wanat, they dismissed American promises as hollow, particularly given their year’s experience with TF Rock’s highly kinetic operations. Given a real ACM threat to their community, they were more likely to respond to an actual threat, not a potential benefit at some ill-defined moment in the future. And, given the likelihood that the new American base would attract indirect and harassment fire that would be certain to strike and endanger the adjacent community, the new COP at Wanat could easily be perceived as a direct threat to Wanat.

The American operational plan failed to implement any measures to counteract or diminish the ACM’s IO advantages and strengths. There is no evidence that any IO effort was performed to inform the people of Wanat and the Waigal Valley as to why a COP was being established in Wanat, and what it would do for the people of Wanat and the Waigal Valley.

A \textit{Shura} between American leaders and Afghan elders was not performed in Wanat until the evening of 12 July, when CPT Myer arrived at COP Kahler, and this was actually a diner meeting rather than a formal I. The Americans were in Wanat for four days before any meaningful contact between American leadership and Afghan leadership was performed, although 1LT Brostrom did make efforts to establish
such contacts. When 1LT Brostrom was informed that a *Shura* was being held between the community, District Government, and ANP at the ANP District Headquarters (probably to plan the attack) he was incensed, and immediately inserted himself into the *Shura*. In doing this, he acted entirely appropriately by Afghan cultural standards. As senior American officer, he represented the “elder” or leader of the new tribe that had just arrived in the community-the Americans. By holding a *Shura* without inviting him, both himself personally and his tribe of warriors as an entity had been insulted and dishonored. 1LT Brostrom had every right to be angered, and by swiftly responding and expressing his displeasure he doubtless regained some American prestige in Afghan eyes. However, this solitary intervention was in and of itself insufficient to divert the attack. This is particularly true since the American army had operated in the Waigal Valley for over two years, sufficient for the Afghan populace to have gained more than a rudimentary comprehension of the American rank structure, and they clearly recognized that a 24-year old “Bar” (1LT’s rank) had little real power or authority. A more senior officer should have met with the community leadership immediately upon troop insertion into Wanat, and introduced 1LT Brostrom to the elders as the new American commander and clearly supported him in that role.

At the same time, American soldiers and officers were not briefed upon the cultural issues associated with the Waigal Valley previous to their deployment. A number of officers interviewed for this study were still uncertain regarding whether Wanat was in Nuristan or Kunar, even after a fifteen month deployment to northeastern Afghanistan. An anthropological and cultural preparation for the mission was never performed, even though resources were specifically available in the country to provide such resources. There are historic and long existing circumstances in the Waigal Valley, which Chosen Company, TF Rock and TF Bayonet had to operate within. One of these constraints was the pre-existing tensions between the Nuristani of the northern highland Waigal Valley, and the Safi Pashtuns of the comparatively lowland Pech Valley. The predominantly Nuristani residents of Wanat did not encourage and would certainly oppose any incursion into the Waigal Valley by the Safi Pashtuns. The Nuristani
Wanat would not necessarily welcome the improvement of the road from Safi Pashtun Nangalam to Wanat, as this could constitute a threat from a Safi Pashtun expansion north into the Waigal Valley. Construction of a road from the center of Safi Pashtun strength into Nuristani territory could be anticipated to generate concerns, without sufficient IO preparation and careful coordination with the Wanat population (and particularly with the Wanat family and tribal elders and leaders). In the absence of this IO campaign, it is not surprising that the local Wanat population viewed the American incursion with disfavor, particular if they perceived that the Americans were being manipulated or prejudiced by the Safi Pashtuns of the Pech Valley with which they were more closely associated. Strong relationships between the Kunar District Governor in Nangalam near Camp Blessing and the US Army at Camp Blessing naturally developed, and the Waigal Valley leaders would certainly have been familiar with them. Any effort to establish a new operating base in Wanat needed to take this potential conflict into consideration, and ameliorate it through careful planning and negotiations. There is no evidence that TF Rock, TF Bayonet or CJTF-101 were ever aware of this strife, or performed any such planning and negotiations in conjunction with CONOP ROCK MOVE to counteract its influence.

The platoon sized element that occupied Wanat possessed barely sufficient firepower to defend itself (as the events of 13 July decisively validated); and lacked adequate firepower to extend their sphere of influence even from the COP into the adjoining community. Upon insertion, the Americans failed to awe the community and local district through an overwhelming display of military might such as CAS, attack helicopters, and powerful indirect artillery, and it failed to provide a demonstration of American power to the people. American patrols failed to maneuver throughout the community and immediate district, extending their influence and controlling the community. When the insurgents tested American resolve and strength by permitting small parties of insurgents to be seen and engaged on the night of 11-12 July, the Americans could only fire a few 60mm mortar shells, which graphically portrayed their weakness. The attack came within 24 hours.
In Wanat, the American counterinsurgents employed none of their advantages, and did nothing to negate the ACM advantages. The result was a failure of COIN manifested in a major combat action that although a marked tactical victory, became an operational and strategic defeat.

2 Giustozzi, Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop, 65, 69, 100.
3 Johnson “No Sign until the Burst of Fire,” 41.
4 SFC Dzikw and SGT Aass Personal Interviews.
6 Article 15-6 Investigation.
7 Article 15-6 Investigation.
8 Article 15-6 Investigation.
9 Article 15-6 Investigation; CPL Oakes Personal Interview.
10 LTC Ostlund Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
11 LTC Ostlund, “Battle of Wanat Storyboard and Brief.”
13 SGT Brian Hisson, “Statement on Wanat to Colonel (Retired) David Brostrom,” (E-mail dated December 15, 2008).
14 CPT Devin George, Personal Statement, “Logistics at Wanat.” (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI on 22 April 2009).
15 SGT Pitts Personal Interview.
16 SGT Pitts Personal Interview.
17 Cubbison, Crossed Swords Tribe of Afghanistan, 166.
19 CPT Pry Personal Interview.
20 Drew Bowman, Team Leader, Human Terrain Team, Afghanistan. “Statement on Waigal Valley.” (E-mail to Mr. Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, February 12, 2009).
21 MILDEC is not even mentioned in the Operations Order.
23 CPT Myer Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
26 SGT Pitts Personal Interview.
27 Department of Defense, Unmanned Systems Roadmap, 2007-2032 (December 10, 2007), 71, 82; and Interview with LTC J.S. Hinton.
28 CPT Pry Personal Interview.
29 SFC Dzikw Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
31 CPL Stafford Statement, Article 15-6 Investigation.
32 CPT J.J. Madill, Personal Statement, “Battle of Wanat” (E-mail to Douglas R. Cubbison, CSI, 19 May 2009).
33 Douglas R. Cubbison, “‘Look Out For Hell Some Place Soon,’ The 2d Colorado Cavalry in Missouri, February - September, 1864” *Military History of the West* 32, No. 1 (Spring 2002), 22.
35 SGT Pitts Personal Interview.
37 Some elements of this concept were derived from Geoffrey Demarest, “19th Century Strategy and Its Applicability to Insurgent Warfare” *Small Wars Journal*. Available from: [www.smallwarsjournal.com](http://www.smallwarsjournal.com).
39 ABC Nightline, “The Other War” (November 12, 2007).
40 For a succinct discussion of how better highways can contribute to Afghanistan’s future, refer to Philip Smucker, “Asphalt Dreams” *The Atlantic Monthly* 301:5 (June 2008), 24-25.
Chapter 4

FINAL ASSESSMENT

“Woe to the government, which, relying on half-hearted politics and a shackled military policy, meets a foe who, like the untamed elements, knows no law other than his own power! Any defect of action and effort will turn to the advantage of the enemy, and it will not be easy to change from a fencer’s position to that of a wrestler. A slight blow may then often be enough to cause a total collapse.”

General Carl Von Clausewitz

Causal Factors

The events that occurred at Wanat, Afghanistan on 13 July 2008 were caused by numerous factors that are inherently complex, and no single cause can be adequately assessed in a vacuum. The precise contribution of many of these causes cannot be objectively assessed.

First, the successful defense by 2d Platoon of Chosen Company, TF Rock can be directly attributed to the following reasons:

• Construction of sufficient fortifications and a comprehensive defensive position;

• The maintenance of high discipline, and continuous adherence to standards, within the platoon;

• Rigorous adherence to “stand to” at a sufficient amount of time prior to BMNT;
• Exemplary NCO and Officer leadership; and

• Individual soldier fighting skill, determination, devotion to duty, courage and valor.

COP Kahler was never penetrated or overrun by ACM forces. OP Topside was never overrun by ACM insurgents. However, OP Topside’s defensive perimeter was penetrated by insurgents, and the most intensive and costly fighting of the engagement occurred at OP Topside directly as a result of this penetration.

The serious losses sustained by COP Kahler, and particularly in the intense fighting at OP Topside, were a direct result of the following causes:

• OPSEC failure, enabling ACM force to attack with nearly perfect intelligence;

• Insufficient logistics at COP Kahler that resulted in inadequate defenses being constructed during the four-day occupation at Wanat, particularly including serious shortages of Class I (potable water), Class IV (construction materials), POL transfer for the Bobcat, and heavy construction equipment;

• Reliance upon Afghan construction company from Jalalabad to provide critical logistical support, perform heavy construction of the COP, and to complete the important road from Camp Blessing to Wanat;

• Constrained configuration for COP Kahler that restricted tactical innovations or adjustments by the 2d Platoon, to include construction of supplemental or alternate fighting positions;
• Insufficient combat power for the specified tasks at Wanat being assigned by TF Rock, TF Bayonet and CJTF-101;

• Erroneous assessment by Chosen Company and TF Rock commanders of ACM intentions and capabilities (and attendant discounting of TF Rock Intelligence Assessment);

• Lack of TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 command emphasis and attention upon CONOP ROCK MOVE.

In addition to these shortcomings, the illumination cycle on the night of 12-13 July that facilitated the ACM insurgent tactical approach to Wanat cannot be discounted. The movement skills, proven field craft, concentration of firepower, efficient employment of weapons, and combat determination of the ACM insurgents that fought at Wanat on 13 July cannot be underestimated. Chosen Company was attacked by an experienced, numerically powerful, highly-skilled, adequately-equipped, tactically-accomplished, and well-led enemy combat force that was truly formidable. The ACM insurgents that the Chosen Few fought with at Wanat were as talented and accomplished as any hostile force that American paratroopers have ever faced.

A large number of indirect causes directly influenced events at Wanat, although an objective evaluation of the extent of their influence cannot be accurately established:

• Lack of adequate preparation for 173d Airborne BCT to sufficiently train and prepare for a deployment to northeastern Afghanistan;

• Absence of adequate cultural awareness and understanding of specific tribal and governance situation in the Waigal Valley;
• Absence of a MILDEC component to CONOP ROCK MOVE;

• Highly kinetic approach by TF Rock throughout the campaign to include extensive use of CAS, that negated the population centric approach previously employed by 1-32 Infantry of 10th Mountain Division; and that caused animosity and hostility among the Waigal Valley population;

• 4 July AH-64 helicopter attack on medical staff of Bella Clinic, that caused numerous fatalities, and exacerbated already fragile relationships between Chosen Company and TF Rock and the Waigal Valley population;

• Chosen Company, TF Rock, TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 leadership permitted acrimonious and retributive perspectives to become predominant within Chosen Company, to the detriment of good morale, and to the detriment of the company’s ability to implement effective COIN operations in Nuristan;

• Dilution of Chosen Company, TF Rock, and TF Bayonet focus on CONOP ROCK MOVE due to ongoing RIP, preparations for imminent re-deployment to Italy and Germany, ongoing Article 15-6 investigation, and supporting numerous other ongoing tactical operations;

• Absence of a Civil Affairs component to CONOP ROCK MOVE, as directed by CJTF-101, and resulting absence of humanitarian supplies, civil affairs support, MEDCAP or VETCAP capabilities to CONOP ROCK MOVE as specified by CJTF-101;

• Withdrawal of ISR assets by CJTF-101 G-2 from Wanat on 12 July;
• IO defeat caused by abandonment of COP Bella and 4 July Attack Helicopter attack, that recruited local fighters to the existing ACM force maneuvering against Bella, emboldened ACM insurgents, and empowered ACM leadership against the coalition forces in Wanat;

• Inadequate force structure to provide effective security to new COP at Wanat, while at the same time establishing a new facility including adequate Observation Posts, while extending coalition presence within Wanat;

• Absence of ROC drill and resulting inadequate planning to identify deficiencies in CONOP ROCK MOVE particularly as regards logistical support, ISR support, fire support planning, and the transition to TF Duke; and

• 2d Platoon, Chosen Company failure to adequately employ the ANA Company to perform local dismounted patrols.

A number of specific recommendations regarding American equipment, tactics, and doctrine were identified, along with the appropriate proponent to address these deficiencies:

• Failure of numerous weapons systems at sustained, cyclic rates of fire during the engagement (PM- Soldier Weapons);

• Absence of individual and squad/platoon water purification systems (PEO-Soldier);

• Increased emphasis upon tactics for the successful employment of Claymore Mines (US Army Center for Lessons Learned and Infantry School);
• Increased emphasis upon fire support procedures and processes at Company/Team level (US Army Center for Lessons Learned and Fires School); and

• Investigation of use of larger CH-47 helicopter as MEDEVAC platform (PEO-Aviation and Aviation School).

To achieve tactical and operational success in Afghanistan, a range of steps well grounded in COIN doctrine must be implemented for any tactical operation to become a success, and to make a permanent contribution towards fostering the strength, dependability and presence of the Afghan central government. The events at Wanat between 8-15 July provide an opportunity to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of adequate COIN doctrine and practices as employed by Chosen Company, TF Rock and TF Bayonet:

• Deployment during the active campaign season resulted in TF Rock and TF Bayonet sustaining casualties during their RIP in May 2008, and provided tactical units inadequate time to learn the human and topographical terrain before being committed to major combat actions;

• Absence of Afghanistan political coordination, input, and objectives in CONOP ROCK MOVE;

• Failure by TF Rock, TF Bayonet and CJTF-101 to configure Chosen Company to adequately implement the “Clear, Hold, Build and Engage” Lines of Operation for successful COIN operations at Wanat;
• Insertion of 2d Platoon, Chosen Company into Wanat without display of overwhelming force and combat power; and

• Poor coordination and relationships, to include lack of mutual trust and respect, between Chosen Company elements and District ANP and District Afghan Government at Wanat; and ANA Company that accompanied the platoon to Wanat.

The conflict in Afghanistan can be perceived as a contest between two different sets of advantages: cultural, ethnical, traditional, linguistics, religious values, and time possessed by the insurgency; against military, financial, and economic strength possessed by the predominantly American coalition forces. The side that most efficiently employs its advantages, while countering or diluting the advantages that the opposition possesses, will win the confidence and support of the population. CONOP ROCK MOVE failed to adequately employ the military, financial or economic strengths possessed by Chosen Company, TF Rock, TF Bayonet, and CJTF-101. The ACM insurgents successfully employed their cultural strengths against the garrison at COP Kahler that enabled them to maneuver a large force through the Waigal Valley and capillary valleys from Bella to Wanat without being detected by American ISR assets, concentrate against the 2d Platoon at Wanat, garner local fighters and local support, gather comprehensive intelligence, and then launch a powerful, aggressive attack on the morning of 13 July. The ACM insurgents demonstrated to the population of the Waigal Valley that they possessed a stronger will in the face of heavy casualties, a superior resolve to maintain a presence in the Waigal Valley, and a determination to persevere even in the face of adversity. The result was a failure of COIN manifested in a major combat action, which although a marked tactical victory, became an operational and strategic COIN defeat.

**Final Assessment**
In the final analysis, the Paratroopers of the 2d Platoon, Chosen Few had achieved a complete tactical victory at Wanat. None of the ACM objectives was achieved. The ACM assault was decisively repulsed, although the ACM had every possible advantage, and fought with fanatical commitment and determination, refusing to yield the battlefield for several hours even after American airpower came on station. The defenses at COP Kahler were established as completely as time and resources permitted, the defenders were alert and ready, and their tactical responses (particularly the extremely aggressive QRFs at Platoon level) were superlative. Although the ACM had the tactical initiative, in large part this was taken away from them by the Officer and NCO leadership of 2d Platoon, Chosen Few that vigorously and independently pushed all available forces to the *schwerpunkt* at COP Kahler- the fight for OP Topside. The American soldiers fought a tenacious defensive fight and eagerly transitioned to the counterattack, crushing an ACM attack that outnumbered them with odds somewhere between 2:1 and 4:1. The ACM suffered crushing casualties in the ensuing debacle, without corresponding tactical benefits. Wanat was a substantial, overwhelming American tactical victory. Tragically, this victory had only been purchased with the considerable effusion of blood by the 2d Platoon of the Chosen Few.

However, two days later American CJTF-101 leadership transformed this tactical victory into an operational and strategic defeat, negating three full campaign seasons of exhaustive labor and sacrifice performed by American soldiers (2006, 2007 and 2008) by abandoning an entire topographical valley to Taliban control. Citizens, and particularly elders and family leaders in the Waigal Valley who had supported the coalition, were abandoned to their fates. The ACM leadership in the Waigal Valley had found the mechanism to effectively employ their relatively meager means against the American forces in a manner that negated the Americans’ far better equipped and trained soldiers by inflicting casualties upon the Americans sufficient to shatter the resolve of the American senior commanders to retain soldiers at a COP in Wanat, or to maintain COIN operations from there. On 15 July 2008 the American CJTF-101 leadership withdrew from the Waigal Valley, even though the paratroopers that fought for them had never
fought more valiantly, and had never faltered in the face of immense adversity. A March 2009 military blog might well have been written about the Waigal Valley: “There are entire swaths of territory that have been ceded to the militants in Afghanistan. In some cases, entire districts are essentially ‘no-go’ areas, starved of development and even regular security resources…”

And throughout 2008 and 2009, as one American officer fighting in the region remarked, “The Taliban and al-Qaeda are moving through Nuristan at will.” The increased combat and terrorist attacks in Kabul and the central Provinces of Wardak and Logar that are occurring throughout 2009 are in part being performed by insurgents that are transiting through the Waigal Valley.

On 13 April 2009, during the preparation of this study, a New York Times newspaper article assessed the current situation in the Waigal Valley, as it has developed following last summer’s fight at Wanat: “The Army left the village. It has yet to return.”

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1 Clausewitz, On War, 257.
### Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT-4</td>
<td>A portable, one-shot anti-tank missile that replaced the M-72 LAW, intended to be carried and fired by a single soldier.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AAF</td>
<td>Anti-Afghanistan Force (Afghanistan Insurgents) - not used in this report</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACM</td>
<td>Anti-Coalition Militia (Afghanistan Insurgents) – used in this report</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANA</td>
<td>Afghanistan National Army</td>
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<td>ANP</td>
<td>Afghanistan National Police</td>
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<td>AO</td>
<td>Area of Operations</td>
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<td>ASG</td>
<td>Afghan Security Guard</td>
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<td>ASP</td>
<td>Ammunition Supply Point</td>
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<td>BDA</td>
<td>Battle Damage Assessment</td>
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<td>BMNT</td>
<td>Before Morning Nautical Twilight (first military significant light)</td>
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<td>C2</td>
<td>Command and Control</td>
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<td>CALL</td>
<td>US Army Center for Lessons Learned</td>
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<td>CAS</td>
<td>Close Air Support</td>
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<td>CCP</td>
<td>Casualty Collection Point</td>
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<td>COIN</td>
<td>Counterinsurgency</td>
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<td>CONOP</td>
<td>Contingency Operation</td>
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<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>Combat Outpost</td>
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<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td>Tactical Command Post (Company Command Post at Wanat)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCGO</td>
<td>Deputy Commanding General-Operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOD</td>
<td>Department of Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>E-Tool</td>
<td>Personnel Entrenching Tool</td>
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<tr>
<td>EENT</td>
<td>End Evening Nautical Twilight (last military significant light)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETT</td>
<td>Embedded Training Team (US Marine Trainers embedded with ANA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FSO</td>
<td>Fire Support Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>FO</td>
<td>Forward Observer</td>
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<td>FOB</td>
<td>Forward Operating Base</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPF</td>
<td>Final Protective Fire</td>
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<tr>
<td>HUMINT</td>
<td>Human Intelligence</td>
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<tr>
<td>HMMWV</td>
<td>High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle</td>
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<tr>
<td>HVT</td>
<td>High Value Target</td>
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<tr>
<td>IED</td>
<td>Improvised Explosive Device</td>
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<td>IO</td>
<td>Information Operations</td>
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<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITAS</td>
<td>TOW Improved Target Acquisition System</td>
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<tr>
<td>JMRC</td>
<td>Joint Multi-National Readiness Center (Hohenfels, Germany)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kandak</td>
<td>ANA Battalion (Afghanistan name)</td>
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<tr>
<td>KIA</td>
<td>Killed In Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>M-72 66mm Light Anti-Tank Weapon. An out-dated Vietnam era single-shot anti-tank weapon, intended to be carried and fired by a single soldier.</td>
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<tr>
<td>LN</td>
<td>Local National</td>
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<tr>
<td>M-4</td>
<td>M-4 Carbine Model of 5.56mm M16 automatic rifle</td>
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<tr>
<td>M-203</td>
<td>Model M-203 40mm grenade launcher, mounted underneath M-16 series rifle</td>
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<td>M-240</td>
<td>M-240 series 7.62mm Medium machine gun (ground mounted or vehicle mounted)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mk-19</td>
<td>Mk-19 model 40mm automatic grenade launcher (vehicle mounted only)</td>
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<td>MEDEVAC</td>
<td>Medical Evacuation Helicopter</td>
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<td>MILDEC</td>
<td>Military Deception</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRE</td>
<td>Military Readiness Exercise</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOD</td>
<td>Night Observation Device</td>
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<tr>
<td>OIC</td>
<td>Officer in Charge (Senior ETT Marine Officer)</td>
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<td>OPSEC</td>
<td>Operational Security</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>Physician Assistant</td>
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<td>PFC</td>
<td>PFC</td>
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<tr>
<td>PID</td>
<td>Positive Identification</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDSS</td>
<td>Pre-Deployment Site Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Platoon Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUC</td>
<td>Place Under Confinement (arrest or detain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QRF</td>
<td>Quick Reaction Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RIP</td>
<td>Relief in Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROC</td>
<td>Rehearsal of Concept Drill (Synchronization drill performed during planning and prior to execution of a military operation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td>Rocket Propelled Grenade (Soviet model weapon system)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO</td>
<td>Radio Telephone Operator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAF</td>
<td>Small Arms Fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAW</td>
<td>M-249 5.56mm Squad Automatic Weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFC</td>
<td>SFC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGINT</td>
<td>Signals Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMAW-D</td>
<td>M141 Bunker Defeating Munitions, intended to be carried and fired by a single soldier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSG</td>
<td>SSG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>Tactical Command Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TACSAT</td>
<td>Tactical Satellite Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCP</td>
<td>Traffic Control Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Terp”</td>
<td>Afghan Interpreter (nickname)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TF</td>
<td>Task Force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIC</td>
<td>Troops in Contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOA</td>
<td>Transfer of Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOC</td>
<td>Tactical Operations Center (TF Rock TOC was at Camp Blessing, TF Bayonet TOC and TF Out Front TOC was at FOB Fenty, Jalalabad Airfield)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOW</td>
<td>Tube Launched Optically Tracked Wire Guided Anti-Missile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTP</td>
<td>Tactics, Techniques and Procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPB</td>
<td>Vehicle Patrol Base [not an established or officially recognized US Army acronym]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIA</td>
<td>Wounded In Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XO</td>
<td>Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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244
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