

# THE BRAVEST WARRIOR

By Bing West

*Excerpted from his book, "The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan"*

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**SETTING:** In 2009, III Marine Expeditionary Force in Okinawa had a standing agreement to provide Marine advisors, or Embedded Training Teams, to the Afghan battalions operating in the high mountains of northeast Afghanistan. The ETTs and their kandaks (Afghan battalions) usually shared the same battlespace with a U.S. Army battalion. Such was the case at Camp Joyce, on the Pakistan border eight miles east of the Korengal Valley.

In early September of 2009, Battalion 1-32 of the 10th Mountain Division conducted Operation Dancing Goat 2. The scheme of maneuver was simple. Thirteen Marine advisors, 60 Afghan soldiers and 20 Border Police would walk into Ganjigal to hold the *shura* (meeting with elders), while a platoon from 1-32 remained in reserve and three teams of scout-snipers took positions on a ridge.

From the start, one advisor—Corporal Dakota Meyer—didn't like it. Dancing Goat 2 seemed haphazard, with too many loose parts and no single commander.

"We should go in expecting contact," Meyer argued, "not expecting to sip tea."

Meyer was a fit, intense grunt inclined to speak his mind. The patrol order remained unchanged and the units moved out shortly after midnight on 8 Sept. 2009. Meyer was driving a humvee with a Mark 19 40 mm gun in the turret. His job was to provide fire support if the four advisors advancing with the lead platoon ran into trouble. As he stood beside his truck at the release point in the predawn light, women, children and goats flocked past him, fleeing out of the valley. He tried to question an old man with a long white beard, but the man refused to shake his hand and hurried past.

Ahead of Meyer, four Marine advisors accompanied the Afghan platoon into the village. The terrain provided no cover. The stone houses lay upslope of the rocky dirt road. First Lieutenant Michael E. "Mike" Johnson radioed that he was approaching the mullah's house. A long concrete schoolhouse lay off to the right, together with a series of terraces supported by stout, chest-high stone walls that prevented soil erosion.

Unseen, enemy fighters were crouched below the windows of the schoolhouse and inside the houses. They were hiding in



The Korengal Valley in Kunar province was well known as a very dangerous Taliban stronghold. (Photo by SGT Matthew Moeller, USA)

the alleyways and, most critically, they were dug in behind the stone terrace walls to the east. They had concealment, bulletproof cover, surprise and superior numbers. They opened fire on the lead element at 0530, shooting machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) downhill with the rising sun at their backs.

Army Captain William "Will" Swenson ran up to the mouth of the wash and grabbed at two *askars* (Afghan soldiers) who were running away. As he yelled at them, bullets chipped the stones at his feet. Altogether, more than 100 enemy were shooting from entrenched positions to the north and east. Swenson was carrying a radio called an MBTR 148 with a long whip antenna. He called to the Operations Center.

"This is Highlander 6," he screamed. "Heavy enemy fire. Request immediate suppression. Fire KE 3354. Will adjust. And get that air in here!"

Fifty meters behind Swenson, Army CPT Raymond Kaplan, the 1-32 intelligence officer, took up the cause, yelling over his radio that KE 3365 was the proper target. "Fire. Fire, g-d----, Smoke. Smoke." Kaplan sent the message seven times. Everyone was trying to talk over the same frequency, cutting each other off in mid-sentence. Kaplan was sure his requests were heard loud and clear.

"The TOC [tactical operations center] won't clear a mission," Kaplan radioed to Swenson. "The f---- won't shoot the arty."

Major Peter Granger, the executive officer in command of the battalion while Lieutenant Colonel Mark O'Donnell, a two-combat tour Ranger, was on leave, arrived at the TOC after the fight had started.

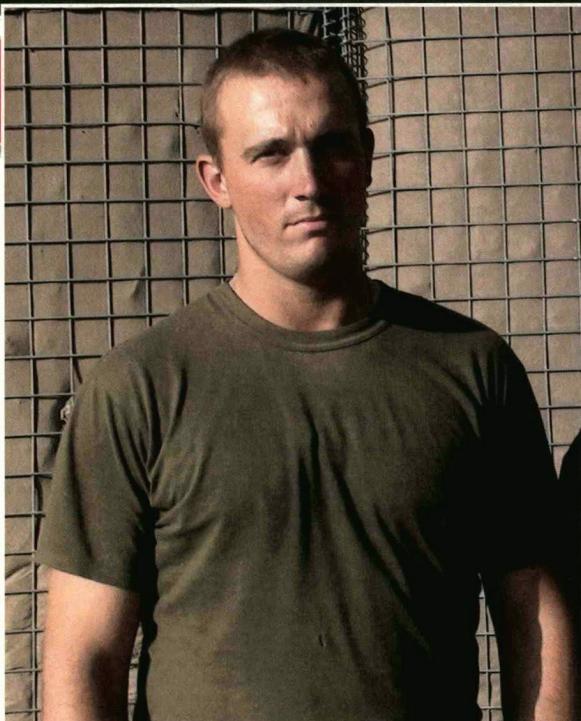
"They didn't know where all their soldiers were," Granger said later. "They didn't know if they'd be calling fire on their own [men]. They didn't have SA [situational awareness]."

An enraged Swenson screamed that he wanted rounds placed on the enemy. How the hell was he to know where everyone was? He was ducking machine-gun fire, and he knew exactly where the enemy gunners were—on a knoll to his right front, trying to kill him.

They're all over the place, Swenson thought. I may not make it out of here.

Several hundred meters to the west, Cpl Meyer and Staff Sergeant Juan Rodriguez-Chavez were standing next to their humvees, listening to the heavy firing. Meyer called Marine First Sergeant Christopher Garza, who was pinned down next to Marine 1stLt Ademola Fabayo, asking to go forward to rescue Johnson. Negative came the reply.

Marine SSgt Aaron M. Kenefick, one of the four trapped



Cpl Dakota Meyer

BING WEST

advisors, came up on the net. "They're all around us," Kenefick yelled. "They're in the house next door. If we leave this house, they'll shoot us down."

Over the radio, Meyer intermittently heard 1stLt Johnson trying to send his grid. The net was clogged with a dozen soldiers trying to talk over the din, stepping on each other's communications. Johnson found a hole in the constant stream of cluttered conversations.

"Clear the net," Johnson said. "I have wounded here. My pos is 793 ... ."

He never finished the sentence.

Meyer paced back and forth as the fight raged on without him. Several *askars* stumbled by, some bleeding, a few without

**"THEY'RE DOWN!" MEYER YELLED.  
"WE GOTTA GET IN THERE NOW!"**

their rifles, all exhausted.

"Where American?" Meyer yelled. "Dost? Dost?"

The Afghan soldiers pointed vaguely down the draw leading to the village.

"They're down!" Meyer yelled. "We gotta get in there now!"

Meyer turned to SSgt Chavez, the other driver.

"You drive my truck," he said. "I'll man the Mark 19."



BING WEST

Cpl Dakota Meyer, in the gun turret, "pounded the rock houses and the terrace walls with the .50-cal."

village. A soldier said they did not have permission from their command to enter the valley.

"I'll go," said Fazel, Meyer's interpreter.

**ROUND TWO.** Chavez, Meyer and Fazel left the Army platoon and went back into the valley in a single truck. Again as the truck pulled out of the ravine, bullets pinged off the armor and Meyer went back to work with the 240 machine gun. And again he yelled, "Stop!"

Four more Afghan soldiers were stumbling out of the village, including their first sergeant, the right side of his trousers covered with blood. Meyer hopped down and pushed all four into the vehicle. Fazel climbed into the turret and manned the

machine gun, firing burst after burst.

It was 0700, 90 minutes into the fight and two Kiowa helicopters with the call sign Pale Horse had come on station.

"In the village," the lead pilot, Warrant Officer Yossarian Silano, said, "I could see men at the windows of buildings and in the doorways. I saw Meyer repeatedly run into the open kill zone to recover dead and wounded men [Afghan soldiers]."

When the truck stopped behind the hill where the other wounded were, the Afghan first sergeant was babbling incoherently, begging Meyer not to go back.

"You get killed!" he screamed. "You get killed!"

Meyer angrily pulled him out of the truck.

"This truck is shot to hell," Meyer said to Chavez. "Let's get another one."

**ROUND THREE.** They drove back to the rendezvous point and hopped into Chavez's truck with a .50-caliber in the turret. Again into the ravine and up the slope to the village houses. Watching from the ridge to the east, Valadez radioed a warning that fighters hiding in the irrigation ditches were sneaking up on the truck from the right. Meyer swung the gun around and pumped heavy slugs into a tall, full-bearded man in his 30s who was running behind the vehicle. Two more fighters rushed in from the right side.

"I can't depress the gun," Meyer yelled, grabbing his M4 rifle.

Chavez watched wide-eyed as a fighter approaching the front hood was shot in the head. As the truck swerved a bit sideways over the rocks, he yelled to Meyer that they might get stuck in the valley.

"Well," Meyer yelled down, "I guess we will die with them."

Chavez drove straight ahead, bullets pinged off the doors, while Meyer fired the .50-cal.

Chavez saw yellow smoke several meters to the right of the road.

"Maybe we've found them," he shouted.

Swenson's party had been pinned down for about an hour. Three border police, too frightened to return fire, had run away. Fabayo was watching groups of two and three enemy fighters darting from one terrace wall to another. A woman in a purple and red dress ran from one house to another with a belt of machine-gun bullets dangling from her shoulders. Fabayo shot one man and yelled to Swenson to cover his back. Shooting over

**ROUND ONE.** On the ridge 500 feet above, Army SSG Guillermo Valadez watched the lone truck leave the rendezvous area and draped a plastic orange air panel on a boulder so that Meyer could track his directions. He told Meyer to take a sharp left and watched the humvee disappear into the ravine.

As the humvee crawled out of the ravine, Chavez could see the first row of stone houses about 100 meters uphill. When a mortar round crumpled in to his right, he jerked the wheel to the left and the humvee skidded sideways. As he rolled a few meters downhill to straighten out, three RPGs exploded in sharp succession, again to the right. He couldn't hear the radio over the racket of the Mark 19. Meyer was shooting at a rock wall right next to the truck.

"Stop, stop!" Meyer screamed.

Chavez hit the brakes while Meyer climbed down from the gun turret and ran over to several askars huddled behind a boulder, also shooting to the right. Meyer pulled first one Afghan and then another back to the truck. Inside five minutes, he had packed three wounded soldiers in the back seat. He ran back and brought another to the rear, opened up the trunk and pushed him in. Another askar stumbled over. Meyer piled him in and climbed back into the turret. Several Taliban had run

**MEYER SWUNG THE GUN AROUND  
AND PUMPED HEAVY SLUGS INTO A TALL,  
FULL-BEARDED MAN IN HIS 30S  
WHO WAS RUNNING BEHIND THE VEHICLE.**

forward and were shooting from stone walls along a terrace about 50 meters to the east, or right-hand side of the truck.

When the Mark 19 jammed, Meyer switched to the backup gun, a 240 machine gun. When he shot one man with a heavy black beard, the others ducked behind the wall. Chavez turned the truck around and they jounced back into the ravine, with Meyer firing bursts in crazy directions.

About 150 meters southwest of the village, Chavez stopped behind a small hill that shielded them from direct fire. As Chavez and Meyer unloaded the wounded, a humvee from Dog 3, the Army platoon, drove up. Meyer asked for help in attacking the

a wall, MAJ Kevin Williams, 1-32, had taken shards of rock in his elbow. First Sergeant Garza had been concussed by the near miss of an RPG and Williams had dragged him to cover.

Over a captured handheld radio, a Taliban leader was taunting them. Ahmad Shafi, Swenson's interpreter, provided a translation.

"You came in," a mature voice said. "Now I decide how you leave. We killed the Russians here. Now we kill you, unless you surrender. Stop shooting and I will let you live."

These were frontline fighters from Pakistan, many in their 30s and some in their 40s, veterans of dozens of skirmishes and several large battles. Unlike in the Korengal and at Barge Matal, their radio discipline was excellent. There hadn't been any intercepts of careless chatter before the attack, and no warnings from the residents of Ganjgal. The fighters had been digging in for over a day.

Sergeant First Class Kenneth Westbrook was shot in the neck and Swenson was applying a dressing when three Afghans in Army uniforms approached. When Fabayo waved at them to duck down, they lifted up AKs and started firing. Fabayo shot one in the chest, while Swenson rolled over, pulled a grenade and blew up the other two. Shafi emptied an M16 clip into them. As Chavez drove toward the yellow smoke, he saw Fabayo and Swenson supporting Sgt Montgomery.

"Get out in front of them!" Meyer yelled.

When Fazel offered to take a turn in the turret, Meyer told him to stay on the radio and tell him what the Afghan soldiers were saying. Chavez maneuvered the truck up the draw to act as

a shield, while Meyer pounded the rock houses and the terrace walls with the .50-cal. After the wounded were safe in defilade, Chavez and Meyer headed up the slope to find the missing four. The truck was now the sole target in the open, quickly bracketed by RPGs. As the lone vehicle entered the kill zone, insurgents from the front and the right flank brought their AKs to bear. Meyer dropped down from the turret, blood pouring down his right arm.

"I'm OK," he said, grabbing an M4 rifle. ".50-cal's empty."

Chavez backed down into the gully and tried to sneak around the left side, but the slope was too steep and the humvee slipped back into the draw. Seeing a wounded askar in a ditch, Meyer ran to the man and turned him over. Dead.

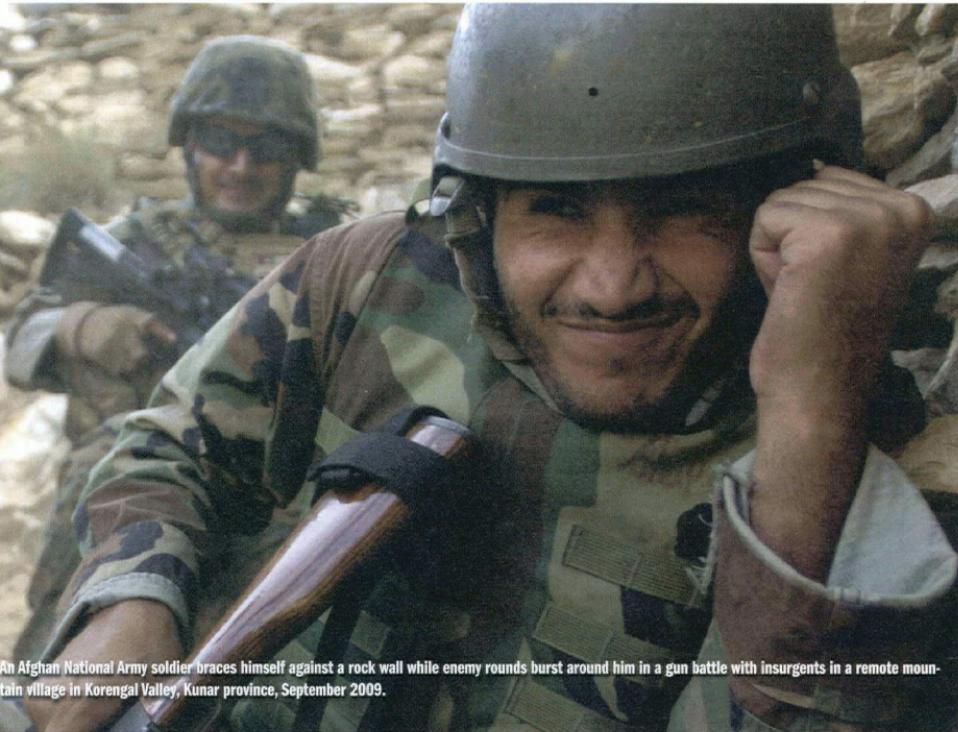
"We need more ammo," Meyer said as they headed back down the draw.

All that had saved Meyer on his third try was sheer luck and an absence of armor-piercing rounds in the enemy PKM machine gun.

Fabayo left Williams, Garza and Jonathan Landay, a reporter for McClatchy newspapers, at a casualty collection point and stumbled back to the rendezvous spot. The askars and border police were slowly recovered from the shock of the ambush and moving down the ravine in small groups.

Good for them, Swenson thought. A platoon leader from 1-32 had spread out his soldiers among the vehicles.

"Mount up in a truck," he said. "You're no help back here. Move the f--- up."



An Afghan National Army soldier braces himself against a rock wall while enemy rounds burst around him in a gun battle with insurgents in a remote mountain village in Korengal Valley, Kunar province, September 2009.

SGT MATTHEW HUEBEL USA

"I can't," the lieutenant said. "The TOC said to cover the vehicles and our rear."

Through a radio relay team, Swenson reached the battle captain at the Tactical Operations Center, who said, "OK. Use him if you want."

When the lieutenant still hesitated, Swenson turned away. "You're f----- useless," he said.

Swenson, Shafi and Fabayo hopped into a Light Tactical Vehicle that weighed 15,000 pounds with its armored sides. The LTV was heavy and clumsy, difficult to turn on the twisting path up to the village. They crossed a culvert and skidded uphill as rounds cracked by over their heads. To Swenson's front inside the village, teenagers were running back and forth among the stone houses, shooting AKs from the hip. They lumbered past where Meyer had left the dead Afghan soldier and found three wounded hiding farther forward in the ditch. Fabayo pulled them all into the LTV and they backed down the rutted

bounced down the draw, accelerated and skidded up the slope and along the main path next to the battered stone houses.

A Blackhawk pilot radioed that he saw bodies near a stone wall beside a terrace on the east side. The zone was too hot with incoming fire to land. He flared the nose of the helicopter and pitched out a purple smoke grenade. Chavez gunned the truck forward and skidded to a stop. Meyer hopped out of the truck and ran forward, ignoring the bullets zipping by. He disappeared into the smoke. Fabayo remained on the gun, providing covering fire.

Meyer found Lt Johnson lying against a low stone wall, handset in hand. To the right, Hospital Corpsman Third Class James R. "Doc" Layton lay next to him, near Gunnery Sergeant Edwin W. Johnson Jr., whom he had been bandaging when he was shot. SSGt Kenefick lay nearby to the left, clutching a GPS. They had been trying to radio their location when insurgents had sneaked up behind them. Their weapons and radios had been taken. Looking at the terrain, Meyer guessed that insurgents had crept around the corner of the wall and shot them from behind.

While Swenson collected the gear, Meyer brought out Johnson, and then the other three. Eight Afghan soldiers and five Americans died in the four-hour firefight.

It was fitting that four Americans and three Afghans completed the mission together. Seven hours earlier, 60 Afghans and 45 Americans had entered the valley. Fire, fear and fatigue had whittled the ranks. Thirteen died and 20 received incapacitating wounds. Some askars ran out of the ravine and to their credit later came back, and some stayed away. Some Americans and Afghans began strong and faltered. Other Americans refused to even enter the wretched ravine.

Swenson, Fabayo, Shafi and Fazel never faltered, while Meyer, a 21-year-old corporal, emerged as the sparkplug in the battle, both the leader and the organizer. Rodriguez-Chavez steadfastly supported him. They provided the shield for Fabayo, Swenson and nine others to escape from a kill zone. They rescued four Afghans on their first trip down the ravine toward the village, five on their second and three on their fourth.

Meyer killed two insurgents within touching distance of the truck, and four others in the bushes alongside the road. By persistently driving into peril, he provided the core leadership and example that kept the others in the fight.

At least twice, Swenson thought Meyer had been shot down, only to see him rush forward on another trip. He rallied others over the radio, charged forward and repeatedly left the armored

## BY PERSISTENTLY DRIVING INTO PERIL, HE PROVIDED THE CORE LEADERSHIP AND EXAMPLE THAT KEPT THE OTHERS IN THE FIGHT.

path, bumping over the jihadist Meyer had killed in the road.

Swenson turned around as the enemy fire again increased and drove back to the casualty collection point. The two most seriously wounded, Westbrook and an askar, were immediately placed on board a medevac helicopter.

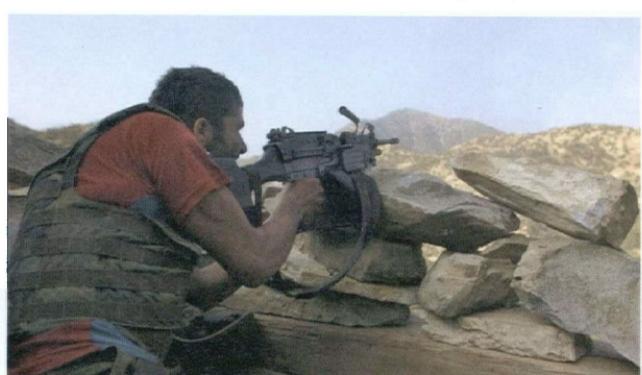
**ROUND FOUR.** Meyer talked to Williams and Garza, then walked back to Chavez.

"They're getting medevacked," he said. "There are four still missing. We're going back in. They headed back down the ravine in the gun truck, this time followed by Afghan soldiers in two trucks. Again they found more wounded. Again Meyer dismounted, ignoring the bullets crackling overhead, and pulled one and then another askar to the safety of the armored truck. Again they drove back to the casualty collection point and dropped off the three askars.

It was approaching 1100, six hours into the fight. The temperature stood at 100 degrees. Apache attack helicopters and Air Force helicopters with Para-rescue Jumpers, or PJs, from the Special Operations Forces were swooping in low from different directions, firing at various insurgent groups and looking everywhere for the missing four advisors. Swenson was on the radio, talking to the pilots as they swooped low across the village from different angles, looking in every backyard and alley.

**ROUND FIVE.** Chavez turned the gun truck around. Swenson sat next to him, switching frequencies on his radio. Fabayo stood up in the gun turret. Fazel sat behind Swenson and Meyer sat behind Chavez. Again they

An Afghan soldier engages insurgents with an M249 squad automatic weapon during a fierce fight in a remote mountain village in Korengal Valley, Kunar province, September 2009.



SGT MATTHEW WIELER, USA



Afghan boys in the village of Ganjgal move rocks into the roadway to block the road, pinning the U.S. and Afghan forces in a kill zone.

in combat, without causing ripples.

"The only way to keep him out of the s---," Kerr said, "was to put a leash on him and tie him to the truck. That's what we loved about him."

His father, Mike Meyer, had a 300-acre farm in Greensboro, Ky. Following his divorce, Mike had full custody of Dakota since he was 10.

"Dakota is a whiz at math," Mike said, "a fine running back, too. The thing about Dakota is his determination. He's just plain goal-oriented. Once he gets something into his mind, he'll stick to it until he does it."

Kerr agreed with Meyer's father. There was no way to keep Dakota out of combat. The Marine chain of command decided it was time for Meyer

to take a break. He was tightly wired, too ready to fight anyone. The Marine Corps gave him time and space to decompress, hoping he would re-enlist. But he decided to leave the service. After a few months at home with his dad, he took a civilian job and bought a house, still protesting that he was not brave.

In his classic book, "The Anatomy of Courage," Dr. Charles Wilson (Baron Moran) described his first-hand experiences in observing bravery amidst the horrors of World War I. "When the death of a husband or son or brother has grown distant, and the world is free again to think without impurity that courage is not common, men will remember that all the fine things in war as in peace are the work of a few men; that the honor of our race is the keeping of but a fraction of her people." Meyer was one of those "few men."

For a man to charge into fire once requires grit that is instinctive in few men; to do so a second time, now knowing what awaits you, requires inner resolve beyond instinct; to repeat a third time is courage above and beyond any call of duty; to go in a fourth time is to know you will die; to go in a fifth time is beyond comprehension. Meyer's performance stood forth as the single greatest act of courage in the war, because he repeated it, and repeated it, and repeated it.

*Author's note: By the time you read this, Dakota Meyer should have received the Medal of Honor. If not, there is something seriously wrong with the Pentagon's award system. Meyer ranks up there alongside Gunnery Sergeant "Manila John" Basileone and Major General Ray "E-Tool" Smith.*

*Editor's note: Bing West, a Marine combat veteran, served as assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration. He is the author of "The Village," "No True Glory" and "The Strongest Tribe." "The Village," a classic counterinsurgency book, has been on the Marine Corps' professional reading list for 40 years. West has journeyed to Iraq and Afghanistan on numerous occasions, and his articles routinely appear in The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal. Buy "The Wrong War" at [www.marineshop.net](http://www.marineshop.net).*

truck to save lives, ignoring the bullets that kicked up dust around his feet. Employing first a Mark 19 that fired explosive shells, then a .50-cal. machine gun, then a 7.62-cal. machine gun and finally an M4 rifle, he broke the momentum of the jihadists who were scrambling down the slopes to surround Swenson and the others. The fiercest fighter in the battle, Meyer both saved and took lives.

On the base at Monti, Army LT Jake Kerr and SFC Kevin Devine kept a close eye on Meyer. They were worried about him and proud of his valor. That wasn't Meyer's point of view. He hadn't done anything. He had lost four comrades. Why did everyone on base walk around as if it were just another day? Why hadn't the fire missions been approved? (Letters of reprimand were later issued to those who did not respond properly back at the Ops center.) Where was the payback? Why had the muj [mujahideen] beaten him back time after time? Screw them. Kill them all.

OK, Kerr said, you can run missions with us—just keep a low profile. That worked until Kerr's platoon rolled into the Dab Khwar Valley north of Monti. A convoy of eight tiny jingle trucks packing local supplies plus a few fuel trucks, escorted by armored vehicles from a U.S. Army logistical company, were ambushed and pinned down. Kerr's platoon arrived within half an hour. Panicked Afghan drivers were banging their fists on the Army armored trucks, begging to be let inside, as the Taliban fired from a distant hillside. Kerr hopped out and aligned a compass azimuth to direct the attack aircraft circling overhead.

Meyer and Specialist Charles Tomeo hopped out behind Kerr and ran down the road under fire, checking each jingle truck and pulling out wounded Afghans. Meyer carried one moaning driver back to Kerr's truck, then looked around for help. He ran up to the armored command truck of the logistical unit and pounded on the door, demanding that all medics dismount and follow him. The captain, too frightened to get into the fight, shouted through the bulletproof glass that her soldiers weren't infantry and it wasn't their job.

"Meyer being Meyer," Kerr said, "he told the captain to get f---- and went back to rendering aid with Tomeo."

Some of the civilian drivers died, and some were saved by Meyer and Tomeo. But a corporal cannot curse at a captain, even