

Battle of Ganjgal and the War in Afghanistan

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The international conflict in Afghanistan began in late 2001. Caused by the attacks of September 11, it was America's effort to end terrorism. It included three parts; the first phase included overthrowing the Government of the Taliban (a conservative religious and political group that controlled Afghanistan and had provided asylum to al-Qaeda, a group behind the September 11 attacks). The second phase is distinguished by an American plan for defeating the Taliban in combat and reconstructing the prime institutions of Afghanistan. The third part began with President Obama's order to grow the number of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan partially. The new force would be used to protect the people from Taliban attacks and try to blend terrorists into Afghan society. This strategy came with a schedule for the evacuation of all foreign troops from the country and security control will be given to the Afghan army. This new policy failed in its objective. Terrorist attacks on civilians remained persistent, while it seemed that the Afghan army was not prepared to fight the Taliban.

A Brief History

The war on terror in Afghanistan, which began in 2001, was the result of over twenty years of war in Afghanistan. In 1979, the [Soviet Union attacked Afghanistan](#) to invade it. However, the Soviet invasion launched a nationwide revolt by freedom fighters, which had the support of the United States. This coalition was able to send the Soviet forces back; however, in the power vacuum created, civil war ruled.

In 1996, the Taliban took over Kabul and implemented the Sharia law. The al-Qaeda supreme leader Osama bin Laden established his base in Afghanistan that same year. Al-Qaeda helped the Taliban win control of most of the country. In September 2001, al-Qaeda hitmen assassinated Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was commanding the Northern Alliance.

The September 11 Attacks And The U.S.-British Invasion

On September 11, 2001, four U.S. airliners were hijacked and crashed. This brought world attention to Afghanistan. Right after the attacks, President George W. Bush planned a strategy of toppling the Taliban and breaking al-Qaeda. The United States demanded that Taliban leaders hand over all the al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan, to which Omar refused. As a result, the U.S. launched the war.

Initially, the Central Intelligence Agency began a covert operation known as Jawbreaker. The agency sent a team to the country that worked with anti-Taliban allies. The U.S. hoped that by allying with the

Afghans, they could avoid deploying their force to Afghanistan. The United States, thus, relied heavily on the Northern Alliance, which had just lost Massoud.

Soon, America and Britain sent Special Forces that provided weapons as well as surveillance for the Afghans. The air campaign was also coordinated, which began in October.

In autumn, the Northern Alliance started gaining territory formerly held by the Taliban. In November, the forces took over Kabul, and later in December, Kandahar fell, marking the end of Taliban rule.

After the dismissal of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the allies now focused on rebuilding Afghanistan. A subsequent amount of money was spent to provide training and equipment to Afghan security forces, and the remainder was used to develop the country. The United States decided to take help from foreign troops while reducing its forces. Allies from Britain, Canada, Germany, Spain, and Italy sent their troops to help the U.S. However, pockets of Taliban resistance kept the war going and resulted in the Allies suffering from the loss of their soldiers.

Initially, the Allies thought that the war had been won with relative ease. And the U.S. government announced that the major combat had ended. Though, in 2005, the Taliban began to reappear. This time, they engaged in a real guerrilla war, using suicide bombings to inflict heavy damage.

The Taliban Resurgence

The return of the Taliban coincided with a feeling of anti-American feeling among Afghans. Such feelings grew because of the slow process of rebuilding, incidences of prisoner torture, allegations of corruption in the Afghan government, as well as civilian casualties.

The Taliban received loads of money from productive individuals in the Middle East and the heroin trade. Although the cultivation of poppy had ended under the Taliban Government, they now pushed to restart it as a source of funding.

An Overview Of The Nature Of Combat

Looking at the barren, seemingly endless [mountain ranges](#), it is understandable why Afghanistan remains one of the world's most forbidding battlegrounds. Extremely cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. The roads are few, water is scarce, and the terrain is equally difficult for machines and men. Besides, the air takes its toll on aircraft as well, like the dust of Afghanistan that chokes everything from soldiers' throats to guns and engines.

Throughout history, the Hindu Kush has been the graveyard of foreign armies. From the Greeks to the Russians to the British and now the American troops, every military has failed to advance here.

However, the Western leaders agree that the probability of a failed Afghan state and the potential

economic and military collapse of a now battle-weary Pakistan next door poses a severe security risk neither.

It seems that both nations have collapsed to the wraith of Islamic radicalism. To add to that, the Taliban and Al Qaeda breed on Islamic radicalism, aided by jobless people living in both Central Asia and Pakistan. The Taliban are believed to number from 10,000 to probably double or twice that number. They are mostly armed with infantry weapons and can fight a guerrilla war with ease.

They know their home terrain quite well: every hidden mountain pathway, every cave that can become a fortress, every village safe house where they can gain support. Unlike NATO soldiers or the Afghan Army, more often than not, they choose the time and place of combat, wresting the tactical initiative away from a much more powerful and technologically advanced Western adversary.

The Taliban freedom fighters are also highly mobile, well-funded and equipped to the teeth from the profits of heroin production and better paid than his Afghan National Army opponent. In fact, morale in the Afghan Police and army is, and both remain poorly trained and ill-equipped.

Unlike the past, the Taliban of the present have improved their art of fighting. They are inspired by the tactics used by insurgents fighting in Iraq. The Taliban have used Iraqi tactics to create a hassle at home.

The Taliban are phantoms, mostly unseen and kill without any warning. It is the IED that sends NATO and the coalition soldiers back home in body bags. As a result, road travel has become extremely hazardous, and soldiers have come to rely heavily on mine-proof vehicles, but even they aren't foolproof, and the Taliban keep improving the explosive strength of their bombs.

Even the helicopter as a means of spying, supplying resources and tactical troop deployment has become invaluable for the allied forces. However, there aren't enough of them, and the sheer nature of combat in Afghanistan makes void any technological advantage allied soldiers bring to the battle.

The enemy is confident and can dare to make assaults, and it feels secure in replacing its casualties whenever needed. Western leaders can't afford to be generous with their combat losses.

The unbearable reality of the military statistics of Afghanistan's war is where matters stand, although the Taliban are increasingly gaining control of Afghanistan, it is not strong enough to get rid of NATO, nor are the NATO robust sufficient to get rid of the Taliban.

Thus, Afghanistan, like all guerrilla wars, comes down to willpower and the ability to wait for the enemy in the hope he will get tired of the fight.

Soldiers' Life In Afghanistan

The American soldiers in Afghanistan are spread over several locations in the valley. The camps have been built from the ground up, and the living conditions are bearable. The troops live in Alaskan tents. They are about the size of a general purpose medium tent but hard framed and with no interior support poles. Most tents house 10-12 Soldiers.

The soldiers sleep on standard-issue military or civilian cots. The tents have wooden floors, and the temperature is controlled by units that provide both heating and air conditioning. However, most of the soldiers live in standard general-purpose medium tents with cheap ACs that are bought locally. They run out of coolant very quickly and blow warm air most of the time. After running patrols, it is unbearable trying to find relief from the heat in one of these tents.

There are showers, toilets, and sinks with plumbing. Drinking [water is all bottled](#). Shower water is contracted in by the locals and is not safe to drink. UGR meals are eaten for breakfast and dinner. They are premade meals that just require the “cook” to drop the packages in boiling water.

There are washers and dryers for clothes; however, the water pumps usually fail, so washing is done by hand. Internet access is insufficient. The days are long and hot, and the conditions are not ideal. Enemy contact often happens with extreme violence.

Battle Of Ganjgal



The Battle of Ganjgal was fought during the War in Afghanistan, between Allied forces against the Taliban, in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan on September 8, 2009 (“The Real Story of Afghanistan’s Harrowing Battle of Ganjgal,” 2017).

On Tuesday morning, September 8, 2009, Captain William D. Swenson walked from Shakani. Almost 100 coalition soldiers, Afghan troops, and border police officers assisted him. They were all heading towards the village of Ganjgal in the Kunar Province. The men walked carefully to avoid any IEDs. Swenson was aiding the 10th Mountain Division Light Infantry while a unit of Marines was also leading a training team.

Captain Swenson was no stranger to working in Afghanistan, having already served tours in the country. However, despite his understanding of the country’s politics and his experience in combat, Swenson was not able to predict the events that were to take place (*Into the Fire* by Dakota Meyer, *Bing West* 2017).

The 10th Mountain Division and the Marine team were to lead the Afghan police to Ganjgal. Village elders had sought the ABP’s guidance for improvements to Ganjgal’s mosque.

After marching through the day, the soldiers reached a rallying point, which was close to the village. There, the group was divided into two groups: one led by coalition forces charged towards the north and south of the village, while the other conducted by Captain Swenson entered Gnajgal from the center.

The 10th Mountain Division was not aware of any terrorist threat in the area. However, Swenson and Westbrook did not let their guard down. Swenson knew that a possible attack was not feasible, yet he couldn't afford the probability.



When Swenson's team was close to the village, instantly, all lights in the village went out, and the group was left in the dark. Taliban opened fire on the troops approaching the village from their hidden positions. Around sixty terrorists infiltrated through hidden trenches around Ganjgal.

To protect themselves, the Allied forces took shelter and fought for their lives. It was decided that troops would withdraw. However, coalition forces were taking fire, and a withdrawal was almost impossible. To add to all this, there was no artillery support, a weakness the enemy seized to its advantage.

Pinned down by RPGs, the situation seemed harsh. All communications with the Marines were lost, and the Afghan soldiers had severe injuries. At this point, Swenson knew that a cloud of white phosphorous could provide a cover. He radioed a command for air support, which was denied.

He was told that it was impossible because of the proximity of the drop zone to a populated area. The nearest point at which it could be deployed was at a distance of 400 meters, which would be useless.

With few options left, Captain Swenson was faced with a difficult decision. With the enemy closing on them from three sides, He and his team knew they had to do something, or they would not make it. Without much delay, Captain Swenson, 1st Lieutenant Fabayo, and Sergeant Garza centered fire on the Taliban hiding nearby, moving quickly to Sergeant Westbrook's position. Any of the three men could have died at any moment, yet they fought for their fellow men.

The arrival of the OH-58 Kiowa attack helicopters implied an important turning point in the battle. And allowed Swenson and some of his men to evacuate, although Swenson and Fabayo returned twice to save his people's lives. The Taliban had fallen back, but obviously, there was no guarantee that the Taliban would let them leave the valley alive (*Into the Fire by Dakota Meyer, Bing West 2017*).

So far an armored Humvee had been used to carry the wounded to the medevac extraction point. Swenson, along with Staff Sergeant Juan Rodriguez-Chavez, Corporal Dakota Meyer, and Lieutenant Fabayo, got into the armored Humvee toward the smoke rising in the distance.



Aftermath

After the battle, the coalition forces implied that officers within the Afghan National Police and the local villagers might have informed the Taliban about the mission. An investigation was done, and the working group concluded that McChrystal's new rules, as well as the battalion commander's deduction, were a flaw. The study found that three US Army officers had shown weak leadership, which had directly resulted in the loss of life.

About The Memoir

On September 8, 2009, around the village of Ganjgal, Meyer was informed that three Marines and a Navy corpsman, all of them were his friends, were missing after being attacked by a group of terrorists. Under heavy fire from the enemy, Meyer entered the terrorist's hideout and eventually found the four missing servicemen dead and stripped of their weapons, body armor and radios. He saw a Taliban soldier trying to take the bodies. The soldier attacked Meyer, though Meyer grabbed a big rock and fatally hit the soldier, killing him. With help from Afghan soldiers, he was able to move the bodies to a safer area where they could be extracted. Meyer is personally responsible for evacuating 12 friendly wounded and providing cover for 24 Marines and soldiers to escape possible death at the hands of a numerically better and determined enemy.

Captain Fabayo and Staff Sergeant Juan J. Rodriguez-Chavez were awarded for their roles in retrieving the bodies of their fallen comrades. Before Meyer searched for the missing marines on foot, Rodriguez-Chavez drove a gun truck into the battle zone with Fabayo manning the truck's machine gun.

Meyer was awarded the Medal of Honor in a ceremony held on September 15, 2011. When a White House official contacted Meyer, Meyer requested that simultaneous commemorative services should be held at other locations to honor his colleagues who gave their lives or were severely wounded during the battle.

References

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