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Abandoned

Report blames Army leaders for denying aid to training team

THE FALLEN

Five U.S. troops, including three Marines, died after their embedded training team was ambushed in Afghanistan in September and their calls for air support and artillery were denied. A look at the fallen:

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Pinned down at dawn in a kill zone and running low on ammunition, the company-sized patrol made an urgent plea from a remote spot in eastern Afghanistan: Send help.

Then they made it again. And again. And again.

Nearly two hours after the initial call for help, helicopter air support arrived — but not before the unit took heavy casualties. The delay occurred because Army officers back at the tactical operations center refused to send help, and failed to notify higher commands that they had troops in trouble. In the end, three Marines, a Navy corpsman and a soldier were dead, along with eight Afghan troops and an interpreter.

Those are the findings of a new investigation into the Sept. 8 ambush involving a team of U.S. military trainers embedded with Afghan troops in Kunar province.

But even though the deaths of the team members were the result of “negligent” leadership — “contributing directly to the loss of life” — it appears no one involved in the botched planning or execution of the mission will get more than a letter of reprimand for contributing to the deaths of five fellow service members.

Three Army officers were cited as a result of the incident, but their names, ranks and units were not disclosed. Officials with Combined Joint Task Force 82 in Afghanistan, which oversaw the unit, have declined to say whether any of them may face more serious discipline, and whether any of them have been relieved of command.

“I’m still pro-military, but it’s a tragedy if these officers get off so lightly with just a reprimand,” said Susan Price, the mother of Gunnery Sgt. Aaron Kenefick, who was killed in the ambush. “Why are they still in command? Where the hell are these officers, and why did they get just a slap on the wrist?”

The incident occurred as 13 U.S. military trainers, 60 Afghan soldiers and 20 border police officers traveled early in the morning to the remote village of Ganjgal to meet with village elders, according to a report by a McClatchy News journalist traveling with the unit when it was ambushed.

“The absence of senior leaders in the operations center with troops in contact in the ... battlespace, and their consequent lack of situational awareness and decisive action, was the key failure in the events of 8 September 2009,” the report says. “The actions of ... senior leaders were clearly negligent.”

Killed were Kenefick, Gunnery Sgt. Edwin Johnson Jr., 1st Lt. Michael Johnson and Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class James Layton. The soldier, Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Westbrook, died Oct. 7 at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington from wounds he sustained in the attack.

The investigation’s findings

Overseen by CJTF-82’s commander, Army Maj. Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, the investigation found a slew mistakes, according to an executive summary report released Feb. 18. Among them:

Poor planning. The acting battalion commander and operations officer were not involved in the mission’s planning and coordination. It was devised instead by field-grade officers and the military trainers without participation from fire-support personnel, the summary said.

DEADLY FIREFIGHT

Three Marines and a corpsman were killed Sept. 8 during a shootout with enemy forces outside of the village of Ganjgal, located in the Sarkani district, Kunar province, Afghanistan. A soldier died Oct. 7 from wounds sustained in the same battle.



Source: Defense Department investigation report

JOHN BRETSCHNEIDER/STAFF

Bad intel. The embedded trainers were told to expect “light harassing fire” from about 10 insurgents while traveling to meet with village elders in Ganjgal, nestled in mountainous terrain near the Pakistan border. The team instead was forced to face between 100 and 150 well-armed insurgents, Defense Department officials now say.

Battalion-level leadership absent. The first shots rang out at 5:30 a.m. At 8:10 the ETT reported it was taking numerous casualties. While the trainers and their Afghan counterparts endured the 2½-hour attack, the battalion’s commander, operations officer, fire support officer, intelligence officer and noncommissioned officers in charge “were not continuously present in the operations center.”

“The actions of key leaders at the battalion level,” the report states, “were inadequate and ineffective.” Unit leadership “reacted appropriately” when they realized how serious the situation was, the summary said, but by then the five U.S. troops and nearly a dozen Afghan troops had been killed or mortally wounded.

Inexperience. During the ambush, the officer manning the operations center’s battle captain slot was “not adequately experienced, qualified or trained,” the summary said. The position typically helps manage information coming from the field. A more experienced officer took over at 8 a.m., but it was too late.

Advice ignored. While several personnel were missing from the operations center early during the engagement, a battalion NCO overseeing artillery requests “took action to provide immediate support to the units in the Ganjgal valley early in the engagement.” An Air Force joint terminal attack controller also acted swiftly to support the requests, but both “were overruled by higher echelons,” the summary said.

Lack of preparation. Complacency within the command post and poor training standards also contributed to the incident, the summary said. The operations center failed to competently track the battle, preventing higher headquarters from intervening in time to save lives. There was no experienced field-grade officer and senior noncommissioned officer in the command post, and it “contributed directly to mission failure,” the report said.

Questions remain

Completion of the investigation answers some questions, but raises others.

For one, Defense Department officials said that Scaparrotti “took appropriate action regarding all personnel involved,” but those actions were not disclosed — neither in the report nor to the victims’ families, who say they have been told only that the punishment doled out is potentially a “career



1st Lt. Michael Johnson, 25, 7th Communications Battalion, Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Japan



Gunnery Sgt. Edwin Johnson, 31, 3rd Combat Assault Battalion, Camp Schwab, Okinawa



Gunnery Sgt. Aaron Kenefick, 30, 3rd Combat Assault Battalion, Camp Schwab



Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class James Ray Layton, 22, 3rd Marine Division, Okinawa

Army Sgt. 1st Class Kenneth Westbrook, 41, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, Fort Riley, Kan.

