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:

By Dan Lamothe
damothe@marinetimes.com

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

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.

“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 ... battle-space, 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.”

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“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 commanding 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