

## **Erik Crouch and Ryan Schloesser on the Battle for Mullah Wasir**

### **Part I: In Their Own Words**

as told to Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.

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When you go out to win some hearts and minds, you had better bring plenty of bullets, just in case. That's the lesson of a 2010 firefight in the Afghan village of Mullah Wasir.

Sergeant **Erik Crouch** and Captain **Ryan Schloesser** went into the village as part of a U.S. Army Civil Affairs team, a Special Operations unit specifically dedicated to “civil-military operations”: reaching out to local populations, conducting humanitarian relief, and funding development projects. But when they arrived, the only people left in Mullah Wasir were the Taliban.

Ten hours later, when the shooting finally stopped, one Afghan government soldier was dead, two Americans were wounded, and the Taliban were in retreat. Crouch and Schloesser both earned the Bronze Star for Valor for their bravery that day. But just as important was their persistence in the weeks and months that followed, when they returned to Mullah Wasir to help the villagers who were returning to their homes.

The narrative that follows is excerpted from interviews with Sgt. Crouch and Cpt. Schloesser, conducted in April 2011 and edited together to explain the sequence of events as clearly as possible from both men's perspectives. For an in-depth analysis of the battle of Mullah Wasir as a microcosm of America's military's challenges in Afghanistan and beyond, go to [www.LearningFromVeterans.com](http://www.LearningFromVeterans.com).

**Sergeant Erik Crouch, U.S. Army Civil Affairs**



Born 1987

Enlisted 2006

Served in eastern Afghanistan, 2008, and Bala Murghab, northwestern Afghanistan, 2010

**Bronze Star for Valor**

**Captain Ryan Schloesser, U.S. Army Civil Affairs**



Born 1981

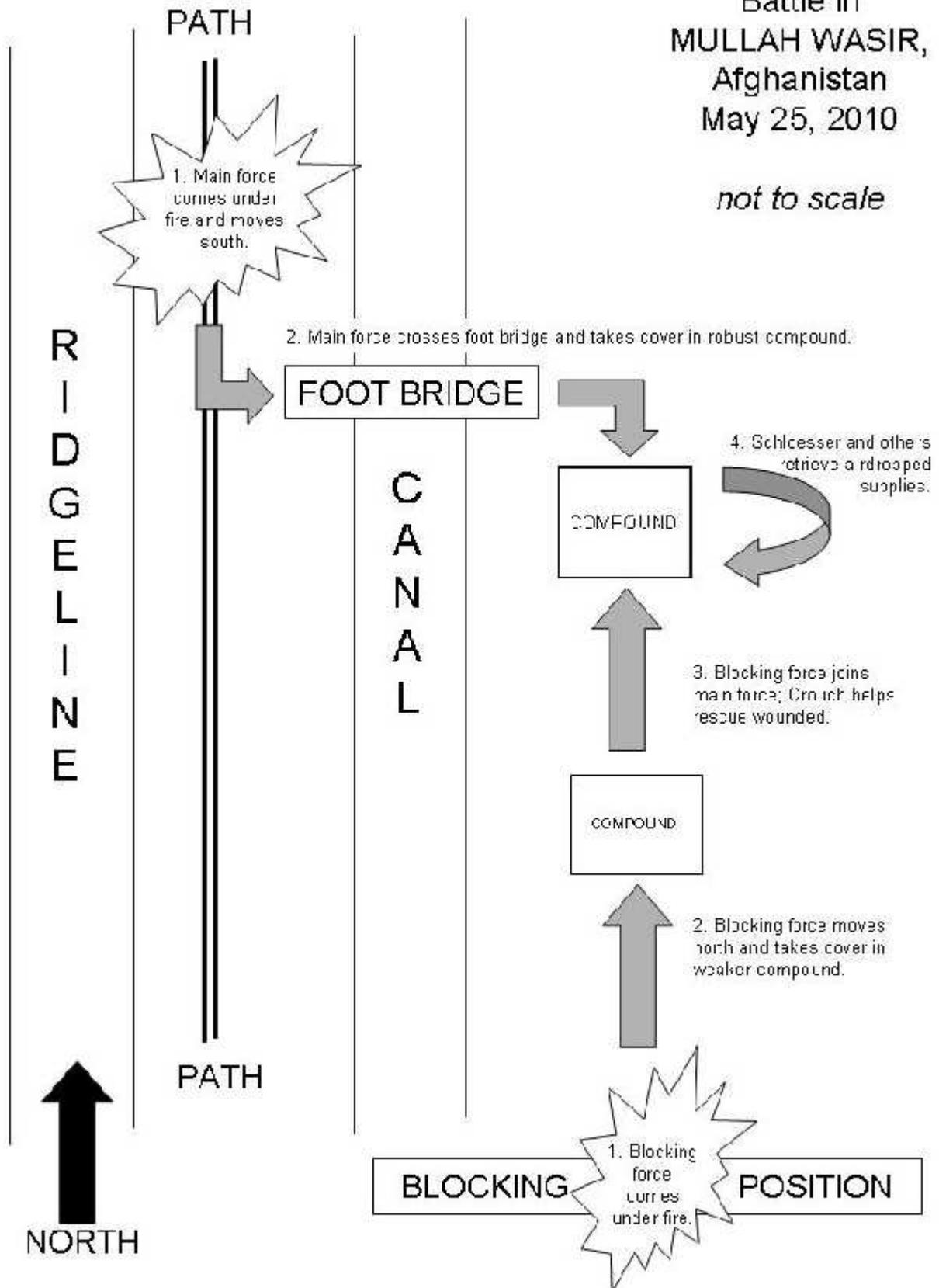
Commissioned 2004

Served in Ar Ramadi, Iraq, 2006-2007, and Bala Murghab, northwestern Afghanistan, 2010

**Bronze Star for Valor**

Battle in  
MULLAH WASIR,  
Afghanistan  
May 25, 2010

*not to scale*



*Erik Crouch and Ryan Schloesser both volunteered for the U.S. Army after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were already underway.*

**Crouch:**

When I decided to come in the military, my dad was a pretty big part in that decision. My dad was in the military – he did twenty years – and I mainly grew up in Columbus, Georgia, right outside of Fort Benning.

My mother was a little hesitant but she understood. I really wanted to join up, serve my country, chance it – and I wanted to get out on my own and not be dependent on my family.

**Schloesser:**

Well, I'm an army brat. My father is now a retired two-star general. My grandfather is a retired full colonel; he was in Vietnam.

However, being the normal rebellious teenager, I did not want to do anything with the military. But I ended up graduating from college and didn't have a job. I was actually tending bar in a hotel.

It was the summer of 2003. I remember quite clearly sitting with my best friend, having a few drinks and going over the day's news and reading about, I think it was a U.S. lieutenant had screwed up or something. I said to my friend, "we could do better than that." And he kind of looked at me and said, "Ryan, put your money where your mouth is. What are you doing with your life?"

So the next day I walked into the Army recruiter.

*Schloesser did a tour in Iraq as an engineer in a "route clearance" unit, removing roadside bombs. Crouch served in Afghanistan as a medic with the Army Rangers. Each then sought a transfer to Civil Affairs. They met when they were assigned to the same four-man CA team, with Schloesser in command and Crouch serving as team medic.*

**Schloesser:**

It's interesting how the dynamic of a four-man team works. For some reason Erik and I, we started being a battle buddy team; and then my team sergeant and my team CA NCO [Civil Affairs Non-Commissioned Officer, a civil affairs specialist] kind of partnered up.

*In January, 2010, the team deployed to Bala Murghab in the Badghis province of northwestern Afghanistan. Although Badghis is far from the main warzones in the south and east, many inhabitants are Pashtuns, the Taliban's core constituency, which gave the insurgency an opening. In remote Bala Murghab, the Afghan government controlled the district capital and precious little else. So, in partnership with an Army Special Forces team, the Civil Affairs soldiers came up with a plan to pry outlying villages away from the Taliban.*

**Schloesser:**

We had been there a couple of months. I happened to have met with several village elders from the surrounding villages that were not inside of the security bubble and who really, really wanted the Taliban kicked out of their village. They wanted American presence there and obviously wanted the American money for projects, which is how I got involved. So I told the [Special Forces] team leader and the SF team sergeant, "hey, look, there're these villagers and they've all already requested us to come through there, so we know once we get there and we do

kick out the Taliban, we're going to have a pretty receptive village that we can immediately begin to work in."

*The Americans chose the village of Mullah Wasir as their initial objective. To scout out the village and secure it, they formed a grab-bag task force:*

- the Army Special Forces ODA (an Operational Detachment A, popularly known as an "A-Team"), down to about eight of its assigned twelve men;*
- Schloesser and Crouch's Civil Affairs team, with four men;*
- about two dozen Afghan soldiers and police;*
- and about two dozen American soldiers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, trained as artillerymen but pressed into service as infantry, something which the U.S. military is chronically short of.*

**Schloesser:**

You're probably wondering, why are we out on this combat-oriented mission when we're supposed to be doing civil-military operations. We were there primarily because the ODA wasn't fully manned: They had taken casualties, and so they were down, like, four guys, and they really needed the help. Additionally we knew more about the area than they did. And we thought there was a possibility that we would actually be able to talk to the people there.

*The American and Afghan force drove as far as the local roads allowed and then hiked the rest of the way overnight.*

**Crouch:**

We rode on trucks to the furthest outstations, just a couple of kilometers away from our FOB [Forward Operating Base]. Then we got out and we started walking. The terrain was very bad, but it was easier than trying to drive on the bad roads.

*Before first light, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne soldiers set up a roadblock south of the village. Then, at dawn, the rest of the force – about twenty American and Afghan troops – moved into the village of Mullah Wasir from the north.*

**Schloesser:**

At dawn, we started our walk through the village and it was a ghost town. There was absolutely nothing there.

**Crouch:**

There was *nobody* in the entire area.

We were almost through the end of the village, and we had halted for a quick little bit to drink some water. Then we heard a motorcycle. That perked our ears up.

**Schloesser:**

You know, we were kind of sitting there. We were taking a knee, drinking some water, guys were smoking cigarettes, just trying to catch their breath and all that. And we heard this motorcycle, and then it was kind of like everyone's looking around, you're tightening your helmet up, because you know it's probably game on.

*Then the shooting started. The Taliban were waiting and well prepared. Their main body had fortified positions on a ridgeline dominating the village, with at least two supporting forces, one to catch the Americans in a crossfire and the other to mine the only road out.*

**Schloesser:**

We took a couple of rounds of fire from our west and immediately took cover, and then we returned fire. Then the call came in that the southern blocking position was under fire and the platoon leader there was wounded.

**Crouch:**

The other soldiers down south of us started taking RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] and machinegun fire and some other small arms fire. Their platoon leader had taken a round to the abdomen – it was just a grazing wound. So we started going down there to help them out, and that's when we walked right into an ambush.

**Schloesser:**

We were probably 400 or 500 meters away from the blocking position when, as we were moving past a cliff, we just immediately started taking massive amounts of fire.

**Crouch:**

They were pretty well trained. Most of the enemy were up in caves and bunkers on the hilltop.

**Schloesser:**

At the top of this hill, the ridge line, there were these big hay bales, and we didn't think anything of it because it's pretty much standard across the landscape in Afghanistan. But actually what they had done was they had built bunkers underneath these hay bales. That's why we had a very tough time, initially, actually identifying the enemy positions. We had no idea.

I was really surprised that after the first set of bombs that we dropped that they wouldn't just turn to run. But we found out later they had a whole trench network laid out, they had bunker complexes. They were prepared for us. So the first sets of bombs and stuff was really not having an effect on them at all.

*Now the Civil Affairs team, the Special Forces soldiers, and their Afghan allies were pinned down behind a wall, with the enemy-held ridgeline on one side and a canal at their backs.*

**Schloesser:**

The canal was just big enough for us not to want to walk or jump over it – it was probably about ten feet wide, so we kind of needed a bridge. Then we started receiving fire from the south, directly up the canal, and which we were completely open to.

The F-15s [fighter-bombers] came in and they did the gun run on the hilltop – which was the first thing that allowed us to start to move. We found a bridge and we moved across.

It was almost like the canal was a funnel for bullets. Moving across was just very, very intense. Tree limbs were falling down because of the amount of bullets being fired back and forth.

*The Americans and their Afghan allies took cover behind the mud-brick walls of a farming family's compound. Meanwhile, the troops from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne and their accompanying Afghan soldiers had holed up in another, less well-protected compound just one or two hundred yards away. But in the confusion of battle, neither group knew where the other was.*

**Schloesser:**

Initially, we didn't even know they were there. We had trouble identifying them. They called in a grid earlier but it wasn't the grid that they were at. Then the heavy airstrikes started coming in and we were getting really worried about where those guys were on the battlefield [because without knowing their location, U.S. aircraft might bomb them by mistake].

We just had to do it the old-fashioned way. I hung a bright orange cloth outside the window, called a VS-17 panel, pointed in the direction where I thought the blocking position was. They popped violet smoke [from a smoke grenade]. They saw us and then we saw them.

**Crouch:**

We were pinned down and we couldn't move to them. So after they did some more gun runs and dropped a couple of bombs, we had all the personnel from the blocking position run through that 200 meters through the field to get to our compound.

**Schloesser:**

We had like a good hundred or hundred-fifty meters of farmland in between us, where it just opened up. Apaches [attack helicopters] fired two Hellfire missiles into the bunkers, which somewhat slowed the fire, and that's when those guys basically started doing a dead sprint to our location in the north.

But after the first guys came across, the Special Forces team leader and the team sergeant saw that not all of them had made it.

**Crouch:**

When they were moving, one of the ANA [Afghan National Army] soldiers got wounded. A couple of other U.S. soldiers that we had on our side ran out and picked him up. Me and the other medic met up with them outside the compound and helped them drag him over this sort of small berm into the compound we were staying in.

That's when me and the [Special Forces] medic started treating him. I was assessing the guy's airway, and he [the other medic] was just right at his chest trying to listen to see if he was actually getting any air. We were inches away from each other.

It was probably only a couple seconds before one of the enemy from on the hilltop was able to get a shot off and shot the other medic in the head.

I heard a loud pop, and someone started yelling 'you're hit, you're hit, you're hit.' [I checked] just to make sure I wasn't the one who got hit. And then I looked over, and I saw him [the other medic] – he was just laid out. I went to go shake him and see if he was actually conscious or not. He came to pretty quick. Luckily it ricocheted off his helmet and got him in the shoulder. That's when I made the call to get somebody else to grab him because the injuries on the other patient were still more pressing.

I dragged the ANA soldier off into the corner of the compound, but we were taking rounds just over my head and it was hitting a wall beside me, so I had to move the patient again into one of the buildings. He was mortally wounded – only it didn't look bad at all initially because he was

wounded just below his armpit on the side of his chest. I got the bleeding to stop. But he wasn't breathing, so I put a needle into his chest to decompress the air.

The Afghan army guys, they did outstanding. When I was working on the ANA soldier that got injured, it really affected them. Me working on him, not giving up, definitely impacted them and kept them in the fight.

*Now the little American-Afghan force was all together and under cover in the walled compound, with friendly aircraft overhead. But they were also in a crossfire, with enemies to the west and south – and the Taliban had slipped in behind them to lay roadside bombs on the one route reinforcements could take.*

**Crouch:**

We'd already called the quick reaction force to come help us out, but the enemy started getting in IEDs [improvised explosive devices], so they were held up trying to deal with the IEDs on that main road. They were trying, they were trying to come down to us to help us out, but, but it took them like an hour per IED.

*The troops in Mullah Wasir were now besieged.*

**Schloesser:**

At this point I'm with my CA NCO up on the second story of the house. The ANP [Afghan National Police] had one machinegun. I have a scope on my weapon, so I was using that to spot for them as well as to return fire.

I was up there for probably – man – time is so distorted, it felt like hours, but maybe was just like an hour or two.

Then enemy identified our windows in the second story, so they started placing a lot of fire on us. They were hitting so close on the walls and right around the window that the mud bricks were kind of exploding. *[He chuckles.]* Both my CA NCO and myself kind of looked at each other, and we came down.

And at that point, when we kind of took that pause, I looked down and I realized that I only had three magazines left. I'd gone through six already. I started checking on my guys and realized all of us were low on water too. So I let the Special Forces team sergeant know, and he pretty much told me that's how we were across the board.

And the enemy fire was still going, it was pretty intense. So we start getting really, really worried.

*A pair of American helicopters flew in, one to hover overhead on guard while the other landed to pick up the wounded.*

**Schloesser:**

As the medevac came in, we were trying to give just any kind of cover we could give to the medevac pilots. Because technically they don't have to come if it's a hot LZ [landing zone] – but they did.

Erik, my medic, he grabbed the ANA [casualty] with one of the Special Forces guys. To pull this litter usually takes four guys at least. The two of them carried it fifty meters through this muddy wheat field to the helicopter.

**Crouch:**

[The U.S. aircraft] tried gun runs and everything to try to suppress the enemy while we ran the patient out to the bird. But they were pretty unrelenting. We were running the patient out, and we heard rounds snapping by our head and by our feet, and we could hear the bird taking rounds. So we started to run out there just as quickly as we could and put both patients up on the bird before they damaged the helicopter too much. We were able to get both people on the helicopter and get the helicopter off the ground before any more damage was done.

I must say I didn't really think about really any of my actions. It was just, it needed to be done, and I did it. [But] I thought for sure that...*[He trails off]*.

*[Interviewer: You thought that you'd be hit?]* Well, when we were taking the casualties out to the helicopter, there was rounds like, going between my feet.

*Meanwhile, the crew of the second helicopter dropped off supplies – which landed outside the compound.*

**Crouch:**

Prior to us going out, we had bags full of already loaded magazines and things, just quick little go-bags. And as soon as the medevac bird took off, their chaser, their escort bird, had those bags on them. They just threw them off the side of the bird. That's when like my team leader and three others ran out to go grab the bags.

**Schloesser:**

We had earlier previously coordinated with the medevac [unit] that when they had to fly in to come get us, they'd drop off our resupply of water and ammunition. So after the medevac bird took off, the chase bird came over really quickly at a hover and kicked out those bags. And he didn't really want to get too close to us – they were about 75 meters away.

Once they left, the F-15s were cleared hot back in and they put in two bombs that were pretty close to us. That was really our first break, where it didn't feel like it was constant fire. We had this respite.

And that's when the ODA team sergeant went, "hey, we need to go out and get this stuff." The guys that had gone out previously were like, "we ain't going back, we almost got killed." So myself and one of the other ODA guys, we said, "hell, we'll go out and get it."

As soon as we ran out there to go get those bags, the firing commenced. It was like being the duck in *Duck Hunter* [a video game].

When we got to the bags, we thought we could each carry one, but then we realized that they were way too heavy. So we grabbed the ammunition bag. The two of us, we're not wimps, we couldn't even pick it up together. We had to drag it 75 meters back to the compound.

It was like a duffel bag that was almost completely full of ammunition. It must've weighed 250 pounds. And that was stupidity on stupidity on our part for packing it that heavy. We should've divided up it up more.

We would do a sprint, try to drag it in a short burst, move ten, fifteen meters, and then rest; or there'd be an irrigation ditch and we had to stop and try to maneuver it [across]. We'd be trying to get down, to take a knee and try to get below the wheat so the enemy didn't see you as well, and then pop back up and continue to sprint back towards the compound.

The last 25 meters, the wheat was cut. It was just completely open, so we sprinted as fast as we could, just dragging that bag.

I have to say that, physically, one of the hardest things I've ever done was drag that thing back. We got it back into the compound, we couldn't even stand, we just collapsed. We just couldn't move. So, so tired.

The bag had several bullet holes, and a couple of the magazines we pulled out were damaged by bullets.

*Now resupplied, the Americans and their Afghan allies could stop conserving ammunition and match the Taliban's ferocious volume of fire.*

**Schloesser:**

Two more guys went out and got the water.

That's really I think where the tide of the firefight turned. Finally at that point we had a really good idea of where the enemy was, which hilltops, and we realized that they were dug in. That's when the JTAC [Joint Tactical Air Controller] directed the F-15s to start doing a delay on their bombs so that that the bomb would actually detonate after it penetrated the ground, which caused the tunnels and the cave systems and the bunker complexes that surrounded us to collapse.

Around three o'clock, the 82nd [Airborne Division quick reaction force] came in. They moved down to the ridgeline that we had been taking fire from all day, and they were able to establish a presence up there and start setting up the OP [observation post]. They called back to us and said, "no kidding, there's, like, bunker complexes up here, and there's a lot of enemy up there that are dead."

The firing from the ridgeline got stopped, but we were still taking sporadic fire to the south, and that's when we started hearing motorcycles. We figured that they're either leaving or they're reinforcing. It turned they were leaving.

*The weary soldiers caught a ride back to their base that night. But their battle wasn't quite over.*

**Schloesser:**

I think we got three hours, four hours of sleep.

But the SF [Special Forces] team leader had said that if the OP that was being established needed help, we would go in and be the quick reaction force for them via air – which we ended up doing the very next day.

At first, it was like, "really?" I saw the SF guys starting to scramble, and I told my guys, "I think we're going back in."

The thing was, my team sergeant had gotten so dehydrated from the battle the day prior, he was still in his bed hooked up with two IVs trying to pump fluids into him. And I had a couple of projects going on. So I ended up leaving my CA NCO back to make those payments to the contractors for the projects in the town, while we flew six kilometers to the south.

I mean, it's crazy. You have Bala Murghab where there's business as usual, the bazaar is open, and the government is functioning to some degree, and then six or eight kilometers to the south you have a battle that is raging. The security bubble really wasn't that big.

Luckily, it turned out not to be nearly as bad as what we thought. It was pretty much all over when we got there. It ended not being like a full-out, full attack. It ended up being more [the

Taliban saying], ‘don’t forget about us. Even though you just did kick our rears the day prior, we’re still here, we’re going to fight back.’”

But we ended up staying that night on the hilltop at the OP with those guys, just to make sure that if anything happened we’d be there.

*After the battle, Captain Schloesser looked out for the family of the Afghan soldier who had died.*

**Schloesser:**

He had really been out in the forefront leading, trying to rally his soldiers, and I wanted to show the Afghanis that they weren’t in this by themselves and they’re not out there to be cannon fodder for the Americans. You had this entire Afghan battalion that’s already had low morale, and we needed to show them that we’re brothers in arms and standing side by side, that we’re going to take care of you just like we take care of each other.

So I got the “Hero’s Payment” to be made to his family. If an Afghan soldier is killed while on an American mission, you can actually pay up to \$2,500 to the family. Because they don’t have any type of insurance or anything like that. Once the soldier dies, that family’s cut off. In some cases that may be the sole income for the entire family.

After that, Afghanis wanted to come out with us. It was like a competition for them to see who could come out with the CA [Civil Affairs team]: “They’ll take care of you, you want to go out with those guys.”

*Meanwhile, the Americans worked to bring aid and security to Mullah Wasir.*

**Crouch:**

We strengthened up security in that area to prevent the enemy coming back in through the village. And the civilians came back to their homes. We also met with the elders in that village and spoke to them about projects and other things we could do for the people that had just moved back.

I was pretty proud of it, and the civilians were really happy. They’d been displaced for so long because of the enemy in the area. It meant a lot to me that I could directly contribute to them coming home.

**Schloesser:**

It was actually really cool.

[After the battle], the next day, I ended up calling the village elder there and told him, “hey, look, you know, your village is clear now. We have the OP in place, you’re inside the security bubble, and we’re working at establishing an ANP [Afghan National Police] checkpoint here. Why don’t you come back? Let me know when we can sit down and eat, there’s a lot of things I want to discuss with you.”

The village elder, elders, they came back not that day, but the next day. We had a shura. We brought in the Italians that were at the firebase, we brought in the 82<sup>nd</sup> [Airborne], and us.

We got to learn a lot about the village. We found that unlike the rest of the smaller villages, a lot of them were goat herders. So we got the vet to come up from Bagram a month later, and we were able to inoculate approximately 500 of the goat herders’ sheep and goats – a month after this battle.

**Crouch:**

We got to see a lot of really interesting illnesses like tuberculosis and just stuff that you normally would never really see in the U.S. A lot of parasite infections. And then we'd go out with the veterinarian. *[He chuckles]* I never really imagined I would deal with any animals. It's a lot of fun. I really enjoy it.

*[The local villagers,]* they were very friendly. They were very welcoming. They really appreciated us helping them out.

*Both men were awarded the Bronze Star Medal with "V" device for valor in combat.*

**Crouch:**

I wasn't really too sure if what I did really merited a valor award. I mean, me, I just feel like I was doing what I was supposed to do and doing my job. But definitely it was nice to get recognition. It's something I'm never going to forget. I'm extremely proud of everything that happened and everybody that was there.

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