

## **Return to COP Keating: Second Soldier to receive Medal of Honor from desperate battle**

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(Editor's note -- This article contains graphic language in some direct quotes. The use of this language in this article is not intended to be offensive, or gratuitous. It is used to convey what the Soldiers were thinking in the heat of the battle, and in the aftermath of the battle.)

WASHINGTON (Soldiers Live, Aug. 20, 2013) -- "Help me. Please. Help me," Spc. Stephan Mace begged as sniper bullets and rocket-propelled grenades landed all around him. His legs had been blown apart, and he tried to drag himself toward a nearby Humvee using his elbows. Although he'd nearly become incoherent because of the pain, Mace remained dry-eyed -- he had lost too much blood to cry.

Inside a Humvee, just 30 yards away, two other Soldiers were trapped by intense enemy fire. They witnessed the scene around them, horrified.

"Mace is right there. He's alive. I can get to him," then-Spc. Ty Carter told his superior.

"No," then-Sgt. Brad Larson replied. Hundreds of Taliban fighters surrounded their tiny, remote outpost in the mountains of Afghanistan, and had breached Combat Outpost Keating. Their radio was dead, and for all Larson knew, he, Carter and Mace might be the only Americans left alive. The men could barely crack the Humvee's windows to return fire before enemy snipers targeted the slivers of open space. If Carter left the vehicle, he would be mowed down in seconds.

"You're no good to him dead," Larson told him.

It was, Carter remembered, the worst part of the worst day of his life. He refused to give up on Mace, however, and will receive the Medal of Honor in a White House ceremony, Aug. 26, for his heroic efforts to save his comrade.

## FROM MARINE TO SOLDIER

After a childhood spent between the Bay Area of California and Spokane, Wash., Carter joined the Marine Corps in 1998 as a combat engineer. He said he wanted to change his life, to live "honestly and honorably. Plus ... I could shoot guns and blow stuff up. After joining the service and being a Marine, the feeling of purpose was great."

It was that feeling of purpose Carter said he'd miss the most when his four-year stint in the Corps was over. But five years later, after Carter had attended community college in California and was looking for a way to support his new daughter Madison, he found that sense of purpose again in the U.S. Army. He became a cavalry scout, tasked with observing enemy movements, and was soon on his way to Afghanistan with Blue Platoon, Bravo "Black Knight" Troop, 3rd Squadron, 61st Cavalry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division.

## THE FISHBOWL

When Blue Platoon first arrived in the lawless frontier region of Nuristan in May 2009, they went to Observation Post Fritsche, a tiny base high in the Hindu Kush mountains. It was meant to provide overwatch for Keating, but no one at OP Fritsche could actually see the combat outpost, which sat at the base of 10,000- and 12,000-foot mountains. The Soldiers knew Keating was dangerous, but they could never have imagined just how bad it was, and Carter was surprised to learn that they would need to wear body armor all the time when they rotated there during the summer.

"Then, when I finally saw it, I understood," he said. "There was no safe spot. ... Tactically it was one of the worst places anyone could have chosen. ... I was in a fishbowl, but as a Soldier, you do what you're told."

Highly trained insurgents subjected the men at Keating to near-daily attacks. You could be heading to the latrine, Carter remembered, and an enemy sniper might take potshots at you.

It was too risky to go outside, Mace had told his mother, Vanessa Adelson, during his midtour leave after she asked why he was so pale and skinny. Getting supplies in via helicopter was treacherous, and

most of the time, the men ate meals ready to eat or goodies from home. Hot meals were a luxury, and with all the climbing the Soldiers did when patrolling the mountains, it was hard to consume enough calories, Carter explained.

The stress was unrelenting. As it turned out, the enemy fighters were probing, testing the Americans to see exactly how they would respond to each type of explosion and every line of fire. They were getting ready for the attack they would launch Oct. 3, 2009.

## A WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Shortly before dawn that morning, some 300 to 400 Taliban fighters surrounded Keating. The location was then manned by 53 Americans, an Afghan National Army unit and its two Latvian trainers. The incoming barrage, from B-10 recoilless rifles firing rocket-propelled grenades, known as RPGs, anti-aircraft machine guns, Russian DShK 12.7mm heavy machine guns, mortars, snipers and small arms fire, was overwhelming from the start, Carter recalled. Insurgents even trained sniper rifles and machine guns on the barracks' doors.

Blue Platoon's job was to resupply ammunition that day, so Carter threw a Kevlar vest over his physical training clothes and grabbed the ammo he had on hand. He ran almost 900 yards through a gauntlet of bullets so thick that it "looked like it was raining" to Soldiers inside the Humvee that housed the long-range advanced scout surveillance system, known as an LRAS.

Red Platoon's Staff Sgt. Justin Gallegos, Larson (now a first lieutenant) and Mace were already there, fighting a desperate battle against shots coming from 12 different locations, Larson recalled. He said he went through 1,200 rounds in less than 10 minutes. Mace was a brave Soldier, the best in his section, according to Larson, but he looked all at once terrified, determined and resigned. As Larson started pulling M4 magazines out of Carter's vest, Carter realized that this was a fight for their very survival.

Sprinting back to the barracks, Carter yelled "everyone needs everything," found some lubrication and headed to the ammo supply point. He shot the lock off one building and then another, opening the door just as an RPG exploded behind him, injuring another Soldier.

He headed back to LRAS2, but "incoming had increased so much that I was almost running in a staggered pattern because explosions were pushing me from side to side." It was so bad that when he got there, the .240 gun outside the Humvee was destroyed, and Gallegos, Larson and Mace had been forced to take shelter inside. Mace was already wounded.

"Either get inside or leave," they told Carter.

## TRAPPED

Soon joined by Sgt. Vernon Martin, the men were trapped in a Humvee that was "rocking back and forth," Carter remembered. "You could hear the tinkling of rounds hitting the armor." Sandbags gave them extra protection, but "it was only a matter of time before the armor-piercing weapons of the enemy would punch through."

An RPG exploded the Humvee's gun turret, demolishing its .50-caliber gun and peppering the men with shrapnel. By this time, enemy fighters were inside the wire and after Staff Sgt. Clint Romesha, who would also receive the Medal of Honor for his efforts to retake Keating, radioed Gallegos that his team couldn't get to the LRAS2, the men decided to make a run for it.

Carter and Larson provided cover fire while Gallegos, Mace and Martin bounded toward the latrine and then the laundry trailer. RPGs landed almost immediately, knocking everyone down and sending up a cloud of smoke and dust that momentarily blinded Carter and Larson, who was shot in the helmet. When it cleared, Carter could see Martin rounding the corner of the latrine, while Gallegos helped Mace, who had been grievously wounded. Then Gallegos turned around, firing his weapon as he was mowed down by machine gun fire. He could have made it to safety, Mace's mother said, if he hadn't stopped to help her son.

Carter and Larson both shot at insurgents who were only feet away. "Get back in the vehicle," Larson ordered Carter. "And then it got real quiet for a while and all you heard were the Apaches, so me and Carter were thinking, 'Holy shit,'" Larson remembered.

Between taking careful shots at insurgents through the windows -- the two Soldiers were down to five or six rounds each -- they talked about what to do if Keating was completely overrun. They decided they would wait for dark, low crawl to the river outside Keating, and swim downstream.

"I had no doubt I was going to die that day," Larson said, adding that he just wanted "to kill as many of them (as possible) before they got me."

"We weren't going to give up," Carter added. "We weren't going to surrender. We were going to ... come back and fight another day."

Eventually Carter saw Mace crawl first from behind the latrine, and then a second time from behind a

rock.

"Are you OK?" Carter called the second time.

"Help me," Mace begged again.

"Let me go to him," Carter asked Larson.

"No," Larson refused again. "Tell him to stay behind the rock. He's got cover there."

Carter obeyed. "I'll get to you as soon as I can," he yelled to Mace.

Carter didn't know Mace well, but he was a Soldier and he was injured. That made them brothers, and Carter was livid that he had to sit by and watch.

"[It] basically just kind of crushed me -- the look on Mace's face -- it was destroying me inside," Carter said.

"I understood why Larson said I couldn't go," he conceded. "I still feel grateful he said that because I wasn't thinking in tactical terms. ... It didn't (make it easier), but he saved my life."

Carter did make it to a second Humvee that was only 10 or 15 feet behind them. It was "full of holes, cut up, punched right through the armor," but it also housed ammunition he and Larson desperately needed, and Larson finally agreed to let Carter go after Mace if he waited for one of the dozens of aircraft that swarmed Keating to make a gun run.

## DARING RESCUE

Carter dashed to Mace and performed first aid under heavy fire before verifying that Gallegos was dead (Martin was missing). After another trip to confer with Larson, Carter carried Mace to the relative safety of the vehicle.

He estimated that Mace had been bleeding for about 45 minutes. His legs were mangled. His abdomen was gushing blood that had turned black. His lips were blue. He was groggy and he was in shock.

He "was getting worse by the second," Carter said. With Larson's permission, Carter exposed himself to enemy fire and left the Humvee once again, looking for anything that could help them.

"I never felt so alone in my life," he remembered. "It's like even the grass blades were out to kill you. ... Everything was a threat. ... The air smelled like burnt carbon ... (and) burning plastic because of the rocket-propelled grenades. ... It was sour, sulfury ... thick and angry."

And then, there it was: Gallegos' radio. And it worked.

Carter rushed back to the Humvee, and Larson coordinated with Romesha and Red Platoon's lieutenant to "release the death blossom," Carter said.

It was like World War II, Larson agreed, enough firepower for them to race Mace to the aid station at about noon. Out of breath, Carter fell to his knees, grateful he had managed to keep his promise.

## FIRE

Then Carter reported for duty. After hours with no contact from his Soldier, Carter's platoon sergeant, then Sgt. 1st Class Jonathan Hill, who is now retired as a first sergeant, had feared he was dead. The battle was far from over however, and despite his relief, Hill ordered Carter back into the fray to identify sniper targets. After several hours, the fire that had consumed Blue Platoon's barracks with 15-foot flames spread to the tactical operations center, referred to as a TOC, and then to a tree that sat between the TOC and the aid station where medical personnel were hard at work giving Mace five buddy-to-buddy blood transfusions, a first for battlefield medicine. The tree had to come down.

Carter was the only one who knew how to work a chainsaw, so as burning embers fell on his neck, he chopped the tree until it fell onto the TOC, saving the aid station. Carter even stayed exposed to remove branches until Hill ordered him to take cover.

## THE NIGHTMARE CONTINUES

The battle lasted for more than 12 hours. Adrenaline kept the men going, and the need to stay alive superseded any thoughts of the seven Soldiers who had already died, including Gallegos and Martin. That night, however, after reinforcements arrived, they had time to think about their fallen brothers, time to wonder why they had survived when others didn't.

It was "absolutely terrible," Carter remembered, "because that's when the emotions hit." And it got even worse when they learned that Mace, who had finally been evacuated half a day after he was wounded, died in surgery. "One of the things that kept me going was thinking that Larson and I were able to save

Mace, and to hear that he died -- I was destroyed."

Down to just the uniforms on their backs and the weapons in their hands, Hill, Carter and the rest of Blue Platoon spent the next few nights outside on tops of containers. Under intermittent fire for the next few days, they slept for just a few minutes at a time, and only when they knew a trusted battle buddy was watching their backs, Hill remembered. And if the aircraft that constantly patrolled the skies above went silent for even a moment, everyone immediately went into battle mode once again.

Finally, three days after the battle, the Army sent the Soldiers to Forward Operating Base Bostick before bombing the now-ruined Keating. With another six months before the deployment ended, it wasn't long before Black Knight Troop was back in the fight. In fact, an improvised-explosive device blew up a Humvee that carried Hill, Carter and two other Soldiers just months later.

## THE HIGHEST HONOR

It was at Forward Operating Base Bostick that Hill told Carter their leaders had recommended him for the Medal of Honor. The image of Mace begging for help haunted Carter. He was just beginning a long struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder, and at the time, was wearing sunglasses constantly because his "eyes would always well up." The Medal of Honor? Carter was almost insulted.

"Why would I even care about that right now?" he told Hill. Carter pushed it to the back of his mind, got help for the trauma of the battle, re-enlisted, transferred to Joint Base Lewis-McCord, Wash., deployed to Afghanistan again, remarried and became a stepfather and a father for the second time. After almost four years, Carter never really believed it would happen.

In fact, when a colonel recently called from the Pentagon to ask if Carter would be available to receive a phone call from a high-ranking official at a certain date and time, Carter initially said no. He was taking his family on vacation.

"You know what this is," his wife, Shannon, told him, and Carter agreed to plan their trip around the call. On the appointed day, they loaded their three kids into a camper and headed down the highway from Crater Lake, Ore., pulling into a gas station to wait for the call.

It was President Barack Obama, calling to give Carter the news. "I was like, 'OK,'" Carter said after he hung up the phone. Then he "hopped in the truck and continued on with the vacation."

Carter's first thoughts were what the medal would mean to his family. It was arrogant and selfish, he

said, and now he's "trying to do what I can to make sure that everybody in Black Knight Troop is recognized for this, especially the families, who ... deserve this honor far more than I do. ... In the end, if it wasn't for (everyone else) ... they would be giving it to my mother."

Because of Carter and the other Soldiers who tried to help her son, Adelson said, Mace died in peace. "I'm so grateful ... because Stephan could have died in the dirt," she said. "I'm just overwhelmed with pride that another one of our Keating Soldiers is getting the Medal of Honor, but also that it was the person who rescued my son."

For his part, Hill's first reaction was "It's about time. ... I knew deep down inside that it was going to happen eventually, because knowing what he went through and knowing the extraordinary circumstances that he and everyone else faced, there was no way that something like this could be passed up."

He's "extremely, extremely" proud of Carter and all of his boys, but admits that he never wanted to say that a Medal of Honor recipient served under him -- it could only ever mean that something terrible had happened. He feels the same way about his own Silver Star: "Sometimes ... it's a curse. I've got something that reminds me every day of the shit storm that I survived and the shit storm where I lost my men, the shit storm that has affected all of us for the rest of our lives."

"I really don't want people to see this as, 'You deserve this,'" Carter agreed. "It's what happens when Soldiers come together who are cornered. They fight to the death for each other. I did what everybody else would have done."

(Editor's note: This is part one of a two-part series about Staff Sgt. Ty Carter, his heroic actions at Combat Outpost Keating, Afghanistan, and his struggle to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder.

Read part II here:

<http://soldiers.dodlive.mil/2013/08/in-the-aftermath-of-keating-moh-nominee-carter-gets-help-for-ptsd/>  
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