

THE CLEARING ZONE

By Aaron M. U. Church, Associate Editor



Combat controller TSgt. Thomas Bauhs was injured, trapped on a rooftop with a dying comrade, facing relentless fire.

It was to be one last mission for combat controller TSgt. Thomas Bauhs, before the end of his tour in Afghanistan. Deployed from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron at Hurlburt Field, Fla., he was embedded with a 12-man Army Special Forces team to coordinate close air support.

The spring fighting season was reaching its crescendo in May 2014. Bauhs' mission was to support the team on a large clearing operation with Afghan National Security Forces in Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan. Nangarhar's mountain valley is the gateway to neighboring Pakistan and consequently a key NATO supply route subject to relentless insurgent activity.

"Basically, our operation was to disrupt the insurgent activities in there, ... remove the fighters, their supplies, and their weapons from the battlefield," recounted Bauhs. This particular area of the central valley was "one of the bad areas. ... We had gone to places in that vicinity several times prior, and that was one of the spots that we were likely, if not guaranteed, to make contact."

The combined force inserted under cover of darkness on May 31. The troops encountered periodic gunfire through the night, but the team was accustomed to it and pressed on, suppressing "a few scuffles" along the way, Bauhs said.

By early afternoon, random gunfire sharpened to more accurate probing. Snipers were taking shots from less than 200 meters away, prompting Bauhs and the Green Beret team leader, Capt. Jason B. Jones, to fire back with rifles and M203 grenade launchers.

The exchange "wasn't anything concerning at that point," though.

After half an hour, the pair's suppressive fire caught the insurgent's attention and "fire really started to focus" on their position.

About six hours after the operation began, Bauhs and Jones—whose troops were widely spread out—took up a defensive position in a small shelter

on the rooftop of a larger, abandoned compound. It was part of a complex the combined Afghan and Special Forces troops had taken and were holding. The structure had windows to the north and west, giving Bauhs a good vantage to direct air strikes, if needed, and a clear field of fire. "That's when we started taking pretty effective machine gun" fire and an accurate barrage of rocket-propelled grenades. Enough was enough. "Time to get some backup here," Bauhs concluded.

He set up to coordinate a series of strikes, and several F-16s dispatched to support him arrived overhead. He began relaying coordinates and targeting information to the F-16 pilots.

TAKING FIRE

"They were very good and I got them on one of the enemy positions pretty quickly," he said. The pilots notified Bauhs they were ready to engage as he was reloading his grenade launcher.

Before he could clear the pilots for weapons release, however, an 82 mm shell smashed through the shelter wall. "I was in a kneeling position, and it flattened me," he said. The blast disoriented him, but he shook it off and grabbed the radio. "I didn't know exactly where the F-16s were in their run in, ... so I communicated that they were approved to release the ordnance on target" and the fighters released a pair of 500-pound bombs.

While Bauhs tried to gather his senses, the insurgents reloaded and adjusted their aim. A second recoilless rifle shell "hit about three feet above my head, collapsing part of the structure" on top of Bauhs and Jones. The explosion gave him a traumatic brain injury, perforating his eardrums, and left Bauhs temporarily deaf.

The dust and smoke inside the rooftop hut were so thick that Bauhs couldn't see Jones, much less pick out targets and direct the aircraft overhead. He called combat controller SSgt. Elias

Left: TSgt. Thomas Bauhs in Afghanistan. He was providing close air support to a 12-person Army Special Forces team when they came under heavy fire.

Bauhs (left), in Afghanistan with a joint special operations military member (face obscured for security purposes), was on his last mission in-country when the clearing operation turned deadly.

Enge—embedded with another group two kilometers away—“screaming into the radio” to take control of coordinating his air support and get the heat off his team.

“I said, ‘Hey, we’re getting hit pretty badly over here. ... I need you to take the stack and start making it happen, and then start working nine-line medevac to get our wounded.’” Bauhs still couldn’t hear and was counting on Enge to understand the information and run with it.

As the dust settled enough for a quick assessment, Bauhs realized the wall he and Jones were sheltering behind



Bauhs (second from left) and other joint special operations team members on a nighttime mission in Afghanistan.

was “pretty much gone.” The heavy machine gun, RPG, and recoilless rifle fire weren’t letting up and he shouted to Jones, several feet away, that they had to find better shelter. He couldn’t get Jones’ attention or even see him, so he low-crawled close enough to shake Jones’ boot. He got no response.

“I could see him when I got a bit closer, [but] he was kind of hunched over” and apparently unconscious, said Bauhs. He propped Jones against the

wall, trying to rouse him. It was then he made the grim discovery that the team leader had “significant trauma to the back of his head.” Bauhs knew Jones’ condition was life-threatening—and they were still pinned down on a rooftop. He rendered what aid he could to prep Jones for movement.

Enge, with the scant information he had, managed to call for a medevac helicopter and was calling in air strikes to support both his team and Bauhs’.

“His element was taking contact—he was dropping danger-close munitions to my element and his element,” Bauhs said, adding that Enge “was doing a great job.” Enge directed the F-16s and several AH-64 Apache attack helicopters that had arrived on scene and was even able to take out an anti-



Capt. Jason B. Jones, KIA

Despite the best efforts of his comrades, Army Capt. Jason B. Jones died on June 2, 2014, a day after being medevaced from the battlefield to a hospital in the provincial capital of Jalalabad, Afghanistan, according to US Army Special Forces Command.

Jones, 29, was serving his second combat tour, deployed as the commander of a 12-man Special Forces “A-team” of the 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne), from Fort Bragg, N.C. A 2007 West Point graduate, he received a degree in nuclear engineering. Jones completed Airborne and Ranger schools and deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom the following year, earning the Bronze Star. After his first deployment, he volunteered for Special Forces selection, completing the highly demanding qualification course.

TSgt. Thomas Bauhs credits the fact that he made it out alive to the Green Berets of Jones’ team. “There are four Army guys I owe my life to on that mission,” he said. The Green Berets braved enemy fire to help pull Jones from the roof. “There were some heroics that happened on the Army side,” Jones commented. “Those guys were awesome.”



aircraft weapon that the insurgents “had laid flat and were shooting at us,” said Bauhs.

Still “fuzzy” from the blast, Bauhs spent several minutes trying to figure out how to drag Jones with him to a safer location. “I’m trying to grab and drag Jason and my dexterity and grip strength [were] really not there,” Bauhs said. Almost 30 feet of wide-open rooftop lay between the ruined mud wall and the stairway down from the compound. He didn’t want to cross it “at all,” he said.

THREE LOCATIONS

Bauhs finally got a break when a strike directed by Enge hit the insurgents who’d been firing on the compound. He scrambled to grab Jones and radioed his team to help him “get Jason off the roof.” Two of Jones’ fellow Green Berets rushed to assist against “some pretty significant enemy fire” just as the medevac helicopter approached. “We were pretty lucky to get off that rooftop in one piece,” he said. His hearing was still impaired but he could now hear “well enough” to communicate. Still reeling from his concussion, he knew he needed to establish a medevac landing zone. Bauhs picked a clearing, north of the compound, that offered relatively safe ingress and egress routes.

Enge directed the Apaches to cover the evacuation. “We were able to load Captain Jones and the injured Afghans,” who had been hit during the firefight, onto the medevac helicopter.” It departed safely. The air strikes tamped down the insurgent fire long enough for the team

Above, Captain Jones in Afghanistan and (right) in dress blues. Jones was killed in the firefight. Bauhs, concussed from a close call with a rifle shell, identified a medevac landing zone and got Jones and injured Afghans away from the relentless small-arms fire.

to regroup. “We determined that we were going to continue on with the mission and exfil at the regular time,” explained Bauhs. He elected to stay with the team despite his injuries.

An hour later the insurgents re-emerged and “we were taking sporadic fire pretty much constantly throughout the day.” He and the Special Forces soldiers “re-established security” at the compound site and deployed an Afghan element north toward where the insurgents had been firing from earlier.

Unfortunately, the Afghan forces “set up security in a bad spot” and rapidly found themselves pinned down by renewed insurgent fire. Bauhs and several SF team members took shelter in a ditch with a clear view of both the Afghan forces and the enemy firing positions. They were being engaged from three locations.

From his vantage point, Bauhs could see enough to pass information to an AC-130W Stinger II gunship, now nearby. He cleared the gunship to fire, but its 30 mm chain-gun jammed. That left Bauhs with a few lightly armed Army OH-58 Kiowa scout helicopters as his only air assets. The choppers weren’t his preferred solution but their “harassing and suppressing” fire kept the insurgents

down just enough to allow the Afghans to pull back.

“They were shooting danger close, about 70 meters from the Afghans, helping those guys,” said Bauhs.

Soon thereafter, a flight of AH-64 Apaches arrived to lay down fire that was “a bit more lethal.” In the meantime, the gunship crew unjammed the Stinger’s gun, joined in the fray, and stopped enemy resistance in a little less than an hour, Bauhs said.

Assessing the more than 12-hour engagement, Bauhs called it a “really good, synchronized effort between the special tactics airmen on the ground, ... the Army Special Forces team, and all the supporting aircraft from the medevac helicopters, attack helicopters, the AC-130s, and fast-CAS.” Procedures worked “really well. Everybody stepped up and made it happen.”

The team had been ambushed by a force of about 50 insurgents and recovered more than 30 enemy dead. However, Jones did not survive, and six Afghans were injured. Despite that, “it was an overall effective mission,” Bauhs said. All told, “we were able to take out anti-aircraft weapons, we were able to take out recoilless rifles, dozens of enemy fighters and weapon caches, and ultimately complete the operation against a determined insurgent force.”

Bauhs received the Bronze Star Medal with Valor Device in a ceremony at Hurlburt earlier this year for his tenacity calling in continued air support and caring for his gravely wounded comrade, while under intense fire.