

Voiceover: Presented in partnership with the US Army Office of Public Affairs Midwest
(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Welcome to a very special episode of Pritzker Military Presents featuring army veteran and Medal of Honor Recipient Sergeant Ryan Pitts. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. The discussion is moderated by Dr. Paul Herbert, a retired army colonel, National War College professor, and executive director of the Frist Division Museum at Cantigny, Illinois. Later on we will be taking questions from our studio and live stream audiences. A veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom and the War in Afghanistan, Former-Sergeant Ryan Pitts was presented the United States' highest award for valor on June 21, 2014 in recognition of his extraordinary heroism during the Battle of Wanat in Afghanistan in 2008. While assigned as a radio operator for the 173rd Airborne Brigade, Pitts deployed twice to Afghanistan, first in 2005 for a year and again in 2007 for a tour that would last fifteen months. It was during that second deployment on July 13, 2008 that he and the rest of his unit were engaged and nearly overwhelmed by a well-organized anti-Afghan force consisting of 200 heavily armed soldiers. Despite heavy casualties to his unit and even after suffering life-threatening injuries, Sergeant Pitts displayed tremendous courage above and beyond the call of duty as he defended his post, ultimately preventing the enemy from capturing fallen American soldiers and fortified positions. And now a special episode of *Pritzker Military Presents* with Medal of Honor Recipient Ryan Pitts and Dr. Paul Herbert.

(Applause)

Herbert: Ryan, welcome to Chicago. Welcome to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. I'm delighted to share the stage with you, and it's a great honor to be here and talk about your experience.

Pitts: Well, thank you for having me and giving me the opportunity to tell our story.

Herbert: It's our pleasure. Before we talk about the action for which you were decorated, let's talk about you a little bit. Tell us about your home, your upbringing, your decision to join the army. Who is Ryan Pitts prior to the Medal of Honor?

Pitts: I grew up in southern New Hampshire. Graduated from a school--my graduating class was about 150, 200--so, really small. Grew up by--I like being outdoors, playing paintball, a little bit of hunting, riding four-wheelers, things like that. Getting into trouble with my friends. And the decision to join the military--I had grown up always wanting to serve. I had a tremendous amount of respect for service members. But when I got to high school I got caught up being a teenage boy, and it wasn't until half-way through my senior year that I starting to think about my future, and several of my friends had enlisted. And I'd been accepted to college but didn't know what I wanted to do. And I thought, you know, serving in the military would be just a tremendous opportunity, and I always wanted to serve my country.

Herbert: And that was in 2003, is that right?

Pitts: That is correct?

Herbert: You entered the service, and did 9/11 play in that at all or the ongoing operations in your decision, or was this more of a life decision?

Pitts: It was both. Probably equal parts life decision, equal parts that.

Herbert: So you came into the army; you were trained as a forward observer, is that right?

Pitts: That's correct, at Fort Sill.

Herbert: Tell us a little bit about that first assignment, and then off to the 173rd, which was in Italy then. Yes, tell us about that transition a little bit.

Pitts: I just went to basic training at Fort Sill, did my advanced individual training on my job, and then after that while I was there I volunteered for Airborne School, went on to Fort Benning, Georgia to do my airborne training and then straight to the 173rd.

Herbert: So you arrived there 2003 or four, right?

Pitts: February 2004.

Herbert: February 2004, and when were you first deployed? Because you've had two tours in Afghanistan with the 173rd.

Pitts: That's correct.

Herbert: So tell us first a little bit about what a forward observer does. What's your job in your unit?

Pitts: So my role, in the position I was in, I served in an infantry rifle company, and I was attached to an infantry platoon, and my job was to control indirect fire assets such as mortars and artillery. Close combat aviation, so Apaches, and close air support such as F15s, AC130s, sort of attack aircraft.

Herbert: Probably a highly prized position in a rifle platoon I would say. Somebody who can bring all that support to his fellow soldiers.

Pitts: I think it was appreciated.

Herbert: Yeah, good. So tell us a little bit about that first deployment. When was that, and where did you serve, and what kind of experiences did you have?

Pitts: It was from Spring 2005 until Spring 2006. Operation Enduring Freedom 6. Our battalion was in Zabul Province. We were in a village town called Qalat along the main highway that ran between Kandahar and Kabul. And we rotated some down to Kandahar to do quick reaction force for what was RC South at that time. We spent a lot of time pressing the fight to the enemy, doing mountain missions in Humvees, going out--we covered a relatively large AO. I think, if I remember correctly, our battalion at least covered an area about the size of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, so 500 soldiers to cover about that area. And we also did a number of air assault missions, flying in in helicopters to empress the fight to the enemy.

Herbert: And so your skills became seasoned. You applied them in the context of actual operations. And did you feel yourself learning your trade and so to speak? Yeah, tell us about that seasoning.

Pitts: Absolutely. I think we got there in April of 2005, and I was in my first major firefight May 3, 2005. And our whole company had gone out to QRF for our scout element that had come under attack by a large enemy force probably anywhere from fifty to a hundred enemy fighters. And that was kind of my first baptism by fire. Actually I didn't end up doing my job. I--one of the infantry guys went down, we weren't using artillery, so I jumped into that infantry slot. But that was kind of the nature of the deployment. I didn't control too many indirect assets. Mortars from time to time. I spent more time controlling close air support in combat aviation, which are incredibly important assets. And also learning the jobs of others around me.

Herbert: Yeah. Okay, so you came back in late 2006, is that what I understand? You were deployed spring of 2006, and the deployment was--when did you come back to Italy?

Pitts: I was spring 2005 to March-ish 2006. That's when we left and went back to Italy.

Herbert: Uh-huh. And then your second deployment began when?

Pitts: Spring of 2007 until the summer 2008.

Herbert: So one year over, one year back, one year over. In that intervening year did you get back home at all back to the states?

Pitts: I took block leave, thirty days, after the end of my first deployment. And then I was able to go home, I believe, Christmastime. That was about the only time I made it home. The rest of my time was spent in Italy training up for that next deployment.

Herbert: Yeah. And did you know--when did you know in that intervening year that you'd be deployed again?

Pitts: I mean, I think we knew coming out of Afghanistan on my first deployment just that that was the op tempo for the military at that time was one year deployed, one year back training up to go. Initially we had been told we were gonna be deploying to Iraq. It wasn't until about three-quarters of the way through our time back that we heard the mission had been changed to go back to Afghanistan.

Herbert: Yeah. And what did that feel like with you and your fellow soldiers, a second imminent deployment? You're keyed up for it, nervous about it? What were your feelings about a second deployment?

Pitts: I think we were keyed up for it. I was fortunate that a lot of the guys that I had come in with or gotten to the unit, we had been privates together, we had gone through our first deployment, had become--got promoted. We became sergeant together, and I think we were very comfortable with each other. We had a lot of seasoned leadership in our unit. A lot of the guys we served with had two combat deployments. A lot of us had one under our belt. So I think we felt pretty good about it. I mean, knowing we got a little bit of a brief up on the area prior to. We had some of the unit members that were deployed there come back to just give us a briefing on the area. And we knew it was gonna be a contentious area, but I think we felt good about it.

Herbert: Yeah. Okay. So you deployed a second time. Now you're a sergeant. You're promoted to sergeant before you deployed, is that correct?

Pitts: I was actually promoted to sergeant on my first deployment.

Herbert: On your first deployment, okay. And are you now a company forward observer, platoon forward observer? Role is pretty much the same?

Pitts: I was still a platoon forward observer.

Herbert: Yeah, and I thought that was really interesting. A lot of the soldiers that you were with on the second deployment were people who had been on the first deployment.

Pitts: That's correct.

Herbert: Maybe slightly different positions, some promotions, a couple guys moved out, some new guys came in, but pretty much the same crew.

Pitts: Quite a bit. I mean, some of the higher leadership was shifted around between various companies, but in terms of the platoon I was in, 2nd platoon, actually most of the guys that became team leaders were from that platoon. They were privates in that platoon. Some of the very squads that they became team leaders in and platoon sergeant may have come from other companies, squad leaders from other platoons, but there was a lot of organic leadership.

Herbert: Yeah, this sounds like a very cohesive, experienced, and pretty well disciplined group of soldiers.

Pitts: Yeah.

Herbert: Not that the 173rd would be anything else, but--
(Laughter)

Pitts: God bless them.

Herbert: Okay, so tell us about--so the second deployment. We know that the action for which you were decorated came towards the end of that deployment, but let's talk about the second deployment. Where is your unit operating in Afghanistan? What are the conditions like? What kind of operations are you doing? How are things going for that time?

Pitts: So this was a completely different area from my first deployment with us being in the south in Zabul. We were up in Kunar Nuristan Province in the northeast. And just different terrain. Still mountainous but just closer in proximity. And down in Zabul along the highway about ten to twenty kilometers on either side of the highway is relatively flat. I use that term loosely, relatively. But then we'd go up into the mountains there where we were in Kunar, it probably wasn't more than 500 meters to a kilometer wide at the bottom of the valley. Or 500 meters to a kilometer--and the mountains were higher, which changed the fight for us a little bit. We had to--every time we'd do, say, a dismount or patrol walking, we'd have to climb the mountains first so we were in the low ground as much as possible. Fewer air assault missions. It was more a lot of mounted and dismounted patrols. And we had a much smaller space. Battalion was in a much smaller area, and a lot of--I don't want to say isolated posts, but more remote posts. We had some that could only be reinforced or resupplied by helicopter.

Herbert: Yeah, I think we've all seen pictures of that terrain. We may all have a mental image of what it's like. But to actually be in it and to be soldiering in it is I'm sure really challenging. You know, weather conditions, temperature, all of that, just making people feel a little bit if you can what it's like to be a soldier there.

Pitts: Okay. Anywhere probably from high nineties, to hundreds during the summer. Walking around trying to drink probably three to six liters of water a day, having to carry that all with us. Probably having seventy pounds of gear, you know, between our weapons systems, protective gear, and all the other equipment we need to do our jobs. Wintertime it actually got pretty cold. One of the outposts I was at, it snowed relatively frequently. Did a patrol once up a mountain just to see how much snow was up there. See if we-- more than we could do our jobs with. It was probably about a foot, foot and a half up at the top.

Herbert: Less than New Hampshire.

Pitts: Yeah, less than New Hampshire, but more than we would have liked.

Herbert: Yeah, and the basic mission of your outfit was to do what? What are you trying to accomplish?

Pitts: Well, we're trying to provide security for the local people and the government and show support for the government there. Also we did a number of humanitarian-type missions--building roads, schools, hospitals, trying to improve the quality of life for the people that were there.

Herbert: And is this near the Pakistan border, the border with Pakistan basically?

Pitts: It was very near, yeah.

Herbert: And who's the enemy? Who is--what are they doing and what are they trying to accomplish?

Pitts: They're trying to disrupt our efforts and our efforts to build rapport with the local people and build support for the government. I mean, they were an elusive enemy. We didn't generally see them until they attacked us. They attacked a number of our outposts. So --and they were easily able to, you know, fall back in with the local populace, blend back in with them so they were a difficult enemy to fight.

Herbert: Yeah. Okay. And then if I understand what I've read about--about the end of that tour, your unit was repositioning itself, and I think the Waynal Valley, is that how you pronounce it?

Pitts: Waygal.

Herbert: Waygal, yeah okay, so you're moving further to the south, you're moving some of those more distant and remote outposts and consolidating in the southern end of one of these very steep valleys. Is that correct?

Pitts: Yeah, that is correct. What kind of--the impetuous for that was, about fifteen kilometers north we had had another outpost called Ranch House, which was close to

another outpost called COP Bella. And about August 2007 that basin come under a large-scale attack by a hundred or so enemy fighters. They had bridged the wire. And this base was built onto the side of a mountain in the village. We were able to hold that base and repel that attack, our guys from 1st platoon were able to. And after that the decision was made to break down that outpost, 'cause it could only be resupplied by helicopter. That's the only way you could land the HLZ was at the top of a building at the southern end of that outpost. Then the only way that could also be reinforced was by walking from COP Bella, but that was a couple-hour walk through the mountains. And so we had broke down Ranch House but maintained Combat Outpost Bella, which was still about fifteen kilometers north of FOB Blessing, our main battalion headquarters where we spent the majority of our deployment. And then about November 2007 we had the Aranas ambush where our platoon was ambushed. Kyle White earned his Medal of Honor there. We had taken six casualties. And over the course of that winter and the next spring the enemy attack activity had picked up, and there were becoming increasing number of attacks on COP Bella with increasing accuracy. They actually landed a mortar round inside the OP there and wounded one of our guys. So the decision was made to--and that was another outpost that could only be resupplied or reinforced by helicopter. You couldn't drive there. And so if there was a large-scale attack going on, there was no way we could get guys on the ground safely. So the decision was made to break down that outpost, and what happened was, we simultaneously moved up to Wanat at the same time that they were expelling from that outpost with our goal to build, lay the groundwork, provide security for the building of a new combat outpost in Wanat village maybe about half the distance from FOB Blessing to COP Bella. So about eight kilometers north of FOB Blessing.

Herbert: Okay. So if I've got this right, the sort of logic of the structure is, you've referred to FOBs, which are FOB, forward operating base. And so that would be a larger unit, maybe a company or reinforced company that's based there. Its headquarters, its logistical support, maybe some combat troops. And then from that forward of that more in the direction of the territory you're trying to control are other types of smaller facilities like COPs, combat outposts, and vehicle patrol bases and things like that, and that give you a presence in this area. And it's a pretty large area that you're trying to control, and very, very difficult terrain. Is that an accurate description?

Pitts: Yeah, absolutely.

Herbert: Yeah, okay. And you referred to FOB Blessing, which is Forward Operating Base Blessing, which is where the company headquarters, your Charlie Company 1st of the 503rd, is that correct?

Pitts: Chosen Company--

Herbert: Chosen Company, 2nd of the 503rd. Okay, forgive me.

Pitts: And our headquarters was there--

Herbert: Important distinctions.

Pitts: --as well as our battalion headquarters was there.

Herbert: Okay, so battalion headquarters is. There. Alright. So it's July of 2007 now, two thousand--I have that right?

Pitts: The attack? 2008.

Herbert: 2008. Okay, so you're July 2008, you're part of these guys that are coming out of those more forward deployed outposts, and you're gonna be at vehicle patrol base Kahler, I think, which is some distance from FOB Blessing, which is further south and further down the valley. And so that patrol base is next to the village of Wanat, immediately across the road. Is that true? And then there's an Outpost Topside, which is some distance from Kahler. But on a higher piece of ground that roughly overlooks both the village and the vehicle patrol bases. Is that--

Pitts: Yeah, it was about a hundred meters outside the wire to the east built up kind of on a spur, some rising ground. It wasn't terribly high or terribly far, but it did provide a better field of view.

Herbert: Yeah. So tell us about that arrangement. It seems like there's three pieces. There's vehicle patrol base Kahler, there's the village of Wanat, and there's Outpost Topside. Tell us about moving into that area and the configuration of that space and what you guys are doing. This is July of 2008, right? Because the action took place days, if I'm correct, after your arrival.

Pitts: Yup, July 13th. We had spent that year--we had even talked about the precious July moving up to Wanat to stand up an outpost, but it just--given resources and the direction of our mission, it didn't happen until the following July when we were breaking down Bella. We moved out the night of the eighth under cover of darkness, got there that night, started to emplace our weapons trucks, our guns trucks. It was kind of--there was a flat area almost an L-shape with the hotels, mosque to the north running east-west and then a bazaar where they had shops where the locals had shops kind of running north-south on the east side. And across the road there was a flat area, and that's where we emplaced our gun trucks. And it at the southern end it kind of terraced down, and that's where we were gonna set up our HLZ. There was a river that ran along the west side. There were some houses in between but it was a small area, maybe a hundred meters, two hundred meters from the western perimeter of our base. Over there we had emplaced concertina wire--barbed wire--around the outside of that perimeter. Started to over the course of those days started to dig fighting positions, fills sandbags. We had a bobcat skid steer-type piece of equipment come in that they had used to build some HESKOs to set up a mortar firing position where we had our 120mm mortar. We had a TOW missile truck out there with their advanced optics and we had on the opposite side of those buildings to the east, a hundred meters out there was OP Topside, Observation Post Topside. And that was roughly the, you know, the post itself, the fighting positions were probably five to ten yards from anywhere from ten to twenty yards, relatively small position with maybe about half the size of a football field area with C-wire around it, around the outside for fortifications. And there was some natural cover there with some rocks and trees. And it was pretty terraced, but we started building into the terraces and creating more fighting positions, building sandbags simultaneously, building up those sandbags while digging down and trying to create as much cover as possible.

Herbert: And this is your platoon plus attached assets like these mortars and the tow vehicle and these other things that you've mentioned. So we have roughly fifty soldiers in this location.

Pitts: Yeah, we had swapped out some guys from our platoon in exchange for the TOW missile truck guys from another company, so yeah, we were roughly a platoon size, about forty-eight Americans on the ground.

Herbert: Yeah, yeah. This sounds like an awful lot of psychical labor. You're stringing wire and parking vehicles and pulling security and digging. Is it easy to dig? I take it it's pretty rocky.

Pitts: It was pretty rocky. We had to sue pickaxes to break up the ground, and then we started digging into the terraces just 'cause the dirt was looser; we could build more quickly. So we kind of--we were trying to save that as much as possible, but in the interest of security and time we starting digging into the dirt from the terraces that they used for agriculture.

Herbert: So generally when you're moving into an area like that, how much sleep are you getting? How much is physical work, how much is security of the place, and how much is rest?

Pitts: Well, it's work and security all day, probably from forty-five minutes before the sun comes up, there's a first light in the sky, until after dark. And then we had--I think we did--so we did thirty-three percent security, so we had nine up at the observation post, so at any given time there was at least two to three guys pulling security. And they would pull an hour shift, and we would just rotate through, so it would be one hour on, two hours off, or two on, four off, some combination thereof all night until that forty-five minutes before sunrise, and then just repeat again

Herbert: So it sounds like you're getting, if you're lucky, maybe four hours of sleep but not continuous.

Pitts: Maybe a little bit more, but right in that area.

Herbert: Wow. Okay, so you're gonna be at this OP, you and your team. Is that--

Pitts: That's correct.

Herbert: You're gonna be up at OP Topside. Before we talk about that, say a word about the Afghans, 'cause they're in the village immediately across the road from Vehicle Patrol Base Kahler, right? Did you have any personal interaction with them, and what was the soldiers' sense of their relationship with the people who lived in Wanat?

Pitts: I didn't have any personal interaction with them. They definitely seemed to be observing us. Some would come and watch what we were doing at the OP from outside the wire. They were at the bazaar area and the hotel area watching our guys build fortifications down at the vehicle patrol base. Definitely felt like we were being observed.

Herbert: Yeah. Okay, but nothing overtly hostile and nothing overtly friendly I take it?

Pitts: Yeah, right in that area.

Herbert: Okay. And there were some Afghan security forces with your--at Kahler, is that--

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Pitts: Yeah, we had a platoon of Afghan National Army.

Herbert: Yeah, okay. So you've got the team that goes up to OP Topside. And are you in charge of that team? That's about nine soldiers including yourself, is that right?

Pitts: Yeah, there was another infantry team leader, Sergeant Matt Gobble, and we were both kind of in charge of that location.

Herbert: Yeah, okay. So tell us about that team. Tell us about what your mission was, and tell us about the soldiers who comprised that team.

Pitts: Our mission was just to be more eyes and ears outside the vehicle patrol base. We had another observations system up there, long range observations system, and our job was just to try and scan for the enemy and, being the forward observer, control any indirect fires and come up with a fires plan, planning targets in case we were attacked. And the team up there was myself, Matt Gobble--Sergeant Matt Gobble--Christopher McKaig, Pruitt Rainey, Jonathan Ayers, Jason Bogar, Matt Phillips, Gunnar Zwilling. And we had three main fighting positions. We had our northern position, which was myself, Gunnar Zwilling, and I think Matt Phillips. And then to the east was Pruitt Rainey, Christopher McKaig, and Jonathan Ayers, and we called that the Crow's Nest. And then to the south was Jason Bogar, Matt Gobble, and Tyler Stafford.

Herbert: And you're still improving that position, right? It's not complete at the time you occupy?

Pitts: No, we had spent every day improving it, and we're just gonna continue to improve it for as long as we're there until we have a really truly hardened position.

Herbert: Yeah. You know, I think one of the interesting things about that is that the farther you push these positions out, and the smaller the group of soldiers are--in this case, nine soldiers--and you've got to maintain twenty-four/seven security of your own position, you're also trying to improve the position. And you're also trying to accomplish the mission of observation and surveillance and all that sort of thing. So you've got three positions of three soldiers, and I take it everybody's got plenty to do all the time.

Pitts: We did. But we set up priorities of work. We identified which positions were most important, which activities we did were most important, and set up work cycles, work/rest cycles of kind of we sued security as our opportunity to rest from work because we'd just be standing there pulling security. So I think we had a good system going to build up our position and accomplish what we were there to do.

Herbert: Okay. Well, we're very interested to hear you talk about what happened on the thirteenth of July, that's the action for which you were decorated. And I know that this group of soldiers were very close to you, that this is a great group of guys who were going about the job that their country asked them to do. So why don't you tell us about what you remember about how July 13th went?

Pitts: We woke up for stand-to. And--

Herbert: And that, everybody up--

Pitts: Everybody up--

Herbert: --really early and alert before the sun comes up just in case you're hit.

Pitts: Exactly. And so everybody had gotten up for that. The sun was already coming up. I don't think we could see it in the sky yet, but it was light out. The TOW missile truck had with its optics system had spotted four potential enemy moving in the mountain to the west, about a kilometer up, and for us we consider that enemy given that was a strange pattern of life. People knew we were there. A group like that moving in the mountains without any goats or anything, that's enemy activity. Historically was enemy activity. So I prepared to work up a fire mission for mortars on their location to be prepared to fire on that. Matt Gobble, Sergeant Gobble was helping me with that. And about 4:30 it started with a burst of machine gun fire from the north, and that was basically the signal to initiate their large-scale attack, and after that pretty much simultaneously 360 degrees the enemy had moved in both within close proximity they were within probably within ten meters of our observation post. They had moved into buildings within the village within close proximity to our forces. They had also been further out high ground 360 degrees. And our position was hit by rocket-propelled grenades immediately. I was wounded, Sergeant Matt Gobble was wounded, Specialist Tyler Stafford was wounded, Corporal Gunnar Zwilling was killed in that opening barrage. At the time Corporal Matthew Phillips had started return fire, he went to throw a grenade, and after throwing that grenade he was killed by incoming fire. The outpost--I mean it was a sustained volley, a large volley of rocket-propelled grenades and hand grenades that hit OP Topside. And at that time the vehicle patrol base was also being hit pretty hard. They heavily targeted the TOW missile truck and our heavy weapons systems such as 50-cals and automatic grenade launchers were on those vehicles. So those were all prime targets.

Herbert: Yeah. And that initial burst of fire by the enemy lasts how long? Five minutes, ten minutes?

Pitts: This was sustained. I mean, I was there on the ground for about ninety minutes, and the attacks went on even after I left. It didn't really taper off. It kind of ebbed and flowed depending on the type of assets that we had. The volume of fire coming from what I've heard from the other guys. But it went on hours even after I left around six o'clock, 6:30.

Herbert: So in the initial burst of fire at least four soldiers are hit, and then immediately thereafter in trying to react at least one more, so you've got five out of nine guys down, including yourself, right? Okay, and so talk us through your memories of what everyone was doing while you tried to hold this position.

Pitts: So that initial volley of RPGs and hand grenades that came in was relatively sustained--I don't know how many we took, but it was a number of them. I found myself--I had been in the center of the OP, of our fighting positions and was knocked/threw

myself into the northern position, then kind of was trying to collect my thoughts, and I kind of had been a little shell-shocked trying to figure out what was going on, where the fire was coming from, what to do next. And I had taken shrapnel to both my legs and my left arm at this point and couldn't move my foot, couldn't use my legs just from shock. There was a piece of shrapnel that had gone through my inner thigh. I was concerned about the major blood vessel in there possibly being injured. And at that point I knew I needed some help, so I crawled to the southern fighting position where I could hear our guys returning fires. And when I got there Corporal Jason Bogar standing up, he had an M249 SAW machine gun, and he's returning fire to the east/southeast, and I can hear Corporal Ayers, Specialist McKaig, and Corporal Rainey, they're in what we called the Crow's Nest, and they had a 240 machine gun, medium machine gun, and they're returning fire. So our guys are immediately responding and doing what they need to do without needing to be told. And they're younger enlisted guys, but they had a year-plus of combat experience, so they all knew their jobs, they were extremely proficient in their jobs, knew what they needed to do. So I get into that southern fighting position. I could see Sergeant Gobble in there, Matt Gobble's in there, and he is wounded and shell-shocked as well. He had ended up in that position. Jason Bogar stopped. He could see that I was wounded, and we talked, and he asked me what I needed, and I said I needed a tourniquet on my right leg. So he--we pulled out my tourniquet, and he put that tourniquet on my right leg. He checked Matt Gobble, and went back to fighting. At about that time Specialist at the time, Tyler Stafford crawled in and told me that Gunnar Zwilling had been killed and that Matt Phillips--what I explained, that he returned fire, threw a hand grenade and he had been killed. And then he said, at that time I didn't know they'd been throwing hand grenades. He said they threw hand grenades. And we had kept hand grenades in our northern fighting position, and I knew that if we were within hand grenade range for us, that they were within as well. Also I then crawled to the northern fighting position and began to throw grenades along what we called our dead space. To the north there was a riverbed about anywhere extending from ten meters out to five meters out running along the northern perimeter west to east. And so I began to throw grenades along that dead space and working that area there.

Herbert: Yeah.

Pitts: And after that it was a mix of trying to get a hold of Captain Myer, at the time our company commander, and give him an update of the casualties we had taken up at the OP. And going back and forth, yes, what targets, preplanned targets that we had that wanted to fire. 'Cause we were within range of the 155mm Howitzers at FOB Blessing. And we had already preplanned targets for them so we had them start firing targets. And it was going back and forth. I didn't want to expend all of our grenades, so there was a 240 machine gun in that northern position, so I was just trying to find the next thing to do because all these other guys like Bogar, Rainey, and Ayers are all fighting, so I felt like I had to do my part. And I crawled over to--I couldn't stand, so I would have to--and the enemy was close, so I would blind-fire over the top of the sandbags, keeping my head down but firing over the top of the sandbags. And then I would physically take my leg and put my knee up, and I would pull myself up and start trying to engage with the enemy. And then at that time the ammunition was in a bag and that's a weapons system that you generally have someone assisting you. There's an assistant gunner who feeds ammo. And I didn't have that, so occasionally the weapon would malfunction; it would jam because the ammo would get caught on something, so I would have to pull it down, correct that malfunction, and then repeat the process over again, blind fire and start firing. And after a while--I don't know how long we were fighting for--Lieutenant Brostrom had come up to the OP. He popped up next to me, and he and Corporal Hovater had made a run from the vehicle patrol base right to the center of the village where there

were enemy positions. They ran about a hundred meters to get to our location, probably shouldn't have made it but somehow they did. And I felt relieved to have him there, somebody else to help control the fight, 'cause I really wasn't in any shape to control the entire observation post. And he--we had a very brief conversation. Told him where I thought the enemy were to the north. There was a rock along the north. I kind of instructed him to be cautious about them trying to flank around that rock. And he took that, and that was the last time we ever spoke. I didn't know that he had brought Corporal Hovater with him. I continued to fire the machine gun. And after a while there was probably some times in there that Rainey said they needed ammo. That northern fighting position is kind of where we kept all our extra ammo, our hand grenades, everything. So Rainey was really helping manage the fight a lot because Ayers would need ammunition, so he'd let me know, and I'd throw him ammunition. And then even after Lieutenant Brostrom got there, at some point I was still using the machine gun, and he let me know Lieutenant Brostrom wanted it. And he was the platoon leader; I trusted him. And he was moving defenses, so I handed off the machine gun, and he gave me the 203-grenade launcher. And at that time I kind of switched over with Lieutenant Brostrom running the fight there. I shifted to talk with Major Myers and try and give him updates and working on fire mission and things like that. And it was after a while--it didn't sound like there was any fire coming out of the OP. It had gotten, what I felt like, quiet internally. And I didn't want to yell out 'cause in case I was alone I didn't want the enemy to know that I was the only one in there. I was sounded, so I wasn't gonna be able to put up a real big fight. So I crawled through the OP, looked down to the terraces below, and I could see some of our guys were down there not moving. And then I moved further. I looked up into the crow's nest, and nobody was moving up there, and I crawled to the southern fighting position, and no one was there. And so I was by myself briefly. And so I crawled back to the northern fighting position, was trying to collect my thoughts 'cause I knew this was a bad situation. I'm wounded. Everybody there was either killed or had to fall back. And I had limited resources. And so just started trying to think, "Okay, what's the next thing that I can do?" So I called down to Captain Myer--Major Myer now, but Captain Myer at the time. And I actually called for Chosen 6 was his call sign. Chosen 2-5 was our platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Dave Dzwik or Chosen 2-6 Romeo, which was at the time Sergeant John Hayes, knowing that they would all be operating radios down at the vehicle patrol base. And I called for any of them. And Captain Myer answered, and I told him the situation. I said that everybody up here is either dead or gone, you need to send reinforcements or just gave him an update. And he came back and told me that there wasn't anybody to send. 'Cause there really wasn't. Every position was in a pretty contentious fight and pinned down. And we were just far enough away. And so, okay. And just moved on with the fight, and just tried to keep thinking of the next thing I can do. And I had the two--Rainey, when I gave him the 240 for Lieutenant Brostrom, he had given me a M4 with a 203-grenade launcher, and so I had seen First Squad Sergeant Samaroo practice with his squad firing indirectly. They only go about 400 meters, even directly, but saw him firing straight up--well not straight up, but not quite as close as this, but shooting to practice his guys dropping them in areas where they couldn't see. And so I started to try and do the same. I knew the enemy was close there on the northern perimeter, so I started to shoot the 203s straight up in the air to drop to try and drop it in as closely as I could. I did that for a while. And eventually Sergeant Israel Garcia and Specialist Jacob Sones had heard my conversation with Captain Myer, and at that time they had been able to hear the enemy talking over my radio and hear them through, 'cause they were close enough they could hear their voices. And Jacob Sones and Israel Garcia made a run to the traffic control point, which was a little closer to the OP that was on the southern end on the road. And they had met

up there with Staff Sergeant Sean Samaroo and Specialist Michael Denton at the time. And they moved along the terraces trying to use them as cover. They were a little bit to the south so they moved north along the terraces to OP Topside. And that was--they got there. That was a tremendous sense of relief for me at that time. Specialist Jacob Sones had started to treat me. Sergeant Garcia was pulling security. Denton and Sergeant Sam were basically checking to see if guys were alive, and if they weren't or even if they had been they were taking ammo or whatever they could off of them to impact the fight. I know at that time Sergeant Mike Denton, he--he was a sergeant afterwards, but Specialist Denton at the time, Hovater and Lieutenant Brostrom and Bogar and Rainey had all kind of been killed in the same area. And Hovater was Denton's best friend, and he--Denton had to search him for ammo and go back to the fight, and he did. He was a good dude. So they're doing that, they're trying to do those things, and then another--

Herbert: So the lieutenant has now been killed in action.

Pitts: Yup. The--

Herbert: And Corporal Hovater, who came up with him, has been killed in action.

Pitts: Yes. As well as Corporal Pruitt Rainey and Corporal Jason Bogar. And then up in the crow's nest Corporal Jonathon Ayers had been killed. And hearing the story afterward from Chris McKaig who was with him, that during the course of the fight Ayers had actually been hit in the helmet with a round. It hadn't gone through. The helmet had protected him. But he had actually after that continued to fire the weapons system. And in my mind he probably had to have a good idea that if he had been hit in the head with one round there's a good chance that's gonna happen again or it could even probably kill him. But he continued to do his job anyways, and he was killed doing it. But it was important to us.

Herbert: Yeah. So there's this second attempt to reinforce OP Topside that you've just described. And is that successful after that point? Do we get control of the OP, or is this still a pretty tough situation?

Pitts: So we have control for a little bit, but then there's another barrage of RPGs that come in. Denton's wounded, Sergeant Sam's wounded, Sones is wounded, I'm hit again, and Sergeant Garcia is mortally wounded.

Herbert: Yeah.

Pitts: Denton from what I had heard was blown off of one terrace down onto the other one and landed on his head. And Sergeant Sam was hit pretty bad both between his legs and his arms. So Sones had been treating me, and he was out of it, and he needed to get some medical aid, so he moved to the southern fighting position, and I crawled to the center. And Garcia was mortally wounded, and it was visible. You know, and I knew there wasn't anything I was gonna be able to do for him, so I just kind of laid there with him and held his hand, and we talked a little bit, tried to make him comfortable, which was difficult. But he--I don't know how long we lay there. Could have been minutes, could have been less. I don't remember, at that point I kind of just didn't really care. And he told me he wanted me to tell his mom and his wife that he loved them. I told him that I would. And after a while I moved to the southern fighting position and told Sergeant Sam and Denton and Sones where Garcia was, 'cause I couldn't drag him myself, so they pulled him into the southern fighting position. And I can see Denton's wounded pretty seriously. I didn't know if at the time, but he had been hit through his right hand and the bone was ticking out of his hand. And he's still standing trying to return fire and pull security on the enemy, but he's right-hand dominant, so now he's switching, and he's using his right forearm to prop his machine gun up. Sergeant Sam couldn't stand, and we had him try to get a radio up and working. And Sergeant Sam had kind of made the decision that we needed to move a little bit out of that position we were in, so we knocked down that wall and moved outside that fighting position, but using the terrace as

cover. There was still over there. And it was around that time that guys--we could see guys starting to come up from the OP. The Apaches had shown up. Prior to the wave of reinforcements was Sergeant Sam. And they were starting to do gun rounds, which kind of pushed the enemy back a little bit, so guys were able to start making their way from the vehicle patrol base back up to the OP to reinforce it a third time again. And we had to--we knew the medevacs were coming in, we heard the medevacs were coming in, and they wanted us to pop smoke, throw a smoke grenade to mark our location, and so we had thrown that to the east, which is in the direction of the enemy up on the terraces, and I never thought that an aircraft would come and land there. I thought they would land at the vehicle patrol base where hopefully it was a little bit safer, being a relative term. It wasn't really safe anywhere, but there would be a little more cover for them. But they came in and landed right between us and the enemy. And I don't really know how they did it. Crew chiefs are getting off the birds, Sergeant Matt Kinney, and some other guys. And they help Sam, Sones, Denton and me work our way up the terraces and get on that aircraft. And that's when we were medevac'd.

Herbert: So you're medevac'd out at that point. And at that point we've established relative control of OP Topside?

Pitts: Yeah, but there were subsequent attacks on it afterwards. There are other guys from what I heard talking to the guys afterwards that were wounded in more volleys of RPGs.

Herbert: It's an incredible story. You made a comment as you went into it that I'd ask you just to repeat or elaborate on a little bit. You said that you were—you were trying to do what you saw the other guys doing. Tell us about that a little bit.

Pitts: Well, when I crawled to the southern fighting position after I had been initially wounded in the beginning of the firefight, and Bogar is standing up returning fire, and he's stopping and treating casualties and then returning to the fight. And I can hear Ayers and McKaig are firing and working the gun in the Crow's Nest responding to the enemy. Rainey is throughout the course of the fight moving ammo where it needs to be and then helping Lieutenant Brostrom shift weapons systems. And Lieutenant Brostrom and Hovater had made the run from the vehicle patrol base to the OP directly in front of enemy positions. There's a lot of other things that happened that I didn't see, that I heard about afterwards of--I've seen the pictures of the gun trucks down at the vehicle patrol base, and they're just covered in bullet holes or impact marks from rounds 'cause they were just so heavily targeted. And at one point, I don't remember when it was in the fight, but I looked down, and they had so heavily targeted the TOW missile truck, the TOW missile truck had actually exploded. And it had thrown a missile actually into a fighting position, and they thought it was starting to arm. One guy picked up that missile and ran it out into the open and set it down so those guys could stay in that position. There were guys--I know Jacob Sones, I think Dylan Meyer, they jumped on the hoods of these trucks to reload the Mk 19s. And these trucks are being heavily targeted. And this is just the type of things that so many different guys were doing. And there's more that I don't even know about, cause I wasn't down there to see it. So really it was just--in my mind we were all doing the same things. I was just trying to keep up with everybody else.

Herbert: I think you've painted such an excellent picture of what happened, that I think what we're gonna do is let our audience ask you a few questions, if that's okay with you.

Pitts: Absolutely.

1: At that base that you were at there was an Afghan army platoon there also. Where were they during this whole process, and what were they doing? And do you have any personal impression or feeling about the Afghan forces themselves?

Pitts: We had integrated the Afghan National Army platoon down at the vehicle patrol base, and they had started constructing fortifications along the northern part of our perimeter. That's where we had kind of integrated them. And during the fight they had fought back. They had taken casualties as well. That's just what I've heard from the other guys. I wasn't down there, so I didn't get to actually see what they did. My experience--we had seen them. We had started a transition to them doing missions while we were there we'd be more of a support role. It wasn't all the time, but that was a big step for them to be able to start running their own missions with us kind of hanging back and pulling, being really more there in case something bad happened. We could come in and bring in the air and artillery assets.

2: What are you doing now, and how does the team spirit that you displayed then carry on to what you do today?

Pitts: So I graduated from the University of New Hampshire last year. I work for Oracle Corporation. I do business development. Previously my role, what I did is I supported our field sales reps, and customer engagement. And I guess in terms of team spirit, I mean it's more of a mentality that I've carried with me, that the team and the mission is more important than myself. And I've always found that if you focus on what your job is and doing your duty and be dedicated to those around you, kind of everything else takes care of itself--career progression, whatever that I don't--you don't need to play politics to get there. It will happen. And that's--I had a dispersed team, and being able to take responsibility and communicate effectively with others, whether that's written or verbal, and just really being dedicated to that I think has helped me a lot and being able to transition between--I learned in the army how to be both a leader and support the team, and transition back and forth or lead a smaller part of a bigger team. And that's, I think, helped me tremendously in just building relationships with the people I work with, that hopefully I'm a valued team member for them.

3: Can you tell us the emotional toll on you at the moment of the incident as well as what motivated you to drive on through that time?

Pitts: (Pause) I think during the event there wasn't really time for me to process a lot of the emotions. I know that when Tyler Stafford told me that Gunnar Zwilling and Matt Phillips had been killed and that they had thrown--enemy were in hand grenade range, I took that personally and that made me very angry that they thought that they could come that close to us. And I wanted to get them back for that. And it wasn't until afterwards I just--it was just trying to carry on the fight and take care of the guys that were still there. And it wasn't until afterwards that it kind of caught up with me. It was at the hospital, and my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Dzwik, had come up and told me about the guys that we lost, and that was really tough. But--and it was tough for a while, and I've just tried to think about it--the way I processed it--I've had that guilt, that survivor's guilt, you know, why did I make it? There were eight guys that died in my position, but that's just the way it happened, and it was out of my control. But I owe it to them to live my life to the best of my ability, to enjoy it 'cause they can't and to live a life worthy of their sacrifice. So I try and take something positive away from it, 'cause they'd want us to be happy.

Herbert: I won't try and elaborate on how Ryan has interpreted the Medal of Honor because he's done it more eloquently than I think it can be done by anybody else. The criteria of course, the fundamental criteria, is above and beyond the call of duty. And as you hear Ryan articulate this or if you research this battle, as I had preparing for this interview, I think Ryan has met that criteria tremendously, and I think any of us who have served and have recognized the profound duty that simply goes with the oath would concur. And I think the thing all of us can take out of your story, Ryan, is not only deep respect for you and the soldiers who served with you, because I think you said that beautifully, but to remember that military duties are really clear. They're very graphic. We

all have duties, and we all have opportunities to serve above and beyond. And in that respect we all have responsibility to you and your fellow soldiers to have a society worthy of your service and sacrifice. So we'll try to do that.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Medal of Honor Recipient Ryan Pitts and Dr. Paul Herbert for joining us today. To learn more about the Medal of Honor or to read Sergeant Pitts' full citation, visit Army.mil. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, download audio podcasts, view additional content, become a member, and explore all the Museum and Library has to offer, visit us at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Voiceover: Visit the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. Explore original exhibits on military history, or be a part of a live studio audience. Watch other episodes of *Pritzker Military Presents*, find out What's On, at PritzkerMilitary.org.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.