

Evan Goodenow Feature Story Writing W10

The longest war: Afghanistan War vets, contractor reflect on U.S. departure

**By Evan Goodenow
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Editor's note: As the U.S. prepares to withdraw most of its troops from Afghanistan nearly 20 years after the war began, The Winchester Star talks with three local Afghanistan War veterans and a civilian contractor who worked there.

When he heard the explosion and saw the mushroom cloud, David Kent knew a fellow Marine had stepped on a landmine.

It was June 6, 2009, and Kent, a Winchester resident, was then a lance corporal. He was a member of 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines, an infantry regiment stationed outside the deserted town of Now Zad in Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan. The explosion was common during Kent's six-month tour with his approximately 150-man company. His tour was cut short a month due to heavy casualties. About 15 men in the company were killed or wounded.

Each day, a squad of about 15 Marines, led by a combat engineer with a metal detector, would leave their outpost on patrol walking about 10 feet apart. They were hoping not to step on landmines planted the night before on the edge of Now Zad by Taliban fighters who sneaked in through tunnels from a forest near Forward Operating Base Cabaretta.

The mines contained about 50 pounds of explosives and were often made from plastic and wood to thwart metal detectors. A surgical team that drove a seven-ton flatbed truck with emergency medical equipment — known as a "doc-in-a-box" — was stationed at the base to try to save Marines, some of whom became double amputees after stepping on landmines. While excruciating to know they could be blown to bits each time they patrolled, Kent said the Marines did it to support each other.

"It's a very odd thing, but you are very committed to going and doing that mission," he said. "There's nothing anywhere that comes close to the bond and the brotherhood."

Kent, who arrived May 20, 2009, was in a squad on a roof in a house a few blocks behind Lance Cpl. Joshua R. Whittle's squad providing cover in the event of an ambush when Whittle stepped on the mine, blowing both his legs off. The explosion killed Whittle and wounded the two Marines behind him. As the wounded were treated, Kent — carrying an M-4 semi-automatic rifle equipped with a M-203 rocket-propelled grenade launcher — and his squad advanced. They arrived about three minutes later to provide cover fire and medical aid. He said it was "hard and eerie" responding to the blast.

"You know you're walking into an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) field and your friends are in there and they're hurt," Kent said. "We started a firefight with them [insurgents] while the people were working on the wounded in the back behind us and the doc-in-a-box is starting to come out, air support's coming, medevac's coming."

Whittle, 20, of Downey, California, a city about 13 miles outside Los Angeles, had been in Afghanistan just three weeks. Kent became close to him during their seven months training in California and Hawaii for the deployment.

Kent served two tours in Iraq before coming to Afghanistan. While both were hot and deadly places, Fallujah, Iraq, was modern with air conditioning, televisions and heavily populated. Helmand, a top producer of opium poppies that make Afghanistan the largest exporter of heroin in the world, was primitive with mud huts for homes.

With civilians cleared out of Now Zad due to the fighting and only an occasional nomad traveling through, firefights occurred regularly in the ghost town during Kent's tour. He estimated the Marines killed some 120 insurgents, some of as young as 13, during his deployment.

Kent said the worst day was Aug. 14, 2009, in Dahaneh, then a Taliban-controlled town of 2,000 about five miles south of Now Zad. It was day three of the Battle of Dahaneh. About 400 Marines and 100 Afghan National Security Forces had helicoptered in for a surprise attack, but the Taliban knew they were coming. The result was fierce, house-to-house fighting.

Kent recalled being shot at as he flew in on a CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter and running for cover after landing. What followed were multiple 10- to 20-minute, close-quarter, building-to-building battles with insurgents retreating before the Marines could call in air attacks. Insurgents were typically armed with AK-47 semi-automatic rifles, RPGs and some carried PKC machine guns — a belt-fed weapon with a tripod. Some insurgents were as close as 15 feet away.

"You're shooting at them for 10 to 15 minutes, throwing grenades at each other and they're shooting RPGs at you," Kent said. "We're doing the same back to them."

On Aug. 14, Lance Cpl. Joshua M. Bernard was killed by a rocket-propelled grenade while on patrol with Kent. As a Navy corpsman and two Marines treated Bernard, Kent provided cover fire.

The Associated Press photo of a dying Bernard — photos of American combat deaths were commonly published during the Vietnam War, but rarely by American media in Afghanistan — reminded Americans of the human cost of the distant war. It had been raging for nearly eight years at that point, but had been overshadowed by the disastrous Iraq War.

Kent, who felt publishing the photo was inappropriate, was friends with the 21-year-old Bernard of New Portland, Maine, a small town about 90 miles outside Portland. They had served together in 2008 in Iraq. Kent said the supreme sacrifices of men like Bernard and

Whittle should be appreciated by Americans each day, not just on Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

"People are so removed and they take those freedoms for granted," he said. "And the willingness of somebody that's 18 years old to go and pick up a rifle and fight on their behalf."

'A very dysfunctional relationship'

Pamela Jessen remembers grabbing her M-4 from her office and doing guard duty at a door at U.S. Air Force headquarters in Afghanistan when the massacre of Air Force personnel occurred at Kabul International Airport on April 27, 2011. The headquarters went on lockdown and Jessen, a Stephens City resident who was then an Air Force major, was told to shoot if she saw a shadow under the door.

Jessen remembered an Afghan interpreter covered in blood alerting them about the shooting. There was fear that there was a second shooter at large, but it was unfounded.

The lone gunmen was Col. Ahmed Gul of the Afghan National Security Forces. He killed eight Air Force personnel and one U.S. civilian contractor before committing suicide. A 2012 Air Force report concluded Gul became radicalized in Pakistan before returning to Afghanistan.

Among the dead was Master Sgt. Tara Brown. Brown, 33, of Deltona, Florida, was Jessen's friend. They met in October of 2010 while training for the Afghanistan deployment that began in December of that year. Jessen said Brown was kind, smart and highly motivated.

"She had just got married before she deployed and was looking forward to her honeymoon that she was going to take for her R&R," Jessen said. "She never got to do it."

Jessen, 54, grew up on military bases as a child and enlisted in the Air Force in 1986 before going to Officer Training School in 2001. She volunteered for Afghanistan, her first war deployment, and advised the fledgling Afghan Air Force. Her job was helping procure helicopter parts for Afghan pilots.

Before the massacre, known as a "green on blue attack," Jessen spent time in spider-filled air raid bunkers during mortar attacks and rode white-knuckled in convoys hoping not to be ambushed or blown up by a roadside bomb. But Brown's death was a reminder that even on a heavily-fortified air base, she was vulnerable. Jessen always wore a 9 mm semi-automatic pistol on her belt, but after the attack, she also kept the M-4 handy. She was always accompanied by an armed member of the NATO coalition teamed with U.S. forces when working with Afghans.

Jessen said the massacre was incomprehensible and made trust between the Americans and Afghans difficult. Gul drank tea and played chess with one of the men he killed the next day. Despite cultural differences that led many Afghan men to see Western women as second-class citizens or sex objects, Jessen said many she worked with loved their country and hated the Taliban.

She empathized with the plight of Afghans working with Americans. By cooperating, they risked death and knew they might someday be abandoned by the U.S.

"It's a very dysfunctional relationship," she said. "After the shooting, we found out you don't know what's in somebody's head and heart."

'Corruption is the Achilles heel of that country'

Afghans cooperating with the Americans were seen as collaborators by the Taliban. John A. Ferguson witnessed an example of that while entering a village in the Sarobi District outside Kabul in 2009 while a Marine chief warrant officer. The example was a large pool of blood on the trail from a beheaded tribal elder.

"The Taliban knew we were coming because we were walking up the valley," said Ferguson, a Frederick County resident who served in Afghanistan in 2008-09. "They just cut his head off and they kept on going."

Ferguson said the fighting was often cyclical. In the winter, the Taliban withdrew into Pakistan. They returned in the spring, which was known as "the fighting season."

The main mission of Ferguson, who enlisted in 1990 and also served two tours in Iraq, was training Afghans on operating aging Russian tanks. They remained after the defeated Russian military withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989.

The work could be frustrating due to endemic corruption and ethnic discrimination. Ethnic minorities had to pay to be promoted and the military would skim ammunition, equipment, food and supplies. For example, when Ferguson ordered 200 quality uniforms for the Afghans he worked with, 70 cheap ones were delivered.

"Everybody along the way has got to get their cut. It's mind boggling," said Ferguson, who grew up in Connecticut. "Corruption is the Achilles heel of that country."

Corruption included favoritism in which opium fields got eradicated. Heroin profits helped fund the Taliban, but Ferguson, who helped oversee the burning of opium fields, was sympathetic to the dirt-poor farmers who grew poppies. He understood why they resented eradication.

"They didn't know the end result: the person that's dying of an overdose on a street corner in America and they didn't care," he said. "They were just trying to put food on the table."

'It's far more complicated there than I realized'

Brian White investigated how heroin helps fuel the war while working in Afghanistan in 2012 as a contractor for Booz Allen Hamilton, an engineering and information technology company. White, a 37-year-old Frederick County resident who grew up in Norfolk, traveled around the country working with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration as part of the Afghan Finance Threat Cell.

His job was "non-lethal targeting" — trying to prevent heroin-related money laundering done on behalf of the Taliban. Islamic money transfers are known as hawalas.

White was involved in investigations leading to the owners of two international financial exchange companies being sanctioned by the U.S. and United Nations in 2012. A Treasury Department news release said they donated "tens of thousands of dollars" to the Taliban. White, who emphasized he only played a small part in the investigation, said heroin traffickers benefit from an unstable Afghanistan.

"What we really are seeing is what I would refer to as narco-terrorism," said White, a husband and father of two who now works as a financial consultant and is an Army National Guard member in the District of Columbia. "It's far more complicated there than I realized before going over there."

White said a generation of girls in Kabul got to be educated thanks to the American occupation and some Afghans are grateful to the Americans for toppling the Taliban. But he said their primary allegiance is tribal due to the weak Afghan government which can't protect citizens living outside Kabul

"So you have warlords and you have a stronger allegiance to one's own tribe or one's own family," he said. "They're so focused individually on trying to survive. They're not worried about larger global strategies."

'Nation-building has never been successful'

Kent, a 34-year-old husband and father of two, survived his deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq without any physical wounds. He deals with the psychological scars through marathon running, transcendental meditation and speaking at schools.

Kent, vice president of Signet Marketing, a family-owned printing company in Winchester, credits strong family ties for helping him deal with combat trauma. He said about 20 of the approximately 500 Marines from his battalion who deployed in 2009 have committed suicide.

While horrific, Kent said combat and the Marines' mission provided a sense of camaraderie, duty and purpose lacking in the civilian world. Although war is traumatic, Kent said people need to understand combat veterans aren't "ticking time bombs" and they aren't going to snap.

Kent doesn't regret his time in Afghanistan, but acknowledges the Catch-22 insanity of the Marines' mission. They often wondered why tanks weren't in front of them on patrol. They were told tanks would ruin the element of surprise, but they knew the Taliban were watching and were aware the minute they left the outpost. The territory Kent's comrades paid for with their blood was eventually abandoned.

Kent supports President Biden's decision to withdraw and said it should have been done after the killing of 9/11 mastermind Osama Bin Laden in 2011 or earlier. He noted Americans not yet born on 9/11 have fought and died in the war.

"If a country is not capable of fighting their own wars and dealing with their own people then why are we there dealing with it for them?" Kent wondered. "We should have been gone a long time ago."

The 52-year-old Ferguson, a father of two who retired from the Marines in 2010, teaches a yoga class for veterans with PTSD. He supported the invasion in response to 9/11. But with the U.S. military now forecasting the Afghan government may fall to the Taliban within six months of the withdrawal — "Civil war is certainly a path that can be visualized," Gen. Austin S. Miller, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, told the New York Times Tuesday — Ferguson wonders if the war was worth it.

"My genuine hope is that country is going to unite and keep itself going the way the Afghan people want it to go," he said. "They're going to have to decide their own fate."

Jessen, a mother of two who does yoga with Ferguson, said she thought the war was a mistake, but volunteered to serve in Afghanistan. She hoped it would prevent her now 16-year-old son from having to fight there someday. Now, she wonders if the billions spent making war would have been better spent on educating Afghans and building up the nation's infrastructure.

"Nation-building has never been successful," she said. "You can't topple a government and not think you're going to be there for the next 100 years."