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4-31st Infantry at the Joint Readiness Training Center

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FORT POLK, La. -- Just seven months ago, Capt. Glenn Kozelka and his men from the Army's 10th Mountain Division fought al Qaeda terrorists in the mountains of Afghanistan. But last week, as he commanded a furious mock assault on the U.S. military's most sophisticated urban training ground, he began to understand why Army doctrine describes city fighting as "primordial combat." He had lost an entire squad to mortar fire, a sniper atop an adjacent building was picking off his soldiers in the street one by one, and a rocket-propelled grenade had just slammed into the next room, killing or wounding everyone inside. "We call it three-dimensional warfare," Kozelka said early one morning. "You can be shot from all around."

Kozelka, a 29-year-old from LaCrosse, Wis., said his men are ready for combat in Iraq after a year in which they went from their home base at Fort Drum, N.Y., to Uzbekistan and then to Afghanistan for a sweep of the eastern mountains there in March, the last major ground engagement of the Afghan war and the first involving large numbers of U.S. forces. He and his men arrived at Fort Polk's Joint Readiness Training Center in early October with two battalions -- about 1,000 troops -- from the 10th Mountain Division's 2nd Brigade for a regular three-week training rotation that began with live-fire exercises and ended last week with a 10-day force-on-force war.

The simulated combat, which costs more than \$1 million a day to wage, involves what is probably the world's most sophisticated game of laser tag against an opposing force, fought over a battlefield in central Louisiana, 15 miles long and 10 miles wide, part of which consists of 28 buildings arrayed across the equivalent of three city blocks. The Army takes great pains to simulate the strain of actual combat. Every soldier wears a laser sensor that beeps when he or she is shot. Once the sensor sounds, a soldier opens an envelope containing a card that describes how badly he or she is hurt. Medical personnel must evacuate wounded soldiers from the battlefield in time to treat their wounds. Soldiers who die are taken to a holding area, where they are made to do manual labor to underscore the point that dying is never fun.



The 2nd Brigade's combat training began with five days of operations against an insurgent force like al Qaeda, switched to a defensive operation against a more conventional invading force with tanks and other armored fighting vehicles, and ended with a night assault on the urban battleground. A battle plan developed by brigade commander Col. Kevin Wilkerson, 43, who has fought in Grenada and Afghanistan, called for Kozelka's company to execute the all-important breach of the perimeter defenses. This would come after Kozelka's company and five others had traveled nearly 10 miles by truck through enemy country and then marched through two miles of swamp and heavy woods.

Almost nothing went as planned. The enemy compromised the battalion's radio network, and an enemy armored vehicle machine-gunned the convoy and killed two squads of engineers who were supposed to help Kozelka's men cut through the concertina wire around their assault point,

Building 13, which they had planned to storm and use as a company command post. By the time Kozelka made it inside, after 2 a.m., his forces had fallen prey to all the hazards of city combat -- an unseen enemy, fire from guns high in buildings, and maximum confusion. "Hey, captain, I've got six personnel in first platoon left alive," Spec. Matt Floyd, a radio operator, yelled at Kozelka after the rocket-propelled grenade attack on their position. "Okay, keep 'em alive," Kozelka yelled back.

Commanding from a room littered with casualties, Kozelka was busy calling in suppressive fire on the next building over and warning soldiers over the radio of a machine gun on the roof of another building across the street. "It's lighting us up," he said. After a few hours of continuous combat, Kozelka and the remnants of his company captured the post office building across the street. During a lull, Kozelka relaxed and started chatting with an observer. Then, an OPFOR soldier burst through the door and shot him. A half hour later, commanders called a halt to the exercise.

"This battlefield throws everything at you all at once," Wilkerson said, mingling with Kozelka and other soldiers as the smoke cleared. "Now, you've done another scrimmage, you've learned how to fight this war, and you'll do it better when there's live bullets."

Looking Back

This is the tenth in our series on the regiment's Bataan-era history. Our September issue described the regiment's counterattack at Abucay Hacienda. As we pick up the story, the counterattack collapses.

For a week, US and Philippine Scout troops had been attacking along jungle trails up the eastern side of the Bataan Peninsula. While the Japanese had air support every day and artillery whenever they wanted it, the US had neither. On the evening of January 20, the weary troops of the 31st (U.S.) and 45th (Philippine Scout) Infantry were ordered to break off the attack and dig in. Japanese snipers had infiltrated behind the attacking regiments and an entire Japanese division had begun moving across the Balantay River. The main blow fell against the 31st Infantry's 1st Battalion at 10 AM on January 21, 1942. As the battalion gave ground under steady pressure, a gap developed between the 31st and 45th Infantry. Japanese troops poured through and worked their way around the 1st Battalion's left flank all day long. After dark, the 1st Battalion began withdrawing, company-by-company, down a narrow jungle trail traversing a steep-sided ravine behind and parallel to the regiment's line. Once the 1st Battalion passed behind it, the 3d Battalion began withdrawing, leaving K Company in place to cover its departure. Soon after L Company withdrew, around 11:30 PM, Japanese troops cut the trail to K Company's east, causing Captain Coral Talbot to organize a hasty horseshoe-shaped defensive position around the trail junction.

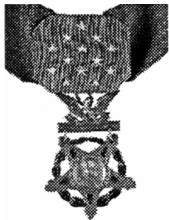


Knowing his company was in danger of becoming surrounded, Talbot selected a third of his men to form a detachment left in contact under Lieutenant James I. Mallette. The men were posted to cover trails entering the company's perimeter and received orders to intensify their fire to make it appear that a full company was still in place, giving their comrades a chance to make it to safety down the ravine to their rear. When Captain Talbot ordered that the wounded be evacuated with the first platoon to depart, PFC Richard F. Gomes, a BAR gunner

wounded in the hip and both legs, refused evacuation, arguing that he would only slow down his comrades trying to escape down the steep trail. As the main body departed under increasingly heavy fire, PFC Gomes asked Private Clifford H. Mygrant, to collect all the BAR ammunition he

could and place it near Gomes' position. Superior numbers of Japanese troops had crawled dangerously close to K Company's thinly held line and would likely overrun it unless sustained firepower could hold them back long enough for the remaining detachment to escape. The company's only remaining mortar had no ammunition left and the regiment's supporting artillery battalion had already been forced to displace out of range. Even if he had artillery available, Mallette had no working radio to call for or adjust fire.

The situation grew increasingly desperate as the number of men left to hold the company's sector shrank. Knowing he was sacrificing his life, PFC Gomes volunteered to stay behind alone to cover the detachment's withdrawal. With the Japanese closing in, Lieutenant Mallette and Private Mygrant stayed with him as long as they could but could not persuade Gomes to allow them to help him reach safety. From his position of advantage overlooking the four-way trail junction, Gomes kept up a steady rate of fire, traversing his automatic weapon to keep fire on each trail as the last of his comrades departed. Given his wounds, such exertions must have been excruciatingly painful. Captain Ralph E. Hibbs, the 3d Battalion's Surgeon, heard a lone gun still firing up on the ridge as he loaded the last of the wounded survivors into a makeshift ambulance in the valley below. Without PFC Gomes' selfless act of courage and self-sacrifice, it is doubtful that any of his comrades in the last detachment could have escaped. Soon after Lieutenant Mallette and Private Mygrant departed Gomes' position, a long burst of fire from Gomes' weapon was answered by exploding hand grenades and intense rifle and machinegun fire as Japanese troops surged into the trail junction from three directions at once. Richard Felix Gomes, the only son of a Portuguese immigrant family from the Azores, had sacrificed his life.



The next day, Sergeant Morris F. Lewis, K Company's Mess Sergeant, heard Captain Talbott telling Colonel Steel and Lieutenant Colonel Brady that Gomes should receive the Medal of Honor. Both colonels agreed and an award citation was drafted by Talbott that day. On the roster Lieutenant Colonel Brady and Major Marshall Hurt compiled during their captivity at Cabanatuan, is an annotation next to Gomes' name, "*M.H. recommended. After being wounded, and withdrawal of company ordered, told Mygrant to leave him and he would cover withdrawal of Co. Killed a few moments later while firing his AR rapidly.*" Gomes' Medal of Honor recommendation never left General Douglas MacArthur's Headquarters on Corregidor where it would have had to be forwarded by submarine to the US for approval. Gomes was instead awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously in February 1942, indicating that MacArthur downgraded the award, as he did with most Medal of Honor recommendations submitted in his area of responsibility throughout the war. General orders awarding Gomes the Distinguished Service Cross left Corregidor by submarine in a box of records sent back to the War Department in February 1942. Ironically, the medal was presented to Gomes' mother at Ft MacArthur, California, a post named after Douglas MacArthur's father who won the Medal of Honor during the Civil War. Equally ironic, Douglas MacArthur was himself awarded the Medal of Honor when he left the Philippines on a PT boat, leaving his troops to their fate.

Private Patrick Davie, now the only survivor of the K Company detachment left in contact, has testified to Gomes' heroic deed in writing. Clifford Mygrant died in captivity. Lieutenant Colonel Jasper Brady and Major Marshall Hurt also died in captivity, as did all of K Company's leaders above the grade of sergeant. Morris Lewis is still living, but was in the rear at the time of the action and has no personal knowledge of the event other than the conversation he overheard between Captain Talbott and his seniors. There is no doubt that Gomes' conscious self-sacrifice was sufficient to earn him the Medal of Honor.

When I began research to write the regiment's history in 1997, Richard Gordon kindly provided me a copy of the roster Jasper Brady and Marshall Hurt so painstakingly compiled with the help of other surviving members of the regiment's chain of command at Cabanatuan POW Camp in 1942. They risked their lives to do that, carefully recording the names, ranks, service numbers, hometowns, next of kin, dates and circumstances of death, burial locations, and pending awards, promotions, or disciplinary actions for nearly every man who served with the regiment during the war. (The roster was found at Cabanatuan in 1945 after its liberation). While there are a few understandable gaps in a record compiled from memory by prisoners of war, the painstaking detail shows that Lieutenant Colonel Brady took his responsibility as a commander seriously and intended to pursue unfinished business when the war ended. Since neither he nor any other member of Gomes' chain of command survived the war, I felt compelled by what I had found to take up that part of Brady's unfinished task. Through Senators Boxer and Feinstein of California, and with the untiring help of Mrs. Adrienne Haaland, Richard Gomes' niece, we are trying to get Gomes' Distinguished Service Cross upgraded to the Medal of Honor. Our first attempt through a Congressman from Gomes' home district failed two years ago but we are trying again, taking advantage of legislation directing a review of all World War II Distinguished Service Cross recommendations for Hispanic and Jewish service members. Since Gomes was Portuguese and would have experienced the same prejudice as a Hispanic soldier, he fits the profile the legislation is intended to address. This last try will need lots of support. Please write to Senators Boxer and Feinstein to express your support and feel free to enclose this description of the action. Without Congressional backing, a hero of our regiment will remain unjustly slighted.

There were many other acts of heroism that day as individuals shunned danger to accomplish a difficult mission under the worst of conditions. Private Walter J. Cox, a medic with I Company earned the Silver Star for dashing across a fire swept trail to come to the rescue of several L Company men who had been hit. He pulled one man to safety and was shot while rescuing a second. Lieutenant Dean K. Wood of I Company received the Silver Star for exposing his position and drawing Japanese fire while Cox performed his rescue. When Cox went down, Wood dashed across the trail, firing as he charged. He was hit while helping Cox get the second man to safety. His Silver Star was subsequently upgraded to a Distinguished Service Cross. Two other 3d Battalion medics, PFC Edward J. Golkas and Private William O. Mann, were killed that day trying to help wounded comrades. Mann, wounded during his first foray to rescue a wounded man, was killed during a second rescue attempt, earning him the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously.

At night, Japanese snipers infiltrated through gaps in the line and climbed trees to await their quarry. Shortly after daybreak on January 23, a sniper's bullet found its victim in C Company. Corporal Charles Peterson lay sprawled in the dirt, quivering, with blood oozing from his temple. In a moment he was still. "Oh God, he's dead, my buddy's dead," sobbed PFC Andy Nickerson as he stood staring at Peterson's lifeless face. "Someone get Nickerson back in his hole," yelled Sergeant Abraham, the company supply sergeant. Staff Sergeant Gerald Farnham quickly complied, knocking Nickerson for a loop, just as another shot rang out. No one was hit this time. Lieutenant Ralph Simmons ordered Private John Novak to find the shooter. The fire could only have come from a cluster of three tall mango trees, so the hunt was easy. When Simmons' patrol opened fire, the sniper fell quickly, dangling from a rope holding him to the tree. Men kept shooting long after he was dead but Nickerson wasn't satisfied and asked Simmons to allow him to blow the man's head off. Private Walter Southard, disgusted at the request, shouted, "What the

hell's the matter with you, Nick, you getting' bloodthirsty?" Go to hell, go straight to hell!" sobbed the grieving trooper as he took aim at the dead sniper.¹

Japanese bombers soon returned, seriously wounding Corporal Charles Adams and killing Private Jose Campos. When the planes departed, "photo Joe", a reconnaissance plane, watched for signs of another target. C Company lay pinned down all day long for fear they would bring on another air or artillery attack. In the heat the bodies of the dead gave off a foul odor from which there was no escape. To this day, C Company's survivors refer to the position as "Dead Man's Hill."

Around noon, Captain John Pray of G Company became impatient for news of what was happening. As part of the 2d Battalion, he was supposed to exploit any success gained by the 3d Battalion's attack, but he did not know the 3d Battalion's plan or where it was. He decided to act on his own initiative. Over the next five hours, he managed to move his company, now down to 55 men, around the mangrove cluster where I and L Companies had been held up. Suddenly, the company was engulfed in a steady stream of rifle and machinegun fire. Two men were killed and eight were wounded. G Company was now little more than a platoon.

By nightfall, the 31st and 45th Infantry Regiments had pulled back almost to the line from which they began their counterattack five days earlier. The troops were exhausted. They had received little food or water, suffered heavy casualties, and got little sleep because Japanese infantry tended to be active at night and Japanese bombers and artillery were active by day. Against that backdrop, a Japanese infantry regiment struggled up Mount Natib in the center of the line and descended into the rear of the II Corps' line. It was hard for the Americans and Filipinos to recognize, but the Japanese were also running out of steam.

¹ LT Ralph C. Simmons (Spartanburg, SC), Staff Sergeant Gerald C Farnham (Little Valley, NY), Corporal Charles K. Adams (Mondovi, WI), and Private John Novak (home town unknown) died in captivity at Cabanatuan. PFC Andrew E. Nickerson (home town unknown) died in captivity at Camp O'Donnell.