

The raid on Camp Bastion was a bloody first for some Marine aviators
Blake Stilwell - We Are The Mighty (WATM)

On Sept. 14, 2012, 15 heavily armed Taliban fighters disguised in U.S. Army uniforms infiltrated Camp Bastion, a large Marine Corps and British forces base and Afghan National Army training complex. Camp Bastion could accommodate some 30,000 people, so when the Taliban split into three teams to wreak havoc on the base's interior, things could have gone very badly for the Marines.

The Camp Bastion infiltrators made it all the way to the flight line, where their coordinated, complex attack began by targeting the Marines' Harrier aircraft. It would be the single biggest loss of American air-power since the Vietnam War. It would also be the first time that the maintainers and pilots of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 211 (VMA-211) operated as riflemen since World War II.



We Are The Mighty (WATM) A video released later showed the attackers dressed for the assault.

The fighting began at 10pm local time with one Taliban team engaging the flight line personnel, another targeting the refueling area, and a third focusing on destroying aircraft using explosives and RPGs. It was an aircraft explosion that signaled the start of the attack.

Within minutes, six Harriers were burning on the tarmac, the Marine helicopter area was surrounded by fires, and the cryogenics and fuel pit areas were on fire as small arms crackled and tracers lit up the night sky. The Taliban brought everything from hand grenades to heavy machine guns and caught the Marines completely off guard.



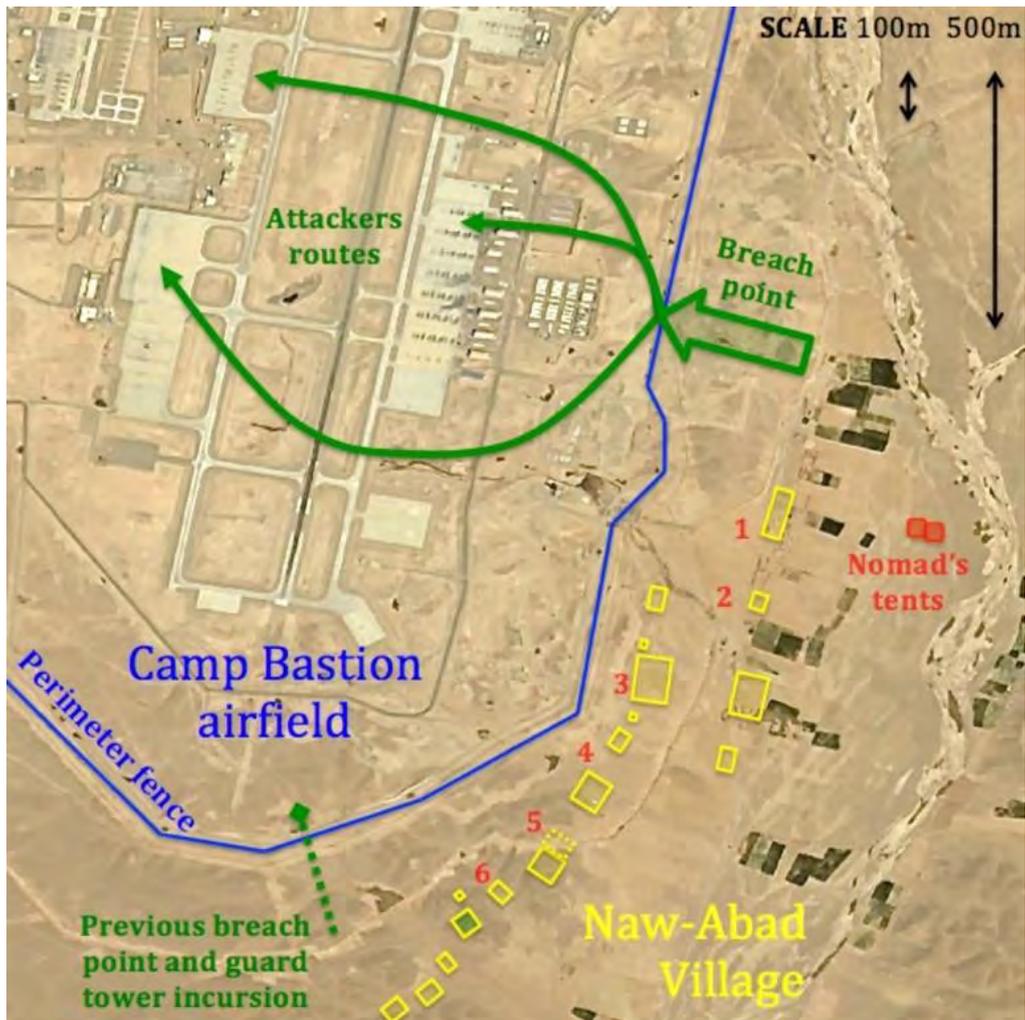
We Are The Mighty (WATM) Lt. Col. Christopher Raible's memorial.

Marines scrambled to protective barriers as RPGs exploded around the flight line. They initially believed it was an attack of opportunity from outside the base — a random, lucky hit from rockets or mortars.

But after ten explosions, one every ten seconds, it was clear that this was more than a few lucky shots. The Troops in Contact alarm began to sound. They called in the British quick reaction force, but they were on the other side of the base and the Marines would have to hold their own until they arrived.

The Marines quickly moved to don their flak jackets and retrieve their rifles. The Taliban weren't going to stop at the aircraft. They fired RPGs at the building that housed Marine workstations while another hit a building that contained the medical section.

An anti-personnel RPG killed the commander of VMA-211, Lt. Col. Christopher Raible, before he could organize a defense. Shrapnel from one of the RPGs lodged in his neck as he was leading a crew full of mechanics and maintainers out into the night as a rifle unit.



We Are The Mighty (WATM) Map of the Camp Bastion assault.

By this time, every Marine was operating as a rifleman. Weapons and ammo were doled out to anyone without one and Marines began taking up their fields of fire. The air wing was a total, confusing mess as the fuel bladders blew up, temporarily turning the night into day.

A Huey aircraft commander and two enlisted Marines were the ones who brought the weapons to the flight line area. They went to check on the entry control point and began to take fire from the cryogenics area. A Huey crew chief manned an M240 to suppress the enemy fire.

At the same time, Marines were struggling to get remaining aircraft in the air to provide close-air support. All they could muster was two Hueys and a Cobra, but the Marines managed to get them ready to fly in the midst of the confusing, intense attack.

Thick smoke, burning ordnance, and enemy fire loomed as flight line Marines took up defensive positions to cover the helicopters' takeoff.



We Are The Mighty (WATM) One of the Harrier jets destroyed in the raid.

When the helicopters were airborne, things changed quickly on the ground. They told the JTAC to concentrate fire toward the enemy position in the cryogenics facility.

When the southern wall of that building lit up with tracers, the AH-1 Cobra helicopter peppered the building with 20mm rounds and UH-1V Venom Hueys tore through it with 300 .50-cal rounds while a gunner on the ground hit it with 600 rounds from a GAU-17.

After the aerial hit, the British quick reaction force arrived and cleared out the infiltrating Taliban in the cryogenics facility with 40mm grenade launchers. That left four Taliban hiding in the T-walls near the flight line.

As Marines on the ground attempted to converge on the remaining Taliban attackers, guns from the helicopters eliminated the last of the threat.

When the smoke cleared, two Marines, Lt. Col. Raible and Sgt. Bradley Atwell, had been killed. Allied wounded numbered 17, six Harriers were completely destroyed, and another two were damaged, along with an Air Force C-130E.

Three fuel bladders and a few sunshade hangars were also destroyed. All but one of the attacking Taliban fighters were killed in action. The attack caused some [0 million](#) in damages.



We Are The Mighty (WATM) Maj. Gen. Charles M. Gurganus, left, and Maj. Gen. Gregg A. Sturdevant were forced to retire just one year after the raid. (U.S. Marine Corps)

The story doesn't end there. The Marine Corps wanted to know how 15 heavily armed Taliban fighters were able to get onto the base in the first place. It turned out the commander of Bastion, Maj. Gen. Charles Gurganus, reduced the number of Marines patrolling the base of 30,000 from 325 to 100 just one month before the attack, leaving the base [guarded by troops from Tonga](#).

He and Maj. Gen. Gregg Sturdevant were forced to retire in the days following the incident. Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. James Amos, said the two failed to accurately assess the strength and capabilities of the enemy in the area and failed to protect their troops.

Sturdevant was the Marine aviation commander of the base and was blamed for inadequate force protection measures on the flight line area that night. The two Marines who went to check the entry control point found it unmanned before they started taking fire from the cryogenics facility.

Meanwhile, the British review of the attack found that only 11 of 24 guard towers were manned that night. Both generals retired with fully pay and benefits.

Later, it would be revealed that the attackers spent months posing as poppy farmers, probing the base defenses and testing reactions from perimeter guards.

They were able to map out the base, its defenses, its fuel farms, and the airfield. They were even trying to target Prince Harry, who was stationed on the base at that time.

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