

# OPERATION STRONG EAGLE III

## BARAWALA KALAY VALLEY

### My Experience

Jared E. Gray

Barawala Kalay valley located in Kunar province, northeast Afghanistan hadn't had any Americans in it since 2005. The last group to try to clear and keep a hold over this valley was a group of Navy Seals; they were not able to accomplish that.

This valley is the biggest training ground for Taliban fighters that come across the Pakistan border. A man known as "QZR" is the highest Taliban leader for all of Kunar province and more. We were tasked to take this man out and clear the whole valley.

On March 29<sup>th</sup>, 2011 our platoon, 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon of the headquarters company of 2-327<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment, first Brigade, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne division led the assault on Barawala Kalay valley. We were the main effort for this brigade size operation. Later on in this operation General Petraeus deemed this operation the "main effort for Afghanistan". I was the 2<sup>nd</sup> to lead guy in the assault of this valley for this six day operation, the 1<sup>st</sup> being my team leader Specialist Wilson. Jokingly I asked him how it felt to be the leader for the main effort of Afghanistan; the #1 man in Afghanistan. 1<sup>st</sup> platoon followed us and then other platoons set up on top of ridgelines along the valley to overwatch for us.

At approximately 0100 our Chinook touched down on top of a ridge overlooking the valley, it was a very steep and slippery walk down that ridge. We got to the bottom and started clearing Afghan house complexes one at a time. We found tons of ammo and weapons hidden in caches around these houses. We'd find more and more as we cleared this valley. This was the easy part of the mission; the next part was a nightmare.

Our platoon was split in half, half of us were at a house overlooking a portion of the valley and I was in the other half; we were walking through a very steep and narrow draw. All of a sudden we started getting shot at from 4 different directions; we had walked into an ambush!! We were taking very accurate fire; immediately I returned fire with my SAW, and sought cover. RPGs were hitting everywhere around us. I was shooting at every single enemy muzzle flash I saw, my squad leader Sergeant Arechaga, a very hardcore short Puerto Rican man, was moving towards my position to get to cover as well, he was hit with a round at the bottom of the draw, my team leader ran down to start working on him. I just kept firing at what I could to keep the enemy suppressed so no one else would get hit. I had to keep suppressing so the guys in the open could stay safe, but also I had to watch my ammo to make sure I didn't run out. The other team leader in my squad was there with my downed squad leader and took a round in the arm. Our medic was on the way to keep my squad leader from bleeding to death.

The ANA (Afghan National Army) guys were with us and they helped us out some, one of them was on my side shooting a 240(a heavy machine). On my other side was a big husky Dominican guy named Ramon, who is in my squad. Between the noise the blast from his rifle made, the noise of my SAW, the ANA soldiers' 240 and the RPGs landing close by, I was deaf. When people would talk to me it sounded like what it sounds like when you talk under water. At some point I saw a Taliban fighter walk right out in the open, look directly at me, raise his weapon and fire off a ton of rounds. This guy was extremely close; I could make out the details on his face. He was no more than 50 meters away.

I should have been dead. The whole time I had been quoting Psalms 91 out loud and I know that's what kept me alive. Immediately I returned fire on that man and killed him.

No one had stopped firing, Guys in our platoon were launching off LAW's (a small shoulder fired missile) and shooting out grenades with the 203's (grenade launcher) mounted on their M-4's. We weren't the only ones in contact; the whole valley was, while we were taking casualties so were other platoons. The Taliban had a very well set up attack. The Taliban fighters in Kunar province have always been known as the most skilled over all of Afghanistan. Back when I first got to this country on the plane ride over here when we'd tell people that were on their way home that we were headed to Kunar they'd just get quiet and say that Kunar was the worst part of Afghanistan and how they were glad not to be us, I soon found out why.

When my squad leader was down our medic came over (Doc Linhcog) and started working on him, he took a round to the chest, the plate carrier didn't stop it. The round had bounced around inside him and he died minutes later. They both got medevaced out along with a dead ANA soldier that rolled down the hill in front me, along with other casualties.

My squad leader, Sergeant Arechaga died on the bird in route back to the base.

There was quite a few more medevac birds picking up other platoon's casualties. One landed not far from us on a terrace. It landed at an angle and an ANA soldier went on the wrong side of the bird where the rotor was really close to the ground and ended up chopping off half of his head. A captain from another platoon went out to grab him and throw him on the bird and he too was decapitated because he stood up instead of staying low to the ground.

We had an action news man with the other part of our platoon; he told us that this has been the worst firefight he's been in for all of his 30 years of filming! I took a look at what they've shown on the news on ABC and a lot of the contact they show is from the second day, which wasn't bad at all because we had great cover inside a house and most of the enemy shots were just harassing fire. It was nothing like the first day.

For the rest of this mission we kept pushing through and clearing houses. We kept finding more and more weapons and ammo. The last walk to our HLZ (helicopter landing zone) was extremely tough. We walked down a very steep and long rocky hill; no... actually I would say it was more like a cliff! Then crossed a stream and walked up a lot of terraces until we finally reached our HLZ. Before we made this long trek I had been hit in the leg by a 2 ft wide boulder that had been kicked loose and had rolled down a hill above where I was. So this last walk was a killer, not to

mention I was walking around with 120 pounds of gear on me, no exaggeration. You can definitely accomplish a lot more than your body tells you if you really push yourself.

Eventually a Ch-47(Chinook) picked us up at our HLZ and we made it back to the base, I was so thankful to be alive. I know it was God's protection over us that kept more people from dying. The way that ambush was set up everyone in that draw that we walked through on the first day should have been dead. Only three died, which is really sad but I think it was just their time to go. I really miss my squad leader, Sergeant Arechaga. He was very well connected with me and the other guys in my squad. He'd come in my room from time to time and just check in on me to see how I was. He had a thick Hispanic accent, he'd ask me "Aye, oww ya doyn man" He looked out for us and made sure other squad leaders wouldn't screw us over. He was also very "highspeed" being an Army Ranger and just his overall demeanor.

This whole operation turned out to be an enormous success for us. The death toll of the Taliban is 120 plus. We cleared the whole valley of Barawala Kalay, the raw Taliban training ground, where Taliban fighters are born and made, a valley where no one has been in for six years. If you look up the history of Afghanistan, Alexander the Great went through and conquered this country except for Kunar province and especially Barawala Kalay valley and others like it. He didn't conquer it until he married an Afghan woman from this province; this stopped the Afghan fighters from trying to kill him.

This is just what our Captain told us, I'll still have to look it up myself.

I think the only reason we accomplished this was with very careful planning and because God was on our side. There were so many things that could have easily gone wrong and none us would have made it out alive. I definitely think I have grown through this experience and am a different person now.

I just want to conclude by saying that the only reason I am still alive through all of this is because God literally blocked bullets from hitting me and suppressed all the RPG blasts around me. I was quoting Psalms 91 and I now know how powerful that book is.

All the glory from this belongs to God.

Jared. E. Gray

April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Psalm 91 (KJV)**

<sup>1</sup>He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

<sup>2</sup>I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.

<sup>3</sup>Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome

pestilence.

<sup>4</sup>He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

<sup>5</sup>Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day;

<sup>6</sup>Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.

<sup>7</sup>A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.

<sup>8</sup>Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.

<sup>9</sup>Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation;

<sup>10</sup>There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

<sup>11</sup>For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.

<sup>12</sup>They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.

<sup>13</sup>Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.

<sup>14</sup>Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name.

<sup>15</sup>He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him.

<sup>16</sup>With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.