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## Farewell to Korengal

By Sebastian Junger

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LAST week the United States military pulled out of the Korengal Valley in eastern Afghanistan. Six miles long, sparsely populated and of dubious strategic value, the Korengal was the scene of some of the most relentless fighting of the Afghan war. American forces have been there in one form or another since the summer of 2005, when Taliban fighters cornered a four-man Navy Seal team on a nearby mountain and killed three of them. They then shot down a Chinook helicopter with 16 commandos on board. All of them died.



For much of 2007 and 2008, I was an embedded reporter with a platoon of airborne infantry at a remote outpost called Restrepo, which was attacked up to four times a day. Many soldiers had creases in their uniforms from bullets that had brushed them. In one firefight a bullet hit a sandbag six inches from my head.

The psychological pressure was enormous. “I’ve only been here for four months and I can’t believe how messed up I am,” one soldier told me. “I went to the counselor and he asked if I smoked cigarettes and I told him no and he said, ‘Well, you may want to think about starting.’”

There were around 20 men at Restrepo — part of a 150-member unit called Battle Company of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team — and the possibility of getting overrun by the enemy was openly discussed. The men slept next to their guns and sometimes with their boots on. More than 40 American soldiers have died in the Korengal Valley.

Now, the military has retreated, saying that the valley is too isolated and that the American presence was possibly pushing the locals to side with the Taliban. This raises some questions: If the Korengal was really worth fighting for, why would we ever pull out? Or, conversely, why did we go there in the first place? Like the soldiers at Restrepo, I was looking at the war through a tiny keyhole, and have no way to answer such overarching questions. But I do know that several important points must be acknowledged.

First, a significant proportion of enemy fighters in the Korengal were foreigners who had come to Afghanistan to wage jihad. There were Pakistani cellphone numbers painted on rocks around the valley as a recruiting tool for potential volunteers; there were Arabic graffiti urging local men to join the fight. These foreigners presumably would have fought the Americans wherever they found them; if we had avoided the Korengal they would simply have shifted the battle elsewhere. (To a better place? A worse one? I doubt even the Taliban could say.)

Furthermore, I was told that one of the reasons for establishing a base in the Korengal was to prevent militants from using the valley to stage attacks on the vastly more important Pech River Valley, immediately to the north. The Pech was a major corridor for moving men and supplies, and after American bases were established in the Korengal, attacks at Pech dropped off significantly. The Korengal may not have been important per se, but arguably the Pech was, and there may have been no way to strategically separate the two.

War is a complex endeavor that has no predictable outcome: ill-equipped militias can defeat modern armies, huge battles can hinge on luck or bad weather. Expecting commanders to make strategically correct decisions every time is not a realistic criterion for evaluating the war.

Some 30,000 British soldiers were killed and wounded in the folly that became known as the Battle of Dunkirk, and yet the Allies went on to win the war. There is no way to know how World War II would have unfolded without Dunkirk. And there is no way to know what would have happened in Kunar Province — or in Afghanistan as a whole — had several hundred local and foreign fighters not been tied up in the Korengal by American forces.

That said, the emotional repercussions of the pullout cannot be discounted. One of the young men I was with at Restrepo is now in a unit that is about to deploy to the Chowkay Valley, immediately to the south. Enemy fighters would come up the Chowkay and then into the Korengal to attack the American positions. Having fought for over a year and nearly lost his life in a battle now deemed pointless, this young man seems unlikely to throw himself into the fight in the Chowkay with the same determination.

I'm a civilian, though — not a soldier — and I may be entirely wrong. The men at Restrepo seemed to make “sense” of combat in a completely personal way. They were not interested in the rest of the war and they were not much concerned with whether it was just, winnable or even well executed. For soldiers, the fight is what gives a place meaning, rather than the other way around.

In that sense, the Korengal was literally sacred ground. Every man in Battle Company lost a good friend there, and every man was nearly killed there. These soldiers did not require “strategic importance” or “national interest” to give the place value — it already had that in spades.

Outpost Restrepo was named after Juan Restrepo, a platoon medic who was killed on July 22, 2007. He was one of the best-liked men in the platoon, and his death was devastating. The men took enormous pride in the outpost they built, and they can now go online and watch videotape of it being blown up by an American demolition team. It is a painful experience for many of them, and in recent days, e-mail messages have flown back and forth as the men have tried to come to terms with it. One man became increasingly overwrought from watching the video over and over again, wondering what all the sacrifice had been for. Another soldier finally intervened.

“They might have pulled out but they can't take away what we accomplished and how hard we fought there,” he wrote to his distraught comrade. “The base is a base, we all knew it would sooner or later come down. But what Battle Company did there cannot be blown up, ripped down or burned down. Remember that.”