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Year of missions in Afghanistan for GHS grad

Imagine days of bombardment by small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

And watching a platoon sergeant get blown apart by an improvised explosive device (IED).

These experiences are just a small piece of what infantry specialist Chad Dachtler encountered while in Afghanistan.

Dachtler, a 2008 graduate of Gothenburg High School, joined the Army in June of 2010.

“I wanted to make a difference,” he said. “I also had a good friend who gave everything he had in Afghanistan and I wanted to give him some closure.”

The friend, he said, shielded others from a grenade blast and suffered a brain injury.

Dachtler’s training as a military occupational specialist in the infantry was the best possible besides what the Army’s Rangers and Special Forces receive, he said.

“We specialize in close quarters combat, capture or kill missions and basically doing all the dirty work that everyone else in the military supports,” he said.

When he first arrived in Afghanistan, Dachtler was deployed to Kandahar province where his platoon did everything from operating as a quick reaction force, which means they're ready for anything such as a detonated IED, to the capturing of a high-value target, to conducting air assault missions into Taliban-controlled areas that have never encountered a military presence.

Dachtler's biggest and most dangerous mission, he said, was to an area called "Mushan" (pronounced Moo-shawn) where he and his platoon were dropped by helicopter into enemy territory.

"Our mission was to disrupt Taliban freedom of movement and make our presence felt by engaging the enemy and eliminating any and every threat that came our way," Dachtler explained. "We had two days worth of gear even though we were planning for at least a week of being out there."

The platoon set up a patrol base in a house and began clearing houses and compounds of IEDs. Soldiers also searched for Taliban strong holds.

An IED factory was discovered in the first house they searched. Soldiers were immediately pounded by enemy fire from small arms and rocket-propelled grenades, he said.

Dachtler said members of his unit returned fire and eliminated the enemy with no casualties.

"This went on for seven days straight," he said. "Every day, we were constantly being engaged by the Taliban and returned fire."

Throughout the week, Dachtler said 26 soldiers were evacuated by helicopters because of injuries from incoming fire.

“Nobody died but we would always remember how bad everything was,” he said. “Losing that many men to injuries is a deadly combination when mixed with multiple groups of insurgents surrounding us and lack of food, water, sleep and motivation.”

After killing multiple Taliban insurgents and destroying IED factories and materials, he said the group got orders to leave.

But before evacuation, the platoon did a final sweep of compounds.

It was then that the platoon sergeant stepped on a pressure-plate IED which exploded, severing both his legs and his right hand.

Medics stabilized the sergeant and he was helicoptered out.

“The plan then was to move to a landing zone and have helicopters pick us all up and bring us to our base,” Dachtler said. “But of course that wouldn’t happen.”

Shortly before the expected arrival of the helicopters, Dachtler said they were ordered to empty food and water containers to make room for men and gear.

“Bad idea,” he said.

A sand storm prevented the helicopters from leaving base so squad members found themselves

with no water or food. They were also heavily overpacked with tons of gear.

The extra gear belonged to the injured soldiers who had earlier been evacuated.

“We rucked over seven miles just the last night to get out of Taliban-controlled territory,” he said, noting that “rucking” means carrying 100 pounds of gear and walking long distances. Over the seven days, the soldiers walked more than 30 miles without water or food supplies, without sleep and without rest.

The mission was later dubbed the “Mushon Death March.”

While in Afghanistan, he said the biggest challenge was the fear of “not making it home to your family.”

“Every day before I went out, and before everyone went out, we thought about our families,” Dachtler said.

But it wasn’t the fear of dying that was so frightening.

“It was the fear of never being able to see my wife again, my parents, my brother and the rest of my family ever again,” he said.

Dachtler, who married Emily Uken of Harvard before his deployment, is the son of Curt and Kelley Dachtler of Gothenburg.

Whether or not the United States should continue fighting in Afghanistan, Dachtler said his mind has not changed since deployment.

“We need all the support we can get for the war,” he said.

That’s because there’s more of an Al-Queda and Taliban presence than the mainstream press reveals, Dachtler said.

“We are making a difference and need to stay in Afghanistan until we crush all 100% of any Taliban or Al-Queda presence so they will never have a chance to attack our great country of America,” he said.

Dachtler said 21 infantryman from his unit were killed during his year in Afghanistan, most of whom were friends.

“Just knowing that you cannot give them their lives back no matter how many Taliban we kill and how many nights we don’t sleep wishing they were still with us is one of the worst feelings in the world,” he said. “I do not ever want to experience this again.”

As a member of the military, Dachtler said he’s grown in confidence, self discipline and has a better appreciation of “all the little things that the easy life once made me take for granted.”

While overseas, he said he appreciated his wife and family more than he could have ever expected.

“They are my life and knowing that my friends and family gave me all their support is one of the greatest feelings,” Dachtler said.

Dachtler is now stationed at Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks, AK, for 15 months.

He plans to finish college at some point and is thinking about a degree in teaching or engineering.

Coming from a small town like Gothenburg helped him in Afghanistan.

“It gives you a hell of a lot more common sense than any city kid,” Dachtler said. “Easy things like knowing how to change oil to knowing how to handle a gun.

“Those are much different for me than someone that has grown up in a big city.”

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