

# COMBAT HIGH

For one platoon, the challenge isn't surviving the war. It's surviving the peace.

BY SEBASTIAN JUNGER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM HETHERINGTON

*Few other parts of Afghanistan have rivaled the remote Korengal Valley in terms of the cost in American lives per square mile. U.S. forces finally pulled out this April, after five bloody years and more than 40 American deaths. In 2007 and 2008, journalist Sebastian Junger spent 14 months intermittently embedded with U.S. forces in the valley, patrolling with them and living among them at their main base, known simply as KOP (for Korengal Outpost), and at Outpost Restrepo nearby, named for Pfc. Juan Restrepo, an Army medic who was fatally wounded there. What the place was like and what it did to the young Americans who fought there are described vividly in this adaptation from Junger's new book, War.*

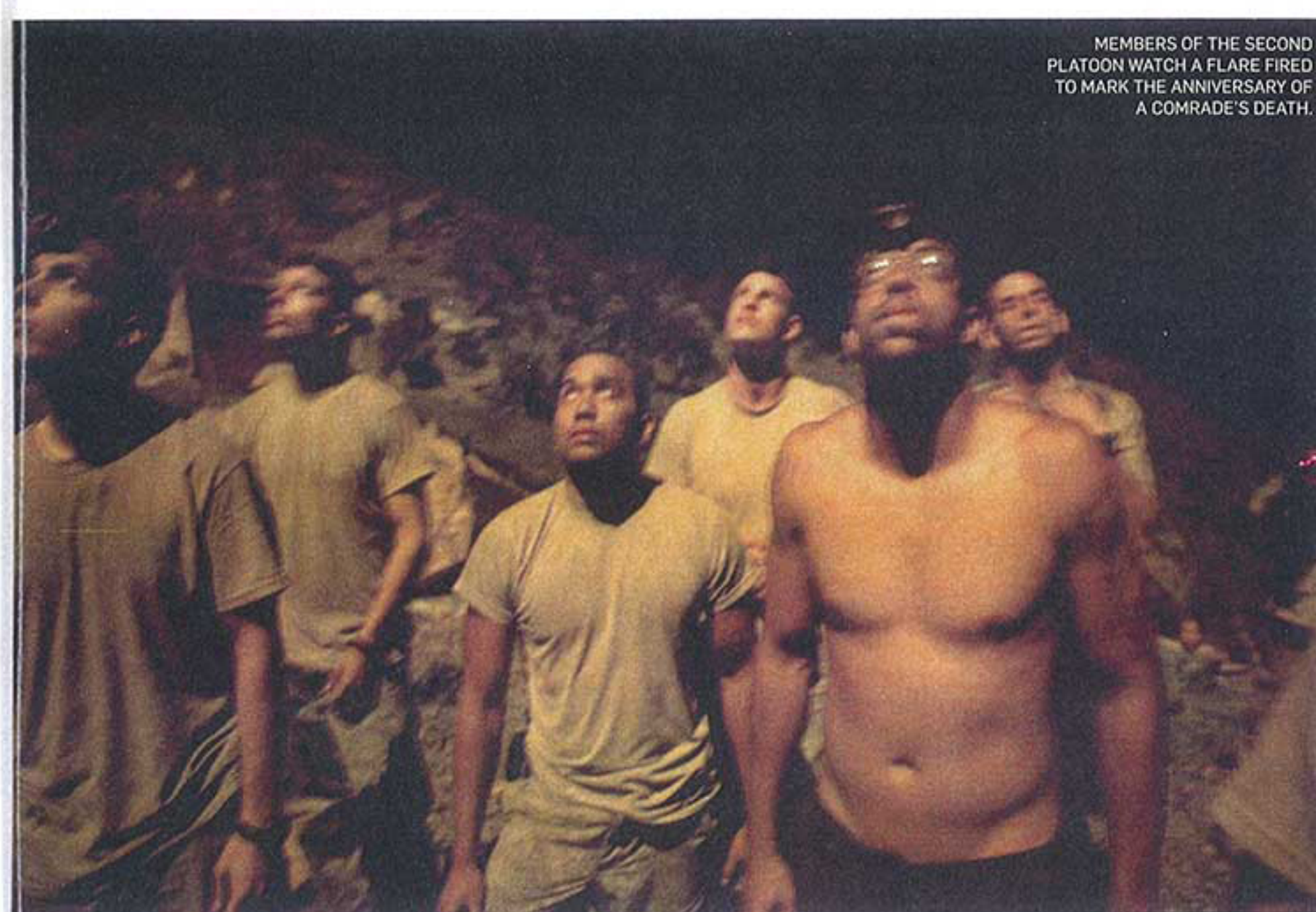
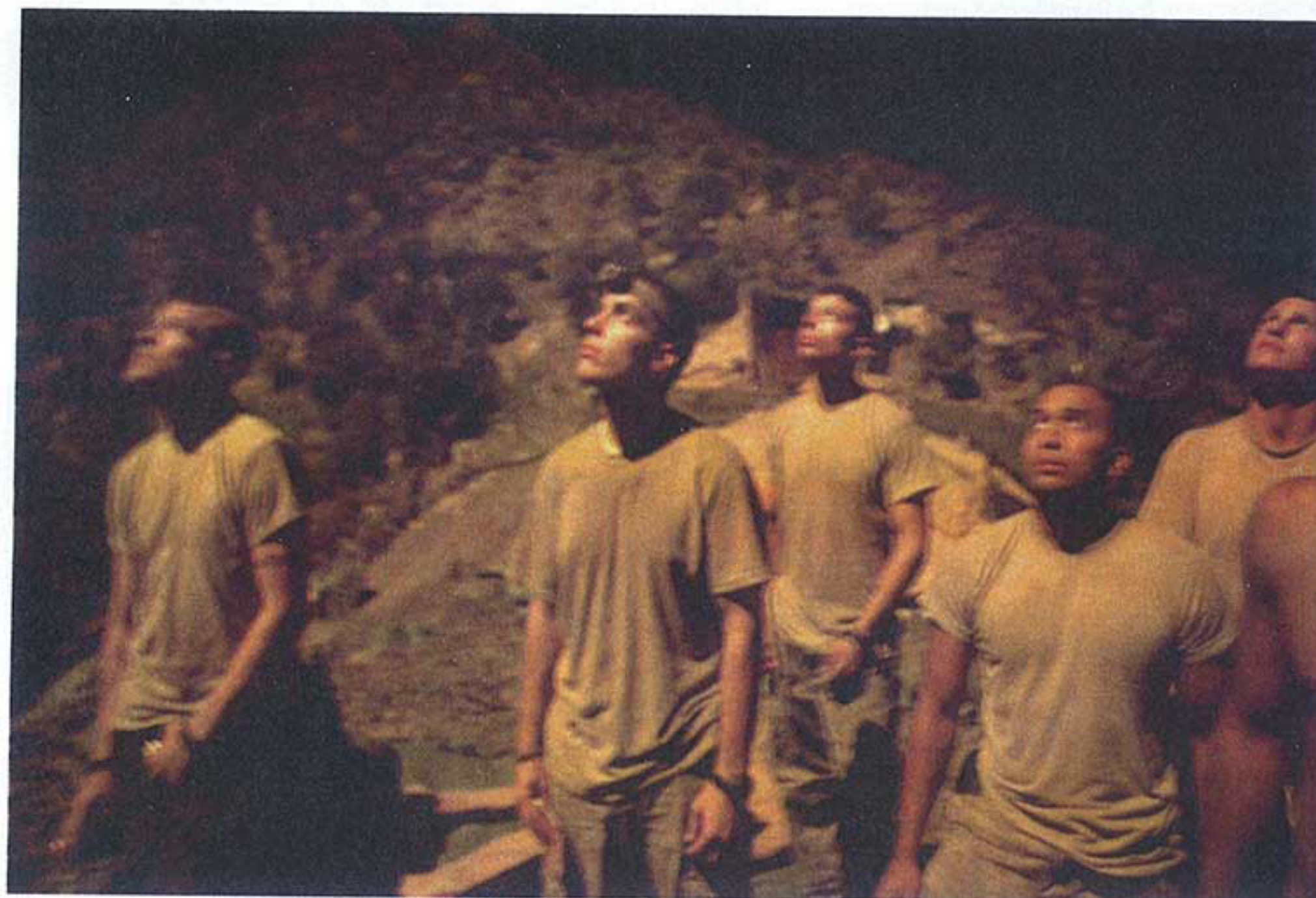
MOST OF THE FIGHTING WAS AT FOUR OR five hundred yards, so no one ever got to see—or had to deal with—the effects of all that firepower on the human body. There were exceptions, though. One day Prophet (as the American eavesdropping operation was known) called in saying they'd overheard enemy fighters discussing how they wouldn't shoot at the Americans unless a patrol crossed to the east side of the valley. Soon afterward, Afghan soldiers spotted armed men in the riverbed and started shooting at them. The men fled up the flanks of the Abas Ghar ridge, and Third Platoon sent a patrol out of the KOP (the main base in the valley) to give chase. They took contact as soon as they crossed the river and found themselves badly pinned down behind a rock wall. Within seconds every American position in the valley opened up. The enemy was caught in the open without much cover, and the valley essentially turned into one enormous shooting gallery. The KOP started dropping mortars on them, and Observation Post 3 engaged

them with a .50 cal and a Barrett sniper rifle, and the trucks opened up from above Babiya, and Outpost Restrepo swung its 240s around and poured gunfire across the valley for almost an hour.

It was a hot day and there hadn't been much fighting lately, so when the men jumped on the guns most of them were wearing only flip-flops and shorts. They joked and laughed and called for cigarettes between bursts. Once in a while a round would crack past us, but mostly it was just a turkey shoot at a wide-open mountainside where the enemy had nowhere to hide. Hot brass was filling up the fighting positions, and more was cascading down out of the weapons every second. At one point I watched a shell drop into Pemble's untied shoe, and he slipped it off, wiggled the shell out, and then slipped his shoe back on without ever stopping firing. The lieutenant was shirtless on the ammo hooch, calling coordinates into the KOP, and some of the Afghans were firing from the hip even though they didn't stand a chance

of hitting anything that way, and Jackson was up on the guard position unloading one of the machine guns. Restrepo alone had to be putting out a thousand rounds a minute, and the Abas Ghar was sparkling with bullet-strikes even though it was broad daylight. Finally Hog showed up—Hog was the radio call-sign for the A-10s—and dropped a couple of bombs on the mountain for good measure.

At some point a call came in over the radio that the Scouts were watching a guy crawl around on the mountainside without a leg. They watched until he stopped moving, and then they called in that he'd died. Everyone at Restrepo cheered. That night I couldn't sleep, and I crept out of my bunk and went and sat on the roof of the ammo hooch. It was a nice place to watch the heat lightning out along the Pech river or to lie back on the sandbags and look up at the stars. I couldn't stop thinking about that cheer; in some ways it was more troubling than all the killing that was going on. Stripped of all politics, the fact of the matter was that the



MEMBERS OF THE SECOND PLATOON WATCH A FLARE FIRED TO MARK THE ANNIVERSARY OF A COMRADE'S DEATH.