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Soldier died saving Polish officer from suicide bomber

Fort Drum staff sergeant has been nominated for Silver Star

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Army Staff Sgt. Michael H. Ollis, 24, of Staten Island, N.Y., died Aug. 28 in Ghazni province, Afghanistan, of wounds caused by an improvised explosive device, small-arms fire and indirect fire. He was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light), Fort Drum, N.Y. (Army)

By Joe Gould
Staff writer

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A Fort Drum, N.Y., soldier killed in Afghanistan died shielding a Polish soldier from a suicide bomber during an assault on their base that involved grenades, mortars, rockets and a 3,000-pound bomb.

Staff Sgt. Michael H. Ollis, of the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light), stepped into the path of an unnamed Polish officer, blocking him from the suicide vest of an insurgent who had raided Forward Operating Base Ghazni.

"In emotional interviews with investigators, the Polish officer repeatedly praised SSG Ollis and credited him with saving his life," according to an Army account of the Aug. 28 action obtained by Army Times.

The 24-year-old from Staten Island, N.Y., has since been nominated for a Silver Star, the third highest military decoration for valor, according to an Army source. The nomination is working its way through Ollis' chain of command in Afghanistan.

"Unfortunately, we lost a great American there from 10th Mountain Division in that attack, but the defenders did extraordinarily well," said Army Lt. Gen. Mark Milley, the No. 2 commander for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Milley is a former commander of the 10th Mountain Division.

Milley called the Ghazni defense a "tough fight," but said, "the enemy completely failed in achieving any kind of operational or strategic effect."

In a ceremony on Sunday at the base, four American and two Polish army soldiers were recognized for valor in the attack, which began when a car bomb breached the base's eastern perimeter

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wall, allowing 10 insurgents in suicide vests to infiltrate the compound.

The attack

The massive blast from the car bomb reverberated across the post at 3:54 a.m. on Aug. 28, kicking off an assault from the east, west and north sides, as insurgents rained mortar shells, shoulder-fired rockets and hand grenades from outside the post, according to Army accounts.

Though it's highly unlikely insurgents would have been able to overrun the base, it holds strategic importance as ISAF's local headquarters and a traffic hub to Gardez and Khost to the east.

Troops who headed to the blast site to aid the wounded found insurgents in suicide vests with assault rifles who had poured through the breach.

The two sides locked in 10 minutes of close combat as coalition troops fought through gunshot and shrapnel wounds.

Meanwhile, Ollis — who first accounted for his men in a bunker — raced toward the bomb blast's massive white smoke plume and the sound of gunfire.

Ollis linked up with a Polish officer he did not know and then with a team of special forces soldiers who had killed eight of the insurgents wearing suicide vests.

A ninth suicide bomber emerged from behind a group of containers, threw a grenade and was killed.

A 10th emerged from behind some other containers near the Polish officer and Ollis, who was the closer of the two.

"As Staff Sgt. Ollis stepped toward the insurgent, he stepped in front of the Polish officer, thereby blocking him," when the insurgent's vest detonated, according to the Army's account.

In the attack, Ollis and a Polish soldier were killed. Ten Polish soldiers and dozens of Afghans were reportedly wounded.

Afghan forces averted a larger tragedy by finding and neutralizing a second car bomb near the base, according to the Army. Two Afghan soldiers received certificates of appreciation for rendering the second car bomb safe.

Ollis' comrades told Army Times they were not surprised that Ollis, who joined the Army in 2006 and had previously deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, died saving the life of another soldier.

They praised Ollis as courageous and diligent, and said he felt a genuine sense of responsibility for keeping his soldiers safe.

"That was the way he was brought up, and I think it would make everybody proud to know that he went out there to take the fight to the enemy," said Sgt. 1st Class Tim Sireno, who served with Ollis in Afghanistan in 2010.



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“He still protected his men and was leading from the front,” said Sireno, now with the 4th Ranger Training Brigade. “You couldn’t ask for anything more.”

'Significant offensive'

Milley, the ISAF commander, said coalition and Afghan forces should expect more complex “high-profile” attacks, which are carried out by suicide bombers and fighters on foot against fixed targets of political significance.

Enemy forces have replaced some less aggressive commanders and are planning a “significant offensive,” he said.

Ollis was one of 35 people killed in four attacks around Afghanistan on Aug. 28, and there have been more than a dozen high-profile attacks against ISAF or Afghan facilities in the Kabul area since early May.

“So I don’t think their intent was to hold anything back,” Milley said.

Milley characterized these attacks as a “resounding failure.”

“I would not call those attacks anything that demonstrates any kind of viable capability on the part of the enemies of Afghanistan, except the fact that they’re terrorists and they’re murderers,” he said.

Honored soldiers

Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter recognized the following American, Polish and Afghan troops in the Sunday ceremony at the base:

■ Polish 2nd Lt. Karol Cierpica, U.S. Army Sgt. Maj. Lester Edwards, U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Nate Abkemeier and U.S. Army Staff Sgt. DaRelle LaMarque received the Bronze Star Medal for valor.

■ Polish Lt. Col. Krzysztof Slomski, Polish 1st Lt. Tomaz Sobanski and U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Michael Clemens received the U.S. Army Commendation Medal for valor.

“What these soldiers showed was not only acts of extreme courage and bravery, they displayed tremendous acts of skill, initiative and fortitude all wrapped up in one event,” said U.S. Army Col. Patrick Roberson, commander of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan.

“Most people probably would not have taken the risks they did — exposing themselves to the enemy in the open with no cover. But they were only thinking about engaging the enemy, not their personal safety.”

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