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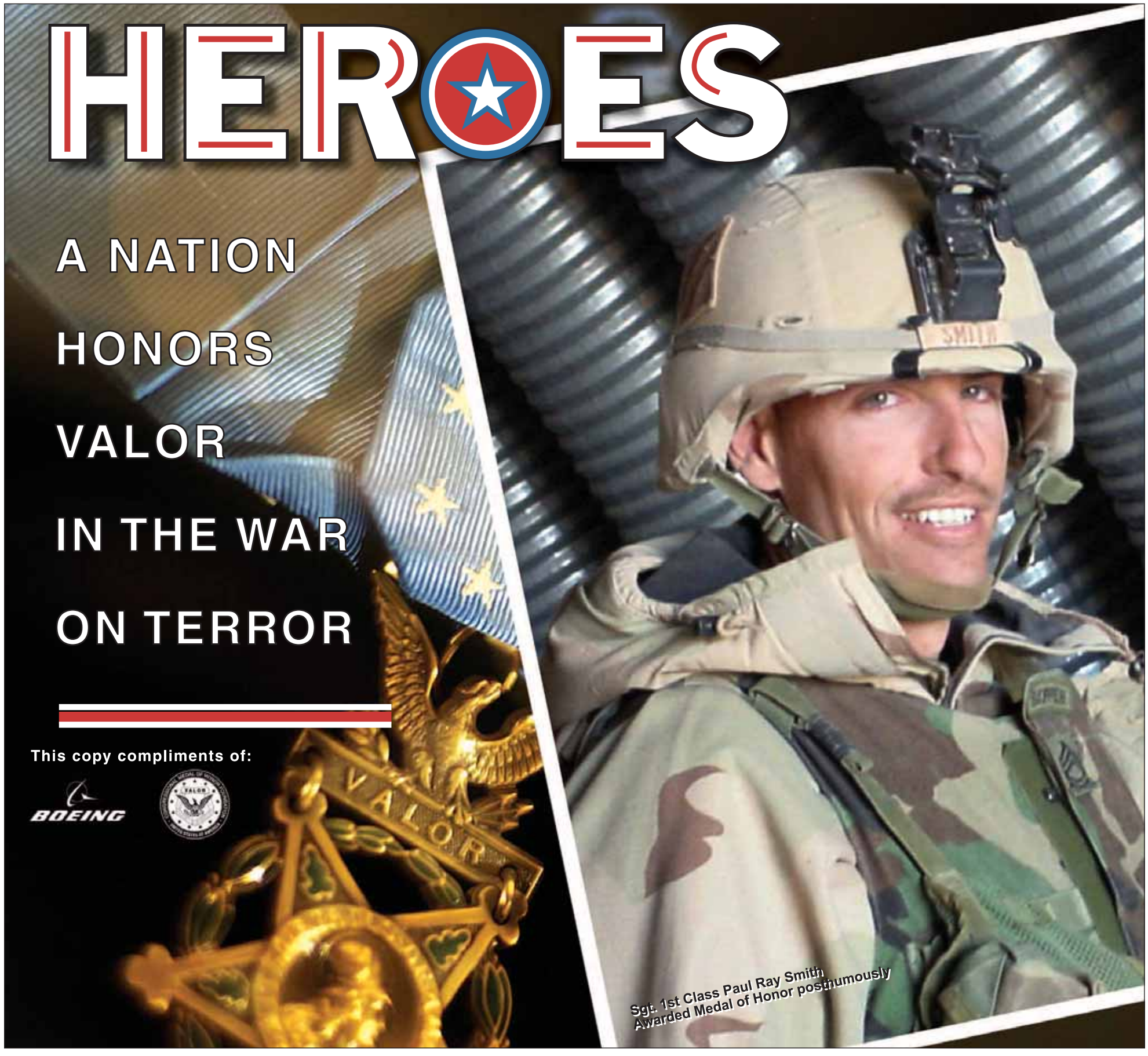
HEROES

A NATION HONORS VALOR IN THE WAR ON TERROR



Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith
Awarded Medal of Honor posthumously

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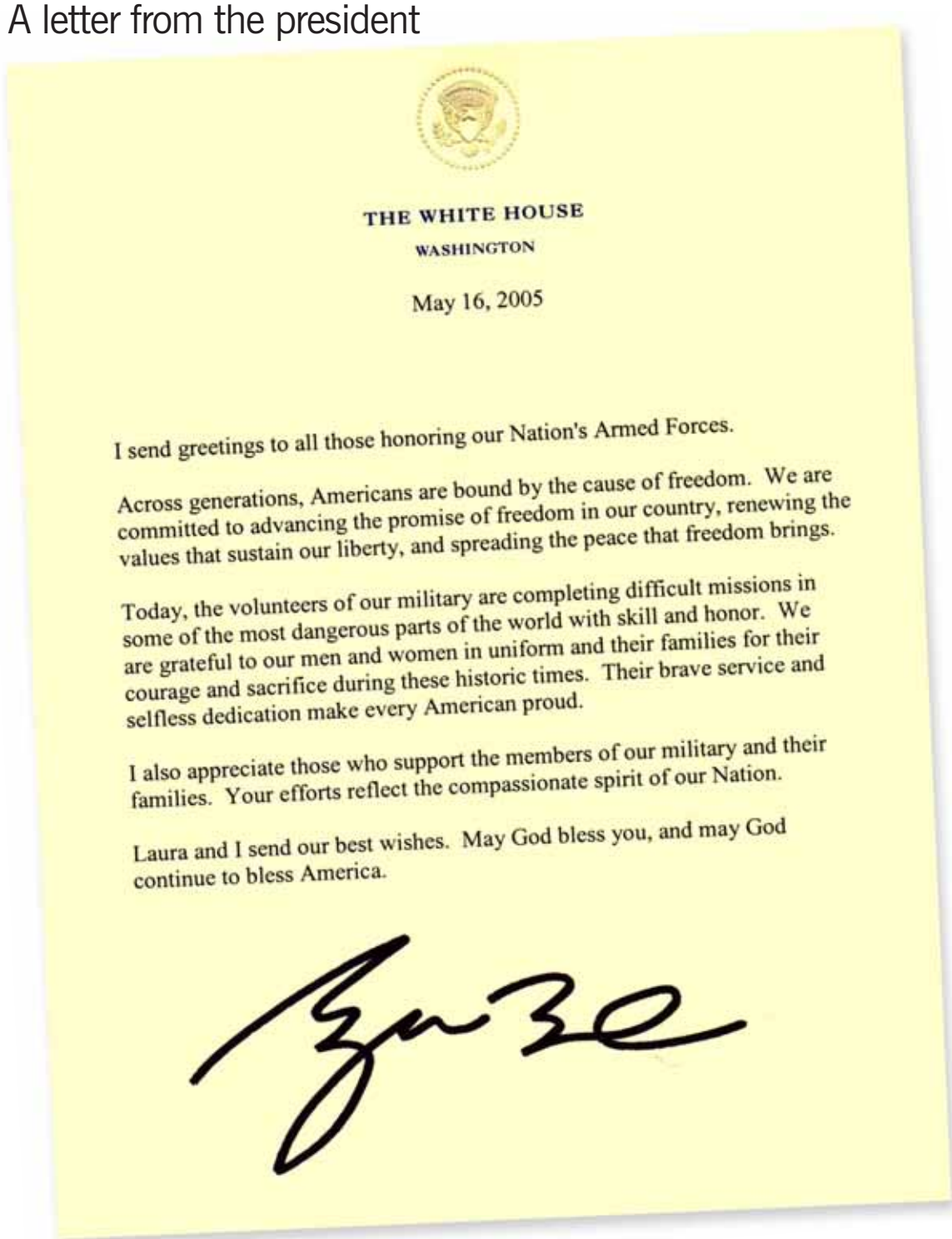
A letter from the president



THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

May 16, 2005

I send greetings to all those honoring our Nation's Armed Forces.

Across generations, Americans are bound by the cause of freedom. We are committed to advancing the promise of freedom in our country, renewing the values that sustain our liberty, and spreading the peace that freedom brings.

Today, the volunteers of our military are completing difficult missions in some of the most dangerous parts of the world with skill and honor. We are grateful to our men and women in uniform and their families for their courage and sacrifice during these historic times. Their brave service and selfless dedication make every American proud.

I also appreciate those who support the members of our military and their families. Your efforts reflect the compassionate spirit of our Nation.

Laura and I send our best wishes. May God bless you, and may God continue to bless America.

VALOR

After the Battle of Iwo Jima, Adm. Chester Nimitz declared that "uncommon valor was a common virtue."

Sixty years later, many American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines are showing that same bravery in a different sort of war — one in which, unlike World War II, there are shadowy enemies and no front lines.

Day after day, they move among the chaos in Afghanistan or Iraq, trying to build bridges, to deliver supplies, to do as they have been asked to help build a stable society where there was none.

They move among the people, wanting to trust but knowing they cannot. They endure dust storms and boredom punctuated by moments of fury, and months of long, sleepless nights away from their loved ones.

Many have died or become maimed. And many, living and dead, have met the test of fear and violence with the uncommon valor of which Nimitz spoke.

In this special section, Stars and Stripes, the independent newspaper authorized by the Department of Defense, examines the nature of heroism and, specifically, the deeds that have earned medals of valor for the dozens of servicemembers profiled on these pages. Those included stand as surrogates for the thousands of others so recognized.

Stripes focused on the highest honors given for valor in a war zone, irrespective of rank. This section pays tribute to the warfighter.

These vignettes aim to delve below the surface of press releases and welcome-home parades to describe what earning a medal for valor is really like, and to honor the living and dead who earned them.

At the core of military values

BY PATRICK DICKSON AND SANDRA JONTZ

Stars and Stripes

Their stories are like those of the soldiers, Marines, sailors and airmen who came before them:

Flying where anti-aircraft gunners can take a pop at you. Racing through a hail of bullets to pull a wounded friend to safety. Just staying with someone in what might be their last moments on Earth.

Are they heroes? What is a hero?

Servicemembers in the field had a lot of definitions to offer, but a recurring theme was not needing or wanting praise.

"A hero is the kid that signs up to serve his nation and to do those things that are unpopular [and] which his nation requires of him," said Marine Corps Capt. Andrew "Del" Del Gaudio, with the 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment operating near Fallujah in recent weeks.

"He will endure any hardship for his comrades, to include giving his life for others. He doesn't want to be thanked for a job well done, he only wants to be with his comrades on the left or the right performing the mission."

Sound off

Send us your comments at:
heroes@stripes.osd.mil

"A hero is someone who does the right thing in spite of adversity," said Spc. Ian Johnson, a medic with 2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery, 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division out of Fort Lewis, Wash.

"It's doing what is right when everything is against you, doing what is morally right in spite of peer pressure.

"If we had more people like that in the Army, stuff like Abu Ghraib would never have happened."

One night while conducting a traffic control point in the flatlands south of Mosul, a couple of soldiers from Battery C, 2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery, 1st Brigade, 25 Infantry Division offered a few insights on heroism.

Many felt that volunteering to do their job makes them heroes.

"I think every soldier makes a hero," said Spc. Nathan Meyers, 24. "From private E-1 all the way up to 'General Whoever-It-Might-Be.' We volunteered to give up so many things to do what we are doing, friends, family, free time."

Other than his absence, it's a sacrifice that won't directly affect his wife, Amanda, for example, he said. "We're trying to stabilize this country, get rid of terrorists from afar and local terrorists. I don't feel we're out here to protect the United States. Everything we're doing, we're doing for this country.

"It's an unselfish act."

Pfc. Damian Pete, 23, wasn't as sure.

SEE HERO, ON PAGE 5

AMERICA'S LIVING MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS

SALUTE

SERGEANT FIRST CLASS PAUL SMITH AND ALL OF THE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVE THEIR NATION TODAY. WE HONOR YOUR COURAGE AND SELFLESSNESS.

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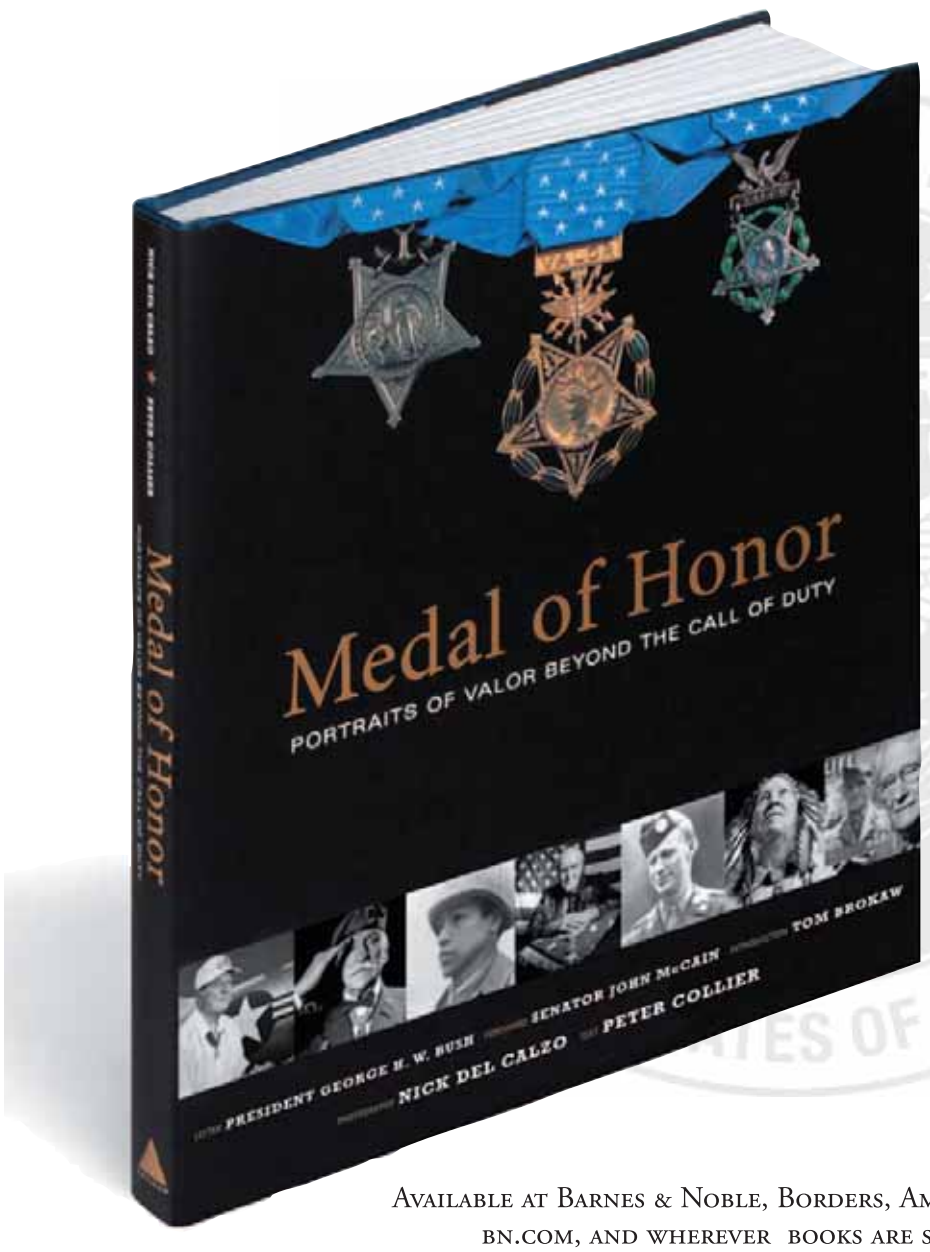

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– Larry King

I ENCOURAGE YOU, THE READER, TO ABSORB THE POWER OF EACH STORY AND TO SPREAD THE WORD SO THAT THESE MEN CAN SERVE AS ROLE MODELS, ESPECIALLY TO OUR YOUNG."

– President George H. W. Bush

THEY [THE RECIPIENTS] ALWAYS MAKE ME LAUGH, MAKE ME CRY, AND, MOST OF ALL, MAKE ME PROUD THAT WE'RE FELLOW CITIZENS."

– Tom Brokaw

"AS YOU READ ABOUT THE HEROES WHOSE EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE TO AMERICA IS MEMORIALIZED IN THIS BOOK, YOU'LL BE AWED, AS I AM, NOT ONLY BY THEIR COURAGE AND CHARACTER, BUT BY THE COUNTRY THAT PRODUCED SUCH MEN."

– Senator John McCain

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Hero: 'It's not about a damn medal'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

"Good question. What the hell is a hero? I just know that I've never met one."

Pete and Meyers, both field artillery crewmembers, get to talking a little to pass time in the darkened desert. They talk of the $82 billion funding supplemental, and whether Pete will be able to get a new flak vest instead of wearing one that not only is a hand-me-down, but held together in one spot with string.

They speak of the hellhole that is this part of Iraq.

"This sucks," Pete said. "I want to go home. I have a son."

His 2-year-old son, Camree, lives on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in South Dakota with his great-grandmother, abandoned by his mother.

"I can't wait to get back to make up for lost time," Pete said. He wants custody of Camree and to bring him back to his home base of Fort Lewis.

"You're gonna be a single dad — in the Army?" Meyers asks, incredulous. "See now, that's a hero right there."

Professor Charles A. Smith of the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University teaches children about courage and heroism.

KRT

Spc. Pat Tillman gave up a pro football career and enlisted in the Army. He was awarded the Silver Star after he was killed in Afghanistan.

In his seminars on heroism, Smith uses the following criteria: the person recognizes the risk or sacrifice; he commits himself fully to a noble goal; he manages fear; and he makes smart decisions.

Would a true hero ever seek attention after the act? Smith doesn't think so.

"Those who engage in heroic action never see what they did as especially noteworthy. They are always uncomfortable with public recognition and often feel unworthy of acclaim.

"Why? Because their action feels so natural, so much a part of who they are that it carries a sense of obligation," he said.

.SANDRA JONTZ/Stars and Stripes

Before making the dangerous trip from Fallujah to Baghdad, Marine Capt. Andrew "Del" Del Gaudio, with 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, briefs Marines and soldiers from the Army Reserve's 98th Division (Institutional Training), out of New York, about the dangers of the mission.

Are athletes heroes?

What about athletes? Do professional athletes take on significant risk or make great personal sacrifices? Are their goals noble?

Jesse Owens suffered the indignities of the day as a black athlete and went into the belly of the racist beast in Hitler's Berlin in 1936 and emerged with four gold medals.

Red Sox slugger Ted Williams gave up five prime years to be a fighter pilot in the Korean War.

Buffalo Bills offensive lineman Bob Kalsu quit the team after his 1968 rookie season to serve in the Vietnam War. He was killed in action in 1970.

Then there's Pat Tillman.

In the spring of 2002, soon after his honeymoon, Tillman informed the Arizona Cardinals that he was going to place his NFL career on hold and become a U.S. Army Ranger with his brother, Kevin.

He turned down a three-year, $3.6 million contract to become a Ranger, and spoke briefly with the media about the decision.

"At times like this you stop and think about just how good we have it, what kind of system we live in, and the freedoms we are allowed. A lot of my family has gone and fought in wars and I really haven't done a damn thing."

Tillman never again made himself available for interviews. He was killed in a friendly-fire incident in the mountains of Afghanistan in 2004.

Is he a hero for giving up a career most young men dream of?

Childhood friend Benjamin Hill said "absolutely," but for more reasons than just that.

"The statements that he made through his choices and actions — in all aspects of his life — are examples of one who is on a constant quest for self-improvement, has the confidence to make choices that are true to his convictions regardless of public opinion, and serve as examples of how to live a life to be admired.

"Pat was an absolutely awesome friend," Hill said. "To me the combination of his ambition, drive, successes and choices make him a great person, but the way he treated his family, friends and loved ones make him a hero to me."

Johnson didn't follow the Tillman saga closely, but he arrived at the same conclusion.

"I suppose he fills my definition of what makes a hero. He put away the easy life, and making tons of money, to do what he thought was right.

"Assuming he was good in all aspects of his life, that's the kind of guy we need, the kind that get more involved in their community."

Doing their part

Stripes interviewed several troops in Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11, when the media was overplaying the word *hero* every chance it got.

"I feel like I'm doing my part," said Army Sgt. Julia Pilat, a civil affairs specialist. "I think the term 'hero' is overused."

Pilat, a reservist, spoke on her last day in Afghanistan. She was due to return to her job as a 10th-grade social studies teacher at Beacon High School in Beacon, New York.

"There are thousands of soldiers over here doing their job, and that's what it is — a job," she said. "There are heroes amongst us, don't get me wrong, but it's not the group."

'Fulfilling the duty'

Not far from where she stood is the Air Force compound at Bagram, the next stop on this quest to better understand heroism.

The center of activity is the building that includes administrative offices, squadron rooms and, of course, the air traffic control tower.

Air Force Staff Sgt. Chris Veilleux, a reservist from Spokane, Wash., with the 94th Security Forces Squadron, weighed in on the issue as well.

"If you charge a machine-gun nest," Veilleux said as he stood guard outside, "you're a hero. The rest of us are just doing our job."

In the end, it's really about purity of purpose.

Air Force Tech. Sgt. William Lanier agrees.

Like Veilleux, Lanier is a reservist with the 94th Security Forces Squadron, based at Dobbins Air Force Base, Ga.

A hero, Lanier said, "is somebody who does something without any benefit to themselves. They just react without thinking what they'll get out of it.

"It's not about a damn medal."

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Ribbons signify duty, honor

BY STEVE LIEWER
Stars and Stripes

On the afternoon of May 16, 1996, Adm. Jeremy "Mike" Boorda, Chief of Naval Operations, drove from his Pentagon office to Tingey House, the CNO's home in the Washington Navy Yard.

He walked upstairs and typed two letters on his home computer, one to his wife and one to his sailors. Then he took a .38 from his desk drawer, walked into the back yard, and shot himself in the chest.

His suicide note said he'd killed himself because some reporters were about to accuse him of improperly wearing tiny "V" devices signifying combat service aboard two ships during the Vietnam War. They were waiting at the Pentagon to question him when he pulled the trigger.

"I love our Navy so much, and you who are the heart and soul of our Navy," Boorda wrote in the note to the fleet, according to the Washingtonian magazine's account, "that I couldn't bear to bring dishonor to you."

Civilians find it nearly incomprehensible that a man like Boorda would take his life over two strips of colored ribbon less than an inch long. It is less surprising to combat veterans, who know those medals are more than just "chest candy," especially the ones that signify valor.

Service ribbons represent duty, honor and courage — the most fundamental values of the military and, in a larger sense, manhood itself.

Gen. George Washington created the first U.S. combat decoration, the Badge of Military Merit, in 1782, but military awards remained relatively rare until well into the 20th Century. Since then, the services have added dozens of awards for service as well as bravery, and for different levels of valor.

Some, such as the Medal of Honor and the Silver Star, are awarded only for actions taken in combat.

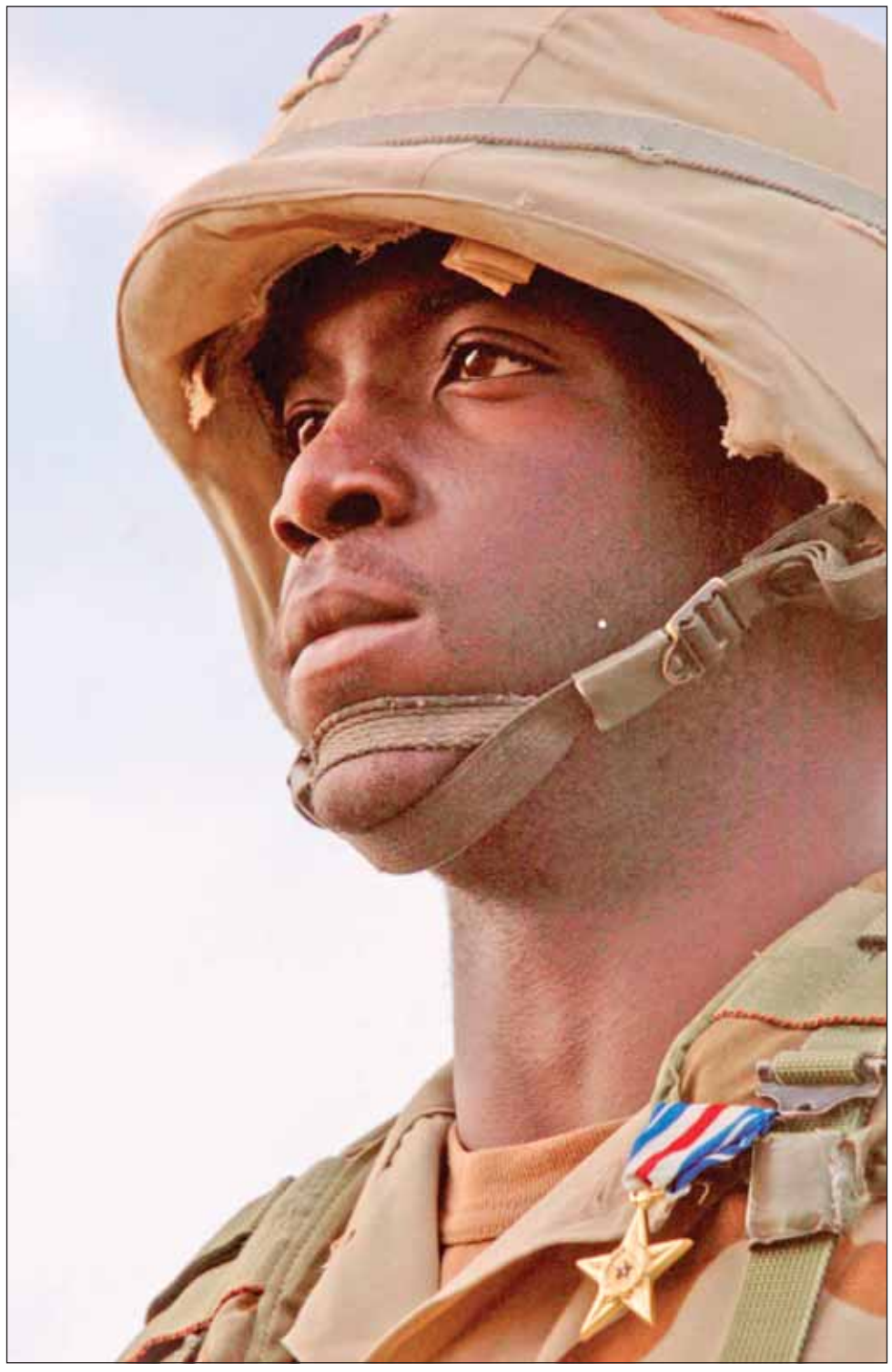
Others, such as the Soldier's Medal, the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, and the Airman's Medal, are reserved for heroism or meritorious acts that do not involve contact with an enemy.

Finally, a third category of medals, such as the Bronze Star, serves both purposes. The addition of a tiny brass "V" device, for valor, on the ribbon of the medal indicates that the awardee earned the decoration in battle. The absence of the "V" indicates meritorious service.

Many servicemembers complain "medal inflation" has made it much too easy to win medals, especially for officers and rear echelon troops.

The result, say some, is that awards designed to give troops a boost end up bringing them down instead.

"In our past, valor awards and exemplary courage in combat were the exception and not the rule," wrote 1st Lt. Kelly Haux, 33, of the Pennsylvania National Guard's 628th Military Intelligence Battalion, in an e-mail from Camp White Eagle, Kosovo. "However, it seems today that valor awards are given out so often that it seems to damage and hinder a unit's morale."



Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Spc. Micheaux Sanders of the 1st Armored Division's 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment was awarded the Silver Star after going to the aid of a 1st Cavalry patrol trapped in an ambush by Iraqi insurgents.

"When given for a truly deserved act they bolster the unit's pride and the unit members morale," said Air Force Maj. David Nadeau, 41, of the Combined Arms Operations Center in Al Udeid, Qatar, also by e-mail. "When given arbitrarily for insignificant incidents, they become a joke and cheapen the process for those who deserve the true recognition."

Nadeau thinks the awards stack should be changed to raise the value of valor awards compared with service awards. "There is no way an award for someone serving a desk job should outweigh a valor or bravery act," he said.

As much jawing as there is over medals questionably awarded, soldiers say the bigger issue is that so much legitimate valor goes unrecognized.

"The people who get them deserve them," said Sgt. Stephen Wagasky, 21, of the 1st Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery, winner of two Army Commendation Medals (ARCOMs) with valor. "But there's a lot of people who deserve them that don't get them."

Combat veterans have their own views of what bravery means.

First Sgt. Michael Grinston, 37, of the 1-7 Field Artillery, earned two Bronze Stars with valor in Iraq last year, both times from extracting outmanned platoons from ambushes, then killing his attackers.

He sees his own acts as simply fulfilling his duty to keep his soldiers alive. What impresses him, though, is the young soldiers in his unit who kept fighting no matter what. To him, valor is moving forward when common sense tells you not to.

"That's brave — to watch your fellow soldiers get killed, and then go right back out," Grinston said. "The reasonable person says, 'I won't take that road, so I'll stay back here.' These guys went forward."

Pfc. James Connor, 20, of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, gives credit to the soldiers who give medical treatment under fire. Last fall near Samarra, a car bomb exploded near his Bradley fighting vehicle, sending shrapnel into his face.

His buddy, Spc. Nick Cademartori, 23, put his combat lifesaving skills to work by bandaging Connor's face and preparing to medevac him out. Cademartori earned an Army Commendation medal for his work.

"It's the people helping the guys who get hurt," Connor said. "Cade, he helped me when I got hit by a suicide bomber. I was freaking out on the inside. I was scared. I thought I was going to be blind."

Cademartori, for his part, felt like he barely held himself together. Connor's apparent calm after nearly being killed awed him so much, he wrote about on his soldier blog, **www.thequestingcat.com**. He said Connor was so cool, he offered him his own knife to cut bandages.

"I am no hero," Cademartori wrote shortly after the incident. "Hero is a 20-year-old Tennessee boy who has metal fragments in both eyes, but still calmly grabs his knife to make sure his fumble-fingered [combat life saver] can help him."

What nearly all troops who earn valor awards share is a belief that they've done nothing that merits special praise. They recoil at the use of the word *hero* — not only out of modesty, but also because it is an epithet hurled at them by drill sergeants in boot camp.

"Those soldiers who do receive them NEVER believe that they deserve them," wrote Sgt. 1st Class LisaLyn DeWitt, 36, of the 12th Aviation Brigade, from Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. "They are true heroes."

Medal recipients frequently have mixed feelings about their awards. Usually the ribbon is linked to the death or serious injury of someone they cared about, or some other harrowing event.

SEE HISTORY, PAGE 7

History

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

"Awards, especially in wartime, nine out of 10 times you get after something bad happens," said Sgt. Charles Fray, 22, of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, who won an ARCOM with valor for the unsuccessful effort to save the life of his platoon leader, 1st Lt. Andrew Houghton, after a rocket-propelled grenade attack last summer in Iraq.

"I went and stuck it in my drawer," said Spc. Adrian Stone, who won a similar award for the same event. "When I look at it, I think of Lieutenant Houghton dying."

Yet for all the controversy surrounding valor awards, a look at the stories surrounding them can't fail to impress how often ordinary servicemembers do extraordinary things under appalling circumstances.

Such as Marine Lance Cpl. Thomas Adametz, who darted out of a besieged house filled with Marines under intense fire during the first battle of Fallujah in April 2004 to grab an abandoned Squad Automatic Weapon and started shooting. He kept firing until the barrel overheated, protecting his buddies inside.

Or Army Staff Sgt. Serena Di Virgilio, a medic with the 230th Military Police Company, who was in a three-vehicle convoy attacked by rocket-propelled grenades near Baghdad. Although she herself was riddled with shrapnel wounds, she treated all of the other wounded soldiers in the convoy before accepting medical treatment herself.

Or the late Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith, a combat engineer from the 3rd Infantry Division's 11th Engineer Battalion, who took over the gun on an M-113 armored personnel carrier and fired 300 rounds in 15 minutes to prevent a courtyard command post near the Baghdad airport from being overrun by a larger enemy force during the April 2003 invasion of Iraq. He was killed by enemy fire and earned the nation's ultimate symbol of bravery: the Medal of Honor.

After the World War II Battle for Iwo Jima, Adm. Chester Nimitz famously declared that "uncommon valor was a common virtue." In this Stars and Stripes special section, you will read the stories of dozens of men and women of today's U.S. armed forces who still live that credo.

Stripes reporter Lisa Burgess contributed to this report. E-mail Steve Liewer at: liewers@mail.estripes.osd.mil

Military awards

Gen. George Washington established the first U.S. military award, called the Badge of Military Merit, in his General Orders of Aug. 7, 1782.

The badge was to be awarded in "not only instances of unusual gallantry but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with due reward," the orders said.

"The road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus open to all," the orders stated.

Medal of Honor

With the brief exception of Washington's badge, the U.S. military did not authorize the award of any medals for valor until the Civil War.

There are now three designs for the Medal of Honor: Army, Navy (which is also given to Marines) and the Air Force, which was not authorized its own design by Congress until 1960.

The language governing the award calls for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty, in action involving actual combat with an opposing armed force."

Navy Cross

Distinguished Service Cross

Air Force Cross

Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross and Air Force Cross

In 1918, Congress passed an act that established a "Pyramid of Honor" that provided for lesser awards, so military commanders would have a way to recognize heroic actions of different degrees.

Among the first medals to be established below the Medal of Honor was the Distinguished Service Cross.

In 1919, the Navy Cross was established for the sea services: the Navy, Marines and Coast Guard. The Air Force Cross was established in 1960.

The language governing the award calls for "extraordinary heroism in actual combat with an opposing armed force."

Silver Star

Congress established the Silver Star along with the DSC in 1918.

The language governing the award of the Silver Star calls for "gallantry in action while engaged in combat against an enemy or while serving in combat with friendly foreign forces."

The required gallantry, "while less than that required for the Distinguished Service Cross, must nevertheless have been performed with marked distinction."

Distinguished Flying Cross

The Distinguished Flying Cross was authorized by President Coolidge in 1926 (retroactive to 1918) to honor aviation's pioneers. Coolidge gave the first DFC to Charles Lindbergh on June 11, 1927.

For the DFC to be awarded for heroism the act "must involve voluntary action in the face of danger and be well above the actions performed by others engaged in similar flight operations."

Bronze Star Medal with "V"

The Bronze Star Medal was established in February 1944 (retroactive to Dec. 6, 1941).

The original purpose of the Bronze Star was to recognize the unique sacrifices of infantry soldiers. But defense officials quickly decided to expand its award to all of the services.

The language governing the award of the Bronze Star includes "heroic or meritorious achievement or service, not involving aerial flight, while engaged in combat against an enemy or while serving in combat with friendly foreign forces."

Air Medal with "V"

The Air Medal was established in 1942, specifically to protect the prestige of the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Like the Bronze Star, the Air Medal can be awarded for both valor (indicated by the "V" device) and meritorious achievement or service.

But the Air Medal is awarded only for circumstances including participation in aerial flight.

The "V" device

In 1944, military officials decided to create a special "footnote" to the Bronze Star by authorizing a tiny brass "V," for valor, that could be attached to the ribbon.

The device, also known as "V" device, Combat V, or Combat Distinguishing Device, is authorized by all the services.

The "V" is used as an attachment to a defined set of awards and decorations at or below the level of the Bronze Star. The Medal of Honor and Silver Star never include a "V" device, because valor is implicit in the award itself.

E-mail Lisa Burgess at: burgessl@ stripes.osd.mil

‘Leadership saved the men’

Stars and Stripes

Two years to the day after Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith fought and died on a dusty road outside Baghdad, the president handed the soldier’s 11-year-old son a glass-encased Medal of Honor in the name of Congress and the nation.

On April 4, President Bush handed Smith’s family what he described as the “first Medal of Honor in the war on terror.”

Credited with rallying the defense of his platoon in the face of a near-overwhelming counterattack by Iraqi forces after the 3rd Infantry Division seized Saddam International Airport, Smith is the first to be awarded the country’s highest award for valor since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began.

In fact, since Vietnam, only two other Medals of Honor had been awarded. Both were given to Delta Force operators — Master Sgt. Gary Gordon and Sgt. 1st Class Randall Shughart — after the pair were killed trying to save downed aviators in Somalia in 1993. Nearly half of all who have earned the award have died earning its honor.

“On this day two years ago, Sergeant Smith gave his all for his men,” Bush said. “Five days later, Baghdad fell, and the Iraqi people were liberated. And today, we bestow upon Sergeant Smith the first Medal of Honor in the war on terror.”

With the Pentagon brass looking on alongside congressional leaders and a handful of Smith’s soldiers flown in from Iraq — where they are now serving their second combat tour — the fallen soldier’s son David stoically accepted the award for the family as his widowed mom wiped away tears.

“The story of Paul Smith is a story of a boy transformed into a man and a leader,” Bush told the assembly. After joining the Army in 1989, Bush said Smith remained “a typical young American. He liked sports, he liked fast cars, and he liked to stay out late with his friends — pursuits that occasionally earned him what the Army calls ‘extra duty’ scrubbing floors.”

SEE HONOR, PAGE 10

AP

Medals of Honor

Only 124 Medal of Honor recipients are still living. Although soldiers have received the lion’s share of the nation’s highest military award, Marines, sailors, airmen and even one coast guardsman have earned the Medal of Honor as well. Here’s how the medals have been split among the services:

Army: 2,401

Air Force: 17

Navy: 745

Marine Corps: 296

Coast Guard: 1

Total number of awards: 3,460

Source: Congressional Medal of Honor Society

U.S. Army via AP

Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith was killed in action when his outnumbered unit was attacked by Iraqi forces at the Baghdad airport April 4, 2003, and is credited with saving hundreds of lives.

Standing firm against attackers

Stars and Stripes

Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously during a White House ceremony April 4, for his gallantry in action with an armed enemy near Saddam International Airport two years before.

Here is his story.

It had been a long, hard slog for the “Jungle Cats” of 3rd Infantry Division’s 11th Engineer Battalion.

Sixteen days and some 300 sandblasted miles since they’d begun pushing through the desert across the Kuwaiti border, plunging deep into Iraq, about 100 bleary-eyed men from the battalion’s Company Bravo found themselves staring down the road to Baghdad along the eastern side of Saddam International Airport.

It was the company’s job to erect barriers to prevent Republican Guard reinforcements from breaking through as the division’s 1st Brigade Combat Team secured the key runways, dubbed Objective Lions, and began probing forward toward the capital city.

That’s when Bravo’s second platoon got new orders to construct a makeshift holding pen for enemy prisoners.

It was Smith — a hard-nosed 33-year-old platoon sergeant from Tampa, Fla. — who got things moving.

A veteran of the Persian Gulf War and then peacekeeping tours in Bosnia and Kosovo, Smith was known as a strict leader. During the buildup for the invasion, he had pushed hard not only to continually refine his troops’ traditional building and demolition skills, but also to carve out time for advanced marksmanship training and urban combat drills.

Maybe that’s why, through the dust and clamor of building the prisoner camp, one of Smith’s troops noticed something strange a few hundred yards away and alerted him.

Peering through the scope on his rifle, Smith could see dozens of Iraqi troops flanking around the division’s lead elements.

SEE FIRM, PAGE 10

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Honor: Smith loved his country, loved his soldiers

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

After his first combat tour during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Smith earned his sergeant's stripes and became known as a stickler for detail.

"Sergeant Smith's seriousness wasn't always appreciated by the greener troops under his direction," Bush said. "Those greener troops oftentimes found themselves [doing] tasks over and over again, until they got it right. Specialist Michael Seaman, who is with us today, says, 'He was hard in training because he knew we had to be hard in battle.' Specialist Seaman will also tell you that he and others are alive today because of Sergeant Smith's discipline."

In a letter written to his parents but never mailed, Smith wrote he was prepared to "give all that I am to ensure that all my boys make it home."

And that's exactly what it took.

"Sergeant Smith's leadership saved the men," under him that day, Bush said, "and he prevented an enemy attack on the aid station just up the road." Manning a heavy machine gun atop an armored personnel carrier, "Smith continued to fire and took a — until he took a fatal round to the head.

"We recall with appreciation the fellow soldiers whose lives he saved, and the many more he inspired. And we express our gratitude for a new generation of Americans, every bit as selfless and dedicated to liberty as any that has gone on before — a dedication exemplified by the sacrifice and valor of Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith."

Stars and Stripes

Birgit Smith, the widow of Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith, breaks down in tears April 5 in front of the memorial site of her husband. The marker was dedicated in a ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery the day after Smith was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Laid to rest

In two ceremonies the next day, Sgt. 1st Class Smith was remembered as a tough soldier who made a difference in the lives of others.

"Today, we assemble in another special place, where we will memorialize Sergeant First Class Smith by placing him in a formation with ranks filled by our nation's most courageous here in the Hall of Heroes," Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker told a somber gathering at the Pentagon.

"As I had the honor of serving with and knowing intimately the last two soldiers who joined this special formation," Schoomaker said, "I am certain that they are very proud to welcome our newest hero, because they are brothers." Schoomaker, as a former Special Operations commander, led Gordon and Shughart before they were killed in Somalia in 1993, the last to earn the Medal of Honor.

Choking back tears, Smith's widow, Birgit, said she was proud her husband was one of those people.

"Paul loved his country, he loved the Army, and he loved his soldiers. He loved being a sapper (combat engineer). He died doing what he loved," she said.

A few hours later, in the Pentagon's western shadow, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth Preston continued the theme of service to nation at Arlington National Cemetery, where a new memorial was unveiled with Smith's name etched in the white stone.

"This stone will give soldiers — past and present — and those who aspire to wear the uniform of a soldier, the opportunity to reflect on Paul's actions two years ago. Actions that saved the lives of 100 of his fellow soldiers," said Preston, under a cool blue sky.

Smith's son David sat stoically between his weeping mom and sister as Preston recounted the day Smith died.

"On that day, 100 American solders witnessed and learned leadership of extraordinary proportions — leadership that changes and influenced their lives forever," Preston said. "Those 100 men will in turn lead hundreds of soldiers who will benefit from that leadership, gained from serving with Sergeant First Class Smith. The process will continue to be shared across the Army from one unit to another."

Firm: Stand against Iraqi counterattack saved many troops

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

The Iraqi counterattack was coming, but not from the direction it was expected. Instead, they were coming right for Smith's position.

Even as Smith barked orders to grab a nearby Bradley fighting vehicle and bring his own armored personnel carriers into position while dispatching the rest of his troops into a hasty defense, more than 100 enemy fighters were soon swarming into nearby fighting positions around a walled compound.

Facing a storm of enemy rifle, rocket and mortar fire, Smith charged the position, lobbing a grenade as the Bradley maneuvered into the fray.

In the ensuing melee, Smith would rally his troops leading from the front as he directed fire, repositioned his squads and — at one point — destroyed an enemy position with an anti-tank rocket.

Before long, though, the Bradley was running low on ammunition and had to withdraw to reload. That's when one of Smith's armored personnel carriers rocked back from a direct mortar hit, wounding three troops inside.

"The enemy attack was at its strongest point and every action counted. Not only were the wounded soldiers threatened but also more than 100 soldiers from B Company, the Task Force Aid Station, and the Mortar Platoon were at risk," reads the official narrative of the battle.

When one of his soldiers slumped behind the .50 caliber machine gun mounted atop another APC, Smith jumped behind the big gun, yelling to a nearby soldier, "Feed me ammunition whenever you hear the gun get quiet."

Firing unprotected, Smith would burn through at least three boxes of ammunition before being fatally wounded.

He is credited with killing 25 to 50 enemy soldiers while allowing the safe withdrawal of numerous wounded U.S. soldiers.

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‘This is how Custer must have felt’

BY LISA BURGESS
Stars and Stripes

The story of Pfc. Jessica Lynch and how the 507th Maintenance Company got lost, then ambushed near Al-Nasiriyah, Iraq, is one of the most widely known of the Iraq campaign.

But there is more than one war story to tell about Al-Nasiriyah on March 23, 2003, including how Marines captured and held the city’s three bridges.

Name: Gunnery Sgt. Justin D. LeHew

Unit: Company A, 2nd Assault Amphibious Battalion

Medal: Navy Cross

Earned: March 23, 2003, Al-Nasiriyah, Iraq

By the end of that blisteringly hot day, Gunnery Sgt. Justin D. LeHew would prove himself a hero in the best tradition of the Corps.

For his valor, LeHew, now first sergeant for Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division, was awarded the Navy Cross, the second-highest military honor after the Medal of Honor.

LeHew was platoon sergeant for Company A of the 3rd Platoon, 2nd Assault Amphibious Battalion. The unit was attached to Company A, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, or “Task Force Tarawa.”

LeHew and his platoon began the day by rescuing soldiers from the 507th who had neither been killed nor taken hostage. But that was simply a sidelight to the day’s main event.

Taking the southern bridge was easy. LeHew said his amtracks, as Marines call amphibious assault vehicles, just drove across.

Holding the bridge would be a different matter entirely.

“We were over the bridge about five minutes when it seemed like the whole city came down on our heads,” LeHew said. “Fire was coming from almost every single building, and we could see swarms of Iraqis coming down the alleys.”

Courtesy of Justin LeHew

Gunnery Sgt Justin LeHew, foreground, and Sgt. Scott Dahn clean their weapons at Firebase Tomahawk, Iraq, in April 2003.

“I remember thinking, this is how Custer must have felt at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.”

It would take more than four hours for LeHew’s 28-vehicle convoy and the 150 infantrymen they carried to emerge victorious through a 360-degree urban firefight, with limited water and ammunition.

With the Marines dressed in head-to-toe-chemical protective suits, the first thing to go was the water.

“They sucked their two canteens dry in the first hour, [as well as] the couple cases we carried in the vehicles,” LeHew said.

Meanwhile, Charlie Company, a unit charged with holding Nasiriyah’s northernmost bridge further up the road, was having its own problems.

The first indication LeHew’s Marines had that all was not well up north was when they saw a smoldering amtrack, careening back toward the southern bridge, where the vehicle smashed to a stop.

“I grabbed my corpsman,” 19-year-old Hospitalman Alex Velasquez, LeHew said.

Ripping off their amtrack helmets (which are tethered to the tracks with communications cords), the pair jumped off their own track, without putting on their Kevlar battle headgear.

LeHew and Velasquez (who was awarded the Bronze Star with “V” device for his actions that day) dodged a curtain of hellfire through the contested intersection.

When they reached the vehicle, LeHew said, “the first thing I saw when I went up the ramp was a leg, still in a MOPP (chem gear) suit.”

LeHew handed the leg to a wide-eyed Velasquez.

“I said, ‘put this in my vehicle. We’re going to find out who it belongs to.’ ”

The stunned corpsman obeyed.

“Doc [Velasquez] was a good little kid,” LeHew said.

Then LeHew entered the track.

“Everybody was dead.”

But as he moved forward to destroy the radios and check to see if the .50-caliber machine gun was salvageable, “I heard a Marine gasp for air. Doc and I started digging.”

They found Cpl. Matthew Juska, a 6-foot 7-inch, 240-pound bruiser who had been pulling security up at the northern bridge.

Juska was horribly wounded. LeHew could see the young Marine’s brain, “and we thought he had a broken back. We had to get him out of there.”

The corporal was trapped beneath the amtrack’s collapsed hatches — hundreds of pounds of mangled steel.

With the help of five Marines who had come to help, “we started yanking him out. It took 30 minutes,” LeHew said.

Juska was evacuated along with several other wounded members of Charlie Company. Once the chopper left the scene, the battle raged on.

Toward noon, with the help of Alpha Company’s tanks that were finally able to make their way from the rear refueling depot and across the southern bridge, the battle finally began to turn.

LeHew’s unit went on to help Marines at the northern bridge, and by day’s end, the battalion had completed its mission.

The three bridges they captured and held made it possible for the 1st Marine Division to make its historic “race to Baghdad,” a journey of more than 1,000 kilometers that stands as the longest combat advance by U.S. Marine forces in history.

But victory at Nasiriyah demanded a steep price: 40 Marines wounded and 18 killed.

Last year at Camp Lejeune, N.C., “someone said, Gunny, go to the orderly room, we have a surprise for you,” LeHew said.

It was Cpl. Juska, out-processing from the Marine Corps with “some neurological problems, but he was walking and talking,” LeHew said.

Asked how it felt to see the man whose life he’d saved, LeHew’s voice became thick.

“It felt good,” he said, and paused.

“It felt good to see the kid was alive.”

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‘Other soldiers … were depending on us’

BY JESSICA INIGO
Stars and Stripes

First Lt. Christopher P. Dean said his troops didn’t think twice when they got the call to save an isolated platoon under attack in Sadr City, Iraq.

As the tank platoon leader of a Quick Reaction Force, Dean got the call for his unit during a change-of-responsibility ceremony on April 4, 2004.

Name: 1st Lt. Christopher P. Dean

Unit: 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment, 1st Armored Division

Medal: Silver Star

Earned: April 4, 2004, Baghdad

Dean led Company C, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment through intense action to save 19 trapped soldiers. The troops, from the 1st Cavalry Division, had already lost one soldier and had others who were wounded.

Dean’s force fought and killed the attacking enemy without ground-troop support. In the fight, one of Dean’s soldiers was killed and another wounded.

Dean, who also suffered wounds to his neck and arm, says the soldiers under him deserve the credit for the successful mission.

“There’s nothing in the world like the American soldier. Even in the face of a kill zone, they knew other soldiers out there were depending on us and not a single man second-guessed his duty,” he said.

The 25-year-old West Point graduate said he fed off the bravery of his men as he led them out of five miles of densely populated and constricted city streets.

That is where Dean ended his tale, but the Army, which awarded Dean the Silver Star, had much more to say.

According to his citation, Dean, trailblazing out of the ambush along Route Delta, fought from out of the hatch of his tank. He took loads of small-arms fire and several rocket-propelled grenades. He fought back, killing a number of attackers on rooftops and in alleyways. Then, he dismounted his tank during an intense defense of the casualty evacuation site and ensured that all soldiers from both his unit and the infantry platoon were safe.

Dean

“First Lt. Dean’s leadership ensured the success of the company mission to evacuate 19 infantrymen isolated and surrounded by the enemy. First Lt. Dean’s exceptional bravery while under intense fire during a four-hour attack despite wounds is in the highest traditions of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment, the 1st Armored Division and the United States Army,” read the final lines of the citation.

Dean said this Army recognition gave him an overwhelming sense of honor and pride, but the real satisfaction is that he continues to lead soldiers.

“I love being a platoon leader,” Dean said, who is currently the mortar platoon leader for Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment out of Friedberg, Germany. “It’s an honor to lead America’s sons and daughters — the finest people in the world.”

Dean currently is in Grafenwöhr showing his troops to train as they fight. He’s going over unconventional firing positions, like those needed to win battles in Iraq.

“The fact is that we train to be ready. It’s fun and it’s what soldiers like to do.”

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‘I started patching them up real quick’

BY LISA BURGESS
Stars and Stripes

When 24-year-old Hospitalman 3rd Class Luis Fonseca Jr. celebrates his sixth year of Navy service in July, topping his decorations will be something most servicemembers have never seen: the Navy Cross, the service’s second-highest award for valor after the Medal of Honor.

Name: Hospitalman 3rd Class Luis Fonseca Jr.
Unit: 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade
Medal: Navy Cross
Earned: March 23, 2003, in Al-Nasiriyah, Iraq

Fonseca is one of two servicemembers from the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade’s Task Force Tarawa awarded the Navy Cross for bravery during the battle of Al-Nasiriyah, Iraq, on March 23, 2003.

On that day, Fonseca was a hospitalman apprentice on his first combat deployment with the U.S. Marines.

His unit, Company A, 1st Platoon, was attached to the 2nd MEB’s 1st Battalion, Company C, 1st Platoon, which was tasked with capturing and holding the northernmost of Al-Nasiriyah’s three main bridges.

As the unit’s corpsman, Fonseca was aboard an amphibious assault vehicle, or amtrack, reserved for evacuating battle casualties quickly to the rear.

WAYNE NELMES/Courtesy of the U.S. Navy

Navy Secretary Gordon England presents the Navy Cross to Hospitalman 3rd Class Luis Fonseca Jr. on Aug. 11, 2004.

“I was supposed to stay back,” away from the fighting, Fonseca said in a telephone interview from Al Asad, Iraq, where he is on his third deployment (Iraq, Afghanistan, Iraq) in three years.

The Marines took the northern bridge at about 11:30 a.m., and almost immediately started taking rocket-propelled grenade and mortar fire, Fonseca said.

Within moments, a call came over the radio reporting that an amtrack had received a direct hit with an RPG, wounding five Marines.

Grabbing his bag of medical supplies, Fonseca jumped from his track and raced to assess the condition of wounded Marines who had been pulled from the smoking vehicle and laid out on the ground by their comrades.

Under fire, “I started patching them up real quick.”

That’s when Fonseca, kneeling over a patient, heard noise from above, and looked up.

“I saw … you know how bottle rockets sparkle? It was like that.”

What Fonseca saw were not bottle rockets; they were cluster bombs from a U.S. Air Force A-10 “Warthog” aircraft.

According to a U.S. Central Command release, a total of 18 Marines were killed in the battle at the northern bridge, with eight deaths attributed to enemy fire, and the rest undetermined because “the Marines were also engaged in heavy fighting with the enemy at the time of the incident.”

According to the release, the official investigation into the possible fratricide showed that the A-10s mistakenly attacked the Marines “for a combination of reasons, including problematic communications links between U.S. forces and a battle plan that, due to unforeseen circumstances, changed as the situation unfolded.”

The pilots were not blamed for the incident, the release said.

After the Warthogs departed, Fonseca and other Marines brought the five casualties to the evacuation amtrack, but that vehicle was soon pounded by at least three RPGs.

“That’s when I decided to evacuate my patients,” Fonseca said.

Fortunately, Marine reinforcements were arriving, and Fonseca was able to oversee the evacuation of his patients by amtrack and by helicopter.

All five Marines survived.

Fonseca was awarded the Navy Cross last August at Camp Lejeune, N.C., where he is stationed with his wife, Maria (also a Navy corpsman) and their two children.

The medal is an honored memento, Fonseca said.

But far more important, Fonseca said, are the friendships he has forged in the crucible of combat.

“Marines are some of the best people I’ve ever met,” Fonseca said.

“To be perfectly honest, being accepted by this tight-knit community … makes me more proud of who I am and what I do than [receiving] the Navy Cross.”

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‘They were everywhere … shooting RPGs at us’

BY RICK EMERT
Stars and Stripes

Nearly a year later, 1st Lt. Neil Prakash can remember a battle with dozens of insurgents in Baqouba, Iraq, like it happened days ago.

For Prakash, June 24 began with he and two of his soldiers manning an observation point on Blue Babe Highway in two shifts from midnight to 7 a.m.

Name: 1st Lt. Neil Prakash
Unit: 2nd Battalion, 63rd Armor Regiment, 1st Infantry Division
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: June 24, 2004, Baqouba, Iraq

“When we came in (to Forward Operating Base Scunion) at 7, we thought we were done,” Prakash said. “We were smoked after being out there all night.”

Instead, Prakash’s crew was sent back out to Blue Babe Highway after there were reports of 25 to 30 insurgents on the roadway, which was a trouble spot for improvised explosive devices.

“Twenty-five to 30 insurgents, you would hear that every month,” Prakash said. “They never assault the FOB. I was thinking it was ‘BS.’ ”

Three hours later, Prakash returned to FOB Scunion and learned that his entire company, Company A, was going to Baqouba, where the city was under siege.

U.S. Army

First Lt. Neil Prakash shows a bloody sleeve June 24, 2004, in Baqouba, Iraq, after a hydrating intravenous puncture wouldn’t stop bleeding.

With Prakash’s 1st Platoon in the lead, the company headed into Baqouba with the mission of securing two bridges in the city.

“When we learned we were going in, we were really pumped up,” Prakash said.

At about 11 a.m., the company was driving south in Baqouba with Prakash’s tank taking the point.

“It was very quiet, like a ghost town,” Prakash said. “There was just nobody there.”

Suddenly a call from the operations center warned that, based on intelligence from unmanned aerial flights, insurgents were in groups of four, they were well-trained and they were going to stand and fight, Prakash said. The attack would start from the left and come from all around them.

“I realized I forgot my chew, and I never smoke, but I figured if there was ever a time to start, this was it,” he said.

Prakash heard an explosion behind his tank, and an RPG fired from a house on the left hit his tank.

“We fired the main gun at the house and there was just this big giant blob of a hole in the house,” he said. “They were everywhere, running up to within 30 meters of the tank shooting RPGs at us.”

As the lead vehicle, Prakash and his gunner and driver were the main target in the onslaught of IEDs and rocket-propelled grenades.

His tank took several hits without much damage, but eventually one RPG took out the tank’s navigation system while another hit the turret, making it impossible to rotate. The tank was hit by seven RPGs as well as multiple IED blasts.

The platoon was ordered to head back north while maintaining contact to provide security for the recovery of a downed vehicle.

“Someone told me right afterward that we were fighting for an hour,” Prakash said. “I thought it was more like 15 minutes. Everything happened so fast.”

Prakash’s tank returned to FOB Scunion for more ammo and to have the damaged turret repaired. He volunteered to go back into battle.

Within minutes, the tank was en route back to Baqouba to secure and hold the two bridges. The insurgents had fled.

Prakash, who was born in India and raised in Syracuse, N.Y., earned a Silver Star for his actions.

He personally eliminated eight enemy positions, an enemy resupply vehicle and several insurgents during the battle, Prakash said.

“He was incredible,” said Spc. John Langford, Prakash’s loader in the battle. “He kept us in line and kept us calm. I couldn’t have chosen a better tank commander or platoon leader for what we experienced that day.”

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‘They shoot at us, we shoot back’

BY STEVE LIEWER
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Michael Broner lay on a cot on July 8, 2004, in Patrol Base Razor’s crude barracks, an air-conditioned refuge against the fierce July heat of Samarra, Iraq.

Suddenly a soldier ran in the front door, shouting something about a truck and a bomb.

Name: Staff Sgt. Michael Broner
Unit: 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division
Medal: Bronze Star with “V”
Earned: July 8, 2004, Samarra, Iraq

Broner heard a crash in the front of the room, then started scrambling over the cots of sleeping soldiers toward the back door.

He waited for the explosion he knew would follow.

“I was saying to myself, it didn’t blow,” said Broner, 32, of the 1st Infantry Division’s 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment.

“And then it blew.”

An explosion from the bomb-laden sport utility vehicle leveled the concrete barracks room, crushing to death five U.S. and two Iraqi soldiers and hurting two dozen others. Four of the dead were members of Broner’s mortar platoon.

STEVE LIEWER/Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Michael Broner, 32, nurses a broken arm back in Germany a month after surviving the car-bombing of his barracks room at Patrol Base Razor, Iraq.

Later, Broner would learn the bomber, wearing a police uniform and driving a police vehicle, was allowed inside the compound, then plowed his vehicle into the barracks. As the SUV exploded, it collapsed the front and outside wall on top of the 11 soldiers inside.

Broner doesn’t remember hearing the blast or seeing the fireball. But he felt the explosion, which sent him flying 20 feet.

“It blew right through me,” he recalled. “The first [wave] lifted me up, and the second one pushed me forward.”

A pile of debris landed on top of Broner, leaving him mostly buried. He stumbled out of the rubble as a few soldiers who had been outside, like Spc. Matthew Campbell, 22, waded in to pull out the dead and injured.

The car bomb had only begun a large insurgent attack on Razor. The insurgents began lobbing rockets and mortars and firing automatic weapons.

Broner made his way to the fire-direction center. From there, he could talk to 1-26 Infantry commanders a few miles away.

“It was just a natural reaction,” he said. “To me, it was like a regular thing: they shoot at us, we shoot back.”

His squad nearly wiped out by the blast, Broner at first had only Spc. Travis Wright to fire the mortars. Eventually, Campbell and Sgt. Matthew Shepherd, who had helped dig through the bombed building, would help as well.

Broner kept the battalion up on the progress of the battle while watching his screen and coordinating three counter-battery mortar missions.

The survivors, boosted by reinforcements and air support, fought off the rebel attack.

Only later did Broner realize that the blast had broken his right arm, burst his eardrums and lacerated him with shrapnel.

Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Broner crawled from the rubble of this barracks room and within minutes was directing counter-mortar fire against the insurgents attacking the base.

Through it all he stayed at his post, leaving only when a medic urged him to go with the other injured to the aid station.

“They said I needed to go,” he recalled. “With the adrenaline flowing, you just don’t realize [you‘re hurt].”

His injuries earned Broner a ticket back to his wife and four children in Germany. He lobbied to return to Iraq as soon as his arm healed. His unit allowed him to return in November.

“I just had to be there for the soldiers,” Broner said. “It was like closure — finishing what I started.”

In April, shortly after his unit returned from Iraq, Broner received a Bronze Star with “V.” Like many decorated soldiers, he has mixed feelings about his medal.

“It’s a great honor,” he said. “But if I could give it up and bring those guys back, I would.”

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‘She was unbelievably level-headed through it all’

BY JESSICA INIGO
Stars and Stripes

It was only supposed to be a mission to deliver a tire to an MP patrol that had come under heavy fire along Alternate Supply Route Sword near Baghdad.

But Staff Sgt. Serena Maren Di Virgilio’s convoy drove right into an ambush.

Their three-truck convoy had been hit with a rocket-propelled grenade.

Name: Staff Sgt. Serena Maren Di Virgilio
Unit: 230th Military Police Company
Medal: Bronze Star with “V”
Earned: April 8, 2003, near Baghdad

“I heard myself screaming, but I couldn’t hear anything else,” Di Virgilio said as she looked away, as if watching a scene from the movie of her life. “Everything was black, and there was smoke everywhere. I’ll never forget that smell.”

And even though the medic from the Headquarters, 230th Military Police Company, was covered with shrapnel wounds, she took care of every soldier in her unit before caring for herself.

Di Virgilio

She focused much of her attention on the gunner of her truck, Spc. Jonathan Kephart, 21, who had shrapnel lodged in his brain. She stabilized Kephart up until the last minute before placing him in a medical evacuation helicopter.

“I feel a lot of guilt for the fact that he died,” Di Virgilio said with a thick voice, as tears filled her light blue eyes.

This is one of the first times she has spoken of the ambush, which took place on April 8, 2003.

Di Virgilio said she was just doing her job. Others call her a hero.

Though at first the 31-year-old from Colorado said her memory of the ambush was fuzzy, the details came flooding back as she relived the day in her mind.

The Iraqis hit the convoy with everything they had once the troops hit the end of one stretch of road.

A string of bombs on the road blocked the troops from going any further, forcing them to turn around and head back into ambush. That’s when Di Virgilio’s truck was rocked by the RPG.

“Kephart was hit. I saw through the smoke, behind the team, that Kephart had fallen back against the cooler, his legs up by the radio. I could only see him from the waist up and then just his legs. He was staring right at me.”

Kephart’s fading eyes locked on Di Virgilio as the medic in her took over. She said the hundreds of Iraqis who had lined up behind berms along either side of the road disappeared. She could no longer hear the whiz of bullets flying by. The explosions no longer mattered. All that mattered was keeping Kephart alive.

While she worked, Iraqis drove alongside the Army trucks to shoot point blank at the troops.

Slowly, the disabled Army trucks made it out of the kill zone.

“She did the medic thing, but she was unbelievably level-headed through it all,” said Master Sgt. Edwin Rossman, who was the fourth platoon sergeant during the ambush. “She went beyond the work of a medic, helping with weapons and ammo at the start of the ambush.”

Di Virgilio — who is the single mother of 10-year-old Taylor Potts — said the real heroes are Sgt. Amy Kovac, who drove the truck out of the ambush, or Staff Sgt. Stephen Mandernach, who took over duties as gunner once Kephart was down.

But it was Di Virgilio who received the Bronze Star with “V” device. She also has earned a Purple Heart and a Combat Medic Badge.

And the horror of that day hasn’t changed Di Virgilio’s view of the Army: Before leaving Iraq, she re-enlisted.

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Who's Your Hero?

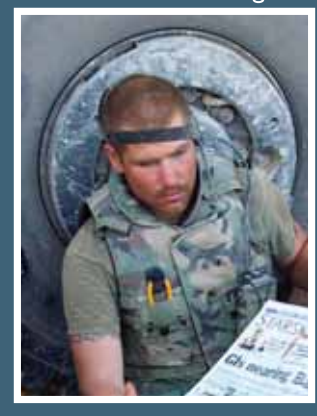
Miller Brewing Company wants to know about the heroes you think deserve some recognition.

Between now and the end of 2005, Miller Brewing Company will salute our "Unsung Heroes"—and not just those who exhibited courage under fire. We are seeking out the everyday heroes, the ones that don't usually get medals or citations. You know who they are: someone who goes above and beyond the call of duty; someone whose job isn't glamorous that you can absolutely count on; someone who is faithful to his or her calling–every day, no matter what.

Tell us about the "someones" you know who give their all and deserve recognition. You decide who the heroes are and tell us their story (it doesn't have to have occurred on a battlefield—it can be any time, anywhere).

Nominations will be reviewed by the Miller Unsung Heroes Selection Committee, a group of Miller employees who have served in the military, created just for this program. Then we'll recognize one Miller Unsung Hero of the Month by printing their story in a full page ad in Stars and Stripes each month through December. Then at the beginning of 2006, we'll celebrate them all and recognize the Miller Unsung Hero of the Year.

Each Unsung Hero of the Month and Unsung Hero of the Year will receive an exciting award package from Miller.



The Miller Unsung Heroes Selection Committee

(from left) **Marty Costello**
Vice President of Engineering
US Navy 1963-69, USMC 1969-1977 A-4 Pilot

Jim Surfus
Environmental Engineer
Air Force Reserve Lt. Col Civil Engineering

Frank Helt
Corporate Security, US Navy

Dwight "Skip" Knak
Corporate Security, USMC 1971-75

Dick Leinenkugel
VP Sales and Marketing Jacob Leinenkugel Brewing Co.
USMC 1980-84 1st Marine Brigade

(not pictured)
Mark Neuwirth
National Accounts Mgr.
USMC 1980-86 Captain, CH-46 Helicopter Pilot

Willie Brown
Corporate Accts Payable
Mother of US Army soldier who recently served in Iraq

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US Army
193rd Military Intelligence Battalion, Ft. Clayton, Panama

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‘We started making them fly off roofs’

BY LEO SHANE III
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Steve Reichert earned his Bronze Star with “V” device like many other Marines in Iraq: saving the lives of members of his patrol by gunning down attacking insurgents.

But he did it from a mile away.

Name: Staff Sgt. Steve Reichert

Unit: 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment

Medal: Bronze Star with “V”

Earned: April 9, 2004, Lutafiyah, Iraq

The 25-year-old sniper with the Headquarters Company of the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, shot down nine insurgents from thousands of feet behind his comrades — including an enemy machine gunner positioned 1,614 meters away — during a mission on April 9, 2004.

Commanders praised his accuracy and quick response as “inspirational,” especially since he did it while under fire himself. Reichert, a Massachusetts native, said it was just part of his job.

“That was the first time we had really come under fire,” he said. “But once the insurgents started to come in, we started making them fly off roofs.”

Reichert and his spotter, Cpl. Winston Tucker, for several days had been using an oil storage tank outside of Lutafiyah to survey the region and cover unit movements through the town. According to the Marine Corps, the patrol’s mission that day was to look for insurgents in the area and protect Arba’een pilgrims moving through.

The storage tank had come under fire in previous days, and Reichert said once he positioned himself on top of it, he came under attack again from enemy snipers and other small-arms fire.

“It was not the best spot in the world, but we needed to be there,” he said.

Courtesy of Steve Reichert

Staff Sgt. Steve Reichert lines up a target from atop an oil storage tank outside of Lutafiyah, Iraq, in April 2004.

Through his gun sight, Reichert spotted an explosive device in an animal carcass along his patrol’s path and radioed disposal experts. Reichert said once they moved in, insurgents began their ambush.

Patrol leaders radioed to him that a rooftop gunner had pinned down parts of the unit. Reichert located him, quickly calculated the distance and drop in his head, and fired two shots, the second killing the attacker.

Tucker and Reichert then swept the area from their distant position, taking out three attackers as they scrambled up a staircase and several others as they darted in and out of buildings.

Reinforcements came shortly thereafter, and at one point mistook Reichert’s sniper fire as part of the enemy assault. Reichert said he held his position and kept firing, even as the friendly fire caromed around them.

The sniper duo spent nearly 13 hours in the field that day, offering support to units entering the escalating firefight.

“When we linked back up, they told me several Marines had been killed, and that was hard to swallow,” he said. “We did the best we could, but it’s tough to see that when you lose guys.”

But Corps commanders credited Reichert’s actions with saving several other Marines that day. A few weeks later, Reichert was seriously injured when the vehicle he was traveling in was hit by a roadside bomb.

He plans on medically retiring later this year, but he said he hopes to continue serving in another government agency.

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‘We made everyone safe, maybe, for another day’

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

As Maj. Gregg Kopeck and his wingman headed to their F-15E fighters on April 2, 2003, their original tasking was scrapped. Flying from Al Udeid, Qatar, to Baghdad, they had precious little time to plan an attack that would require seamless coordination, creative tactics and near-perfect aim.

Name: Maj. Gregg Kopeck

Unit: 336th Fighter Squadron

Medal: Distinguished Flying Cross

Earned: April 2, 2003, Baghdad

Medal: Air Medal

Earned: April 4, 2003, Baghdad

Kopeck, now assigned to 13th Air Force, was flying with the 336th Fighter Squadron from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C.

At a time when it was feared Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, Kopeck would take the lead in destroying suspected Scud missile launchers stashed in bridge culverts under a major highway coming out of Baghdad.

It was a mission that ended 10 hours later and included destruction of a rocket launcher and an anxious flight back to Qatar. For his feats that day in combat, Kopeck earned the Distinguished Flying Cross.

To take out the Scud launchers, Kopeck and his wingman, Capt. Randall Haskin, employed a “buddy tactic.” One aircraft would drop the bomb and the other would guide it in with lasers.

“It’s something that we do practice,” Kopeck said. “What made this different, after the first bomb released, it was a wake-up signal for everybody” with anti-aircraft artillery in Baghdad to start shooting. “It exposes the second aircraft to more risk.”

That was one of many challenges. Since the launchers were concealed, various resources were needed to find and confirm the target, from the weapons systems officer in a two-seat F-15E to an Army forward controller watching the Iraqis hide the weapons from about 1,500 yards away. As the lead pilot, Kopeck also had to ensure he and Haskin didn’t get hit by other aircraft in the vicinity, including bombers flying as high as 50,000 feet.

Determining the best angle to guide the weapons was tricky. Not only would it have to enter the culvert, which Kopeck estimated was only 30 to 40 feet wide, but there was traffic on the bridge. Despite the fact Baghdad was under attack, “people were going back and forth to work,” Kopeck said. “We had to ask a few questions and consider what kind of collateral damage we would accept.”

After they launched two bombs, heavy anti-aircraft artillery forced Kopeck and Haskin to split up and form a “tag team,” each taking turns guiding their weapons in, eluding a surface-to-air missile in the process. They confirmed five targets; the pilots had to guide 10 weapons, one into each end of the culvert. Though it was unknown what exactly the Iraqis concealed, Kopeck said at least one Scud launcher was confirmed, both by the ground spotter and the fact the culvert burned long into the night, indicating the presence of rocket propulsion fuel.

Courtesy of Gregg Kopeck

Maj. Gregg Kopeck holds his daughter, Natasha, at an Operation Iraqi Freedom homecoming in 2003 at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C.

“We were able to hit all of the targets without destroying” the bridge or any vehicles, Kopeck said. “We saw the targets detonate. There were still cars driving on the bridge. It must have been a pretty wild ride.”

After refueling, the pilots were tasked to locate helicopters in and around Baghdad. Senior leaders not only feared at the time that Iraqi outlaws were escaping from Baghdad this way, but rumors abounded that helicopters outfitted with crop-dusting equipment were being loaded with deadly chemicals, Kopeck said.

Kopeck and Haskin had to drop to a lower elevation to hunt helicopters, exposing them to the heavily-fortified missile engagement zone around Baghdad. “The Iraqis took every surface-to-air missile and concentrated them in Baghdad for a last stand,” Kopeck said. “We had to pick our way in and out of Baghdad to find the helicopters.”

They didn’t find any, but they located a missile launcher and destroyed it. As they headed out of Baghdad, on the return to Qatar, Kopeck’s wingman had aircraft trouble, reporting hearing a “rumbling.” The wing tank was malfunctioning, but the plane held together long enough for them to make it to Al Udeid.

Looking back, Kopeck called the mission “pretty intense. We realized we had done something pretty special, especially with the short-notice tasking, digging out and finding the Scuds. The biggest fear at the time was Saddam was going to load up Scuds with bad things. We felt we did ourselves, our country and (Iraq’s) neighbors proud. We made everyone safe, maybe, for another day.”

Kopeck also received an Air Medal for a mission two days later on April 4, in which he and his wingman, Capt. Mike Love, bombed an Iraqi military encampment along the Euphrates River near where a team of U.S. Army Rangers was planning to cross.

“They passed along a thanks when we went home,” Kopeck said of the Rangers. “I took that as a sign we did what they wanted us to do.”

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‘He’s the reason I’m … talking to you’

BY STEVE LIEWER
Stars and Stripes

Spc. Larry Underwood’s nose told him his buddies were in trouble.

He and four of his scout-platoon mates from the 1st Infantry Division’s 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment sat in the rear of a Bradley fighting vehicle the night of July 21, 2004.

Name: Spc. Larry Underwood

Unit: 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division

Medal: Silver Star

Earned: July 21, 2004, Ad Duluiyah, Iraq

They were hot and tired; they’d just wrapped up a 24-hour foot patrol in Ad Duluiyah, Iraq, just east of rebel-held Samarra. About 50 yards behind them was a second Bradley.

As they cruised along, a roadside bomb exploded underneath the second Bradley.

“We didn’t really hear the explosion,” Underwood said, explaining that the rumble of their vehicle’s tracks disguised the boom. “But we could smell the gunpowder.”

The driver heard it and stopped. They jumped out and rushed to the burning Bradley. Their actions in the next few minutes would save four soldiers’ lives and earn Underwood a Silver Star.

Underwood, 30, grew up in rural Booneville, Ark. After high school, he drifted from one dead-end job to another for six years until his older brother, an officer, talked him into joining the Army.

In late 1999, after training as a Cavalry scout, he landed in Schweinfurt, Germany, with the 1-4 Cavalry. Early in his second tour, the unit was called to Iraq.

The soldiers were ready and eager, but that excitement soon faded into a routine of patrols and raids that Underwood described as “the most boring months of your life, and the most exciting seconds.”

On that night, Pfc. Nicholas Blodgett, 21, was driving the second Bradley. Standing in the hatch next to him was the fighting vehicle’s commander, Staff Sgt. Bradley Shadden.

In the back was a five-man patrol they’d picked up around midnight. Staff Sgt. Metoyer Jordan and his team shouted over the Bradley’s din, discussing what comedy they might watch when they returned to nearby Forward Operating Base MacKenzie.

Then came the blast.

“My initial reaction was, ‘What the hell was that?’ ” Jordan, 29, of New Orleans, recalled.

Courtesy of Larry Underwood

Spc. Larry Underwood earned a Silver Star for freeing four other soldiers from a burning Humvee. Pictured are, from left: Sgt. Vincent Vidal, Staff Sgt. Thomas Francis, Sgt. Josh Tyler, Staff Sgt. Adam Young, Underwood and Sgt. Wesson.

As smoke filled the Bradley, Jordan tried to pull Blodgett out of the driver’s hole. But he was hopelessly stuck and showed no signs of life. So he rushed to the rear to open the hatch. It opened a crack, then jammed. Jordan and the others yelled for help.

Outside, Underwood and his platoon mates — Staff Sgts. Tommy Francis and Shawn Norman, Sgts. Josh Tyler and Vincent Vidal — saw the flames and came running to help.

Shadden leaped out of the hatch. Underwood grabbed a fire extinguisher to douse the flames around the driver, then tried to help Shadden pull Blodgett’s body out.

It was no use.

Hearing Jordan’s shouts, Underwood and Shadden raced around back to help open the jammed hatch. Heat and smoke prevented them from spending more than 30 seconds each on it.

“It was driving everybody crazy,” Underwood said. “You’ve got four guys yelling out of the vehicle. Nothing was going to get us away till we got them out.”

As flames licked at feet and hot smoke seared lungs, Underwood realized he could use his rifle barrel to pry at the stuck latch. Instantly the door opened. The trapped soldiers barreled out and were led to a wall to protect them from ammo rounds now cooking off.

In April, after returning from Iraq, Underwood learned he would receive the Silver Star.

It brings him no joy. It reminds him of the Bradley burning with his friend’s body inside. And he doesn’t like being singled out.

“It was a team,” he said. “Everybody did everything they could.”

The men who were in the burning Bradley, however, don’t doubt Underwood deserves the medal.

“I haven’t really thanked him, because I don’t know how,” Jordan said. “On the inside, I love this soldier to death. He’s the reason I’m here talking to you.”

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‘We almost walked on top of the enemy’

BY LISA BURGESS
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Konrad Reed should consider calling “Ripley’s Believe It or Not.” After all, how many soldiers have lived to describe what it feels like to roll on top of a live grenade?

To top it off, the 24-year-old father of five from Murdo, S.D., survived not one, but two grenade explosions on the same day.

Name: Staff Sgt. Konrad Reed

Unit: 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division

Medal: Bronze Star with “V”

Earned: April 25, 2003, Afghanistan

Reed, a field artillery soldier, was stationed with the 82nd Airborne Division’s C Battery, 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment at Firebase Shkin, a dusty little base near Pakistan.

The unit went into Afghanistan in January 2003 and wasn’t due to leave until August 2003.

On April 25 of that year, the unit mounted a reconnaissance mission to look for 20 to 30 al-Qaida loyalists that local Afghans said were slipping over the mountains from Pakistan and stirring up trouble.

Sure enough, “we almost walked on top of the enemy,” Reed recalled in an April telephone interview from Fort Bragg, N.C. “They were in some kind of assembly area, like they were pulling security.”

Reed, a sergeant at the time, figured he was “less than 12 feet away” when the insurgents started shooting, hitting a staff sergeant from Reed’s unit right in the kneecap.

Reed yelled for a medic, dropped to the ground, and started firing back.

“It’s the greatest feeling, and the worst at the same time,” Reed said of his first taste of combat. “You know people are getting shot, but you’re doing what you’ve been training to do every since you got in the Army.”

Unfortunately for Reed, there was no cover to his front, and nothing close behind him.

“I was completely pinned down,” Reed said. “Things were getting intense.”

Reed’s lieutenant yelled “grenade.”

“Before I could do anything, sure enough a grenade landed top of me,” Reed, who was on his back firing, said.

The grenade “hit my weapon and bounced off to my left,” Reed said. “I rolled to my right and started crawling as fast as I could.

“At this point in time, I pretty much considered myself done for.”

Reed

The grenade went off.

“It was incredibly loud. The blast split my [M-16] sling. I lost my weapon,” Reed said. “I got hit in the foot with shrapnel.”

Nevertheless, Reed was surprised to note, he was still alive and able to keep crawling back to a safer position.

“Thankfully, it was a cheap Chinese grenade. They don’t make them as good as we do,” he said.

The second grenade came maybe 20 minutes later.

“It landed somewhere to my left,” Reed said.

Urgently trying to avoid the munition, but not sure where it had landed, Reed took a desperate gamble.

He dived left, tumbling down the hill — smack into the path of the grenade.

“It rolled under me and blew up,” Reed said.

Witnesses told Reed the grenade blew him 6 feet into the air.

“I thought that only happened in the movies,” Reed said one of them later told him.

Reed was unconscious and soaked with blood. Battlefield medics were sure he was dead.

But “the IBA [individual body armor] worked,” Reed said.

Damage was limited to “42 pieces of shrapnel and a bunch of ruined equipment.”

Reed spent three days recuperating from his injuries at Bagram Air Field before returning to his unit for the rest of the deployment. Two servicemembers died in the fight and more than 20 were wounded.

Reed was awarded the Bronze Star with “V” for valor for his actions.

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‘Yes, I was scared during that time’

BY GREG TYLER
Stars and Stripes

The Marines from Company K of 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, were fortunate that an attached squad leader from I Marine Expeditionary Force, 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, used innovation and determination under fire to rig a makeshift bridge they all had to cross just outside Baghdad.

Sgt. Mauricio Guevara, 24, and his squad traveled ahead of the larger force April 5, 2003, determining that the bridge had been sabotaged to prevent crossing.

He was awarded the Bronze Star with “V” because of his subsequent actions.

He later spoke about rifle fire and mortar blasts intensifying late that afternoon. Guevara realized the bridge had to be patched, but the sergeant needed sturdy materials very quickly to complete the fix.

At nightfall, Guevara slipped into a small town and searched the area for useful objects. With the enemy still shooting and lobbing mortar shells, he carried out his plan.

Name: Sgt. Mauricio Guevara

Unit: 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, I Marine Expeditionary Force

Medal: Bronze Star with “V”

Earned: April 5, 2003, outside Baghdad

“We did some recon in the nearby town and took a bunch of scaffolding materials with us, still taking fire, even in the dark,” Guevara said. “We used the scaffolding to build something like a footbridge and were able to cross the next day.”

The rigged bridge allowed Guevara’s squad and the larger force of troops to their rear to cross, but the danger from enemy fire intensified.

“During that time, we were still taking fire when the other Marines started making their way across behind us,” he said. “Then we started taking more mortar and finally, artillery.”

Guevara kept his composure and helped others who struggled as they crossed the bridge of scaffolding. He stayed calm, he said, to set an example to his squad members, ignoring the possibility of being hit by a rifle shell or worse.

“Yes, I was scared during that time, but even so, you can’t show it because you are in a leadership position with your squad, and they depend upon you and draw their own courage from you,” he said.

After the crossing, two Marines from Company K were killed. All of Guevara’s squad members made it across safely.

He said his award isn’t about his individual actions in Iraq.

“I couldn’t have done any of those things by myself,” he added. “To me, it has always been about the squad’s efforts.”

E-mail Greg Tyler at: tylerg@pstripes.osd.mil

Courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps

Sgt. Mauricio Guevara receives the Bronze Star with “V” from Col. Stephen Fenstermacher, commander of Marine Wing Support Squadron 171, at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

‘Time to throw the rules out and do what was necessary’

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Within a span of six days, F-16 fighter pilot Maj. Thomas Hanford used instinct, skill and a dash of courage to destroy numerous targets on the ground and save the lives of U.S. forces in two missions flown in the early days of the Iraq war, while fighting was intense.

The feats would earn him two Distinguished Flying Crosses.

On April 1, 2003, Hanford, who at the time was assigned to the 77th Fighting Squadron at Shaw Air Force Base, S.C., was tasked with his wingman, Capt. Matt Williams, to take out Iraqi military vehicles that were spotted at night parked just off a Baghdad road.

Name: Maj. Thomas O. Hanford

Unit: 77th Fighting Squadron

Medals: 2 Distinguished Flying Crosses

Earned: April 1 and 7, 2003, Iraq

Though cleared to bomb a set of coordinates, Hanford decided to fly in and look at the target area with his own eyes “since the weather was good enough for me to see the ground.”

He wanted to confirm the trucks were there, and see whether any civilian facilities were nearby. Sure enough, he found a civilian housing area next to the target area, information he used to adjust the angle of his bombs to avoid collateral damage.

“After about five passes, I dropped my bombs on the Iraqi vehicles and destroyed several of them,” he said.

Every dive produced a barrage of anti-aircraft artillery from Iraqis on the ground. Coming off target, Hanford spotted what he thought was either a surface-to-air missile or a large-caliber anti-aircraft artillery site “shooting up into the air and exploding at about 30,000 feet,” he said.

“Whoever it was, was trying to find coalition aircraft. Rarely do you get to see where they’re coming from.” He radioed for more F-16s and guided them to the source. “They rolled in, dropped their bombs … it burned for hours.”

The mission wasn’t over. Hanford was out of bombs, but since Williams still had an anti-radiation missile — used to identify and destroy enemy missile sites — they were tasked to find more anti-aircraft artillery over Baghdad. The sun was starting to rise and Hanford could see bullets flying just about everywhere.

“I started calling the fighters over and stacking them up, and we just started picking off” artillery nests. Target sites were close to Baghdad, many were located in parks.

Hanford said he followed “each flight down the chute to make sure they were dropping on the right thing,” all the while, with his wingman, trying to avoid seven surface-to-air missiles shot their way. Hanford called the eight-hour mission “probably the most we had been shot at.”

On April 7, Hanford and wingman Capt. Jay Mahajan, on an uneventful night sortie, listened on the radio as a team of U.S. special forces called for air support in the mountains northeast of Baghdad near the Iran border.

Bad weather prevented two F-14s and their back-ups from homing in on the enemy targets before they had to leave to refuel; Hanford and his wingman then had their chance.

“We don’t have a targeting pod; all we have is our night-vision goggles,” Hanford said. “So I put my wingman in trail and we dove down under the weather” below a 5,000-foot ceiling.

Hanford

It was dark, still hard to see. Down below, 15 U.S. servicemembers were getting shelled by Iraqi paramilitary troops, holed up in a mountainside in bombed-out bunkers.

A special ops forward-air controller gave “me the coordinates for where the bad guys were. He told me I was clear to drop on those coordinates,” Hanford said.

But the points seemed close to a team Hanford had worked with on the ground only an hour prior, so he asked the controller, who was hiding in the dark from Iraqis with the other U.S. troops, to recheck the location while he and his wingman held at around 1,000 feet.

The controller said, “ ‘Standby, let my get under my poncho,’ ” Hanford said. “He got under his poncho (to look at his map) and said, ‘Oh, good catch.’ He had missed a digit on his coordinates, which would have made it about 10 miles off.”

With this new information, and guided by the controller, who beamed at the Iraqi’s position an infrared light that Hanford could see with his night-vision goggles, we “dropped cluster bombs on the Iraqis, destroyed whatever was there,” Hanford said. “[The special forces] were very happy.”

In dipping below the 5,000-foot ceiling, Hanford noted he broke a rule of engagement that pilots were not to fly under 10,000 feet without permission “because they didn’t want you getting shot down. We made a personal decision in our squadron, if there were guys in trouble, there were no limits to what we would do. It was time to throw the rules out and do what was necessary.”

Hanford also in 2003 received three Air Medals: March 22 and March 31, for individual combat sorties flown in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom around Baghdad; and March 2 to April 14, for flying 20 combat sorties over Iraq.

Now at Misawa Air Base, Japan, where he’s chief of weapons and tactics for the 35th Fighter Wing, Hanford said he’s most proud of helping the Special Forces “because we actually got to help some guys out who might not have survived if we hadn’t gone below the weather.”

But his most rewarding mission, over an 18-year Air Force career, was being the pilot who first made radio contact with Scott O’Grady on June 8, 1995, six days after O’Grady’s F-16 was shot down by a surface-to-air missile over Bosnia.

“It was pretty emotional because we really thought he was dead,” Hanford said.

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‘What good am I if I lose my head?’

BY RON JENSEN
Stars and Stripes

The Shahi Khot mountains of eastern Afghanistan were dark, cold and dangerous.

More than 2,000 coalition forces, about half of them American, were on those rugged, snow-covered slopes, trying to put the squeeze on Taliban and al-Qaida forces in what was known as Operation Anaconda.

Name: Tech Sgt. Robert A. Roberts III

Unit: 321st Special Tactics Squadron

Medal: Distinguished Flying Cross

Earned: March 2002, Shahi Khot mountains in Afghanistan

Medal: Air Medal with “V”

Earned: Classified

It was March 2002, just six months after the attacks on America that killed nearly 3,000 people.

Word reached the 66th Expeditionary Rescue Squadron at Kandahar air base that three soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division needed evacuation, including one severely wounded by shrapnel from a mortar.

That’s where Tech Sgt. Robert A. Roberts III comes in.

Roberts is a pararescueman, now with the 321st Special Tactics Squadron of the 352nd Special Operations Group at RAF Mildenhall, England. In March 2002, however, he was assigned to the 58th Rescue Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., which had deployed to Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

His job, once the wounded men were reached, was to get them aboard the HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter and treat their injuries. On the way in, the helicopter took fire. At the landing zone, it took even more.

Roberts, 30, remembers rocket-propelled grenades, mortar rounds and machine gun bullets flying through the landing zone.

He doesn’t brag, but he acknowledges he stayed cool while he assessed the situation.

“Chaos and fear are contagious. They really are,” he said. “What good am I if I lose my head?”

Two of the wounded had minor injuries. The other was severely wounded.

Roberts oversaw loading them all on the helicopter.

The most seriously wounded soldier suffered from, among other things, hypothermia and loss of blood.

Roberts

The citation that accompanied Roberts’ Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism, which he and 16 others on two rescue missions that night were awarded in November 2002, includes this description: “The patient was pale and cold. His blood pressure could not be measured.”

The citation credits Roberts’ bravery, medical knowledge and rapid response to the patient’s condition with saving the man’s life.

On the ride to a hospital, Roberts transfused blood to the patient.

“He was pretty bad off,” Roberts recalled recently. “And he’s alive because of me.”

Again, he’s not bragging. The DFC is evidence of that.

Roberts joined the Air Force as a civil engineer after completing a degree in architecture at Arizona State University. Someone suggested he might like the life of a pararescueman.

Despite the operations tempo — he was on temporary duty 311 days in 2004 — the career agrees with him. In a later rescue that is still classified, Roberts earned the Air Medal with “V” for valor.

The citations are nice, Roberts said, but “not a necessity.”

“A pat on the back and a shake of the hand would mean just as much to me,” he said.

Two days after the rescue, Roberts visited the soldier whose life he saved that night in Afghanistan. He gave the man a pararescueman patch with Roberts’ name on the back, something he gives to everyone he rescues.

“It’s a silly thing that I do,” he said.

It is safe to guess the rescued soldier still has that patch, silly or not.

The record shows that eight Americans died in Operation Anaconda. Without Roberts, that figure would have been nine.

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‘Everybody behind me was dead or injured’

BY STEVE LIEWER
Stars and Stripes

First Sgt. Michael Grinston stepped around a corner, onto the narrow Bayji thoroughfare his men called “Market Street” because of the dense row of shops that hugged its curbs.

He trudged along, fourth in the line of soldiers that had snaked through alleys from the Iraqi police station, headed for the mayor’s office two blocks ahead.

Name: 1st Sgt. Michael Grinston

Unit: 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Infantry Division

Medals: 2 Bronze Stars with “V”

Earned: April 9 and July 2, 2004, in Bayji, Iraq

As they talked with the police chief around noon on this eerily quiet Good Friday, April 9, 2004, an Iraqi man rushed in, warning that 20 insurgents were about to attack the mayor’s office.

Later, Grinston, then 36, of the 1st Infantry Division’s 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery Regiment, would learn to be wary of such claims — to respond at full strength, with weapons ready, behind as much armor as he could muster. They might be marching right into an ambush.

But with only a month in Iraq under their ammo belts, Grinston’s artillerymen-turned-grunts had a lot of learning ahead of them.

Suddenly, from a rooftop a block ahead, he heard the whoosh of a rocket-propelled grenade headed his way.

“It probably went 4 or 5 inches over my shoulder,” he recalled. “I didn’t have a scratch. But I was the only one [standing] in the alleyway, because everybody behind me was dead or injured.”

The RPG hit the three soldiers behind him before exploding against a wall in a shower of metal. Staff Sgts. Toby Mallett, 26, and Raymond Jones, 31, were killed instantly. Spc. Peter Enos, 24, a medic, would die of his injuries soon after. Two others suffered shrapnel wounds.

A hail of small-arms fire filled the alley as he stood, alone and exposed, in the street. He tried to fire his M-16, but it jammed.

Grinston raced back and pulled a yellow smoke grenade off of Mallett’s body and set it off, a prearranged SOS to the rest of his platoon. In a matter of minutes, he had rallied the rest of his team, ordered suppressive fire against the rooftop sniper’s nest, and dragged the casualties around the corner to relative safety.

Shortly his platoon would speed to the rescue in Humvees, loading up the dead, the wounded and the survivors and rushing back to their camp, Forward Operating Base Summerall, just west of the city.

“It was probably only 10 or 15 minutes,” Grinston said. “But it seemed like a lifetime.”

But Grinston’s day was far from over. Back at Summerall, he organized three platoons and some tanks, then headed back downtown for a counterattack.

During a six-hour firefight, he earned the awe of his men by racing from vehicle to vehicle to instruct his soldiers after their radios failed — again. Once he braved a barrage of RPGs to order a tank forward.

DAVID C. DYER/Courtesy of the U.S. Army

First Sgt. Michael Grinston, right, poses with 1st Infantry Division commander Maj. Gen. John Batiste.

Grinston’s men swept the buildings along Market Street and cleared them of insurgents.

“I wish the guys wouldn’t have died,” he said. “But it taught us. We had to learn it.”

Grinston’s efforts earned him the Bronze Star with “V,” the first of two he earned during his yearlong Iraq tour. (He was awarded the second after another patrol was ambushed on Market Street on July 2. He rallied his troops and organized a counterattack that killed 10 enemies and wounded 10 more, with no friendly casualties.)

The attack solidified a reputation Grinston earned almost as soon as he arrived in Iraq as a magnet for bombs and bullets. His driver, Sgt. Stephen Wagasky, 21, of Houston, said their Humvee was hit by roadside bombs at least five times, and once it hit a land mine. They came under fire from small arms and grenades more times than he can count.

“Every time we went out, something would happen,” Wagasky said. “There were at least 10 times I thought we were going to die.”

Growing up in Jasper, Ala., Grinston planned to be an architect, not a soldier. But he ran out of money during his studies at Mississippi State, and jumped when a recruiter dangled college cash in front of him.

Long experience as artillerymen, who typically work behind the lines, made the fearlessness of Grinston and his men all the more remarkable. But he rejects the idea he’s done anything special. He was just doing his job, taking care of his soldiers.

Although he’s proud to have earned them, his Bronze Stars don’t give him much pleasure.

“A lot of bad things happened (for me) to get those awards,” Grinston said. “People are dead; people are missing limbs. It’s something I don’t want to think about.”

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‘It just felt wrong not to pull the trigger’

BY BEN MURRAY
Stars and Stripes

By the time Lance Cpl. Thomas Adametz darted out of the besieged house full of Marines to man an abandoned machine gun, scores of insurgents were close enough that they could almost drop grenades on the troops.

Name: Lance Cpl. Thomas Adametz

Unit: 2nd Battalion, 1st Regiment, 1st Marine Division

Medal: Silver Star

Earned: April 26, 2004, Fallujah, Iraq

AK-47 fire rained down from nearby windows and doorways, and insurgents sent rockets sizzling into the Marines’ position.

The more than 30 men from the 2nd Battalion, 1st Regiment of the 1st Marine Division were hemmed into the battered building in Fallujah. Their position was in danger of being overrun. Casualties were mounting.

“All the houses around us were just full of insurgents. They were on the rooftops right next to us,” said Lance Cpl. John Flores, who was wounded in the attack. “They were swarming all in on us.”

The machine gunner, who was dazed by a grenade explosion, dropped his Squad Automatic Weapon, and Adametz made the decision that would eventually earn him the Silver Star “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action against the enemy,” on April 26, 2004, his award citation reads.

“I knew my 16 wasn’t laying down enough fire,” he said. So he darted into the automatic fire and explosions outside the Marines’ defensive position and grabbed the abandoned SAW, firing it at the attackers until the barrel overheated.

“He just stepped out there and started shooting,” Flores said.

The Marines had been out on a mission to clear a pair of buildings near a new sniper location before the shooting started that morning, Adametz said. It was a quiet morning, with ominous portents of a coming battle.

“ ‘Something’s not right. Something’s going to happen,’ ” he remembered thinking. “It was quiet for hours and hours.”

Flores remembers the day beginning the same way, quietly, with, “only a couple of RPGs and a couple of AK rounds or whatever.”

ANDY J. HURT

Lance Cpl. Thomas Adametz received a Silver Star for his actions during operations in Fallujah last year.

But then, the insurgents sprang their ambush by tossing grenades onto the roof of the Marines’ position, wounding the men there, and suddenly things were no longer quiet.

“I just heard grenades, and people screaming and yelling,” Flores said.

The grenade attack was the catalyst for the assault that would eventually bring the insurgents right to the very doorstep of the Marines’ makeshift bunker.

“They were so close,” Flores said. “They were, like, kicking the door in, trying to come into our house.”

It was in trying to repel that onrush that Adametz burned his hand changing out the melting barrel of his adopted SAW, before ratcheting in a second barrel. When that one seized up, he ditched it, ran inside to get another, then went back out again to continue defending the building.

There was no shortage of targets, he said, recalling enemy fighters arriving “by the truckload and the busload.”

“They just kept on coming,” he said. “It just felt wrong not to pull the trigger that day.”

With nearly half the squad eventually hit in the more-than-five-hour fight, the number of unhurt defenders was shrinking, Adametz said, and he thought he might eventually be overwhelmed by the attackers. His reaction to the notion?

“To be honest? ‘This sucks,’ ” said the 23-year-old from Winslow, Maine.

But Adametz and the Marines of Company E stayed on their guns until the wounded could be evacuated and the attack subsided, a desperate defense that garnered the men a number of Bronze Star and Silver Star nominations.

“And I can’t even count how many Purple Hearts were awarded that day,” Adametz said.

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‘The pedals were gone, and so were my legs’

BY LEO SHANE III
Stars and Stripes

Maj. Ladda “Tammy” Duckworth remembers seeing a ball of flame after an RPG hit her helicopter, and wondering why her legs couldn’t work the control pedals.

“I found out later the pedals were gone, and so were my legs,” she said.

Name: Maj. Ladda “Tammy” Duckworth

Unit: Illinois Army National Guard

Medal: Air Medal, Army Commendation Medal

Earned: Nov. 12, 2004, in Iraq

The 36-year-old Illinois Army National Guard pilot was returning from a mission Nov. 12 when the attack occurred. Before the attack, Duckworth said, she had flown more than 120 combat hours during her eight months in Iraq without incident.

But that day insurgents scored a direct hit on her Black Hawk, seriously wounding her and another guardsman inside. Doctors told her she lost nearly half the blood in her body and almost lost her right arm as well.

“I didn’t know I was hurt,” she said. “We had started taking some small-arms fire, and I turned to my co-pilot and said we could be in for some trouble. As the words left my mouth, there was a big fireball at my knees.”

Duckworth said she remembers acting on instinct after that, doing everything she could to land the helicopter. Looking back now, she thinks her efforts did little, because the rocket punched a gaping hole into the aircraft floor and control systems.

But her pilot in command, Chief Warrant Officer Dan Milberg, did manage to land the chopper safely. Once she realized they were on the ground, she reached up to turn off the helicopter blades.

“That was the last bit of stress that caused me to black out,” she said.

She passed in and out of consciousness for eight days. Milberg got Duckworth to a nearby rescue crew, who rushed her to a nearby camp, then to Germany for emergency surgery.

Milberg earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions that day. Duckworth, who was awarded the Air Medal, said she’s proud of her reaction to the crisis, but she called Milberg “the real hero” of the mission.

Duckworth, who works as a supervisor for the charity Rotary International in her civilian life, has spent the last six months at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, rehabbing her still-injured right arm and learning to walk on two prosthetic legs.

She also caught the attention of congressional officials during numerous hearings in Washington, for her blunt assertion that she’ll fly helicopters for the Army again someday.

“This didn’t change who I am,” she said. “I’m an air assault pilot. I’m not about to let some guy who got lucky with an RPG decide how to live my life.”

In early May she started that process, climbing back into a Black Hawk cockpit at Fort Belvoir, Va.

Duckworth said she is proud of her Purple Heart, an award her late father, a Marine, also received. She is thankful that she lost only her legs and not her life, and she uses that as her motivation to get back to flying.

“For me to sit around and feel sorry for myself, that’s going to dishonor my crewmates’ efforts to save my life,” she said. “I’m not about the pass up the second chance I’ve been given.”

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COURTESY OF BRYAN BOWLSBEY/Illinois Army National Guard

Maj. Ladda “Tammy” Duckworth, pictured here as a captain, poses with candy-filled packages for Iraqi children in 2004.

‘All I thought was ‘Shoot back!’ ’

BY LEO SHANE III
Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Sholah Yi said his bad luck in Iraq probably was good luck for the Army.

Investigators said the five insurgents who attacked his Humvee — killing his commanding officer and wounding Yi — likely had their sights on an easier, more vulnerable target.

Name: Sgt. Sholah Yi

Unit: 21st Military Police Company, 503rd Battalion, 16th Military Police Brigade

Medal: Bronze Star with “V“

Earned: March 24, 2004, outside Baghdad

But Yi’s patrol from the 21st Military Police Company out of Fort Bragg disrupted their plans by confronting the insurgents, killing several in an ensuing firefight and likely saving lives of coalition forces.

“We really messed up their ambush, so we kind of got lucky that way,” said Yi, a 24-year-old from California. “Once it was over, we found a lot more ammunition and machine guns in their truck, so they were probably planning a larger attack.”

Yi, who earned a Bronze Star with “V” and a Purple Heart for that incident, previously had spent six months serving in Afghanistan and was scheduled to end his tour just before his unit was to be deployed to Iraq. But he re-enlisted, he said, to help keep his fellow soldiers safe.

“It’s just something I wanted to do,” he said.

He had been driving scout missions for convoys for about two months before the March 24, 2004, firefight. On that day, Yi said, he and two other soldiers were escorting a convoy from the Baghdad International airport when they saw a suspicious vehicle.

His squad leader, Sgt. 1st Class Wentz Shanaberger III, told Yi to pull alongside, then both men got out to investigate the four men in the car. Yi said as soon as Shanaberger reached the vehicle the men began firing.

Yi

Shanaberger was killed instantly. Yi said he was wounded on the wrist and thigh as he dived for cover.

“When the first shots rang out, all I thought was ‘Shoot back!’ ” he said. “But all I had with me was my 9 mm (pistol), so as I fired I went back to the Humvee to get my rifle.”

He took cover behind the vehicle just as a grenade exploded, sending shrapnel into his shoulder and incapacitating his left arm. His gunner suffered a concussion, leaving Yi alone to face the insurgents.

“I grabbed my M-4 and caught one guy as he came around the truck,” he said. “Then I fired the rest of my mag into the car, then went back to look for more ammo.”

Reinforcements from the convoy and a nearby Marine patrol arrived shortly thereafter, and more insurgents began firing from nearby rooftops. The Marines eliminated the disorganized ambush while they rushed the wounded soldiers back to camp.

Yi took several months to recover from his wounds, but he returned to Iraq in September to finish his tour of duty with his company.

“I requested to go back as soon as I could,” he said. “Part of me was still mad about [Shanaberger], and I wanted to get back there. But I also didn’t want to leave the guys there.”

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‘He told me, ‘Sarge, I’m not going to leave you’ ’

BY BEN MURRAY
Stars and Stripes

In the middle of the gunfire and confusion that followed a roadside bomb attack on their supply convoy, two soldiers sat alone in the street having a desperate conversation.

One of the men, Sgt. Arthur Coleman from the 1st Battalion, 77th Armored Regiment, had been grievously wounded in the April 11, 2004, explosion near Logistics Support Area Anaconda.

Name: Spc. Blair Boyette

Unit: 1st Battalion, 77th Armor Regiment, 1st Infantry Division

Medal: Bronze Star with “V“

Earned: April 11, 2004, between LSA Anaconda and Balad, Iraq

His right side shredded and burned by the explosion, Coleman had been shot at least three times as he tried to escape a burning truck, and he was convinced he would never make it off that street alive, he said.

Coleman told his driver, Spc. Blair Boyette, to remember his last words and then get away, so the message could be conveyed to his wife.

“Pretty much, in my mind, I was already dead,” Coleman said.

But at his side, Boyette, also from the 1-77 Armored, was trying to patch up the sergeant’s wounds while gunfire flashed around them.

“I told him, ‘If I fade, you need to go,’ ” Coleman said. “Instead, he said he’d rather stay there with me.”

And so Boyette remained with the sergeant, if only for what Coleman thought was to comfort him in his last moments.

“He told me, ‘Sarge, I’m not going to leave you,’ ” and he didn’t, Coleman said.

It was an act Coleman — who a year later is still in recovery from his injuries — said will always stick with him.

For his efforts, Boyette earned the Bronze Star with “V,” which was given to him in a ceremony in late May.

Now, more than a year after the attack that nearly claimed his own life, the 23-year-old Boyette remembers the day of the attack as a normal afternoon. Their truck was just rolling down the road when a massive explosion knocked him senseless and “blew the truck pretty much to hell,” Boyette said.

Boyette

Fire and smoke immediately filled the cab, and the truck crew scrambled to get out.

And then “they began shooting at us,” he said.

For Coleman, his right side devastated by the blast, it was a horrifying moment.

“I watched the bullets hit the right side of my body,” he said. “I could look through my arm and see the people shooting at me.”

Dragging himself to the driver’s side, Coleman was helped out of the truck by Boyette, then shot again as he tried to limp away.

Acting mostly on instinct, Boyette said, his only thoughts were to get Coleman out of harm’s way and help him as best he could.

“The only thing I thought about was getting him and patching him up,” Boyette said. “He was pretty messed up, bleeding pretty good.”

The pair collapsed on the road about 10 yards from their vehicle, Coleman said, where they started talking.

Courtesy of Blair Boyette

Spc. Blair Boyette’s destroyed vehicle sits on a truck after the April 11, 2004, attack.

“At first I was chewing him out [because] he left his doggone weapon on the truck,” Coleman said.

In the confusion, both men had left their rifles in the burning cab, and were now defenseless in the street while gunfire continued to fly around them. Then, the talk grew more grave, Coleman said.

“I told him we might not make it. We pretty much thought that was it,” he said.

But Boyette, almost unscathed in the explosion, refused to leave the wounded sergeant. Help for the two eventually arrived, and Coleman and Boyette were ferried to a hospital.

Looking back on the ambush, Boyette downplayed his valor on the day of the attack, saying he did what any soldier would have done in that situation.

“I’m glad he’s still alive and he could come home to see his wife and kids,” Boyette said about Coleman. “That’s all I cared about.”

But Coleman said the first aid Boyette gave him under fire was critical to keeping him alive in the minutes after the attack.

“If Boyette wouldn’t have put that dressing on my arm, my arm would have been amputated,” he said.

Doctors told him he wouldn’t have lasted 20 minutes without immediate care, he said.

But most of all, Coleman said he will never forget how he was comforted by the young soldier who refused to leave him in what he thought were his final minutes.

“He was there for me. He could have left,” Coleman said. “He said, ‘I’m going to just hold on with you.’ ”

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‘It was pretty surrealistic’

BY STEVE LIEWER
Stars and Stripes

Though all soldiers in Iraq face danger, only a few receive awards for bravery.

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Almous Irby, who flies an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter for Troop E of the 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, has earned a deuce.

Name: Chief Warrant Officer 3 Almous Irby

Unit: 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division

Medals: 2 Air Medals with “V”

Earned: April 10 and June 24, 2004, Baqouba, Iraq

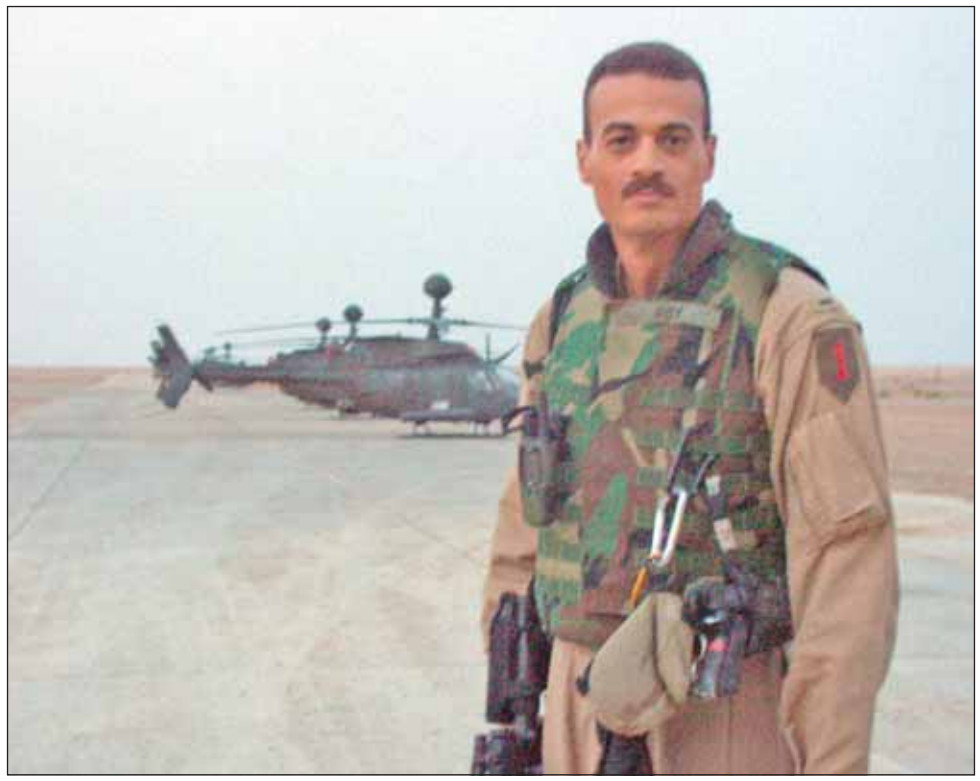
At a November ceremony at Forward Operating Base MacKenzie, Iraq, north of Balad, Maj. Gen. John Batiste pinned not one, but two, Air Medals with a “V” for valor on Irby’s chest for actions in separate engagements in Baqouba on April 10 and June 24, 2004.

“It’s kind of a surprise, but it feels good, obviously,” said Irby, 36, of Neptune, N.J. “It doesn’t remind you of a happy event.”

During the uprising, ground forces from the 1st Infantry Division’s 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery called on the two-seat Kiowas — attached to the unit as a quick-reaction force — about 2:30 p.m. to flush out a group of enemy fighters crouched in a palm tree grove.

The ground troops had planned to challenge the guerrillas directly but couldn’t because their main gun malfunctioned.

So the Kiowa pilots flew one pass after another directly into the fierce ground fire. They maneuvered while firing their mounted .50-caliber machine guns as well as aiming hand-held M4 rifles from the helicopters’ open windows, swooping in as low as 20 feet. A set of power lines in front of the grove made the attacks more treacherous.



STEVE LIEWER/Stars and Stripes

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Almous Irby, 36, was awarded two Air Medals with “V” for two battles with insurgents in Baqouba, Iraq. He pilots an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter.

“It was a standing firefight,” Irby said. “As soon as one aircraft would peel off, the second would come in right behind.”

The battle lasted about 25 minutes, until the rifle fire stopped. Ground troops later found four insurgents dead in the grove, and blood trails indicating many others had been wounded. No one in the helicopters was injured, and none of the Kiowas had a single bullet hole.

“There was no hesitation. We just went right to work,” Irby said. “Later, when we realized how close they’d gotten to us and none of us got hurt, it was pretty surrealistic.”

The April 10 “Battle of Baqouba” was the first real combat for Troop E, but there would be plenty more.

On June 24, Irby was again on the quick-reaction force. Near Forward Operating Base Gabe in Baqouba, one of the 1st Infantry Division’s unmanned aerial vehicles spotted people handing out weapons from a van.

Irby and his wingman tracked down the van, but the driver heard them coming and stopped at a house. The guerrillas scattered. Some of them ran inside and began firing rifles and rocket-propelled grenades at the Kiowas.

“We couldn’t just lay waste to the house, because we didn’t know if innocents were inside,” Irby said.

But he shot up all three vehicles outside with his .50-caliber machine gun and killed four guerrillas outside with a direct rocket hit. Tracking down a van that had driven away from the house, he hovered low and stopped the vehicle. The van held a couple and three children — innocents whose house apparently had been commandeered by guerrillas. Irby let them go.

Sometimes, not shooting is a heroic act.

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‘This was bad, this was not good at all’

BY RICK EMERT
Stars and Stripes

On the morning of July 27, 2004, Staff Sgt. John Lewis talked to his future wife on the telephone, hearing her voice for the first time.

At about 5 p.m., he had to make a split-second decision in Baqouba, Iraq, that would save his life and the lives of more than 40 other soldiers from 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery Regiment.

Name: Staff Sgt. John Lewis

Unit: 1st Battalion, 6th Field Artillery Regiment

Medal: Bronze Star with “V”

Earned: July 27, 2004, Baqouba, Iraq

While Lewis and his fellow soldiers were on heightened alert after a recent bus bombing, Lewis was pumped up about talking to Annabella, whom he had met on the Internet a few weeks earlier. They would marry after he returned from Iraq.

“It was a strange day, one very good thing and one very bad thing happening in the same day,” Lewis said.

Baqouba was a hotbed of insurgent activity, with improvised explosive devices and car bombs wreaking havoc nearly every day. But the mission of setting up a security point in heavy traffic was a familiar one for the unit’s soldiers.

On this mission, a platoon from 1-6 FA, including Lewis’ squad, was sent into Baqouba to provide security for two tractor-trailers that had been stopped by insurgents on a divided, four-lane road.

One of the trucks — carrying cement blocks to be used for security barricades — had already been burned by the insurgents.

“We set up a perimeter and blocked traffic through the circle, letting cars use a small area to turn around and head back the way they had come,” Lewis said.

For a few hours, the soldiers kept the area secure without incident.

As a way of staying alert as the hours slowly passed, Lewis and his gunner, Spc. Ryan Dehaan, would watch approaching vehicles and guess whether the drivers would turn around or be bold enough to try to ram the perimeter.

“This one little [Volkswagen] comes up, and Dehaan says, ‘That one’s going to turn around,’ ” Lewis said. “I said, ‘No, it’s not.’ The car was getting closer, and I could see the driver smiling like he was really, really happy. He was revving the engine, speeding up toward us.”

Lewis

Lewis had discussed with his squad many times before that day how they would react to such a situation.

“Every time we went out, I would talk about the kind of threats we might face and what we would do if we encountered those threats,” Lewis said.

But that was just talk in the relative safety of Forward Operating Base Gabe.

Now, a Volkswagen weighted down with explosives was speeding toward their secured perimeter.

“I looked at [Dehaan and Sgt. William Stover, a team leader] and we all three knew that this was bad, this was not good at all,” Lewis said.

With the vehicle about 50 feet away, Lewis took out the driver with his M-16, aiming first for the head and working his way down the driver’s torso. Meanwhile, Dehaan fired several 7.62 mm rounds into the car.

The explosion was heard at FOB Gabe about a mile and a half away by 1st Lt. John Bechtold, the 1-6 FA adjutant.

A few of the 45 soldiers at the site had minor injuries from shrapnel, but all of them would live to fight another day.

Dehaan also received the Bronze Star with “V” for valor and Stover earned the Army Commendation Medal with “V.”

“If not for their actions that day, I would have been planning a memorial service,” Bechtold said. “Sergeant Lewis recognized and defeated [the suicide bomber]. [The three soldiers] blew the car up before it could enter the secured area. They demonstrated the fortitude and confidence of American soldiers.”

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‘I’m just glad I didn’t get shot’

BY LISA BURGESS
Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Jeremy Church had been driving trucks in Iraq for just over a month. But he had quickly learned to listen to a new little voice inside that warned him when something wasn’t right.

On April 9, 2004, things went just about as wrong as they could go for the 724th Transportation Company. Church had just enough time to hear the voice say one thing.

Name: Spc. Jeremy Church

Unit: 724th Transportation Company

Medal: Silver Star

Earned: April 9, 2004, Baghdad

“This can’t be good.”

The voice was right.

Church’s 26-vehicle convoy was about to encounter the most organized ambush, arranged along the longest “kill zone,” ever set up by Iraqi insurgents against U.S. forces.

A 27-year-old, self-described “laid-back and humble” Wal-Mart security guard from St. Louis, Church had been in the Reserve for about five years before his Bartonville, Ill.-based unit deployed to Iraq in early 2004.

It was about 11 a.m. on a pleasantly warm day when Church and 1st Lt. Matt Brown, the convoy commander, spotted a disabled vehicle beneath an overpass near Abu Ghraib, west of Baghdad.

Brown halted the convoy, which was on an emergency fuel run from Balad to Baghdad International Airport, while another unit investigated the obstacle.

That’s when Church’s voice started talking.

“I can’t put my finger on it; it just wasn’t right,” Church, who has been promoted to the rank of specialist, said in an April telephone interview from New York City.

CHRIS FARLEY/Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Spc. Jeremy Church shakes the hand of Col. Daniel Puhl, Fort McCoy deputy commander for mobilization, upon the 724th Transportation Company’s return to Wisconsin from Iraq.

Brown felt it, too.

“Traffic went from heavy to light … to just gone,” said Brown, who joined the interview.

“I turned around to [another NCO in the Humvee] and said, ‘Hey, Sergeant Holly, I think we’re in trouble here.’ He said, ‘Yes, sir, I think we’re going to get hit.’ And two or three seconds later, we started taking fire.”

Insurgents were firing “heavy machine guns, RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades], mortars, the full gamut,” Brown said. “There was so much fire you couldn’t even hear the radios.”

Both Church and Brown began shooting back, with Church steering with his left hand and firing his M-16 though the driver’s side window with his right.

Five minutes into the attack, a small arms round struck “two centimeters from the brim and shot my Kevlar right off of my head,” Brown recalled.

The concussion caused Brown’s brain to bleed and swell against his skull, as well as popping his left eye out of the socket.

But the young officer was still alive, and even conscious enough to follow Church’s directions to close his window.

“I remember thinking, ‘Ooh, I’m hurt.’ ”

Church yanked his combat bandage off his shoulder, opened the brown plastic with his teeth, and fumbled to press the cotton against his commander’s head, while continuing to steer the Humvee.

An improvised explosive device blew out a tire. Church fought for control and kept driving on the bare rim, looking for help.

After about 15 minutes, Church ran into a perimeter secured by the 1st Cavalry Division’s 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment. He led the convoy into the gates, screaming for help for his lieutenant.

After dumping Brown into the arms of several medics, Church started rallying the 12th Cavalry soldiers “to get out there and help” the trucks that were now hopelessly trapped in the kill zone.

After quickly collecting as much ammunition as he could from his own company’s trucks as they limped in the gate, Church jumped into a 12th Cav up-armored Humvee that was pulling out to join the fight.

“Specialist Church went far beyond the call of duty,” Brown said. “There was no expectation, whatsoever, for him to go back into the kill zone.”

Church and his new mates fought their way to a disabled Humvee where 10 seriously wounded U.S. soldiers and contractors were huddling for protection against the maelstrom.

Ten minutes after the last person had been evacuated and sent back toward the 12th Cav’s perimeter, an RPG hit the vehicle.

“It’s very possible that if [Church] had not gotten there as soon as he did, those people would all be dead,” Brown said.

Church said that that while he’s honored to receive the Silver Star, “I don’t think I deserve it.

“I’m just glad I didn’t get shot,” he said.

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‘I had so much adrenaline pumping I didn’t feel anything’

BY LEO SHANE III
Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Lorenzo Nathan said he joined the Army to “show my mom that I could do something great with my life.”

And he did just that on May 15, 2004, by protecting the lives of two injured soldiers even after he himself was injured in a late-night ambush outside Baghdad. Nathan was awarded the Bronze Star with “V” for his actions.

Name: Sgt. Lorenzo Nathan

Unit: 10th Cavalry Brigade Recon Team, 1st Cavalry Division

Medal: Bronze Star with “V”

Earned: May 15, 2004, Baghdad

Nathan, who joined the Army in 2002 at age 20, had been a gunner in Iraq for about 2½ months before the attack. He said that up until then, his unit had encountered a number of roadside bombs during their midnight patrols, but no direct attacks from insurgents.

“During our patrol, at one point, I had turned around to help guide my driver as he backed up, and when I turned back I saw two bright flashes,” he said. “I didn’t realize they were RPGs until I saw the hood of our Humvee on fire.”

The impact knocked his driver from the Humvee and sent shrapnel into another soldier’s face. Nathan’s tank commander escaped the vehicle and started firing at the insurgents.

After a third rocket-propelled grenade landed nearby, Nathan said, he grabbed his machine gun and scrambled back on top of the Humvee. When he tried to lift the gun, he realized that shrapnel had seriously damaged his left arm.

“It was to the point where I couldn’t use it,” he said. “But I had so much adrenaline pumping I didn’t feel anything. I lifted the gun with one arm and fired 325 rounds at the insurgents, and when it went black I reloaded it and started firing again.”

Nathan

Nathan said he still isn’t sure how he got the extra ammunition into the gun with just one arm; he credits his training with keeping him focused during the attack.

Nathan estimated that eight insurgents were involved in the ambush; Army officials think it was at least 17. Nathan and his tank commander kept the attackers at bay until reinforcements arrived several minutes later, who then evacuated the wounded soldiers from the area.

The driver and passenger both survived their wounds, and Nathan said that today his left arm is about 80 percent healed. He doesn’t expect he’ll ever be able to return to combat, but he said he is determined to stay in the active Army in some role.

“Before I went over, I really had a lot of love for what the Army stood for,” he said. “I don’t want to leave that. So if I can’t stay in the field, I’ll find something else in the Army to do.”

Currently he is stationed at Fort Hood in Texas, but he did find time to return home to San Diego and tell his service stories to his mother.

“She cried a lot, and she’s upset that I got hurt,” he said. “But both of my parents are proud. I told them before I left what could happen, and that I would put my life on the line for my fellow soldiers.”

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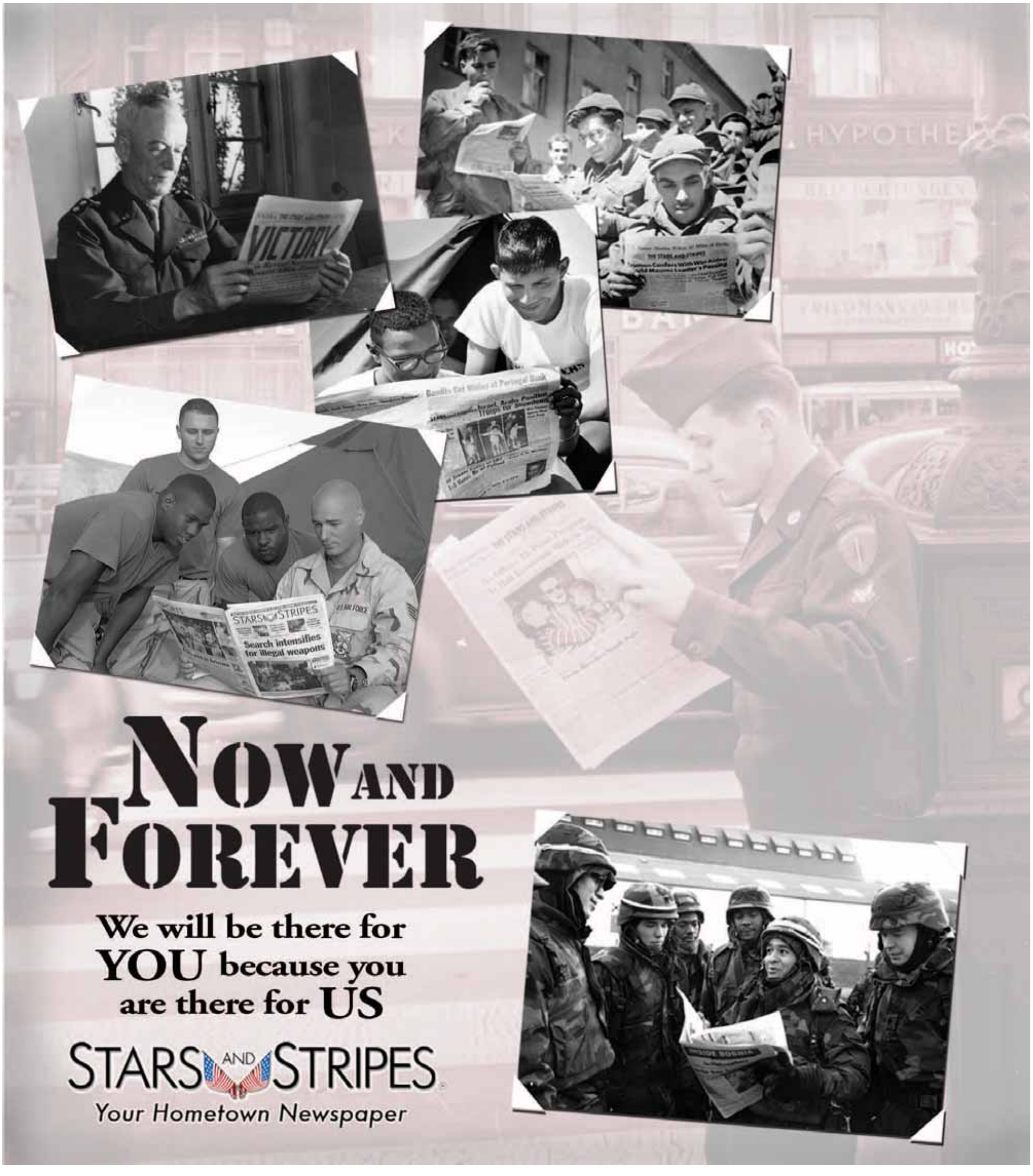
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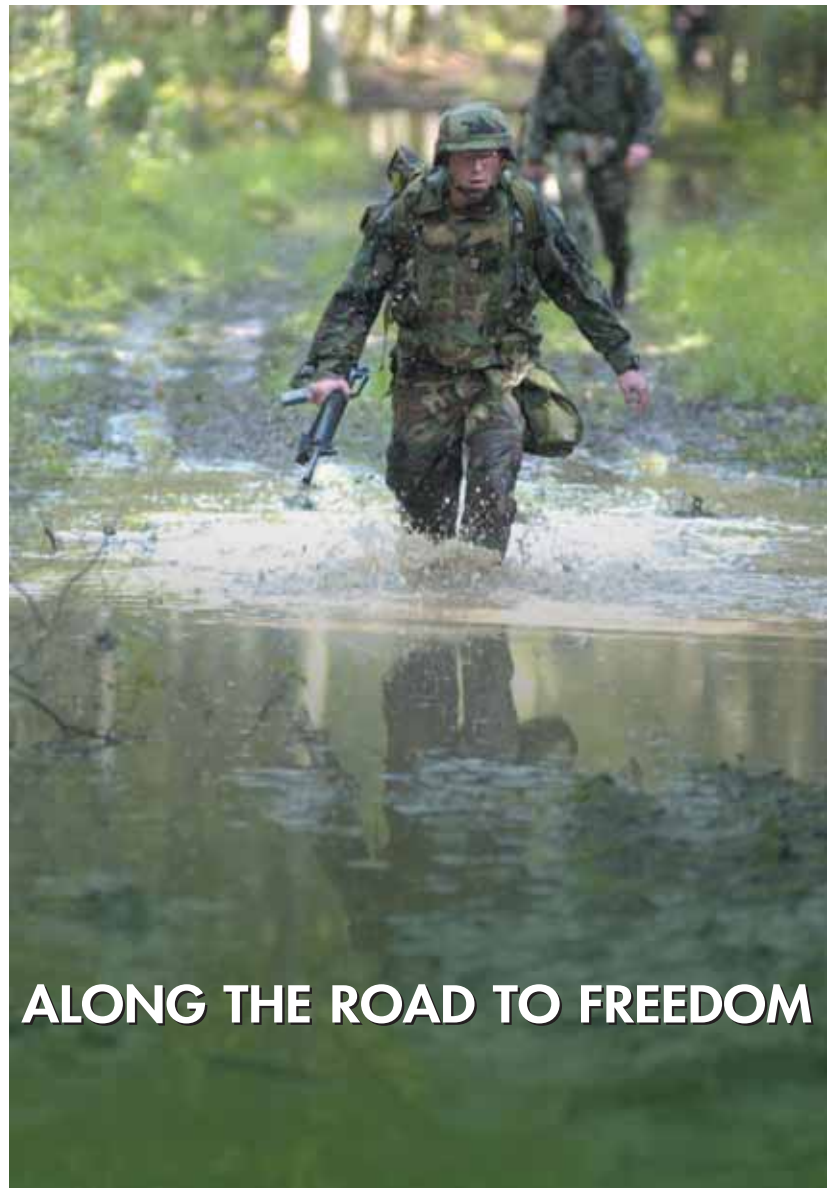

Thank you for your unwavering bravery, courage, dedication and strength

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