

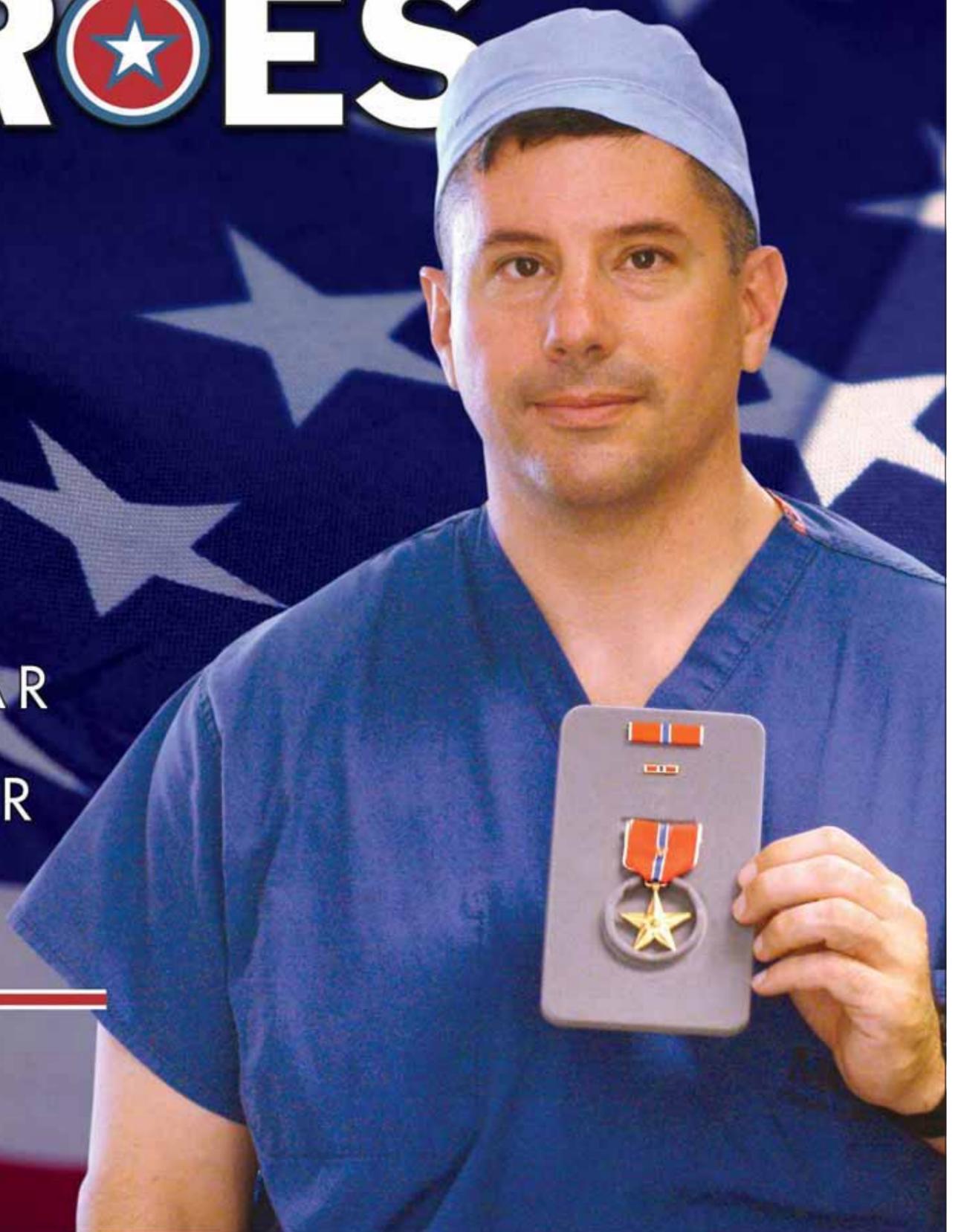
# STARS AND STRIPES



STARS AND STRIPES, JUNE 14, 2006 • HEROES •

## HEROES

A NATION  
HONORS  
VALOR  
IN THE WAR  
ON TERROR



Lt. Cmdr. Richard Jadick was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for his efforts at Fallujah, Iraq. For his story, see Page 4.

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PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY CATE MEYERS/Stars and Stripes

# VALOR

For more than four years now, American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have been fighting the war on terror. While politicians and pundits argue the merits and demerits of strategy and prosecution, the military man or woman has been slugging it out, every day, with a foe who is often unseen.

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 been maimed. And many, living and dead, have met the test of fear and violence with uncommon valor.

It's hard for those who've not known war to capture what it is that these warriors experience. Where we could, we've left the talking to the warfighter. When asked or prodded about heroic deeds, the soldier or Marine will listen almost quizzically, as if wondering why you bothered to ask. "It's just my job. ... That's what I'm paid to do."

In interview after interview, these servicemembers played down their own deeds. They spoke only of the responsibility to their fellow fighter and the privilege of wearing the uniform.

An admirable humility shines through. They point out that they were part of a team; that someone else was the real hero, and even when devastated by injuries, expressing only that they wish to be back in the fight, because they have friends there — friends they would never let down.

Yet, they are heroes.

In this special section, Stars and Stripes, the independent newspaper authorized by the Department of Defense, looks at the deeds that have earned medals of valor for the servicemembers profiled in these stories. 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.

This publication captures but a glimpse of the deeds U.S. servicemembers have performed in distant lands. We honor all those who persevere in the cause of liberty.

— PATRICK DICKSON/*Stars and Stripes*

## A letter from the president



THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

May 8, 2006

I send greetings to all those honoring America's military.

For more than two centuries, the members of our Armed Forces have answered the call of service in our Nation's hour of need. When the enemies of freedom have threatened our country, brave citizens have stepped forward and stopped their advance. Today's service members are taking their rightful place among the heroes of our Nation's history. These patriots are selfless, tireless, and unrelenting in the face of danger, and they have brought honor to the uniform. Our country is proud of their service, and I am proud to be Commander and Chief of the finest military in the world.

America is grateful to our military families and all those who support our service members with compassion and generosity. We ask for God's special blessing on the families who have lost a loved one. Our Nation will always remember the courage of those who paid the ultimate price for our security and freedom. We honor their sacrifice by completing our mission and laying the foundation for peace around the world.

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

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# 'I didn't do it by myself'

BY LEO SHANE III  
Stars and Stripes

When Lt. Cmdr. Richard Jadick tells his story, he downplays many of the details. He doesn't recall the bullets being that close.

He emphasizes that other teams faced more danger than him.

He names nearly a dozen others who are "the real heroes."

And when asked why a 38-year-old Navy urologist with a pregnant wife would volunteer to go to Iraq, he seems confused by the question.

"Nobody asked me, nobody told me I had to go," he said. "But why do you take this job? Why do you join the military? I had floated with these guys, and I knew a lot of them. I thought I could bring something to the table."

**Name:** Lt. Cmdr. Richard Jadick

**Unit:** 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment

**Medal:** Bronze Star with "V"

**Earned:** Nov. 8, 2004, in Fallujah, Iraq

Naval officials believe he did more than that.

In the middle of Operation Phantom Fury, the second major operation in Fallujah in 2004 and one of the fiercest battles U.S. forces have faced in Iraq, Jadick and his team of young corpsmen treated hundreds of patients and saved dozens of lives.

The service awarded him a Bronze Star with "V" device for his actions, and called him a hero.

But Jadick still isn't completely sold on receiving the award, and says the terrible memories he has from the time sound more heroic to others than they do to him.

"Anybody who says they don't remember all of it is lying," he said. "I saw some horrible things. It sticks with you."

## 'Gut-wrenching fear'

Just days after the birth of his daughter in June 2004, Jadick deployed to Iraq with the 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment.

The senior medical officer from Camp Lejeune, N.C., had limited experience with trauma cases but was confident that medical knowledge would be invaluable on the battlefield, even though he had never treated a patient at war and had himself missed action in the first Persian Gulf War.

On Nov. 8, Jadick waited at a medical command post just outside the city as his company headed into battle. About 14 hours later, after getting a call about a Marine with a chest wound who needed on-site assistance, he made his first house call in a combat zone.

"That was the first real combat I'd seen," he said. "There was lots of shooting and all kinds of other crap going on. But there, it wasn't bad. We still felt secure."

It took Jadick and his team several minutes to find the wounded man in a near-ruined building. The team patched up his wounds, carried him out and sent him back to the medical post.

While they were finishing up, the medical team received another call, this time



COURTESY LT. CMDR. RICHARD JADICK

Lt. Cmdr. Richard Jadick, right, and other servicemembers gather in December 2004 following the Battle of Fallujah.

from an ambush scene near the city's cultural center. They packed up and headed deeper into Fallujah.

"When we got off the track, there was gut-wrenching fear," he said.

The firefight was much more intense here: This time, bullets were striking all around their vehicle as soon as it stopped, and at least two rocket-propelled grenades bounced off the armor without detonating.

And this time, it wasn't just one wounded Marine. It was seven and counting.

For the first time, Jadick realized he was risking his life.

"The only thing that kept me going was the other fear: the fear of failing everybody who was out there," he said.

"You know, the fear of failure is a pretty motivating factor. It got me out of the ambulance and kept me moving."

## 'You never know'

Jadick dashed out of the vehicle between automatic weapons fire and dove beside a dying Marine, dragging him behind a nearby wall as he surveyed his wounds.

The man was bleeding profusely from a deep shrapnel wound in his groin. Jadick ran through his first-aid checklist, packing sterile gauze into the hole, applying pressure to the wound — searching for some way to slow down the bleeding.

After a few minutes, he realized it was a futile effort. He moved on to the next patient.

The Marine died shortly thereafter.

"That's the first time I've ever had to make that kind of decision," he said. "You never know if you've made the right call."

Right or wrong, Jadick didn't waste any time. He taped up one gunshot victim, limped him back to the ambulance, then moved to the next one. In less than 30 minutes, the rescue vehicle was full.

Jadick said the corpsmen with him later told him bullets were bouncing within inches of him as he treated Marines and dragged them back to the armored ambulance. He said he didn't notice them, but knew how fierce the firefight was based on the wounds he was looking at.

By the time he left the scene, he was covered in blood.

As the ambulance reached the nearby transfer station and sent on the injured Marines, another groin-wound victim was

"That was a huge morale boost, especially for me," he said.

Battalion commanders said the private was one of seven Marines saved by Jadick's quick thinking and bravery on that outing alone.

But Jadick remembers the man who died en route to the transfer station, and the first shrapnel victim he couldn't save.

"Did I do enough of the right things to try and stop the bleeding?" he said. "I learned a lot from working on [the second groin-wound victim], specifically. If [the first Marine] was to present to me 20 minutes later ...

"But the fact is, I was not good enough during that time to save that Marine."

## 'We needed to be closer'

Those deaths — and the remarkable recovery of the private at the transfer station — convinced Jadick he needed to move his medical team deeper into the city. He had already drawn up plans for a frontline ER operation in case it was needed, and told battle commanders he could save lives if they could get him closer.

"Grunts don't want to have a whole lot of medical personnel with them to protect," he said. "But I told the [executive officer], 'You need the two ambulances in there to move people in and out. I can load what I need on those ambulances.' He asked me how long it would take."

They moved into an Iraqi government complex later that night, and prepared for patients under the subdued glow of their ambulance emergency lights.

"Although it was supposedly secure there, the chaos gets to you," he said. "I know there was a point as units moved around where my aid station was the edge of the perimeter. [The first night] all the corpsmen who carried M-16s were up, and the rest of us were up keeping our eyes outside the wall."

"The only thing that kept me going was the other fear: the fear of failing everybody who was out there."

— Lt. Cmdr. Richard Jadick



brought to Jadick. The potentially fatal injury was nearly identical to the one Jadick had treated less than an hour earlier.

Not again, he thought.

The crew worked furiously to pack his wound, set up an IV and get some fluids into him. Within minutes, the private came to and started asking questions.

When dawn came on the second day, the team saw their new hospital: a 15-foot-square prayer room in the parking lot where a command center was being established.

The space was ideal from a first aid standpoint, with a plenty of room to move patients around and a clear path to get people and supplies quickly inside.

But the area was a military nightmare: Tall buildings with snipers were all around, and a nearby gateway separating the secure zone from no man's land had been destroyed the previous day.

At one point, as Jadick looked over a wounded servicemember about to enter his new emergency room, he spotted an Iraqi sniper taking aim from 50 yards away. As he took the man inside, he asked nearby Marines to "please" take out that gunman.

They did.

Later, a lieutenant patrolling the parking lot was shot by an enemy sniper and died before the team could treat him.

In the first 72 hours, more than 60 wounded troops were brought in. Many of the wounds were gruesome: skull trauma, missing limbs, massive hemorrhaging.

But Jadick said his instinct to get closer to the fight was right. Of the nearly 100 patients they saw in the first week there, at least a dozen would not have been saved if they had to wait through an extra trip to medical stations outside the city.

### 'It's your job'

During that week, Jadick got even closer to the fight, traveling out with some patrols to the front lines to meet with the unit's other corpsmen and the battle-weary Marines.

"There's a morale thing to that, when they know that their medical team is close enough that if they get shot they can actually have a fighting chance at getting evacuated," he said.

Most of the medical team stayed at the hospital/prayer room for 11 days before the regiment was ordered out of the city to secure another area.

Jadick said he continued to see patients and gore after the Fallujah campaign — just days later, on Thanksgiving, he helped save six more men but had two die before they could be helped — but nothing that compared to the 12 days during the siege.

When he returned stateside in January 2005, he did not publicly discuss details of what happened until a year later, when Navy officials awarded him the Bronze Star. His wife, Melissa, knew little about his time in Iraq until she began reading news reports about his heroic acts.

Part of the reason for his silence was a desire not to relive the horrors he had seen, Jadick said.

"I still don't really want to talk to anyone about it," he said. "It was my life then, and when I came home my life was my daughter and my wife. None of them needed to mix."

But a bigger part was Jadick's insistence to this day that his actions weren't as heroic as those of the Marines around him.

"I didn't do it by myself. All I did was show up," he said. "It's just stuff you do because it's your job."

But for members of the 8th Regiment, that job was more than a typical day in the office: Officials credit Jadick with saving more than 30 U.S. lives during the siege.

# 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.

Since then, the U.S. military has sought to honor its heroes by creating a "Pyramid of Honor" that recognizes varying degrees of distinguished service.

## 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 with "V"

The Bronze Star 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."

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.



## 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.



# 'Bullets pinging all over the place'

BY LEO SHANE III  
*Stars and Stripes*

Army Staff Sgt. Timothy Nein had tried to prepare his soldiers for anything, making sure their vehicles had enough supplies and ammunition for three days if need be.

But even he was surprised when he found his unit up against more than 30 insurgents on what was supposed to be a routine convoy escort.

"Seven to 10 insurgents is what you usually plan for, and we always push to be ready and expect a few more," said the squad leader from the Kentucky Army National Guard's 617th Military Police Company. "We never really expected to be fighting a force that huge."

But they were ready. Nein and his nine soldiers killed 27 insurgents that day without losing a single unit member.

Three of them earned Silver Stars for their actions: Nein, medic Spc. Jason Mike and team leader Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester. She was the first woman to receive the Silver Star for actions in Iraq.

**Name:** Spc. Jason Mike  
**Unit:** 617th Military Police Company  
**Medal:** Silver Star  
**Earned:** March 20, 2005, outside Baghdad



Courtesy of U.S. Army

**Spc. Jason Mike stands at attention at an awards ceremony at Camp Liberty, Iraq.**

Three other unit members, Spc. Ashley Pullen, Spc. William Haynes II and Spc. Casey Cooper, each earned the Bronze Star with "V."

The unit was trailing a convoy outside Baghdad on March 20, 2005, when it came under small arms fire. Nein was familiar with the area and directed the squad's three vehicles to a position between the convoy and the attackers, who were hidden behind a berm near the road.

As they got into position, the fight escalated. A rocket-propelled grenade hit Nein's Humvee and knocked his gunner, Cooper, unconscious.

"I heard a pop, and saw the whole vehicle covered in smoke," said Hester, whose Humvee was following close behind.

"It was only a few seconds, but we didn't know if they were OK or not. But when we realized the driver was still going, we kept going."

Soon the units could see dozens of insurgents coming at them. Hester and Nein jumped out of the vehicles and took cover

near the insurgents' trench, and took out several with RPGs and anti-tank guns.

Meanwhile, despite riding in a heavily damaged vehicle, soldiers in Mike's Humvee took up position at the trench's other end, to prevent any escape. But another wave of attackers came up from their rear.

Before long, three of the four soldiers around the medic were wounded.

"One sergeant was hit in the back and said he couldn't feel his legs, but I couldn't get to him because he was exposed," Mike said. "We laid down fire and pulled him back the first chance we got."

"It was adrenaline, the 'flight or fight' instinct, and luckily 'fight' kicked in."

He used his 9 mm pistol to keep back the attackers as he tended to his injured teammates. As the enemy advanced closer, he dropped the handgun to wield two machine guns, using one in each hand to fight insurgents on either side.

Some of the injured soldiers rejoined the fight as well: Haynes continued manning his gunner post after taking a bullet in his hand, and Cooper came to and resumed his gunner post.

Meanwhile, Nein and the other group had also received fire

from behind their posts, but a few grenades from his unit stopped that ambush attempt.

Under cover from the other soldiers, Nein and Hester entered the trenches to finish off the remaining insurgents.

"We were under heavy fire the entire time — there were bullets pinging all over the place," Nein said. "How we didn't get shot, I don't know."

They killed multiple gunmen and eventually made it to Mike's position. By then, the medic had used an anti-tank gun to take out several more attackers positioned in a nearby building. Reinforcements arrived soon after

to evacuate the wounded soldiers.

All three Silver Star soldiers had faced combat before, but nothing to this scale.

When they returned to civilian life last fall, Nein resumed his job as a printer for International Paper and Hester returned to managing a shoe store. Mike is a self-described entrepreneur.

All three said it was an honor just to be considered for the Silver Star. For Hester, being the first woman serving in Iraq to receive it was a secondary issue.

"This shows that women can do anything the males can," she said. "But this award doesn't have anything to do with being female. It's for doing my job."

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**Staff Sgt. Timothy Nein — along with Mike and Hester — served with the 617th Military Police Company in Iraq.**



**Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester was a vehicle commander when the convoy was attacked near Baghdad on March 20, 2005.**

# 'It was 23 minutes of us getting shot at'

BY JULIANA GITTLER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Days into the start of the war in Iraq, a group of Army Apache helicopters with the 101st Airborne Division outflow their supplies by about five days. They landed in the Iraqi desert out of fuel and waited for their supply lines to break through vicious sandstorms to reach them.

**Name:** Chief Warrant Officer 3 Brian Mucci  
**Unit:** 101st Airborne Division  
**Medals:** Air Medal with "V"  
**Earned:** April 2003, south of Baghdad

They were some of the first across the berm, 48 pilots out alone in the desert with little food or water.

"We were hurting pretty bad," said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Brian Mucci, now with the 1st Battalion 2nd Aviation Regiment at Camp Eagle, South Korea. "We had to wait for our people to catch up."

Fast-forward a few weeks, and the Apache pilots continued some of the most dangerous missions: serving air patrols for convoys and doing "deep territory" attacks in places in which the war still raged hard.

One of those missions stands out: In April, Mucci was in the rear aircraft in a line of six Apaches. They were sent to help accept the reported surrender of an Iraqi armored division.

But the Iraqi Republican



Courtesy of Chief Warrant Officer 3 Brian Mucci

**Apache pilot Chief Warrant Officer 3 Brian Mucci earned an Air Medal with "V" for missions flown in Iraq during the first year of the war.**

Guard beat them to the division and forced it to fight. The group of hundreds of tanks, armored personnel carriers and other vehicles had hidden in a ravine, near where they were expected to be waiting. After the five other Apaches passed, Mucci and his co-pilot were in closest range.

A bright flash shot by, a softball-size mass of lead. "We actually thought we were hit," he said. The blast flew so close they felt the pressure on their legs

inside the cockpit.

Mucci fired almost everything he had to repel the attack as his co-pilot ducked through a barrage of fire. His summation: "It was 23 minutes of us getting shot at."

An artillery round hit the ground so close that dirt sprayed their windshield.

Mucci shot Hellfire missiles, 30 mm chain guns and 2.75-inch rockets. He took out a tank, a

BRDM Armored Reconnaissance Vehicle, an ammo cache and 20 D-30 artillery pieces: "We pretty much got a lucky hit on it," Mucci said.

When reinforcements clearly were needed, Mucci called in the grid coordinates to a U.S. artillery unit, and two Army tactical guided missiles quickly put a stop to the assault.

When the Apaches reached "bingo fuel" — meaning just

enough to get back — they left. When they landed, Mucci had been in the cockpit for six hours.

But the former enlisted Ranger — who's been on missions in Haiti and Panama — characterized that six hours as all in a day's work.

For that particular day's work, however, Mucci received an Air Medal with Valor — in recognition, he said, of the amount of enemy assets they destroyed while under fire.

For his work months later, safeguarding a crash site after a Black Hawk was shot down near Tikrit, Mucci earned an Air Medal for Achievement. He picked up one more Air Medal for his time in combat.

But the medals don't mean much to him, Mucci said.

"Nowadays, war really isn't that heroic," he said. "Medals don't make heroes. Heroes to me are firefighters or teachers. People who make a difference, who don't have to. I was just doing my job."

He said his most memorable war experience came during a stop in Mosul in the north. There was nowhere to land on the Army base that was his destination, so he stopped in a field, which turned out to be a school.

Swarms of students and adults came out to meet the pilots, giving him an interaction with local Iraqis most soldiers never get to experience.

"I got a different picture" of the war, he said, "talking to the people."

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# 'It felt like my body was burning from the inside out'

BY BEN MURRAY  
*Stars and Stripes*

As tired as he was after a night on watch at Saqlawiyah Bridge in Fallujah, Lance Cpl. Ben Gonzalez could sense that something had been thrown at him.

He didn't really see it coming, he said, but the body has a funny way of detecting movement, of perceiving threats.

"You can feel things, like, lobbing towards you. You can feel that," Gonzalez said.

When it landed with a "clink" just a few away from him and fellow Marine Cpl. Charlie Koczan, dozing on the ground nearby, it took only an instant to figure out what it was: a grenade.

With just a split second to react, Gonzalez could see that his sleeping friend had no idea what was about to happen, and he threw himself on the man to protect him from the blast.

When it went off, the explosion ripped into Gonzalez's lower legs, feet and abdomen, wounding two of the other three men from Company F, 2nd Battalion, 1st Ma-

rine Regiment in the fighting hole, but leaving the sleeping man unhurt.

For his action on that morning and his efforts to protect a friend on June 18, 2004, Gonzalez was awarded the Silver Star for conspicuous gallantry, a decoration he received this year in March.

Now back in his hometown of El Paso, Texas, and still recuperating from his wounds, the 21-year-old said recently the most vivid memory he has of that morning was looking down to see his boot half-torn off his foot.

"I turned around and I saw my boot was half off and my left leg was kind of crooked," he said. The gear Marines wear in Iraq is tough, he said, and he just couldn't seem to grasp that the explosion had shredded his footwear.

Things had been pretty quiet the preceding two or three weeks in Fallujah, Gonzalez said. His platoon was rotating duty in observation posts for an Iraqi National Guard unit controlling traffic at the bridge, and little was happening, he said.

He was just coming off a night watch when two men on a motorcycle sped by and threw the grenade at the four Marines.

The first thing Koczan recalls was being awakened by the "the boom and the screams" and Gonzalez rolling off him, he said.

But Gonzalez said he can't forget the look on Koczan's face when he woke up. "He looked at me like it was my fault,"



Courtesy photo

**Lance Cpl. Ben Gonzalez receives a certificate for his Purple Heart from Gen. William Nyland, assistant commandant of the Marine Corps, at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., while his wife Mindy looks on.**

he said. "He was like, 'Oh [expletive], what'd you do?'"

As the only one not hit, Koczan was immediately dispatched to lead the defense, while the others attended to Gonzalez's wounds, which included serious

damage to his legs and hundreds of small shrapnel wounds throughout his lower body.

"All the pain I'd ever felt before, it all hit me at once," he said. "It felt like my body was burning from the inside out."

Gonzalez is normally somewhat of a joker, so they tried to calm him by telling him to think of women, said Cpl. Avery Williams, another Marine in the hole that day. But humor could do little to help at the time.

"You can only be so cheery in a situation like that," he said.

Gonzalez's injuries were enough to cause doctors to doubt whether he would be able to walk again, but by this spring he was able to get around with a cane.

Two years after the attack, he says he jokes about the incident with the other men who were there that morning.

He ribs Koczan that he should have just jumped over him instead of on him, and Koczan said they have both caught flak for "spooning" on the job. The jokes for Koczan, however, don't diminish what his friend did for him.

Gonzalez's effort to cover him was "pretty much the only reason I'm not messed up right now," Koczan said.

Gonzalez said his improving mobility and experiences in recovery have changed him deeply.

"It turned out for the best, I guess," he said. "I'm a stronger person for it."

E-mail Ben Murray at: murrayb@mail.estripes.osd.mil.

# 'I would ... do the same thing again'

BY LISA BURGESS  
Stars and Stripes

It was Nov. 8, 2004, and the Marines had just begun the major assault on Fallujah, Iraq. HM3 Clayton Garcia was sitting next to a seven-ton truck when he heard it.

"Corpsman, up!"

The battle cry of the corpsmen has launched such men into action since 1898, when the Navy first assigned them to accompany Marines landing at Guantanamo Bay during the Spanish-American War.

For Garcia, 22, the call of "Corpsman, up!" would prompt him to expose himself repeatedly to enemy sniper and machine gun fire as he dashed across an open field to help a wounded Marine.

**Name:** HM3 Clayton Garcia  
**Unit:** Attached to the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment  
**Medals:** Bronze Star with "V"  
**Earned:** Nov. 8, 2004, in Fallujah, Iraq

when he got involved in the Fallujah battle.

His first deployment, from late March to October 2003 attached to the 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment (Mechanized), was quiet.

Aside from heat-related injuries, "nothing huge happened, medical-wise," Garcia said. "I was surprised at the lack of conflict we were in."

But compared to the first tour, his second Iraq tour a year later, "was like night [and] day," Garcia said.

This time, Garcia was attached to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force's 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., which was stationed at Camp St. Michael, a no-frills base in Iraq's notorious "Sunni Triangle."

Garcia was assigned to Fox Company, 3rd Platoon.

The big fight came in November in Fallujah, where U.S. and coalition forces were tasked with rooting out entrenched insurgents, including those loyal to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of al-Qaida in Iraq.

Garcia's battalion was called up to Fallujah to assist with the main assault, with Fox Company assigned to conduct security for a mortar platoon.

No sooner had the fight kicked off than Fox Company came under heavy fire.

"I was sitting by a seven-ton, and I



Garcia



Courtesy of HM3 Clayton Garcia

**Navy Hospital Corpsman Clayton Garcia was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for helping wounded Marines in November 2004 in Fallujah, Iraq.**

heard 'Corpsman, up!' " Garcia said.

Garcia grabbed his medical bag, ran up and over an earth berm, and onto the exposed field where a young lance corporal lay, bleeding from his upper arm.

"He was screaming," Garcia said. "He was in a lot of pain."

This particular injury was very serious, because the bullet had severed the Marine's brachial artery, a primary carrier of blood to the body.

As Garcia raced against time to keep the Marine from bleeding to death, the

young man had an unusual follow-up query.

"I remember him distinctively asking me if he'd ever be able to skateboard again," the corpsman said.

"I told him, 'Yeah, I think so.' "

Later on, back in the States, Garcia met the lance corporal he helped rescue that day.

"He said, 'Thanks, Doc, for saving my life,'" Garcia said.

"And that's probably the greatest thing anybody's ever said to me."

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# 'Tracers were flying everywhere'

BY JASON CHUDY  
Stars and Stripes

The day started out badly for Petty Officer 2nd Class Alan Demeter while he served with the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment near Nasiriyah, Iraq. And it never got any better.

By the end of that day, March 26, 2003, Demeter would end up with shrapnel in his shoulder and leg, but his actions taking care

of wounded Marines would earn him the Bronze Star with "V."

Demeter's morning began with a call to evacuate some wounded Marines. As he was preparing to leave, the Navy corpsman found that his rifle wasn't working properly so he had to scramble to borrow another.

After a couple more trips to treat more wounded through the day, Demeter and a few fellow corpsmen, who were

based in Camp Lejeune, N.C., settled in for a quiet evening in their tent.

The unit's armorer sat working on Demeter's rifle when mortar rounds started to hit their position.

"All of a sudden, one hit next to the tent and shrapnel hit near the chief," he said, "and we hit the deck."

The sailors left the unprotected tent and found themselves in the thick of an enemy attack. "Two trucks were on fire," he said. "Tracers were flying everywhere."

Mortars, bullets and rocket-propelled grenades were hitting in the camp.

"Marines were yelling 'corpsman up' in a 360-degree radius," said Demeter, a 13-year Navy veteran. "They were hit all over the place."

Demeter and the other corpsmen responded to the calls.

"There were so few of us (corpsmen) ... [we decided] to bring them to us," he said about the wounded.

Almost immediately, a nearby machine gun position was hit with what Demeter believes was a rocket-propelled grenade.

One corpsman went to pull the wounded to safety. Demeter went to get his medical supply bag, which was kept in a nearby ambulance.

"I overshot the ambulance," he said.

"Then a mortar landed in the middle of the courtyard not 25 yards away. Shrapnel broke the concrete ... and knocked me square over on my back."

Small pieces of shrapnel had embedded in his shoulder and leg.

"I didn't realize I was hit," said the Gladstone, Mich., native. "I rolled over and scooted back." Grabbing his bag, he made his way back to the other corpsmen.

A wounded gunnery sergeant then came over to their position and said his Marines were pinned down next to the south wall.

"I said 'Roger that,' and grabbed my medic bag with extra bandages and took off to the south wall," he said.

Demeter stopped to patch up one or two wounded Marines, he said, before making it to the wall. There, a lieutenant waited to hoist him to the other side, which was under direct enemy fire.

"There was a couple second lull in the fire," Demeter said, "and I jumped over the wall."

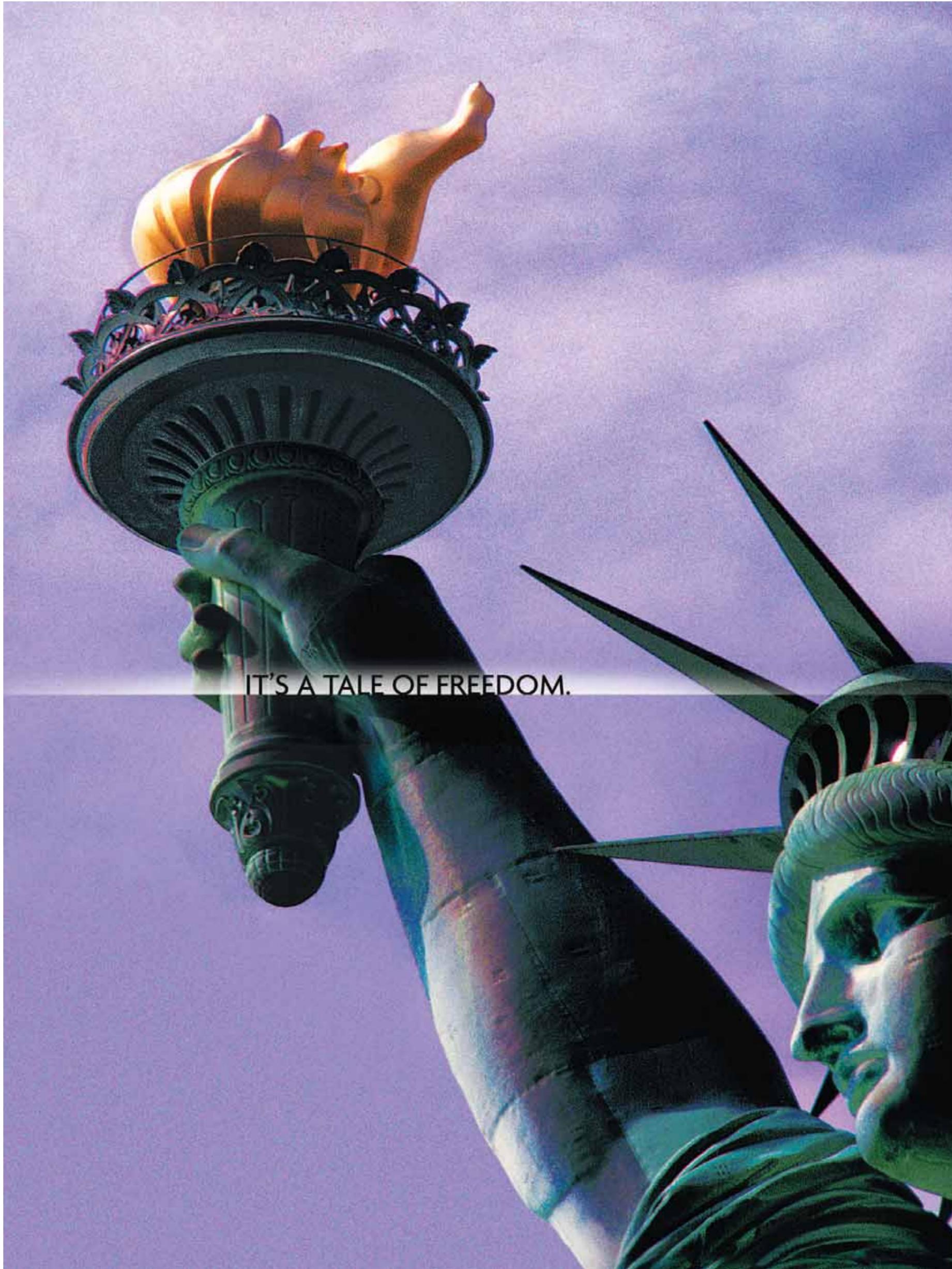
He treated six wounded Marines on that side of the wall, eventually evacuating them to the battalion aid station, and was credited with helping 31 wounded Marines that night.

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U.S. Navy photo

**Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Alan Demeter addresses friends, family and co-workers after receiving the Bronze Star.**



IT'S A TALE OF FREEDOM.

# 'Saving my guys ... was the big thing'

BY JASON CHUDY

*Stars and Stripes*

When enemy forces wounded his fellow soldiers on June 21, 2005, Spc. Kurt-Alexander Kaahui responded without hesitation, repeatedly exposing himself to Taliban fire in order to treat his comrades during a seven-hour battle.

Because of his actions that day, the 32-year-old Olowalu Villager, Hawaii, native would be recommended for a Bronze Star with "V," having treated and evacuated five soldiers while under heavy fire.

All of the soldiers would eventually make a full recovery.

Kaahui's Vicenza, Italy-based Company C, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment was in Afghanistan's Sharak Darreh river valley, hunting for a Taliban district chief who was believed to be living in the area. The man had led a recent attack that had destroyed the legitimate Afghan government district headquarters.

Within a half-hour of landing, Kaahui's platoon was attacked by about 50 Taliban fighters with assault rifles, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, firing at them as they climbed a rocky hill.

One of the platoon's soldiers was hit in the thigh and immediately moved to

a casualty collection point. Kaahui ran about 300 yards across an open field, all while under direct enemy fire, to treat the soldier.

After stabilizing the casualty, according to his award narrative, Kaahui moved the soldier another 300 yards to a landing zone, continually monitoring and reassuring him that he'd pull through despite the heavy enemy fire.

While Kaahui was evacuating the first casualty, the platoon took more wounded. Kaahui took the company commander's rifle and moved back up the hill, "dodging intense enemy machine gun and RPG fire," according to the narrative.

As Kaahui tried to move up the hill, he was frequently pinned down by enemy fire. Most frustrating was "not being able to be there when the call came," said the three-year Army veteran.

"All you'd hear on the radio was 'We have a guy down,'" he said. "We were pinned down and they were trying to move me up."

Slowly but surely, he made his way up the hill to the casualties.

"You don't think about it, you just do it," said Kaahui about the day. "Saving my guys, that was the big thing."

Kaahui assessed the casualties, stabilized them for movement, and moved them back to the landing zone, all under clear enemy fields of fire.

"Kaahui never hesitated or faltered," his award narrative read. "Despite the number and types of casualties, the heat, terrain and unrelenting fire, Spc. Kaahui treated every soldier with care."

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JASON CHUDY/Stars and Stripes

Spc. Kurt-Alexander Kaahui was honored for treating and evacuating five soldiers while under heavy fire in Afghanistan.

# 'Something had to be done and we did it'

BY KENT HARRIS

*Stars and Stripes*

The soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment hadn't been in Afghanistan for long when they were put to the test.

A group of scouts from the battalion's Headquarters and Headquarters Company came across a man while on a morning patrol on May 3, 2005.

He told them he had just been beaten up by a group of insurgents near Baluc Kalay.

Led by Staff Sgt. Patrick Brannan, the scouts investigated and came into contact with an enemy force many times their own numbers. Brannan's forces engaged the enemy and called in reinforcements.

Brannan, who has since left the Vicenza, Italy-based battalion, was awarded the Silver Star for his efforts that day. Two other soldiers from Chosen Company who came as part of the reinforcements also earned the Silver Star in the battle, the first major fight in country for soldiers from "The Rock."

Staff Sgts. Matt Blaskowski and Christopher Choay were at the battalion headquarters in Qalat when they heard that their fellow soldiers were under attack

until help could arrive to evacuate the wounded.

Less than two hours later, they were in the fight themselves, thanks to CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

"The bird that I was on got hit by two RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades)," Blaskowski said. "It landed safely, but further away from its original destination."

Still, Blaskowski and his squad — six men and two machine guns — were directed to a hilltop that would allow them to direct fire on enemy positions in an orchard-filled valley below, keeping their foes from maneuvering or retreating. The position was less than ideal, though.

"There were only a few rocks and they weren't very big," Blaskowski said of the cover provided. And enemy forces soon realized that they needed to eliminate those on the hill if they had any chance of winning the battle.

Blaskowski and his men endured fire from opposing ridge lines for four hours, maintaining fire of their own. Spc. Tyler Wilson was hit in the leg and back and severely wounded. Blaskowski went to help him and was shot in the leg.

"After my bleeding stopped, I was OK," he said, crediting the other soldiers with him for treating him and Wilson. Blaskowski continued to direct the fight

until help could arrive to evacuate the wounded.

In the meantime, there was heavy fighting in the valley below. Enemy forces were found to be centered along a stone wall and bunker. Apache helicopters circled overhead, but were largely thwarted from attacking many positions by the tree cover the orchard provided.

Choay's squad was told to take the position.

"When we hit the ground, casualties had already been reported," Choay said.

He and his squad ran toward the enemy position, using the tactics they were taught: Provide cover as your buddy advances, then advance yourself.

Choay said he was able to approach the wall from a flanking position because of the efforts of Blaskowski's crew and other soldiers who were largely holding the enemy's attention. He found three enemy combatants on machine guns and another with an RPG launcher. He killed three and wounded another, who was then shot by another soldier. Approaching the bunker, Choay exchanged shots with someone.

"He fired at me and I fired at him," Choay said. "I think we both missed."



Blaskowski

**Name:** Staff Sgt. Matt Blaskowski

**Unit:** 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment

**Medal:** Silver Star

**Earned:** May 3, 2005, near Baluc Kalay, Afghanistan

**Name:** Staff Sgt. Christopher Choay

**Unit:** 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment

**Medal:** Silver Star

**Earned:** May 3, 2005, near Baluc Kalay, Afghanistan

Another soldier killed that enemy, leaving Choay free to toss a grenade into the bunker. Five bodies were later found inside the bunker.

Choay said that he and his soldiers had to rely on instincts honed by training at such places as Grafenwoehr in Germany.

"There wasn't time to think," he said. "We had to get to the objective quickly. You can't just stay in one place. Somebody's got to move."

"Everyone knew their jobs and did it," Blaskowski said.

He said his first large firefight did have some surprises, though.

"Everyone thinks in a large fight that it would be so chaotic and noisy," he said. "But it was really quiet at times."

The fighting, which started late in the morning, would continue for hours.

Enemy forces eventually fled the field during the night. Dozens of insurgents were killed, though the exact number might never be known, because insurgents often carry off their dead if they can. No U.S. soldiers were killed, but several were severely wounded — including Wilson, who was paralyzed. Another lost a leg.

Both Blaskowski and Choay said they feel proud of their accomplishments that day, but believe that many other soldiers in the unit deserve the same recognition.

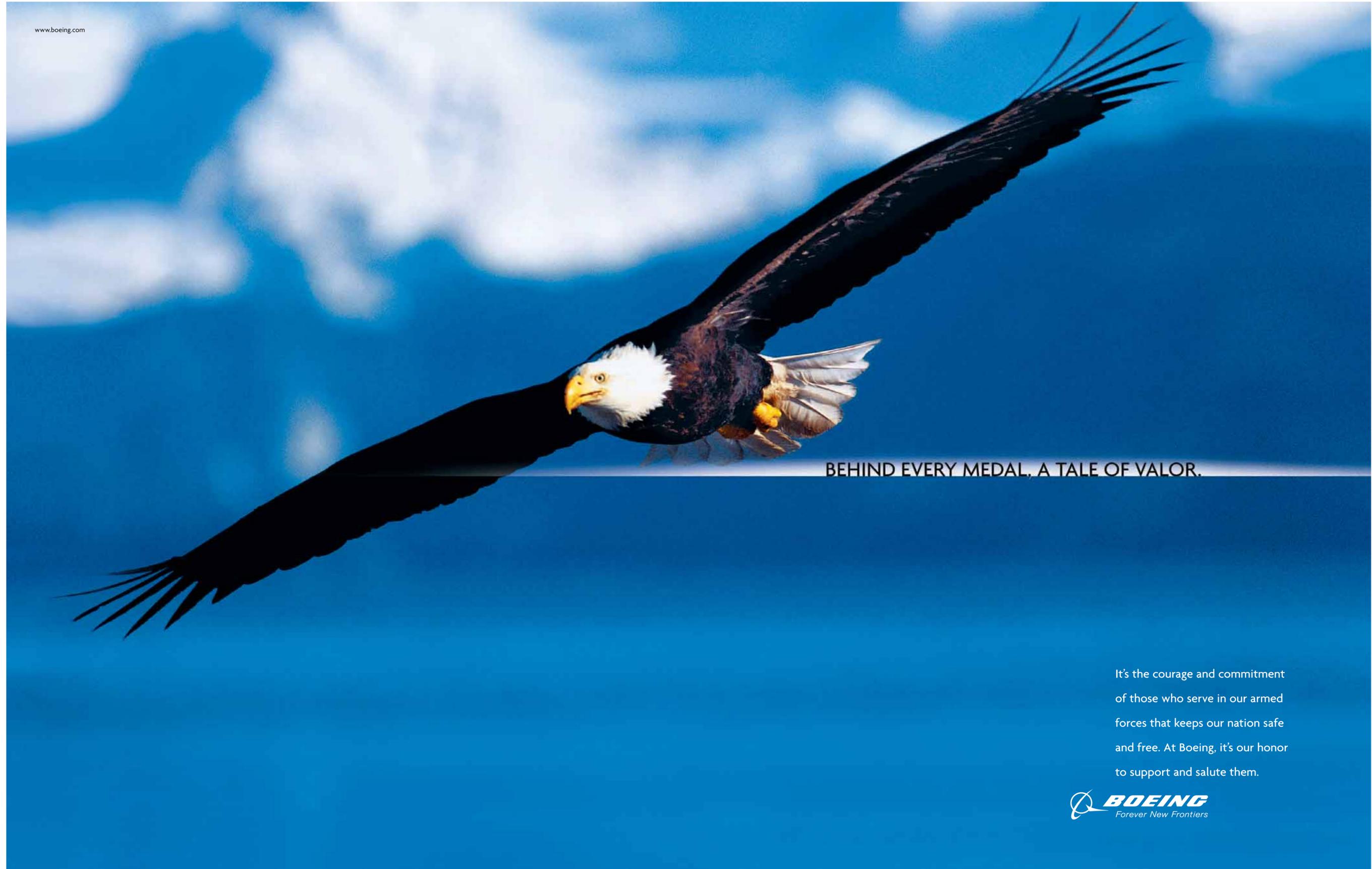
"I think we were put in a situation where something had to be done and we did it," Blaskowski said. "But I don't think it was something that anyone else in the battalion wouldn't have done."

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# 'Just proud to serve the way we did'

BY VINCE LITTLE

*Stars and Stripes*

Huddled around a television in March 2003 at Al Jaber Air Base, Kuwait, F-16 pilot Steve Engberg and other 524th Fighter Squadron members watched as President Bush delivered his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein: Leave Iraq or face war with the United States.

"There was a feeling of uncertainty knowing that something would happen but not knowing exactly what our role in that was going to be," he said. "It was exciting at the same time to be able to apply the training I'd gotten ever since becoming a fighter pilot."

The initial days of armed conflict and daily combat missions seemed much like the deployment's previous three months, Engberg said. His unit from Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., had been helping with Operation Southern Watch, which monitored the no-fly zone over southern Iraq.

But his actions on March 30 — three successful sorties over a 12-hour period, dodging heavy anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles throughout the night — eventually earned him the Air Force's prestigious Distinguished Flying Cross.

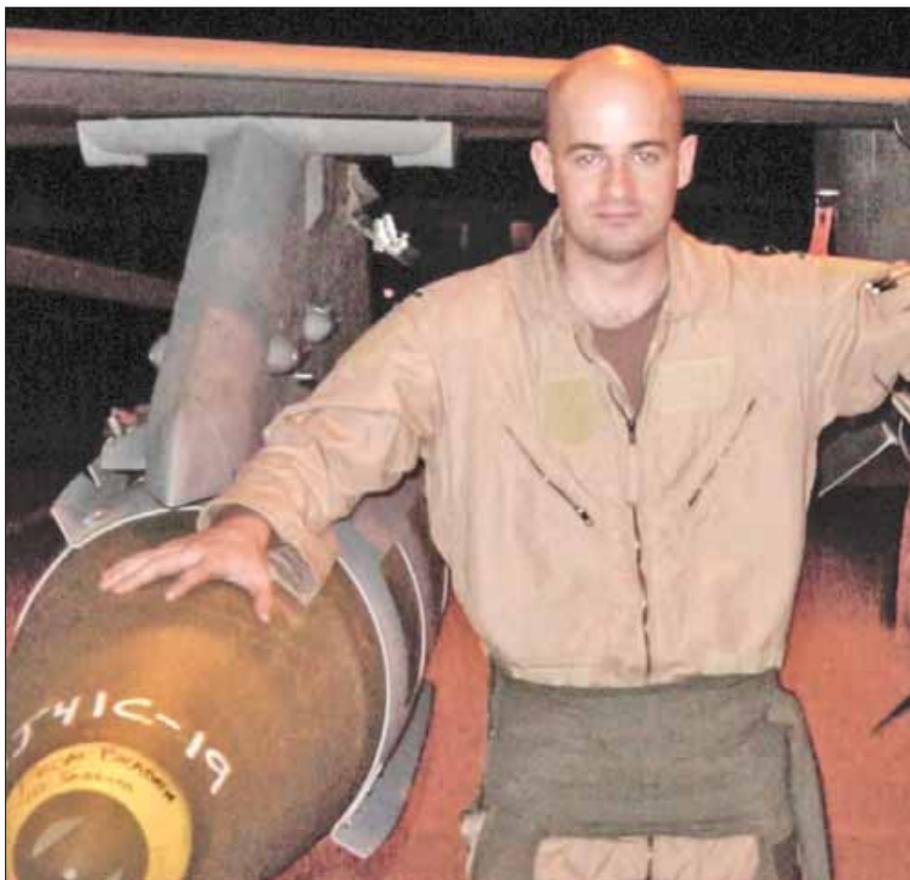
Engberg, of Burnsville, Minn., is now a captain serving as assistant operations director for the 36th Fighter Squadron at Osan Air Base, South Korea. Then, he was a 25-year-old first lieutenant who took off from Al Jaber that night with his lead pilot to find regime targets in Baghdad. They were engaged by enemy ground fire almost immediately.

**Name:** Capt. Steven Victor Engberg

**Unit:** 524th Fighter Squadron

**Medals:** Distinguished Flying Cross

**Earned:** March 30, 2003, over Baghdad



Courtesy photo

**First Lt. Steve "Bjorn" Engberg stands next to an F-16 "Fighting Falcon" before flying a combat sortie, while deployed to Al Jaber Air Base, Iraq.**

"It was not the first time we'd seen that on deployment," Engberg said. "It was the first time I'd experienced that level of accuracy or closeness to our formation. It was eye-opening to see how close it was ... in relation to where we were."

"They were constantly throwing up (anti-aircraft) fire on different missions. How heavily you experienced it just depended on the mission. Due to where these targets were, the concentration of

enemy fire was a little thicker that night."

Upon returning to Kuwait, the pilots received information for a second sortie.

His F-16 this time fitted with laser-guided bombs, Engberg headed back out to strike Fedayeen targets in Karbala. "The maintainers did a great job of reloading us and we scrambled again," he said.

Poor weather forced him to circle the area at low altitudes, but he managed to

destroy the Fedayeen building. A short while later, Engberg provided close-air support as his flight leader attacked another Baghdad location.

Despite the heavy enemy fire, he said, the possibility that they might not make it back never crossed his mind.

"I didn't really have a chance to think about the events that night until afterward," Engberg added. "It was so busy, all we could do was fly, land, [be given] the next target; fly, land, [be given] the next target."

"I was just out there flying, doing what I was trained to do. It didn't strike me as anything out of the ordinary or anything I hadn't been doing over ... the previous three months of my deployment."

Engberg's squadron emerged unscathed, he said: Its personnel and aircraft all returned to Cannon with no battle damage.

"Not a single scratch," he said. "We never lost one sortie due to maintenance, either. Those guys did a great job enabling us to fly on a daily and nightly basis."

"The entire squadron was extremely motivated and excited to be out there performing their duties ... I think we all performed to an exceptional level when the challenge arose, met it with great professionalism and great lethality. We were all just proud to serve the way we did."

And Engberg was happy he roomed with two other lieutenants, including Chad "Skeet" Martin, who also earned the DFC and later joined him at Osan. The brand new wingmen all faced the same highs and lows under difficult circumstances.

"I was feeling camaraderie with those other two pilots the entire time," Engberg said. "Having that release to talk and hang out with those guys after different missions helped a lot. They're some of the most poignant memories I have from that deployment."

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# 'We ended up landing on a big nest ... we stirred them up'

BY JASON CHUDY

*Stars and Stripes*

When interpreters with Company C, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment, reported that Taliban fighters were radioing to one another that they were preparing to attack the Americans closing on their positions, the soldiers decided to call their bluff.

When the resulting battle subsided more than five hours later, dozens of Taliban were dead and Sgt. Justin Hormann had earned a Bronze Star with "V."

Hormann earned the award for saving the life of another soldier and leading a squad that was "outgunned (and) outmanned," according to the award narrative, and pinning down a force of Taliban fighters five times larger than his own.

By the end of the mission, more than 76 Taliban were dead, including 42 killed as

**Name:** Sgt. Justin Hormann

**Unit:** Company C, 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment

**Medals:** Bronze Star with "V"

**Earned:** June 21, 2005, in the Sharak Darreh river valley, Afghanistan

a direct result of the actions of Hormann's squad.

The 22-year-old native of Melbourne, Fla., said that the June 21, 2005, mission in the Sharak Darreh river valley of Afghanistan had started as any other.

The Vicenza, Italy-based soldiers were hunting for a Taliban district chief who was believed to be living in the area. The man had led a recent attack that had destroyed the legitimate Afghan government district headquarters.

Hormann's platoon inserted near the headquarters, then tried to trick the Taliban into believing that they were leaving the area. Another unit was to move in to engage any enemy forces in the area.

Instead, Hormann and the rest of Chosen Company's 2nd Platoon became the hunted — as well as the hunters.

"We ended up landing on a big nest or a weapons cache and we stirred them up," he said about the Taliban.

The 25-man platoon was moving toward some high ground when they were attacked by about 50 enemy fighters with rocket-propelled grenades, AK-47 assault rifles and machine guns.

The unit's 1st Squad was ordered to move over a rocky hilltop and get closer to the enemy.

When they had gotten within 30 feet of

the enemy, the squad leader was hit in the arm and suffered severe bleeding.

Seeing this, Hormann sprinted about 30 feet to the staff sergeant and applied a tourniquet that stopped the man from bleeding to death.

He then ordered the wounded soldier moved back to the command post and took charge of the squad, leading it back up the hill toward the enemy.

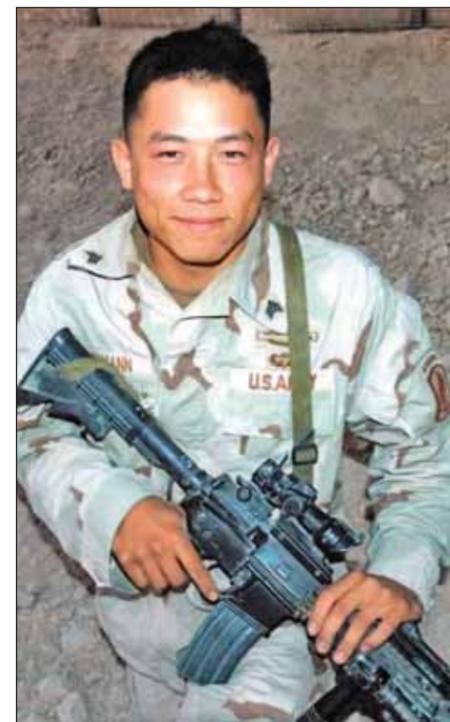
Hormann led the squad for the next four hours of fighting, during which another soldier was wounded, and the squad was ordered to pull back. Grabbing the wounded man's Squad Automatic Weapon, Hormann lay down suppressing fire that allowed the squad to move down from the hill.

Eventually, the soldiers set up a patrol base for the night, and later were flown from the valley.

A few days later, Hormann found out both that the wounded soldiers would be fine, and that he was being recommended for a Bronze Star.

"That was the last thing on my mind," he said about the medal. "It was not really something I was thinking about. It was kind of like a bonus after learning that everybody was going to be fine."

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JASON CHUDY/Stars and Stripes

**Sgt. Justin Hormann saved the life of another soldier and led a squad against difficult odds in Afghanistan.**

# 'Americans will not make it out alive'

BY SEAN KIMMONS

*Stars and Stripes*

Screams from fellow Marines being attacked by insurgents in a mountainous area of eastern Afghanistan were all that 1st Lt. Stephen Boada needed to hear.

The moans from the dying Marines of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, sparked a rescue attempt led by Boada, the fire direction officer for the 1st Battalion, 12th Marine Regiment, on May 8, 2005.

In February, the 27-year-old from Bristol, Conn., was awarded the Silver Star for his actions that day.

While on a dismounted patrol through the Alisheng Valley, Boada's unit of about 30 Marines began to pick up radio traffic between insurgents on their Icom scanners. Interpreters informed the Marines that the insurgents — concealed in the rough terrain — were plotting an ambush.

"The Americans will not make it out alive," Boada remembers one of the insurgents saying on the radio.

To keep one step ahead of their enemies, the Marines tried to call in helicopter support. However, the weather did not permit such action, so the Marines forged ahead in a movement-to-contact approach, said Boada, who was a forward air controller at the time.

A few Marines on top of a hill scanned the area and spotted 10 armed individuals walking across the valley. A single rifle shot, believe to have been fired by one of

**Name:** 1st Lt. Stephen Boada

**Unit:** 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment

**Medals:** Silver Star

**Earned:** May 8, 2005, in the Alisheng Valley, Afghanistan



Courtesy of 1st Lt. Stephen J. Boada

**First Lt. Stephen J. Boada, shown near the Afghanistan/Pakistan border in early 2005.**

the individuals, prompted the Marines to open up machine gun fire on the enemies, about 800 meters away.

The other Marines, including Boada, pushed toward their adversaries, who were fleeing up the mountainside as the machine gun team on the hill provided supporting fire.

While making their way up the ridge, Boada called for fixed-wing air support.

Four A-10 Warthogs came roaring over the valley, unleashing 30mm cannon fire and 2.75-inch rockets onto the enemy locations, as Boada, with help from the machine gun team, called in target adjustments to the aircraft.

After about eight passes by the A-10s, the Marines searched for enemies killed or injured by the barrage, he said.

Lance Cpl. Nicholas C. Kirven came

across a body and called out to Cpl. Richard P. Schoener to provide security.

Boada was about 25 meters from Kirven and Schoener when he heard the bursts of an AK-47 rifle and the screams of both Marines, he said.

The rest of the Marines began to circle around Kirven and Schoener, who were lying near a cave whose mouth spat out persistent gunfire.

Using a smoke grenade for concealment, Boada and Cpl. Troy Arndt made it up to the Marines.

"Corporal Kirven was dead, but the other one was still alive and talking to us," he said.

Arndt grabbed Schoener but couldn't drag him away. Boada then tried to help Arndt, but Schoener's flak vest ripped. Boada and Arndt had to take cover after more enemy gunfire came from the cave.

Boada fired his M-9 pistol and threw four grenades into the cave to eliminate the threat.

"No one was left in [the cave], just body parts," Boada recalled.

Other Marines tried to resuscitate Schoener and Kirven, but were unsuccessful.

"Our efforts were futile, because they lost so much blood," Boada said.

On top of their loss, the Marines could not get a medical evacuation and had to carry both bodies back to the vehicles that were about six miles away, he said.

Although Boada has been called a hero, he said he believes that the two Marines who didn't walk away from that fight are the real heroes. Arndt, who earned a Bronze Star for his actions on that day, and the other Marines who were out there are heroes to him as well.

"I wasn't the only one out there. I was just put in a position to make a decision," Boada said.

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# 'There was just no way I was leaving my boys'

BY GEOFF ZIEZULEWICZ

*Stars and Stripes*

With the typical stone-faced grit of a Marine, Staff Sgt. Anthony Viggiani is modest about how he came to be awarded the Navy Cross, the service's highest award.

"I'm honored to receive the award," said Viggiani, 26, now a drill instructor at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. "But for what I did, I was just doing my job. When you hear about other citations, they did a hell of a lot more than I did."

Regardless of how Viggiani feels about the award, the dedication to his "boys" while deployed to Afghanistan in 2004 is evident. Viggiani crept up on an enemy position and took out three fighters. And even after taking a shot to the leg, Viggiani didn't leave his unit.

"I was like, 'I ain't [expletive] going nowhere,'" Viggiani said of attempts to get him first aid for his leg wound after the combat quieted down. "There was just

no way I was leaving my boys."

Viggiani's June 3, 2004, patrol with Company C, Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit started out like many days in the Zabul Province of Afghanistan.

"We were rolling through and got intel reports to sweep a village," he said. "And we got reports that they had spotted some guys."

Soon, Viggiani led a squad on a chase of the insurgents, which led them into mountainous terrain that thwarted some of the technological advantages normally held by U.S. forces.

"We had no idea where our second squad was because of the mountains," he recalled. "The radio transmissions were pretty jacked up."

Enemy forces began firing on one of Viggiani's teams from a well-entrenched cave position, pinning them down.

Under fire from another enemy position, Viggiani scrambled to lob a fragmen-

tation grenade into a cave holding the forces that had trapped one of his teams with furious gunfire.

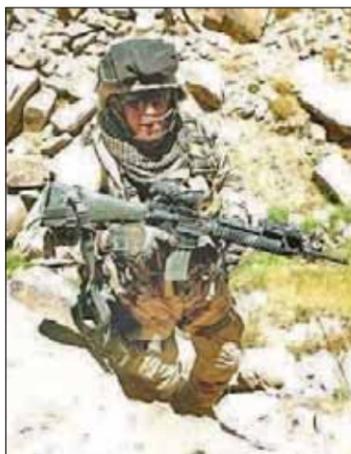
"I've got a rifle in my right, a frag in my left," he said of his race down a ridge to take out the cave position. Soon, Viggiani saw a small hole leading into the cave. The enemy was close.

"I saw a cloth in there and fired three or four rounds inside," he said. "The cloth moved, and I saw skin. I fired about three, four more rounds. Then I pulled the pin on the frag, dropped it down, took two steps and plastered myself against the rock. [Expletive] went everywhere. Cloth, blood, everything."

Soon, machine gun fire came in Viggiani's direction from across the way. He took a shot to the leg as he and another noncommissioned officer

tried to avoid the fire. Air support soon came through and cleaned out the enemy position that had hit Viggiani.

Three to four hours after spotting the enemy forces, Viggiani's company took



Courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps

**Despite a bullet in the leg, Marine Staff Sgt. Anthony Viggiani continued to lead his squad against the enemy in Afghanistan in 2004.**

out 14 enemy fighters.

Seeking medical treatment for his wound during a lull in fighting, while the enemy was still precariously close, was just not an option that day, he said.

Instead, Viggiani focused on the other guys who were injured, and how things could have been much worse.

During a Company C dinner in Rota, Spain, as the deployment was ending, Viggiani was recognized by those who knew what he had been through.

"They read what I did, and I got a standing ovation from all my peers," he said. "That meant more than the award, because they were there with me."

For almost a year, Viggiani has been training the next wave of Marines as a drill instructor at Parris Island.

"It's very challenging," he said. "But I miss the grunts."

Viggiani still stays in touch with the team and squad leaders who were with him that day in Afghanistan.

Viggiani is reluctant to call himself a hero. "If somebody does their job, brings the boys home alive and accomplishes the mission, that's it to me," he said of heroism. "All of my boys, I wouldn't trade them for anything."

"It's a brotherhood. When you get over there, your mom, dad, brothers and sisters, they can't help you. It's the man to your left and the man to your right. That's what matters."

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# 'It was just mayhem every day'

BY FRED ZIMMERMAN

Stars and Stripes

Marine Sgt. Keith Camardo says he did nothing more than any other Marine during his time in Iraq. The hierarchy of I Marine Expeditionary Force begged to differ. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with "V."

Camardo was assigned to the unit as an individual augmentee February to September 2004. His home unit is 9th Engineer Support Battalion at Camp Hansen, Okinawa, where he serves as an explosive-ordnance disposal technician. While in Iraq, Camardo served with an EOD team pieced together with Marines from four different bases.

The team served primarily in the city of Mohammadia in the Anbar province. Camardo said he believes that during his time there, team members may have had it worse than most other EOD teams: They were finding 500-pound bombs daisy-chained together as one giant improvised explosive device. During its

**Name:** Sgt. Keith Camardo  
**Unit:** 9th Engineer Support Battalion  
**Medals:** Bronze Star with "V"  
**Earned:** March 3 to Sept. 15, 2004, in Mohammadia, Iraq

seven-month tour, Camardo said, the team responded to more than 300 EOD calls and faced numerous ambushes and fire-fights.

"It was just mayhem every day," said the 37-year-old Redwood City, Calif., native.

The longest day, Camardo said, was when the Army entered its forward operating base looking for help. He said an Army convoy drove through an ambush that "lasted for miles" and had to leave some gear. The Army asked the Marines to help by retrieving it. The Marines obliged and sent a three-man EOD team, including Camardo, out to help by checking for booby traps.

"We were in an ambush for about five or six miles," he said. "We got past that and then started taking ambushes from palm groves."

He said the ambush went on for so long, they finally decided to stop at an intersection. Camardo said a gas station with burning tanks was on one side and they were taking fire from all other directions. The driver of the wrecker in which the Marines were riding parked the vehicle, then ran to take a defensive position. Camardo and his fellow EOD Marine then climbed atop the wrecker with their "designated marksman rifle" and spotting scope.

"We were taking shots from about 700 meters," Camardo said. "I had to put my weapon down ... he was engaging targets, but I couldn't shoot since I was spotting."

He said they stayed atop the wrecker for about a half-hour before moving to the roof of a nearby building and continuing the firefight. In all, the ambushes and firefight lasted more than eight hours, Camardo said.

But one of the closest calls for Camardo came in September, near the end of his tour, after an Army vehicle was disabled from an IED. The vehicle was moved off the road and the area was secured, causing a long traffic jam. To get the wrecker in to pick up the vehicle, Camardo said, traffic had to be released.

That's when a suicide bomber in a car was able to drive to the back of a South African armored vehicle and detonate. Camardo's Humvee was parked nearby; he was sitting in the rear seat with the door open. He said the blast threw him off his seat and knocked him out for a second.

"I stepped out of the vehicle, took one breath and then threw up for about a half-hour," he said. He said that just the suicide bomber was killed but the massive blast scattered car parts everywhere; the engine flew about 50 meters — totally outside their perimeter.

Of his award, Camardo said, "I just did my job. There were guys out there that did the same thing and they didn't get anything."

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FRED ZIMMERMAN/Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Keith Camardo of the 9th Engineer Support Battalion received the Bronze Star with "V" on May 2.

# He 'told me I was hit, and I said: No, I'm not'

BY PATRICK DICKSON

Stars and Stripes

Hospital Corpsman Juan Rubio grabbed a Marine he was on patrol with to repeat a warning the radioman hadn't heard.

"I said, 'Parrello, man, we need to get back behind this building.' And as soon as we turned around, it went off."

Their platoon leader had told them that the 5-gallon aluminum can on a nearby wall was the kind of thing insurgents often used as a marker, to know when to set off a bomb by remote.

"It knocked him into me, and threw me up against the building," the San Angelo, Texas, native said, likening it to the desktop toy where a metal ball hits the stack and knocks the ball on the other end free. "[It] knocked me out."

Seconds later, Rubio came to. With rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns roaring, he low-crawled over to 19-year-old Lance Cpl. Brian Parrello, who had absorbed much of the blast. He was in bad shape.

"So I started working on him and I dragged him over a wall ... and asked another Marine — I had 15 Marines that I had taught Combat Lifesaver [skills] ... I asked Sergeant Davie to monitor him to make sure the bleeding had stopped ...

"And that's when I heard the cry that there were two more people out there."

Directing cover fire at muzzle flashes in a tree line and shooting his own M-16, Rubio came first to a major whose name he does not recall.

Rubio brought him behind a building, and put a tourniquet on his severed forearm. He grabbed another Marine to monitor the major. The Marine saw another wound.

"What color blood is it?" Rubio shouted.

"It's arterial!"

"Holy s---!" Rubio said. "We've got another arterial!" Another tourniquet.

Rubio went back and found out that his gunnery sergeant was shot twice in his right hand. He started an IV and left him with another Marine. He then got to a Marine who was shot in the leg and the least critical of the

**Name:** HM2 Juan Rubio  
**Unit:** Small Craft Company, 4th Platoon, Camp  
**Medals:** Silver Star, Purple Heart  
**Earned:** Jan. 1, 2006, in Haditha Dam, Iraq



Courtesy of U.S. Navy

Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Juan M. Rubio gets a hug from one of his children after he was awarded the Silver Star.

four.

With their radioman down, they had to send two runners back to the boats they'd been patrolling the Euphrates on before an ambush had brought them into the small hamlet of Haqlaniyah, near their base at Haditha Dam.

The boats and their firepower were nearby, but they had no sense of the battlespace, having lost radio contact with Parrello. But with the runners directing fire, they opened up.

"They saw the insurgents, and they waylaid on those son of a guns, oh my gosh," Rubio recounted.

With the wounded on board, the group's lieutenant gave the order: "Punch out! Punch out!"

They drove about a mile and a half upstream to three Humvees waiting outside the base. They roared to the base, where medics at a battle aid station could administer more care while they waited for the arriving Medevac helos.

Not sure about the fate of the insurgents, Rubio and two Marines got back in the Humvee to rejoin the battle. They were speeding off the base when one of the Marines saw blood on Rubio's leg.

"[He] told me I was hit, and I said, 'No, I'm not — it's other people's blood,' and he goes, 'No, doc, your pants are ripped and I can see it! Holy s---! Doc's hit!'"

"The corporal who was driving slammed on the brakes," Rubio remembers, and he busts out laughing. "I flew from the back of the Humvee into the cab!"

"And they turned around and they called back one of the birds and loaded me up."

They were in radio contact with the other chopper carrying Parrello. Rubio had been talking with him on the boat and in the Humvee, keeping him alert, reassuring him that he would be OK.

Rubio begins to choke up when retelling the scene.

"He took 90 percent of the blast when —" he stops. "He was standing right next to me when it went off ..."

Over the radio, he heard that Parrello had lost consciousness. He never awoke.

Rubio was awarded a Silver Star for his actions that day. And, of course, a Purple Heart.

At the hospital at al Assad, doctors looked at Rubio. They told him that if he wanted some of the deeper pieces of shrapnel taken out, he'd have to go back to the States.

"I asked, 'Can I live with it in my leg?' and they said, 'Well, it'll bother you from time to time, but sure.'"

A day and a half later, he hopped a convoy back to the unit.

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Rubio

# 'I just had a bad feeling'

BY LEO SHANE III  
Stars and Stripes

When he saw the RPG headed toward him, Army Staff Sgt. Jason Pepper's first instinct was to push his men out of the way.

"They were young guys, and they had families and their whole life ahead of them, too," the 28-year-old from the 16th Engineer Battalion said. "I protected them because it was the right thing to do."

The attack came in May 2004 as his unit was on patrol through the Iraqi city of Karbala. Other units had been through the city on a major offensive just weeks earlier, and Pepper said his battalion had been performing reconnaissance in the city for several days leading up to the incident.

Even though the men had been through the area before, Pepper was edgy that day. His mission route had been switched just minutes before the unit was scheduled to leave, and he worried that the intel reports available weren't current enough.

"I just had a bad feeling," he said.

As their patrol reached the downtown area, a rocket-propelled grenade struck the lead tank and the soldiers leapt into action. Pepper and his men got out of their vehicle, surveying the area with their guns raised.

The ambush site was a tight corridor —

**Name:** Staff Sgt. Jason Pepper  
**Unit:** 16th Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Division  
**Medals:** Bronze Star with "V," Purple Heart  
**Earned:** May 7, 2004, in Karbala, Iraq



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

**Staff Sgt. Jason Pepper, with the help of his wife, Heather, touches the 1st Armored Division memorial monument following a ceremony for 1st AD soldiers who died during Operation Iraqi Freedom.**

as they looked to their left, one of their own tanks pulled up close and partially blocked off their field of fire. Pepper said as he turned around to cover the other direction, he saw an insurgent fire another RPG.

Instinctively, he dove into soldiers closest to him, knocking them behind a tank and out of the explosive's range. The two

men suffered only some bumps and bruises as the round exploded.

As he stood to return fire, a remote bomb planted in a tree detonated just a few feet away. The blast caught him full force.

The only sign that Pepper was still alive was the air bubbling through the blood covering his nose.

"I could still hear explosions around me, but I couldn't do anything," he said.

"I couldn't see anything, I couldn't say anything, and I didn't really have control of my arms."

The soldiers around him took a moment to realize he was still conscious, and they rushed him into an evacuation vehicle while they pushed back the insurgent attack. His whole firefight — from dismount to heroics to injury — took only a few minutes.

Pepper spent the next few weeks moving from hospital to hospital before arriving at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., for months of rehabilitation. Twenty-five surgeries over 16 months rebuilt most of the bones in his hands and wrists, but he is blind and lost his sense of smell.

During his recovery at Walter Reed, he became a mini-celebrity because of his name and rank — at the time, he was Sgt. Pepper — and even earned him a spot in a *Doonesbury* sequence. He said his fellow battalion members saw the comic as they were finishing up their tour and told him it was a morale boost knowing he was being cared for.

He credits his family with getting him through the recovery: His wife Heather and mother-in-law Denise have been by his side through the surgeries, and his 3-year-old daughter Naomi has even started to help guide him around.

Pepper, who previously served four deployments in Bosnia and Kosovo, said protecting his fellow soldiers was his job, regardless of the consequences.

"If I could, I'd go back in a heartbeat," he said. "That's my job. I want to go back downrange."

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# 'We are all going to make it out of here'

BY ERIK SLAVIN  
Stars and Stripes

Less than two weeks into the invasion of Iraq, U.S. forces had advanced to within 50 miles of Baghdad.

The 1st Armored Division's 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry out of Fort Riley, Kan., was about to battle its way across the Tigris River at As Samawah. Then-commander Lt. Col. George Geczy received orders to attach an armored company, while sending one of his infantry companies 50 miles away to what would become the Battle of Karbala.

The companies had to fight their way to their new areas within 18 hours.

Geczy chose an infantry company led by then-Capt. Marlon James, who would receive the Bronze Star with Valor for leading his soldiers into an urban battle and pulling several wounded soldiers from harm's way at great personal risk.

"Bottom line: I needed a smart, aggressive and experienced company commander to pull off a complex mission ... I chose

**Name:** Capt. Marlon James  
**Unit:** 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment, 1st Armored Division  
**Medals:** Bronze Star with "V"  
**Earned:** Spring 2003, in Karbala, Iraq

Marlon," said Geczy, now a full colonel and joint operations chief at U.S. European command.

James and his company arrived on Karbala's outskirts and saw through their binoculars, hundreds of Fedayeen Saddam paramilitary fighters sitting on the rooftops. They were waving their weapons inward, daring the soldiers to enter the city of about 500,000 people.

"Tell my wife I did my best," said one soldier over the radio. Others shared similar sentiments. James wouldn't have any part of it. "I don't want to hear that talk," he said. "We are all going to make it out of here."

James and three Bradley Fighting Vehicle platoons advanced and met with automatic weapons fire from Fedayeen riding in the back of pickup trucks driven by women and children.

Faced with incoming fire, James made decisions that have made it difficult to sleep at night.

When under fire, "you tell your soldiers, 'Don't worry who is in the vehicle,'" James said. "As Americans, we see women and children and we don't shoot. (The Fedayeen) knew that."

As the company penetrated further in Karbala, casualties began to mount. James and his executive officer, 2nd Lt. Steven Thorpe, pulled six to eight injured men off the ground and got them inside vehicles. Thorpe later would be awarded a Silver Star.



ERIK SLAVIN/Stars and Stripes

**Maj. Marlon James was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for his actions as a company commander during the Battle of Karbala in 2003.**

By then, the enemy had begun repositioning its troops, while reinforcements arrived from other cities. The company was getting bogged down as fire intensified.

James told his troops, "Let's go," and

charged ahead in front.

"It made those guys focus on me," James said. "I think anybody would have done it as a leader. I really don't think it was worthy" of a Bronze Star. "It was just my job."

James' C Company completed its mission after 18 hours of fighting, protecting the main attack's flank at the Euphrates River. Some soldiers celebrated. James had his mind on the next battle.

Today, James is a major and the personnel chief for the 2nd Infantry Division's Fires Brigade at Camp Casey, South Korea. He says he loves the Army and will stay in as long as he can. But James makes it clear to soldiers that he does not love war.

"Don't ask for war," he said. "Your name will be called. But be prepared spiritually and physically. You'll deal with it when you leave that environment."

And he denies his actions merited a medal. Instead, he speaks of 22-year-old Spc. Larry Brown of Jackson, Miss., shot in the leg during the 2003 push to Baghdad. Brown escaped and hid in an alley, alert and talking to comrades.

That made later news of Brown's death all the more shocking, James said: The bullet had severed an artery.

James, who said he's called the young soldier's mother over the years, said Brown "lost his life April 5. I'll never forget it. That's who the real hero is."

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# 'I was going to go down fighting'

BY LISA BURGESS

*Stars and Stripes*

Standing in the blood of his Iraqi counterparts, back to the wall with just four bullets and a "folding flip knife" to defend against onrushing insurgents, Col. James Coffman Jr. had just one thought going through his head.

"I was not going to be on TV with them cutting my damn head off," the Special Forces officer said. "I would eat a grenade first. I was going to go down fighting."

Coffman, 51, fought, but he didn't go down.

Instead, Army Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, commander of Iraq's Multi-National Security Transition Command and Coffman's

boss at the time, personally awarded him the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions on Nov. 14, 2005.

The Great Barrington, Mass., native spent most of his 32-year Special Forces career in psychological operations.

When Petraeus, the 101st Airborne Division commander, was tapped to lead the training and equipping of the army and police in May 2004, he asked Coffman to be "his eyes and ears out on the ground," Coffman said.

Eventually, Coffman became the sole American adviser to the 1st Iraqi Special Police Commando Brigade, a group of highly trained forces that belong to Iraq's Ministry of the Interior.

In mid-November 2005, the minister of the interior called the commando unit to Mosul to help gain control of the city, which was being overrun by insurgents. Most of the local police had abandoned their posts in fear for their lives.

At 10:30 on Nov. 14, Coffman's commandos received an emergency call for help from the only police station in the city that was still staffed. It turned out to be an ambush.

The insurgents pinned down the commandos until Coffman and his men were trapped with the police station to their backs, and a small retaining wall, about 8

**Name:** Col. James Coffman Jr.

**Unit:** American adviser to the 1st Iraqi Special Police Commando Brigade

**Medal:** Distinguished Service Cross

**Earned:** Nov. 14, 2005, Mosul, Iraq



Col. James Coffman Jr. responds to insurgent gunfire in Iraq on Dec. 3, 2005, while traveling with the 1st Iraqi Special Police Commando Brigade. He was the brigade's American adviser.

feet high, in front of them.

Then they hit hard, with "very intense small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades," Coffman said.

Casualties were heavy and immediate. All but one of the Iraqi officers were killed or incapacitated within half an hour of the attack.

"The ground was literally running with blood," Coffman said. "I always thought that was just a figure of speech."

With their leaders down, the remaining commandos "were in a fairly excited state," Coffman said.

So Coffman took over, using hand signals to mime what he wanted the commandos to do when his fragmented Arabic failed him.

Coffman kept fighting even after a bullet smashed through the palm of his left, dominant hand and into the stock of his M-4 rifle, blowing the gun apart.

He dropped the useless weapon, picked up an AK-47 from a dead commando, and began to fire with his right hand.

"I could feel the bones crunching around" in his hand, Coffman said, but there was surprisingly little pain — "it was adrenaline kicking in."

The commandos fought on, repelling two charges by the insurgents.

Finally, about 3 p.m., "it was just myself and one police commando that were 'unwounded,'" Coffman said, dismissing his shattered hand as "a minor problem."

"I was down to four rounds of ammunition," he said.

"The insurgents were getting ready to rush us for the third time — a half dozen, dozen of them — literally, they were about 20 meters away from us."

He had vision of being captured, paraded on television and beheaded, like so many other Western hostages.

He made up his mind: "I was going to go down

fighting."

Just at that moment, "the cavalry arrived": soldiers in Stryker wheeled combat vehicles from the 4th Infantry Division.

The quick response team quickly subdued the insurgents and, four hours after it began, the firefight at the Mosul police station was over.

Out of the 120 Iraqi commandos who had responded to the call for help, 48 were wounded and 13 were killed, including one wounded major who was taken to

"The ground was literally running with blood. I always thought that was just a figure of speech."

— Col. James Coffman Jr.



Coffman stands tall after being awarded the Distinguished Service Cross during a Baghdad ceremony.



Coffman wears a cast as the result of wounds suffered during a firefight.

a local hospital, kidnapped by insurgents and later beheaded, Coffman said.

On the enemy side, "23 bodies showed up at local hospitals, and another 24 were wounded," Coffman said. "We probably hit them pretty hard."

When Coffman learned that Petraeus had personally submitted him for the Distinguished Service Cross — the Army's second highest award for valor, below only the Medal of Honor — "I was completely floored," he said.

"I would say I was able to keep some training and composure," he said. "But I was no Audie Murphy."

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Born: July 21, 1940  
Branch: U.S. Marine Corps  
Action: Vietnam, 1965

**Harvey C. "Barney" Barnum, Jr.**

*"The destiny of our great country lies in the hands of our youth, the future leaders of America."*



Born: August 1, 1943  
Branch: U.S. Army  
Action: Vietnam, 1968

**Paul W. Bucha.**

*"The Medal of Honor is proof that ordinary men and women have within them the potential to challenge fate and literally change the course of history. It only requires the courage to try."*



Born: July 11, 1939, Opelika, AL  
Branch: U.S. Army  
Action: Vietnam, 1968

**Robert L. Howard.**

*"It's a great privilege to be an American. And the greatest privilege of all is the right to choose."*



Born: August 2, 1945  
Branch: U.S. Army  
Action: Vietnam, 1968

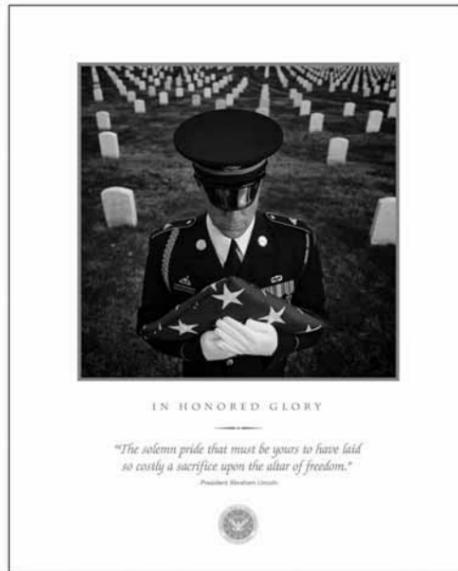
**Jack H. Jacobs.**

*"Freedom is purchased with the lives of those magnificent people who value American liberty above all."*



**Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation Values**

- **Courage.** We embrace the indomitable courage demonstrated by the recipients of America's highest military honor for valor as an ideal that should endure in all ways of life.
- **Sacrifice.** We support sacrifice and service above self as principles that all Americans should strive for as citizens of a free and prosperous nation.
- **Patriotism.** We promote love of country and are committed to support and defend the freedoms we enjoy as Americans.
- **Citizenship.** We believe that America's destiny lies in its youth and are committed to helping them become worthy citizens of our country in the belief that ordinary Americans have the potential to challenge fate and change the course of history.
- **Integrity.** We believe that the mark of a true hero is to have the moral courage to do what needs to be done because it is the right thing to do.
- **Commitment.** We steadfastly support the valiant men and women who serve their country in the same spirit of commitment and sacrifice as those who preceded them.



*These Medal recipients have visited the troops and walked the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq. One served in theater on active duty as a battalion commander.*



Born: January 21, 1940  
Branch: U.S. Marine Corps  
Action: Vietnam, 1966

**John J. McGinty, III.**

*"The Medal I wear was earned by the Marines and Navy corpsmen of the 1st Platoon of Kilo Company, 4th Marine Regiment. Against tremendous odds, One-Kilo, supported by intrepid Navy and Marine aviators, upheld the honor of the Marine Corps, and I am proud to have been their leader. Semper Paratus."*



Born: June 14, 1950  
Branch: U.S. Army  
Action: Vietnam, 1969

**Gordon Roberts.**

*"My generation, just like the ones before it, kept the dream of our founding fathers alive and started the march toward freedom worldwide. It is now for the next generation to continue that long march to peace and freedom for all. God bless those who serve."*



Born: October 26, 1944  
Branch: U.S. Army  
Action: Vietnam, 1970

**Gary L. Littrell**

*"To our youth, don't give in to peer pressure. If it's wrong, say no. Your peers will respect you for it and you will be my hero."*



Born: January 14, 1944  
Branch: U.S. Navy  
Action: Vietnam, 1972

**Thomas R. Norris**

*"Everyone faces seemingly overwhelming odds sometime in their life - never give up."*



Born: February 14, 1932  
Branch: U.S. Air Force  
Action: Vietnam, 1967

**Leo Thorsness**

*As a six-year prisoner of war, I learned that freedom is our most important commodity. We keep it through personal responsibility. Freedom is the flip side of responsibility."*

# 'The asphalt became shrapnel'

BY LEO SHANE III

*Stars and Stripes*

After months searching for mass graves in Iraq, Army Reserve Majors Lauralee McGunagle and Kathryn Van Auken had grown used to the horrors that lay just below the desert surface.

But they weren't ready to find 10 mortar shells hidden underground outside Karbala. And they found them the hard way.

"They exploded in the middle of our (12-vehicle) convoy," McGunagle said. "The asphalt became shrapnel, and nearly cut the vehicles in half. These were unarmored SUVs. But everyone survived.

"We were very lucky."

Foreign troops serving with the pair said it was more than luck. They lobbied U.S. commanders to honor Van Auken and McGunagle for their calm leadership following the blast, coordinating medical and military backup among three foreign fighting forces and keeping everyone safe.

Army officials agreed, awarding each a Bronze Star with "V" for "courage under fire" and protecting the lives of the civilian investigators with whom they had become close friends.

The IED attack came Feb. 14, 2004, as the recovery convoy moved just outside of Karbala.

The two U.S. soldiers were accompanied by a team of Kuwaiti forensics experts who had just investigated another mass grave site, as well as a unit of Thai engineers and a squad of Polish military police.

The convoy had just turned onto a raised causeway when the daisy-chained shells were detonated, sending dirt and glass everywhere. Van Auken said the group had encountered IEDs in the past, but nothing this large or destructive.

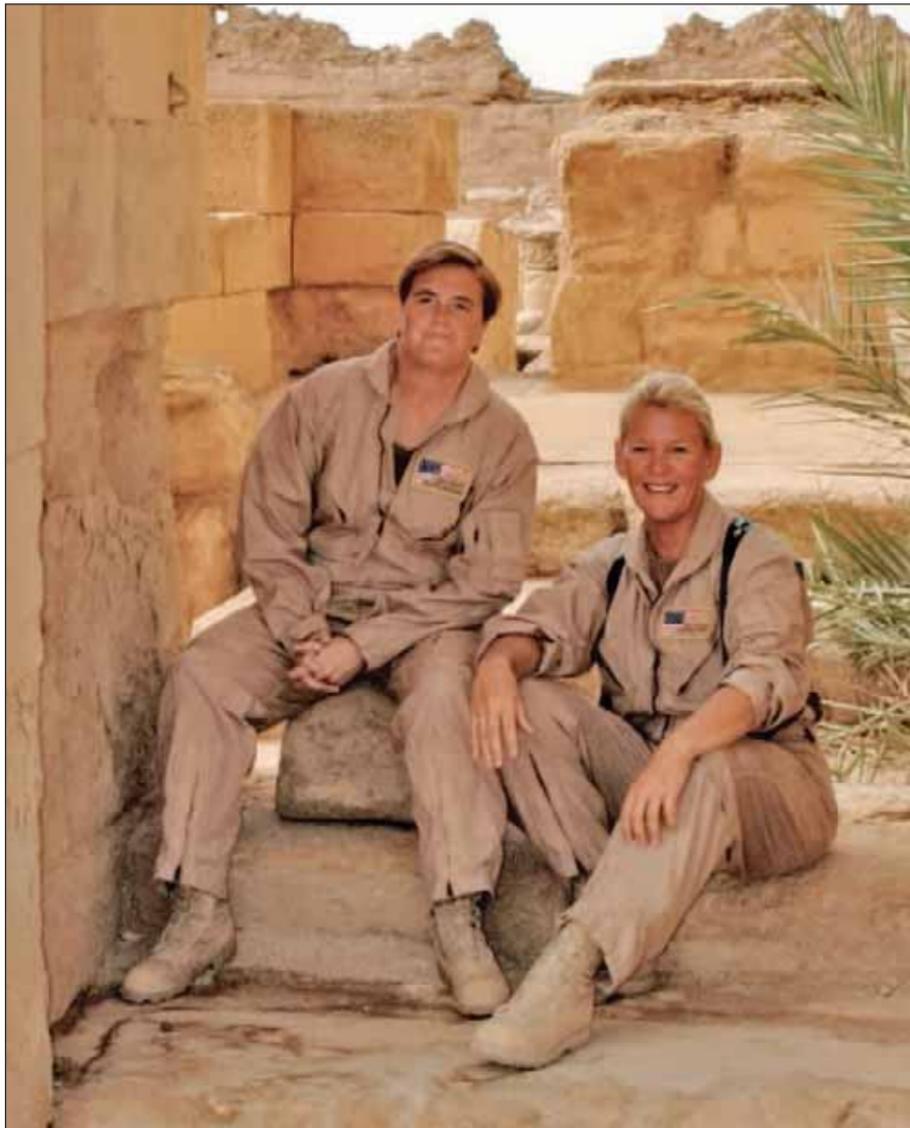
"There were 10 huge craters in the

**Name:** Maj. Lauralee McGunagle

**Unit:** Army Reserve

**Medal:** Bronze Star with "V"

**Earned:** Feb. 14, 2004, outside Karbala, Iraq



Maj. Kathryn Van Auken, left, and Maj. Lauralee McGunagle relax during a mission just south of Mosul, Iraq, in September 2004.

ground, and we didn't know how many more might be there," she said. "There was a lot of screaming over the radio, and a lot in Arabic."

The U.S. soldiers immediately tried to move the vehicles out of the area, fearful of a secondary attack. But the vehicles hit

were completely disabled, and several of the injured civilians were wandering away from the convoy, panicked and disoriented.

So McGunagle and Van Auken rushed out of their vehicle and into the exposed roadway, scanning the area for signs of

another attack.

"The Polish MPs were yelling at us to stay in the vehicle," Van Auken said, "but the Kuwaitis needed help."

McGunagle said the pair knew the convoy was very vulnerable, and started directing the still-functioning vehicles to form a perimeter and protect the Kuwaiti casualties. Both women split their attention between administering first aid and readying the group to defend themselves for the next attack.

That ambush never happened. Rescue crews and a Russian helicopter escort arrived on the scene a few minutes later and pulled the injured investigators out.

The women downplayed how important their role was in the aftermath, especially since the second attack never came.

But Army officials said just moments after the explosion the scene was filled with large crowds of Iraqis and vulnerable team members and, without their leadership, the situation easily could have turned tragic.

McGunagle said the incident left all of the group shaken — "we knew how to curse in four languages after that" — but also brought the group closer together. The Polish MPs were impressed with the women's fearlessness, and the wounded civilians credited them with keeping them calm and safe until backup arrived.

Van Auken said that's just part of the job description.

"It's clichéd, but we were there to protect and to serve," she said. "And here, someone needed help."

The two women spent 16 more months traveling around Iraq after the attack, helping to investigate and uncover more graves. The roadside bombs didn't discourage them in the least.

"After what happened to us in Karbala," McGunagle said, "we were ready for anything."

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**Name:** Maj. Kathryn Van Auken

**Unit:** Army Reserve

**Medal:** Bronze Star with "V"

**Earned:** Feb. 14, 2004, outside Karbala, Iraq

# 'It happens so quickly you really don't think about it much'

BY JULIANA GITTLER

*Stars and Stripes*

Air Force F-16 pilot Chad "Skeet" Martin left Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., as scheduled in December 2002, to serve his three-month rotation in Kuwait in support of Operation Southern Watch.

As the deployment progressed, it became apparent they wouldn't be going home as scheduled.

In March 2003, armed conflict began, and Martin began flying real-world combat missions — 29 combat sorties over 26 days, he said.

But in the first week of April 2003, Martin would take part in two sorties that would help alter the course of the new war. For those flights, he later would

**Name:** Capt. Chad T. Martin

**Unit:** 524th Fighter Squadron

**Medals:** Distinguished Flying Cross

**Earned:** April 2003 over Baghdad

receive one of the Air Force's most prestigious awards, the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Martin, now a captain with the 36th Fighter Squadron from Osan Air Base, South Korea, took off from Al Jaber Air Base, Kuwait, to offer close air support in an area outside Baghdad.

They encountered heavy anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles before they finished their mission and returned to Kuwait.

The pilots then received orders to fly their second sortie of the day.

"When we took off, we didn't know where we were going," Martin said.

In the air, the pilots learned their destination: They were instructed to fly back to Baghdad to destroy anything and everything military at the international airport.

Under fire, Martin's lead pilot took out an ammunition area. Martin spotted tanks nearby and dropped his payload.

At the time, it was a regular mission. That afternoon, watching the news back at base, Martin watched as V Corps took the airport.

He realized he helped pave the way for

that victory, among the pivotal events of the early war.

"You know you had something to do with that," he said. "That's exciting."

Months later, he earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for those two sorties.

Martin said he remembers looking at his wife's grandfather's shadowbox on the wall at home displaying the Distinguished Flying Cross that man earned in World War II.

"Those guys in World War II really had it hard. I felt like I can't compare," Martin said. "But it was neat to have the same medal."

Several pilots from his squadron also earned a DFC.

"If I deserved one, everyone in my squadron did," Martin said. "We all did the same things."

On a personal level, the experience is



Martin

one he'll never forget. On a professional level, it has helped him as a pilot.

It's also helped him as a mentor, preparing new pilots for the reality of combat — even though training never can prepare pilots fully for coming under attack, he said. "You can't simulate the real thing."

With anti-aircraft artillery, the enemy "throws lots of lead up hoping to hit you," he said. Ballistic missiles look like rockets. Pilots duck away from their telltale trail of white smoke.

Martin was fired on for the first time before the war even began, during Operation Southern Watch on Feb 11, 2003.

"I probably didn't realize" they were firing at him, he said. "It happens so quickly you really don't think about it much."

During combat sorties, Martin said, pilots must stay focused. The danger doesn't sink in until the wheels touch down.

He remembers touching down after the airport sortie.

"I breathed a sigh of relief," he said. "I definitely had a hard time sleeping that night."

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# 'I was actually the lucky one'

BY LISA BURGESS  
Stars and Stripes

Until Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Robert Maldonado faced three months of Hospital Corps School, the Los Angeles native never felt much incentive to study.

But Maldonado had two strong motivations to graduate and become a full-fledged corpsman.

The first, according to the 25-year-old sailor, was pride.

"This was the first school I ever took serious," Maldonado said in a telephone interview from Kauai, Hawaii, where he is on shore duty at the Naval Branch Medical Annex at Barking Sands.

The second reason was more practical: The Navy sends hospital corps dropouts to the fleet as undesignated seamen.

In other words, he said, "you fail, you're chipping paint for 18 months."

Little did he know that all those nights hitting the books would pay off in a single day five years later and 6,000 miles from home.

In fact, the events of Sept. 30, 2005, in Afghanistan would not only earn Maldonado a Navy Achievement Medal with Valor, they would also help convince him to set his sights on becoming a Navy officer.

Afghanistan was Maldonado's first combat deployment. He and Marines from the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, which is part of the III Marine Expeditionary Force based at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, arrived in June 2005 at Camp Blessing, in the Kunar Province.

On Sept. 30, Maldonado and three Ma-

**Name:** Petty Officer 3rd Class Robert Maldonado

**Unit:** Attached to the 3rd Marine Division

**Medals:** Navy Achievement Medal with "V"

**Earned:** Sept. 30, 2005, Afghanistan



Courtesy of Petty Officer 3rd Class Robert Maldonado

**Petty Officer 3rd Class Robert Maldonado and other troops were wounded when a blast took out their Humvee in Afghanistan.**

rines were bringing up the rear of a convoy moving through the Korengal Valley — "bad-guy central," as Maldonado called it — when an IED exploded directly under their up-armored Humvee.

The explosion blew the doors off the vehicle and sent shrapnel into Maldonado's arms and legs.

"But I was actually the lucky one," he said.

The gunner and the relief driver in the right front seat were both blown clear out of the vehicle, while the driver, a Marine sergeant, "absorbed most of the impact of the blast," Maldonado said.

Ears ringing and "throwing up — I think it was radiator fluid. I was like 'wow, my mouth tastes like chemicals,' " — Maldonado lurched out of the Humvee, pulling the unconscious driver with him.

The driver's lower leg was blown open, bones sticking out "of a huge hole," Maldonado said. And blood so bright it looked almost pink was spurting rhythmically into the air.

"I was like, 'Oh God, this is arterial bleeding,' which can cause death in minutes, Maldonado said.

"I put a tourniquet on him, tightened it as much as I can," he said, then wrapped

and stabilized the sergeant's leg, using part of the Marine's M-4 rifle as a brace.

"Puking and stumbling," Maldonado then ran to help the machine gunner, "who was out in the road where he could get shot at."

The gunner also had a shattered lower leg, which Maldonado splinted and bandaged after dragging the Marine to safety behind the Humvee.

Finally, Maldonado sought out the third Marine from the Humvee, who was on the other side of the vehicle, "half hanging off the cliff."



Maldonado

And when Maldonado inspected him, sure enough, "it's the same exact thing" as the other two Marines: a splintered lower leg, with "his bones sticking out, as well."

Maldonado had just finishing bandaging his third patient and was checking back on the sergeant when Marines from the convoy came racing back to help.

"They were like, 'Wow, everybody's already bandaged up!'"

The four wounded Marines and Maldonado were evacuated by helicopter to the combat support hospital at Bagram Air Base.

There, a military doctor told the corpsman that his swift action had saved the sergeant's life.

"I just thank God he was the closest one to me, thank God he was the first one I attended [to]," he said.

What the corpsman was surprised to learn was that he might also have saved the machine gunner.

"The doctor said yeah, that guy had arterial bleeding, too," Maldonado said. "I didn't see it [at the time] but I was afraid," given the nature of the injury.

"So I put on a tourniquet, just in case."

Editor's note: Listen to audio clips of Maldonado's recounting of his experience. Go to Stripes' Web site at [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com)

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# 'There was no way we were running'

BY LEO SHANE III  
Stars and Stripes

Master Sgt. Suran Sar had to reassess his battle plan after being shot in the head.

"I knew the enemy was in the bunker, but I didn't want to use a grenade because we didn't know

what was in there," said the 39-year-old soldier. "But as I looked around the corner, he fired at me and hit my helmet. It broke my chin strap, hit the screw holding that together.

"I fell back, and I told my guy to get a grenade in there."

Sar said the bullet felt like a hammer hit his head, but he suffered no long-term effects. "The enemy" wasn't as lucky, as Sar and his team moved from structure to structure eliminating them, now more careful about sticking their heads out as targets.

Even before that Spring 2005 encounter in Paktika, Afghanistan, Sar and his team

**Name:** Master Sgt. Suran Sar

**Unit:** Operational Detachment Alpha 732, 7th Special Forces Group

**Medals:** Silver Star, Bronze Star with combat V, Purple Heart

**Earned:** March-April 2005 in Paktika, Afghanistan

had already had several close calls. They came under fire as soon as their Black-hawks started to land, and Sar had to rush unprotected at the enemy to help team members who were pinned down.

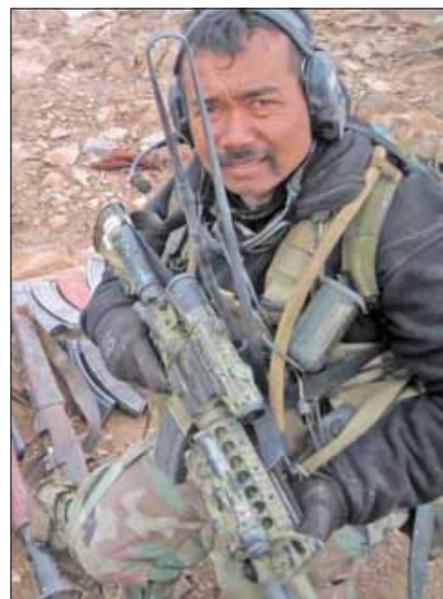
Blocking a bullet with his head on top of that convinced Army officials to hand him the Silver Star for his heroism and selflessness that day. But Sar deflects that praise, saying all of the hardware he has earned is a tribute to the men with whom he serves.

"This is a group of great Americans, very patriotic, who are serving their country," he said. "This team did exceptional work, and the enemy paid dearly."

He calls the Army "his home," and considering his family history, its no empty sentiment.

As a boy in Cambodia, he grew up during the reign of the Khmer Rouge and suffered through his father's imprisonment and the execution of his older brother. His mother and two other brothers died from starvation. Sar said when he arrived in the United States in 1981, he had no family and no money.

He joined the Army in 1986, planning to spend a few years to earn money for college, but said his commanders quickly became his close friends and convinced him to stay in. They pushed him toward the special forces, and he had conducted operations in Africa, Kosovo and Afghanistan before last spring's second tour in



Courtesy photo

**Master Sgt. Suran Sar secured enemy weapons possibly used against his team after a March 5, 2005, firefight.**

Asia.

The March 5, 2005, raid where he was shot was the first major firefight for his new team and, despite his headache, he called the mission a success. The group rounded up several small caches of weap-

ons and cleared out a mountainside controlled by enemy forces, the first of a number of strongholds they attacked that spring.

In fact, Sar was awarded a Bronze Star with V for actions just a few weeks later, in a similar firefight where his team found themselves several hundred feet below enemy fighters on a hillside.

Sar said he had been attempting to lure the shooters down from their point when crossfire caught the team off guard. Despite the strategic disadvantage, he said the team kept calm and stuck to its training.

"If we had tried to retreat, we would have all been dead," he said. "So I gave the order to charge the hill."

He led the assault. The U.S. special forces took the hill without any casualties; Sar said after his men killed two of theirs, the rest turned and fled.

"I knew my guys were better soldiers than them," he said. "There was no way we were running."

During their campaign in Paktika, the 13-man team did lose one soldier. Sar said the fallen man is the true hero who deserves recognition, not him.

"I told his family they didn't lose a son, they gained 12 others," he said. "We're a family now. This team earned this valor, not just me. I told them if they need anything, we'll be there for them."

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# 'I'm just dangling there'

BY STEVE MRAZ  
Stars and Stripes

As the medical evacuation helicopter sped to the ridge where two wounded Special Operations Forces troops waited, the flight crew heard ominous sounds over the radio.

"The whole aircraft's quiet, and one of the pilots is like, 'I think that's gunfire,'" said Sgt. 1st Class Makonen Campbell. "And I'm like, 'Yeah. I think it is gunfire.'"

It was April 11, 2005. Taliban insurgents had ambushed Afghan forces on a high mountain pass near Khost in an attempt to assassinate a former Afghan military commander. U.S.

SOF troops came to the aid of the Afghans, and two of the U.S. troops — Paul, an Army master sergeant, and Brad, an Air Force tech sergeant, identified by their first names only for security reasons — were wounded in the fighting.

Campbell — then a staff sergeant with the 159th Medical Company (Air Ambulance), based in Wiesbaden, Germany — was serving as flight medic on the helicopter that was assigned to evacuate Paul and Brad.

When the helicopter got to the scene, crewmembers realized that they would not be able to land on the ridge. They would have to use a hoist.

**Name:** Sgt. 1st Class Makonen Campbell

**Unit:** 159th Medical Company (Air Ambulance)

**Medals:** Distinguished Flying Cross

**Earned:** April 11, 2005, near Khost, Afghanistan



PHOTO COURTESY OF MAKONEN CAMPBELL

**Then-Staff Sgt. Makonen Campbell attends to a patient in Afghanistan. The flight medic earned a Distinguished Flying Cross for rescuing two troops in a separate incident.**

As Campbell was lowered for the roughly 150-foot descent, his radio was smashed against the side of the aircraft. Now he would have to rely on hand signals to communicate with the soldier controlling the hoist.

Campbell continued his ride down, but the hoist stopped.

"So I'm just dangling there," said the 30-year-old from Charlotte, N.C. "I've got my 9 mil (9 mm pistol). I've got my M-4 (carbine). I'm ready to return fire, but it got to a point where I was like, 'OK, I'm just here. If they want to shoot me down,

they're going to shoot me down.' At that point, I was like, 'All right, I'm about to eat the big one on this one.'"

He started to give frantic hand signals to put him on the ground. Campbell finally reached the ground close to the wounded and was met by an Afghan Special Forces soldier. Campbell noticed dust being kicked up near his feet.

"There's rounds actually coming by at my feet," he said.

Campbell hit the deck and made his way to Paul, who was shot in the groin and in both legs, and Brad, who was shot

in the ankle but was returning fire from the cover of a small rock.

Campbell quickly attended to the critically injured Paul and secured him in a rescue stretcher that was lowered from the helicopter.

Next was Brad. Campbell got him in the stretcher and gave a thumbs-up to the crew chief in the helicopter. Campbell thought he would have time to gather up his gear before riding up with Brad. Campbell turned around, saw the sked was going up and jumped for it.

"It looked like some straight 'M:I III' stuff, some 'Matrix' stuff," Campbell said of his leap. "Didn't think it would take it up so fast."

The wounded were treated on the way back to Forward Operating Base Salerno. When the helicopter landed, Paul and Brad were taken to the emergency room. Paul had lost four pints of blood into his gut but survived. Brad also made it out alive.

U.S. and Afghan forces were credited with killing 12 insurgents. Another Black Hawk that was involved in the mission had more than 50 bullet holes in it. The pilot of that aircraft was awarded the Silver Star for his actions.

"It was a normal mission to us," Campbell said. "Next thing you know, we had the whole SF Group coming up to the hospital, wanting to talk to us, congratulate us, thank us — however you want to look at it — for going out there to get them. It was like, 'That's our job. That's what we do.'"

For his actions during the 45-minute mission, Campbell was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on Dec. 2 in Wiesbaden.

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The paper has been published continuously since 1942 in Europe and 1945 in the Pacific.



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# Heroes for a devastated land

BY KEVIN DOUGHERTY

*Stars and Stripes*

There was nothing really heroic about it, at least not in the classical sense.

On short notice, hundreds of U.S. servicemembers deployed last fall to northern Pakistan to assist in earthquake relief efforts. They were joined by military personnel from other nations, such as Australia, Japan and Germany.

Given the lethality of the 7.6-magnitude earthquake that struck the Kashmir region Oct. 8, there was little choice.

"We had to get there," said Army Col. Angel Lugo, commander of the 212th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. "People were dying."

Ripping into villages, tearing apart countless families, the quake killed an estimated 87,000 and left 3 million homeless.

And, to make a shaky situation even worse, the harsh Himalayan winter was looming.

"There's no telling how many lives they (U.S. personnel) saved," said Army Lt. Col. Sam Hamontree, deputy commander of the 4th Aviation Brigade, which sent rotary aircraft, personnel and equipment to the area.

The overall U.S. military response was led by Navy Rear Adm. Michael P. Lefever, who headed up the Combined Disaster Assistance Center in Pakistan.

It was formed in mid-October, when the majority of U.S. military personnel arrived. At one point, according to Lefever, the number of U.S. military personnel on the ground exceeded 1,000.

Each service had a hand in the relief effort. Navy Seabees cleared roads and swung hammers; Navy ships and Air Force cargo planes delivered aid, from rice and cooking oil to blankets and bandages; the Army dispatched a water purification detachment; a Marine rigging crew helped Army and Navy helicopter crews; and the Army and Marine Corps medical personnel ran separate hospitals near the quake's epicenter.

"I don't know how many people told me, 'You know, sir, this is why I joined the military,'" said Lugo, the MASH commander.

The initial U.S. force consisted of several Army Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters sent to Pakistan from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Navy and Marine aviators got into the act, too.

That airlift contingent was eventually succeeded by Task Force Eagle, which supported and coordinated much of the massive U.S. humanitarian relief effort. Headed by Army Col. Robert Johnson, commander of the 4th Aviation Brigade, Hanau, Germany, the task force worked out of a hangar at Qasim air base, located just south of the capital city, Islamabad.

Other units, such as the 212th MASH task force, the 267th Quartermaster Company, and the Marines Combined Medical Relief Team 3, moved north to be closer to the disaster area.

"We all thought we'd be back by Christmas," Johnson said.

Within weeks it was pretty clear they wouldn't wrap things up that soon. Hospital visits to the 212th MASH in Muzaffarabad, for instance, continued to climb, averaging more than 300 a day by year's end.

Some personnel wound up staying in the region until late March.

In the early days of the operation, "everything was coming at us 100 miles an hour," said Army Staff Sgt. David Gonzales of the 4th Aviation Brigade. "There was no issue with falling asleep [at night]."

The task force's basic mission was



Courtesy of U.S. Air Force

**U.S. Army Sgt. Kornelia Rachwal gives a drink of water to a Pakistani girl being flown from Muzaffarabad to Islamabad, Pakistan, aboard an Army CH-47 helicopter.**

twofold, Johnson said.

Obviously, the primary and overriding purpose was to support the government of Pakistan in providing assistance to affected areas.

But the United States also viewed the effort as a way to "improve [its] strategic relationship with Pakistan," according to the task force's mission statement, something Johnson and others were keenly aware of.

"We had a chance to influence an entire generation in a known terrorist strong-

hold," said Army Maj. Kevin Rants, the task force's logistics officer.

They exerted influence in subtle and not so subtle ways.

One way they won over the skeptics, Johnson said, was to let

the Pakistani people see the U.S. military at work in a humanitarian operation.

Allowing health-care providers to travel to villages to offer medical treatment helped neutralize some of the negative sentiments that existed.

"When we first got there (to Pakistan)," Johnson said, "many thought we were spies or something."

The goodwill the task force built up unraveled a bit in mid-January, when the United States bombed a suspected terrorist hideout near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, said Hamontree, the deputy commander of the 4th brigade. The task force was further handicapped by the cartoon controversy involving a Danish newspaper and the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Still, despite the suspicions and setbacks, soldiers like Rants and Gonzales said they felt good about what they and the others accomplished.

"It was clear that we were needed there," Lugo said, "and that we brought the right stuff to save hundreds, thousands of lives."

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## Fitting finale

BY KEVIN DOUGHERTY

*Stars and Stripes*

It was a fitting encore for the last and most decorated MASH in the U.S. Army.

The day after a 7.6-magnitude earthquake rocked Pakistan last fall, Col. Angel Lugo got a call from a friend who told him the 212th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital might be tabbed to go.

Based in Miesau, the 212th MASH had just returned from an exercise in Angola, so the unit wasn't expecting to go anywhere, especially since it was in the process of being turned into a Combat Support Hospital.

When the Oct. 8 earthquake hit, many in the 212th MASH were on leave. Lugo, the commander, was touring Heidelberg, while his operations officer, Capt. Liza O'Neal, was in Paris.

"It was a long weekend," O'Neal said, "and we were all out and about."

But two weeks after the Kashmir earthquake had killed 87,000 people, a task force led by the 212th MASH was in the Himalayas setting up a \$4.5 million hospital, which the United States later donated to Pakistan.

"You didn't have time to think," Sgt. Michelle Berres, a nurse, said of the hasty departure. "You just worked until it was done."

The MASH task force, which drew heavily from personnel at nearby Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, established its base in Muzaffarabad, about six miles from the epicenter. The 84-bed hospital included two operating tables, four wards, a power station, pharmacy, lab, radiology section and other features.

"Leave it to the Americans to bring the Mayo Clinic to Pakistan," O'Neal

said, recalling the sentiments of one nongovernmental organization worker.

Almost immediately, the hospital became a magnet.

The medical staff began seeing patients within six hours of their arrival. The first surgery occurred the following day and by nightfall the intensive care unit was filled. Local clinics were no match for the MASH.

"We had the only ventilators" in Muzaffarabad, O'Neal said. "We had a dozen. They had zero."

Lugo and his staff planned for a deployment of up to 90 days, though many, including the boss, thought they might make it home by Christmas. Instead, the task force, which included a detachment from the 123rd Main Support Battalion in Dexheim, kept Operation Lifeline going until February.

During its four months in Pakistan, the MASH treated more than 9,200 people, performed over 420 surgeries, visited at least 50 villages and gave tens of thousands of immunizations. It also welcomed many high-level dignitaries, from Vice President Dick Cheney to President Musharraf of Pakistan to actress Angelina Jolie in her capacity as a U.N. goodwill ambassador.

But in the end, it was the staff members' bedside manner that won over the locals. One of them became known for giving younger patients "field trips" around camp. Other health care providers ventured into remote villages to provide basic medical care.

Lugo said he sensed that many Pakistani patients were surprised by the amount of care and compassion the Americans displayed.

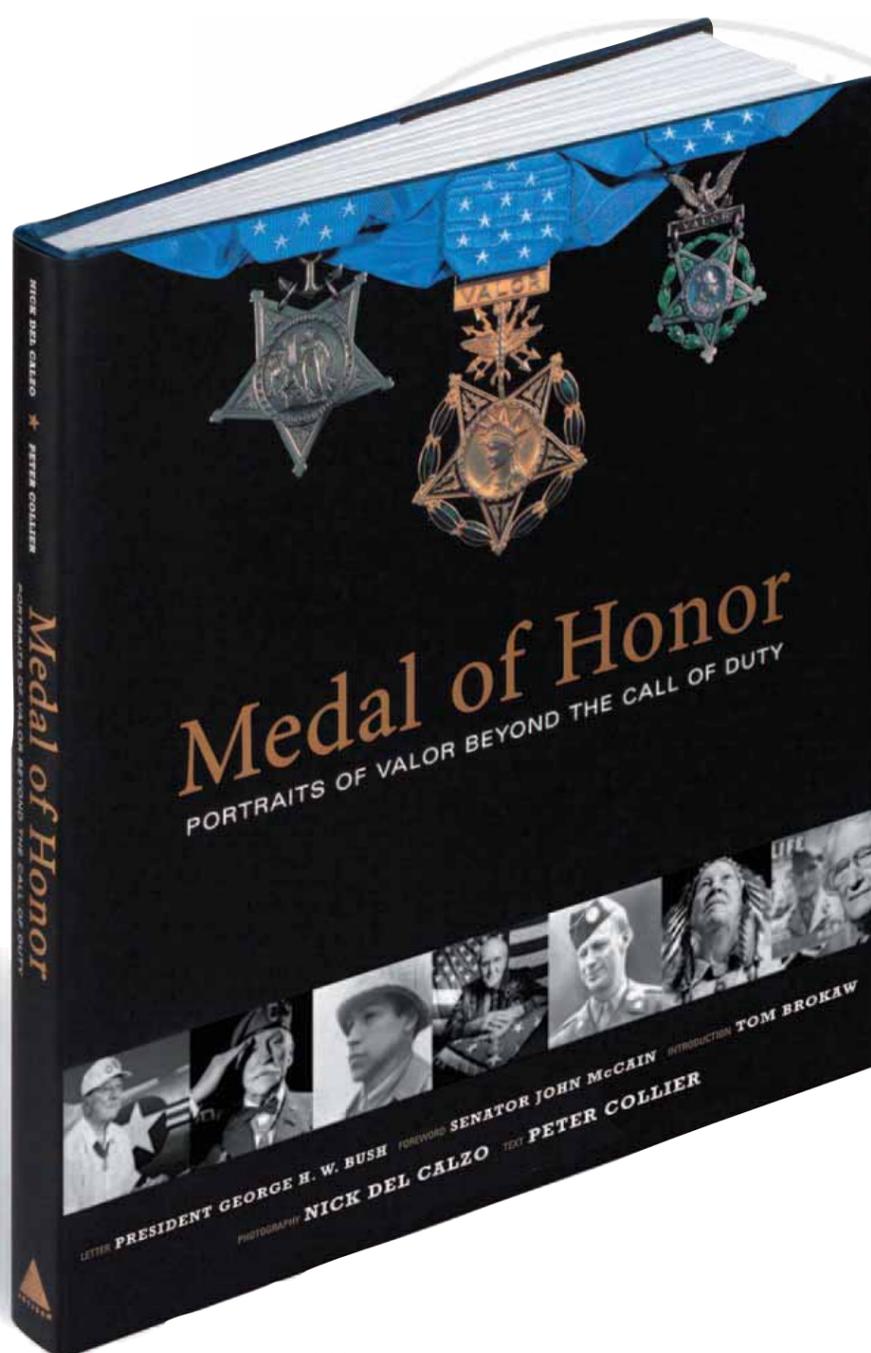
"Word got out that we weren't these 'mean Americans,'" Lugo said.

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