

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

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HEROES

A nation honors valor
in the war on terror



Photo courtesy of Debra Dunham
Photo illustration by Noga AMI-RAV/Stars and Stripes

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BOEING



VALOR

American soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have for five years now been fighting the war on terrorism. The arguments about the course of the war in Washington and in the media matter little to the military men and women who put on the gear and head into the fight every day.

Every day.

They inhabit the chaos in Afghanistan or Iraq, trying to build bridges, to deliver supplies, to do as they have been asked to help build stable societies where there were none.

Every day.

They get pictures and packages from home, trying to keep it in their minds that normal still exists.

They learn that their tours have been extended. They salute and drive on.

They live and work in the tense unknown and unseen, always anticipating the fury that so often erupts.

Every day.

In his Gettysburg Address, President Abraham Lincoln spoke of the selflessness and sacrifice that also characterize today's American warfighter:

"We cannot dedicate — we cannot consecrate — we cannot hallow, this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have hallowed it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, while it can never forget what they did here."

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.

It is up to us to remember the deeds of those who have been in the arena, faces covered in dust and sweat and blood, while we go about our daily lives.

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

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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

May 15, 2007

To the men and women of the United States Armed Forces:

Defending the ideals of our founding has required the sacrifice of every generation. Our military has triumphed over brutal enemies, liberated continents, and answered the prayers of millions around the globe. At this critical time, we will again answer history's call with confidence and build a better world for our children and grandchildren. I am always impressed by the honor, courage, and decency of our service personnel, and I am honored to be your Commander in Chief.

America also owes a debt of gratitude to the military families who support you in times of war and times of peace. These loyal citizens inspire our Nation with their sense of duty and deep devotion to our country.

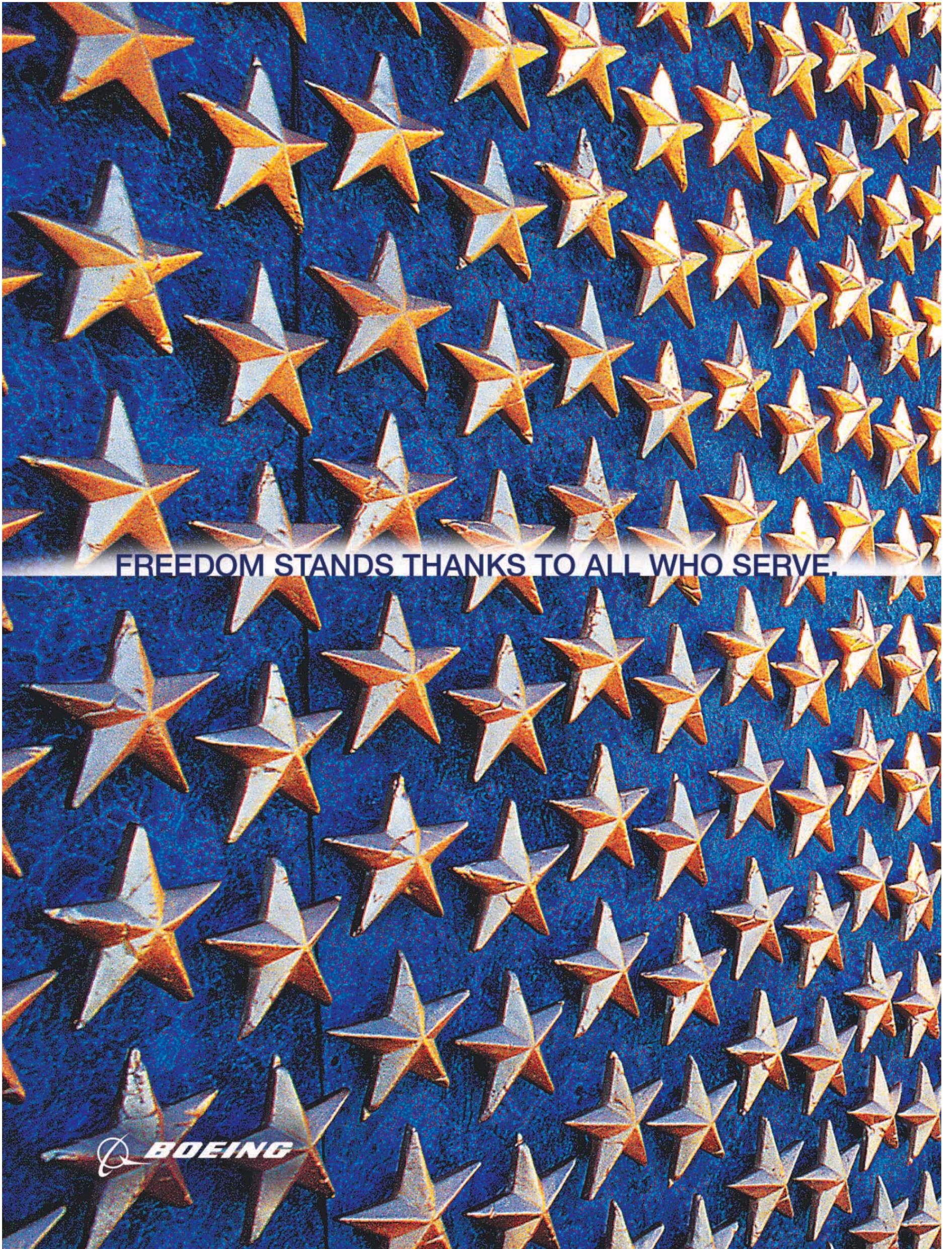
I appreciate all the Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and Coast Guardsmen for your service and sacrifice. Patriotic men and women like you make our military the greatest force for freedom in the history of the world. Your good work is helping to secure our liberty and lay the foundation of peace for generations to come.

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

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FREEDOM STANDS THANKS TO ALL WHO SERVE.

 **BOEING**

'He was just a genuine human'

BY LEO SHANE III

Stars and Stripes

When Cpl. Jason Dunham was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in January, his family said they were both proud of his bravery and devastated by his sacrifice.

His Marine family still feels the same way.

"I think about him every day," said Sgt. Billy Hampton, who served alongside Dunham in Iraq. "Everything reminds me about Jason. Every time I look in the mirror and see those scars, I remember what he did."

Dunham was only the second servicemember to receive the nation's highest military honor for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the first Marine.

The process took almost three years, but his friends and family said they knew his heroism would eventually be recognized.

"A Marine's Marine"

Dunham's family and friends describe him as far from the stereotypical Marine. While both fit and fearless, he wasn't an angry, hulking caricature of a military man.

"He wasn't a yeller. He wasn't an intimidator. He was just a genuine human," said Maj. Trent Gibson, Dunham's company commander.

"He knew how to be a human being. He knew how to respect people. His Marines admired him for that, and they respected him for that, and they followed him for that."

"He was a Marine's Marine."

Dunham's platoon commander, 1st Lt. Brian Robinson, said that when Dunham first arrived in Iraq, the upstate New York native re-enlisted to make sure his tour would be as long as the rest of his company's stay.

"He didn't want to leave early if they weren't going to be able to," Robinson said.

Dunham would often talk to the younger Marines in the company, treating them as equals rather than lower-ranking enlisted troops.

Name: Cpl. Jason Dunham
Unit: Company K, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines
Medal: Medal of Honor
Earned: April 14, 2004

Just a few days before his death, Dunham spent the night relaxing with several of those Marines talking about ways to stay safe in an ambush. Several wondered if a helmet could withstand a grenade blast if one landed nearby, and Dunham himself wondered whether anyone could get the Kevlar headgear off quick enough in such a scenario.

Other Marines remembered Dunham as someone who was tough but fair, listening to their side of the story before chewing them out or offering them help.

"He made you feel like a person," Hampton said. "He made you feel like you were actually part of the brotherhood."

Without hesitation, Dunham pulled off his helmet and jumped on top, hoping to shield his Marines from the blast.

"That's Dunham's helmet"

Hampton was beside Dunham on April 14, 2004. Dunham, 22, was supposed to be leading the squad on patrol for the first time, but that mission was scratched when another unit came under attack.

As they rushed to the scene, another attacker fired an RPG across the hood of the squad's lead Humvee. The troops immediately began combing the area, and stopped traffic to search the cars for any other insurgents.

Hampton said he had just finished looking through a bus when he saw an Iraqi leap out of his SUV and punch Dunham. Both Hampton and then-Pfc. Kelly Miller rushed to help him.

As he reached the attacker, "I looked down, I saw Jason with his helmet off," he said. "I couldn't figure out why. I thought maybe during the fight the Iraqi had pulled it off or something."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DUNHAM FAMILY

Cpl. Jason Dunham's sacrifice in Iraq is remembered by his family and friends.



Far left: Dunham's family is honored by a visit and an award from President Bush.

At left: Dunham, in happier times.

“A reporter asked me how someone could decide to jump on a live grenade. It’s not a decision. It’s your instinct as a Marine to confront a threat and protect your other Marines.”

Maj. Trent Gibson,
Dunham’s company commander

“He was up on top of [the helmet]. And that’s when the grenade went off.”

Hampton said he had no idea what exploded, but suddenly found himself flat on his back and bleeding from shrapnel to his arms and legs. Miller was also blown back and suffered similar wounds.

Witnesses later said the Iraqi had dropped the live grenade as he and Dunham fought. Without hesitation, Dunham pulled off his helmet and jumped on top, hoping to shield his Marines from the blast.

The Iraqi survived the blast but was killed trying to flee. All three Marines were quickly evacuated from the scene.

Gibson said that when he arrived, the other Marines had gathered all of Dunham’s equipment but couldn’t find his helmet. Someone suggested he may have used it to try and contain the grenade.

“I’m looking around and there are tiny scraps of Kevlar all over the road,” he said. “I told the Marines, ‘Start picking it up; that’s Dunham’s helmet.’”

Both Miller and Hampton had severe injuries, but nothing life-threatening. Dunham absorbed most of the blast and shrapnel.

Hampton said after he was stabilized he rushed to find Dunham and see what support he could offer, but “every time I tried talking to him, I broke down.”

Dunham died eight days later at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

“I wouldn’t be alive”

At the White House ceremony where Dunham’s family was presented with his Medal of Honor, President Bush praised him as the ultimate example of a hero.

“On a dusty road in western Iraq, Cpl. Dunham gave his own life so that the men under his command might live,” he said.

Gibson said that was no surprise.

“None of it surprised me the day it happened,” he said. “It just seemed perfectly natural for him to do it.”

“A reporter asked me how someone could decide to jump on a live grenade. It’s not a decision. It’s your instinct as a Marine to confront a threat and protect your other Marines.”

Hampton said every time he hears the story about another Marine receiving a medal or some sort of heroic act in Iraq, it seems hollow to him because he compares it to Dunham’s sacrifice.

“I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for Jason. My daughter wouldn’t have been born if it wasn’t for Jason.”

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In their own words

Sometimes, even the best writers can’t capture the whole story.

This year, Stripes’ special Heroes section allows some of those heroes to tell their own stories.

Audio clips are available at www.stripes.com in the ‘Heroes 2007’ section to hear the following war-fighters recount their tale:

- Chief Warrant Officer 2 Christian Beck
- Sgt. Aubrey McDade Jr.
- Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stephens
- Airman 1st Class Charity Trueblood
- Airman 1st Class Christian Jackson
- Sgt. Tommy Rieman
- Sgt. 1st Class Gerald Wolford
- Petty Officer 2nd Class Alan Demeter

In addition, the online section features clips from Sgt. Billy Hampton discussing Cpl. Jason Dunham’s heroic actions, and an audio slideshow of his Medal of Honor ceremony at the White House.

Additional photos of many of the other heroes are online as well.

Military awards

Gen. George Washington established the first U.S. military award, called the Badge of Military Merit, in his General Orders of Aug. 7, 1782. The badge was to be awarded in “not only instances of unusual gallantry but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with due reward,” the orders said. “The road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus open to all,” the orders stated.



Medal of Honor

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

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

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



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.”



The “V” device

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

The device, also known as “V” device, Combat V, or Combat Distinguishing Device, is authorized by all the services. The “V” is used as an attachment to a defined set of awards and decorations at or below the level of the Bronze Star. The Medal of Honor and Silver Star never include a “V” device, because valor is implicit in the award itself.

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.”

A tiny brass “V,” for valor, can be attached to the ribbon.



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.



Navy and Marine Corps Medal with “V”

Awarded to junior officers and enlisted personnel serving in any capacity with the Navy and Marine Corps who distinguish themselves by outstanding professional achievement or for leadership. Originally a non-combat award, the achievement medal is now awarded for both combat and non-combat service. The combat “V” device is worn on the ribbon if stipulated in the citation.



Army Commendation Medal with “V”

The Army Commendation Medal is awarded to any member of the Armed Forces of the United States other than General Officers who, while serving in any capacity with the Army after 6 December 1941, distinguished himself/herself by heroism, meritorious achievement or meritorious service.



'I thought that was death'

On Dec. 23, 2004, a mortar platoon with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines was clearing a sector in Fallujah when several Marines became trapped in a building full of insurgents. The accounts on this page are about two Marines who were decorated for trying to save and recover their fellow Marines that day.

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

When Cpl. Jeremiah Workman heard the Squad Automatic Weapon open up, he didn't think much of it.

But when he heard the AK-47 going off, he and the rest of his squad knew something was wrong.

And by the time they ran to the house in Fallujah, Iraq, where Marines were trapped inside, the gunfire was intense.

Workman, 23, said he stepped inside the house and saw two sergeants trying to talk to the Marines upstairs.

The bullets were hitting so close to the head of one of the sergeants that Workman screamed for him to get down.

The three went outside where Workman learned that about six Marines were trapped in the home.

After coming up with a plan, they were joined by a lieutenant who led between eight and 11 Marines toward the home, said Workman, then with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines.

"As soon as we get to the front door, the lieutenant backs out of the way ... He peels off the stack, so now I'm first, and I'm just thinking, 'Oh [expletive]," said Workman, of Marion, Ohio.

When the Marines got to the staircase,

the lieutenant told Workman to go up on the count of three. As soon as Workman started running up the stairs, bullets started to fly.

"It was like one of them damn cartoons where they shoot at the feet and the cartoon dances. I mean literally, it was right on my ass as I was running up the stairs," he said.

By the time he got to a landing that offered cover, Workman realized that none of his fellow Marines had been able to make it up the stairs.

Workman said he saw three of the Marines trapped inside, but he was unable to yell to them over all the noise.

After being ordered to come back down the stairs, he dove down the staircase to rejoin the rest of the Marines.

"I got back down and they picked me up and the lieutenant's like, 'I'm going to throw a grenade up there to soften them up,'" Workman said.

Of course, the grenade bounced back down the stairs, but Workman and the others were able to take cover before it went off.

The Marines then made a second assault up the stairs, and this time all of the Marines made it up, Workman said. By this time, the three trapped Marines he had seen were gone.

He would later learn that they had made it to the roof in an attempt to escape.

Workman and about three other Marines were now firing at the insurgents. He was so close to another Marine's weapon that he was getting showered with the brass casings.

During the firefight, Workman would have to put down his rifle as fellow Ma-

rines handed him grenades to throw.

"I felt naked. To throw the grenade, I'd have to let my rifle down and then throw it, and that was one of the most awful feelings ever, was not having my rifle up. You felt like you were vulnerable."

After he grabbed his rifle to start shooting again, an insurgent tossed a bright yellow grenade at them. It landed a few feet from the Marines.

"I had enough time to, like, shield my head. I yelled 'Grenade!' and it went off."

He said he felt like someone had hit him in the leg with a baseball bat, but otherwise he was unharmed.

But the Marines were running low on ammunition, so they had to run downstairs and outside the house.

Once outside, Workman ran into one of the Marines who had been trapped inside the house. The man was bleeding and stumbling, so Workman dragged him to safety.

Afterward, he went back into the house and started firing and tossing grenades at the insurgents.

While making his way up the stairs, he heard a "God-awful, blood-curdling scream" from behind him.

One of his buddies had been hit in the arm with an armor-piercing AK-47 round. "His arm was damn near gone. I mean, it completely blew his tricep out, so he has no — he's trying to fire his rifle with one arm, and he's not quitting."

Workman and the other Marines got the wounded Marine outside, where the man demanded to go back into the house.

"I just remember, his exact words were, 'Give me a [expletive] pistol!' Workman said. "He kept saying, 'Give me a [expletive] pistol!' This guy wanted — damn near on his death bed from loss of blood and everything else — he wanted to go back into this house with a pistol so he

could keep fighting."

He grabbed about seven magazines and ran back into the house.

Once he was inside, two insurgents ran at him and another Marine.

Workman kept hitting the bad guys, but they didn't fall down, so he slung his M-16 and opened up with an AK-47 he had on him.

Finally, the two insurgents fell down, but then insurgents tossed another grenade at the Marines.

It blew up and knocked him down.

Workman tried standing up against a wall, but he ended up sliding down against it and throwing up.

"I thought that was death, when in fact I was just so dehydrated and so overwhelmed with everything that I just, was like, passed out," he said.

Eventually, a major dragged Workman out of the home by his helmet.

Outside, he learned that all of the Marines were now accounted for. Three were dead.

Now the Marines sat quietly, some smoking, as they waited for the airstrike that had been called in to level the block.

His platoon commander was crying. "I don't know if he felt like he had failed because we had lost guys or what, but when I saw that, I started crying," Workman said.

Now a sergeant, Workman is credited for killing more than 20 insurgents that day, but he is unsure how officials arrived at that number.

About two years later, Workman learned he would receive the Navy Cross for his actions that day in Fallujah.

"I think I almost instantly teared up, because it brought back everything, and all I could think about was the guys we lost."

E-mail Jeff Schogol at: schogolj@stripes.osd.mil

Name: Cpl. Jeremiah Workman
Unit: 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines
Medal: Navy Cross
Earned: Dec. 23, 2004, in Fallujah, Iraq



Workman

"It was like one of them damn cartoons where they shoot at the feet and the cartoon dances."

Cpl. Jeremiah Workman

'Fortunately, the grenade didn't go off'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

Two of his Marines were down. The rest of his platoon was unable to reach them.

And so, Marine 1st Lt. Alfred Lee Butler IV and other Marines in his platoon ended up leaping rooftop to rooftop to rescue them.

Now, almost three years later, Butler said his most vivid memories of that day are of seeing his Marines down. He hoped they were still alive, but he had a "sinking feeling" that they were already dead.

It was Dec. 23, 2004, in Fallujah, and Butler commanded a mortar platoon with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, out of Camp Pendleton, Calif. Now a captain at Camp Geiger, N.C., Butler would earn the Bronze Star with a "V" device for his actions that day.

Butler, 28, said he and his Marines were tasked with clearing out insurgents who had been bypassed during the fighting the month before or who had managed to



MARK SIXBEY/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marine Maj. Gen. Richard Natonski, left, presented the Bronze Star with "V" to 1st Lt. Alfred L. Butler IV in Iraq.

sneak back into the city before U.S. troops could allow civilians back in.

While his Marines were clearing one building, insurgents tossed a hand grenade at four Marines, wounding three of them, said Butler, of Jacksonville, N.C.

The four Marines managed to make it outside to a second-floor patio, where one fell to the ground, mortally wounded, he said. Then an insurgent shot and killed a second Marine who was standing guard so his comrades could get away.

At the time, Butler did not know if the two Marines still on the second-floor patio

were still alive, he said.

"All we know is they are upstairs and there is a lot of gunfire going on and we've got to go get them."

So he took some Marines and ended up jumping onto the roof of the building with the insurgents. Once there, they started taking fire.

"You hear the crack," Butler said. "You see the kind of puffs as they come off the cement walls as we were trying to make our way across."

Butler and his Marines made it to the patio.

Insurgents tossed a grenade at them, so Butler and another Marine jumped on the two Marines.

"I didn't know if they were dead or alive, (but) I knew enough if they took more injuries they probably wouldn't live," Butler said.

But the explosion they were awaiting never came.

"Fortunately, the grenade didn't go off, because that would have been a bad day for everybody."

Butler said he helped get the Marines from the patio to the roof and then onto the street.

In the process, other Marines in his platoon were wounded.

He said he still remembers the cries for a corpsman.

"Every time you heard that, you knew one of your Marines was hurt."

By the time the insurgents had been cleared, three of Butler's Marines were dead, including the two he helped recover from the patio, he said. Another dozen or so Marines were wounded.

But not Butler. "I was one of the lucky ones," he said. "Don't ask me how that happened. One of those 'a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right wouldn't be here' kind of things."

Now Butler was faced with the task of writing the families of wounded and fallen Marines.

This hit close to home for Butler, whose father was one of the 241 servicemembers killed in 1983 when a terrorist destroyed the Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon.

"[Having been] on the receiving end [makes it] that much harder, because you know what the families are going through," he said.

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"You hear the crack. You see the kind of puffs as they come off the cement walls as we were trying to make our way across."

1st Lt. Alfred L. Butler IV

'The grenade is in the truck!'

BY MARK ST. CLAIR
Stars and Stripes

He was patrolling Baghdad's Adhamiyah neighborhood with members of Cobra platoon, manning a .50-caliber machine gun from atop the last of a six-vehicle convoy.

After turning onto a city street, an enemy fighter on a nearby rooftop threw a grenade. It dropped through his turret and into his truck.

His actions were instantaneous and life-saving, and for them

he was awarded the Silver Star and has been recommended for the Medal of Honor.

Spc. Ross Andrew McGinnis — posthumously promoted for his bravery — paid the ultimate price Dec. 4, 2006, throwing himself on the grenade to save the four others inside his Humvee.

When he saw it go in, he yelled "Grenade!" over the vehicle intercom and tried to deflect it. The truck commander, who also was McGinnis' platoon sergeant, didn't know that the grenade had gotten inside and shouted, "Where?" to McGinnis, who looked as if he was going to jump out of his gunner's hatch to safety.

Instead, realizing that the four other soldiers inside were trapped, he shouted, "The grenade is in the truck!" and threw his body on it, trapping the deadly explosive between his back and the radio mount between the two front seats.

He was killed instantly, but his warnings to the other crew members gave them time to posture themselves for minimal damage. Because of this, none was seriously wounded.

Name: Spc. Ross Andrew McGinnis
Unit: Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: Dec. 4, 2006, in Adhamiyah, Iraq



BEN MURRAY/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Ross McGinnis mans his weapons in Baghdad in a photo that appeared in Stars and Stripes before he died. He was later promoted.

Living his dream job of "shooting big guns and getting paid for it," the Knox, Pa., native was just 19 when he died.

He had wanted to be a soldier since kindergarten, and he signed up for delayed entry in the Army on his 17th birthday — the first day he was eligible, his parents, Thomas and Romayne, told members of his unit.

His company commander in Iraq, Capt. Michael Baka, of Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, and other members of his unit remembered how he loved the spotlight. After a picture of McGinnis and his .50-cal graced the cover of an edition of Stars and Stripes, Baka

told him he was famous. McGinnis brushed it off, but his friends said he cherished the photo and carried it with him everywhere.

Baka also was the one who first recommended McGinnis for the Medal of Honor, which, as the United States' highest award for wartime valor, is approved sparingly and takes months or even years to be awarded.

Only two have been given out for actions taken since Sept. 11, 2001, and both posthumously. The first award, to Sgt. 1st Class Paul Ray Smith of the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, was presented to Smith's wife and two children by Presi-

dent Bush on April 4, 2005 — two years to the day after Smith's death.

It took two and a half years after the death of the second recipient, Marine Cpl. Jason L. Dunham, for word that he would be decorated.

According to the Army's official Web site, "because of the need for accuracy, the (Medal of Honor) recommendation process can take in excess of 18 months with intense scrutiny every step of the way."

Six months after his death, McGinnis' Medal of Honor recommendation has been approved at every step so far, and it is presently working its way through the Army's Human Resources Command.

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'It was instant gunfight every time we left'

BY BEN MURRAY
Stars and Stripes

Tech. Sgt. Nathan Salvemini didn't earn his Bronze Star with Valor for a specific mission.

There was no one day or particular battle, no specific operation that earned him the distinction.

Instead, when recalling the events of his deployment to eastern Afghanistan in late 2004 and early 2005, the combat controller

from the 321st Special Tactics Squadron at RAF Mildenhall reels off a litany of harrowing events, any one of which sound like they could be the basis of a distinction.

Fighting out of an ambush in an Afghan village. Thwarting a nighttime raid by scores of Taliban fighters on his outpost. Coordinating artillery and air assets to help free a group of pinned-down Marines.

The area around Forward Operating Base Tillman at the time was so rife with enemy activity that, working from observation posts and sniper nests, "Sal" Salvemini was responsible for 80 percent of all

close air support missions in Afghanistan over his three-month deployment, commanders later told him.

"It was so active, I wouldn't even have to call down air support," Salvemini said. Pilots in combat aircraft — A-10 Thunderbolts, AH-64 Apaches, high-level bombers — knew they could just fly over the area and expect a mission from him, Salvemini said.

It was a dangerous time to be at FOB Tillman, a small outpost within sight of the Pakistan border.

"We were getting hit with 20, 30 rockets every other night," Salvemini said. On his first day at the base, FOB Tillman was showered with 35 rockets in just two hours, he said.

Going outside the wire was hardly a safe bet either.

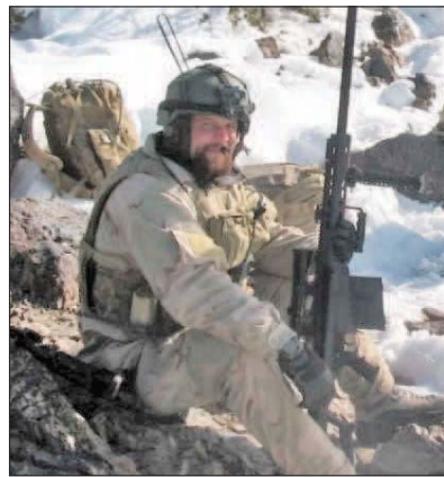
"It was instant gunfight every time we left the base," he said.

Sitting in his outpost one night near the FOB with several Afghan soldiers, for instance, Salvemini got the sense something was wrong. Looking over the edge of the position, he could see "little black dots all coming up the ridge."

Scores of enemy fighters were halfway up the slope by the time he spotted them, and for once no aircraft appeared to be able to respond before the outpost was going to be overrun.

"I was like, 'This is going to be over in 10 minutes,'" Salvemini said of the predicament.

But by chance, a pair of Apache helicopters had diverted to the area that night,



Tech. Sgt. Nathan Salvemini in Afghanistan.

and Salvemini instantly hailed them to assist. He highlighted the fighters with infrared markers, and the helicopters attacked with guns and rockets.

"That quelled the first wave," he said. Salvemini then called in A-10s to drop guided bombs below his position, and he was relieved as the explosions broke up the attack.

"I was like, 'Oh yes,'" he said.

When the area was surveyed the next morning, the bodies of more than 60 enemy fighters were found, he said.

In another incident, a group of about 30 enemy fighters on a ridge had a group of

Marines and Afghan soldiers pinned down in a valley. To get at the fighters, Salvemini devised a deadly ruse.

From his position looking down on the action, he called artillery rounds onto the ridge from a nearby firebase to flush the fighters off the slope. They ran back to a rendezvous point they knew was out of range of the Howitzers and regrouped — in an area Salvemini knew was in range of a second firebase.

By the time the enemy had collected near their getaway car, shells from the second firebase were already in the air, targeting the rendezvous point.

"They kind of looked at each other like, 'Where did that come from?'" he said.

He timed the artillery strike to hit just seconds before he scheduled two A-10s to drop guided bombs and rockets on the target, completing the rout.

Stories like those are just mere samples of Salvemini's deployment, however, which also saw him engaged in numerous gun battles.

"One day, we got caught up in a pretty good gunfight. ... Twenty dudes opened up on us," he said of one mission.

"We came under direct fire in the middle of [a medical evacuation]. We started getting shot at like crazy," he said of another day.

"[Sal] is a man who continually steps up to always do the right thing with old-school leadership and motivation," said Senior Master Sgt. Mickey Wright, superintendent of the 321st STS.

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'Taking fire the whole night'

BY MATT MILLHAM

Stars and Stripes

They had been warned that something like this might happen. They just didn't know what convoy would be targeted, where or when. If they didn't know anything, they'd have been almost as well off.

Cobra Company's logistics convoy would have rolled regardless. The war wasn't going to be put on hold until better information came in, and neither would they.

Just after dark Oct. 10, 2006, six trucks rolled off Camp Ramadi to resupply two combat outposts — COP Sword and COP Grant — in south central Ramadi. It's an area of the city you're guaranteed contact nearly every time, 1st Sgt. William Thompson said.

A fuel truck and a supply truck — the most vulnerable vehicles — rode in the middle of the convoy. Thompson's Humvee led the pack, followed by another Humvee, while two more brought up the rear.

His driver, Spc. Thomas Tatum, and gunner, Spc. Sean Egger, scanned the road along with him for anything out of the ordinary.

They knew the stakes. The three soldiers and their Humvee were replacements for Cobra's former first sergeant and his crew, who were blown up by a roadside bomb almost two months prior. First Sgt. Aaron Jagger, Spc. Shane Woods and Spc. Ignacio Ramirez were all killed in the attack.

Egger and Woods were close friends; former roommates who'd traveled Europe together and went to church together on Sundays.

Thompson and Jagger had been friends as well, and Lt.

Col. V.J. Tedesco, the battalion commander, picked Thompson to replace the fallen first sergeant. Thompson picked Egger, who'd spent the last two months manning the radios in the battalion headquarters, to man the .50-caliber machine gun in the turret of his gun truck.

Egger "was definitely a steely-eyed killer and did not belong behind the radios," Thompson said.

Their convoy continued its slow march through the Ramadi night. Thompson still hadn't decided which of two available routes to take to COP Sword; the north or the south. Some last-minute intel crackled over the radio. There might be a bomb on the southern route.

The convoy edged on a bit farther before Tatum cranked the wheel to the right and onto the northern route.

Just as the last truck radioed it had made the turn, Tatum saw the bomb.

Thompson gave the order to back up. But the ambush was already on.

As they rolled in reverse, the bomb, a stone's throw away, went off. Dirt and sand flew at Egger, exposed in the turret. A few small scratches streaked his face, but he didn't even notice until later. Nobody else was hurt.

Tatum spotted the trigger man running down an alley and yelled to Egger, who swung his .50 cal to meet the fleeing ter-



Courtesy of 1st Sgt. William Thompson

Spc. Sean Egger in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2006. Egger, now a corporal, was awarded the Army Commendation Medal with "V" for his actions during an ambush on the night of Oct. 10, 2006, in Ramadi.

rorist.

The trigger man's spotter popped up and started to take off, too, Thompson said.

"Swing and a miss, they should have stayed down," he said. "Egger whacked 'em both immediately using the .50 cal."

Seconds later, the convoy started taking fire from the left, right and behind.

Thompson had already jumped out of the Humvee to get a better view of the battlefield. What was happening wasn't normal. Usually the enemy just staged a quick ambush and ran away. This time they'd stayed to fight and were trying to force his convoy forward.

This was the complex attack Thompson had been warned to look out for before he rolled out of the gate. It could have hit any of the logistics convoys, he said. Every company ran one a day. "It just so happened that we were the fortunate ones."

The only way out was back where they came from, through the hail of bullets.

"We were basically caught and couldn't move," Thompson said.

He and another soldier, Staff Sgt. Ronnie Cunningham, directed the gun trucks to reorganize to protect the unarmored fuel and supply trucks as they turned around on the narrow street, threw smoke grenades to hide their movements and took shots at the enemy as they managed the chaos.

Egger, meanwhile, scanned the rooftops, windows and alleys for their attackers, laid down suppressive fire and called out enemy positions over the radio to help his comrades get a bead on them.

Staff Sgt. John Evangelista, gunner for one of the rear Humvees, took aim at the assailants, but heavy return fire raked the shield of his turret and flung his 240B machine gun from its mount.

Blistering bullet fragments pelted Evangelista from all sides bruising his arms and face, Tatum recalled, but he wasn't wounded. Evangelista took his machine gun in hand and popped out of the turret like a whack-a-mole, strafed the enemy positions and popped down again to dodge the retaliatory fire.

Egger took aim at a rooftop machine



Courtesy of 1st Sgt. William Thompson

1st Sgt. William Thompson stands with his shotgun in Ramadi in 2006.

gun as the gunman unleashed a stream of bullets at the soft-sided fuel and supply trucks. The attacker didn't damage anything before "Egger engaged and destroyed that knucklehead," Thompson said. Had the fuel truck been pierced, it could have been catastrophic.

More bad news came over the radio. A dozen engineers on foot patrol were pinned down by heavy fire just blocks away. Thompson and his gun trucks were in the best position to stage a rescue, but he was still neck deep in his own ambush.

It had taken just minutes to get turned around, but it felt like forever as they continued to take fire, Egger recalled. Their destination now was COP Grant, about a half-mile away. The only way there was the southern route where, as far as they knew, a roadside bomb waited with their names on it.

"Basically, we just cleared it with our fingers crossed and hauled ass up to Grant," Thompson said.

Bullets flew at them the whole way to the gate. The supposed bomb didn't go off, at least, but the night was still young. They still had a platoon to rescue.

Thompson left the supply and fuel trucks at Grant. Tatum drove as fast as he safely could down the northern route toward the ambush with two more gun trucks right behind. A pair of Abrams tanks bracketed the ends of the ambush zone and provided cover for Thompson's team.

The engineers, who had been conducting a house-to-house census, were now stuck in a home with an Iraqi family. Enemy fire was coming in from about 10 directions when Thompson's team pulled up, and the engineers concentrated their efforts on protecting the civilians, Tatum said.

There was no safe route out. Thompson's team had to make one.

Thompson and Cunningham leapt from their Humvees to set up security, leaving Egger in charge of the gun trucks, which threw everything they had at the enemy. Thompson threw smoke grenades to create a shield as he and Cunningham moved up to make contact with the trapped soldiers and show them the way out.

They quickly made it back to the gun trucks, which surrounded them in a protective formation as gunfire continued to come in from all directions. Thompson walked with them as the Humvees shielded their egress to COP Grant. The bullets didn't stop flying until they were back inside the wire.

"We were taking fire the whole night," Tatum said. Somehow, nobody was hit. "We got really lucky."

Egger said it wasn't luck. Everybody executed what they'd been trained to do, and nobody backed down, nobody cowered, he said.

For their actions and bravery that night, Thompson and Cunningham were awarded the Bronze Star with "V." Now-corporal Egger, a two-time Purple Heart recipient, and Evangelista were both awarded the Army Commendation Medal with "V." Tatum is still waiting for word on his ARCOM with "V."

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Cunningham

'My hands were burning with his blood'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

In the nearly five months Marine Capt. Brian Cillessen had been in Afghanistan, the bad guys' tactic would be to hit hard and melt away. That changed on Jan. 23, 2005.

Cillessen, 35, was an embedded trainer with Afghan troops in northeast Afghanistan, attached to a Special Forces detachment that fell under Task Force Phoenix.

Name: Capt. Brian Cillessen
Unit: Assigned to Task Force Phoenix
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: Jan. 23, 2005, in northeast Afghanistan

Afghan troops had found several large weapons caches, causing al-Qaida and Islamic militants to stir from their winter siesta, said Cillessen, of Aztec, N.M. And recently, some members of the Afghan security forces had been killed by a roadside bomb.

On this day in January, Cillessen and the Afghan troops had hired 60 donkeys to take away part of a large weapons cache, he said.

The local authorities were cooperative, but in hindsight, they seemed to know something was up, he said.

"They had a feeling that something would happen to us also because no one wanted to talk to us for very long."

On the way back, the Afghan troops sent some soldiers ahead of the main convoy, but their vehicle broke down.

"We caught up to them about the time we got to the kill zone for the ambush," Cillessen said.

The 45 Afghan commandos and four U.S. servicemembers were on a road flanked on both sides by steep mountain slopes when al-Qaida and other Islamic militants fired a volley of rocket-propelled grenades, disabling the vehicle in front of his, Cillessen said.

The coalition troops and bad guys were separated by a river.

"My initial instinct was to return fire and kill as many of the enemy as possible before they have a chance to withdraw," he said, but after 10 minutes of sustained



COURTESY OF BRIAN CILLESEN

Capt. Brian Cillessen participates in the recovery efforts after the crash of a Boeing 737 in 2004 outside of Kabul, Afghanistan.

RPG fire, he realized the bad guys were not going away.

"We started to gain fire superiority. It looked like we had things well in hand, and then the casualties started to mount in our unit."

One Afghan soldier was dead; more were wounded.

Just as they moved to leave the kill zone, the enemy opened fire from the rear. Now they were in serious trouble.

"Afterwards, one Marine said when that happened, he thought he was going to throw up," Cillessen said. "I can relate to that, because my stomach was in my throat at the time."

For a moment, he thought there was no way out.

But then an Afghan soldier, Sgt. Abdullah, began directing Marines' fire, and grabbed Cillessen and led him to the middle of the road.

"I remember thinking to myself, he

can't be serious — he wants me to go where?"

But Abdullah had led him to a better position where he could fire at the enemy. He could now see all of the enemy; the downside was there was no cover.

That didn't seem to faze Abdullah, which reassured Cillessen.

"He looked at me, and the confidence he had, and I thought, 'it can't be that bad because he's been fighting his whole life.'"

So Cillessen started firing grenades at the enemy as Abdullah patted him on the back and told him where to aim.

Another Marine who was at the scene later told Cillessen that he seemed to disappear in a cloud of dust and tracers.

Cillessen eventually fired some 40 grenades until he ran out, all the while taking fire. He was OK, but Abdullah was hit.

Cillessen said he raced back to a vehicle to try to give him first aid, but it was clear

Abdullah had been mortally wounded.

"My hands were burning with his blood," Cillessen said.

At that point, he had to make a decision: continue to try to save Abdullah or get the rest of the coalition troops out of the kill zone.

Cillessen laid Abdullah down and told the other Afghan troops to get ready to move.

"I just told him I was sorry," Cillessen said.

Then a Marine and several Afghan troops moved one of the disabled vehicles out of the way, allowing the rest of the vehicles to finally get out of the kill zone after close to an hour, he said.

Cillessen may have been given the Silver Star for his actions, but he says Abdullah was the hero that day.

"He inspired all of us to fight harder."

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'Everybody was shooting everywhere'

BY ASHLEY ROWLAND

Stars and Stripes

Capt. Colin Hoyseth got the Bronze Star with "V" device for courage in battle, but what he remembers about his first true combat in the days after the United States invaded Iraq was being mad.

"You get kind of angry when people are shooting at you, but as a leader you get more angry when people are shooting at your soldiers," he said of that

early-morning firefight outside the Baghdad airport. "I wanted to get rid of the danger as quickly as possible because we had people on the ground who were exposed."

Name: Capt. Colin Hoyseth
Unit: 3rd Infantry Division's 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment.
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: April 4, 2003, in Saddam International Airport, Baghdad

It was April 4, 2003, two weeks after the invasion. Hoyseth was traveling north to Baghdad from Karbala, about 60 miles away, and was among the first from his company to arrive outside the Iraqi-held Saddam International Airport, on the city's western edge, at 2:30 a.m.

The airport was quiet for the next four hours as the rest of his company arrived. Then, he said, the Iraqis began to attack and "it just went nuts" — rocket-propelled grenades, small-arms fire, tanks being blown up.

"It was just nonstop chaos," said Hoyseth, now 32. "I remember looking at my gunner as the day went on and saying, 'Wow, this is bad, and it's getting worse.' We knew it was a little bit different fight that day."

Iraqis began shooting at Hoyseth and his soldiers from an airport tower, but the



Hoyseth

Americans were positioned under trees and couldn't see the Iraqis clearly. Hoyseth, then a lieutenant, moved his soldiers about 100 yards to the right, away from the trees, and began returning fire.

It was the worst fighting he had seen since the war began.

"That's the day I thought it was most like combat was going to be — tanks shooting tanks, airplanes dropping bombs, high-intensity combat," he said.

"Other times, I guess I was more scared because it was more unknown. But that day, it was pretty straightforward, because everybody was shooting everywhere."

He had spent the past year training with his soldiers. They became his motivation during the firefight.

"You get to know these people pretty

well, and obviously you want to protect the people you know," he said.

Thoughts of his two children, then 4 months and 19 months old, provided similar motivation, he said.

About two hours after the attack began, U.S. forces broke through a wall and got inside the compound. Hoyseth's company detained 30 Iraqi soldiers. A few of his soldiers were wounded, but none was killed that morning.

Hoyseth is proud of his work, and of helping remove Saddam Hussein from power.

"I believe in the mission. Obviously, things haven't gone the way everyone had hoped," he said. "I would like to go back to Iraq, to see the difference, just to see what's changed in four years."

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"It was just nonstop chaos. I remember looking at my gunner as the day went on and saying, 'Wow, this is bad, and it's getting worse.'"

Capt. Colin Hoyseth

'The best picture I have of hell'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

Lance Cpl. Todd Corbin got word that a platoon of his fellow Marines were "heavily engaged" in Haditha.

So he and the rest of the Quick Reaction Force took off in three Humvees and one seven-ton truck.

What they didn't know is that they were walking into a well-prepared trap laid by insurgents.

Corbin, 33, a reservist with the 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines, said he noticed that a car was following the QRF team as it left the gate on that day, May 7, 2005.

In another ominous sign, no one was on the streets when the team got to Haditha, the Norwalk, Ohio, native said.

When one of the tanks escorting the team came across a roadblock, the team's platoon sergeant decided to turn around and find another way to get to the besieged platoon.

As they were turning around, a white van came out of an alley that Corbin had not seen.

Corbin, who was in the truck at the time, said he watched as the driver

Name: Lance Cpl. Todd Corbin

Unit: 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines

Medal: Navy Cross

Earned: May 7, 2005, in Haditha, Iraq

reached between the seats and pulled the detonator.

"It was just like I was watching TV," he said.

The blast disabled three Humvees and knocked many of the dismounted Marines to the ground. Of 16 Marines, only seven were uninjured.

The insurgents immediately opened up with mortars, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

The fact that insurgents already had their mortars zeroed in showed that they had prepared the kill zone for the QRF, Corbin said. And knowing the Marines' rules of engagement, the insurgents had taken position in a hospital.

Corbin told his vehicle commander to report that they had been ambushed, and he ran over to the Humvees to pick up his wounded comrades, he said.

He first picked up his platoon commander and carried him 30 to 40 yards to safety, all the while being shot at.

"All I wanted to do was get him off the ground and get him out of harm's way."

After putting his platoon commander in the back of the truck, Corbin went back to

help carry more of the wounded to safety.

He said it's a mystery how he managed to avoid getting killed in the hail of gunfire.

"By God's grace," he posited. "It's kind of a weird feeling when you see the ground jumping in front of you and you don't get hit."

When he got back to the Humvees, he saw a Marine try to help a mortally wounded corpsman.

Corbin tried to get the corpsman to respond to him, asking the corpsman to blink, but the man died right in front of him.

"He just laid back and took his final breath."

Corbin then ran back to the truck and grabbed a gurney, and then he and another Marine helped move another wounded Marine to safety.

For the next 45 minutes to an hour, Corbin crisscrossed the kill zone until he had picked up all of the wounded and fallen troops and loaded them into the back of the truck, all the time shooting while on the move.

"All I'm thinking is, 'I want to get my buddies out of there.'"

He said he still remembers vividly seeing one of the Humvees engulfed in flames and hearing the shrieks of the

wounded and the dying.

"The best picture I have of hell is that day."

But the Marines fought their way through it, firing at muzzle flashes until the shooting on the other end stopped.

When Corbin had every wounded servicemember in the back of the truck, he took the wheel.

Even though the vehicle had three flat tires and had been shot through the radiator, Corbin drove the truck over rubble, somehow managing to get it back to base "on a wing and a prayer," he said.

While driving, Corbin realized that his body armor had stopped two rounds.

He later learned from other Marines who interrogated the insurgents that they had planned a "perfect ambush" for the Marines. His Marines were able to get through it only by "violence of action."

Now a corporal, Corbin said it was bittersweet when he learned he would receive the Navy Cross for his actions in Haditha, saying he lost a lot of good people that day.

"If I could give back my Navy Cross and bring my friends home, I would, without a doubt, because that's too big a price to pay for a piece of metal," he said.

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Corbin

"It's kind of a weird feeling when you see the ground jumping in front of you and you don't get hit."

Lance Cpl. Todd Corbin

'It was surreal that I even was hit'

BY LEO SHANE III

Stars and Stripes

At the time, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Christian Beck had more pressing things to worry about than the bullet hole in his leg.

Primarily, he was worried about the bullet. After ripping through him, the round tore into the dashboard of Beck's helicopter, knocking out the primary navigation altimeter.

So Beck had to level out the medevac Black Hawk and try to figure out how far away it was from crashing into the ground. At night. While keeping his crew and wounded patient calm.

And Beck's boot was filling up with blood.

"I didn't want to just give up, because I didn't want to crash and burn," he said. "It was surreal that I even was hit, so I just continued to fly until my co-pilot could take over the controls."

Beck, an eight-year soldier currently stationed at Fort Riley in Kansas, earned a Bronze Star with "V" for his level-headed thinking and level flying that day.

The attack occurred during Beck's second deployment to Iraq. Until then, he said, his crews had flown over insurgents and received some small-arms fire, but never anything that actually hit his helicopter.

After picking up a wounded Iraqi soldier from inside the Sunni Triangle, Beck's Black Hawk and another medical

Name: CWO2 Christian Beck

Unit: Company C, 2nd Battalion, 1st Aviation

Medal: Bronze Star with "V," Purple Heart

Earned: Dec. 26, 2004, northwest of Baghdad, Iraq



Photos courtesy of CW2 Christian Beck

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Christian Beck stands in front of his Black Hawk helicopter on an airstrip outside Balad, Iraq, in December 2004.

helicopter headed back toward their Baghdad base. Within moments after it took off, tracer rounds came whizzing toward the aircraft, followed by more enemy bullets.

Army investigators later discovered that a single bullet was the only round to hit the helicopter, but it nearly killed not just the pilot but the four other troops on board. Beck said when he tried to bank the aircraft out of the line of fire, it struck the floor just right below his right leg.

"You could smell the sulfur and burning metal," he said. "You could feel it hit the

helicopter, and I obviously felt it hit me."

Beck, a pilot since 2003, said he immediately told the crew he had been hit, but he needed to pull the helicopter out of its sharp bank before his co-pilot could take over. His right leg was worthless, but he managed to level out quickly and hand over the controls.

"I just started using the radio box to tell him I was OK," he said. "I knew the extent of my injuries better than anyone else, but I had to keep a level of calm. Everybody was pretty concerned that I



Beck goes through a pre-flight check in his Black Hawk outside Balad.

wasn't going to make it."

After about 15 minutes of reassurances from their pilot and 15 minutes of intense pain for Beck, the helicopter was safely back on the ground. Medics rushed to treat Beck's wound and to tend to the other wounded patient: He suffered no long-term problems, while Beck needed eight surgeries to regain strength in his leg.

But he did, and he served a third tour in Iraq as a pilot after about a year of rehabilitation.

"My only real fear (during the attack) was that I wouldn't be able to fly again," he said.

"I knew the most important thing was to stay calm and maintain control of the aircraft. Otherwise, I could seal the fate of all of the lives on board."

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'How close I came to life and death'

BY LISA BURGESS

Stars and Stripes

Before starting off on a convoy trip through Iraq, Airman 1st Class Christian Jackson always made sure the slip of paper his mom sent him was tucked securely into his uniform pocket.

On the paper, in his mother's handwriting, was Psalm 91, which many Christians call "the psalm of protection." It reads, in part: "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day ... There shall no evil befall thee."

But evil did befall Jackson in Iraq, on Dec. 5, 2005.

Evil befell the 21-year-old from Niagara Falls, N.Y., as well as the entire convoy of five Humvees loaded with security personnel guarding 25 tractor-trailers driven by employees of the military contractor KBR.

Evil befell them in the form of an insurgent ambush, in a small village less than 30 minutes from the safety of their home base of Balad, one of the largest U.S. military installations in Iraq.

But as the evil rose out of the darkness and surrounded the convoy, the slender,

short young airman — who had traded his normal, relatively safe driver's spot on that mission for the gunner's turret on a whim — found something inside him that he didn't know he had.

"I learned that I'm willing to put my life on the line so other people can be safe," Jackson said in a telephone interview from Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., where he is stationed with the 377th Air Base Wing.

Jackson received a Bronze Star with "V" device for his actions that night.

Jackson had been traveling Iraq's roads since arriving at Balad in July 2005 with the 232nd Detachment of the 732nd Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron. The squadron was part of the 732nd Expeditionary Mission Support Group, 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing.

Although Jackson was a driver, not a gunner, "we all knew each other's jobs and positions," and maintained that proficiency, he said.

He had struck a deal with one of his gunner buddies — coincidentally, someone he had gone to high school with — to trade places a couple of times during their deployment. He and that man had traded places once before, uneventfully.

The convoy they chose for the second trade was a short "milk run" between Balad and Camp Speicher. It was a cold

night, late and very dark.

"We only had, like, a half-hour left to go," said Jackson, who was in the second of the five Humvees, manning the turret-mounted .50-caliber machine gun.

The convoy was passing through a village when the first gun truck emerged to the sight of tracer rounds and muzzle flashes.

The truck's gunner immediately sent up a red flare to warn the rest of the convoy, followed by a white illumination round so the gunners could spot targets.

It was Game On. His driver, Airman 1st Class Charity Trueblood, maneuvered the Humvee into position. Up in his turret, Jackson's reaction was automatic: he pushed the safety on the "fiddy cal" and looked for flashes of light indicating the enemy. Almost simultaneously, his index finger pulled back on the trigger. Bullets, already chambered and ready to rock, started to fly.

Then the gun jammed.

Jackson cursed and yanked the gun's retracting handle backward. A dead round came tumbling out of the ejection mechanism.

But almost as soon as it started firing again, the gun jammed a second time, and Jackson cleared it.

He made his way through his entire ammunition load, 100 rounds, in about 40

seconds, even with the two jams, Jackson said. Then he turned to his M-4 rifle and began to fire that.

All around, the sounds of gunfire and screaming ripped the night.

As he fought, "I probably went blank," Jackson said.

He had just one conscious thought, he said: "I want to make it home."

All this time, the convoy was speeding out of the kill zone. The train of vehicles finally stopped about 3 miles down the road to tally the wounded: three KBR drivers, who didn't have the protection of Humvee armor, had been shot during the engagement. Trueblood treated the most severely wounded contractor. None of them died as a result of their injuries.

Jackson's Humvee, meanwhile, had been hit several times by bullets, but he didn't have a scratch. Nei-

ther did any of the airmen on the security detail.

"It hit me how close I came to life and death," Jackson said. "Other people got shot, but I'm sitting up there [in the turret], and nothing touched me at all."

Jackson never memorized the words to Psalm 91 during his Iraq deployment.

But he knows the gist of it: "Even though there's a lot of stuff going on, it's going to be OK," he said. "God is watching over you."

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Name: Airman 1st Class Christian Jackson

Unit: 232nd Detachment, 732nd Expeditionary Logistics Readiness Squadron

Medal: Bronze Star with "V"

Earned: Dec. 5, 2005, near Balad, Iraq



Jackson

"I learned that I'm willing to put my life on the line so other people can be safe."

Airman 1st Class Christian Jackson

'He said I had a good Humvee-side manner'

BY LEO SHANE III

Stars and Stripes

Charity Trueblood still has nightmares about the ambush, and all of the blood as she tried to close up the contractor's wound.

She said that's a curse and an inspiration.

"It's a bad thing because I haven't learned to deal with it fully yet," said Trueblood, who has left the Air Force and is now living in Wyoming.

"But it's a good thing because I know what I can do now."

"I know what I can accomplish, I know what I want to do in life ... I know it made me a stronger person."

Trueblood, 22, earned a Bronze Star with "V" for her actions during that attack during a convoy mission outside Balad, Iraq, 18 months ago.

The airman first class was driving an up-armored Humvee near the middle of the 30-vehicle convoy when the lead vehicle spotted what looked like a roadside bomb.

Her unit had encountered snipers and bombs in the area in the past and anticipated a possible ambush. When shots rang out from the darkness as they slowed to examine the bomb, they reacted instantly.

"You just go," she said. "As soon as the attack starts, you return fire and get out of their range. I moved the [Humvee] towards the side of fire to block the unarmored ones, but we all started moving."

Two of the contractors' trucks she was



LANCE CHEUNG/U.S. Air Force

Senior Airman Charity Trueblood was awarded a Bronze Star with "V" for her life-saving efforts on Dec. 5, 2005, near Balad, Iraq.

trying to shield were riddled with bullets as they sped away. Trueblood said the first had a tire blown out, sending sparks across the asphalt as the vehicle bounced down the highway on a rim.

The second truck caught on fire after being hit, and the troops forced it to a stop as soon as they got out of the shooters' range. When they opened the truck door

they found that the shooters had also hit the driver, contractor Robert Martin.

Her crew pulled him from the burning car, threw him on the hood of the tightly packed Humvee, and crept away from the growing fireball.

"We wanted to get out of there so no one would get hurt in the fire, but you can't drive too fast or stop too fast when some-

one is holding onto the hood," she said. "You have to be pretty careful."

Once out of the flames' reach, Trueblood jumped out of the car with the first aid kit to treat the contractor. The wound was worse than they had thought.

"He had a through-and-through gunshot wound: It entered in his right arm, completely missed bone and came out between his shoulder blade and his spine," she said.

"When we got back, the guys asked what I did to the Humvee, because there was blood all over it."

Trueblood, a combat lifesaver, frantically packed his arm and back with gauze as others radioed back for a helicopter. She said she barely remembers what she was doing as she tried to stop the bleeding.

"You react," she said. "When something happens, at least in my case, you react, and you deal with it later."

A few minutes later, the contractor was in the air and headed back to base. Trueblood was left to her normal duties, shaking and wondering if he'd live.

She got her answer a few days later. After recovering from his wounds, Martin found Trueblood's commander and asked if he could thank her in person.

"He said I had a good Humvee-side manner," said Trueblood, who was promoted to senior airman after her efforts that day.

The two still e-mail occasionally; he is still working in Iraq, while a recurring back injury cut short Trueblood's Air Force career.

Now she wants to go into medicine, and plans on heading back to school next fall for a nursing degree.

"I actually had started an EMT class before I deployed," she said. "But I didn't think I'd be good at it. Now ..."

"I've always wanted to help people. I just didn't know how."

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'I was just doing what I had to do'

BY CINDY FISHER

Stars and Stripes

Days later, the smell — a terrible mixture of decaying flesh, human waste and dried blood — still clung to his uniform and skin.

More than a year later, the memories — crawling through rubble and gore in the darkness — still cling to his thoughts.

Cpl. Mina Salama said he'll never forget Nov. 8, 2005.

On that day in Iraq, then-Lance Cpl. Salama, with Battalion Landing Team 2/1, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit, was the Arabic translator for a resupply convoy when a radio call came in saying Marines might be trapped in a collapsed building in nearby Husaybah.

The convoy immediately diverted to the town.

Capt. Thomas Parmiter, the senior officer at the scene, said it was unbeliev-

Name: Lance Cpl. Mina Salama

Unit: Battalion Landing Team 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit

Medal: Navy and Marine Corps Medal

Earned: Nov. 8, 2005, in Husaybah, Iraq.

able that the mountain of rubble they found was once a two-story home.

The home, a suspected insurgent safe house, had been bombed the day before, Salama said.

As translator, Salama approached about 25 Iraqis loitering in front of the rubble to find out what was happening.

"They told me there were people inside," said Salama, 22, a Jersey City, N.J., native.

That was all he needed to hear. He immediately headed for a small gap in the rubble.

"I couldn't fit inside the hole with all my gear on. I had to take all my flak, helmet, all my protective gear off," Salama said.

Parmiter remembers grabbing Salama by the collar to stop him.

"He told me, 'Sir, there are people still alive in there,' so I let him go," Parmiter said.

Marines, friendlies, insurgents — Salama didn't care.

"He just went in," Parmiter said, adding that the average-sized Marine wouldn't have fit.



Salama

Salama, who weighs less than 145 pounds, crawled in on his stomach, digging a path with his hands.

Though daylight outside, it was pitch black amid the debris. He wormed his way deeper into the dark by the thin stream of a flashlight.

In the darkness, he said he was engulfed by "terrible, horrible smells. I could smell it on me for days afterwards."

Salama soon found two dead Iraqis. Then he found more. In all, he and two other Marines pulled out five bodies.

The worst was a baby girl, Salama said in a voice tight with emotion.

He haltingly continued, "she was about ... she was less than 3 years old ... and she was dead."

What kept him going "was a voice I heard. I just wanted to be sure that there was nobody else left in there," he said.

The voice echoed through the debris, making it difficult to locate. But he kept going and finally found an Iraqi man buried in 2 feet of rubble about 15 feet from the entrance.

He and the other two Marines, all wedged in the cramped space on their stomachs, used sledgehammers to pound at debris — debris supporting the rubble

above them — to rescue the man.

In a deposition, Sgt. Shane R. Bertrand called it "one of the bravest and most unselfish acts I have witnessed in three combat deployments."

Once they pulled the Iraqi man out, Salama continued talking with bystanders to see if additional aid was needed. From them, he learned of a young girl injured in a nearby building and coordinated medical evacuation for her as well.

For his actions, Salama, currently deployed to the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit on Okinawa, received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal.

According to the Navy,

the medal is awarded to servicemembers who risk their lives to save others in actions not involving actual conflict with an enemy. President John F. Kennedy was awarded the medal for his World War II actions in saving crewmembers of his Navy patrol boat — PT-109 — after a Japanese destroyer sliced through it in the Solomon Islands.

Though others call Salama heroic, the Marine says otherwise:

"I'm not a hero. I was just doing what I had to do."

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"He told me, 'Sir, there are people still alive in there,' so I let him go."

Capt. Thomas Parmiter

'After I threw that first grenade, it got pretty quiet'

BY LISA BURGESS

Stars and Stripes

The Silver Star and Purple Heart Army Sgt. Tommy Rieman wear are for helping his patrol survive an ambush in a very bad Iraq neighborhood called Abu Ghraib.

Insurgents attacked the eight members of Echo Company, 51st Long Range Surveillance, just

a few miles outside the gates of the Abu Ghraib prison, Rieman said.

That night, Dec. 3, 2003, the LRS team had been anticipating a routine mis-

sion, Rieman told Stripes in an interview at the Pentagon, where he works in the Army's personnel division.

It was going to be 12 or 14 boring hours of sitting very quietly in a well-concealed position, keeping eyes on a suspected insurgent's front door and collecting information on who was coming and going.

Because he knew the area better than the team's official leader, Rieman was guiding the group on its way to the place where they would hide the Humvees.

He was in the driver's seat of his Humvee, holding his flashlight in one hand and using it to peer at the map awkwardly unfolded in his other hand, when the air around him exploded.

Three rocket-propelled grenades crisscrossed the convoy's path. Two just barely missed the vehicles, but one struck a soldier manning the gun in the back of the third truck, Sgt. Bruce Robinson, literally cutting his right leg out from beneath him.

Beneath Rieman's vehicle, or near it (it was too confusing for him to tell), a bomb exploded. Two more went off at the same time.

Rieman was briefly deafened by the noise of the fusillade, which seemed to

Name: Sgt. Tommy Rieman

Unit: Echo Company, 51st Long Range Surveillance

Medal: Silver Star

Earned: Dec. 3, 2003, in Abu Ghraib, Iraq



Courtesy of Tommy Rieman

Army Sgt. Tommy Rieman was awarded the Silver Star for his actions in the town of Abu Ghraib, Iraq, in December 2003.

come from everywhere at once. U.S. troops later found 10 dug-in positions along the roadside.

Rieman's gunner, Spc. Robert Macallister, cried out that he had been shot in the butt. Rieman was shot twice, where his vest didn't offer protection: in the chest under his right arm, and across it. He also took shrapnel in his chest, stomach and ear.

But neither Rieman nor his gunner paid attention to their wounds. Rieman leaned back against the gunner, trying to shield as much of his legs as possible with his torso, and began firing back with his rifle, tossing some grenades for good measure. The gunner started hitting the trigger on the .50-caliber machine gun in the roof turret ring for all he was worth.

The tiny convoy sped out of the kill zone and stopped in a clearing about 2 miles down the road to deal with the wounded.

Rieman staggered out of his truck, blood running down his uniform. Ignoring cries from other soldiers to sit down, he started to make his way back to the truck to see how Robinson was doing. Not well — he was bleeding out from the gaping hole where his leg had been and in danger of dying. Immediate air evacuation was called.

Rieman started setting up a defensive perimeter so the choppers could land.

Suddenly, the group of stunned and bleeding soldiers began taking a huge volume of fire again, from the cover of some palm trees. U.S. troops scouting the area later estimated that at least 50 insurgents were positioned there for the second round of the ambush.

As the hail of bullets began again, Rieman saw red.

"I wasn't scared, I was [angry]" during the original ambush, he said. "I couldn't

believe they had actually gone up against us in the first place."

Now, the enemy was keeping the Americans from helping their dying friends.

"Oh no you will NOT," he roared, whether in his head or vocally, he doesn't know.

But by this point, the Americans had expended almost all of their ammunition. They were prepared for emergencies. They weren't prepared for a war.

But there was one weapon Rieman hadn't expended yet: he still had well over a dozen 40 mm grenades, looped neatly in their little holders on his combat vest and sagging the bottoms of his cargo pants.

"I was screaming at them," as he ripped those grenades from his vest and his pockets and stuffed them into the M2-3 grenade launcher, yanking back the trigger and firing one after another at the palm grove, until the barrel on the gun was red-hot.

What was he yelling?

"I don't like to say," Rieman said. "It was curse words. Bad stuff."

Were they yelling back?

"No. After I threw that first grenade, it got pretty quiet."

The firing from the palm grove had stopped. The medical evacuation choppers were able to land.

Sgt. Bruce Robinson ended up losing his left leg, as well as his right, but he survived, thanks in part to some amazing surgery performed by Air Force doctors in flight from Iraq to Landstuhl in Germany, Rieman said.

Now that he has a wife and a young son, Rieman decided to leave active duty and work with America's Army, an outreach and recruiting project, as a full-time consultant.

But in the end, the Army is too much under his skin to take off the uniform.

In early May, Rieman decided to join the National Guard, even though he knows that means he's likely to head back to Iraq once his guaranteed stabilization period expires.

"That's fine," Rieman said, smiling.

"I'm good with that."

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'I could hear the bullets whizzing by'

BY JIMMY NORRIS

Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Alan Martinez said his experience in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 did almost nothing to prepare him for what he would face in Iraq in 2003.

"Desert Storm was completely one-sided," he said. "It was a live-fire exercise, if you ask me."

In Operation Iraqi Freedom, he said, "we had to adapt to unconventional ways of doing things. It was my first time getting shot at, my first time dealing with [home-made bombs] and my first time being mortared."

A squad leader and master gunner with the Kansas-based Company A, 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment, Martinez described his experiences during the invasion of Iraq as 36 hours of continuous road marching followed by 72 hours of fighting.

It was his actions during those 72 hours that earned him the Bronze Star with "V."

Shortly after entering the fighting in Samawah, Martinez's unit was ordered to conduct a feint, a maneuver intended to draw enemy fire, in order to give forces from the 82nd Airborne Division room to retreat.

"They were getting chewed up and had no armor assets," Martinez said.

Martinez, whose job was to operate his M-113 armored personnel carrier's .50-caliber machine gun, rode near his unit's medics, who also were in an M-113.

As his unit neared the enemy stronghold, they began taking fire from small arms, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

Martinez said the medics' M-113 was in a dangerously exposed position, so he told them to move their vehicle behind his in order to provide them some protection.

As he tried to provide cover for the medics, a three-man enemy team attempted to engage Martinez's

Name: Staff Sgt. Alan Martinez
Unit: Company A, 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment,
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: Awarded May 3, 2003, Samawah, Iraq, for actions from March 29 to April 1, 2003.



COURTESY OF ALAN MARTINEZ

Staff Sgt. Alan Martinez, left, and Spc. Darren Mendiola ride in a Bradley fighting vehicle shortly after fighting in Samawah, Iraq.

vehicle.

"I could hear the bullets whizzing by," he said. "I laid the .50 cal down on them. I'm assuming they're dead. I didn't stop to look."

In another operation, Martinez's unit was assaulting an Iraqi stronghold while under heavy mortar and RPG fire.

One Iraqi soldier with an RPG had set his sights on an 82nd Airborne Division Bradley fighting vehicle.

Martinez radioed the Bradley's crew and told them about the threat, but the Iraqi was too well concealed. The only one who could see the Iraqi, Martinez opened

fire and neutralized the threat.

According to the award citation, he "courageously engaged and destroyed numerous enemy targets, securing strategic strong points allowing for a highly successful mission completion without casualties."

He said his experience has changed the way he looks at life.

"It makes you rethink everything," he said. "You thank God every day that you're still alive. You learn to appreciate the little pleasures in life."

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'I thought for sure we would be shot down'

BY VINCE LITTLE

Stars and Stripes

Anti-aircraft artillery, rocket-propelled grenades and machine-gun fire lit the night over the notorious Sadr City section of Baghdad.

Army Chief

Warrant

Officer 4

Doug Hud-

dleston, an

AH-64D

Longbow

Apache pilot,

had just

helped free

U.S. ground

forces from

an ambush.

Now, his

formation was

called to

destroy a

suspected

weapons

cache nearby.

"We fixed

the location,

and set up

racetrack patterns

500 meters to the east

for an attack," Huddleston recalled. "We

immediately began taking varied enemy

weapon system fires ... from all direc-

tions, rooftops, windows, streets."

Looking through his night-vision system,

he saw streaks of light everywhere.

"There were so many bullets and rock-

ets flying at us, I thought for sure we

would be shot down," he said.

Instead, the

Apaches

pumped 30

mm cannon

fire into the

cache. On a

second pass,

they ignited it

in a series of

explosions

that shot 400

feet up. An

estimated 128

insurgents —

mostly Sadr

militia —

were killed.

Huddleston

emerged with

a prestigious

Air Medal

with "V"

device for his

actions, the

first of three

he'd earn in a

yearlong

deployment to

Camp Taji, Iraq.

The action in Sadr City, on April 5,

2004, began when elements of the 1st

Cavalry Division's 4th Brigade Combat

Team were ambushed. Abrams tanks and

Bradley fighting vehicles took RPG and

machine-gun fire while dismounted pa-

trols faced snipers in the area.

The Apache pilots plotted the lead pla-



Courtesy of Doug Huddleston

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Doug Huddleston, an AH-64D Longbow Apache pilot, earned the Air Medal with "V" three times during a yearlong deployment to Iraq.

toon's location and then suppressed the enemy with cannon fire, strafing rooftops. Huddleston's AH-64D was hit several times, but all systems continued to function normally.

The U.S. ground forces eventually broke contact and moved to a safe position. But two

soldiers were killed, several others were wounded and two Bradleys were destroyed in the fight.

The attack helicopters then took out the weapons cache before returning to Camp Taji, Huddleston said. He had a few bumps and bruises, but soon discovered his aircraft had sustained structural damage to its main rotor.

"After looking at the aircraft after our second turn in the FARP (forward arming and refueling point), it baffled me as to how the aircraft had brought us back," he said.

Huddleston's second medal was earned during the August 2004 battle for Najaf.

On the third night of fighting, enemy operating from the Haifa mosque riddled his Apache with armor-piercing RPGs and machine-gun fragments. He suffered a loss of systems, but continued wiping out enemy forces and mortar positions in

the vicinity of friendly troops with 30 mm cannon guns and 2.75-inch rockets.

He picked up a third decoration three months later while providing aerial coverage for convoys moving into the Fallujah area. After one came under attack, the Apaches leveled two houses and killed an estimated 50 insurgents.

Huddleston, 46, of Killeen, Texas, now is the safety officer and Apache pilot in command for 1st Battalion (Attack), 2nd Aviation Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division at Camp Eagle, South Korea.

He says his faith, wingmen and crew — including warrant officers Carl Fox, Patrick Page, Brian Haas and Chris Miles and first lieutenants Derek Smith and Sean McBride — got him through Iraq.

"You get scared, for one split second, then the reality that every gun pilot has to deal with: If I don't kill this guy that's shooting at me, myself or my wingman will die,"

Huddleston said. "It happens so fast you don't have time to feel anything. It's calculated maneuvering, tactics and firing the weapon systems. You count on the airman you fly with ... and you put each other's lives in your hands."

Huddleston said he considers this a group accomplishment.

"We did our best to protect the soldiers and Marines on the ground," he said. "I pray we did our part to help the people of Iraq, to give them free elections and a chance at a democratic government, and the hope of a better life."

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"You count on the airman you fly with ... and you put each other's lives in your hands."

Chief Warrant Officer 4
Doug Huddleston

'Everybody ... was passed out'

BY STEVE MRAZ

Stars and Stripes

In spite of the danger in Hit, Iraq, soldiers planned to pass out candy to children on Nov. 28, 2006.

Earlier in the month, Sgt. 1st Class Leon Richardson's section of Bradley fighting vehicles had been hit by about five roadside bombs in a week.

His driver, Cpl. Jonerik Loney, and his gunner were getting itchy from the danger but still wanted Richardson to toss some of the candy from the Bradley to the city's kids.

On the morning of Nov. 28, the soldiers put a bag of candy in Richardson's hatch to throw to the kids.

They went out on patrol in the afternoon. Richardson, second platoon sergeant with the 1st Armored Division, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, Company A, lobbed candy. All seemed fine.

Around 2 p.m., the Bradley came

around a corner, and Richardson saw some guys take off. The soldiers followed. The vehicle made a left turn, but 200 feet later a roadside bomb exploded.

The blast flipped the tracked vehicle on its side.

"The only thing I heard was somebody in my headphones yelling," said the 29-year-old from San Fernando, Calif. "Everything slowed down to nothing. Everything went black. Everybody in the Bradley was passed out. I believe there was about six of us inside the vehicle."

Everybody inside was knocked out for about a minute. Richardson, positioned in the turret, got up first and went to the front of the vehicle. He had cuts on his face and his legs were bleeding pretty bad. All that remained of the front of the vehicle was a big hole where the driver's hatch used to be, Richardson said.

Richardson checked that the gunner got out and moved him to the back of the vehicle to keep him from seeing what happened to Loney.

The squad leader in the back of the Bradley yelled to Richardson that they were all right, but had taken some injuries. The medic had shrapnel in his shoulder. The soldiers got out of the Bradley, and Richardson — without a weapon — ran to another Bradley about 100 yards behind his position to make sure they were calling in the reports.

The soldiers made a decision to move to a house about 200 yards away to treat the wounded. Between the Bradley and the house was a small dirt mound.

"We started moving, going around the dirt mound," Richardson said. "That's when we got hit by small-arms fire. One of my soldiers was hit in the head."

The bullet ripped through the soldier's helmet, scratching him, and some bullet fragments entered the soldier's head.

The group stopped and returned fire. Richardson began performing first aid on the wounded soldier. Once he was sure the soldier was OK, Richardson and the soldiers made their way to the house. He helped treat the four wounded soldiers once inside the house.

As the medevac team arrived, it started taking small-arms fire.

"We were trying to guide them to the house because they couldn't find us," Richardson said. "We were trying to keep our heads down."

The injured were evacuated, and another squad of soldiers was dropped off to

Richardson. The soldiers left the house in search of the insurgents. One squad went to the northwest. Another went to the south.

"Once they got in their houses, we located one sniper," Richardson said. "At the other house, they located two guys that had weapons also, so we did capture some bad guys."

Richardson coordinated the effort while still suffering from his wounds.

"I guess the medic said my wounds were pretty bad," he said. "Plus, the concussion they said was pretty bad. I didn't think it was that bad. Maybe it was just the adrenaline running through me."

Richardson and a sergeant made the decision that they would recover Loney's body. Soldiers pulled security and popped smoke to provide cover while Richardson performed the grim task.

After providing cover for the team recovering the downed Bradley, the two squads made their way back on foot to the forward operating base in Hit. At around 8 or 9 p.m., Richardson was finally treated for his wounds.

For his actions, Richardson was awarded the Silver Star in March.

"You can't say enough about Loney himself," Richardson said. "He was the perfect citizen. I don't know anybody who disliked him."

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Richardson

'You never find the IEDs; they always find you'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

Senior Chief Petty Officer Jason Taggart was more cop than sailor during his first tour in Iraq.

After arriving in Iraq in April 2003, Taggart was assigned to the Coalition Military Assistance Training Team as head of a Personnel Security Detachment for a British general.

Over time, the team's missions expanded to include route security and guarding Iraqi security forces graduations. After one such graduation in December

2003, Taggart's Ford Explorer was hit by a roadside bomb.

"You never find the IEDs; they always find you, and as we were driving, one of the IEDs, a 155 (mm) round, found us," said Taggart, 35, of Wellsville, Ohio.

Taggart suffered a separated shoulder and perforated eardrum but refused to be evacuated, staying on the scene to help clear the area and make sure there was no secondary assault.

When he was treated later, he was offered the chance to go home but turned it down.

"I didn't want to let the team down, and I also knew that with me going home, someone would have to come and replace me," Taggart said by e-mail. "Bottom line, I wanted to finish out my tour and not let others down."

Taggart, now a chief warrant officer 2, would continue serving in Iraq until the end of March 2004, earning a Bronze Star with "V" for leading five security detachments during his first deployment to Iraq.

Name: Senior Chief Petty Officer Jason Taggart

Unit: Individual augmentee, assigned to British forces

Medal: Bronze Star with "V"

Earned: December 2003 in Iraq



Courtesy of Jason Taggart

CW02 Jason Taggart at the Baghdad Presidential Palace in September 2003.

When Taggart volunteered to go to Iraq as an individual augmentee, he was a submariner based in Bangor, Wash.

At first, he was working on communications for the Coalition Provisional Authority, which was then in charge of Iraq.

But then he learned that a British general in the CPA needed a security detachment and was looking for someone to run it, he said.

Taggart had served as a reserve police officer in Poulsbo, Wash., for close to seven years, and had also volunteered for security work in South Korea and Japan during previous shore duties, he said.

"I was pretty used to walking to beat

with a weapon," he said.

Taggart inquired about the position and was then put in charge of four British soldiers.

He said working with the British troops "had its fun moments, and it had its trying moments."

The British troops would tease him about what a submariner was doing in Iraq.

"I told them we were dredging the Tigris River to try to get submarines up there," Taggart said.

As a member of the CPA, Taggart was able to get the supplies and intelligence that his team needed.

And while he had received between two and three weeks of training before coming to Iraq, he would rely mostly on his police training in his new role.

He said one lesson from police work that he took to heart in Iraq was, "Nothing is ever routine."

His instincts were on display in one incident in which his team was helping guard an event intended to try to get some former Iraqi officers to come back to the new Iraqi army.

Taggart said he noticed one vehicle that kept driving by.

"You can always see when people are acting suspicious," he said.

After the fourth or fifth drive-by, it was clear that the occupants were potentially dangerous.

Taggart moved close to a building to watch. The people inside got out of the car and began firing AK-47s.

Taggart shot back with his M-4 rifle, hitting some of the attackers.

He declined to give a lot of details about the incident, saying he does not like to talk about it.

Taggart said he would have rather used "other means" to respond to the situation, if they were available.

"But the vehicle was occupied by four individuals, and three of them did not make it," he said.

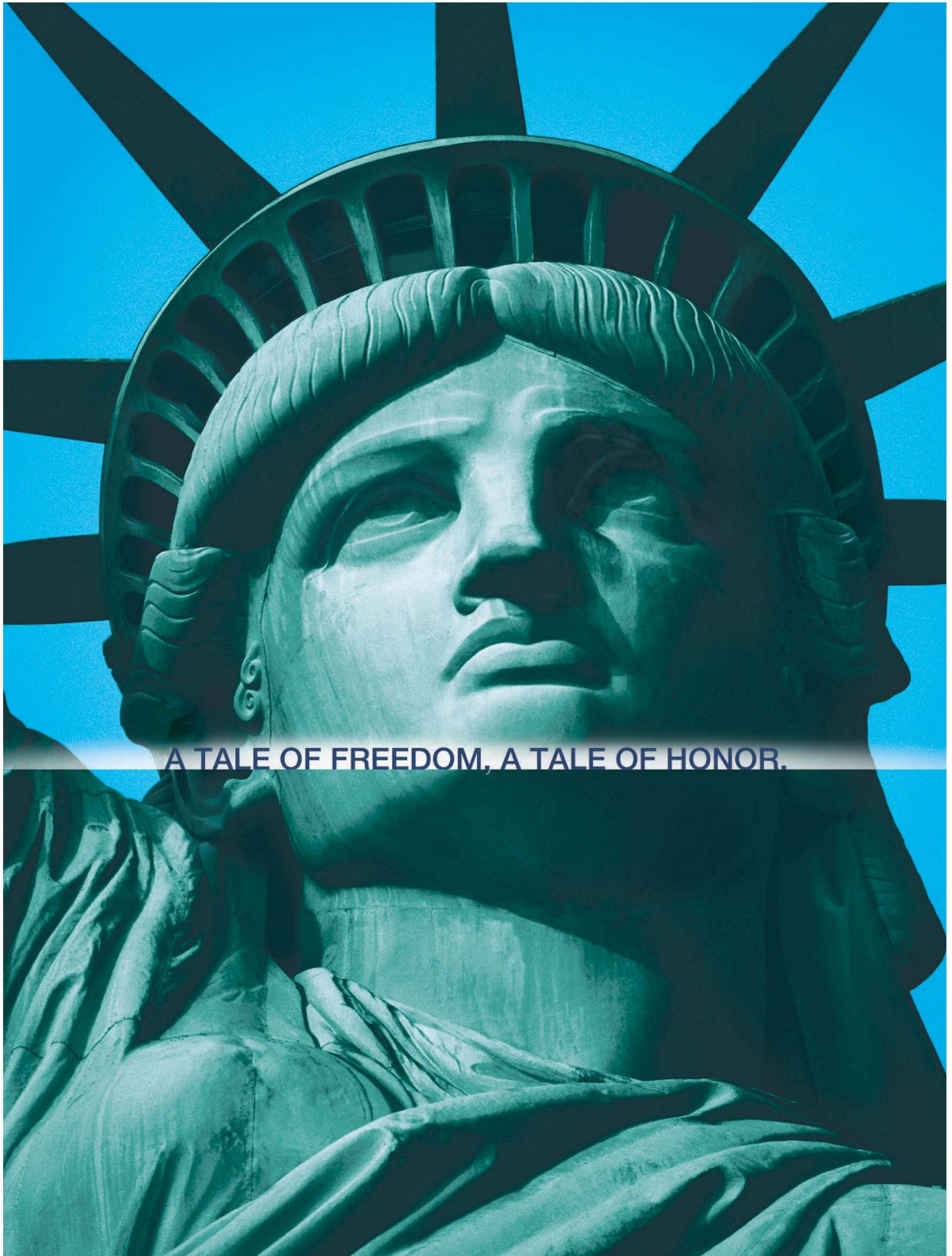
Taggart is now on his third tour to the Middle East with Naval Expeditionary Combat Command's Mobile Security Detachment 25, based in Portsmouth, Va.

He would not say specifically where he is, only that he is in the 5th Fleet theater of operations conducting anti-terrorist missions.

Taggart said he was surprised when he learned he had earned the Bronze Star with "V" for his first tour in Iraq, and that the real heroes of this war are the fallen servicemembers.

"Most of these men and women have themselves just begun their life and in turn given that up so that others may live."

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A TALE OF FREEDOM, A TALE OF HONOR.



BEHIND EVERY MEDAL, A TALE OF VALOR.

It's the courage and commitment of those who serve in our armed forces that keeps our nation safe and free. At Boeing, it's our honor to support and salute them.



'What keeps me going is my job'

BY SANDRA JONTZ

Stars and Stripes

Carlos Gomez-Perez's skin has mended. The yawning hole once in his shoulder has closed; his face bears a small scar.

He looks healed. To some, his scars might be invisible. But they're evident nonetheless.

"If you're talking more of the physical, then yeah, I'm healed," the 24-year-old former Marine says into his cell phone after ordering french fries for breakfast one Tuesday morning at a fast-food restaurant in downtown San Diego.

He suffers nightmares. His temper at times scares his nearly 6-year-old son.

"I'm not liking people too much some days," said Gomez-Perez, who suffers from residual post-traumatic stress disorder. "If it were up to me, I'd stay home all the time. I wouldn't go out of the house. But what keeps me going is my job."

The Iraq veteran receives mental health counseling, but prefers to keep the details private. Instead, he talks about his good job teaching a rigorous two-week self-defense, force protection and anti-terrorism

Name: Carlos Gomez-Perez
Unit: Company E, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: April 26, 2004 in Fallujah, Iraq



COURTESY OF CARLOS GOMEZ-PEREZ

Carlos Gomez-Perez of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, sits in front of a hospital sign in Fallujah, Iraq. Gomez-Perez was shot in the face and shoulder while running through insurgent gunfire to rescue a dying friend.

course to deploying sailors at the 32nd Street Naval Base in San Diego.

"I give them my best so they won't be surprised when they get over there, so they'll be able to take care of themselves."

Gomez-Perez finds solace, he said, in his new mission to prepare servicemembers for missions to the same war zone that scarred him, and yet produced a war hero.

A war hero for others.

He doesn't see it that way.

"Please don't call me a hero," he says. "I'm not a hero. I was doing my job."

During an intense firefight with insurgents in Fallujah, Iraq, three years ago, he rushed back into a building under siege

by insurgents to rescue a dying friend. In the midst of the firefight, he had been shot in the face, and had a gaping hole torn into his shoulder — an injury that eventually meant the infantryman needed to be medically retired from the Marine Corps.

For his actions in braving hostile fire on April 26, 2004, Gomez-Perez received a Silver Star, the nation's third-highest military citation for bravery.

"I'm not a hero," he repeats. "I'm just another dude."

Ask him about what happened on the hot April day, and he launches into a long tale that would make Hollywood screenwriters drool. And yet, there is no hint of bragging in his tone, as the former infantryman recounts tales of how some 150 insurgents surrounded "the 27 to 30 of us ... attacking from the north, south and east, leaving us only to the west to go."

But leaving wasn't an option. The Marines of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment stood their ground.

Gomez-Perez and others made it to a second-floor patio as they worked their way toward the rooftop in an attempt to gain control. "They shot at us from all directions. I could see bullets clearly hitting the concrete in front of me."

His buddy, Lance Cpl. Aaron Austin, had been shot repeatedly in the chest by AK-47 fire. Gomez-Perez was shot making his way toward his dying friend. He tried to stop Austin's bleeding, to get him off the rooftop.

"But Austin died in my arms."

Amid the confusion, Gomez-Perez was evacuated.

He went kicking and screaming, not wanting to leave his men behind, said Lt. Col. Gregg Olson, the battalion's former commanding officer.

When Olson saw him, he wasn't struck at all by Gomez-Perez's first words to the leader. "His first words? He expressed concern for his fellow Marines, asking 'How is everyone else doing?'"

"Not only were his actions selfless that day on the battlefield, but his thoughts later were selfless as well," Olson said in an

interview last year.

The younger Marine is a modest man, one who doesn't take well to accolades for accolades' sake, Olson said.

"He's a very likable person," Olson said. "And a humble man. He thinks of himself more as a team member rather than an individual. He's a solid citizen and a good American Marine."

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“They shot at us from all directions. I could see bullets clearly hitting the concrete in front of me.”

Carlos Gomez-Perez

'I don't think anybody joins up to win medals'

BY GEOFF ZIEZULEWICZ

Stars and Stripes

Valor rarely takes place in a bubble. Marine Corps Maj. William D. Chesarek Jr. understands that.

Make no mistake. He's honored that he received Britain's Distinguished Flying Cross — the equivalent to the American Silver Star — in March, from Queen Elizabeth II, no less. But his actions in aiding British soldiers in Iraq, and risking his own hide to get a wounded soldier out of harm's way, weren't all his own making or ever part of his intent.

"I don't think anybody joins up to win medals or anything like that," said Chesarek, a helicopter pilot who was providing support for British ground forces during an operation in the city of Al Amarah last year, when things took an unexpected turn. "It's not something that guys seek out."

Chesarek certainly didn't think a queen's commendation was coming his way when he set out from the British base on the night of June 10, 2006. As part of a military exchange program, Chesarek was deployed with British troops around the southern city of Basra.

That night, in his Lynx AH7 helicopter, and with British Royal Navy Lt. David Williams and British Royal Marine Lance Cpl. Max Carter in the cockpit with him, Chesarek set out to keep about 100 British soldiers with the 20th Armoured Brigade

Name: Maj. William D. Chesarek Jr.
Unit: Assigned to British forces
Medal: Britain's Distinguished Flying Cross
Earned: June 10, 2006, in Al Amarah, Iraq



COURTESY OF WILLIAM D. CHESAREK JR.

Marine Corps Maj. William D. Chesarek Jr., center, was awarded Britain's Distinguished Flying Cross — the equivalent to the American Silver Star — from Queen Elizabeth II.

supported as they looked for an insurgent weapons cache.

As the operation stretched into the morning and the soldiers prepared to leave the area, a ground vehicle became disabled. And insurgents took advantage.

"It kind of delayed the process, and now it's going from night to day," Chesarek

recalled. "They started taking more fire as well."

While Chesarek and his guys in the air tried to find the sources of the insurgent attacks — he estimated it was the work of five to 10 groups of men — civilians started emerging to see the spectacle, making it more difficult for the helicopter to sin-

gle out and fire back at the insurgents.

"There were a couple different crowds," Chesarek said. "I think the insurgents were using them and hiding behind them."

As the summer sun climbed higher into the clear Iraqi sky, attacks on the marooned ground forces increased, and one British soldier was shot in the head. Chesarek and his crew landed and evacuated the casualty.

During the chaos, Chesarek also drew enemy fire away from the ground troops and called in air support that helped disperse the insurgents during the incident.

As the chopper pulled away from the scene, an RPG whizzed by the aircraft.

"I remember looking behind me in the face of my door gunner and laughing briefly at the expression on his face after that barely missed," Chesarek said.

Chesarek said he doesn't recall any hesitation during that day, just the need to make sure his crew had their heads on straight.

There's always the concern that the distance of a helicopter from the ground can lessen the urgency of the event going on below, he said.

"Oftentimes you get removed with the din of the helicopter," Chesarek said. "You don't deal with the sounds. All you hear is that helicopter."

Despite his honor, Chesarek said that the Brits with him, Lt. Williams and Lance Cpl. Carter, were not recognized for their part. And that bothers him.

"I think it would've been nice," he said. "I guess sometimes you're in the right place at the right time and you're able to make a difference. For each award, there's 20 other instances where something just as special happens. Oftentimes, it doesn't get recognized."

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'I don't really remember it'

BY STEVE MRAZ

Stars and Stripes

Before telling of the actions for which he earned a Bronze Star with "V" device, Army Master Sgt. Michael Morton starts with a disclaimer.

"Well, first, I'm not a hero," said Morton, of the 1st Armored Division, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Battalion, 35th Armored Regiment, Headquarters Headquarters Company. "I'm just a soldier. I was just doing my job."

Despite his humble words, Morton's actions on a summer day in Ramadi, Iraq, were indeed heroic.

It was about 4 p.m. on July 2, 2006. Soldiers were on a combat patrol in up-armored Hum-

vees. U.S. forces had already found two roadside bombs in the area earlier in the day. Morton, the mortar platoon sergeant, was riding in the second vehicle in the convoy about 50 meters or so behind the lead truck when it happened.

"I just remember seeing a big, bright flash," said the 40-year-old from Bradenton, Fla. "The IED struck my first truck. We took part of the blast — just smoke and complete blackness for a few seconds."

Immediately, he knew the first truck hit a roadside bomb. Morton scanned the scene for a few moments, looking for

secondary bombs or a potential ambush.

"My medic was my driver so I said, 'Let's go, doc,'" he said. "We moved up. I set security out to protect us. Then, I ran up to the vehicle."

The Humvee was flipped on its side, burning.

"I started pulling the guys out of the truck," Morton said. "One of the guys was trapped underneath on the driver's side near the gun turret. They say I tried to lift the Humvee up. I don't remember trying to do that."

But Morton did. The soldier trapped was Sgt. Chad Rozanski.

The ammunition inside the Humvee had caught fire and was cooking off.

"My soldiers who were there watching said that I actually went into the burning Humvee, grabbed stuff, came out and started throwing it out," he said. "But I don't really remember it."

But Morton did that as well.

Morton used a jack in an attempt to lift up the turret to get Rozanski out, but it didn't work. Morton tried a few other things.

"I guess I broke (Rozanski's) wrists from trying to pull him out, trying to dig him out to pull him out, but I couldn't get him out," Morton said.

Morton took one of the other Humvees and rammed the front part of the downed truck in an effort to push it off of Rozanski. On a second try, the downed Humvee was pushed back, but the turret popped off onto Rozanski.

"That really scared me, so I ran over and tried to pull the turret off of him," Morton said.

That didn't work, so Morton got a sling leg, roped the top of the turret and pulled back. The turret came free. Morton grabbed Rozanski, dragged him behind some of the other trucks and started treating him.



SCOTT SCHONAUER/Stars and Stripes

Army Master Sgt. Michael F. Morton, right, receives the Bronze Star with Valor during a ceremony in Baumholder, Germany. Morton freed a soldier who was pinned underneath a vehicle in Iraq after the vehicle hit a land mine.

While Rozanski was trapped under the vehicle, he was burning.

"He was yelling at me, 'Just shoot me and leave me here,'" Morton said. "I started getting upset. I started cursing at him. 'We are not leaving you. I am not leaving you.' It was just by the grace of God or whatever that we were able to pull him out. I couldn't leave him."

As the medevac helicopters were inbound, Morton was kneeling over Rozanski. Morton stood up to go, and he felt everything tighten up. Something was wrong. He was hurting. A moment later, Morton went unconscious. Morton was

evacuated to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center for about a week with minor burns to his hands along with neck and back injuries from straining to free Rozanski.

Rozanski survived the ordeal but lost his legs. The other three soldiers hurt in the blast also survived.

Morton and Rozanski were reunited at the brigade's welcome home ceremony in December.

"(Rozanski) said, 'Thank you so much. You saved my life,'" Morton said. "I said, 'I just did my job. I'm just glad you're able to be here with us.'"

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'I need to be where the most danger is'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

The convoy had been taking fire for a while by the time it came across the first roadside bomb.

Maj. Jim Gant knew he could not wait for the Explosive Ordnance Disposal technicians to show up.

So he decided that his up-armored vehicle would have to eat the roadside bomb. He also made sure that it would explode on his side.

Gant, 41 explained that was his job as a leader.

"I need to be where the most danger is," said Gant, team leader for the Iraqi National Police Quick Reaction Force Transition Team.

On Dec. 11, 2006, Gant was leading a convoy of Iraqi police commandos from Balad to Taji.

Iraqi police had been making regular trips to Balad, and there had been heavy fighting along the route for the past six weeks, said Gant, of Fort Bragg, N.C.

This day would be worse.

And the two F-16s that were supposed to support the convoy had been diverted, Gant said.

About 15 miles from Balad, the convoy started taking heavy enemy fire.

Two Iraqi police commandos were wounded — one, shot in the face. Gant said he treated the Iraqi who was hit in the face and got them evacuated.

By the time the convoy got to the first roadside bomb, about 30 minutes later, it was taking fire from both sides of the road, Gant said. He knew they had to push on.

"If we would have stopped, they would have tore us up," he said.

He also knew that if one of the police commandos' vehicles ran over the roadside bomb, the results would be catastrophic and would tie down the rest of the convoy.

"If that IED is going to hit one of my vehicles, I want it to be mine," Gant decided.

Gant said he had his gunner drop into the Humvee and he positioned the rest of the convoy away from the roadside bomb.

Then they drove forward until the bomb went off. The blast "absolutely rocked" the Humvee, Gant said, but everyone was OK, so they kept driving.

About two minutes later, the convoy found a second roadside bomb.

Again, Gant positioned the rest of the convoy away from the bomb as his Humvee drove toward it.

They got closer and closer to the roadside bomb, but nothing happened.

When they got between 15 and 20 feet away, the bomb finally went off.

Once again, the blast rocked everyone in the vehicle, but otherwise, the occupants were unhurt.

As soon as the bomb went off, a ma-



Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Maj. Jim Gant was awarded the Silver Star for his actions leading a convoy in Iraq between Baghdad and Balad.

chine gun opened up on Gant's vehicle with bullets hitting the windshield.

The fight was not over.

Minutes later, the convoy came across third roadside bomb, but this time it did not go off when Gant's Humvee drove by.

By this time, Gant had learned that an Iraqi vehicle had joined the convoy and a woman inside had been hurt by one of the roadside bombs that went off.

After pushing through the most violent part of the ambush, Gant got out of his Humvee and tried to treat the injured

"If that IED is going to hit one of my vehicles, I want it to be mine."

Maj. Jim Gant

Iraqi woman, whose legs had been hit by shrapnel.

Gant said that the woman initially did not want Gant to touch her, but an Iraqi colonel persuaded her, saying: "This American is my brother. He's going to take care of you."

After putting tourniquets to the woman's legs, Gant decided to put a young Iraqi girl who was also in the car into his Humvee to protect her from small-arms fire.

The convoy then pushed on until it finally reached Taji.

They had taken fire for more than an hour over 10 kilometers and made it through three kill zones, each with between 25 and 35 determined enemy fighters, Gant said.

"They fought very bravely that day; we just fought better," Gant said.

He said the Iraqi police commandos and U.S. troops succeeded not because they had better weapons or technology but because they had the will to fight.

"It was courage and bravery to take this fight that won the day," Gant said. "The soldiers on the ground won this battle."

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COURTESY OF GERALD WOLFORD

Sgt. 1st Class Gerald Wolford and his crew endured a four-hour firefight in an attempt to secure bridges outside Baghdad as the war got under way. From left, Sgt. Derek Rippee, Wolford, Spc. Michael "Woody" Woodward, Sgt. Galen Young and Spc. Cory Christiansen. For his efforts, Wolford was awarded the Silver Star.

'Every window had someone with a gun'

BY LISA BURGESS

Stars and Stripes

People who have been in combat know that any firefight that lasts longer than five or 10 minutes is a relatively rare event, even in a "hot" shooting war.

The fight on the banks of the Euphrates River in As-Samawah, southeast of Baghdad, that earned Sgt. 1st Class Gerald Wolford a Silver Star for valor went almost four hours.

By the time it was over — in the early hours of April 1, 2003 — the Humvee that Wolford was using had survived two direct hits by rocket-propelled grenades.

Humvees are designed to "run flat," or move even when the tires are blown out, Wolford noted.

"But this one looked like a Fred Flintstone cartoon — you know, where the stone wheels just keep getting more and more chipped away? Like that."

Wolford, who was wounded during the fight but refused medical care until it was over, was fighting alongside two soldiers who were also badly wounded, but they, too, demanded to stay in the fight.

Three of his soldiers also received the Bronze Star with "V" device for valor that day: Sgt. Cory Christiansen, Spc. Michael "Woody" Woodward, and Sgt. Derek Rippee.

It is the dedication and loyalty of his soldiers, more than his medal, that makes Wolford recall that day with such pride, he told Stripes in an interview in Washington.

"They just blew my mind," he said. "I never had a question that they'd do what I said. When I said, 'Follow me,' they were right there with me."

When the battle happened, Wolford was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division's 3rd of the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, out of Fort Bragg, N.C.

When the war kicked off, the heavy weapons section leader and his recon platoon were part of a ground attack convoy moving north from Kuwait to Tallil Airfield, southeast of Baghdad.

On March 31, he and his Humvee-mounted platoon were told to secure a series of bridges across the Euphrates River in As-Samawah, and then perform reconnaissance for the follow-on infantry units, who were on foot.

The mission got exciting at the first bridge, when Wolford told his driver to hold up — his gunner, Christiansen, had spotted a pickup outfitted with a machine gun on the bank, positioned on the far side of the Euphrates, about 200 yards away.

Christiansen, who was up on the .50-caliber gun, asked his leader for permission to fire.

"I told him to go ahead," Wolford said.

"Those were kind of, 'the shots heard 'round the world,' at least for our battalion, because they were the first time anyone had fired in the war," Wolford said.

Christiansen's first blast disabled the engine block.

A second round "disabled the driver."

But those shots also "opened up a whole can of worms," he said. "People started coming out of the woodwork."

Suddenly, "it was like every house and every window had someone with a gun" in it — and all those weapons were firing at Wolford and his men.

One of the most immediate threats was coming from a house that had sandbags covering the door, absorbing the impact of Wolford's unit's machine-gun fire.

Wolford, who had been using a Mark-19 grenade launcher, decided this was a good time to pull out the AT-4, which is a 74 mm anti-tank shoulder-fired missile.

"Christiansen was busy; he had bigger fish to fry," Wolford said. "Also, I wanted to fire one in combat; they're really cool. This seemed like a good time."

The missile worked even better than it had in training. It worked spectacularly — "the whole house fell in on the guy."

Psyched by his first AT-4 kill, Wolford began looking for another target.

He saw fire coming from a foxhole in another direction. The shooter seemed to have figured out that the Mark-19 is a little slow in flight, and kept popping back into his hole like a rabbit, just in time to avoid getting hit by the grenade.

So Wolford readied another AT-4 round.

The results of this shot were even more dramatic than the first one: in an attempt to escape the incoming fire, the enemy fighter leapt from his foxhole and made a break for it.

But he zigged when he should have zagged, "and impacted directly with the missile," Wolford said. "Basically, he ran right into the missile, or it went off right in front of him, I couldn't tell. But he was gone. There was nothing left of him at all."

The fighting continued as Wolford's team moved toward the second bridge. At one point, working to extract a small group of engineers that had gotten pinned down, he and his men took their first RPG.

"My gunner and I both saw an RPG fired at our position at the same time,"

Wolford said, "I had time to turn and yell 'RPG!' so the two other men had time to get down."

The RPG hit the bridge above their Humvee, wounding Woodward and Rippee, and knocking Wolford over in the blast. Wolford got his dazed and bleeding soldiers to their feet, into the vehicle, and took them to a nearby casualty collection point, then went back to the fight.

During a lull, he went back to check on his men. Woodward had received less of a blow than Rippee, and was patched up and on his feet.

After talking to the medics, "I let him make the decision, and he decided to come back," Wolford said.

Rippee had been hurt worse, and lost a lot of blood, but was begging to return anyway.

"The medics said,

"If he dies, it's on your head,'" Wolford said. "That was the most asinine thing I'd ever heard. He's my soldier. If he dies, it will be my fault no matter what."

Rippee came back just in time to be present when the Humvee got hit for the second time with an RPG.

This one went underneath the vehicle and destroyed the right rear tire, adding to the "Flintstones" motif.

But it kept running. So did Wolford and his men, fighting the enemy on both sides of the Euphrates River.

"Being awarded the Silver Star is an incredible honor," said Wolford, 30, who has just finished Officer Candidate School and is "in the pipeline to be an infantry officer."

"But having my men receive awards for their valor is what made my accomplishments honorable."

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“Having my men receive awards for their valor is what made my accomplishments honorable.”

Sgt. 1st Class Gerald Wolford

'They had a bead on me'

BY LEO SHANE III
Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Aubrey McDade Jr. knew there were three Marines in the alleyway pinned down and quickly bleeding to death. Reaching them meant three trips from the cover behind his unit's up-armored Humvees deep into the enemy's shooting gallery, and three trips back out carrying the wounded while dodging bullets.

"(My gunnery sergeant) said if I got hit, he wasn't going to be able to come out and get me," the squad leader said. "I told him 'OK, just don't let me die.'"

McDade's company had been fighting in Fallujah for almost a month, but none of the previous encounters with insurgents was very intense.

But on Nov. 11, 2004, another company with the First Battalion, Eighth Marines was ambushed while pushing through the center of the city, and Company B with McDade's machine gun squad was called in to back them up.

As they arrived at the fight, enemy fighters dressed as Iraqi security forces caught them off-guard. McDade was manning a gun a few blocks away when the three Marines were shot trying to drop back and regroup.

Under cover fire, McDade took his first trip into the alleyway, running a few hundred feet toward the closest

injured Marine.

"They had night-vision goggles or something, because they had a bead on me," he said. "They started firing into the bushes. It was so dry, the bushes caught on fire on top."

Still, he made it unharmed to Lance Cpl. Andrew Russell, whose leg had nearly been severed by machine gun fire. In order to lift him he took off most of Russell's gear, just like he had dropped his own moments before.

"I kept on the flak jacket and the Kevlar (helmet) and my weapon," the 25-year-old Marine said. "I had heavier stuff, and a pack, and magazine of extra ammo ..."

"The gear will protect you, to a point, but it wasn't going to be able to stop all the stuff they were sending downrange. So, I just took it off and hoped that if I moved fast enough, they wouldn't be able to hit me."

Once he had Russell slung across his body, he lumbered back toward the safe zone. The insurgents followed each step.

"The rounds were getting real close to me, so I just tossed Russell as far as I could and just laid down in the road," he said. "When it lightened up, I drug him the rest of the way to the CCP."

He paused for a moment before heading back for a second time.

It was the same story: sprinting then diving then crawling to cover, then repeating the process again and again until he reached Lance Cpl. Christian Dominguez, who had a less severe leg injury.

"He was a little-bitty fellow, so I made him take off all of his gear, had him keep his weapon, put him on my shoulder and ran as fast as I could," he said.

They reached safely. As McDade prepared for another trip out, tank reinforcements

arrived, and helped clear a path down the alley to where Cpl. Nathan Anderson had fallen. After the first two bullet-dodging sprints, the third one was literally a stroll down the street.

“The gear will protect you, to a point, but it wasn't going to be able to stop all the stuff they were sending downrange. So, I just took it off and hoped that if I moved fast enough, they wouldn't be able to hit me.”

Sgt. Aubrey McDade Jr.

Name: Sgt. Aubrey McDade Jr.
Unit: 1st Platoon, Company B, First Battalion, Eighth Marines
Medal: Navy Cross
Earned: Nov. 11, 2004, in Fallujah, Iraq



Courtesy of Aubrey McDade Jr.

Sgt. Aubrey McDade Jr. receives the Navy Cross from Brig. Gen. Paul Lefebvre, commanding general of Marine Corps Eastern Recruiting Region, in January.

Unfortunately, it wasn't fast enough for Anderson, who died before the help arrived. Troops on the scene believed he was dead before McDade began his heroic work, but said McDade insisted on trying to save him.

McDade, now a drill instructor at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island in South Carolina, was awarded the Navy Cross earlier this year for his courage that day. His citation reads that his "quick thinking and aggressive actions were crucial in saving the lives of two of the three casualties."

He still wishes all three trips had been successful.

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'Many of us never felt more alive'

BY LISA BURGESS
Stars and Stripes

If war was like the movies, they would have gone at it alone, just Capt. Jason Amerine and his nine Special Forces soldiers and 50 Afghan irregulars against 1,000 Taliban.

Since war isn't like the movies, Amerine — who is now a major — did the sensible thing.

He called in Navy F-14s and Air Force F-16s.

And since war really isn't like the movies, the Afghan irregulars fighting with

Amerine's Operation Detachment A (ODA) 574 on Nov. 17, 2001, didn't stand bravely by and fight to the bitter end with their American Brothers.

No, they were so freaked out by the airstrikes that they fired up the pickup trucks that had brought the entire group up into the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains, and high-tailed it back to Tarin Kot, in southern Afghanistan's Uruzgan Province.

As soon as the trucks had stopped in the city, their American Brothers had to grab their Afghan Brothers by their shalwar kameezes and throw them out of the trucks, so they could commandeer the damn things and get back up into the pass

and try to stop the Taliban.

Because the city was the prize that day, the whole reason Amerine and his soldiers were in the pass.

They were trying to block the Taliban, who were coming in to try and retake the city from local citizenry, who had gotten brave, thanks to encouragement from Hamid Karzai and his band of freedom fighters, and hanged the Taliban-sponsored mayor from a lamppost the day before.

The Taliban had gotten wind of this rebellion, and mounted a very large convoy in Kandahar to come get their city back, according to what Amerine and Karzai had learned through the grapevine.

Amerine and ODA 574 infiltrated Afghanistan by MH-60 Pave Hawk, a special-operations variant of the Black Hawk helicopter, on Nov. 14, 2001.

The small team had a very big mission, Amerine told Stripes in an interview in Washington: to help Karzai, Afghanistan's future president, and 200 of his fighters foment rebellion against the Taliban in the southern part of the country.

Tarin Kot was a key to the job, because it was the very birthplace of the Taliban.

And everything was going great, until the local guerrillas got unnerved by the airstrikes the ODA started calling in on the Taliban convoy.

Fortunately, Amerine and his team were able to prevail that day despite that temporary setback.



Amerine

They were aided by the people of Tarin Kot, who "started pouring out of their houses" to defend their town against the Taliban that had broken through, Amerine said.

Hours of close combat later, the people had prevailed. The Taliban were

delivered "a crushing blow."

"That was some pretty heavy fighting," Amerine said.

Tarin Kot was just their first of many fights that Amerine and his team engaged in over the next few weeks as they and Karzai kept moving ever closer to the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar.

The team was involved in a street-by-street battle to win the city Showali Kot on Dec. 3, and a Taliban counterattack that threatened to surround the town.

Next, Amerine and his team captured the only bridge that crosses the Arghandab, a major river between Tarin Kot and Kandahar. In the process, the team was attacked by Taliban in the town of Sayyd Alma Kalaya, finally forcing the enemy to

surrender.

On Dec. 5, the Taliban sent a delegation to surrender Kandahar.

Amerine was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" device for his contributions in leading ODA 574.

And Amerine wasn't the only hero on ODA 574.

On his team were the recipients of three Silver Stars, four Bronze Stars with "V" devices, three Bronze Stars and 11 Purple Hearts.

"Many of us never felt more alive than we did in Afghanistan," Amerine said. "I had a lot of fun there."

Amerine's actions, the actions of his team, his medal, and his reaction to the whole affair, sound a lot like the movies' take on war.

But war isn't like the movies. So there's one more part of this story to tell.

Because "the fun stopped on Dec. 5," Amerine said.

On that day, a B-52 aircraft dropping 2,000 pounds of explosives missed its target while flying a mission north of Kandahar.

The bomb landed 100 yards from the position of Amerine's Special Forces team.

Three of Amerine's soldiers died: Staff Sgt. Brian Cody Prosser, Master Sgt. Jefferson Donald Davis and Sgt. First Class Daniel Petithory. Another 20 U.S. troops, including Amerine, were injured.

Not like the movies.

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'Wall of tracer fire coming at you'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

Capt. Allen Grinalds and his division of four Cobra helicopters were flying from Iraq back to Kuwait when they got the call that coalition troops were in trouble.

It was March 23, 2003, and Grinalds' helicopters from Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 267 had been flying for 10 hours supporting Marines making their way to Baghdad.

The call for help came from British troops near Basra.

With his helicopters low on fuel and his pilots exhausted, Grinalds said he was initially reluctant to accept the mission.

But it became clear that his group was the only help the embattled British were going to get. He then took his helicopters into an intense battle that ultimately left numerous Iraqi tanks and artillery pieces destroyed and 30 Iraqis dead, according to the citation for Grinalds' Distinguished Flying Cross with "V" device.

As the helicopters got close to Basra, Grinalds could see the Iraqi artillery

shells landing near the British troops. It was clear the Iraqis had artillery with a much greater range than the British.

"They were basically swacking these guys with impunity," he said.

At first, Grinalds tried to see if any fighter aircraft could provide air support to the British troops, he said.

Since Cobra helicopters have about as much armor as a "can of soup," Grinalds said, this was not a mission that Cobra pilots typically fly.

"The tension is obviously rising because Manila 6, the forward air controller, is kind of waiting to see what we're going to do, the artillery is coming in, they're still taking casualties and I can't get any fixed-wing support."

When Grinalds heard that fighters were 30 minutes away, he made the call to go in.

Flying far behind enemy lines, the helicopters initially saw only a mass of Iraqis trying to flee Basra, he said.

But when the helicopters searched near a mosque, they found the Iraqi artillery.

When the Cobras got within about 4,000 meters of the artillery pieces, "everything broke loose," Grinalds said.

"It's difficult to describe, but it was just essentially a wall of tracer fire coming at you."

Grinalds said he broke off the attack, changed direction, and then came at the artillery pieces from out of the sun.

This time, his helicopters started to pick off the enemy artillery, flying lower than the Iraqis could depress their guns, Grinalds said.

But as the helicopters flew over a berm, they found a new threat — a company of Iraqi tanks that were preparing to move against the British, he said.

"Those folks (the British) didn't have any armor with them, they were light infantry, they had Land Rovers," he said. "The concern was that if the armor got down there, it would not be good at all."

Even though the Iraqi tanks had missiles and other weapons that could hit the helicopters, Grinalds turned his helicopters to fight them, he said.

His helicopters fired several missiles. "It's basically kind of one of those moments where the balance of the battle hangs in the air," he said.

But when the Iraqi soldiers saw the tanks begin to explode, they broke and started to run, allowing the helicopters to

mow them down, Grinalds said.

Grinalds said he estimates he destroyed two tanks himself along with one artillery piece, two or three anti-aircraft artillery pieces and about 10 Iraqis.

By the time the battle was over, all four helicopters had fired every single rocket, missile and 20 mm round and had expended all their countermeasures, he said.

They still had to fly about 8 miles back to friendly lines, Grinalds said. On the way back, the helicopters took small-arms fire.

"That was probably the longest three-minute flight of my life," he said.

In the end, his helicopters did make it back and he learned that they had allowed the British to evacuate their casualties, Grinalds said.

Now a major with Headquarters Marine Corps, Aviation Branch, Grinalds said that it was a hard decision to take his helicopters into the fight, but he remembers the advice of his commanding officer at the time:

"Use your best judgment and do everything you can to support the guys on the ground, because that's the only reason we exist as Marine aviators."

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'The next thing, shots rang out'

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

The only things that made Staff Sgt. Clifford Neighbors stand out from the other 84 National Police Training Team members who returned to Hohenfels, Germany, in February were the medals plastered across the front of his uniform.

The medals gave an indication of the horrific injuries he suffered last August when a sniper's bullet pierced his arm, heart and both lungs in an attack in Baghdad. His Iraqi interpreter died during the attack.

The 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment soldier received his wounds while checking on Iraqi National Police checkpoints, according to Capt. Todd Jones, deputy team chief of 1st Battalion, 3rd Brigade, National Police Transition Team, which Neighbors was assigned to as operations noncommissioned officer in Iraq.

"The team was involved in a complex attack from an insurgent cell in northeast Baghdad on one of the highways. We secured the area and waited on EOD (explosive ordnance disposal)," Jones recalled.

While Neighbors was providing security, he and one of the team's interpreters were shot by a sniper, he said.

The interpreter suffered a fatal wound to the chest. Neighbors, also shot in the chest, made it back into the vehicle and managed to get his vest off so the vehicle gunner could apply first aid, he said.

Once the interpreter was moved into the vehicle, Neighbors helped apply pressure to the interpreter's chest wound while the team rushed them to a combat surgical hospital, he said.

"On the way back ... Neighbors continued to assist with first aid despite the pain of his ... injuries. Later, we found that ... Neighbors was shot in the lung and a small portion of his heart," Jones said.

Name: Staff Sgt. Clifford Neighbors

Unit: 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment

Medal: Army Commendation Medal with "V," Bronze Star

Earned: August 2006 in Baghdad



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Clifford Neighbors, left, is presented with a Purple Heart, Army Commendation Medal with "V" and a Bronze Star during a ceremony in Hohenfels, Germany.

Neighbors remembers three IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, going off shortly before he was hit.

"I was in the rear vehicle, and me and the interpreter got out. The next thing, shots rang out," he recalled.

A bullet pierced his triceps and then went through his lung, heart and the other lung before exiting through his chest, he said.

Neighbors is back with his unit and gradually recovering from his wounds.

Jones describes him as: "a huge guy always with a smile on his face and a coffee in his hand."

The Odessa, Texas, native lives and breathes football and makes friends wherever he goes, Jones added.

"He learned German quickly and has many German local-national friends. He is well known in many circles in Germany, and you pretty much can't go anywhere out in town without finding someone that knows him," he said.

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'Shooting just started ... everywhere'

BY KENT HARRIS

Stars and Stripes

The last time Staff Sgt. David Barberet left Afghanistan, he was on crutches, with an embarrassing story to tell. Of course, the fact that he had a pair of medals earned for his valor in the country kept the ribbing to a minimum.

Or at least as light as such things get in an airborne unit.

"I fell in a hole," Barberet said of the torn ligaments he suffered in his leg, which would eventually require surgery at Aviano Air Base when he returned to Italy. "I could have flown out earlier, but we only had a few days left, so I decided to stay with my unit. After all we had been through ..."

Barberet, 25, from New Hartford, Conn., earned a Bronze Star with "V," Army Commendation Medal with "V" and a Bronze Star during his last stint in Afghanistan with the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment. Now he's back in country again as operations sergeant for the battalion command group.

Name: Staff Sgt. David Barberet
Unit: 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: 2005-2006, Zabul province, Afghanistan

He led 1st Squad, 1st Platoon from Company B over hundreds of miles in patrols during his tour in 2005-2006. Much of the time, he and his men were based in Baylough, a forward operating base plopped down in the mountainous north of Zabul province.

Because of the terrain, patrols by vehicle weren't practical. That meant a lot of walking.

That included the early morning incident when he didn't see a man-sized hole in front of him. He needed help to get out, and spent his last week in country hobbling around.

Just a few weeks earlier, Barberet managed to emerge from an intense firefight without any injuries. He was credited with saving the life of Spc. Kris Miller, a member of his squad.

Operation Walkabout, which kicked off Feb. 16, was supposed to be a 65-kilometer patrol in the south part of the district of Day Chopan. After conducting a search of the village of Dawzi, the soldiers began walking toward the village of Andar. But only about 800 yards outside of Dawzi, Barberet's squad found itself in an ambush, with very little cover. Barberet crawled into a small depression in the



Barberet

ground and directed his men in returning fire.

Miller was hit in the hand and continued to battle. Then he was hit again. The bullet passed from one side of his chest to the other. Barberet, braving bullets that were striking the ground around him, raced to Miller's aid. He stopped the blood flow and called in assistance.

"I had never applied first aid to anyone under direct fire before," Barberet said. "Or tried to treat a sucking chest wound."

His treatment kept Miller alive until a medic — and later a Chinook helicopter — could arrive and take him away for treatment. Soldiers firing mortars and Apache helicopters forced the enemy to disengage.

Air assets had also played a role in another of the squad's battles earlier. They were called to reinforce other elements of the company on July 11. Entering a village surrounded by mountains, "shooting just started erupting everywhere," he said. Some U.S. elements held the high ground, exchanging fire with enemy elements on other mountains.

Barberet's squad made its way up one mountain, then was directed to head down and take another mountain.

While his squad was moving as quickly as it could over the valley separating the two mountains, navigating through waist-high grass, they came under fire from both the front and rear. Everyone made it to the second mountain and began to climb up.

"Rounds are ricocheting right by your head, off rocks," Barberet said. One of his two SAW gunners ran out of ammunition. Then the other one. Everyone else was getting low as well. But they continued the climb.

A-10 Warthogs had joined the fight, suppressing much of the fire coming from behind by hitting the first mountain. A B-52 flew over, dropping flares. Barberet's squad gained the heights to find the enemy had fled.

Eight and half hours after the fight began, it was over.

But Barberet and his squad had hundreds of miles — and several more fire-fights — left to go.

"I had never applied first aid to anyone under direct fire before. Or tried to treat a sucking chest wound."

Staff Sgt. David Barberet

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'When there are guys screaming ... you stay'

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

The clouds were low, the risk high. But Lt. Col. John J. Schaefer III, 37, stayed until his bombs ran out and the Iraqi tanks burned in the desert.

It was the most intense combat mission of his life, and the reason Schaefer, from Eagle River, Alaska, wears the Distinguished Flying Cross with "V."

As dawn approached on April 3, 2003, Schaefer, then a major, was leading a two-ship team of F-15E Strike Eagles.

It was their second sortie of the night. En route to an area north of Baghdad, they were diverted: A ground unit advancing toward Baghdad was in trouble on the southeast side of the city, where a major battle was about to unfold. Numerous Iraqi Republican Guard T-72 tanks were posturing to attack the exposed right flank of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force's forward elements, according to Schaefer's award citation.

Schaefer — part of the 336th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron deployed from Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, N.C., to Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar — and the other Strike Eagle, arrived to fight about 4:30 a.m., an hour shy of sunrise.

They spotted the Iraqi tanks on a small ridge line engaging the Marines. But the Iraqis could see them, too. A low cloud cover forced Schaefer and his wingman to an altitude where stealth wasn't a factor — even less so as the morning sky paled.

"Typically we operate at medium to higher altitudes," Schaefer said in a recent phone interview from Osan Air Base, South Korea, where he works for the 607th Combat Plans Squadron. "To get the job done that morning, we had to operate very low, which meant they could see us very easily."

The Strike Eagles were about as visible as "an ant going across a white bedsheet," Schaefer said.

The Iraqi tanks couldn't shoot at the jets. But the ground air defense systems, with which tank units typically travel, could. And did.

Each F-15E pass below the clouds triggered a heavy barrage of anti-aircraft artillery and small rockets from below.

As Schaefer and his backseat weapons systems operator dipped to drop 500- and 2,000-pound laser-guided bombs, they saw exploding chunks of lead and light arcs from tracer gun fire — aimed at them.

"If it starts somewhere and follows you, you know they're after you," Schaefer said of the tracers.

Schaefer made 10 to 12 passes below the clouds in two hours.

"Every time we make a pass, they get a little bit smarter on us and it gets a little more dangerous," he said.

The Iraqis saved their most lethal weapon for last.

"The last pass we made, they launched a big surface-to-air missile at us," Schaefer said. "Operating as low as we were, it's very dangerous."

The missile was aimed at Schaefer's plane. He saw it launch off the ground, kicking up a big cloud of dust and sand.

"You see it with a huge flame behind it, maneuvering towards you," he said.

In a last-ditch maneuver of his own, Schaefer jettisoned his external gas tanks to avoid the missile and shot it down.

In all, 10 bombs were dropped — seven by Schaefer, three by his wingman in the other F-15E — and 10 tanks were destroyed.

"With laser-guided bombs, we rarely miss," Schaefer said.

Schaefer stayed until he was out of bombs. His final glimpse of the battlefield was of a small victory: burning tanks and Iraqi equipment operators running away.

"When we left, there was nothing credible of that Iraqi tank equipment," he said.

In his award citation, Schaefer is credited with preventing a major tank battle despite "significant risk to his own life," and aiding the "historical progress of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force towards Baghdad."

Schaefer could have opted to pull out from the fight much earlier, declaring weather conditions too risky for the mission.

"We could have left," he said. But there was only one decision to be made that day, he said.

"I don't think I have a choice when there are guys screaming for help on the radio," he said. "You stay."

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Courtesy of the U.S. Air Force

Lt. Col. John J. Schaefer III dodged a surface-to-air missile, among other dangers, as a major during a 2003 combat mission in Iraq.

'The Taliban were waiting for us'

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Jared Pietras didn't deploy to Afghanistan to earn a chest full of medals.

He didn't storm into a hail of enemy gunfire during the opening salvo of last year's spring offensive to impress any board.

And the special-operations airman didn't rescue three dozen Afghan soldiers pinned down by Taliban fighters in a secluded grape field to be called a hero.

The unassuming, quick-witted 25-year-old South Carolina native, affectionately known to his fellow airmen as "Peaches," said he did all that and more during a perilous six-month Afghan tour for his comrades.

"It's not for me. And it's not for the medals," Pietras said from his unit's headquarters on RAF Mildenhall in England. "I do it for my teammates, and I know they do it for me, too."

Pietras' was a grueling tour in the Kandahar region — sweating through long days and toiling through even longer nights in a volatile region alongside coalition partners and American special-operations counter-

parts — in which he established himself as an intrepid leader and selfless warrior.

The mission kicked off on a brutal note.

His squad was airlifted into a southern Afghanistan valley, an area with a rich history of combat where mujahedeen fighters had defeated a Soviet force decades earlier.

He was part of a team positioned to control the north side of the valley, while an Army Special Forces team held the south side. But when his team touched down in the valley, the plan was immediately interrupted under a fierce attack.

"As soon as we exited the back of the aircraft, we started getting shot at," he said. "We had a pre-bombing campaign, but apparently it wasn't enough."

The 352nd Special Operations Group combat controller stuck to the mission, and began calling in air support.

"We had to neutralize the whole area so we could get more ground forces in," he said. "We were doing that for a good 36 hours straight. The Taliban were waiting



Pietras

for us, and had dug in for a good fight. They had beat the Russians there, and thought they could do the same to us."

The fighting in the valley prompted Pietras to scale a nearby mountain for a higher vantage point for calling in airstrikes. He ultimately took control of all the airspace above the fighting, momentarily postponing a bomber strike to expedite an emergency medical evacuation.

The coalition forces ultimately seized the area, and sought to engage Taliban fighters in the greater region.

"The push was still to go north, but we knew it wouldn't be easy," he said.

Days later, Pietras found himself again in the midst of a crisis. Communication difficulties in the geographically challenging region had left roughly three dozen Afghan soldiers stranded in a secluded grape field under attack by well-armed Taliban.

Pietras formed an impromptu rescue party with two other Special Forces soldiers, who sneaked undetected into the grape field and rescued their allies.

"That's just how it is out there. I didn't even know those soldiers before that day, and we just went in and did it. We were three guys, going to get 36 guys out," he said. "When you look back, us three shooting our way out of that field with the Af-

ghans running behind us, all of us smiling and laughing, it's pretty dumb. But you don't think that when it's happening."

For his actions in Afghanistan, his singular dedication to his comrades and his acts of courage in the face of overwhelming adversity, Pietras has been awarded three separate Bronze Stars with "V" device and is under consideration for awards from foreign governments as well.

His actions have not gone unnoticed by his superiors.

"Peaches' has shown great initiative and leadership," said

Senior Master Sgt. Mickey Wright, the top enlisted airmen in Pietras' squadron.

"This was proven when he was selected as the 2004 U.S. Air Force Combat Control Airman of the Year, and as an element leader, his leadership is proven daily."

For Pietras, the Bronze Stars affirm his role in the nation's fight against terrorism.

"I joined the Air Force special ops to do exactly this, to find out how I would react in these kind of situations. And I liked what I found out in Afghanistan," he said. "I know that I'm willing to do what it takes for my teammates. The medals and awards are nice, but it's the recognition from my peers that makes this job special."

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"We were three guys going to get 36 guys out."

Staff Sgt. Jared Pietras

'We've been training for this; let's go'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL

Stars and Stripes

Marine Capt. Armando Espinoza faced the prospect of going to a hot landing zone with no combat aircraft escort and only minimal weapons aboard the two CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters in his section.

But he knew wounded Marines needed to be evacuated.

So he turned to his crew and said he was going in, but that he would drop off anyone who did not want to go.

Then he asked, "Who's with me?"

"The answer I got from everybody is what I expected: 'Hey sir, we've been training for this; let's go,'" said Espinoza, 38.

It was about 4 a.m. on April 10, 2003, when Espinoza was ordered to take off to pick up the wounded Marines.

At the time, Espinoza, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico when he was 2 years old, was with Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 268, known as the Red Dragons.

Because his section leader was having problems with his radio and navigation equipment, Espinoza took the lead for the operation after the two helicopters took off, he said.

That meant it was his job to work the radio to try to call in for combat escorts, Espinoza said.

After being told none were available, Espinoza spied some Cobra helicopters and asked if they could tag along.

But Espinoza said the Cobra leader told him, "I'd love to join you, but I'm out of gas and I have no bullets."

The two helicopters went on to the landing zone, and Espinoza's helicopter took sniper fire, he said.

Marines on the ground and a door gunner from the other helicopter provided

suppressing fire while Espinoza's helicopter took on wounded Marines.

After dropping the wounded Marines at a fleet surgical center south of Baghdad, Espinoza and the other helicopter on his section were ordered to return to the landing zone to pick up more casualties, he said.

On the way back, Espinoza could see that "all hell is breaking loose" below in Baghdad, he said.

The two helicopters again picked up casualties at the landing zone, but it was not long after taking off that they received a call of even more casualties that needed to be evacuated.

ated.

So Espinoza decided to break off and return to the landing zone — unescorted and alone.

"That's a questionable tactic," he said.

But Espinoza made it back to the landing zone and took on more casualties.

As his helicopter started taking off, Espinoza asked a corpsman how the patients were doing.

"He said calmly, 'Sir, they're doing fine. Just fly the [expletive] plane,'" Espinoza said.

Afterward, it became clear Espinoza's helicopter had gone too far to the east and accidentally veered over Saddam City, now known as Sadr City.

"It was not a friendly place to be," he said.

The area was essentially a no-fly zone, but Espinoza's helicopter took only sporadic fire.



COURTESY OF ARMANDO ESPINOZA

Marine Capt. Armando Espinoza, standing behind the gentleman crouched down, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross with "V" for leading a two-helicopter team into a hot landing zone to evacuate wounded Marines.

"I think everyone was surprised that we were dumb enough to fly over Sadr City, single-ship," Espinoza said.

Once again, Espinoza made it back to unload his casualties, and his section went on to fly five missions that day including an impromptu resupply mission after a Marine handed someone in his section the cardboard sleeve for a Meal, Ready to Eat with the message written on it: "Hey, we need ammo resupply, water resupply and we need a fuel tank or an AAV [Amphibious Assault Vehicle]."

By the time his section stood down

about 11 p.m. that night, Espinoza had helped evacuate 21 Marines and seven Iraqi civilians who had been caught in the crossfire.

Now a major, Espinoza received the Distinguished Flying Cross with a combat "V" for his actions that day over Baghdad.

Espinoza, who has since rejoined his unit, credits his entire squadron for the day's accomplishments.

"When I accepted the award, I accepted it for the Red Dragons. I accepted it for the squadron."

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'I felt and heard a large explosion'

BY LISA BURGESS
Stars and Stripes

Her handle is "Killer Chick," but the Distinguished Flying Cross that Air Force Maj. Kim Campbell was awarded involved the act of preservation, not destruction.

On April 7, 2003, Campbell, an A-10 Thunderbolt II pilot with the 75th Fighter Squadron, helped save the lives of American troops who were pinned down by Saddam Hussein's elite Republican Guard on the Tigris River, near the North Baghdad Bridge.

Campbell also saved Iraqi lives because she refused to ditch her aircraft over the crowded capitol and eject, allowing the burning jet to crash into a city of 11 million people.

And Campbell saved U.S. taxpayers the cost of replacing one "Warthog" — a 30,000 pound, multimillion-dollar twin-engine jet aircraft specifically designed for close air support, one of the most in-demand missions in Iraq and Afghanistan to this day.

Early that gray and windy morning in Iraq, Campbell and her flight lead, squadron commander Lt. Col. Rick Turner, were waiting their turn in the "CAS stack," the name Air Force fighter pilots give for the circles they fly while waiting to be called to perform close-air-support missions.

Campbell and Turner had flown their two-ship formation to Baghdad from Al Jabr Air Base in Kuwait, stopping just long enough on the way for their Warthogs to sip a load of fuel from the refueling tankers playing the role of flying gas stations, she said.

When the call came over the radio that U.S. troops at the bridge needed help,

Name: Capt. Kim Campbell

Unit: 75th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, 332nd Expeditionary Operations Group, 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing

Medal: Distinguished Flying Cross

Earned: April 7, 2003



COURTESY OF KIM CAMPBELL

Maj. Kim Campbell was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for getting her A-10 Warthog back to Kuwait on manual controls after it was shot up by Iraqi forces during the initial push into Baghdad in 2003.

Turner, as flight lead, knifed the nose of his A-10 downward and dived through the dense clouds, calling for Campbell — a captain at the time — to follow.

The pair immediately spotted the fighting at the bridge. They began to respond in a square dance of mayhem, taking turns letting loose with the Warthog's 30 mm cannons and explosive rockets.

When it was her turn to make her final pass, Campbell dropped in from south to north, left hand pushing the throttle all the way forward to give the aircraft maximum power.

As she rolled in on her target, and adjusted her position using the joystick in her right hand, Campbell's thumb slipped over the "pickle button" at the top of the stick. A split-second before the Warthog hit the target her thumb pushed the button, and the rocket spat from the plane with a bright flash of flight.

With the throttle still full out, Campbell began to make her move up and away

from the target. She was just beginning to move to her left, with the familiar, solid sensation of G-forces underneath her seat, "when I felt and heard a large explosion in the back of the aircraft."

"There was no doubt in my mind," she said. "I knew exactly what it was. I knew I'd been hit."

It was an anti-aircraft missile, and the impact had sheared both hydraulic lines to her jet.

"Our hydraulics are really what allow our flight control system to function normally," Campbell said. If the system is compromised, rudders, flaps, and other critical flight and landing gear won't work.

"At this point there's really one option," Campbell said, "and that's to switch to manual inversion" — the A-10's backup system of cables.

Campbell also knew she had a second option: eject and allow the plane to crash.

But there were civilians down there,

and there was no knowing who would be hit by the burning Warthog.

Moreover, "ejecting in itself over friendly territory is one thing. Now, ejecting over enemy territory and going down over Baghdad, where we were just delivering ordnance on Iraqi Republican Guard, is a totally different story."

So that left the manual inversion, a technique that Campbell, like most A-10 pilots, had performed exactly once, during initial pilot training.

"There's one sortie where you'll fly in manual inversion for very limited time, to understand that it's just a little bit more difficult to fly," said Campbell, who is now 31 and A-10 division commander for the 53rd Test and Evaluation Squadron's 422nd Test and Evaluation Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

All of this flashed through Campbell's mind. She reached over with her right hand and hit the switch to put the A-10 into manual.

Instantly, the jet began to respond to her flight commands once again, and she began to climb, up and away from Baghdad.

"It was a huge sense of relief," Campbell said. "That's not a system you check in the preflight, so you put 100 percent trust in the maintenance guys that it will work, and it did. It worked as advertised."

The flight home was smooth.

"I had plenty of gas and the airplane was flying very well, so we decided to take it back to Kuwait," Campbell said.

But Campbell was angry that her aircraft had been shot up, and absolutely furious that they had been forced to leave the troops on the bridge.

"When it's your own Americans are getting shot at, you want to do everything you can to help them out."

At Al Jabr, the A-10 continued to respond through the entire landing process. In fact, "I'd say probably one of the best landings I've ever done," Campbell said.

"I'm just very impressed with the people who had that the forethought to design such an amazing airplane, and also with our maintenance troops," Campbell said. "They don't realize all the time that what they do has a direct impact in really saving someone's life."

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'It's a chess match, back and forth'

BY JEFF SCHOGOL
Stars and Stripes

He was only a couple of feet from a roadside bomb.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Devon P. Bryan had arrived on the scene to take care of a roadside bomb in Baghdad when a soldier told him he had found what looked like another bomb.

Bryan said he asked the soldier to walk him over to the secondary bomb, but by the time the soldier finally pointed it out, the two were right on top of it.

"Your butt puckers, and you take off running," said Bryan, 26, of Greenville, Mich.

The bomb was eventually taken care of, and Bryan earned the Bronze Star with "V" device along with the rest of his outfit, EOD Mobile Unit 2, Detachment 2, for their work from January to July 2005.

EOD is not a job for people who have a

Name: Petty Officer 2nd Class Devon P. Bryan

Unit: EOD Mobile Unit 2, Detachment 2

Medal: Bronze Star with "V"

Earned: Early 2005, in Baghdad



COURTESY OF DEVON P. BRYAN

Petty Officer 2nd Class Devon P. Bryan says that finding and dismantling bombs, as he does, is not a job for the timid.

problem handling stressful situations, Bryan said.

In one incident, Bryan had to hand-carry unexploded mortar shells about a quarter-mile from outside the

wire back to base, he said.

On the way back, he and other troops got shot at, he said.

Once they got back to base, insurgents started lobbing mortars at them right as Bryan was ready to detonate the unexploded shells, he said.

Before he could take cover, another servicemember jumped into a nearby Humvee and locked the door, leaving Bryan stuck outside, he said.

You have to have a sense of calm to work with things that go bang, Bryan said.

When he's working, Bryan concentrates on other people's safety.

"My personal safety is one of the last things I think about," he said.

Bryan said he has been in the EOD community for more than three years and he intends to re-enlist.

He said he got into EOD because he liked the other sailors in the community and he found the job intriguing.

"This is more of a direct way of help-

ing," he said.

Bryan said he takes satisfaction in knowing that he is saving lives by taking roadside bombs off the street.

U.S. troops who have been to Iraq appreciate what EOD technicians do, although they have varying reactions when the EOD technicians show up, Bryan said.

"They're pissed sometimes [that] it takes us a while to get there," he said.

Defeating roadside bombs is a constant struggle to try to stay ahead of the enemy.

"It's a chess match, back and forth," Bryan

said.

He said he returned to Iraq in March 2006 and was "pretty amazed" at how much progress the bad guys had made adapting to coalition procedures and finding new ways to deploy roadside bombs.

The back-and-forth between the coalition and bombmakers shows no signs of abating, Bryan said.

"It's not going to end until we leave."

E-mail Jeff Schogol at: schogolj@stripes.osd.mil

“My personal safety is one of the last things I think about.”

**Petty Officer 2nd Class
Devon P. Bryan**



Courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps

Lance Cpl. Roger Deeds, left, and Staff Sgt. Logan Cortes rest against a wall during a three-month deployment to Al Anbar Province, Iraq, with the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit at the end of 2005. Cortes received the Bronze Star with "V" for his actions during a firefight Nov. 15, 2005. Deeds was killed in the fighting that day.

'Wrong place at the right time'

BY CINDY FISHER
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Logan Cortes wasn't concerned about the bullets flying to his left and right. His Marines needed him.

Cortes, 31, twice went into a hail of enemy small-arms fire to rescue wounded Marines during the Nov. 16, 2005, battle in New Ubaydi, Iraq, a warren of one- and two-story buildings that had become a last stand for insurgents.

He braved the bullets once again to retrieve more ammunition.

For his actions that day, Cortes, now deployed to Okinawa as part of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, received the Bronze Star with "V."

In Iraq, Cortes was with Battalion Landing Team 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit. A few days before the firefight, the unit had begun clearing the Euphrates River town in Anbar province, about 12 miles from the Syrian border, as part of Operation Steel Curtain.

They were expecting trouble, said Cortes, who then was a machine gun section leader.

They got it. Cortes didn't have to be in the fight that day, but he insisted he was going to be where his Marines were, said 1st Lt.

Name: Staff Sgt. Logan Cortes
Unit: Battalion Landing Team 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: Nov. 16, 2005, in New Ubaydi, Iraq



CINDY FISHER/Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Logan Cortes says of his acts of bravery, "I was just doing what any Marine would have done."

Chris Southard, then weapons platoon commander.

Cortes set up a machine gun team on a roof as platoon mates prepared to clear a nearby single-story building.

That's when the enemy sprung an ambush, firing from several well-fortified positions. Cortes and a second machine-gun team rushed to the street to return fire.

As the battle raged, Cortes saw three Marines hunkered down against a nearby

"[Cortes] knew there were Marines in trouble, and all he thought about was helping those Marines. He had no regard for his own safety."

1st Lt. Chris Southard

weapons platoon commander at the time

Staff Sgt. Logan Cortes earned his Bronze Star with "V"

building.

One of Cortes' troops, Lance Cpl. Roger Deeds, called to the three Marines to see what was happening. They responded that the enemy was in the next building and there were wounded Marines.

Cortes rushed from his covered position, dashing through enemy fire and into the enemy-fortified position to search for casualties. Deeds was hot on his heels.

Cortes "knew there were Marines in trouble, and all he thought about was helping those Marines," Southard said. "He had no regard for his own safety."

Cortes and Deeds found a Marine with severe leg injuries, the result of a grenade. They pulled him to a staging area where corpsmen waited.

Cortes then became separated from Deeds. When Cortes returned to the building he found the machine gunner he positioned pinned down by enemy fire, he said.

"He was out of ammo, so I went back to get more ammo."

It wasn't that simple, though.

The ammo was about 100 yards away. To get it, Cortes raced through an open area amid enemy fire and then made the same mad dash back with the ammo.

On the return trip, an insurgent fired an AK-47 directly at Cortes. He missed.

Cortes returned fire. He didn't miss,

hitting the insurgent three times.

He "must have been a bad shot," Cortes said. "At this point, the enemy was just firing. They weren't aiming."

But one round came dangerously close. "I felt the wind from it as it went past me," said Cortes, who survived the day unscathed. "That one was close."

By then, the tanks had come out, which pretty much quelled enemy action, he said.

In the heavy fighting that day, five Marines with his landing team were killed, including the 24-year-old Deeds.

"His actions that day were some of the bravest I've heard of," Southard said of Cortes.

Cortes received his Bronze Star in a May 15 ceremony at Camp Hansen on Okinawa. He says he doesn't deserve the medal.

"I was just in the wrong place at the right time," he said. "I was just doing what any Marine would have done."

A real hero, he explained, is someone who displays courage over the long haul. Like his mother.

"She raised five children on her own," he said. "She could have dumped us in an orphanage or escaped through alcohol or something, but she didn't."

"That's a hero. Not me."

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'He never left anything in the bag'

BY ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

“We're hitting the airport tonight.”

The command came faster than anticipated, but didn't altogether surprise soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division's 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment.

The attacks through the Karbala Gap had gone well, and anything with a name like Saddam Hussein International Airport was an objective worth taking.

The battalion prepared to storm the airport with massive infantry attacks and 44 armored vehicles.

That was the plan, anyway.

But then a road collapsed into a canal, delaying 80 percent of the battalion's advance.

Early in the morning, Staff Sgt. William Trent and the Company B “Bushmasters” made it to the airport perimeter along with elements of the 3rd Battalion, 69th Infantry.

Three 2,000-pound bombs dropped before their arrival left the night air reeking of burnt rubber and thickened by smoke and whirling sand.

“We were briefed that this was going to be the heaviest defended place in the country,” said Trent, an Alabama native. “Couldn't say there was fear, but there was the unknown.”

They had far less firepower than expected and no medical support, but still managed to scout the area and take about 20 prisoners.

Name: Staff Sgt. William Trent

Unit: 3rd Infantry Division's 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, Company B

Medal: Bronze Star with “V”

Earned: April 4, 2003, near Baghdad



COURTESY OF JOHN JOHNSON

Sgt. 1st Class William Trent flies May 10 from the Demilitarized Zone, Korea, to his current assignment with the 2nd Infantry Division.

Most of the battalion advanced to the airport by daybreak and started organizing when four Iraqi T-72 tanks fired. They destroyed a Bradley fighting vehicle, though the driver managed to back away and unload his crew.

Spc. Jefferson Jimenez and Pfc. Rodney Davis then destroyed the four tanks with only three Javelin missiles. Trent's squad leader coordinated the missile attacks, leaving Trent as ground commander when torrents of bullets and grenades flew from a walled palace compound behind their position.

Trent quickly devised a plan to breach the wall with Staff Sgt. Danny Bost and about a dozen infantrymen.

Capt. Stephen Szymanski gave Trent the OK.

“I told (Capt. Szymanski) I'm going in there, and if I need you, I'll call you,” Trent said. “I was the most experienced person on the ground, so it was my responsibility.”

After breaching the wall by ramming it with a Bradley, Trent led his team through about a mile of scarred flatland.

They rushed a barracks to the right of the palace and found dozens of Iraqi soldiers waiting. The Iraqis appeared paralyzed by the assault.

“None of them ran, as far as I can remember,” Trent said. “It was like they were on drugs or something.”

“We were briefed that this was going to be the heaviest defended place in the country. ... Couldn't say there was fear, but there was the unknown.”

Sgt. 1st Class William Trent

Every soldier fired with the same accuracy they trained with at Fort Stewart, Ga., Trent said. The Iraqis were far less accurate.

The fight didn't last long.

“But 10 minutes in a firefight was like a full 12-hour duty day,” Trent said. “Then you realize it's still 8 or 9 in the morning and you have a full day of fighting ahead of you.”

The only casualties Trent's team suffered in the compound was a private with a bullet wound to his leg.

Following the fight, Trent flashed a big, sweaty, dirty grin while filling a string of water canteens next to Szymanski's Bradley. He and Szymanski each had seen prior combat and now qualified for the Combat Infantryman Badge.

“Do you feel like we've earned it now?” Trent asked.

“All I could do was give him a big grin back,” said Szymanski, now a major.

“(Now-Sgt. 1st Class) Trent is what we need more of in the U.S. Army — someone who will speak his mind and give his opinion,” Szymanski said. “He never left anything in the bag. Everyone could see what he carried, and it made me and others trust him.”

Trent earned the Bronze Star with “V” for his actions.

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COURTESY OF WILLIAM TRENT

Then-Staff Sgt. William Trent kneels at the airport formerly known as Saddam Hussein International Airport in April 2003. Trent directed an assault that earned him a Bronze Star with “V.”

'10 or 15 guys ... with RPGs'

BY LEO SHANE III

Stars and Stripes

As Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stephens sprinted through gunfire toward the lost Bradley fighting vehicle, he realized he had forgotten something.

His armor.

And his weapon.

And possibly his senses.

"Everything was in the vehicle," he said, chuckling at his own story. "We wear crew helmets inside those vehicles, so I took [the rest] off. ... I didn't really think about it at all.

"I just knew if those guys went too far back into the fight, we'd lose them all. So I just thought about getting to that vehicle."

Stephens' unprotected run through the streets of Baqouba could have earned him a trip to a field hospital or worse. Instead, it earned him a Silver Star for his quick thinking and decision to risk his own life to save others.

The 39-year-old guardsman is a Persian Gulf War veteran who moved back to North Carolina and signed up for extra service after his active-duty time ended. He laughs and jokes about dumb moves he made and the injuries that resulted, but he becomes quietly serious when he talks about tragedies that happened or might have happened to his men.

His platoon had been called to Baqouba for a major offensive in June 2004. After completing an eight-hour patrol through the city one morning, his men were called back into the town center to help support another platoon repelling enemy fighters.

Within minutes of their arrival, the company commander, Capt. Christopher Cash, was mortally wounded in a second ambush, and Stephens was left pinned down with 25 men piled into three Bradleys.

"I really thought that day we would lose everybody we had," he said, his voice starting to drop.

"The attack was really sophisticated. They knew exactly where we'd be, what building to get on, what buildings were reinforced concrete so our weapons would have limited effect on them."

The platoon was ordered to fall back

and secure a bridge. Stephens said he thought any sort of retreat was a mistake, but he ordered the soldiers to their next point.

"When we moved out, I looked on top of one of the buildings ... there was probably 10 or 15 guys at the top, with RPGs," he said. "I told [my guys] to keep firing at them; don't let any of them pop up.

"[Gunner Spc. Daniel Desens] did everything he could, but they got a lucky shot off."

An RPG round slammed into their vehicle, sending shrapnel and smoke

everywhere. When Stephens recovered, he saw that several of his men were wounded, Desens seriously.

Even worse, one of the Bradleys spun around backward and was



Stephens

driving back into the heart of the fighting.

Stephens dashed from the minimal safety of the makeshift casualty collection point to the wayward transport. The other soldiers quickly saw him, covered his sprint and followed him back to the base of the bridge.

The attacks continued as the platoon tried to treat its injured. Soldiers tried to pull Desens out of his gunner seat from inside the vehicle, but couldn't. Stephens climbed on top of the transport to pull him out, hearing bullets bounce off the steel around him as he moved.

"While I was on top, another (enemy) vehicle with AK-47 came from under the bridge, and they started to engage me," he said. "But my guys took them out."

At that point, Stephens ordered a full retreat back to base to get medical treatment for the wounded.

On the way back, another ambush ensued, and fighters lobbed an RPG into Stephens' Bradley. The shrapnel ripped into his new gunner's back, while the explosion burned his hands and face, singeing his eyes shut.

When they arrived back at camp, the platoon received word that Desens and Cash were dead. Seven others from the 25-man unit had to be evacuated out of Iraq for medical treatment.

But the others survived. The second gunner was back in the fight after a few months at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

And despite some bad burns and hours of dodging bullets, Stephens was treated by field medics and sent on another mission within hours.

He said the rest of his deployment was quiet compared with that day. But from then on, even during routine patrols, he remembered to keep his armor and his weapon close by.

"My guys stayed on me after that," he said, laughing again. "They always reminded me to keep the stuff on."

"I really thought that day we would lose everybody we had."

Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stephens



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHAD STEPHENS

Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stephens salutes after receiving the Silver Star last October.

Name: Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stephens
Unit: Company A, 1st Battalion, 120th Infantry Regiment
Medals: Silver Star
Earned: Baqouba, Iraq



Sgt. 1st Class Chad Stephens sets up a checkpoint in Baqouba, Iraq, in June 2004.

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'We put hellfire into them'

BY DAVID ALLEN
Stars and Stripes

Chief Warrant Officer 4 John Moseley says that what struck him most about his first tour in Iraq was the incongruity of the battlefield scenes.

"Najaf was insane," he said of the March 25-28, 2003, battle to take the city about 96 miles south of Baghdad.

He was the leader of a team of two Apache helicopters engaged in close combat attacks on enemy positions identified by troops on the ground.

"It was daylight action, so when you're flying over the city, you're a target, too," he said. "We only attacked what the ground guys said to attack and what had positively been identified as the enemy."

"It was crazy," said Moseley. "There'd be a serious battle going on over one city block and three or four blocks away we'd see kids playing soccer."

Moseley, 41, is now a maintenance test pilot with the 1st Battalion, 2nd Aviation Regiment at Camp Eagle, South Korea. He is a recipient of six Air Medals — two with "V" devices — that he was given for general combat action during his first tour in Iraq from March 2003 to January 2004. He received a seventh Air Medal for his second tour, from January to December 2005.

When he deployed to Kuwait in February 2003, "we had no idea what to ex-

pect," he said. "Most of our time leading up to the war was doing 'brown-out' landings and take-offs. The conditions were nothing like back in the southeast United States. The soil is like ... brown talcum powder. Whenever you got close to the ground, a huge cloud of this stuff would engulf you and you couldn't see. It was like learning to fly all over again."



Moseley

When the war began, the Apaches supported the 3rd Infantry Division on their sprint to Baghdad.

"They were the real heroes of the war," he said. "They really knew what they were doing. After all, they had left equipment in Kuwait after Desert Storm and came back every year practicing to invade Baghdad."

Moseley's first taste of combat was attacking the crack Medina Division of Iraq's Republican Guard at the Karbala Gap, a narrow strip of land between the Euphrates River and a lake. It was the last large obstacle on the 3rd ID's advance to Baghdad.

"We had to defeat the Medina Division prior to getting the bridges across the Euphrates," Moseley said. "No one knew what to expect. The Medina Division was supposed to be the best of the best, and Saddam Hussein was known to use chemical weapons."

"It was hot and cramped in the Apaches," he said. "With my flight suit and chemical protective gear and my body armor and my pistol in a shoulder holster, my co-pilot and I were like Robocops in that

tiny cockpit. I felt like the Michelin Man. "We attacked at night; dropping rocket-propelled anti-artillery rounds to make them keep their heads down. It was like the Fourth of July."



COURTESY OF JOHN MOSELEY

Army Chief Warrant Officer 4 John Moseley received a total of six Air Medals during his first tour in Iraq and one for his second tour.

The enemy fire was much lighter than expected, he said. "Most of their tanks and trucks were parked along Highway 9 and we zoomed in as low as possible — about 35 feet off the ground — and wiped them out," he said.

Using special heat-detecting night-vision equipment, the rule was "if it glows, it blows," Moseley said. "We put hellfire into them. Just that one night we killed the majority of the vehicles of the Medina Division."

Moseley's unit was next sent to Najaf, where they zeroed in on weapons caches and snipers. That's where he got his second Air Medal with a "V."

Moseley, a 15-year veteran who now has more than 3,000 flying hours under his belt, said waiting for the invasion to begin was the toughest time.

"I was most frightened while waiting for the war to kick off," he said. "We expected every Scud missile to come over us to have biological weapons, and sometimes we had to sleep in our protective gear."

"Trying to sleep in this Darth Vader mask — that was pretty scary," he said. "We itched for the fighting to start. Better to die in combat than dying like a cockroach from nerve agents."

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'Like an old World War II video'

BY FRANKLIN FISHER
Stars and Stripes



COURTESY OF ROBERT L. ZACKERY III

Air Force Staff Sgt. Robert L. Zackery III was awarded his second Bronze Star with "V" for his actions directing airstrikes in Iraq from March 3 to May 19, 2003. He earned his first Bronze Star with "V" in 2001 in Afghanistan. He's now a technical sergeant stationed at Osan Air Base, South Korea.

When then-Air Force Staff Sgt. Robert L. Zackery III and the rest of a special-operations task force neared one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, Iraqi anti-aircraft guns filled the night sky with lethal streaks of light.

"Like an old World War II video," Zackery, now 29 and a technical sergeant, recalled of the 2003 raid on the Tharthar palace complex northwest of Baghdad.

"Pitch black, dark sky, would light up every two seconds: boom, boom, boom," said Zackery. "Explosions both ways. It was something out of a movie, honestly. I never experienced anything like that before."

Within minutes it would be Zackery's job to start directing airstrikes onto those anti-aircraft sites and other enemy positions, including a unit of Saddam's Republican Guard nearby.

About 40 special-operations troops flew in aboard special ops-modified HH-60 Black Hawk and MH-47 Chinook helicopters, supported by various combat aircraft including A-10 Thunderbolts.

As part of an Air Force terminal attack control party, or TAC-P, Zackery's job was to go in with ground troops and relay to pilots the information they needed to attack ground targets.

Zackery was a veteran of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and had been awarded the Bronze Star with "V" device for his actions there. But this was his first mission in Iraq, and it led in part to his second Bronze Star with "V."

Name: Staff Sgt. Robert L. Zackery III

Unit: 8th Air Support Operations Flight, in support of special-operations forces

Medal: Bronze Star with First Oak Leaf Cluster (for second Bronze Star with "V")

Earned: March 3-May 19, 2003, various locations in Iraq

The raiding party touched down around 3 a.m. Some troops dashed toward several four-story palace buildings and started clearing them floor by floor, while others concentrated on assaulting other parts of the complex.

Zackery, as planned, set himself up on the fourth story of one of the guest towers for the duration of the mission.

As he looked out across a road through night-vision goggles, he spotted an Iraqi pickup truck with armed men in the back, speeding toward the palace grounds.

He radioed two of the A-10s.

One swept to the attack, the pilot firing his 30 mm Gatling gun. Zackery saw sparks fly off the pavement around the truck, but nothing more, and thought the pilot had missed. In the next instant, the truck exploded in flames.

Moments later, Zackery saw two more pickups heading in and again called them in to the A-10s. Both trucks were destroyed.

By now, aircraft were drawing Iraqi ground fire, and Zackery pinpointed the gun positions for the pilots. The A-10s destroyed four positions.

About 45 minutes after they'd touched down, the raiding party reboarded helicopters and departed.

Later, while at Fort Lewis, Wash., Zackery received his second Bronze Star. Among the actions specified in the accompanying citation was his role in the palace raid.

"His calm professionalism under fire resulted in the destruction of enemy reinforcement vehicles approaching the palace perimeter ..." it stated.

And how did he come by that calm professionalism under fire?

Consider his response to what he'd tell others asking him for advice about combat service:

"First of all, I'd start with the cliché, 'The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war,'" he said. "The more you know your job, the more you train, whatever you do, when you have that combat stress placed on you, you're not worried because you know you're prepared."

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Stripes Heroes: Where are they now?

'It definitely changes you'

BY LISA BURGESS

Stars and Stripes

"I don't talk about it a lot," Staff Sgt. Konrad Reed said, as a Black Hawk helicopter buzzed overhead the East Baghdad base he was calling home in February. "I have a platoon of 33 guys, and maybe 10 of them know about it."

"It" is a Bronze Star with "V," and one of the weirder combat stories to come out of Afghanistan.

Reed, who was then 23 years old, was an artilleryman with the 82nd Airborne Division's C Battery, 3rd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment. They were posted at Firebase Shkin, near the border with Pakistan.

On April 25, 2003, Reed survived a firefight that included not one, but two grenade explosions — including one that went off right underneath him and threw him six feet in the air.

Two U.S. servicemembers died in the fight that day, and more than 20 were wounded.

But despite 42 shrapnel wounds, Reed was back on duty after just three days of recuperation at the hospital at Bagram Air Base.

What does being a "hero" really mean to those who have earned the title, once a few years have passed? Stripes tracked down two servicemembers who were featured in previous editions of Heroes to find out how their lives have changed since they were decorated for valor.

Four years later, Reed is still with the 82nd, this time with the 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and he's on his fourth deployment.

Now that he's moved away from the unit where everybody knew the story about the Afghanistan battle, he's no longer accorded the same kind of quiet deference, said Reed, who has been selected for promotion to sergeant first class.

"In my old unit, everybody wanted to hear what I said," Reed said. "Everyone treats you different."

In his new unit, Reed said, "I feel more invisible."

It doesn't help matters that Reed has such a difficult time talking about what happened that day — except with people who went through it with him.

"The few who talk about it a lot, they were there (in Afghanistan on April 25, 2003), but they weren't involved" in the actual battle, Reed said. "It seems like the more someone talks about it, the less he actually did."

In fact, despite the fact that he's back in a combat environment, with reminders of war all around him, "I don't (even) think about it a lot," Reed said.

Then he paused and corrected himself. "I do and I don't," he said. "Certain smells, certain sounds — they take you right back. It's kind of weird."

Asked whether the events of April 25 changed him, Reed paused.

"It definitely changes you, makes you think about things differently," Reed said. "At the same time, a lot of the reason I'm good at my job is because it hasn't changed me."

Reed moved off the topic quickly, clearly uncomfortable.

Reed, who hails from Murdo, S.D.,



LISA BURGESS/Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Konrad Reed, who was awarded a Bronze Star with "V" for his actions during a firefight in Afghanistan in April 2003, was back in Baghdad in early 2007.

scored the Iraq trifecta when his unit crossed the Kuwait berm in January.

For this last deployment, "we got the official word we'd be going on Dec. 27, and we were in Kuwait on Jan. 5," Reed said.

The 504th PIR is part of the 28,000 troops ordered by President Bush to Iraq in January to help secure Baghdad.

The unit wasn't completely surprised,

Reed said: As the Army's "ready" battalion, expected to be prepared to pick up and go anywhere in the world on a moment's notice, the 504th was "on the bubble" anyway.

But it's a little more complicated for Reed to leave than it is for some soldiers, because he's leaving behind five kids, as well as his wife.

So far, none of Reed's experiences in Iraq have come close to the level of danger he experienced in Afghanistan, he said, although he's been on patrols where his Humvee came under fire, and insurgents used to throw rockets and mortars at his base, Anaconda.

"Other than that, though, nothing extreme," Reed said.

Now, however, Reed and his unit are in the heart of Baghdad, based at Forward Operating Base Loyalty and in charge of Sadr City, one of the most restive and dangerous areas in the entire country.

"I don't really worry too much for myself," Reed said. "I've been here a few times, and I know what to expect. I believe I know how to keep myself out of trouble. But I definitely worry about the people in my unit."

Watching Reed outside the 504th tactical operations center, or TOC, at Loyalty, it's clear that other soldiers treat him with respect and even a slight deference.

"He doesn't always say much, but he's a stud," one sergeant, who didn't want his name used, said about Reed.

"I know what he did in Afghanistan, and it's not about the medal," the soldier said. "It's that he survived (the battle). I'd rather go into a fight with someone like that any day."

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'Best time of my life, working with Marines'

BY LISA BURGESS

Stars and Stripes

Life wasn't supposed to turn out like this for Alan Dementer.

Less than four years ago, Petty Officer 2nd Class Dementer was being called a Navy hero. His friends and family watched with pride as he was pinned with a Bronze Star with a "V" device for his actions during the battle in Nasiriyah, Iraq, on March 26, 2003, while serving as a corpsman with the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment.

Dementer, a strapping six-footer who single-handedly lifted and carried wounded Marines in full combat gear to safety through hails of enemy fire, was credited with helping treat 31 Devil Dogs through that long night.

When a mortar hit near the corpsman, throwing him onto his back and spraying him with shrapnel, he was so focused, with so much adrenaline coursing through his veins, he barely registered the pain.

In the aftermath of "the Nas," the physical wounds from the shrapnel that sliced Dementer through the shoulder and leg healed fast.

The mental wounds are taking longer. Like many servicemembers who survived that battle, one of the invasion's bloodiest tests, he's still struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder.

But there was yet another layer of wounds Dementer suffered that day, wounds that couldn't be healed with stitches or counseling.

"I didn't know it at the time, but when I got knocked on my keester, I got blast

injury," Dementer said in a telephone interview with Stripes from his home near Iron Mountain, Mich.

What Navy doctors later found, after countless tests, was that the blast damaged nerves in his spine, up near his neck. As Dementer scrambled to move his Marine charges to safety, he unknowingly aggravated the damage.

But even if he had realized it, Dementer told Stripes, he wouldn't have done anything differently.

Those Marines were not only his responsibility — they were his friends.

"The best friends I ever had," he said.

Friends he misses desperately since he was medically discharged from the Navy in 2004.

Soon after Nasiriyah, Dementer said, he started getting shooting, burning pain in his legs, hands and arms, which would then go numb. His back hurt badly, and "I couldn't lift much of anything."

Still, "I was in denial," Dementer said. He kept hoping the symptoms would go away. He wanted to get better so he could be assigned with another Marine unit and get back to the combat zone.

"All I wanted to do was go back to the

Fleet," he said. "That was the best time of my life, working with Marines."

Instead, after returning from Iraq, Dementer and his family were transferred to Great Lakes Naval Station, Ill., where he spent countless hours at the naval hospital, trying to find the source of the trouble.

At first, doctors diagnosed him with polyneuropathy, a chronic and severe nerve pain that affects all the limbs, usually caused by a traumatic event.

They later refined that to diagnosis degenerative nerve disease, which means that not only will Dementer's condition not improve, "it's just going to get slowly worse and worse," said his wife, Jerri, who had joined the telephone conversation.

When he got the news of his forced retirement from the medical board in 2004, Dementer had 16 years in the service — four critical years short of the all-important 20-year mark he needed to qualify for retirement benefits.

Those four years also pushed Dementer into the "exceptions" category of the so-called "concurrent receipt" law Congress passed in 2003.

Before 2003, military retirees were not allowed to collect both their monthly retirement stipend and any disability payment they may have earned from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Military advocacy groups tried to get

the law changed for years, saying the two payments were unrelated. But Congress kept refusing, saying it was too expensive to taxpayers, and "double-dipping" to boot.

Finally, as of Jan. 1, 2004, the law was changed so that retirees with disability ratings of higher than 50 percent are allowed to collect both payments.

But the law exempts servicemembers who have been retired for medical reasons with less than 20 years of service. Like Alan Dementer.

These members are not allowed to collect both their monthly

medical retirement from the Defense Department and the VA stipend. It's one or the other. Since the VA stipend is higher, that's the payment servicemembers take.

This is an issue that is increasingly affecting servicemembers who are getting hurt in Iraq and Afghanistan, he said.

Alan and Jerri Dementer are raising three children on just his VA disability payment, which amounts to about \$2,000 (fully taxable) a month, plus whatever Jerri can earn providing day care from their home.

"For us [not getting both payments] means a few hundred dollars a month," Dementer said. "That money would mean a lot to us."

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Dementer

"I didn't know it at the time, but when I got knocked on my keester, I got blast injury."

Alan Dementer

Fallen Heroes

By Peter Collier

Behind the men in this book—and all the men and women who have served our country—stands an army of fallen heroes who have died defending our country. We take their sacrifice for granted—just as we take for granted our liberty itself. We know that there always have been and always will be Americans who will give up all their tomorrows for our todays.

Most Medals of Honor—more than 60 percent since World War II have been awarded to men who never came home. Their reward is sparse: the riderless horse, the lonely echo of bugler's taps, the last salute of a rifle team's gunfire; the folded American flag handed to those who now have only memories to cherish.

A few of them become celebrated figures. On October 3, 1993, for instance, Delta Force Sergeants Randall Shugart and Gary Gordon were involved in an assault on a rebel force in the Somali capital of Mogidishu when two Black Hawk helicopters went down. From their own helicopter, they were providing protective fire at the crash sites when they learned that U.S. ground forces would not be able to rescue one of the crews. Shugart and Gordon volunteered twice to go down and help protect the Americans. Their commanding officers denied the requests because they knew how great the odds were against the two men. Shugart and Gordon knew too, but they insisted on going anyhow and were inserted near the site, each armed only with a sniper rifle and a pistol. As dramatized in the book and film *Black Hawk Down*, they fought their way through heavy fire to the downed helicopter and gave their lives saving the injured pilot.

Most posthumous recipients are more anonymous, earning only a brief

mention in the news when they receive their medals from a grateful nation. Sergeant First Class Paul R. Smith, for instance, was at the Baghdad Airport on April 4, 2003, engaged in the construction of a prisoner-of-war holding area when his small task force was attacked by an enemy force numbering more than one hundred. Smith immediately organized a defense with grenades and antitank weapons and

then directed the evacuation of three wounded Americans. Fearing that his unit would be overrun, Smith moved under withering fire to a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on a damaged armored personnel carrier and engaged the enemy, killing dozens of them before he himself was killed. Smith saved his unit. The story of another such hero, Marine Lance Corporal Jason Dunham, is recounted in this supplement.

These four men and all the others—more than 500 since the beginning of World War II—who fell on grenades to save their buddies, single handedly charged enemy machine guns, or fought on long after ordinary bravery should have been exhausted would not have suffered in the eyes of their comrades if they had decided to live to fight another

day. But for reasons that are beyond our understanding—reasons having much to do with duty, country and honor and little to do with fame and glory—they made a different decision: to look unflinchingly into the face of death.

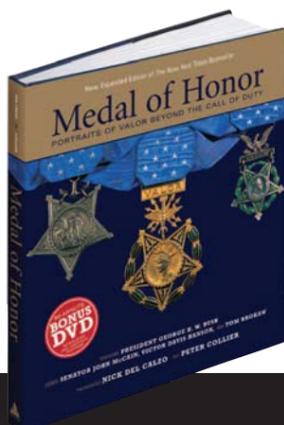
Each of them is now a chapter in the still unfinished book of our American heritage, a stilled voice in the long battle cry of freedom. As members of an army of fallen heroes, they protect us still by their legacy. What each of them did challenges us to assert the power of memory and continue to learn from their sacrifice. The lesson is as clear as it is compelling: We are the land of the free for one reason and one reason only—because we are also the home of the brave.



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Photograph by Nick Del Calzo



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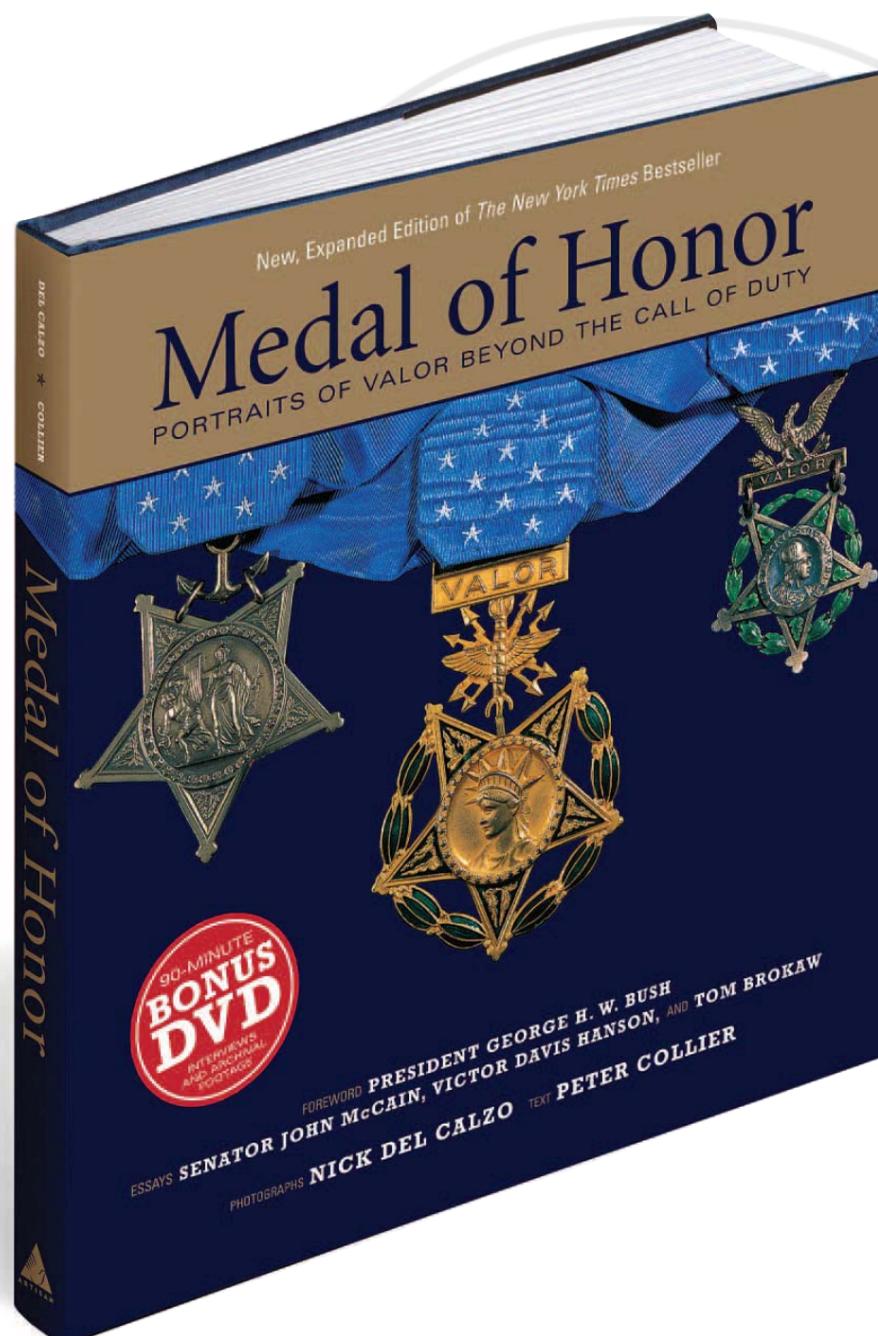


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"THIS BOOK IS THE REAL MCCOY; THESE GUYS ARE THE REAL MCCOY; AND THEIR STORIES ARE AMAZING – 138 STORIES; 138 MEN, ANY ONE OF THEM I'D LOVE TO KNOW. ANY PARENT WOULD DO WELL TO GET THIS BOOK INTO THE HANDS OF THEIR TEENAGERS TO SHOW THEM WHAT AMERICAN VALUES ARE REALLY ABOUT."

– Larry King

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

– President George H. W. Bush

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

– Tom Brokaw

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

– Senator John McCain



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