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HEROES

A nation honors valor in the war on terror



Lt. Michael P. Murphy



Pfc. Ross McGinnis



Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael Monsoor



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BOEING



Valor

Very few Americans can know how they would react in danger. We have, by and large, been given health, safety and prosperity. As such, many grow up indifferent to troubles not set before them.

But there are those who were raised to understand duty. They have been inspired by the country's highest ideals, and follow in its greatest traditions. They see wrong and try to right it; they see tyranny and understand that someone out there needs a hand.

It may be that soon we'll speak of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as entering a new decade. The unrealistic expectations of the public, who watched with nervous fascination in its early weeks and months, have died away. Much of the media coverage also has evaporated.

None of this matters to the warfighter. He puts his gear on and goes to work. There will be time later for reflection. For now, there are houses to clear and villages to secure.

In this special section, Stars and Stripes, the congressionally authorized, independent newspaper for the military, looks at the deeds that have earned medals of valor for the servicemembers profiled in these stories. They stand as surrogates for the thousands of others so honored.

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

To each soldier, Marine, sailor or airman who steps up and does the right thing — who reacts with violence when his comrades are threatened, who comforts a frightened Iraqi child in the wake of such violence, and to the families that ache for them — you are never alone.

We salute you.

— Patrick Dickson
Stars and Stripes



THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

May 14, 2008

To the Men and Women of the United States Armed Forces:

Since America's founding, members of our military have protected our citizens and preserved the ideals that make our country strong. Today, you serve our Nation with valor and distinction as part of the greatest force for freedom in the history of the world and set a fine example of courage for your fellow Americans. By answering the call to serve with honor, decency, and resolve, you have earned the respect and admiration of a grateful Nation.

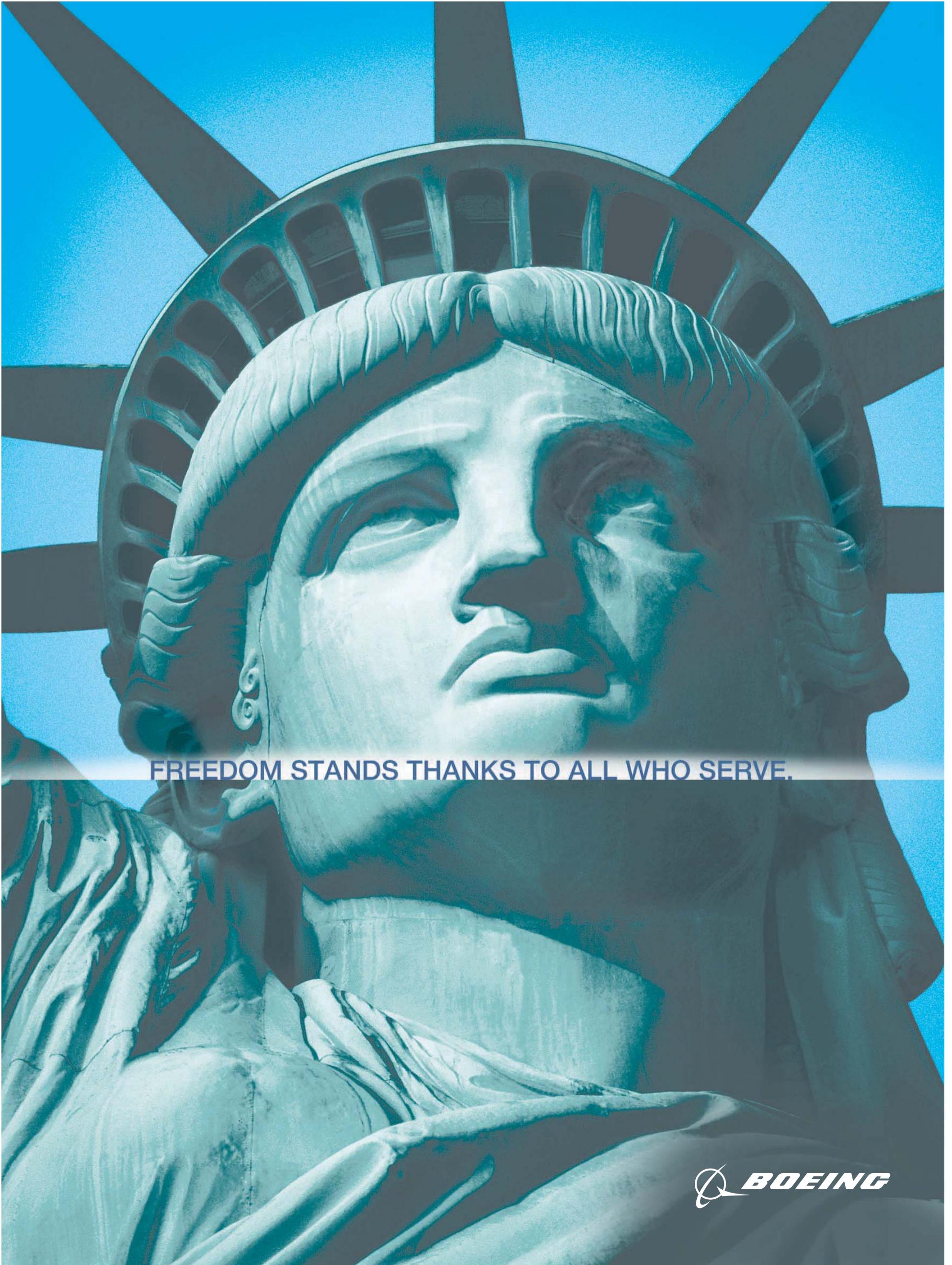
We owe a lasting debt to those who sacrificed their lives while protecting our country from danger. These fallen soldiers live on in our national memory as extraordinary Americans who have shown the true meaning of heroism. We also pay tribute to the military families who live with uncommon challenges, enduring sleepless nights and long family separations, and making sacrifices so that we can all continue to live in freedom.

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

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FREEDOM STANDS THANKS TO ALL WHO SERVE.

 **BOEING**

'Mom, it's a job; I had to do it'

By JEFF SCHOGOL
Stars and Stripes

It's clear that Navy Lt. Michael P. Murphy's parents love talking about their son, whom they describe as a selfless, humble and heroic individual.

But their joy in recounting his life is tinged with an intrusive sadness.

It arrives unannounced when Daniel J. Murphy talks about how he's come to view the loss of his son, causing him to pause to regain his composure.

"The world might be a lesser place without my boy in it, but ... the world was a lot better place ... for 29 years with him in it," the elder Murphy said, choking back the emotion.

Michael P. Murphy was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor last year in a ceremony at the White House. He and two other members of his SEAL team were killed on June 28, 2005, in Afghanistan.

While on a mission, the team came across some goat herders, whom Michael Murphy ordered to be released.

It is believed the herders told the Taliban where the SEALs were, and the team soon found themselves faced with an overwhelming enemy assault.

Michael Murphy was shot in the back as he called for backup, but the helicopter carrying the Quick Reaction Force was shot down on the way to the scene.

The SEALs continued to fight, but only one SEAL survived the battle — Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell, who was rescued later.

"By his undaunted courage, intrepid fighting spirit and inspirational devotion

Name: Lt. Michael P. Murphy
Medal: Medal of Honor
Earned: June 28, 2005, Afghanistan



Courtesy of the U.S. Navy

SEAL Lt. Michael P. Murphy was killed while leading a four-man team searching for a Taliban leader in Afghanistan.

to his men in the face of certain death, Lt. Murphy was able to relay the position of his unit, an act that ultimately led to the rescue of Luttrell and the recovery of the remains of the three who were killed in the battle," the Navy announced in October.

Maureen T. Murphy said losing her son has left a void in her heart that can never be filled.

"There's always one part of the day

where I just lose it because I miss him," she said.

The Murphys said the Navy has played a tremendous role in keeping their family together after their son's death.

"It is difficult to explain to people unless you've lost a child and, even worse, lost a child as a result of a violent death in defense of this nation, to exp— to— ... to let them know how — it's not just a tragedy; it

is something that pulls at the very fabric of the family unit," Daniel Murphy said.

"And it was the Navy community that kept us together," he said, his voice breaking. "They adopted us as a family and made us understand that we weren't alone."

Maureen Murphy said her son's hometown friends have also helped her with household chores. Last year, they raked up 153 bags of leaves at her Long Island, N.Y., home.

"And they always say it: 'Hey, he would have done it for us,'" she said.

She recalled the time that her son first talked to a retired Navy SEAL in college about the possibility of joining the SEALs. She said the man later revealed he was chopping wood when her son arrived at his home.

"He didn't even have to ask, but Michael took off his jacket, picked up an axe and started helping him chop the wood," Maureen Murphy said.

Her son viewed himself as a "cog in the wheel," she said.

"Everyone has got a job to do, and when you pull together, the job gets done," Maureen Murphy said.

Daniel Murphy said he hopes that quality of his son comes across in an upcoming movie about the SEAL team's fight in Afghanistan. He also said he has made some casting recommendations to Peter Berg, the actor and director who is working on the movie.

"I told him that Matt Damon would play Michael to a 'T,'" Daniel Murphy said with a laugh.

Brimming with pride, he said he also suggested that Ben Affleck could play Marcus Luttrell.

"Marcus says, 'We're in negotiations,'" Daniel Murphy said.

But Maureen Murphy said her son would not want a lot of attention.

"Michael would be like, 'Mom, it's a job; I had to do it, that's what I trained for, that's it, boom.' He would — he was very humble. He just would be, he would be — I can hear him saying, 'Mom, shut up. You need to be quiet right now. Don't be telling every little story about me.'"

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'Man, they unloaded on us'

By JEFF SCHOGOL
Stars and Stripes

Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell was taking a nap when his SEAL team leader, Navy Lt. Michael Murphy, woke him up and pointed to the mountain.

"I rolled over and [saw] a line of Taliban above me, 20 feet, 20 feet above me," he said. "We were right off the top of the mountain. And the hair stood on the back of my neck. I could smell them."

The team was facing about 180 Taliban fighters, one of whom looked down on the SEALs from pine trees above the team, Luttrell said.

"I [shot] him, and when I did, man, that unleashed hell," he said. "I never been — I never heard gunfire like that."

The SEALs fought "an avalanche of Taliban" for about five minutes before Murphy ordered the team to fall back, Luttrell said.

"I grabbed my pack and my rifle and the ground gave out from underneath me and I started tumbling," he said.

Luttrell said he did three complete



Murphy

flips before he was able to stop himself. The other SEALs likewise tumbled down the mountainside.

"When we hit the open ground, man, they unloaded on us with mortars and RPGs like nobody's business," he said.

One team member, Petty Officer 2nd Class Danny Dietz, tried calling in for help, but his hand got blown off during the radio call, Luttrell said.

"I was a medic, and he's like, 'I need some help, man, they shot me!'" Luttrell said. "And I was like, 'Well, I can't help you,' because there's no medicine on the battlefield for those who don't know that. It's rounds back downrange. That's it."

Dietz put a magazine in his rifle and continued to fight, Luttrell said.

The SEALs worked their way down to a ravine, where the Taliban started picking them apart, he said. At one point, an RPG flew right between Luttrell and Murphy.

Dietz was shot twice in the throat and then suffered a fatal shot in the head after Luttrell picked him up, Luttrell said.

Surrounded by Taliban, Murphy

worked his way up the mountain to call for backup, he said. Despite being shot twice in the back, Murphy finished his call.

"About 10 minutes later, you know, he started screaming my name, and this is bad, I tell people, I was like, I don't want him to die because of the way he was screaming my name," Luttrell said. "Like, you know, you never hear a man scream like this in your life ... I can't get it out of my head."

After Murphy died, Luttrell and Petty Officer 2nd Class Matthew G. Axelson, who had been shot in the head, tried to make it to safety when Luttrell was knocked unconscious by an explosion.

Luttrell said he woke up later and crawled several miles to a village, killing three Taliban on the way.

He was later captured by the Taliban, who threatened to cut his head off, before being rescued by local villagers and eventually found by Army Rangers.

Despite his wounds, Axelson survived another two weeks before his body was found, Luttrell said.

"True testament to a warrior," he said.

"I [shot a Taliban], and when I did, man, that unleashed hell. I never been — I never heard gunfire like that."

Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell

'Mike was a giver'

By JEFF SCHOGOL
Stars and Stripes

There are few awards not given to Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael Monsoor, the most highly decorated servicemember in the War on Terror.

The Navy SEAL had been awarded the Purple Heart, Good Conduct Medal, Combat Action Ribbon, Bronze Star with a "V" device, Silver Star; and in April, he posthumously received the Medal of Honor for jumping on a grenade to save his teammates.



Monsoor

Monsoor, 25, of Garden Grove, Calif., enlisted in 2001 and went through SEAL training later that year, but he had to drop out after he broke his heel.

From 2002 to 2004, he served on a security detachment in Sigonella, Sicily, before going through SEAL training again and graduating near the top of his class, according to the Navy.

On Sept. 29, 2006, Monsoor was on a rooftop in Ramadi, Iraq, when an insurgent lobbed a grenade at his team.

"He immediately leapt to his feet and yelled 'grenade' to alert his teammates of impending danger, but they could not evacuate the sniper hide-site in time to escape harm," according to the summary of Monsoor's actions, provided by the Navy.

Monsoor jumped on the grenade "without hesitation and showing no regard for his own life," the summary said.

"He is a martyr who embodies what all Americans should be striving for in terms of the survivability of our nation," said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Seth Stone, who led Monsoor's unit in Ramadi.

Stone remembers how Monsoor had a dry sense of humor that made missions more enjoyable, such as when the normally quiet SEAL belted out at the top of his lungs that an intersection was clear.

But Monsoor also was a stoic, Stone recalled.

"To be truthful, I thought he was the toughest guy in my platoon," Stone said.

Monsoor would never complain, even when he was tasked with carrying heavy weapons that had heated up to 150 degrees during the day, Stone said.

"I almost wanted him to complain sometimes," he said.

Stone said he was not surprised when Monsoor sacrificed himself to save others.

"Mike was a giver," Stone said. "He gave of himself on every mission."

To Monsoor, the choice between saving himself and saving others was no choice at all, President Bush said at Monsoor's Medal of Honor Ceremony in April.

"One of the survivors puts it this way, 'Mikey looked death in the face that day and said, 'You cannot take my brothers, I will go in their stead,'" Bush said.

Monsoor's actions on Sept. 29, 2006, were not the first time Monsoor had saved a teammate. In May 2006, Monsoor exposed himself to enemy fire to rescue a fellow SEAL, who had been shot in the leg.

"He ran out into the street with another SEAL, shot cover fire and dragged his comrade to safety while enemy bullets kicked up the concrete at their feet," according to his Navy biography.

Monsoor's older sister, Sara, said he was committed to his friends.

He also applied creativity to solving problems, she said.

Once, his parents asked him to remove a palm tree, so he tied the tree to a car and yanked it out, the elder Monsoor said. Afterwards, he dragged the tree around in a victory lap.

"He just had fun with it," she said.

She said Monsoor's family is proud that he is being recognized as a hero, but she added she remembers him as a brother.

"Mike will always be my Mikey," she said.

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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."



Distinguished Flying Cross

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

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



Bronze Star Medal with "V"

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

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

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



Air Medal with "V"

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

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

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



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 Dec. 6, 1941, distinguished himself/herself by heroism, meritorious achievement or meritorious service.



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.

'The grenade is in the truck'

By LEO SHANE III

Stars and Stripes

On his MySpace page, Pfc. Ross McGinnis wrote about his "three separate lives" even though he hadn't yet reached his 20th birthday.

His first, his pre-Army days, centered on his family and friends while growing up in Pennsylvania. His second was his time stationed in Germany, where he met more friends and "my true love," his girlfriend Christina.

"My 3rd life is my army life," he wrote "Yet again another large group of friends, who are more like a bunch of brothers. The kind of brothers you can joke with and cry with. The type you can make fun of all you want, but as soon as someone else does, they are getting their ass kicked."

The self-described "skrawny white kid" posted the message shortly after deploying to Iraq for the first time. He said he expected the tour to be hard, but looked forward to getting back to all three homes.

"I just cannot wait for the day when I can connect all 3 lives into one," he wrote.

That happened less than a year later, when his family, friends and fellow soldiers gathered at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia for his funeral. His friends said McGinnis sacrificed his "three separate lives" in order to keep four of his fellow soldiers alive.

Name: Pfc. Ross McGinnis
Award: Medal of Honor
Unit: 1st Platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment
Earned: Dec. 4, 2006, Adhamiyah, Iraq



BEN MURRAY/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Ross McGinnis of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, mans his weapons in the turret of a Humvee in the Adhamiyah neighborhood of Baghdad.

McGinnis' lives intersected again last month, at a White House ceremony where the teenager was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. The event came just a few days before what would have been his 21st birthday.

Sgt. Ian Newland, one of McGinnis' first friends in the service and one of the last to see him alive, said the young soldier seemed to be friends with everyone. McGinnis was as comfortable playing with Newland's kids as he was playing poker with war-weary soldiers in Iraq.

The two men were assigned to Schweinfurt's 1st Platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, a unit deployed in summer 2006 to patrol Adhamiyah.

"It was a modern day Vietnam," Newland said. "We had ambushes on almost a daily basis. The drive-bys and hand grenades were first, and the IEDs came later on. You never let down your guard."

But McGinnis, a Humvee gunner, still had a joke ready at the end of every patrol, something to ease the tension. In late November, after his picture appeared in Stars and Stripes, McGinnis became the butt of the jokes, and was happy to play showman again for the unit.

Just a few days later, on Dec. 4, McGinnis' combat patrol was dispatched to deal with weapons smuggling and kidnappings in the area.

That morning a military police patrol had been attacked on their same route, and McGinnis' Humvee drove by the crater left by the roadside bomb in that attack improvised explosive device. As they wound through area side streets, an unidentified insurgent peered out from a nearby rooftop and lobbed a grenade at the vehicles.

Soldiers told Army investigators that McGinnis shouted a warning and tried to grab the explosive before it got into the Hum-



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army

Pfc. Ross A. McGinnis earned a Medal of Honor after sacrificing himself to save his comrades.

vee, but it bounced by him and fell onto the vehicle's radio mount.

According to service reports, none of the men inside the vehicle realized where the grenade had fallen. As he prepared to leap to safety, McGinnis realized they would not be able to unlock the heavy Humvee doors before it detonated.

When Truck Commander Sgt. 1st Class Cedric Thomas shouted for the location

of the explosive, McGinnis dropped down from his safe perch and announced, "The grenade is in the truck."

He threw his back onto the mount an instant before it exploded.

In the resulting hail of smoke and shrapnel, Newland suffered severe injuries from the shrapnel and blast wave, but survived the attack. Thomas and the other two passengers suffered minor injuries.

Investigators said McGinnis was killed instantly. Thomas told them the gunner clearly had the time and the means to get to safety, but opted instead to try to save his fellow soldiers.

Army officials said McGinnis'

"extraordinary heroism and selflessness at the cost of his own life" embody the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor.

Newland, now medically retired from the Army, said he thinks about McGinnis' sacrifice almost daily.

"It's one thing to see a car swerving off the road and push someone out of the way," he said. "It's a another to push them out of the way and stand in their place. The courage it took for him to do that..."

Just days before the attack Newland was in a nearly identical ambush, where a gre-

nade dropped through the gunner hatch and into his Humvee cab. Newland and his soldiers followed their training perfectly in that incident: The gunner yelled a warning and jumped away, and the other soldiers evacuated as quickly as possible.

It took them several seconds, too long to survive if that grenade hadn't been a dud, Newland said.

"It's one thing to see a car swerving off the road and push someone out of the way. It's a another to push them out of the way and stand in their place."

Sgt. Ian Newland
wounded during the attack that killed Pfc. Ross A. McGinnis

"We got lucky," he said. "And just a week and a half later, we have the same thing, only (McGinnis) didn't follow training. He made a decision to jump on it, to sacrifice himself."

McGinnis' family left his MySpace page up after his death as a memorial. His last login date was Dec. 1, 2006, but

friends and strangers have continued leaving messages of thanks and grief for his inspiration.

One of the most frequent posters is Newland, who says he owes every day of his life since that attack to his friend.

"I will never stop telling people why I made it out of there and what an awesome soldier, person you have been in my life Ross," he wrote in one recent post. "I think of you everyday and miss you for who you are to me and my little family. Love you, brother."

Email Leo Shane at: shanel@stripes.osd.mil.

'Shots were ringing off ... my seat'

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Master Sgt. Scott Innis knows war can be ugly. He's seen comrades killed and he's shot the enemy in the face from close range.

But he keeps going back.

With three combat deployments to Afghanistan under his belt, the Air Force combat controller often shares his war stories with newer members of his unit, the 22nd Special Tactics Squadron at McChord Air Force Base, Wash.

They always want to know, "Were you scared?" says Innis.

Everybody gets scared, he tells them. But "you don't have time to think about it. You just accept the fact 'I may get shot. I may get blown up with an [improvised explosive device], but this is the course I chose.' As soon as you accept that fact, it gets a lot easier."

The story that Innis gets asked about most these days ends with the 40-year-old native of Secaucus, N.J., receiving the Silver Star and Bronze Star with "V" device for valor during a deployment to Afghanistan from February through June 2006.

Two particular days from the deployment stand out. At the time, Innis was attached as a joint terminal attack controller to a U.S. Army Special Forces team in a heavily contested region of Afghanistan.

On March 25, the team was ambushed while trying to secure some helicopter landing zones.

The bullets and rocket-propelled grenades started flying while Innis's convoy of more than two dozen Humvees drove on a road squeezed between 10-foot-high compound walls. "Shots were ringing off the side of my seat into the vehicle," Innis

Name: Master Sgt. Scott Innis
Unit: 22nd Special Tactics Squadron, McChord Air Force Base, Wash.
Medals: Silver Star, Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: 2006, Afghanistan



Courtesy of Scott Innis

Master Sgt. Scott Innis was awarded the Silver Star for his actions during a 2006 attack in Afghanistan.

said.

Innis shot an insurgent in the face from about 80 feet away, putting his rifle down only to call in air support. Airstrikes delivered 2,000-pound bombs and rockets, leveling the compound and destroying a weapons cache.

Before the team pulled out, Sgt. 1st Class Chris Robinson was fatally shot under his body armor.

"We limped our way back," Innis said.

The team was operating out of a remote forward operating base in southern Afghanistan, living out of steel truck containers with a perimeter of razor wire and dirt security barriers. The highest point was a plywood observation tower. Two days after

the ambush, a coalition convoy on its way to the base was attacked.

Most of the 80 vehicles made it to the base. But shortly after the last one pulled in, after midnight on March 28, hell broke loose.

The base received a heavy barrage of rocket-propelled grenade, mortar, machine gun and small-arms fire from three sides.

Innis quickly scaled the observation tower, where minutes before he had left his body armor and communications gear to type up a situation report from a secure area.

"I spilled myself into the tower," Innis said. "I tried to get as flat as I could."

Bullets "were snapping past my head,"

he said. A rocket-propelled grenade that passed within a foot of the tower looked like a football with sparks as it whistled by.

At first, Innis lay on his back. After he got his radio gear together, he rolled over onto his stomach, sticking his face over two sand bags — his only buffer.

He sat up to watch for mortar fire, hitting the flashes with a laser range finder, and then quickly ducking to calculate the target with his Global Positioning System. Innis then called for close air support from A-10s, Predators, B-52 bombers and other attack aircraft. He also guided Black Hawk helicopters evacuating the wounded.

During the battle, Innis had a Predator watch the base perimeter near an area from which small-arms fire was originating. It ended up following about 12 people to a ferry crossing point at a nearby river. Innis directed a Predator Hellfire missile on them.

About an hour later a vehicle retrieved the body parts and returned to a compound "where someone we had been looking for was living," Innis said.

Innis used A-10 attack jets to secure the area before a Special Forces team cleared out the compound of enemy personnel. A large weapons cache was found, including 1,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate, which can be used to make explosives.

After the team pulled out, Innis directed more aircraft to the compound, destroying it.

By then it was 2 p.m. the next day. Innis hadn't moved from the tower.

"I wasn't tired. I was amped up," he said. "I was just going and going and going."

On the coalition side, about five were dead, another 15 wounded. Enemy losses, however, were much higher.

"During the 24-hour pitched battle, Sergeant Innis defeated the enemy through the decisive use of air power that resulted in the death or injury to over 100 insurgents," his Silver Star citation reads.

Innis is getting ready "to roll out again. We're at war right now. We're prepared," he said.

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'I am very lucky to be alive'

By CINDY FISHER
Stars and Stripes

"I couldn't believe I just survived this. It's hard to realize what things are going to be like in the future when you've lived through getting blown up twice."

Capt. Jared A. Laurin, 31, of Xenia, Ohio, admits he had a couple of lucky moments while serving as an adviser to an Iraqi infantry battalion.

But Laurin, who was based in Hit, Iraq, from January 2006 to January 2007, said the three-week period that included both close calls was particularly difficult.

It all started Sept. 23, 2006, said the infantry officer with Combat Logistics Regiment 37, 3rd Marine Logistics Group, III Marine Expeditionary Force.

Laurin, based at one of Camp Hit's forward operating bases, was with some Iraqi soldiers doing a cordon-and-search operation in the city.

Name: Capt. Jared A. Laurin
Unit: Combat Logistics Regiment 37, 3rd Marine Logistics Group
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: January 2006-January 2007, Hit, Iraq



Laurin

"I was in a vehicle that got hit with an IED that pretty much destroyed the vehicle," he said matter-of-factly. Because no one was seriously injured, they continued their mission.

Three days later, a bomb had a bigger effect on him.

The night before, Laurin had been in the city doing a night operation with an Iraqi company. He, another Marine adviser and a few Iraqi officers met at about 10 p.m. to plan the next morning's mission.

Laurin set out with the group at 5 a.m. to conduct a house-to-house census. They also were looking for bad guys on a hit list, he said.

At 11 a.m., it was time to head back to the forward operating base for a little down time and sleep.

No sooner had he reached the compound when "we took three incoming mortar

rounds," Laurin said. "I was standing there. I heard the whistle."

That whistle was the sound of an incoming 120 mm mortar — a sound he was familiar with because rounds hit near the base on a fairly regular basis.

"I was almost looking straight up," he recalled. "I remember looking up, hearing the sound and then dropping to the deck in the dirt. I knew something had hit close by."

In fact, the mortar, which has a kill radius of about 180 feet, had hit about 12 feet from him.

Another hit within the camp's perimeter. The third landed right outside.

"Most of the shrapnel went in the other direction," Laurin said.

"I am very lucky to be alive," he said.

He had shrapnel up and down his right arm and his face, and burns down his right side from being so close to the explosion. He also fractured a rib.

"I don't even know if I really heard the third one," he recalled. "I was sort of out of it. I sprinted inside of the building and fell over" in the combat operations center. There, a medical officer and a corpsman assisted him.

Less than two weeks later, he would have another brush with death.

On Oct. 8, 2006, most Marines with the

Military Transition Team convoyed to Al Asad to have the team's Humvees hardened with more armor. Capt. Robert M. Secher and another Marine remained in Hit to run a mission with the Iraqis.

On that mission, Secher was shot in the head.

Laurin remembers the convoy detouring to see Secher in the hospital and they "got to hold his hand as he passed away." On the way back to Hit, one of the vehicles hit a landmine.

"Luckily, we had just up-armored the vehicle, so no one was hurt, but the vehicle was destroyed," he said.

The next day, three more incoming rounds killed nine Iraqi soldiers and wounded 32 others.

During that year, Laurin participated in 44 combat foot patrols, 89 mounted patrols, 17 deliberate vehicle checkpoints, 11 personnel checkpoints, 15 civil affairs-sponsored operations and 11 raids in which detainees were captured, according to the citation for the Bronze Star with "V" device he received Oct. 15, 2007.

"I was a little surprised. I knew somebody was putting something in, but a Bronze Star with 'V,' I never really saw myself as receiving awards like that."

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'It was a good day for the Marines'

By JEFF SCHOGOL
Stars and Stripes

In October 2006, 1st Sgt. Paul Archie and his fellow Marines beat back a massive insurgent attack on their base north of Fallujah.

The Marines inflicted 11 casualties on the enemy and suffered two wounded, both of whom lived.

"It was a good day for the Marines," the Dallas native said.

Archie, 39, was deployed to Iraq from August 2006 to February 2007 with the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, based out of Camp Lejeune, N.C.

The day before the attack, intelligence warned Archie's commanding officer about a possible attack.

"We were ready for it," he said.

Sure enough, the next day a dump truck approached the base.

The Marines gave the truck several warnings but it kept coming, so they shot at the driver's windows.

"The driver veered off the side of the road and the truck exploded," he said.

Archie said he will never forget the sound of that explosion. He was about 300 yards away, but the explosion was so big that Archie thought the building he was in had been hit.

After the blast, insurgents opened up on the base with small-arms fire, indirect fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

While they had taken incoming fire before, the volume of fire that day was something the Marines had not yet experienced, he said.

Archie and his commanding officer ran outside to make sure everyone "fought like Marines," he said.

Thinking back on the event, Archie realized he was exposed running around the base, but that wasn't a concern at the time, he said.

"When you're in a combat situation, you are thinking about the Marines more than yourself," Archie said.

Archie went to three different posts to supervise the

Name: 1st Sgt. Paul Archie
Unit: 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: North of Fallujah, Iraq



Courtesy of Paul Archie

First Sgt. Paul Archie was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for his actions in an October 2006 firefight north of Fallujah, Iraq.

Marines, bring ammunition to Marines who needed it, and fight the enemy himself.

"I'm a rifleman just like my Marines," Archie said. "That means if they're fighting, I'm fighting right beside them."

The battle lasted for more than an hour, during which about 60 Marines fought between 20 and 30 insurgents.

After the shooting stopped, evidence was found suggest-

ing that 11 of the insurgents had been hit, Archie said.

"The blood stains tell the whole story," he said, explaining that the enemy takes their killed and wounded off the field.

While the insurgents never launched an assault of that magnitude on the base again, the Marines kept fighting just as tenaciously for their entire tour, Archie said.

"We never back down to the enemy; we bring the fight to them," Archie said.

During their time in Iraq, Archie's Marines were hit by roadside bombs about every other day.

However, the Marines kept going outside the wire, because that is what Marines are trained to do, Archie said.

"I feel a platoon or a squad of Marines can take on anybody," he said.

Now sergeant major at the Marine Corps recruiting station in Baltimore, Archie was awarded the Bronze Star with a "V" device for his time in Iraq.

To him, the medal represents all the Marines in his company.

"They deserve the award just as much as I do," Archie said.

Archie also said it is important to note the dedication that servicemembers give to their country.

He said he recently lost a friend in Afghanistan, Marine 1st Sgt. Luke J. Mercardante, 35, of Athens, Ga., who was killed April 15.

Archie said Mercardante wrote a letter home two days before he was killed that said: "Don't feel sorry for us. We're doing exactly what we want to do, which is protecting America from those who want to do harm to us."

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"I'm a rifleman just like my Marines. That means if they're fighting, I'm fighting right beside them."

1st Sgt. Paul Archie
Bronze Star with "V"

'Everything looks like slow motion'

By ASHLEY ROWLAND
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Murray Rice doesn't remember much about his first ambush — just a five-minute blur of firing his M-16 at insurgents hidden behind mounds of sand on a desert highway.

But he can vividly describe how an exploding grenade looks like an orange basketball on fire. And how a rocket-propelled grenade looks like a slow-moving boat, even as it hurtles toward you.

"I don't know why, but everything looks like slow motion coming at you," said Rice, a combat medic who on July 20, 2003,

was caught in one of the earliest roadside ambushes against American troops in Iraq.

At that point, the ambushes were still rare. In fact, Rice, then with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, thought the war was essentially over and he would be going home in a few months.

That day, he was part of a small convoy delivering \$750,000 to the mayor of Anah. The money was earmarked for police salaries, water and sewer services — money to make the city function.

Rice waited outside while a civil affairs team ate lunch, drank tea and delivered money to the mayor. They were about



Courtesy of Murray Rice

Sgt. Murray Rice, a combat medic, was awarded the Army Commendation with "V" for his actions in Iraq in 2003.

30 miles from Haditha, and out of radio range.

"We didn't have the kind of secure communication that units with more money and equipment had," Rice said. "Whatever we encountered, we have to deal with on our own."

After lunch, the three-vehicle convoy pulled onto Iraq's Highway 12. Fifteen minutes later, four insurgents — two on

each side of the road — attacked.

Rice was riding in the back of an open Humvee when the Iraqis opened fire. He kept shooting, and the convoy kept driving.

"All I know is I had three magazines changed and rotated through my weapon before I even knew I was doing it," he said. "I didn't think of anything except shooting back, because that's how they trained me."

As a combat medic, Rice's job is first to shoot during an attack and then treat the injured. It wasn't until the convoy was about three miles past the ambush site that he realized several Americans had been hit by shrapnel, though they had been able to keep shooting.

"They were the walking wounded," he said. "I actually know what white as a ghost means now."

Rice treated the soldiers, though none of their injuries was life-threatening. Three were awarded Purple Hearts, and Rice and several others were awarded the Army Commendation with "V" device.

"I didn't think I deserved it, and I still don't. I think the reason we got it was because it was the first ambush, but it became a daily activity over there," he said.

Rice, now with the 568th Medical Company at U.S. Army Garrison-Humphreys in South Korea, said he expects to return to Iraq someday. For now, his focus is training his medics for when they'll be in combat.

He says he thinks he lived through about 10 ambushes before he left Iraq in April 2004, but said he stopped counting after a while.

And each time something blew up, he said, he was afraid.

"Anybody that says they weren't scared, something's wrong with them," said Rice, who is married with three

children. "Yeah, I was scared. You don't think about it then, but when you're sitting in your safe secure zone, you just think about how lucky you are."

But every time they were attacked, his training kicked in. That training — and knowing he might have to save another soldier's life — outranked his fear, he said.

"You know their family, you know how many kids they have. You basically know what their car payment is," he said. "You can't say, 'I won't go out on this mission with them,' because if they get hurt, I'm there to plug bullet holes."

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"All I know is I had three magazines changed and rotated through my weapon before I even knew I was doing it. I didn't think of anything except shooting back, because that's how they trained me."

Staff Sgt. Murray Rice
Bronze Star with "V"

'It was swarming with the enemy'

By ERIC SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

First Lt. Colin Cremin's tour was supposed to end in April 2004. Instead, it got tougher.

He was attached to the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment through Company A, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment, 1st Armored Division.

The unit arrived in April 2003 but stayed beyond its 12-month tour as pockets of resistance mushroomed into the ongoing insurgency.

On April 17, 2004, Cremin and elements of Task Force 2-37 left Kut's Camp Delta for Najaf in a 75-vehicle convoy.

About 70 of them were the military equivalent of 18-wheel trucks hauling tanks chained to flatbeds.

The convoy was supposed to skirt the edges of Diwaniyah, a medium-sized city, but an overturned crane blocked its path.

That forced the convoy through the heart of the city around 6:30 p.m.

Downtown streets were quiet, which every seasoned soldier knows is a very bad sign.

"That's when everybody started jumping on rooftops and popping out of doors," Cremin said.

They took fire, and soldiers in the lead vehicles returned it with their own. Sgt. Jonathan Hartman, in the lead tank commander's cupola, was shot in the abdomen and dropped to the turret. He died later.

Cremin heard about the casualty over the radio and ordered the trucks from the narrow battle zone to a rally point in an open area a mile away, where Hartman could be better treated.

Rocket-propelled grenades, AK-47 rounds and anything that could be fired peppered the trucks as they moved out.

"I looked back and saw twenty to thirty tracer rounds bounce all around [Cremin] as he was out of the hatch firing his M4," said 1st Lt. Colin Welch in the after-action review of the battle.

In the gunner seat of Cremin's tank — still lashed to the back of the truck — Sgt. Shaun Ellertson fired his M-240 machine gun to clear a path to the convoy rally point.

One truck took a wrong turn at a traffic circle leading out of the battle zone. First Lt. Joe Rhyne, in a tank on the lost truck, crawled out, banged on the window while ducking bullets and got the rig turned around.

Insurgents disabled another truck, forcing its crew to flee. On the back of that truck, Staff Sgt. Kevin Morton's tank crew revved up the engine, snapped the hold-down chains and rolled out.

Although Cremin had made it to the rally point, several 18-wheelers were stuck in a standstill at the traffic circle.

Seeing the potential catastrophe, Cremin's tank crew broke chains and rumbled back into the battle zone with three other tanks led by Staff Sgt. Antonio Costa, Staff Sgt. Ronny Coleman and Staff Sgt. Jeff Yager.

Name: 1st Lt. Colin Cremin
Unit: Company A, 2nd Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment, 1st Armored Division
Medal: Silver Star; Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: Silver Star earned April 17, 2004; Bronze Star earned at Najaf, Iraq, in May 2004



COURTESY OF COLIN CREMIN

First Lt. Colin Cremin, left, and tank crew mate Sgt. Shaun Ellertson dismount after a mission in Iraq. Both would come under fire for about five hours in Diwaniyah on April 17, 2004.

Cremin rolled in over the north side of the traffic circle to reach the disabled truck.

Yager's tank mired in thick mud. Coleman stayed with Yager, leaving only Cremin and Costa's tanks to mount the counterattack.

They passed the circle and crested a bridge, then saw the disabled truck, which Cremin knew would make an impressive trophy for the insurgents.

"It was swarming with the enemy, seemingly surprised and confused that two tanks were returning," Cremin said.

While Cremin fired from the turret with his rifle, two grenades flew high over the tank.

As darkness fell, the Americans gained an advantage with their night-vision goggles.

Ellertson was able to see the building where the grenades flew from. He fired the big gun. A 120 mm tank round reduced the building to rubble.

The remaining insurgents fled.

While Cremin pulled back to wait for an order to either tow or destroy the truck, another grenade set it on fire.

Cremin would eventually call in a vehicle recovery team, which braved erratic fire to hook up the truck and tow it. Every vehicle made it out of the city, but not until after five hours of intense fighting.

Cremin and at least three others earned Silver Stars in the battle. Ellertson and Costa both earned Bronze Stars with "V" devices. The following month, Cremin also earned a Bronze Star with "V" during a battle at the Najaf cemetery.

For a long time, now-Capt. Cremin kept his Silver Star close, on his keychain. It wasn't there for show; few of the soldiers in his command at the 2nd Infantry Di-



Cremin gets together with his comrades after a mission near their base in Baghdad. From bottom left: Cpt. Roger Maynulet, Staff Sgt. James Boucher, Cremin, Staff Sgt. Dave Neuzil.

vision's 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, in South Korea have any idea that he earned it.

Cremin kept it close because it reminded him of the three men who lost their lives in Diwaniyah.

Those men were Hartman, 27; Pfc. Clayton W. Henson, 20, a gunner; and 1st Lt. Robert Henderson II, 33, a Kentucky

National Guardsman assigned to one of the trucks at Diwaniyah. Cremin also lost his friend Sgt. Michael Mitchell to an insurgent attack earlier that month.

Cremin's last words for this interview were all about his hope that their memories be honored in this story.

"Just do right by them," Cremin said.

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'They needed us and we helped them'

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The shooting star "blips" lit up the F-16's infrared targeting pod screen.

"Red-hot bullets were flying towards the friendlies," is how a pilot flying overhead would later describe the fray.

It was Feb. 1, 2007, a morning that would test, like no other, Capt. Seward Matwick's combat skills and ability to think under fire.

The Air Force Academy graduate from Peachtree, Ga., rose to the occasion.

"It was one of my biggest thrills in the jet to be able to perform under such high pressure," he said.

For heroism from the cockpit, a dizzying 60 minutes or so that "rocked" the world of suspected insurgents and saved lives of U.S. soldiers, Matwick earned the Distinguished Flying Cross.

But the 28-year-old pilot assigned to Misawa Air Base, Japan, is still getting used to the idea of joining an elite club of DFC

medal recipients that includes George H.W. Bush, John McCain, John Glenn, Jimmy Stewart and Curtis LeMay.

He humbly redirects the spotlight on to what he calls a team effort, to his wingman Capt. Brent Ritzke, and "all that went right, all the support structure, all the training."

But his vivid, heart-pounding story speaks for itself.

Matwick and Ritzke, both assigned to Misawa's 14th Fighter Squadron, were to provide close air support to a small Army special operations unit near a village south of Baghdad.

The soldiers the two assisted that day were preparing to search a house where a "high-powered meeting" was believed to be happening.

Barely had the pilots been briefed on the mission when the situation turned violent.

"This building that they're going to raid just erupts," Matwick said. "It's kind of [like] ants at an anthill that's been disrupted."

People sprinted from the house toward the village and "then the town just erupts as well" with an estimated 200 people, Matwick said.

"It could have been a peaceful rally or these guys were up to no good," he said.

Several clues that it was the latter: "They're not going to school at 6:30 in the

morning carrying man pads (rockets). I could see they were carrying something and this crowd is all shooting at this convoy we're supporting."

The Joint Terminal Air Controller on the ground told the pilots the soldiers were receiving gunfire from men running from the house across a field.

The JTAC saw them duck into another house, this one in the village.

He tried to "talk" the pilots' eyes onto the location.

The plan was to blow up the house "and everybody that's in it," Matwick said.

Here's where it got tricky.

The U.S. soldiers were about 1,000 feet from the house. A less-than-precise bomb could have killed them. The streets were "a beehive" of people. Thick clouds at 10,000 feet made for low, risky flying.

Matwick and the JTAC agreed he would drop a laser-guided 500-pound bomb.

"This is my first laser-guided bomb I had ever dropped in practice or in real life," Matwick said. "It was interesting to see whether this technology was all smoke and mirrors or whether it would actually work."

The house went up in smoke.

But Matwick and Ritzke were only getting started.

Ritzke dropped the next bomb, nailing a

truck in a field that had picked up men running from the village after the house was destroyed.

The U.S. soldiers on the ground were still taking fire, now from an open field. The pilots didn't see the shooters. Matwick and Ritzke, one after the other, strafed the field, guided to the targets by the JTAC.

Low on fuel, Matwick and Ritzke returned to Balad Air Base, north of Baghdad.

An e-mail the next morning from the JTAC tallied the battle damage. The soldiers found a huge weapons cache in the bombed-out house, in which 40 to 80 suspected insurgents were killed.

It was a sobering aftermath for the pilots, forcing them to deal with complex emotions and tough questions.

Were there women and children in the mix? Did every single person killed want to harm U.S. troops? Did their actions help the American effort in Iraq? Matwick doesn't have all the answers. But he was able to resolve any doubts.

"No one was up to good news there. That made it easier," he said. And instead of thinking on such a large scale, he boiled down the mission to this: "These Army troops, they needed us and we helped them ... That made me really proud."

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Courtesy of Seward Matwick

Capt. Seward Matwick, an F-16 fighter pilot with the 14th Fighter Squadron at Misawa Air Base, Japan, earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for a combat mission flown over Iraq in February 2007.

'Your soldiers need you'

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

From his right side or the front, Staff Sgt. Matthew Ritenour looks unscathed.

But if you stand on his left you can see scar tissue around the hole where the bullet entered his skull and two larger scars, in the shape of a cross, where the surgeon opened up his head to remove bullet and bone fragments.

"I've got a way to go but my rehab is going good," said the young soldier, who has had physical, speech, occupational and psychological therapy.

Now he's planning to rejoin his unit, Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, although his injury means he can't go back to his old job.

The 32-year-old Chicago native was shot in the head during an attack on Forward Operating Base Baylough in southern Afghanistan's mountainous Dey Chopan district on Sept. 4.

The wound left him partially paralyzed, but according to soldiers who fought alongside him that day, he continued to lead his men by manning a radio and directing fire for more than an hour. He has received the Silver Star for his deeds.

When the attack came, Ritenour was in charge of soldiers manning the "rock guard" — a pile of massive boulders, some as large as houses, overlooking a series of ridgelines, orchards and farmhouses and a small stream to the north and west of Baylough.

Pfc. Jason Byrd, 23, of Greensburg, Pa., a medic, recalled running toward the rock guard to get into a defensive position as insurgents pounded the base with rockets, mortars and heavy machine gun fire. Soldiers had to run down a staircase made of old ammunition containers that was a magnet for enemy fire, he said.

Two soldiers were shot in the wrist by a burst of enemy fire. Then Ritenour, who was checking on his soldiers, ran up the stairs and was struck by a round that penetrated his Kevlar helmet.

Byrd and another soldier dragged the NCO to cover and started treating the wound, which was bleeding heavily.

"There was a trench going across the back of his skull ... you could see shards of skull. ... It was pretty deep ... but I stopped the bleeding with a dressing," he said.

As Ritenour lay on the ground in shock, other soldiers became confused and communication began to break down. Then they heard that a friendly observation post overlooking the forward operating base was in enemy hands, Byrd said.

"I gave Ritenour the radio and said, 'Your soldiers need you.' He just snapped to it even though he was half-paralyzed and couldn't move. He had me hold the map in front of his face and started calling for fire from the mortars and calling out to the guys to see if they were OK. He was running the position like he was supposed to, even though he couldn't

Name: Staff Sgt. Matthew Ritenour
Unit: 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: Dey Chopan district, Afghanistan



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Matthew Ritenour was awarded the Silver Star for his actions during a firefight in Afghanistan.

get up and move around," he said.

Ritenour refused to be evacuated by medevac helicopter to an aid station and continued to lead the defense of the rock

"He just snapped to it even though he was half-paralyzed and couldn't move. He had me hold the map in front of his face and started calling for fire from the mortars."

cover to attack the rest of the FOB.

"But our men traded machine-gun fire with the enemy so they could get into their positions and fight," he said.

Pfc. Jason Byrd

medic describing Staff Sgt. Matthew Ritenour's actions

guard for more than an hour, until airstrikes hit the insurgents, Byrd said.

Sgt. 1st Class Russell Johnson, 32, of Cumberland, Va., said the attack on the rock guard was probably an attempt to breach the wire there and use the rocks as

It was 45 minutes before jets arrived to drop 500-pound bombs on enemy positions 500 meters from the rock guard. But some enemy fighters were as close as 75 meters and more were taking cover in a creek bed.

"Once the helicopters got there — Dutch Apaches — they were able to get closer to the FOB with rockets and 30 mm cannons. They cleared the enemy out of the creek. And that pretty much ended the battle on the north side," he said.

On the other side of the FOB, the Taliban overran an Afghan National Police observation post at the top of a nearby mountain with a clear view of the American positions.

The Taliban destroyed a Zeus anti-aircraft weapon at the outpost and captured an 82 mm recoilless rifle but the Americans responded by peppering them, from more than a kilometer away, with .50-caliber sniper fire and dropping mortar rounds on the outpost, which soon caught fire. The ANP reported four Taliban bodies in the outpost when they returned.

After he was transported to the U.S., Ritenour began a long road to recovery that enabled him to return to Germany in February to greet his unit as they returned from Afghanistan.

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'Shooting fish in a barrel'

By SEAN KIMMONS
Stars and Stripes

It sounded like a good idea on paper. U.S. soldiers and Iraqi policemen on joint boat patrols would stop bad guys smuggling weapons and personnel along the Tigris River in northern Baghdad.

But the first boat patrol for Sgt. Ken Thomas, now a staff sergeant, and his troops ended up being their last river assignment after insurgents near Falahat lined up the banks to ambush his floating convoy on Feb. 16, 2007.

Thomas, a section sergeant with Troop C, 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, received the Silver Star in August for his actions during the battle that would ensue.

Only a few minutes into the four-boat patrol, Thomas, 23, of Utopia, Texas, heard a machine gun unload on the boats from the river's shore.

Then, numerous insurgents popped out of buildings on both sides of the river and peppered the unconcealed blue boats with bullet holes.

"Bullets were everywhere. It was pretty wild," said the 1st Cavalry Division soldier, who figured there were close to 100 people firing at them. The soldiers had a gut instinct that the mission wouldn't be a quiet cruise down the river, so they brought extra ammunition. Thomas estimated that he shot off at least 570 rounds from his M-4 rifle in the firefight.

He also lit up the shores with 600 rounds from the boat's PKC machine gun after an Iraqi policeman ducked for cover when a bullet whizzed past his head, Thomas said.

"All you could hear was bullets hitting the boat," he said.

First Lt. John Dolan, Thomas' platoon leader in the lead boat, had no choice but to give the order to turn back. But it was too late for the first two boats.

While steering around, an Iraqi policeman driving Dolan's boat was fatally shot in the stomach and fell against the wheel, making the boat veer toward an island

Name: Sgt. Ken Thomas
Unit: Troop C, 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: Feb. 16, 2007, near Falahat, Iraq



U.S. Army photos by Staff Sgt. Jon Cupp

Sgt. Ken Thomas, right, a team leader with Troop C, 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, talks with Iraqis near Taji, Iraq, during a foot patrol. Thomas received the Silver Star for actions taken during an enemy ambush.

where it ran aground.

Thomas' crew in the second boat went to help but his two-engine boat lost power when bullets destroyed one of its engines. The boat also got stuck in shallow waters, forcing the six soldiers to bail out into the polluted river.

Weighed down by roughly 80 pounds of combat equipment, the soldiers struggled to swim in the murky water to another island about 50 meters away, Thomas said.

"We were gasping and breathing in that crap," he said. "It was disgusting."

Once the lighter load freed up the boat, the Iraqi policemen transported those six soldiers from the island to shore. While still under fire, they ditched the boat and

all took cover in a large hole on the 20- to 30-foot-high riverbank.

Staff Sgt. Allen Johns ordered Thomas to climb the steep, muddy riverbank and look for a way out while the rest hunkered down. As he climbed, Iraqis armed with AK-47 rifles as close as 50 feet away were taking aim and machine-gun fire continued from across the river.

"You could see them running outside their homes to shoot at us," he said. "They were shooting fish in a barrel."

At the top, Thomas saw a metal fence too high to scale. So, he pulled out wire cutters and began to cut away. What he didn't know is that power lines shot in the firefight had fallen on the fence, electrifying it. He

was also soaking wet from his unexpected swim.

"It shocked the hell out of me," he said of the fence. He ignored the painful electric jolts and hacked at the metal fence to make an exit. "I figured we better get off this bank or they're going to start firing RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]."

Thomas then pulled security as the crew made its way through the fence. The crew took cover at the closest home by kicking in its door. The Iraqi family in the home helped barricade the door while the crew gave first aid to each other.

"We were all cut up and banged up," he said.

Thomas and others headed up to the roof to pick off targets and provide security for a UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter snatching up Dolan's crew stranded on the other island.

Thomas' crew soon realized that water had fried its radios and ammunition was running low.

"We started popping smoke so someone would find us," he said.

The soldiers finally spotted an Army convoy in the neighborhood and sent runners to retrieve them. The convoy didn't have room for all of them, so Thomas, Johns and Spc. Jonathan Toth stayed behind.

Another convoy arrived later and helped the three soldiers scour the streets for the culprits. Their efforts were futile.

"There's no telling who did it," he said. "Everybody has an AK-47."

In all, 11 soldiers were wounded, one Iraqi policeman was killed and a few others were injured. Twenty-two insurgents were killed in the battle.

Thomas didn't have to man a boat crew for the rest of his 15-month deployment. The mission was given to another unit.

"We never had boats again," he said. "Our first mission was a complete disaster."



Staff Sgt. Matthew Schilling, left, and Staff Sgt. Ken Thomas, both of Troop C, 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment search an abandoned house near Taji, Iraq.

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'It really felt like a long night'

BY ALLISON BATDORFF
Stars and Stripes

Their Bradley Fighting Vehicle hit a "speed bump" in south central Ramadi and suddenly "the whole world was a cloud of sewage-type mud."

Several explosive devices were then hurled at them like "Frisbees" when they were stuck in the kill zone, said Sgt. 1st Class Jose Rodriguez.

It was for his actions on March 19, 2007, that Rodriguez was awarded the Silver Star 11 months later.

Ramadi changed drastically in those intervening months.

The "Iraqi police now run the city," Rodriguez said in a phone interview this March as his platoon readied for its return to Fort Stewart, Ga.

"All we have to do is supervise," Rodriguez said. "It's good that we got to see this side (of the war), because stuff like that is what we're here for."

That fierce Monday night a year earlier was a different story.

Two of the platoon's Bradley Fighting Vehicles were being attacked by insurgents less than 1,000 feet outside Forward Operating Base Hawas in the maze of south central Ramadi's streets and alleys.

Pinned by enemy fire, the Bradleys were also penned in with roadside bombs they called "speed bumps," said Rodriguez, a 28-year-old native of Los Angeles.

And when Rodriguez's Bradley rushed out of the base to aid the others, it hit a

Name: Sgt. 1st Class Jose Rodriguez
Unit: 3rd Battalion, 69th Armor Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: March 19, 2007, Ramadi, Iraq



Courtesy of Sgt. Michael Connors

Gen. Richard Cody, the Army's vice chief of staff, presents Sgt. 1st Class Jose Rodriguez with the Silver Star.

speed bump as well, a cloud of foul-smelling mud engulfed the vehicle, he said.

"The bomb caught the engine on fire, which started smoldering," Rodriguez said. "I saw my gunner was OK, but the

driver was coughing."

Rodriguez was able to drag the driver out of the smoky compartment to safety.

"I told him that 'everything would be all right' and he said he was good — he

just couldn't catch his breath," Rodriguez recalled.

Bullets pinged the Bradley for the next 90 minutes as all vehicles outside the forward operating base took and returned small-arms fire. Another Bradley attempted to rescue the soldiers but was hit by a roadside bomb as well.

That meant two Bradleys were down and two were "boxed in" by roadside bombs, Rodriguez said.

They were still under fire when the recovery vehicle attempted to bump their Bradley out of the kill zone, Rodriguez said. But as he helped from outside the vehicle, Rodriguez saw enemy approaching through the smoke and dust, he said.

He opened fire with his M-16 rifle. When he stopped, eight enemy combatants were dead. It was over.

"They finally pulled us back to safety and then we collapsed," Rodriguez said. "That was a long night that night ... it really felt like a long night."

There were no major U.S. casualties that night, Rodriguez said.

As for the people he killed, Rodriguez said it "was a matter of self-defense" for him and his guys.

"You have to look out for each other, and you have to look out for yourself," Rodriguez said.

"That's the way I see it ... it might not be the same for everyone else."

This was Rodriguez's second deployment to Iraq. Receiving the Silver Star this time around makes him "proud," but many deserve awards for their time in Iraq, he said.

"A lot of people should have received similar or better awards than mine," Rodriguez said. "I was just the one who got written up."

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'We train and train and train for this'

BY CINDY FISHER
Stars and Stripes

The 80 pounds of protective gear weighing down the Marines — in a vehicle with no air conditioning — made a hot day even hotter in Fallujah, Iraq.

Master Gunnery Sgt. Michael C. Sharp describes the heat on May 30, 2006, as "dog-gone hot."

To top it off, he hadn't had his morning coffee and by the end of the day, he had "a screaming headache."

Still, Sharp was in a good mood that Tuesday. He was out of his Fallujah office and on a call with his explosive ordnance disposal Marines of 3rd Platoon.

Before the day ended, Sharp's actions — those he took that day, and later during his unit's tour — in disarming enemy ordnance would bring him a Bronze Star with a "V" device.

He dismisses the award, saying he was "kind of unhappy about it" because he was

just following his training and being part of a team.

The platoon, part of Okinawa, Japan-based 9th Engineer Support Battalion, deployed to Fallujah in April 2006 for 11 months to augment an EOD unit within the California-based I Marine Expeditionary Force.

Once in country though, Sharp, 43, from Eldorado, Texas, was assigned a desk job while his platoon continued the task of disabling homemade explosives.

Sharp was not happy to be stuck "doing strictly office work. No one volunteers to become EOD to man a desk," the 25-year veteran said.

"I tried to seek sanity from I MEF by going out with my guys," Sharp said. It was something he did whenever he could to support his Marines "and show them I care."



Sharp

Sharp's EOD team stayed busy, getting 10 to 12 calls a day. "I knew I would get to go on a call with my guys," he said of the May 30 mission.

This time, they were responding to a call about a possible improvised explosive device on a street curb in the outskirts of Fallujah, near a hospital.

"It was just a regular IED call," Sharp said.

There were fields to the left and residences to the right at the location, he remembers.

Their disabling protocols require that the suspected explosive be viewed and disabled by remote technology, Sharp said, but "eventually, someone has to go out and be hands-on."

As the senior man in the vehicle, he felt responsible to do what was potentially the most hazardous part of the call — collecting the explosive, and hoping it had been disabled.

Walking up to the bomb, he remembers, "there were kids out watching us and that's what I was most concerned about — could these children be a threat to the team."

But he had a job to do.

"We were sure as you can be by looking remotely that it was clear," he said. "By the time you get out of the vehicle, you should be pretty sure that you're just going out to collect evidence."

This time, he said, "it just happened" that it wasn't disabled.

"Oh crap," was the first thought that went through his mind, he said.

Then he performed immediate action, which for an EOD Marine doesn't mean getting out of the potential blast zone. It means moving in close and disabling the bomb.

"We train and train and train for this" and the training just kicked in, he said.

After that episode, Sharp was transferred back down to lead his platoon. During his tenure, his unit disabled more than 1,650 IEDs, captured 105 weapons caches and disposed of more than 14,360 unexploded ordnance and 25,000 small-arms rounds, according to the citation accompanying his medal, awarded Aug. 3, 2007.

Sharp said his actions on May 30 were more about the EOD team he was with. It was a fluke that he was even with them that day, he added.

"The day of the award, I could have picked out at least five guys who rated the award much more than I did," he said. "They did some miraculous stuff every day."

"Putting hands on a live IED doesn't make you a hero," Sharp said. "It's the least preferred thing to do" and maybe even foolhardy, he said.

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'It's not about awards'

By JEFF SCHOGOL
Stars and Stripes

In his Silver Star citation, Marine 2nd Lt. Brian M. Stann is praised for his "zealous initiative, courageous actions and exceptional presence of mind" during seven days of fighting in Iraq.

But Stann, now a captain, is not into fame or self aggrandizement.

"It's not about awards, especially when you're out there," said Stann, 27. "It's about defeating the enemy and getting your boys out alive."

Stann was born at Yokota Air Base in Japan and then moved to Scranton, Pa.

From May 8 to May 14, 2005, Stann was part of Operation Matador with 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines.

Name: 2nd Lt. Brian M. Stann
Unit: 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: May 8 to 14, 2005, Karbala, Iraq

The action started when Stann's platoon was given about 35 minutes' notice that it needed to head to the Ramana Bridge, north of Karbala, he said.

Another unit was supposed to provide a blocking position at the bridge, but when they couldn't make it on time, Stann's platoon was sent to fill the gap.

As it turned out, a lot of the enemy had settled in that area.

Stann said his platoon was engaged in a "constant gunfight" until it was relieved, and then he and his Marines had to fight their way back to base.

The worst fighting was May 10, when his platoon was sent back to the bridge to stay and got ambushed on the way, he said.

The insurgents hit Stann's platoon with roadside bombs, rocket-propelled grenades and suicide car bombs, destroying a Humvee and a tank recovery vehicle that

was hauling wounded, he said.

"We had a rough night."

Stann's Silver Star citation briefly summarizes his actions during the ambush.

"Second Lieutenant Stann personally directed two casualty operations, three vehicle recovery operations and multiple close air support missions under enemy small arms, machine gun and mortar fire in his 360-degree fight," the citation said.

But Stann didn't want to get into specifics about what he did during the fighting.

"Everyone has done some courageous things," he said. "It's just part of our calling. It's part of our job."

Instead, Stann preferred to talk about his Marines.

Despite the casualties and carnage, they did not panic, he said. They kept their heads, beat back the enemy and evacuated their wounded.

"Because of that, the casualties that we did take did survive," Stann said. "Guys that lost limbs lived. Guys that took shrapnel and things of that nature to the head lived, and they wouldn't have lived if we hadn't have done that."

Throughout their deployment, Stann's Marines focused on their job, whether it meant sleeping in their Humvees on hot nights or manning a machine gun at 2 a.m., he said.

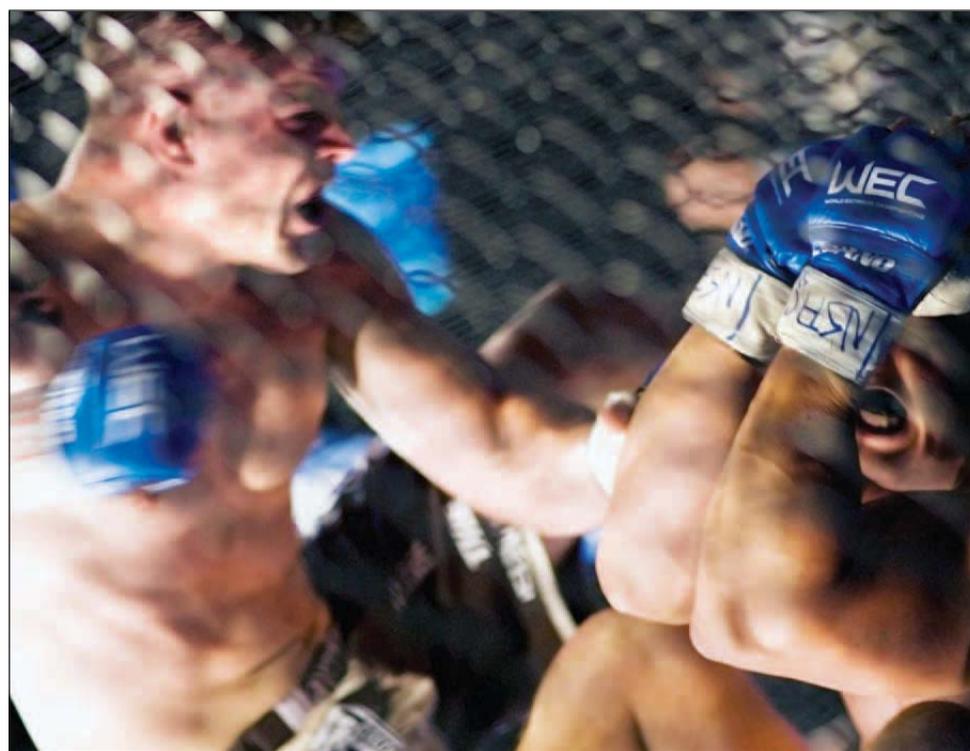
Stann said his Silver Star represents what the Marines under his command accomplished.

"They executed flawlessly, and we're talking 19- to 20-year-old kids, and these are tougher situations than 90 percent of Americans will face," he said.

Stan says he also tries to represent all



Stann



Courtesy photo

Brian Stann delivers the ground and pound to Jeremiah Billington during World Extreme Cagefighting 30 at Hard Rock Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Stann, a Marine first lieutenant, has a short but impressive mixed-martial-arts career where he holds the WEC record for fastest knockout.

the Marines who have fought with him in his other profession: World Extreme Cagefighting.

He said he started cagefighting professionally after his first deployment in Iraq, and got a shot at the title after winning all of his fights in 2007.

In late March, Stann won the light heavyweight title when he beat the reigning champion in 1 minute, 35 seconds.

Stann said he approaches cagefighting the same way he does combat: He figures

out how to leverage his strengths against his enemy's weaknesses.

He also said his combat experience has made him mentally prepared for bouts.

Some people panic when they start taking hits in the cage.

Not Marines.

"If we have to keep taking it on the chin and keep coming back harder, that's what we'll do," he said.

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'You're not thinking about you'

By ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

By the time Chief Warrant Officer 3 Richard Chenault and his Apache helicopter arrived, the patch of nowhere below him had already been hit hard.

Army Rangers and a host of others in a daring air assault had seen to it that the terrorist training camp in the remote western desert near Syria wouldn't be doing much business.

The few enemies who remained on June 12, 2003, had little, but they did have the element of surprise — and it was enough to put up a fight.

Chenault, a veteran of Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, and three other two-man Apache crews from the 3rd Battalion of the 101st Aviation Regiment were sent to fly security detail over the site.

It was a typically hot day, Chenault recalls, when the Apache crews saw a white pickup truck driving toward them in the dust below.

Eight men popped out of the truck and fired a volley of rocket-propelled grenades, striking the Apache flown by Chenault's company commander.

The volley disabled the helicopter's flight controls. The two-man crew crashed within 100 yards of the enemy fighters.

The grenades kept coming at Chenault, now the mission commander.

"At that point, you're not thinking about you," Chenault said. "You're worried about the two guys on the ground going through a little bit of suffering after getting shot

Name: Chief Warrant Officer 3 Richard Chenault
Unit: 3rd Battalion, 101st Aviation Regiment, 101st Airborne Division
Medal: Bronze Star with Valor
Earned: Western Iraq, June 12, 2003



Courtesy photo

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Richard Chenault, left, hangs out with then-1st Lt. Scott McCraney while serving in Iraq in 2003.

down."

As long as the downed pilots were so close to the enemy, firing a Hellfire missile in their vicinity was risky.

Meanwhile, Chenault's Apache got hit. He lost his utility hydraulics system and access to his 30 mm gun.

It got worse for his wingman. A round ripped through the armored plate of Chief Warrant Officer 2 Paul Larson's seat and gashed open his back. They were 100 miles from base and they had minimal first aid.

"It wasn't life-threatening, but in the air you don't know exactly how bad he's shot," Chenault said. "You just know he's bleeding."

With three Apaches beaten up, the fight would go on for 20 minutes. Despite crippled weapons functions, Chenault

and the other pilots seized the fight after the downed pilots made it clear of their helicopter.

"You do it like old-school Hueys and Cobra [helicopters]," Chenault said. "Put crosshairs on the windscreen and shoot the thing ... and as you're making your break, you have zero protection whatsoever."

Nevertheless, Chenault says he felt very prepared and comfortable shooting rockets that way.

The three helicopters' tactics took out the enemy fighters. Ground soldiers brought back the downed pilots.

One of those pilots says he'll forever be grateful to Chenault for his performance.

"CW4 Chenault is by far the most dedicated Warfighter that I have had the pleasure to work with in over 17 years of military service," wrote Maj. Michael Williams in an e-mail. "His unwavering commitment to his tactical and technical expertise is surpassed by none. If it were not for his valiant actions ... I would not be here today to endorse his heroic deeds."

Chenault flew along with Larson to a hospital, where Larson would receive 38 stitches. Larson would get back in the air after a one-month recovery.

"The first thing when you see someone bleeding is, 'Oh my God, what did we just go through?' Then reality sets in," said Chenault, now Chief Warrant Officer 4 of headquarters company, 2nd Combat Aviation Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division at Camp Humphreys, South Korea.

"There we were again in another serious firefight ... even though we were shot, we felt very fortunate that eight guys were still alive. Any time an airplane goes down, there's a reasonable chance of losing somebody."

Chenault would face more firefights during his 12-month tour, but none as fierce as that day in June, he said.

Out of the 24 aircraft in Chenault's unit, 22 came back from the deployment. Three pilots were wounded, but all survived.

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'I wanted to make myself a target'

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Jon Hilliard lay sprawled atop the burning Stryker.

A buried bomb had ripped through his unit's vehicle during a clearing mission in Baqouba. The force of the blast shot Hilliard some six feet into the air, tearing ligaments in his left leg. Smoke poured into the troop compartment below, where his injured 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment soldiers were in need of medical help.

Hilliard had a choice.

He was alone and unprotected on top of that Stryker. Immediately after the explosion, machine-gun fire ricocheted around him. An ambush was under way. It all happened in a flash.

A decision had to be made fast: Take cover or stand up and fight.

But Hilliard insists: "There was no choice."

"I wanted to make myself a target. My biggest fear was soldiers getting hurt during the evacuation," said Hilliard, 26.

Left without his weapon after the explosion, Hilliard spotted an M240 machine gun wrapped up in cammo netting. He used his knife to cut it loose. Then he stood up and aimed at the direction of the ambush.

"Rounds were hitting all over the Stryk-

Name: Staff Sgt. Jon Hilliard
Unit: 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: March 24, 2007, Baqouba, Iraq



Staff Sgt. Jon Hilliard receives the Silver Star for his actions on March 24, 2007, during a route-clearing mission in Baqouba, Iraq.

Photo courtesy of Michael Marker

er," said Hilliard, of Winlock, Wash., who served as a squad leader with the Fort Lewis, Wash.-based 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division.

Hilliard wanted to provide cover and

draw attention away from the injured soldiers being evacuated. That meant exposing himself to the return fire.

For about three minutes, Hilliard fired at the insurgents, which allowed seven of

the injured to be pulled to safety.

After the wounded were evacuated, Hilliard climbed down from the Stryker to take control of his squad. The fighting continued for about another 20 minutes, he said.

At one point, he crossed a clearing to retrieve a weapon, which meant coming under fire once again.

"Some asshole fired an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) at me. It landed about 10 meters away," he said.

Hilliard says he wasn't frightened during the fight. Just angry. Two of his soldiers lost legs because of that bomb.

"I've been in quite a few battles. The combat thing doesn't shock me or scare me," he said. "Every day you get tested. There is no common enemy. You don't know who the enemy is. It's like being blind. But my biggest fear was losing one of my guys."

In February, Hilliard was awarded the Silver Star for his actions on March 24, 2007.

Hilliard's "bravery in the face of fire, tireless efforts and selfless service were instrumental in the successful recovery and evacuation of men, weapons and equipment, as well as the destruction of numerous [enemy forces]," according to a brigade account of Hilliard's valor. "His actions and his demeanor were truly inspirational to those present throughout these actions."

But like so many others, Hilliard recoils from being called a hero.

"I was just doing what any NCO would do for his men," he said.

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'They had set up a complex ambush'

By CHARLIE REED
Stars and Stripes

As a combat engineer halfway through his second tour in Iraq last spring, Army Staff Sgt. Norman Inch II spent thousands of hours conducting routine route-clearance missions through the desert.

The job that requires soldiers to expect the unexpected.

Inch had just been promoted to sergeant with the 111th Sapper Company, 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Infantry Division out of Fort Riley, Kan. It was his first mission as a truck commander that day in March when he and his crew rolled out from Forward Operating Base Marez.

Name: Staff Sgt. Norman Inch
Unit: 111th Sapper Company, 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Infantry Division
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: March 17, 2007, Mosul, Iraq



Army Staff Sgt. Norman Inch, right, with another soldier at Forward Operating Base Marez in Mosul, Iraq, last year.

Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Norman Inch

reputation and the empty street erupted with a fiery and piercing blast.

"My platoon sergeant was in front of me and I saw him swerve to the right to go around a big blast hole already in the middle of the road," he said. "That's when four homemade propane tank bombs exploded under his truck and threw it 10, 15 feet in the air."

His instincts and training took charge and thrust the young noncommissioned officer into action, which ultimately saved the lives of four soldiers and earned him the Silver Star.

The explosion ripped off the gunner's turret and front of the truck, leaving the

rest of the mangled vehicle face down in the ground at a 45-degree angle, Inch said.

Instead of waiting for a Buffalo, a heavily armored truck with a robotic arm used to handle roadside bombs, Inch enlisted the help of three Special Forces soldiers who were riding along with him that day to clear the truck.

"When we get blown up, we're supposed to wait for the Buffalo. But I knew with the severity of the damage that we needed to do something. I didn't know if everybody was dead or how bad they were injured," he said.

As soon as Inch and the men dismounted, a barrage of small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades began raining down from what seemed like every direction.

"They had set up a complex ambush on us. They had planned it out and had everything in place so that, once they struck us, they could hit us hard. ... But we didn't know that until we got on the ground."

While the remaining 12 troops in the convoy set up a perimeter around the scene and began laying suppressive fire against an estimated 30 insurgents, Inch held the 300-pound door of the disabled vehicle open with his back while the wounded were extracted.

Inch and his partner had only removed two of the men when the attack got so bad they were forced to start fighting back with the other soldiers. Eventually back-up ar-

rived and the unit gained fire superiority, allowing Inch to carry on rescuing the victims from the blown-up truck.

The battle raged for about an hour "but it felt like forever," Inch said.

The wounded soldiers survived though one is now paralyzed, one broke his back and another broke his arm, he said. Inch was credited with seven of the 17 confirmed kills that day. No other serious casualties resulted from the fight.

Inch said he has been involved in at least 20 intense battles similar to the one that day in Mosul.

"It's not that you're not thinking, but it's more reaction. It's like muscle memory. You're trained to do something so you know how to respond when something happens," said Inch, now assigned to the 65th Engineer Battalion, 25th Infantry Division at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii.

"I didn't really want the Silver Star. I wanted my soldiers to have awards because if it wasn't for them none of us would've made it out," he said.

"Don't get me wrong, I was very honored. I don't want to sound like a jackass. But at the same time I thought my soldiers deserved high awards as well."

"I was just doing my job."

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"It's not that you're not thinking, but it's more reaction. It's like muscle memory. You're trained to do something so you know how to respond when something happens."

Staff Sgt. Norman Inch
Silver Star



BEHIND EVERY MEDAL, A TALE OF VALOR.

It's the courage and commitment of those who serve in our armed forces that keep our nation safe and free. At Boeing, we are honored to support and salute them.



Seaman Brendan McGuire took this self-portrait during a mission in Anbar province, Iraq, in 2005.



Photos courtesy of Brendan McGuire

'Total disregard for his own safety'

BY ALLISON BATDORFF
Stars and Stripes

Seaman Brendan McGuire's story might be told best starting from the present and working back.

Today the corpsman works in U.S. Naval Hospital Yokosuka's patient care ward. He's tall, freckled, has pale blue eyes and stands ramrod straight. The 30-year-old hails from Manalapan, N.J. This year he was awarded the Navy Achievement Medal with "V" for Valor for his deployment to Iraq in 2005.

Recent kidding with a co-worker about his award weighs heavily on his mind, he said.

"I told him I got it for decorating for the Navy Ball because there were poisonous spinning tarantulas in the room," McGuire said. "I didn't mean to joke about it."

He recognizes this as an avoidance tactic — a way to get out of telling and retelling the story behind the "V."

McGuire actually has three stories — there are three valorous acts noted in his commendation. But going backward in time means starting with the worst, as Mc-

Name: Seaman Brendan McGuire
Unit: Individual Augmentee Hospital Corpsman assigned to 3rd Platoon, Company L, 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines
Medal: Navy Achievement Medal with "V"
Earned: March 11 to Sept. 20, 2005, in Anbar, Iraq (three citations)



McGuire stands by the Haditha Dam in Anbar province, Iraq, in 2005.

Guire witnessed one of the war's deadliest attacks on U.S. forces about six weeks before he finished his six-month deployment.

On Aug. 3, 2005, an amphibious assault vehicle full of U.S. Marines was hit by a roadside bomb in Barwana, Iraq.

Fourteen people were killed in the attack — most from the Ohio-based 3rd Battalion, 25th Marines, which lost 23 servicemembers in this single, deadly week.

McGuire was one of the first people on the scene. His gaze is steady when he talks about it, but all he'll say about what he found there is that "it was everything I expected in a major incident."

"It was dramatic," he said. "To say anything else would be too morbid."

According to McGuire's commendation, the corpsman ran to the burning AAV

"with total disregard for his own safety" as ammunition "cooked off around him." Looking for survivors, McGuire spotted a single Marine crawling from the wreckage, pulled him to safety and "provided immediate medical care." The Marine was the only survivor of the attack.

"There was only one person we could help," McGuire said. "I figured I'd deal with the emotions later, and deal with what is in front of me now. I was so focused on what I was doing that it surprised me to hear later that the ammo was going off."

McGuire had braved bullets before. On May 8 of that year, he went under fire to aid six Marines wounded during a clearing operation in New Ubadyi. The injuries weren't too serious, demurs McGuire — shrapnel in feet and forearms — and all the servicemembers recovered.

And on April 28 — six weeks after McGuire arrived in Iraq — he was walking through palm groves with Marines when he treated his first gunshot wound, he said. But this time, it was Iraqi civilians who were hurt.

"A car rolled up and an Iraqi man jumped out. He had blood on him. I was asking, 'Is that guy shot? Is that guy shot?'" McGuire said.

They were out in the open and "it wasn't safe," so the troops moved the injured man to a house and started treating him, Mc-

Guire said. Three other Iraqi civilians had been injured in a firefight between Marines and insurgents, and McGuire treated them all. Their injuries didn't appear to be life-threatening, he said.

Though he never found out what happened to his patients, he was told that everyone "was going to be all right," McGuire said.

Almost three years later, McGuire found out he'd received a commendation for those three events. It is an "honor," he said.

Today, Iraq is a different place, McGuire said. That's his disclaimer to his fellow corpsmen who ask his advice before their own deployments. Then McGuire tells them to start working in the

emergency room and get into shape.

"The situation changes so quickly in Iraq," McGuire said. "I can just tell them a couple of things."

And while McGuire hasn't had nightmares, the experience has stayed with him. Initially, it was a fear of crowds, McGuire said, but now, it's a frustration with military people who forget about the big picture.

"Some people can't see beyond their careers," he said. "They forget that this job is about going into harm's way to protect the country. That it means potentially getting killed. It all has to be about defending the country — and that is the reward."

"There was only one person we could help. I figured I'd deal with the emotions later, and deal with what is in front of me now."

Seaman Brendan McGuire
Navy Achievement Medal with "V"

'40 ... got to go home that day'

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

It was only 36 seconds. They were seconds that held the fate of perhaps three dozen lives.

And they were seconds that Special Agent Gregory A. Carmack can't erase from his memory of war, where as the triggerman, he had only 36 seconds to stop an apparent suicide car bomber.

Carmack received the Bronze Star with "V" device on Sept. 13, 2007. The 16-year Air Force veteran's heroics came more than a year earlier.

On June 14, 2006, Carmack was sent to capture or kill two Iraqi policemen who were suspected terrorists working a roadside checkpoint outside Kirkuk Air Base, Iraq.

Carmack's armored Suburban was leading a convoy of three vehicles carrying six Air Force special agents. In the early afternoon, Carmack's group met up with an Army convoy of nine Humvees.

The Army blocked the road on either end with help from an Iraqi police cordon to stop traffic while the soldiers and OSI agents disembarked from their vehicles to discuss mission details.

After the soldiers returned to their Humvees, Carmack was still briefing two of his agents while standing on the side of the road away from traffic.

"I heard a gunshot and looked through the window of the vehicle I was standing next to," he said. "I saw an Iraqi policeman with his pistol up in the air. Within a second or two, a little white truck ran him over and he went flying."

Training and "gut instinct" took over. Carmack stepped to the front of the vehicle and, from across the engine block, starting shooting at the driver, who was fast approaching from about 20 feet away.

Carmack fired three rounds from his M-4 rifle before the truck flew past Carmack, headed toward the parked Army Humvees. The other convoy members had taken

Name: Special Agent Gregory A. Carmack
Current unit: Air Force Office of Special Investigations, Detachment 601
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: June 14, 2006, near Kirkuk, Iraq



Courtesy of Gregory A. Carmack

Air Force Special Agent Gregory A. Carmack is pictured in Iraq in 2006. Carmack was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for heroism during his 2006 deployment.

cover; only Carmack had a clear shot at the attacker, according to Air Force officials.

"As he passed, I took up a kneeling position, rotated, fired another seven rounds, four of which almost 100 percent [certainty] hit him," Carmack said.

The truck rammed into the back of one of the Army escort vehicles directly in front of Carmack, with the driver slumped over in the cab.

The entire sequence lasted 36 seconds.

It wasn't over yet.

An explosives ordnance disposal team dispatched a bomb-dismantling robot to examine the truck. Two 130 mm cannon

shells were found rigged to the passenger floorboard, ready to explode. EOD deemed the only safe solution was to detonate the vehicle with the driver, who was believed dead, inside.

But, about 30 minutes after the truck came to a stop, the driver suddenly burst from the vehicle.

"He stumbled around, he fell to his knees, he made a motion the Army felt was aggressive," Carmack said. "The Army finished him off."

In the end, EOD could not determine why the cannon shells didn't explode. Was it "fate? Luck? Did I shoot him before he

could detonate?" Carmack said.

"In the end, they ended up crediting my actions for the truck not exploding," he said. "Based on the explosives and how close they were, EOD told me that if at any time the vehicle had detonated, I'd be dead."

Though people tell him he's a hero, Carmack, 35, says "any one of the guys I was with, if they were in my shoes, they would have done the same thing. The only thing I feel good about is ... 40 men and women got to go home that day."

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'I just wanted to get my crew out'

By STEVE MRAZ
Stars and Stripes

It was just past midnight on June 1, 2007, in Mosul, Iraq, when a roadside bomb struck one of the convoy's scout vehicles.

At the rear of the 90-plus vehicle convoy, Spc. James Peterman readied himself behind a .50-caliber machine gun in a Humvee turret. Buildings two- to four-stories tall lined both sides of the road.

Name: Spc. James Peterman
Unit: 66th Transportation Company
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: June 1, 2007, Mosul, Iraq



Courtesy photo

Spc. James Peterman earned a Bronze Star with "V" in Iraq.

terman would be awarded the Bronze Star with "V" device.

As a wrecker made its way forward to recover the downed scout vehicle, the front half of the convoy started taking small-

arms fire. Soon afterward, insurgents were spotted near the rear of the convoy.

"A guy jumped over the wall and was making his way over to a wrecker vehicle," said Peterman, 23, of San Antonio. "My [truck commander] told me to turn and fire, so I did. Then we started taking heavy small arms from all over the place, some mortar fire and some RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) as well."

From about 30 feet away, Peterman eliminated the man who had jumped the wall and began firing at insurgents everywhere he could. Soldiers estimated that a platoon-sized group attacked the convoy.

Peterman's .50-cal barked out rounds toward fighters atop a building at his 8 o'clock position and others firing from his 5 o'clock and 3 o'clock positions.

"At one point, I ran out of ammo so I took my M-16 and started laying suppressive fire," Peterman said.

Peterman's truck commander, Staff Sgt. Alberto Green, retrieved more rounds for the .50-cal, but as Peterman reloaded the heavy machine gun, enemy fire grazed his left shoulder. Body armor prevented him

from being injured.

"I wasn't even fazed by it," Peterman said. "I continued firing. I kept having Kiowas (helicopters) come in and attack whatever positions I could light up for them."

Peterman spotted an insurgent with an RPG launcher on a rooftop and contacted air support. The Texan used suppressive fire to mark the spot where the enemy was. A Hellfire missile from a Kiowa took care of the RPG threat.

"Specialist Peterman was in the last vehicle, getting hit the hardest by small-arms fire," said 1st Lt. Brett Dunning, who was there for the ambush and now serves as 66th Transportation Company's executive officer.

Eventually, the convoy was able to move out, but Peterman's Humvee was taking fire as it left the "kill zone."

During the firefight, Peterman said he thought of his crew.

"I was just trying to get my crew out of there," he said. "I could really care less happened to me during that firefight. I just wanted to get my crew out."

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From left, a Peshmerga fighter, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Tony Lopez, Staff Sgt. Malcolm Jennings and Sgt. 1st Class Chris Crum advance on Sargot in March 2003. They later exposed themselves to enemy sniper fire in a successful bid to take an area held by extremists.



TIME MAGAZINE/Courtesy of Malcolm Jennings

'Cooperation is very satisfying'

By ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

It's a good thing the Ansar-al-Islam snipers weren't just a little better.

On March 28, 2003, a bullet whizzed by Staff Sgt. Malcolm Jennings' head and struck a rock close enough to send jagged shards into his face.

Jennings got low.

He looked over at the penny loafers, the baggy khakis and the granite eyes of the 14-year-old Kurdish Peshmerga fighter guiding him through the mountains. The boy's glance needed no translation.

Dude, I told you so.

"From there on, we maneuvered in a more stealthful fashion," said Jennings, then a communications specialist with 3rd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group.

To a degree, getting shot at had been part of the plan.

Jennings' team moved out with the Peshmergas at 5:30 a.m. for an assault on Ansar-al-Islam-held territory around Sargot, Iraq, a mountain town along the Iranian border.

Jennings and other soldiers began climbing with 90 pounds or so on their backs. The stone mountain with sparse vegetation provided little cover to hide from snipers and others firing crew-served weapons.

Sgt. 1st Class Chris Crum made short work of many of them with his sniper rifle at the outset, Jennings said.

Name: Staff Sgt. Malcolm Jennings
Unit: 3rd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: March 28, 2003, near Sargot, Iraq



Courtesy of Malcolm Jennings

Staff Sgt. Malcolm Jennings shows off his explosive smile in Iraq in 2003.

But by 3 p.m., no one could get a fix on the rest of the snipers' locations. If the U.S. forces wanted to find them, they would have to draw the snipers out.

Jennings went one way around the exposed mountain peak and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Tony Lopez went the other way.

The snipers found them — and by doing so, revealed their positions.

"I know what it's like to look at a guy

through a scope and I know how hard it is to shoot from [that far] away," Jennings said. "When you know ... you have a better sense of the risk you're taking. On an emotional level, I didn't feel that I was taking any unnecessary risk."

Jennings then called for indirect fire, something Special Forces soldiers rarely were in a position to do before that time.

It was a gratifying moment for him. He

began his career as an artilleryman and remembered how his comrades sometimes felt unappreciated by the front-line infantry.

"There's something about an indirect fire measure," Jennings said. "The cooperation is very satisfying when it works."

Mortars picked off the enemy positions and allowed Jennings' team and the local fighters alongside them to advance.

By the next day, they secured Sargot and its outlying regions.

They found weapons, ammunition, training materials and anti-American propaganda in some of the buildings formerly held by Ansar-al-Islam.

"It was pretty obvious that their mission in life was to hurt as many Americans as possible. So there was some satisfaction," said Jennings, now a chief warrant officer 2 and Chinook helicopter pilot for Company C, 3-2 General Support Aviation Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division at Camp Humphreys, South Korea.

Like many who deploy, Jennings had glossed over the riskier aspects of his assignment.

Whenever his wife, Anna, asked him about his job, he'd make it sound more like he was working a mundane desk job.

Shortly after the fight at Sargot, he spoke to Anna.

So, you're on "administrative duties?" she asked.

Anna then asked if he'd seen the April 7 issue of Time magazine. It had a picture of him, Lopez and Crum from the battle.

"She was pretty cool about it," Jennings said. "I think she was kind of proud of what me and my team were doing."

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Photos courtesy of Ross Pixler

First Lt. Ross Pixler, left, led his men on patrol Oct. 30, 2007, in Salman Pak, just south of Baghdad. Pixler's actions during an attack on his convoy that day earned him the Silver Star.

'Little time for feeling emotions'

BY GEOFF ZIEZULEWICZ
Stars and Stripes

It seemed a day like any other during their 15-month deployment when 1st Lt. Ross Pixler led his men out on patrol in Salman Pak, just south of Baghdad.

But an attack on his convoy on that day, Oct. 30, 2007, earned Pixler the Silver Star earlier this year. The attack also cost his company the lives of Sgt. Daniel McCall, Pfc. Rush Jenkins and Pvt. Cody Carver.

"On a personal level, receiving the Silver Star is difficult," Pixler said in an e-mail, unable to be reached by phone as his deployment neared its end in April. "The award serves as a constant reminder of what happened and those incredible individuals who are no longer with us."

One bit of personal acclaim cannot begin to compensate for so much loss, he said.

"I would give up the Silver Star in an instant if I could make that day never happen."

Pixler, 25, of Phoenix, was in the lead Bradley Fighting Vehicle of a four-vehicle

convoy on a patrol in Salman Pak's al Bawi area.

Suddenly, a roadside bomb — "the largest anyone had ever seen," he said — hit Pixler's Bradley.

The force of the blast pushed the up-armored floor of the Bradley into the passenger compartment, killing McCall, Jenkins and Carver, Pixler said.

With their weapons and helmets destroyed in the blast, the remaining soldiers in the hit Bradley got out to assess the scene.

Before they knew it they were being attacked from a farm to the west, said Pixler, of Company A, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division.

As the remaining three vehicles returned fire, Pixler, now suffering from a concussion and other injuries, directed

air support against the suspected enemy positions.

Later, while evacuating in another Bradley, that vehicle was hit by a "secondary, catastrophic" roadside bomb, Pixler said.

With that vehicle rendered immobile, Pixler and his men got out and were soon under attack again.

During four hours of securing both bomb sites and waiting for reinforcements and evacuation teams, the soldiers repulsed numerous enemy attacks.

Besides symptoms of traumatic brain injury, Pixler said he's all healed from the battle.

During the attacks, Pixler said he doesn't remember feeling much of anything. The training kicked in, and it was about survival.

"We have been attacked so many times and in every instance, our training takes over and every Soldier does what he is supposed to do and what he has been trained to do," Pixler wrote in an e-mail. "There is very little time for feeling emotions."

Pixler and his sergeants kept the other soldiers away from the spot where McCall, Jenkins and Carver had fallen.

"After we determined the three soldiers were dead, we did not allow anyone to go over and look at the scene," he said, add-

ing that the enormity of those hours only caught up to him during breaks in the fighting. "I do not know if it was due to the concussion or if it was from the emotions, but I do remember at one point during a lull in the fighting, throwing up while waiting for the support to arrive."

Pixler was sent to the hospital in Balad. His father, a civilian reconstruction official, visited him.

Doctors wanted him to undergo further head injury testing, but Pixler said he insisted on returning to his outpost for the memorial ceremony for his guys.

The events of Oct. 30 were "one of many attacks we have experienced," he said, adding that his units have found or been hit by nearly 70 roadside bombs while being engaged by enemy forces hundreds of times.

The improvements now being seen on the ground in Salman Pak are a testament to the sacrifices of men like McCall, Jenkins and Carver, he said.

"You need to understand that I serve as a platoon leader for some of the greatest heroes that our great country has to offer," Pixler said.

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Name: 1st Lt. Ross Pixler
Unit: 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: Oct. 30 2007, Salman Pak, Iraq



Pixler's company lost three men during the Oct. 30 action.

'The loudest thing I've ever heard'

By MATT MILLHAM
Stars and Stripes

In May 2007, Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment patrolled Adhamiyah, a Sunni enclave in northeast Baghdad that was arguably the most dangerous neighborhood in Iraq. No battalion has seen more soldiers fall in a single deployment since Vietnam, and Charlie, with 13 lost, was the hardest-hit company in the battalion.

When Charlie was pulled from Adhamiyah a few months later, it was replaced with an entire battalion augmented by a company and specialty platoons.

The following is excerpted from interviews with three Charlie Company members about an attack that was, nine months into the deployment, the worst the unit had faced. Spc. Jarrod Taylor and Staff Sgt. Octavio Nuñez were awarded the Silver Star. First Lt. Matthew Martinez was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with "V" device. Four other soldiers in the attack also earned the Bronze Stars with "V" for their actions; another three earned Army Commendation Medals with "V" device.

Nuñez: May 14. It was the first patrol. I believe we left around 10 in the morning.

Taylor: It was in Adhamiyah — northeast Baghdad.

Nuñez: Right near Abu Hanifa Mosque where all the (expletive) always happened. We're driving from west to east, south of the mosque.

Martinez: That was around midday that it happened, around 13-1400. An IED (improvised explosive device) went off in front of my truck — between my truck and the lead vehicle.

Nuñez: All I saw was something red and shiny shoot across in front of us. There was no damage, nothing. We called it up and kept rolling.

Martinez: We were going to take another little side road, and as soon as we pulled up on the road, everybody started running.

Nuñez: You could tell it was an ambush coming. You just know something bad is going to happen. It's hard to explain. You gotta be there.

Martinez: So we turned the convoy around, and as usual I took lead as soon as we got contact so I could be up front and see what was happening.

Nuñez: I was in the first truck with the LT (Martinez). (Staff Sgt. Juan) Campos was second, (Sgt. Oscar Gonzalez) "Gonzo" was third and (Staff Sgt. Christopher) Cunningham was last. There were five guys in



Courtesy of Jarrod Taylor

Spc. Jarrod Taylor takes aim with his squad automatic weapon while on patrol in Adhamiya, a Sunni enclave in northeast Baghdad. Taylor and Staff Sgt. Octavio Nuñez (pictured below), a fellow member of 3rd Platoon, Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, earned the Silver Star for their actions following a roadside bomb attack that killed two and severely wounded three others.

our truck including the terp — interpreter — five in the second, three in the third and five guys in the last truck.

Taylor: I was in the last truck. We only rolled four trucks deep that day.

Martinez: We went down a different street.

Nuñez: It looked pretty normal. I remember this because we stopped right at the intersection. (Spc. Michael) Alexander was driving, and he stopped to ask the LT which way to go — straight, right or left. The LT told him to go straight. And he takes off slow. We ran over the IED. I don't know why they didn't hit us. I remember hearing the thunk, like a grenade; it wasn't even that loud. I remember I told the gunner (Staff Sgt. Jeremiah Grubb), "Grubb, hey, look back, make sure everybody's

good." He looks back, and then he's like, "Second vehicle got hit — it's on fire!" As soon as he said that, I opened the door and I jumped out and I ran toward it.

Martinez: It just got the right spot on the truck, ignited the fuel tank and just went off.

Taylor: Sergeant Cunningham yelled, "Get out." (Pfc. Sean) Cousino grabbed the fire extinguisher.

Nuñez: I'm talking the whole Humvee was on fire, like fire coming out of the doors, through the turret, the hood — that was blown open, flames.

Martinez: It was the loudest thing I've ever heard in my life. That was our heavy truck. It had extra grenades, extra ammunition. Out of any of the trucks, it was the worst one to have been hit.

Nuñez: So I run and I stop real close to the fire. And out of the fire, Sgt. (Terry) Fleming came out. Just like in a movie. He was running, on fire and screaming, "I'm on fire! I'm burning!" I thought about jumping on him and putting out the fire with my hands. But I see him and I'm like, "I'm going to mess him up, because his face, his hands, everything's on fire."

Martinez: Cousino and Doc Flowers — Sgt. (Robbie) Flowers — ran by the truck before the flames got too big and were working on our side with (Pfc. Omar) Avila for the most part.

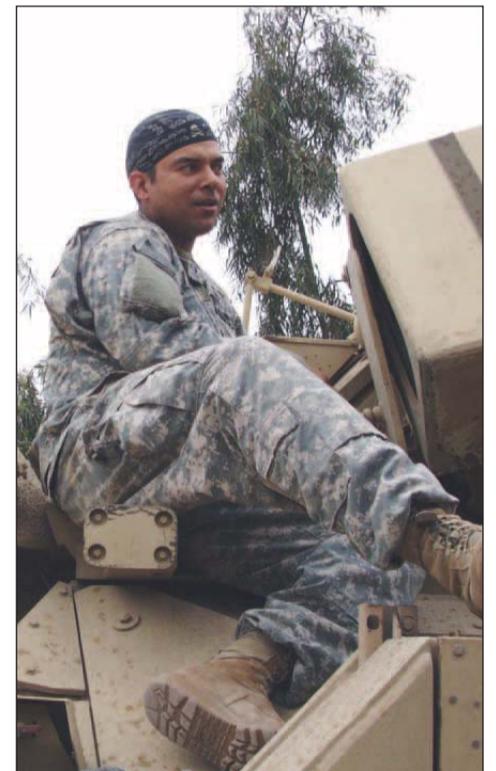
Nuñez: Cousino told me he saw Fleming running, and he went after him.

Martinez: Alexander ran up with the fire extinguisher and helped put Sgt. Fleming out.

Nuñez: Cousino did the right thing, though. When he was running, he looked down and saw Avila on the ground on fire. Avila looked at him, like, calm, and said, "Put me out, man." He saved Avila's life.

Martinez: Then I grabbed Fleming and carried him back to the first vehicle and put him in my seat. It turned bad really quick.

Martinez: I mean, the burns were all over



Courtesy photo



Courtesy of Jarrod Taylor

A view of Abu Hanifa Mosque, as seen from the turret of a Humvee. The mosque — "where all the (expletive) always happened," according to Staff Sgt. Octavio Nuñez — is in Adhamiya, a Sunni enclave in northeast Baghdad.

his body. And his face was charred, like, gray. I'm sending up the report to say what his status is, and I see he's going into shock. His equipment was still kind of smoldering. And I didn't even think about it when I threw him in. I just wanted to get him away from the fire, away from the rounds going off all around us. He had a vest that went over his body armor. Normally, you could open it with the Velcro, but it had a zipper that ran from the bottom of the vest to the top, and that whole zipper melted together and wouldn't move.

Nuñez: I run back to the Humvee again, and I'm closer now, and I see Avila on the ground, like, 5 feet from the Humvee, just sitting.



Photos courtesy of Jarrod Taylor

The Scallywags of 3rd Platoon, Company C, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, pose at Forward Operating Base Apache — also known as Gunner Palace — in northeast Baghdad in 2007.

Martinez: He climbed up out of the gunner's hatch and then jumped off and broke his legs when he jumped off.

Nuñez: He wasn't on fire; he was just smoking. He's a big guy. He was, like, 240 pounds. I dragged him out and I was looking for somewhere safe to put him to protect him from all the explosions going off.

Taylor: I took a round in the side plate from the ammo cooking off. They were going all over the place.

Nuñez: We were taking fire, too. I didn't focus on that. My focus was just on the guys. There were two helicopters that were flying by. It was a — I don't know — act of God that he decided to send those two helicopters and provide us with cover. They were hovering right above us. What they say they saw was 40, 50 dudes with RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) and AKs running toward the smoke because of the fire. So they were coming to finish us off.

Martinez: Avila was really bad. He's looking directly at me. I can see the fear in his eyes, and he's saying, "Sir, am I gonna die?" I told him, "No, you're gonna make it." It looks like his nose is gone. His whole face is charred to a crisp. He tried to sit up and both his legs just opened up and, like, bone was sticking out and blood was pouring everywhere. And I was like, "Don't move your legs. I have the medic here with you. He's gonna take care of you."

Nuñez: When I put him in the Humvee, I didn't know he had broken legs. So I'm like, "All right man, you're gonna have to take the pain." He looks at me and just nods. So I pick him up, and he holds onto me a little and stands up, and I go to push him into the Humvee and he falls. He says, "Oh, my legs are broken, sergeant," but not, like, in pain; he just says it. So I got him in, and then I went back to the fire, but I couldn't see anyone else. We were stuck, pretty much.

Nuñez: LT sent the medic with Fleming and Avila. Alexander was driving. He was brand new to the platoon, so he didn't know



Spc. Nicholas S. Hartge died in a May 14, 2007, roadside bomb attack that turned the Humvee in which he was riding into an inferno.

the area. Avila had to pretty much guide him back. ... The rest of us did a linkup — went through the neighborhood on foot, and linked up with the other Humvees.

Taylor: I was on the other side of it. I couldn't see what was going on over there; he couldn't see what was going on over here.

Taylor: When I ran up there, (Pfc. Andrew) Catterton had nothing on — no shirt, nothing from the bottom up. His hands were extremely burned. He said, "Help me, help me, I've been hit." I pointed at him, I said "Go — go sit in my seat. Go!" You could tell he was scared out of his mind — for good reason. And I turned around and Sgt. (Chad) Chalfant was putting Campos out. He was so close to the Humvee. I said, "We need to get him away

"I burned my hands because he was that hot."

Spc. Jarrod Taylor,
trying to rescue injured
Staff Sgt. Juan Francisco Campos

from here." So me and Sergeant Gonzo are pulling him away, and I burned my hands because he was that hot.

Taylor: We get a spine board, and we're trying to load him in the truck. The doors have a little belt that keeps it so it can't swing all the way open. The helicopter is right on top of us. (Pvt. Naryan) Curtis was shooting at something. Rodriguez just got done shooting at something. And I'm putting Campos in and you can't fit the spine board in there. I said "[Expletive] the spine board, we're just puttin' him in like this." Campos was yelling, in a lot of pain. He wanted me to cut his belt off, so I cut it and ripped it off. I kept talking to him, telling him, like, "We're goin' back. We're goin' back home." He was tellin' me on the way back, saying, "I'm burning, I'm burning." He's smoking still at the time. I'm like, "What do you want me to do?" I tried to cut off his IBA, but still couldn't get it off. His pants were burnt off.

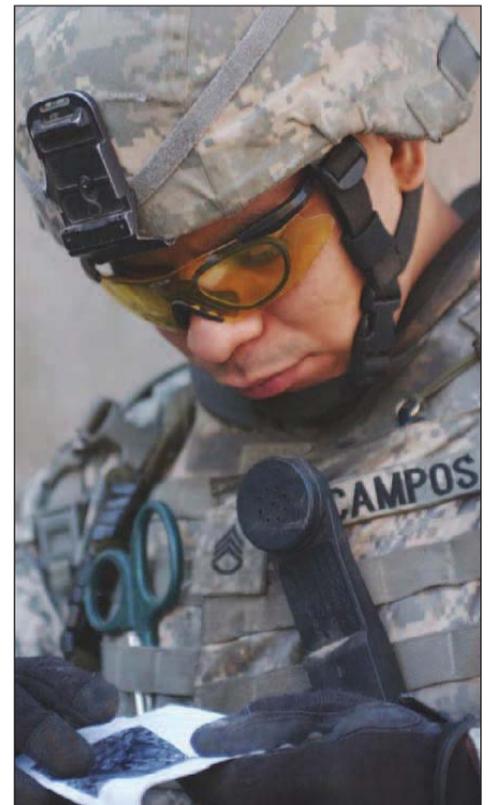
Nuñez: He didn't look like Sgt. Campos.

Taylor: Yeah. He didn't. He didn't make it. He died June 1 back in his home state.

Nuñez: I wanted to get (Pfc. Nicholas) Hartge from the fire because that's my soldier right there. Chalfant said, "There's somebody right there," and he points, and I look and I can barely see him in the fire. And I see the body. I knew it was him because of the red hair.

Taylor: Hartge — you couldn't get to him. It was too — the fire was too hot.

Nuñez: For the longest time I thought he, he suffered a lot, you know, because the way he was on the ground. My dreams and



Staff Sgt. Juan Francisco Campos was mortally wounded in the blast. He died June 1, 2007, at Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, where he was treated for severe burns.

nightmares were that he was crawling and just died asking for help.

Martinez: The blast was immediately behind Hartge's feet.

Nuñez: I wrote his mom, and she told me — they told her that he didn't inhale any smoke or any of that. He died on impact. He didn't suffer.

Nuñez: If anybody should get an award, it should be them.

'They would have had us dead'

By TERI WEAVER
Stars and Stripes

When you ask Sgt. 1st Class Sean Bennett about his Silver Star, this is what he will tell you:

Capt. Brian Freeman was a big, good-looking guy from California. He went to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and made the Army's bobsledding team. First Lt. Jake Frist, another West Pointer, was a great, great officer.

Spc. Johnathan B. Chism went by his middle name, Bryan, something Bennett had learned back when he was the young soldier's drill sergeant in basic training. Pvt. Johnathan Millican — he was the scrappy guy in the unit.

And Pfc. Shawn Falter? "He was me 10 years earlier," Bennett said. "A little smart-ass, a good kid."

Bennett, 33, of Elgin, Okla., enlisted 14 years ago because he was looking for friendship. He wanted to work with people who had the same focus and the same goals. He wanted his work to have a purpose.

"I found one," he said in March, more than a year after he and others from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, lost Frist, Chism, Millican and Falter. Also lost was Freeman, a reservist from the 412th Civil Affairs Battalion out of Whitehall, Ohio.

It was a little before sunset that day, Jan. 20, 2007, and prayers were echoing across Karbala, Iraq. Bennett was one of about three dozen U.S. soldiers who worked and lived at the city's Provincial Joint Coordination Center, a government repository that is part city hall, part 911 center, part police station.



Courtesy of the U.S. Army

Sgt. 1st Class Sean Bennett of the 377th Parachute Field Artillery Regiment receives congratulations for his Silver Star.

Bennett and four others were in the communications room that Saturday. Millican was using a Web camera to talk with his wife.

"Out of nowhere, they stormed the place," Bennett remembered.

The attackers, some of whom were dressed in military uniforms, took over Humvees parked at the center, aimed a .50-caliber gun at the buildings and sent "flaming beer cans" through the walls, Bennett said. They cut the electricity and began to attack the buildings on foot.

Bennett and four other soldiers — Staff Sgt. Billy Wallace, Staff Sgt. Jesse Hernandez, Spc. Johnny Washburn and Millican — were caught in the comms room.

Bennett first went for a grenade, but then realized he didn't have time. Instead, he and Wallace slammed themselves against the opening door, but they were seconds too late.

The attacker managed to wedge a rifle nose through a crack in the door and sprayed the room with bullets. Bennett grabbed the muzzle and tried to fight back.

Then, a concussion grenade bounced in. A minute later, Millican was dead and

three of the four soldiers trapped in the comms room were wounded. They waited for the door to open.

But for some reason, the attack stopped. Nobody looked in to check for survivors. "They would have had us dead," Bennett said.

Bennett used a satellite phone to call for air support. As they waited, Bennett started an intravenous drip on Hernandez and dressed Wallace's shrapnel wounds. Then somebody noticed a tear in Bennett's black fleece top. A bullet had taken off a piece of his left bicep and broken his arm.

"I didn't know it for 20 minutes," he said. "It's one of those strange things."

Iraqi police eventually found Freeman, Chism, Frist and Falter among a group of abandoned sport utility vehicles on a deserted road, according to a July article in Time magazine.

Some had been pulled from a room right next to the comms room. They had been kidnapped, handcuffed and shot multiple times, Time reported. They were left for dead.

Fourteen months later, Bennett's arm has full mobility, but the artillery gunnery sergeant has been reclassified since he lost some power in his left side. He's waiting to hear about his next job.

But he knows what he wants. He wants to work in a Warrior Transition Unit to help with outpatient care for wounded service-members at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Bennett said a lot of the soldiers assigned to WTUs are like him, combat wounded. "I've been through the system myself," he said. "I know what they need."

At Bennett's Silver Star ceremony, Wallace wrapped him in a bear hug. "He definitely saved lives that day," Wallace said at the ceremony.

When you ask Bennett about his Silver Star, this is what he will tell you: "I lost some awesome guys that day."

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'It felt like my whole body was paralyzed'

By KENT HARRIS
Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Kyle Dirkintis didn't deploy to Afghanistan looking to get into a firefight.

The 24-year-old from Racine, Wis., had certainly prepared for the aftermath of one, though.

When he deployed to Afghanistan in May 2007, it was the first time he'd been assigned to a combat tour. But he'd spent most of his 4½-year Army career training as a medic. A member of the 173rd Brigade Support Battalion, he was assigned to provide support for Company C from the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment.

"I know that they were involved in some fights during their last deployment here," Dirkintis said of the previous stint by the Sky Soldiers in 2005-06. But life was pretty quiet at the Ranch House — a few scattered buildings on a mountain ridge surrounded by concertina wire — until Aug. 22.

Dirkintis awoke to the sound of gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades. He and the other soldiers in their makeshift barracks quickly donned their gear and rushed



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army

Sgt. Kyle Dirkintis earned a Bronze Star while deployed with the 173rd Brigade Support Battalion (Airborne), to Jalalabad Airfield in Afghanistan.

outside.

A group of insurgents had managed to get inside the wire and were threatening to overrun the compound, which was manned by only about two dozen U.S. soldiers and about as many Afghan National Army

troops and private security guards.

"My role as a medic was basically to stay at the aid station or casualty collection point," he said. But after treating one soldier hit by shrapnel in the face he realized that other casualties wouldn't be making their way to him. He'd have to go to them.

He and Staff Sgt. Eric Phillips tried to make their way to an outpost along the perimeter where a soldier had been shot in the leg. But they came under intense fire on the way and stopped at a building. Phillips told Dirkintis to hold his position and watch for enemy movements while he moved around the side of the building. Dirkintis started to trade fire with the enemy and was almost immediately hit.

Phillips noticed Dirkintis was bleeding and told him they had to get him to a place where he could receive aid. Dirkintis couldn't do that, though.

"It felt like my whole body was paralyzed," he said. "And my whole lower body was numb." He'd find out later that a bullet went in through his shoulder, pierced a lung — narrowly missing his heart — and bore back out through his body. Phillips dragged him to safety.

Dirkintis, who would eventually receive the Bronze Star with "V" device, was able to give some advice to those treating him while he and the others waited for medical evacuation.

He said he and soldiers from the company had practiced life-saving techniques repeatedly during their down time. They

put them to good use until the battle largely came to a close with the arrival of Air Force A-10s that sent enemy forces looking for cover.

Dirkintis and the other wounded were evacuated by helicopter. He passed through Bagram before spending less than two weeks at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany.

"They told me when I arrived I'd be there for five or six weeks," he said. "But I guess I heal quick."

After spending a few more weeks at his home base in Bamberg, Germany, Dirkintis got a chance to see his family in the States. He then volunteered to return to Afghanistan and resume his duties as a medic. He now works in the clinic at the brigade's main compound.

Maj. David Hamilton, Dirkintis' company commander, said he serves as an example for all the other medics in his unit.

"He was wounded while attempting to take care of his soldiers, which is one of the highest honors you can have for a medic," Hamilton said.

Hamilton said he's sure the near-fatal wound gives his soldier a new perspective as well.

"He was a good medic before this," he said. "But he definitely looks at things from a different viewpoint. He was able to see things from a litter perspective."

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'We out-gunned them'

By **TERI WEAVER**
Stars and Stripes

Master Sgt. Thomas Ballard walked through the battlefield near Najaf just after daybreak. That morning, Jan. 29, 2007, he could barely take three steps through the farmland without bumping up against a body. Around him, 368 people lay dead. Another 407 people were detained, and it seemed like all of them had pieces of shrapnel in them.

Ballard, a paratrooper from the 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division, walked among some of the bodies, over weapons "littered like leaves," and past a downed U.S. Army helicopter. He began to understand the previous 24 hours, including the three hours that he and 11 others on his team held their ground.

He went toward the village. Twenty-four hours earlier, initial reports had said 15 or 20 shooters were firing at the Iraqi army's 1st Brigade, 8th Division. Instead, Ballard and other coalition forces had discovered they were up against hundreds of shooters

Name: Master Sgt. Thomas Ballard
Unit: Military Transition Team 0810, 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division
Medal: Silver Star
Earned: Jan. 28 and 29, 2007, near Najaf, Iraq

aiming from well-planned fortifications.

It had started about midday the day before. A group of Iraqi soldiers were taking fire in a field north of Najaf, and 10 had been killed. Ballard and other members of Military Transition Team 0810 were nearing the field to assist when they saw an AH-64 Apache falling from the sky.

The group, led by Lt. Col. Stephen Hughes and Maj. John Reed, went for the crash site.

The group's three trucks started taking machine-gun and rocket-propelled grenade fire. Ballard's truck moved closest to the Apache. The enemy was headed in the same direction, piled in pickup trucks.

"We had to go see if anyone was there," Ballard, 41, of Aberdeen, Miss., said of the crash site. "After circling around, (we saw) there wasn't anything left. There was some things left, but it wasn't nice."

The three trucks stopped to mount a fight and protect the remains of the two pilots and the Apache.

By luck, they had more ammo than they thought they would ever need. They had loaded the trucks with thousands of rounds for a planned training with Iraqi forces



Ballard

that day. Turns out, they went through it all, more than 14,000 rounds.

For the next three hours, Ballard, Hughes, Reed and nine other soldiers blasted the enemy. When a shooter popped up, the U.S. soldiers would pick him off.

"We out-shot them and we out-gunned them," Ballard said. And they kept anyone from getting to the pilots in the Apache. "That was our happiest moment, when we kept them from getting our guys."

Help came in ripples throughout the day. The Air Force hit from above. An Iraqi special forces unit pulled up. And by nightfall, the 4th Brigade's Stryker Battalion was in place.

"That got their attention," Ballard said. By then, the MITT was out of ammo. They went to a nearby base for supplies and a nap. When they returned the next morning, the battlefield had been secured. That's what Ballard was looking at on Jan. 29 — the aftermath. The New York Times reported it was one of the bloodiest battles in the war's first four years.

By noon, the Stryker battalion and most other U.S. units had returned to base. It was up to Ballard, Hughes, Reed and nine other soldiers, along with their Iraqi counterparts, to start cleaning up and processing the detainees.

Among those hundreds of detainees, a young Iraqi girl insisted on speaking with an interpreter.

"She was a beautiful girl, distraught-looking," Ballard remembered. "She was stepping around these bodies and most of them she knew and she was very upset.

And very brave."

She led them to a house, half-collapsed, and into a bedroom. At the girl's direction, Ballard and the others moved a bed, a carpet, square-foot floor tiles, another carpet and a grate. Ballard found himself looking into a hole.

The battlefield wasn't cleared.

"Sure enough there was some people in there," Ballard said.

Inside that hole were four leaders of the group called Soldiers of Heaven, a Sunni group hoping to disrupt an annual Shiite pilgrimage to nearby Karbala.

The soldiers re-searched the area and found two more high-ranking leaders outside. The house itself held a safe with millions of dollars, boxes of cell phones, 20 passports, cameras and all sorts of weapons, Ballard said.

"This was a no-kidding unit," he said.

The MITT spent the next week helping the Iraqis process the detainees.

The entire team would be honored with the Army Commendation Medal with Valor. Hughes and Reed each got a Bronze Star. Ballard received a Silver Star.

"It gives you mixed emotions, being singled out," he said. "I'm an infantry guy. Maj. John Reed is an infantry guy. But my team was made up of all different types of people. We're all fighters, but different specialties. The team supported me. It'd been a lot better had we all been standing there."

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'Immediately went in and got everybody'

By **JIMMY NORRIS**
Stars and Stripes

After a few quiet weeks in Karbala, Iraq, then-Pfc. Matthew Bratton wasn't expecting to end up in a firefight, much less lose friends.

Bratton, now a sergeant, said the 194th Military Police Company team he belonged to was supposed to spend a slow night manning radios at an Iraqi police compound Oct. 16, 2003.

But just as they were getting ready to begin their shift, they heard the distress call over the radio: "We're taking fire! We need assistance!"

A group of insurgents manning an illegal checkpoint had ambushed a squad of military police from Bratton's company.

Bratton — now assigned to the 142nd Military Police Company, 19th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) in South Korea — said he and his team rushed to their Humvees and sped off to the aid of their comrades.

"We immediately went in and got everybody," Bratton said. "We didn't wait to make a plan. We just went in and laid down suppressive fire."

Bratton said the ambush raged just a few blocks from the police compound and he wasted no time getting to the fight. He was driving so fast, he said, that the vehicle went up on two wheels at one point.

"It would have been something cool to see in a movie, but I didn't even pay attention," Bratton said.

Within minutes his team's three Humvees arrived at a scene Bratton described

Name: Pfc. Matthew Bratton
Unit: 194th Military Police Company
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: Oct. 16, 2003 in Karbala, Iraq



Courtesy of Matthew Bratton

Sgt. Matthew Bratton earned a Bronze Star with "V" while deployed to Iraq with the 194th Military Police Company.

as "mayhem." Insurgents poured fire onto the ambush site from all directions, and his fellow soldiers had already taken three or four casualties.

The soldiers loaded the wounded into a Humvee, which raced back toward the compound. Bratton steered his own vehicle next to another Humvee and hurriedly exited the passenger door.

The first thing he spotted was a group of

men standing in an alleyway, but he wasn't sure if they were insurgents. They answered that question for him with a burst of automatic gunfire.

He returned fire until he emptied an entire magazine; the gunfire from the alley ceased.

Rounds continued to pepper the ground near him, but Bratton said the alleys and streets were covered by his teammates

and he wasn't sure where the fire was coming from.

A moment later, he glanced up and spotted three or four men firing down into the street below from a three-story building.

"I started firing controlled bursts at these men," Bratton said. "One of my tracer rounds stopped on a man's chest. It burned out on his chest, then he fell forward, all the way down into the street. I remember being satisfied; 'That's what you get, mother [expletive]'; I yelled."

Bratton said he wasn't sure what his unit would do — whether they would stay and fight their way through the insurgents, or evacuate the rest of the wounded and leave. His first sergeant eventually screamed "Get them out of here," Bratton said of the wounded.

Bratton said three fellow military policemen were killed that night, and he believes more would have died if his team had not moved so quickly.

After the attack, he said, his unit had a hard time adjusting to the loss.

"It was pretty rough for a few days," he said. "We hadn't lost anybody at all before [that night]. It was hard to let people go."

Bratton was awarded a Bronze Star with "V" device for his actions. He said he was one of seven or eight from his team to receive the award. He said three to four others received Army Commendation medals with "V."

Since then, he's learned to take being called a hero in stride.

"I've been told since that night that I was a hero — exposing myself to enemy fire, eliminating enemy targets, helping evacuate the wounded," he said. "I did what I was trained to do, and what my gut instincts told me to do; eliminate the threat from my fellow comrades. I did the right thing in the right situation. If that makes me a hero, well, that's just fine with me."

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'Red mist and dust everywhere'

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

Red mist and dust filled the air in an Iraqi shop where Staff Sgt. Frederick Rowell and his weapons squad took cover from enemy fire in southern Baghdad on Sept. 11, 2007.

The soldier with Company E, 2nd Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment had been blown off his feet by an explosion. Deafened by the blast, he struggled to his feet and tried to figure out what had happened.

Hours earlier, Rowell and his men set out on a routine foot patrol out of Combat Outpost Blackfoot in Baghdad's Hadar neighborhood, at the time one of al-Qaida in Iraq's last strongholds in the Iraqi capital.

But the Eagle Company soldiers soon found themselves on a stakeout, occupying two observation posts hidden in abandoned Iraqi homes, Rowell, 29, of Pensacola, Fla., recalled.

"We could overlook this main road and see trucks convoy in with people and boxes and stuff and come out with nothing," he said.

The soldiers from Rowell's squad set up their outpost early in the morning on the roof of a building, then moved inside after sunup, he said.

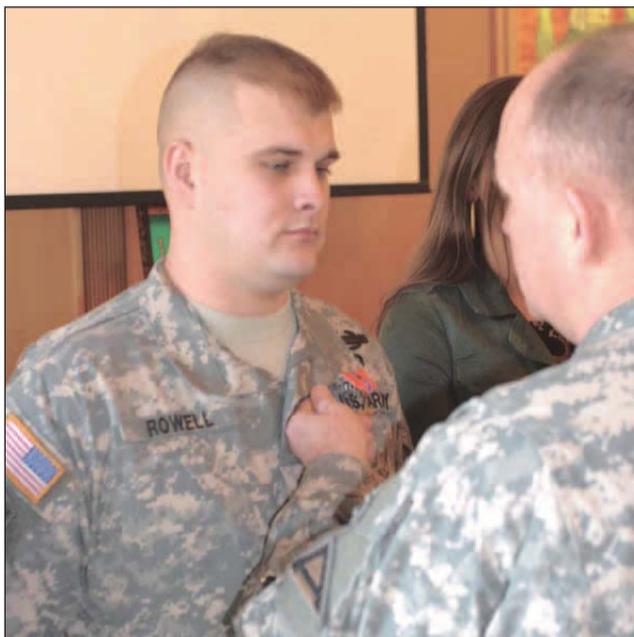
"Our mission was not to be seen, just observe," he said.

As a protective measure, the soldiers barricaded the door of a downstairs shop, something that Rowell believes may have given away their position to insurgents.

"Around 10 a.m. a guy on another roof started shooting at my 240 (machine gun) gunner. We returned fire and killed the shooter. Then OP 1 (the other observation post) described three men with AK-47s southeast of us in an ally but they couldn't engage," Rowell said.

Soon his squad was taking fire from all directions. A

Name: Staff Sgt. Frederick Rowell
Unit: Company E, 2nd Squadron, 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: Sept. 11, 2007, Baghdad



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

Joint Multinational Training Command chief Brig. Gen. David R. Hogg presents Staff Sgt. Frederick Rowell with a Bronze Star with "V" in Vilseck, Germany.

decision was made to move all of the soldiers to OP 1, he said.

The squad threw out a smoke grenade to obscure their movement and prepared to exit the building. But as the first soldier stepped through the door there was a mighty crack.

Pfc. Jonathan Pruziner had stepped on a plastic bottle full of homemade explosives placed in the doorway. The blast blew him into the street and severed his leg.

Meanwhile, Rowell, deafened by the explosion, tried to work out what happened.

"I thought it was an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade]. I woke up on my back and there was red mist and dust everywhere. I couldn't hear to save my life and it was so dusty I couldn't see in the street," he said.

Enemy gunfire targeted the doorway but Rowell ran through it and dragged Pruziner back inside to a medic, then went back out and recovered the man's missing leg.

Third Platoon leader 1st Lt. Christopher Turner called for Apache attack helicopters to fire missiles on the enemy positions.

Rowell used another smoke grenade to mark his position as friendly while the rest of the squad laid down suppressing fire.

Soon, a quick-reaction force of Stryker armored personnel carriers showed up. Rowell ran into the street again and showed the vehicle gunners where the enemy was firing from. He got one of the Strykers to pull up to the building where his squad was so Pruziner could be evacuated to a combat hospital.

On the way back to the hospital, Rowell manned a roof gun in one of the Strykers and fired on the enemy.

During a ceremony in Vilseck last month, Rowell received a Bronze Star with "V" device his actions in the battle. It was his second valor award. He received a Silver Star after being shot several times during the battle to secure Baghdad International Airport in 2003.

Brig. Gen. David R. Hogg, chief of Joint Multinational Training Command, who presented the medal, praised Rowell, who "moved out under fire, took charge of the situation and organized the evacuation of his soldiers," he said.

In accepting his Bronze Star, Rowell — who is recovering at the Vilseck Warrior Transition Unit and fighting to stay in the Army despite long-term injuries sustained during the battle in Baghdad — was humble.

"Everybody does the same thing I did. I've seen it a million times. I've seen a civilian do it in combat. The other guys who were with me that day deserve it as much as me," he said.

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'Never taught me to fight a battle with a cell phone'

By **VINCE LITTLE**
Stars and Stripes

The grim scene looked like something out of a movie — only this fight was all too real.

Deadly rocket-propelled grenades and mortars blasted all around as machine-gun and AK-47 fire whizzed overhead and pinged off armored Humvees. Burning vehicles littered the road and debris was everywhere.

The heat and dust merely added to the misery.

Staff Sgt. Jason Moyer, attached to the 25th Infantry Division's 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team but assigned as a liaison officer to Iraq's 3rd Special Police

Name: Sgt. 1st Class Jason Moyer
Unit: 293rd Military Police Company, 3rd Military Police Battalion (Provisional), 3rd Infantry Division
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: Nov. 14, 2004, Mosul, Iraq



Moyer Courtesy of Jason Moyer

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Moyer earned the Bronze Star with "V" in Iraq.

vice for valor.

Conditions in northern Iraq were at a boiling point in mid-November 2004.

Three days earlier, terrorist fighters overran much of Mosul. About 3,200 of the city's 4,000 police officers abandoned their posts, leaving five stations empty.

The 1st Iraqi Special Police Commando Brigade's 3rd Battalion deployed from Baghdad to reinforce Mosul.

On Nov. 14, 2004, casualties mounted as Moyer and the second reaction force fought their way toward the Four West po-

lice station. He soon discovered he was the team's lone communications link. Using only a cell phone, he called in and directed multiple airstrikes — all while repeatedly exposed to enemy fire.

"It wasn't that I was scared because I was just going with what I was trained to do, but there were frustrations not having a radio ... to communicate with the brigade," Moyer said.

"It was pretty awkward because in all my years of training they never taught

me to fight a battle with a cell phone. For a while towards the end — and before the Strykers arrived — I thought, 'Please do not let the cell battery die on me,' because I was on it so much."

Once the Strykers reached the scene, Moyer ducked enemy fire and joined their position, briefing reinforcement forces on the situation. He then directed efforts to treat and evacuate the wounded.

The carnage was significant. Twelve Iraqi commandos lay dead and more than 40 were injured.

Estimates placed the number of enemy killed at 25 to 30, with many more wounded.

"One of the things that I can remember smelling to this day is the burning vehicles and the gunpowder of all the weapons that had been fired," Moyer said.

Despite heavy enemy fire, Moyer made it back to Forward Operating Base Freedom unscathed. He says the thought of not returning that day never really crossed his mind.

"I was on autopilot from all the training that I received over the years," he said.

Moyer, 36, of Wilkes-Barre, Pa., now a sergeant first class, currently serves as first platoon sergeant for the 55th Military Police Company, 94th Military Police Battalion, 501st Sustainment Brigade at Camp Casey, South Korea.

Looking back, he says he doesn't always feel deserving of the medal and was only "doing what I have been trained to do."

"I knew that others have done more and gotten less," added Moyer, who also deployed to Afghanistan for six months in 2003. "But when I received the award, I felt a pride in knowing that I completed a job well done and that the standards I made for myself were exceeded."

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A platoon of Iraqi commandos there had come under attack, and an initial relief team sent to assist got ambushed en route.

"It was intense," Moyer recalls. "When the intense fighting began, I thought that [the enemy] would have to run out of ammo eventually."

"On any given day, you never know what is going to happen to someone or yourself. The thought is that one minute you are sitting on a [forward operating base] and the next you are in a fight for your life."

His actions on this day, however, would lead him to the Bronze Star with "V" de-

'Near to soldiers wherever they go'

BY KEVIN DOUGHERTY
Stars and Stripes

It's the summer of 2007, and several soldiers are gathered around a Bradley fighting vehicle parked in a motor pool at Camp Ramadi in Iraq.

Music booms, sunglasses are on, jackets are off and the midday temperature is well above the century mark. The men labor to change a pair of metal vehicle tracks, worn thin on the hard streets of Iraq.

Into this scene strolls Capt. Douglas Downs, the battalion chaplain.

He banters a bit with the guys and then removes his uniform top, grabs a sledgehammer and gets to work, pounding pins into a newly installed track. The soldiers exchange glances, but Downs is nailing everything, so they let him swing away.



Baldwin

"I kept trying to get the sledgehammer back from him," recalled Staff Sgt. David Hendryx of Schweinfurt, Germany. "He wasn't afraid to get down to our level and do some grunt work."

In ways large and small, public and private, straightforward and subtle, military chaplains influence a lot of people.

Their impact can be felt during Sunday service, in a private chat or in a garage with GIs working on a vehicle in a faraway land.

These days, no assignment carries more weight with chaplains than a tour to Iraq or Afghanistan, where most servicemembers featured in this section performed their heroics.

More than 450 U.S. military chaplains serve downrange, two-thirds of them in the Army. As a rule, chaplains don't come armed. Yet they expose themselves to many of the same dangers that bedevil their brothers and sisters in arms.

"We are near to soldiers wherever they go," said Maj. Gen. Douglas Carver, chief of Army chaplains.

"George Washington had chaplains in the military," observed Maj. Gen. Charles Baldwin, the Air Force chief of chaplains. "It's just part of the military heritage."

Several military chaplains have been wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, notably Army Chaplain (Maj.) Tim Vakoc, a Cath-



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army

Iraqi children surround Army Chaplain (Capt.) Douglas Downs in the Ta'meem district of Ramadi, Iraq, last year. Downs was helping a humanitarian patrol with 1st Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion 18th Infantry Regiment, which was attached to Task Force 1-77 (1st Battalion, 77th Armor Regiment). Downs was the 1-77 chaplain.

olic priest gravely injured by a roadside bomb four years ago.

Vakoc is one of several military chaplains

to have received a Purple Heart. And at least four Army chaplains, all with special operations units, have been awarded medals with "V" devices, according to Lt. Col. Mark Nordstrom, the plans and operations officer for the U.S. Army Europe command chaplain in Heidelberg, Germany.

Nordstrom, a Protestant minister, has served two tours in Iraq, including the 2003 invasion, when he was the 1st Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division chaplain. He doubts he'll ever forget the third day of the war, when his convoy got ambushed north of Nasariyah near Samawah, and a vicious firefight ensued.

"I was close enough to see the guys who were trying to kill me," Nordstrom remembered as he sat in his Heidelberg office.

"You could hear and see the bullets and [rocket-propelled grenades]. Thank God they were not good shots."

Because they are unarmed, chaplains aren't likely to engage in valorous acts, where mettle and might and an M-16 might help them win a combat medal. That traditionally affords them a degree of security from the enemy — though not always.



Photo courtesy of the University of St. Thomas

Army Chaplain (Maj.) Tim Vakoc was injured May 29, 2004, when his armored Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb. This portrait of Vakoc, part of a national exhibit called the "100 Faces of War Experience," was painted last year by Matthew Mitchell.

History of honor

Perhaps the most celebrated account of selfless service in the U.S. military chaplaincy occurred in World War II, and is known simply as the "Four Chaplains."

Torpedoed by a German U-boat, the USAT *Dorchester* was sinking in the North Atlantic off the coast of Greenland. It was nighttime, early February 1943. The four chaplains aboard — a priest, a rabbi and two Protestant ministers — comforted the wounded, helped soldiers and sailors evacuate the ship, and willingly handed their life jackets to those who had none. The ship sank in just 18 minutes. Survivors recall seeing the four chaplains "arm-in-arm in prayer on the hull of the ship" as the end neared.

"As I swam away from the ship, I

looked back," one survivor recounted. "The flares had lighted everything. The bow came up high and she slid under. The last thing I saw, the four chaplains were up there praying for the safety of the men. They had done everything they could. I did not see them again."

In 1960, Congress honored the four chaplains posthumously by creating the Special Medal for Heroism. It was presented the following year. Apparently, Congress wanted to give them the Medal of Honor, but couldn't due to the strict requirement for "heroism performed under fire." The Special Medal for Heroism has not been awarded since.

Sources: *Four Chaplains Memorial Foundation, Library of Congress*

— KEVIN DOUGHERTY

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

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One chaplain, for instance, was shot by a sniper just a few months ago, Nordstrom said.

"They get right up there with the soldiers," said Lt. Col. Steven Miska, commander of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment, 172nd Infantry Brigade in Schweinfurt, Germany. "A chaplain, to be effective, must understand the same stresses that soldiers are exposed to, and to do that they must be there."

On rare occasions, they cross a line they are not meant to cross.

In April 2003, a battalion chaplain with the 3rd Infantry Division caught hell for using an M-16 when his unit came under fire. If there is a cardinal sin on the battlefield for chaplains, that's it.

Taking part in armed conflict "is not their job," said Capt. Brian Miletich, a member of Miska's battalion. "Their job is taking care of the emotional and moral well-being of the force."

Soldiers say the best chaplains are the approachable ones. They are men and women of faith who inspire and comfort, teach and listen. An effective chaplain, Miletich said, is skilled at reading people and events, adjusting accordingly.

Chaplains "have incredible mental and emotional agility," he said.

Downrange, whenever a life is lost or hanging in the balance, a chaplain is usually nearby, praying over the shoulders of medical personnel.

Last summer, Air Force Chaplain (Capt.)

Onyema Okorie was an hour away from celebrating Sunday Mass when he was summoned to bless the body of a dying soldier. The troop had been badly burned by a roadside bomb.

"I gave last rites, stayed and prayed, placing my hand on the charred body for close to 40 minutes, until he took his precious last breath," Okorie recalled. "Thereafter, I left to conduct the Catholic Mass, with my hand still smelling strong from the burnt body."

Okorie said it was emotionally hard to shift gears so quickly, but he did.

"You always have to have enough in the tank for the next guy, because you never know what is coming next," said Maj. Abdul-Rasheed Muhammad, the Army's first Muslim chaplain.

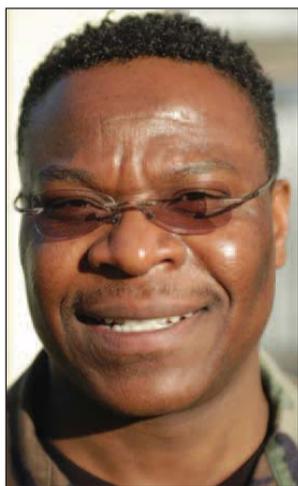
Because chaplains follow uniformed personnel into battle, they are as susceptible to post-traumatic stress syndrome and mild traumatic brain injuries as the next guy, Carver and Nordstrom said. Carver's deputy,

Chaplain (Brig. Gen.) Don Rutherford, the former USAEUR and 7th Army command chaplain, got his bell rung in 2005 when his Stryker hit a roadside bomb.

Most Army chaplains have served two tours, so like any soldier they have tales to tell. But there are stories they can tell, and stories they cannot.

"We are the keepers and carriers of their stories," said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) John Read, the deputy command chaplain at USAREUR.

Nordstrom spoke of a soldier who needed to pray with him one stormy night dur-



Okorie



Photo courtesy of USAG Benelux

Maj. Gen. Douglas Carver, Army chief of chaplains, speaks during last month's prayer breakfast at SHAPE headquarters near Mons, Belgium.

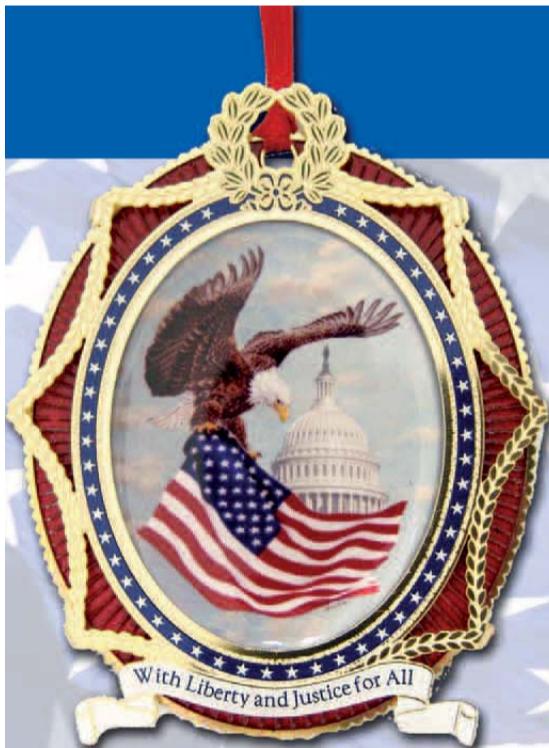
ing the 2003 ground invasion. The kid from Kansas City was trying to deal with a family tragedy back home.

When Nordstrom was done, the soldier,

clad in chemical gear, thanked him, turned around and disappeared into a dust storm like some spirit.

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'Then I see a red fireball coming'

By CHARLIE COON
Stars and Stripes

John DeWeese sat up in the turret of his Humvee scanning the scene.

Two blocks away a Bradley Fighting Vehicle lay flipped over and smoldering next to a bomb crater.

The locals were milling about, rubber-necking Baghdad-style.

DeWeese and his mates had rolled from their base to escort two Iraqi fire trucks to the site of the deadly roadside bomb blast. The soldiers were now guarding a nearby intersection. They'd been there for 90 minutes as responders dealt with the Bradley.

In the distance DeWeese saw something fishy.

"It looked like three guys dropped something," said the 21-year-old Army specialist. "At the same time everybody just ran. So I'm thinking there's going to be a firefight. I stand up in the gun and start scanning my sector, waiting to get shot at."

"Then I see a red fireball coming flying at the truck."

The dropped package had been a modified air-to-ground rocket, set on the ground and fired from more than 100 meters. The rocket hit the Humvee, exiting through the windshield. It was a lucky shot from such a distance.

Inside the Humvee the fire extinguisher system started gushing. A lieutenant in the

back seat was screaming and a sergeant in the right front was bleeding and teetering out of his opened door.

The driver, now dead, was sprawled at the feet of DeWeese, who was bleeding.

The Adhamiyah section of northeast Baghdad was a messed-up place in June 2007. The Sunni enclave was surrounded by Shiite neighborhoods and suffered many deaths from sectarian violence.

DeWeese's unit, the Stuttgart, Germany-based 1st Platoon, 554th Military Police Company, was there to train Iraqi cops or at least keep them from shooting each other.

The platoon worked in support of Schweinfurt's 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, which saw 31 of its soldiers killed during its deployment, including five in the destroyed Bradley two blocks east of DeWeese's position.

After the rocket tore through DeWeese's Humvee, soldiers scrambled to aid the wounded and defend the disabled vehicle.

After regaining his bearings, DeWeese stood in his smoking turret and aimed at muzzle flashes coming from the same direction as the rocket.

"At least I was behind a .50-cal and a

turret shield," DeWeese said. "I knew I had some cover."

"My job was to suppress the enemy so everyone else can do their job. That's the only thing going through my head."

DeWeese promptly tore into the distant building with his .50-caliber heavy machine gun. But he soon noticed that a baseball-sized hole had been blown open in his right thigh under his buttock.

He took out his tourniquet and quickly cinched up his leg above the wound, and then turned back to the enemy fighters, who were firing at the soldiers with small arms, probably AK-47s.

DeWeese had zeroed in on a third-story window from which guns were blazing about one block away. He directed most of his .50-caliber fury at the window as a medic and others tended to the wounded sergeant and others.

DeWeese, tall and lean from tiny Deputy, Ind., held forth in his turret.

"We looked up and it was like, 'He's not coming down,'" said Sgt. Robert Holloway. "There was so much fire going on around us and he was, like, standing up."

"He wasn't trying to hunker down and select targets. He was just trying to shoot and destroy whatever he was looking at. Who knows what else they would have tried to fire back at us? But instead of trying to get out and save himself, (DeWeese) kept firing."

DeWeese unhooked the .50-caliber from its mount, accidentally squeezing off a last few rounds from his hip, and then tripped over his gunner's sling and fell face first into the right front seat of the Humvee.

On the way out he grabbed his collapsible butt-stock, barrel-shortened .249 Squad Automatic Weapon. Wounded and

bleeding heavily, he took position behind a vehicle and continued laying down fire.

The other personnel were finally ready to evacuate. DeWeese was the last soldier to board.

DeWeese was transported to the combat hospital in Baghdad's International Zone. He was given two weeks' worth of Percoset and sent back to his base in Adhamiyah.

"I took the Percosets for, like, two days," DeWeese said. "Then I told them I couldn't sit around the (base) anymore — I'm going back out. So I flushed the Percosets."

"Every day before I'd go out, (medics) would rewrap the leg. I'd go out on a mission, come back, take the bandages off, pull all the stuff out of it, take water bottles and clean it out," DeWeese said.

"Then (they would) stick in more wet cotton, foam, some crap like that, and shove it back in there and wrap it back up. They did that every day until it healed up."

DeWeese had built a Tiki bar at Combat Outpost Old MOD (Ministry of Defense building, where the platoon was based). DeWeese, Cpl. Karen N. Clifton and others would meet at their Tiki bar to play cards, sip non-alcoholic drinks and have a few laughs.

At 10:30 a.m. on June 21 — one year into their tour and just as they started a three-month extension — DeWeese and his squad got the call to roll. A Bradley had been hit; fire trucks needed an escort.

Clifton, age 22, hopped into the driver's seat of DeWeese's Humvee.

The soldiers would return to Stuttgart without her. "We were just making the best of a (expletive) situation," DeWeese said. "After she got killed, no one would go out to the Tiki bar anymore."

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Name: Spc. John DeWeese
Unit: 554th Military Police Company
Award: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: June 2007, Baghdad



Photo courtesy of John DeWeese

Spc. John DeWeese of the 554th Military Police Company earned a Bronze Star with "V."

'It's just like going to work; you get used to it'

By LISA M. NOVAK
Stars and Stripes

After six months in Iraq, Petty Officer 2nd Class Chris Blount was one day shy of heading home. But as a bomb disposal technician, Blount didn't have the luxury of thinking about tomorrow.

He had to stay focused on the job at hand. Still, home couldn't have been far from his mind that day in July 2007, when an explosive detonated under his vehicle as he headed out on his last mission.

"You don't know what's hit you until it's over. The first thing we did was ask if (everyone) was OK," Blount recalled. "I had dirt in my mouth which had risen off the floor of the truck. My ears rang a little for a few minutes, but we were all fine."

Just another day at the office for Blount, a native of Tampa, Fla., and a member of Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 8 based in Sigonella, Sicily.

That last day mirrored his first day of the deployment, when his unit was hit with a roadside bomb in January, luckily with the same results. "It's just like going to work; you get used to it. You know your team, and you know your mission," Blount said. "I wouldn't think about it much on my off time. I'd sleep, watch movies, read, etc...."

Blount conducted route clearing and dismount operations during his deployment.

Name: Petty Officer 2nd Class Chris Blount
Unit: Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 8
Medal: Army Commendation medal with "V"
Earned: July 2007, Iraq



Photo courtesy of Chris Blount

Petty Officer 2nd Class Chris Blount disposed of 23 bombs during his recent deployment to Iraq. Blount received an Army Commendation Medal with "V" device.

He received an Army Commendation medal with "V" device for a two-day period in which he identified two explosives prior to detonating and assisted with the capture of three insurgents directly linked to anti-Iraqi forces mortar cells. Throughout the

operations, which took place primarily in Baghdad and Diyala province, Blount recalls falling under small arms and indirect fire from various positions.

In all, the 23-year-old senior technician completed 68 combat missions and dis-

posed of 23 bombs. "We were just basically on call, a lot of waiting. I didn't spend much time worrying. I knew that my wife worried about me and we talked whenever we could," Blount said.

With almost five years in the Navy, Blount considers himself a career sailor. Initially trained as a corpsman, he said the job description of the EOD community persuaded him to switch careers.

"When I was in corpsman school, I met someone whose brother was in EOD. The job description of diving, jumping and demolition was more appealing than corpsman," Blount said.

The EOD community is not very large. Created in 2006, there are only about 1,300 personnel with this particular designation, according to the Navy. The yearlong training course is intense. In addition to the physical training including deep-sea diving, and parachute jumps, EOD technicians are experts in many types of explosives including airborne, underwater and nuclear devices. The training, according to Blount, definitely prepared him for life in a war zone. But he said there's no substitute for actual experience.

"Going there makes you more confident about doing your job," he said. "The training was great. I felt totally prepared."

That preparation and experience will come in handy. In late May, Blount was preparing for his next deployment, this time to Afghanistan. Along with his training, he said he draws strength from his wife, Elizabeth.

"She is my biggest supporter, and this will be our third deployment in three years. She handles them really well."

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'This is what they're paying me for'

By LISA M. NOVAK
Stars and Stripes

Few would argue that practicing emergency medicine is a high-stress job. When you do it in a combat zone, it adds an entirely new dimension.

"Nobody really felt vulnerable until we got hit," recalled Petty Officer 1st Class Andrew Slaughter, a Navy corpsman currently assigned to Naval Hospital in Naples, Italy, referring to an incident in February 2004. "Then it was like, 'Oh crap — this is for real.'"

It was the first time he had seen a combat casualty up close. At the time, Slaughter was assigned to the 1st Marine Division, deployed to Iraq.

That and several other incidents through October of that year earned him a Bronze Star with "V" device.

Several vehicles in his convoy were hit by roadside bombs planted in a 55-gallon drum hidden behind an exit sign.

The ensuing wreckage left one Marine with a shattered arm, one of his triceps torn apart and an open fracture on his opposite leg. Another Marine had a face full of shrapnel, and a third was knocked unconscious from the blast.

Mental focus is what allowed Slaughter to save their lives.

"That just comes through training while having people yell at you," said Slaughter, who was the only Navy corpsman in the convoy.

"If you can't concentrate while some-

Name: Petty Officer 1st Class Andrew Slaughter
Medal: Bronze Star with "V"
Earned: February to October 2004, Iraq



By LISA M. NOVAK/Stars and Stripes

Petty Officer 1st Class Andrew Slaughter was awarded the Bronze Star with "V" for combat service in Iraq.

body's yelling at you, you can't detach yourself. We'd go up on scene, take the medical bag off, I would just take a deep breath, go through my mental checklist and say 'OK, this is what they're paying me for.'"

The February incident was during Slaughter's second deployment to Iraq. The previous year he provided humanitarian support in Nasariyah.

His convoy was going from Fallujah to Ramadi when an Army convoy traveling in the opposite direction was struck by a car bomb that hit a fuel tank.

"We pulled off to the side of the road, and

I could taste the smoke and soot in the back of my lungs," Slaughter said. "I was trying to pull (the gunner) out who was knocked completely unconscious. He was wedged into the deck at a 90-degree angle.

"We finally get him out, drag him into a ditch in the medium. His arms were real mushy — they felt like sandbags."

Slaughter was told there was a more critical patient that needed attending. A soldier traveling in the convoy had his throat slashed.

"There was a flap — you could see it moving up and down as he was breathing. I told him I was gonna ... put a tube in it so he could breathe better. I don't really remember what he said, I just took out my pocket knife and basically widened up the slit so I could fit a tube in."

He didn't have much time to tend to those patients. Another bomb was detonated, sending a spray of shrapnel and ball bearings in all directions.

"A staff sergeant took a ball bearing to the eye — he basically had brains coming out of one eye socket. He was dead, there was nothing I could do for him. Half of the gunner's nose was missing. He had shrapnel all in his face and couldn't feel his left arm. I splinted his arm, bandaged his face and looked for others who were injured. Some guy had his eardrums blown out."

Not many people could withstand those visuals and still function. But Slaughter said maintaining control is key to saving

lives.

"You just have to separate yourself from the situation. If you ... get grossed out, the Marine that's injured is probably gonna die because he'll get freaked out and his blood pressure will go up, and he'll lose all the blood in his body."

But he can't always focus on saving lives.

There are times when Slaughter, who said he gets teased constantly about his name and his profession, has to put down his medical kit and pick up a weapon.

During an ambush, he said he had to give his rifle to a scout whose gun was destroyed, and had to use his 9 mm pistol to fire at an approaching vehicle.

In all, Slaughter traveled in more than 140 convoys through active combat zones. His only injury was some minor shrapnel wounds in his foot. Though he's been back in Naples, Italy, for three years now, Slaughter said his experiences have made him a better corpsman.

"When I talk to junior troops, they know I'm speaking from experience, and that I'm not full of it. I really try not to let what happened carry me. I haven't been pimpin' my award."

He said he's been able to put the graphic experiences into perspective and move on.

"A lot of it stayed me for the first two years. I kept thinking about it over and over again, then just every once in a while. I guess it's just water under the bridge now."

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"If you ... get grossed out, the Marine that's injured is probably gonna die because he'll get freaked out and his blood pressure will go up, and he'll lose all the blood in his body."

Petty Officer 1st Class Andrew Slaughter
Bronze Star with "V"

'It definitely would have caused a lot of death'

By LEO SHANE III
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Alexander Mazza insists he earned his Bronze Star during just a normal day at work.

But he acknowledged that not everyone's day at the office requires them to disarm a dump truck packed with 2,000 pounds of explosives.

"To us, it's just our job," the explosive ordnance disposal technician said. "We'd typically get three calls a day. Sometimes they'd be nothing, sometimes they'd be homemade explosives that were a real danger.

"Of course, we didn't usually see anything that big."

In March, Marine Corps officials awarded Mazza the Bronze Star with "V" device for "fearlessly" completing his job that day, potentially saving hundreds of lives with just a single skillful bomb response.

The incident occurred on his second tour in Iraq. In the first, from August 2005 to March 2006, he worked with an EOD quick-response team disarming hundreds of IEDs around

Haditha. His skill and success earned him a promotion to team leader for his second tour, this time based out of Camp Baharia near Fallujah. Mazza said his three-person team responded to dozens of calls over the first three months of his deployment, but the May 17 incident was the most dangerous they faced.

"We got an early call, while it was still dark, that the Iraqi Army had conducted a joint raid and found homemade explosives all over this compound," he said. "The way it was laid out, we knew we couldn't get our robots in there, so we had to go in ourselves."

With a pair of security Marines in tow, Mazza began moving from room to room while his team explored other sections of the compound.

As he walked into the courtyard, he spun around a wall and found himself just yards from a truckload of wires, detonators and 55-gallon drums stuffed with homemade explosives.

"If (the insurgents) had gotten it into a populated area, it definitely would have caused a lot of death," he said.

Although the insurgents apparently were caught before finishing their

work on the car bomb, Mazza said the ton of explosives still posed a threat to the troops nearby. He dismissed his security detail before approaching the truck and stabilizing its load.

"When we talked about it later, my (security) guys were surprised they had been standing next to that much explosive," he said.

"When we talked about it later, my (security) guys were surprised they had been standing next to that much explosive."

Staff Sgt. Alexander Mazza
Bronze Star with "V"

Later sweeps of the compound found hundreds more pounds of munitions and bomb-making devices, all of which were destroyed without any harm to friendly troops, Mazza said.

Corps officials said Mazza's team successfully disarmed and disposed of more than 11,000 pounds of explosives during their seven-month tour.

Mazza said bomb disposal is a family business. His father is a retired bomb technician, and after Mazza joined the Corps he quickly applied to follow in his footsteps.

"We're helping our Marines first-hand in this job," he said. "For every IED we find and disarm out there, that's one less that could have hurt our guys. So when we catch those hazards, it's a good feeling."

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LANCE CPL. GREGORY AALTO

Marine Staff Sgt. Alexander Mazza received a Bronze Star with "V" for his bomb disposal work in Iraq.

The Unknown Soldiers

By Peter Collier

The Medal of Honor is emblematic of one individual's willingness to put everything at risk to save a comrade, drive back the enemy, hold a position. Those who wear it emboss the abstract ideal of courage with a specific face, a name and character, a deed that gives momentary clarity to the chaos of battle.

The Medal brings immortality to those who live to accept it, and also to the many who receive this honor after their death. The stories of these men and women have become part of the American narrative, yet the recipients are themselves always the first to remember comrades who weren't so honored and to acknowledge all those anonymous and unremembered servicemen and servicewomen who made the ultimate sacrifice.

If the Medal of Honor commemorates the valor of the unique few, the Tomb of the Unknowns symbolizes the service of all the others—those who came back from the foreign battlefields where they served their country and those who died there. This haunting monument was created by Congress in the spring of 1921 to honor all the unidentified soldiers who had fallen in World War I. Four bodies were exhumed from military cemeteries in France and their caskets placed in a hall under an honor guard. Army Sergeant Edward Younger, a highly decorated veteran of the war, randomly selected one of them; the others were reburied. The remains of the Unknown Soldier were brought home to lie in state at the Capitol and were then interred at Arlington National Cemetery on Armistice Day of the same year. As part of the ceremony, President Warren Harding presented the Unknown Soldier with the Medal of Honor.

In 1931 a monument was erected to stand over the simple marble tomb.

The design selected was in the form of a sarcophagus, eleven feet tall and eight feet wide at the base. On the panel facing the Potomac River are three carved figures symbolizing Victory, Valor, and Peace. On the back panel is the inscription Here Rests In Honored Glory an American Soldier Known But to God.

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower signed a bill to select the Unknown Soldiers of World War II and Korea. In 1958, two sets of unidentified remains from World War

II—one from the Pacific theater and one from the European theater—were taken aboard the USS Canberra, a guided missile cruiser. Navy Corpsman William Charette, himself a Medal of Honor recipient, selected one of them as World War II's Unknown Soldier; the other was buried at sea. At the same time, in Hawaii, Army Sergeant Ned Lyle made the selection of the Unknown from the Korean War. On Memorial Day 1958, the two caskets were taken to Arlington by caisson. President Eisenhower awarded each soldier the Medal of Honor, and the two caskets were buried.

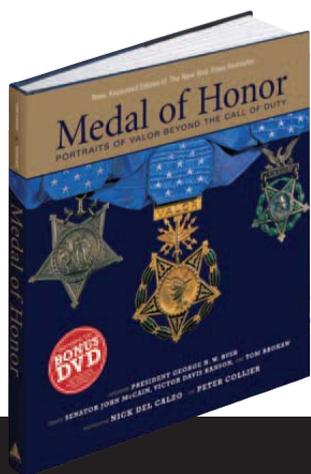
The Unknown service member from the Viet-

nam War was selected by Medal of Honor recipient Marine Corps Sergeant Major Allan Kellogg and buried at Arlington on Memorial Day 1984 after being presented with the medal by President Ronald Reagan. (In 1998, these remains were identified by DNA as those of Air Force Lieutenant Michael Blassie, shot down near An Loc in 1972. He was reinterred in a family plot; the crypt of the Vietnam Unknown remains empty to this day.)

The Tomb of the Unknowns is a reminder that no member of the American armed forces, wherever he or she serves or however he or she falls, is forgotten. The profound association of the Medal of Honor with the tomb is a reminder that all who give their last measure of devotion for their country are heroes.



Photograph by Nick Del Calzo



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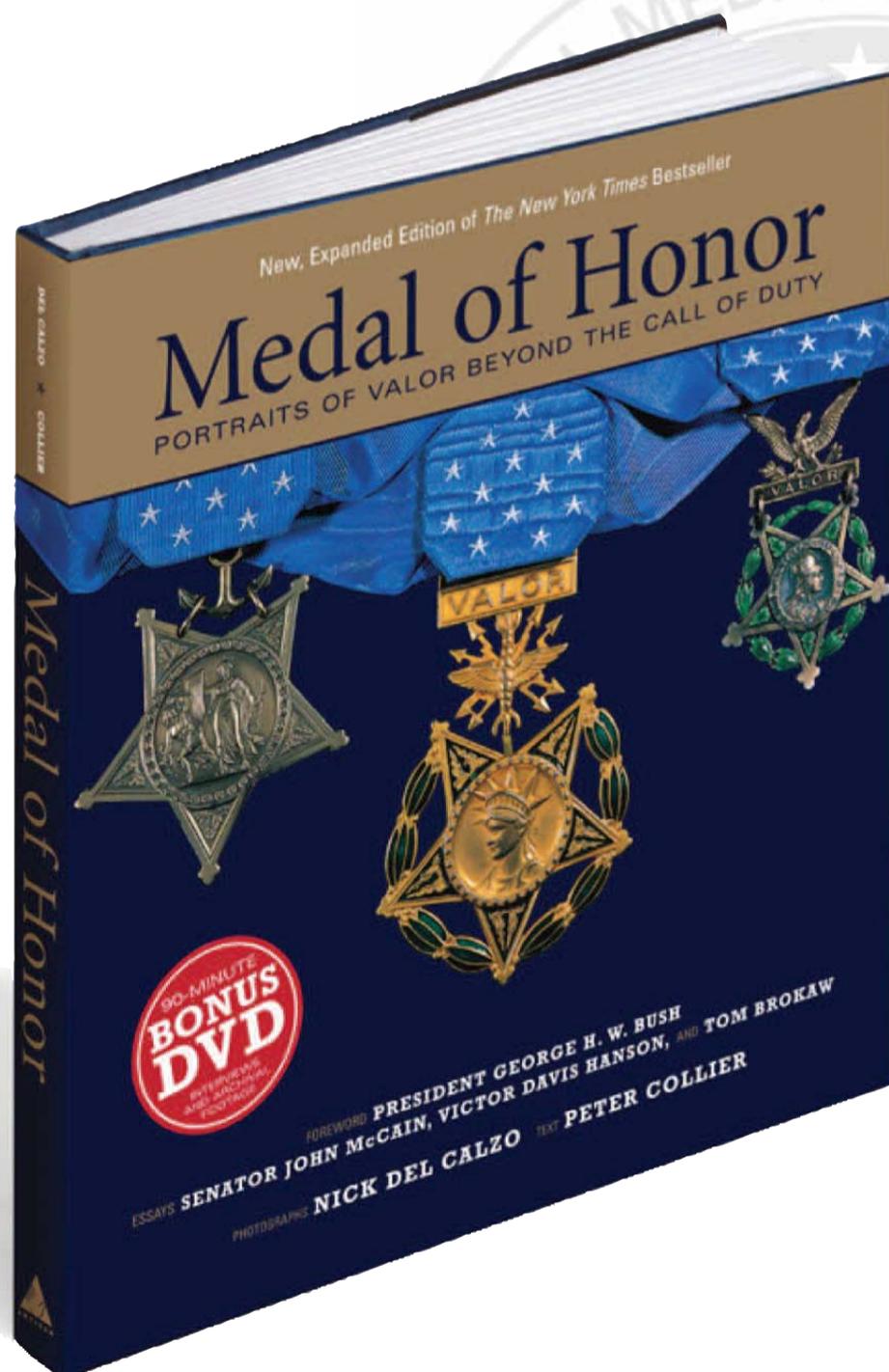


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